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Item 70 (b) of the provisional agenda\*

**Promotion and protection of human rights: human rights questions, including alternative approaches for improving the effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms**

## Youth activism: from systemic exclusion to real participation

### Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the General Assembly the report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Gina Romero, in accordance with Human Rights Council resolution [50/17](#).

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\* [A/81/150](#).



## **Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association<sup>1</sup>**

### *Summary*

In the present report, the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Gina Romero, recognizes the value of youth activism and analyses the persistent and heightened barriers and threats for its exercise. She provides youth-informed recommendations for protecting and sustaining youth activism as an essential tool for the political participation of young people and for the sustainability of democratic institutions, as well as the protection of rights and freedoms worldwide.

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<sup>1</sup> The Special Rapporteur dedicates the present report to Gustavo Gallón and the youthful rebel that always dwelt within.

## I. Methodology

1. For the preparation of this report, the Special Rapporteur used a participatory and intergenerational approach, engaging with young activists and child rights experts during the report's design and collection of information, to reflect their voices and lived experiences. The report is substantively informed by 190 submissions,<sup>2</sup> including from 180 young people, youth-led organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), one ombudsperson's office and 10 States,<sup>3</sup> as well as by data gathered alongside meetings and consultations with young people engaged in community and grass-roots activism, leaders and participants of social movements and peaceful protests, individuals from marginalized groups, displaced and refugee youth activists, individuals in displacement camps and youth representatives in multilateral spaces, including United Nations youth ambassadors, among others. Collectively, these data concern 97 States and regions,<sup>4</sup> as well as global and regional and subregional trends covering the European Union, Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, the Sahel, the Western Balkans and small island developing States. The report also draws from interactions of the Special Rapporteur with students and youth activists across different regions and her first-hand monitoring and documenting student-led protests.<sup>5</sup>

2. By consulting with over 500 youth-led organizations and activists worldwide, the Special Rapporteur sought to hear directly from young people and children regarding the barriers, challenges and opportunities for exercising their rights to freedoms to peaceful assembly, association and participation. The report provides evidence based on first-hand accounts. It aims to elevate these voices and recognize young people's agency and authenticity. Quotes from youth contributors include their country of origin or region, unless the content of the quote was repeated by different sources.

<sup>2</sup> Given the sensitivities and currently threatening environments, children's and youth activists' submissions will not be published and will be referred to anonymously.

<sup>3</sup> The Special Rapporteur wanted to officially collect inputs from young people using their own preferred formats (audiovisuals, for example) but this was not allowed by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

<sup>4</sup> Albania; Argentina; Armenia; Australia; Austria; Bangladesh (including Rohingya refugee camps); Belarus; Belgium; Benin; Bolivia (Plurinational State of); Brazil; Bulgaria; Cambodia; Cameroon; Canada; Central African Republic; Chile; Colombia; Côte d'Ivoire; Cuba; Ecuador; Egypt; Eswatini; Ethiopia; France; Gambia; Germany; Ghana; Greece; Guatemala; Haiti; Hungary; India; Indonesia; Iran (Islamic Republic of); Iraq; Ireland; Italy; Japan; Jordan; Kenya; Lao People's Democratic Republic; Lebanon; Libya; Madagascar; Malawi; Malaysia; Mali; Mauritius; Mexico; Morocco; Mozambique; Myanmar; Nepal; Netherlands (Kingdom of the); New Zealand; Nicaragua; Niger; Nigeria; North Macedonia; Norway; Pakistan; Peru; Philippines; Poland; Portugal; Republic of Korea; Romania; Russian Federation; Rwanda; Senegal; Serbia; Singapore; Somalia; South Africa; South Sudan; Spain; Sri Lanka; Sudan; Syrian Arab Republic; United Republic of Tanzania; Thailand; Timor-Leste; Togo; Tunisia; Türkiye; United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; United States of America; Uganda; Ukraine (including the temporarily occupied Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, Ukraine); Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of); Viet Nam; Zambia; Zimbabwe; Hong Kong, China; and State of Palestine.

