



EMPOWERING YOUNG WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN WEST AFRICA AND THE SAHEL: STRENGTHENING YOUTH-LED CIVIC MOVEMENTS

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Date:

March 2026

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1. Executive Summary

Human rights defenders (HRDs) are individuals or groups who promote and protect human rights through advocacy, community mobilization, monitoring, and public engagement. Across the world, HRDs play a critical role in defending civil liberties, strengthening democratic accountability, and advancing social justice.¹ Within this broad community, women human rights defenders (WHRDs) represent a particularly important group whose activism often intersects with gender equality, youth empowerment, climate justice, and community development.

Young women human rights defenders (WHRDs) play an indispensable role in youth-led civic engagement across West Africa and the Sahel. They drive advocacy on gender equality, climate action, health rights, and democratic accountability, often navigating complex political, social, and digital landscapes.² Despite their critical contributions, these actors face

¹ United Nations General Assembly. (1998, December 9). *Declaration on the right and responsibility of individuals, groups and organs of society to promote and protect universally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms* (A/RES/53/144). Available here:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-right-and-responsibility-individuals-groups-and>

² Front Line Defenders. (2024). *Global analysis 2023/24*. Available here:

<https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/resource-publication/global-analysis-202324>



multi-layered challenges including restrictive legislation, online harassment, limited access to funding and mentorship, and socio-cultural barriers that reduce visibility and legitimacy.³

This policy brief examines the systemic barriers confronting young women defenders, analyzes best practices emerging from youth-led movements, and proposes actionable recommendations for governments, regional institutions, civil society, and private sector actors. Supporting WHRDs is vital for enhancing civic engagement, protecting human rights, and strengthening democratic governance in the region.⁴

2. Background and Context

Over the past decade, youth-led movements have emerged as transformative agents in governance and civic life across West Africa and the Sahel. Young women, in particular, have been at the forefront of mobilizing communities, advocating for policy reforms, and promoting social justice initiatives.⁵ Their activism ranges from civic education and community mobilization to cross-border advocacy on human rights, climate action, and democratic accountability.

However, the environment in which these defenders operate is highly challenging and volatile. Legal frameworks often criminalize dissent, restrict freedom of association, or impose burdensome registration requirements on civil society organizations.⁶ Digital spaces, which are increasingly central to advocacy and mobilization, present additional risks, as WHRDs are disproportionately targeted through cyber harassment, impersonation, and online misinformation campaigns.⁷ Resource constraints, including short-term donor funding and

³ Oluymi, O. (2016). *Barriers to women's political leadership and participation*. International Journal of Political Science and Governance, 6(2), 85–91. Available here:

<https://www.journalofpoliticalscience.com/uploads/archives/6-2-28-677.pdf>

⁴ CIVICUS. (2023, July 14). *The civic space crisis in Africa and how civil society responds*. Available here:

<https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/op-eds/6475-the-civic-space-crisis-in-africa-and-how-civil-society-responds>

⁵ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2018, June 21). *The impact of online violence on women human rights defenders and women's organisations*. Available here:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2018/06/impact-online-violence-women-human-rights-defenders-and-womens>

⁶ African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. (2007, May). *Resolution on the situation of human rights defenders in Africa (ACHPR/Res.104(XXXI)07)*. African Union. Available here:

<https://achpr.au.int/en/adopted-resolutions/104-resolution-situation-human-rights-defenders-africa-achpres104>

⁷ Article 19. (2020). *The Global Expression Report 2019/2020: The state of freedom of expression around the world* (GxR2019-20report). Article 19. Available here:

<https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/GxR2019-20report.pdf>



limited access to mentorship or leadership development, further impede the effectiveness and sustainability of youth-led initiatives.⁸ Socio-cultural norms and gendered expectations continue to undermine women's legitimacy in leadership, limiting their influence in policy-making processes and public discourse.⁹

Addressing these intersecting challenges is essential for sustaining youth-led civic engagement, protecting human rights, and fostering inclusive democratic governance. Strengthening young women defenders is not only a gender imperative but also a strategic investment in democratic resilience and social stability.

Despite their growing visibility and influence, young women defenders confront a set of interrelated obstacles that restrict their impact. Legally, many countries maintain restrictive laws that constrain freedom of expression, assembly, and association. Enforcement of protective measures is inconsistent, leaving young women defenders vulnerable to arbitrary detention, harassment, or intimidation.¹⁰

Digital threats exacerbate these risks, as women defenders face targeted online attacks, misinformation campaigns, and harassment, which can diminish public credibility and reduce outreach effectiveness.¹¹ These vulnerabilities are compounded by limited capacity and resource gaps. Youth-led movements often operate with short-term, project-based funding, limiting sustainability and scalability. Mentorship and leadership development programs are

⁸ Association for Progressive Communications. (2025, December 4). *Submission by the Association for Progressive Communications to the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders for the Human Rights Council 61st session report "Raising their voices: HRDs respond to the human rights crisis"*. Available here: <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/submission-association-progressive-communications-special-rapporteur-human-rights-defenders>

⁹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2021, December). *SIGI 2021 Regional Report for Africa: Women's political voice, leadership and agency*. OECD Publishing. Available here: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/sigi-2021-regional-report-for-africa_a6d95d90-en/full-report/component-1_2.html?utm_

¹⁰ United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2023, May 11). *Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (A/HRC/53/17)*. United Nations Human Rights Council. Available here: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/53/17>

¹¹ United Nations in Türkiye, *Seven in ten women human rights defenders, activists and journalists report online violence* (press release, 9 December 2025). Available here: https://turkiye.un.org/en/306847-seven-ten-women-human-rights-defenders-activists-and-journalists-report-online-violence?utm_



fragmented and fail to sufficiently address the intersectional challenges faced by young women activists.¹²

Socio-cultural barriers further restrict the effectiveness of youth-led advocacy. Patriarchal norms and social stigma frequently undermine the legitimacy of young women leaders, reducing participation in decision-making forums and limiting collaboration opportunities.¹³ Collectively, these challenges constrain the operational capacity, visibility, and long-term impact of youth-led civic initiatives, particularly those spearheaded by women.