<sup>5</sup> The Special Rapporteur has been in close contact with youth activists, including high-school and university students, since she became the mandate holder. In 2024, she consulted with 100 students from different universities to collect information for a set of recommendations for the protection of assembly and association rights in universities worldwide (see <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/association/statements/20241004-stm-sr-association.pdf>). In 2025, she met with young people during academic visits to the United States of America (30), Kenya (15) and Serbia (24). From January to June 2026, Special Rapporteur directly interacted and met with over 230 young people.

3. There is no universally agreed-upon definition of “youth” or “young persons”, and this report does not aim to present a definitive one. The Special Rapporteur acknowledges the practical utility of defining youth as an age-related condition for policy design and service delivery,<sup>6</sup> however, she prefers to draw on academic perspectives that view youth as a condition and lived experience, constructed from contexts in which young people live and act as historical, political and social subjects.

4. In this sense, young people comprise individuals whose life experiences are determined by personal characteristics (such as gender and ethnicity), as well as living conditions and opportunities and lived experiences (including access to education, work status and social moratorium). These structures grant, or frequently impose, specific roles, functions and commitments. Ultimately, being young transcends age; it is a fluid construct marked by cultural and social architectures that dictate identities, opportunities and the capacity for transformative change; therefore, a group’s sociohistorical-cultural context serves as a far more precise analytical lens.

5. To accommodate diverse sociocultural contexts and the distinct realities of young people across regions, this report applies the broadest operational parameters of existing definitions and also recognizes a general exclusion of children under 12 and adults over 35. The report emphasizes that all young activists under 18 must retain the full spectrum of special protections afforded by international human rights law, specifically under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, while concurrently exercising the standard rights to their status as young people. The term “young activist” is thus used to refer to all young people, including those under 18 and over 12.

6. Within this framework, “activism” refers to the action of all young people who, individually or collectively, exercise their rights – including freedom of peaceful assembly, association and participation – online and/or offline. The term “youth activism” is deliberately chosen to reassert young people’s agency in defining social or political objectives and driving societal change. By positioning youth activism as an essential vehicle for real participation, the report challenges traditional restrictive frameworks that confine young voices to structured “adult-defined decision-making spaces”. Such conventional mechanisms often result in tokenistic inclusion, rather than approaching participation as a “collective political action”.<sup>7</sup>

## II. Introduction

7. The right of young people to civic and public participation, including their right to be heard and have their voices given due weight, is firmly grounded in international human rights law,<sup>8</sup> as well as in global agendas for realizing young people’s right to participation. States should ensure that young people and children can express their “views freely in all matters affecting” them,<sup>9</sup> granting their views due consideration in decision-making, policymaking and the preparation and evaluation of laws and/or

<sup>6</sup> The United Nations, Member States and regional bodies use varying age ranges in their policies and programmes. The United Nations uses 15–24 years, recognizing that the term varies globally. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) defines young people as those aged 10–24. The African Youth Charter applies to ages 15–35, while the European Union defines young people as those aged 15–29. Age ranges also vary widely by national frameworks; in Latin America and the Caribbean, there is a broader consensus regarding the onset of youth (set at 15 years of age by 67 per cent of countries), but there is less agreement on its conclusion (24 years in 42 per cent of countries, 29 years in 30 per cent) (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean).

<sup>7</sup> See <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/chso.70026>.

<sup>8</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, art. 25; Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 12, para. 1; Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

<sup>9</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 12, para. 1.

measures.<sup>10</sup> Participation must be voluntary, inclusive and accountable, with continuous access to formal and informal avenues that directly impacts decision-making.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, States are obliged to guarantee these rights by dismantling persistent legal, political, economic, social and cultural barriers.<sup>12</sup>

8. The role of young people in driving positive change through organizing, mobilizing and innovative actions is widely acknowledged. Global and local policy commitments increasingly recognize the necessity of their meaningful participation, inclusion and engagement in policymaking and decision-making processes. This acknowledges their vital contributions to conflict prevention, building sustainable peace and security, advancing sustainable development and tackling the climate emergency to achieve climate justice. Rather than being viewed merely as passive beneficiaries, young people are explicitly identified as active agents of change and essential partners in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

9. The right of youth participation is grounded in the World Programme of Action for Youth of 1995 and in Security Council resolution [2250 \(2015\)](#), in which the Council urged Member States to include young people at all levels of peace processes and decision-making. In 2018, Youth 2030: the United Nations Strategy on Youth recognized the essential role of young people as leaders and agents of change, emphasizing their resilience and contributions. Its current phase 2 (2025–2030) strategically aims at fostering meaningful youth engagement by strengthening youth-led organizations, networks and movements, explicitly encompassing both formal and informal communities, federations, unions, councils' mechanisms and structures.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, in 2024, the Pact for the Future reasserted global and national commitments to “meaningful youth participation” (actions 36–37);<sup>14</sup> complemented by its annexed Declaration on Future Generations, which emphasized intergenerational dialogue to safeguard the needs and interests of future generations in decision-making. The 2026 Core Principles for Meaningful Youth Participation aim to transition youth engagement from symbolic presence to genuine partnership and “shared decision-making that reflects young people in all their diversity”.<sup>15</sup>

10. Regional dedicated policies and agendas further commit to advancing the right of youth participation. The rights to political participation, freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly and association are formally recognized under the Ibero-American Convention on the Rights of Youth, which mandates that public institutions promote youth participation in policy and legislative projects while respecting the autonomy, independence and resource access of youth organizations. The Ibero-American Youth Pact fosters youth engagement in the 2030 Agenda. The African Youth Charter guarantees freedom of association, assembly and active participation “in all spheres of society”, emphasizing States' responsibilities to promote active youth engagement.<sup>16</sup> The European Union Youth Strategy (2019–2027) promotes policy cooperation to foster “youth participation in democratic life”, “support social and civic engagement” and “ensure that all young people have the

<sup>10</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, general comment No. 12 (2009), para. 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, paras. 128 and 133.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, paras. 11 and 135.

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.un.org/youthaffairs/sites/default/files/2025-05/Youth2030-Phase2-May%202025.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> See [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sotf-pact\\_for\\_the\\_future\\_adopted.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sotf-pact_for_the_future_adopted.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> See [https://www.un.org/youthaffairs/sites/default/files/2026-03/Core%20Principles%20for%20Meaningful%20Youth%20Participation\\_United%20Nations\\_EN.pdf](https://www.un.org/youthaffairs/sites/default/files/2026-03/Core%20Principles%20for%20Meaningful%20Youth%20Participation_United%20Nations_EN.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> See [https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/7789-treaty-0033\\_-\\_african\\_youth\\_charter\\_e.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/7789-treaty-0033_-_african_youth_charter_e.pdf). See also the African Union's Youth Decade Plan of Action, and Malabo Decision on Youth Empowerment.

necessary resources to take part in society”.<sup>17</sup> The Council of Europe’s Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life (updated in 2025–2026) provides a framework for municipalities to involve young people as active partners in decision-making, as essential for building “more democratic, inclusive and prosperous societies”.

11. While global youth agendas and policy commitments consistently emphasize meaningful engagement, protection, prevention and partnerships, as well as young people’s right to self-organize, mobilize and be heard, systemic and practical gaps persist. At both the national and international levels, participation continues to be often tokenistic; young people are systematically excluded from policy design and decision-making, leaving them marginalized during democratic processes.<sup>18</sup>

12. Despite these challenges and a rapidly shrinking civic space, young people are actively seeking innovative, alternative pathways to claim their space, assert their agency and ensure their voices yield meaningful impact. Enabling the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association remains a prerequisite for meaningful, inclusive civic and public participation. It is therefore imperative that all stakeholders recognize and actively foster young people’s political agency, authenticity and potential.