3. Methodology and Objectives

This policy brief adopts a qualitative desk-review approach drawing on existing literature, regional policy frameworks, civil society reports, and documented experiences of youth-led civic movements in West Africa and the Sahel. The analysis focuses on identifying key barriers affecting young women human rights defenders and examining emerging practices that strengthen their participation in civic engagement and advocacy.

The brief pursues three main objectives:

To examine the structural, legal, digital, and socio-cultural challenges confronting young women human rights defenders in youth-led civic movements.

To analyze emerging strategies and practices that have enabled young women defenders to sustain advocacy and civic engagement in the region.

To propose policy recommendations that governments, regional institutions, civil society organizations, and private sector actors can adopt to strengthen youth-led civic participation and protect women defenders.

4. Findings & Analysis

Existing studies and civil society reports indicate that legal and institutional protections for young women defenders are often inadequate and inconsistently applied. While regional

¹² CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, *Youth activism: pathways, challenges & learnings* (September 2023), Available here:

https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/youth-activism-report_en.pdf?utm

¹³ Ibid



frameworks such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) and ECOWAS protocols establish principles for the protection of human rights defenders, enforcement mechanisms are weak, and reporting systems are largely inaccessible to youth and women activists.¹⁴ As a result, WHRDs remain exposed to harassment, intimidation, and other risks that limit their ability to engage safely in civic initiatives.

Digital vulnerabilities represent another significant challenge. Online platforms, which are critical for mobilization, information dissemination, and advocacy, are frequently sites of harassment for women defenders. These threats include impersonation, doxxing, and coordinated disinformation campaigns. Limited digital literacy and online security training reduce the ability of WHRDs to protect themselves and to leverage digital tools effectively for advocacy purposes.

Capacity and funding limitations are equally significant. Youth-led initiatives frequently rely on temporary donor support, reducing their capacity for strategic planning and long-term impact. Fragmented mentorship and training programs do not always address the specific needs of young women leaders, including navigating gendered risks and advancing advocacy in restrictive contexts.¹⁵

Socio-cultural norms remain a pervasive barrier. Gendered expectations, societal stigma, and limited recognition in leadership spaces undermine credibility and access to decision-making forums.¹⁶ Nevertheless, despite these challenges, youth-led coalitions demonstrate remarkable resilience. They have developed innovative advocacy strategies, formed cross-border networks, and leveraged digital tools to advance civic engagement, human rights advocacy, and policy influence. These practices illustrate the potential impact of strategic investments in young women defenders.

¹⁴ African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, *Report of the Study on the Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders in Africa* (2012). Available here: https://peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/report_of_the_study_on_the_situation_of_women_human_rights_defenders_in_africa.pdf

¹⁵ Luna, M. T. (2025, July 10). *Youth-led organizations' insights for an aid system in crisis*. Georgetown University Collaborative on Global Children's Issues. Available here: <https://globalchildren.georgetown.edu/posts/youth-led-organizations-insights-for-an-aid-system-in-crisis>

¹⁶ Kyambade, M., Tushabe, M., Namatovu, A., & Oyella, S. (2024). *Bridging the gender gap: Analyzing women's participation and leadership representation in university governance*. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10(1). Available here: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311886.2024.2432519?utm_source=chatgpt.com#d1e523



5. Policy Recommendations

5.1 Strengthen Legal and Institutional Protection

Governments and regional institutions should provide accessible legal aid, emergency support, and psychosocial services tailored to the needs of young women defenders. Gender-sensitive reporting and monitoring mechanisms should be embedded within national and regional human rights institutions to ensure accountability and protection.

5.2 Enhance Digital Security

Regional actors and civil society organizations should provide training in digital literacy, online safety, and cybersecurity for WHRDs. Partnerships with technology platforms should focus on mitigating harassment and countering misinformation campaigns targeting young women defenders.

5.3 Invest in Capacity and Funding

Sustainable funding streams, including multi-year grants and mentorship programs, should be established to support youth-led initiatives. Cross-border networks and peer-learning platforms should be strengthened to enable collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and skills development among young women leaders.

5.4 Promote Visibility and Advocacy

Initiatives should highlight the contributions of young women defenders to civic engagement, democratic governance, and human rights advocacy. WHRDs should be actively included in policy consultations, advisory boards, and regional dialogues to increase recognition and influence.

5.5 Foster Public–Private and Regional Partnerships

Corporate and philanthropic actors should invest in youth-led civic engagement and digital literacy initiatives. Regional consortia should be established to support policy research, advocacy, and leadership development for WHRDs, ensuring long-term sustainability and impact.

6. Conclusion



Young women human rights defenders are indispensable to advancing civic engagement, democratic accountability, and human rights protection in West Africa and the Sahel. Legal, digital, financial, and socio-cultural barriers significantly limit their operational effectiveness, visibility, and sustainability. Strategic, coordinated support from governments, regional institutions, civil society, and private actors is essential to empower these leaders. Strengthening youth-led movements not only enhances democratic resilience but also ensures inclusive, rights-based, and sustainable governance across the region.

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