### III. Patterns of youth activism

13. Contemporary youth-led activism follows a historic pattern in which children and young people serve as catalysts for positive social and political change. Precedents include college students in the United States of America mobilizing against the war in Viet Nam in the 1960s and 1970s; youth participation in the Civil Rights Movement; student movements driving the collapse of the Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe in 1989; leading anti-Apartheid campaigns in South Africa; and resisting Latin American dictatorships. Young people were also a driving force in the Arab Spring, the global Occupy movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, climate justice movements like Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future, and the green waves for women’s reproductive health rights in Latin America. Young people were on the front lines of pro-democracy movements in Hong Kong, China, including the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2019 protests; led Thailand’s 2020s protests demanding democratic and monarchy reforms; were central to the “*estallidos sociales*” across Latin America between 2019 and 2021; and played a key role in the Sudan’s 2019 mass protests that led to regime change. Beyond mass mobilization and strikes, children and young people have consistently organized through grass-roots, community and student associations, including student councils, rights clubs and youth syndicates, to advocate for rights and empowerment.

14. Contrary to public narratives portraying young people as “apathetic” and disinterested in political and democratic processes, recent global patterns demonstrate a deep sociopolitical engagement. In 2024 and 2025, mass youth-led civic mobilization and activism, branded as the “Gen-Z Movement”, surged globally. Initially emerging in Bangladesh and Kenya in 2024, major youth-led protests spread in 2025 to Nepal, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, Madagascar, Mali, Morocco, Mexico, Peru and Serbia.

15. Gen-Z activism reflects universal demands for “accountability, inclusion, justice and a meaningful role in shaping their future”.<sup>19</sup> Rather than “isolated

<sup>17</sup> See [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC\\_2018\\_456\\_R\\_0001](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2018_456_R_0001).

<sup>18</sup> See Global Youth Participation Index, available at <https://gypi.epd.eu>.

<sup>19</sup> Submissions from Kenya and Libya.

disruptions”, contemporary youth-led protests are driven by systemic exclusions and a profound “crisis of legitimacy and trust in institutions and authorities”.<sup>20</sup> Despite diverse local contexts, these movements have drawn thousands of participants from varied backgrounds and united them around a deep disillusionment with traditional political structures, which young people increasingly perceive as vehicles of self-preservation for elites that systematically fail to represent their needs. Specific concerns target corruption, systemic abuse of power, failures in public service delivery, worsening socioeconomic inequality and the global resurgence of autocratic practices that clamp down on fundamental freedoms. Consequently, these youth-led concerns have resonated across broader society, mobilizing widespread public support, framing demands around intergenerational justice<sup>21</sup> and opening spaces for broader democratic transformation.

16. For young people, freedom of peaceful assembly and of association are not abstract normative rights, but necessary avenues to protect their present and future well-being. Their activism is deeply personal and political, values-based and rooted in lived experiences, as they bear the brunt of compounding global economic, environmental, political and security crises. It is driven by a profound sense of survival urgency in the face of existential threats like catastrophic wars, genocides and irreversible climate change.<sup>22</sup> For marginalized young people – including LGBTIQ+ persons, refugees, displaced or stateless persons, young people with disabilities and those living in repressive or conflict settings – activism is “often a survival mechanism”<sup>23</sup> and a critical necessity to protect their lives and dignity.

17. For young people, assembling and protesting is seen not as a choice, but a moral necessity to break the silence against deepening injustices.<sup>24</sup> Contemporary youth-led protests have indeed acted as guardians of conscience, and youth activism has taken a significant part in resisting the erosion of human rights and democratic freedoms. In the context where formal political avenues are restricted, youth activism often emerges as the sole available hope.

18. While public debate frequently reduces youth activism to visible protest movements, its scope extends far beyond these to encompass collaborative, development-oriented and non-confrontational actions. This structural engagement thrives through community-based initiatives, student representation, targeted advocacy, institutional involvement and intellectual resistance, among others. It manifests routinely in after-class meetings, drafting policy proposals, negotiating with institutions and leaders, representing peers, leading projects, participating in youth councils, generating knowledge to preserve collective memory and creating opportunities for others, to name just a few. It even includes everyday resistance, such as volunteerism or pursuing learning outside of undue family control. For instance, in Nigeria, young women developed curricula challenging traditional norms amid a climate of fear and overprotection exacerbated by kidnappings.

19. Extensive cooperation remains central to youth activism and encompasses diverse youth initiatives, teachers, public institutions and other sociopolitical actors, including adult-led NGOs. Youth-led organizations frequently fill critical gaps by providing civic and political education, coaching emerging leaders, creating safe

<sup>20</sup> Consultations. See also <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2025/10/the-gen-z-movement-this-is-why-were-risking-our-lives-to-protest/>.

<sup>21</sup> See <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/misunderstanding-youth-activism>; submissions; and consultation with Kenya.

<sup>22</sup> See <https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/berj.4126>.

<sup>23</sup> Submission from Rohingya youth activists.

<sup>24</sup> See <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2025/10/the-gen-z-movement-this-is-why-were-risking-our-lives-to-protest/>.

spaces for dialogue or promoting volunteerism. Rather than merely responding to imminent dangers, this activism is a forward-looking pursuit of tangible community transformation, meaningful co-decision-making and cross-border solidarity. Global restrictions on civic space have catalysed previously disengaged young people, fundamentally redefining the nature of political participation.

20. Amid growing repressions of civic spaces, both online and offline, young people are reimagining and reshaping political activism and participation by relying on non-traditional, creative forms to exercise their assembly and association rights. They organize community initiatives, school and university strikes and direct protest, while also leveraging digital technologies, social media, “artivism” (visual art, performance and digital media), humour and storytelling. “Young people today are not waiting for institutional permission to participate in democracy. We are building our own civic spaces, because traditional institutions have failed to meaningfully represent our realities” (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland).<sup>25</sup>

21. Unlike traditional forms of engagement and hierarchical NGOs, modern youth-led association operate through informal, fluid and decentralized networks. Collective actions form organically and often temporarily around shared interests and localized mutual aid rather than institutional and project-based frameworks, often born out of a necessity to shield leaders from repression, informed by past experiences. This design includes intergenerational interaction and reflects youth aspirations for democratic decision-making. For instance, during recent youth protests in Serbia, students used democratic assemblies or plenums, for the adoption of collective strategies. Similarly, youth protesters in Nepal responded to the Prime Minister’s resignation and the dissolution of Parliament by organizing a live-streamed digital election on Discord.<sup>26</sup> In India, young people created a satirical political movement. This horizontal, spontaneous design allows for rapid mobilization to political crises via immediate “response hashtags”, as “informal organizing allows young people to move quickly, reduce risk and involve participants who may otherwise avoid activism entirely”.<sup>27</sup>

22. Youth movements rely heavily on a “digital-first” approach, leveraging encrypted, community-driven networks and diverse messaging or gaming platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Signal, Telegram, Discord and X. Beyond simple advocacy, they develop digital tools to host debates, expand cross-border solidarity, exchange strategies and support other movements. In Argentina, for example, young people developed digital applications to track policy positions of elected officials, enabling activists outside the capital to engage in public debates.<sup>28</sup> Globally, digital platforms “have become essential civic spaces” for peer support, mental health solidarity, emergency fundraising and the live monitoring of protests.<sup>29</sup>

23. To avoid surveillance and censorship, activists depend heavily on pseudonym anonymity and employ creative methods – such as coded language, symbols, music, art or memes – to bypass moderation algorithms, counter-targeted “shadow-bans” or narratives aimed at undermining their legitimate activism. For vulnerable groups – including LGBTIQ+ young people,<sup>30</sup> as well as girls and young women facing systemic discrimination, physical persecution or legal and administrative bans – online spaces frequently serve as the sole available avenue for engaging, associating and assembling, making some movements entirely online-based.

<sup>25</sup> Submissions.

<sup>26</sup> See <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/09/nepal-gen-z-topple-government>.

<sup>27</sup> Submissions.

<sup>28</sup> Consultations.

<sup>29</sup> Submissions.

<sup>30</sup> Communications HUN 2/2025; and TUR 3/2026.

24. Consequently, Gen-Z has effectively redefined “assembly” as a porous continuum where digital spaces and physical street protests continuously reinforce each other.<sup>31</sup> Exiled activists reporting domestic street restrictions in Cuba to international media help protect on-the-ground activists from prosecution.<sup>32</sup> Conversely, for young people who endure severe digital surveillance or lack basic connectivity, activism remains “physical-first”, rooted in “invisible” community initiatives designed to raise awareness, provide support and preserve memory.

25. Youth mobilization frequently adopts an intersectional approach, linking distinct struggles simultaneously, such as climate justice, ethnic and racial justice, disability rights, LGBTQIA+ rights and economic equality. In several instances, this shared activism has helped dismantle entrenched historical ethnic and social divisions. In Kenya, youth activism has fostered a “pan-identity” anchored in shared socioeconomic grievances and a systemic lack of opportunities. Contemporary youth activism innovatively instrumentalizes transparency. By leveraging digital tools to document and expose corruption and abuse of power, they successfully mobilize public support and counter misinformation. Young people have used social platforms in a variety of ways: in Madagascar, to expose State censorship and corruption; in Nepal to expose corruption, human rights violations and police crackdowns against peaceful protesters; and in Morocco, an online discussion group on systemic inequality expanded into a massive digital transparency campaign that prompted offline demonstrations and political reforms.<sup>33</sup>

26. The intensity and deep moral commitment of youth activism create structural pressures that often feel like a burden and frequently result in mental health burnout. In Serbia, for example, there is a “public pressure and expectations from young people to ‘liberate’ the country and change society, to the point that students feel a heightened level of personal responsibility to not disappoint citizens”.

27. Youth activists – particularly within Gen-Z protest movements – frequently perceive their efforts as failures when they do not secure immediate institutional reforms, a perspective that overlooks the structural realities of power. Attributing the lack of systemic change solely to youth movements is analytically flawed; young people cannot bear ultimate responsibility for societal transformation while remaining systematically excluded from formal decision-making. Therefore, the metrics for evaluating the success of youth mobilization must be reframed. Reclaiming public space to demand systemic accountability is itself a profound success, as the streets function as critical, informal arenas for civic education and political socialization. This alternative form of learning is uniquely vital for marginalized young people and children who are excluded from formal educational institutions, providing an otherwise inaccessible pathway to develop political agency and democratic literacy.

28. Furthermore, informal structures and “digital-first” approaches create additional vulnerabilities. While reimagining democracy, decentralized, leaderless movements often struggle to translate temporary momentum into sustained institutional reforms and policy changes. This leaves movements highly vulnerable to co-optation by established political actors or heavy criticism that could deter future activism. “The issue is no longer whether young people are willing to engage, but whether political, legal and institutional systems are prepared to recognize, protect and support that participation” (sub-Saharan Africa).

<sup>31</sup> See <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/from-screens-to-streets-a-new-wave-of-youth-led-protests>.

<sup>32</sup> Consultations.

<sup>33</sup> See <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/10/04/world/gen-z-protest-movement-explainer-intl>.

## IV. Barriers and protection gaps

29. Youth-led activism is inhibited by systemic legal, digital and socioeconomic barriers, alongside growing securitization and repression of dissent. This suppression is compounded by a standing fatigue and frustration stemming from past failed engagement attempts and persistent lack of access to justice for rights violations. Generally, Governments publicly encourage and support youth participation only when politically convenient and non-disruptive, while systematically suppressing critical activism. “Young people are welcomed when they volunteer, innovate or promote officially accepted causes. However, once youth activism becomes politically inconvenient, confrontational or critical of existing power structures, it is often treated as a security issue rather than democratic participation.”<sup>34</sup>

## V. Public stigmatization and paternalistic narratives

30. Stigmatization propagated by public authorities severely obstructs fundamental freedoms.<sup>35</sup> “My age is perceived as a limitation rather than an asset” (Zimbabwe). A persistent pattern of negative framing exists where State actors, public officials and media dismiss youth activists as lazy, naïve, overly emotional, irresponsible, politically manipulated, “puppets” incapable of understanding sociopolitical complexities or controlled by external opposition or foreign agents. This paternalistic framing discredits youth participation without engaging with the substance of their demands, reinforcing the view that young people are too inexperienced to lead change or to speak on “non-youth-related matters”. “They said we’re blinded by idealism. But we are not blinded; in fact, our eyes have been opened, and we see that our future is at stake” (Philippines).

31. Public discourse frequently stigmatizes young people as inherently violent, troublemakers, vandals, rioters or extremists, and criminalizes youth mobilization, framing peaceful protest and political dissent as a threat to national security, public order, public morality or national values. Authorities and State-controlled media routinely label young activism and non-violent acts – such as campus occupations, climate road blockades and student strikes – as terrorism, economic sabotage, vandalism, organized crime or intents to overthrow the constitutional order, often misclassifying property damage or provocateur-led looting to youth protesters. This narrative is instrumentalized to undermine credibility and public solidarity, reduce trust and justify surveillance, criminalization or the use of lethal or excessive force, including militarized police interventions.

## VI. Legal barriers, exclusion and financial precarity

32. Youth activists across regions report a pervasive environment of fear driven by the securitization of public debate that is used to justify the criminalization of youth movements and dissolution of their associations. The global trends toward criminalization of solidarity and non-violent civil disobedience<sup>36</sup> heavily impacts young people, who frequently rely on these methods to be heard. Belarus has deployed broad extremism laws to target independent student associations, labelled as “extremist” or “terrorist”, subjecting members to severe criminal penalties, including in absentia prosecutions, and classifying the social media of independent student unions

<sup>34</sup> Submissions.

<sup>35</sup> See A/79/263.

<sup>36</sup> See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2025/09/un-and-regional-experts-urge-states-stop-criminalizing-civil>.

as extremist materials.<sup>37</sup> In Nicaragua, the Central American University of Managua was closed and its facilities confiscated after being labelled a “centre of terrorism”.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, infrastructure laws target climate activists with disproportionate penalties, while anti-money-laundering and counter-terrorism financing frameworks are instrumentalized to freeze funds for informal collectives and criminalize crowdfunding.

33. Youth activism is heavily impacted by restrictive legal environments that prioritize formal, registered entities, resulting in structural exclusion. Contrary to international human rights standards, Governments increasingly criminalize spontaneous gatherings, including protests and unregistered associations,<sup>39</sup> weaponizing authorization and registration laws to label informal youth groups and assemblies as illegal. Onerous administrative regulations disproportionately burden youth-led initiatives, particularly those led by or serving economically disadvantaged communities. This forces young people into a trap: they must either operate through adult-led NGOs or keep their initiatives informal, leaving them exposed to legal systems that criminalize unregistered entities and block their access to vital resources and protection.

34. Young people under 18 face even greater legal barriers, as national frameworks remain largely inconsistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. State laws impose strict statutory age-limitations on the right to organize, lead or register organizations or require demonstrations permits to be obtained exclusively by adults, who assume the legal liability.<sup>40</sup> Some jurisdictions explicitly prohibit young people under 18 from attending protests or joining activities without parental permission. In contrast, in its general comment No. 20 (2016) on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence, the Committee on the Rights of the Child emphasized that persons between 10 and 18 are entitled to the enjoyment of these freedoms across all spaces – including in schools and online – and must be granted the legal recognition to establish their own associations.<sup>41</sup>

35. In several jurisdictions, young people face severe legal restrictions when trying to form student unions or organize on campus. Pakistan, for instance, maintains a four decades-long ban on student unions, effectively excluding generations of students from political and democratic participation.<sup>42</sup> In March 2026, Nepal enacted an action plan to ban and dismantle politically affiliated student organizations, replacing them with non-partisan “student councils”.<sup>43</sup> Such measures threaten the outright disappearance of independent youth associations, mirroring restrictive environments in Belarus, China and Cuba.

36. Restricting freedom of association on political grounds violates the prohibition on limitations based on political opinion established in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Such legal environments stifle youth formalization or grant States dangerous overreach. In the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the “NGO law” grants the Government discretionary powers to dissolve associations via ministry

<sup>37</sup> See [https://en.rada.fm/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2025/05/eng\\_joint\\_submission\\_to\\_the\\_united\\_nations\\_human\\_rights\\_council\\_by\\_the.pdf](https://en.rada.fm/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2025/05/eng_joint_submission_to_the_united_nations_human_rights_council_by_the.pdf); and communication BLR 13/2025.

<sup>38</sup> Communication NIC 1/2025.

<sup>39</sup> Human Rights Committee, general comment No. 37 (2020).

<sup>40</sup> See <https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Under-Protected-and-Over-Restricted-The-State-of-the-Right-to-Protest-in-21-European-Countries.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> General comment No. 20 (2016), para. 45.

<sup>42</sup> Consultation. See also, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1876827>; and <https://www.thenews.pk/print/1398042-42-years-on-no-government-has-kept-its-promise-to-restore-student-unions>.

<sup>43</sup> See <https://kathmandupost.com/politics/2026/03/31/planned-ban-on-student-unions-sparks-debate-on-fundamental-right>.

resolution, bypassing any required judicial process.<sup>44</sup> Consistent with standards set by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Committee on the Right of the Child, all young people – including those under 18 – must be guaranteed the right to form and join trade unions or associations of their own choosing, regardless of contracts status, sector or engagement in the formal or informal economy.<sup>45</sup>

37. Accessing and managing funds remain a critical challenge. Traditional donor models are generally inaccessible to grass-roots initiatives because support is conditional on formal registration, complex reporting and onerous application. This excludes small, fluid and informal structures, forcing them into dependency on larger NGOs or compelling them to adopt rigid institutional forms that undermine their autonomy. Even when youth groups attempt to register, they are frequently blocked by excessive administrative hurdles and age restrictions. Without legal status, they cannot open bank accounts or manage funds legally, limiting their sustainability. This model particularly harms young people in hostile, repressive environments, where formal registration increases visibility and heightens the risk of State persecution.

38. Compounding this, available funding is frequently short-term and project-based, failing to offer the structural continuity or well-being support needed to prevent activist burnout. Globally, the defunding of civic spaces is worsened by foreign funding stigmatization, which deters young people from seeking outside resources. For example, conditioning international aid on the exclusion of “gender ideology” and diversity, equity and inclusion frameworks has devastated youth-led organizations working on sexual, reproductive and LGBTIQ+ rights globally. This economic precarity creates a vicious cycle: economically vulnerable young people cannot sustain long-term engagement due to a lack of support networks, facing a “trade-off between survival and activism” forcing them to divert energy from organizing towards financial survival and managing the resulting mental health strains. In response, youth actions are often self-funded, via crowdfunding and community support. Innovative youth-led donor models have emerged where young people control grant-making decisions and provide flexible, trust-based support (such as the CHOICE for Youth & Sexuality model, funded by the Kingdom of the Netherlands). Flexible pro bono legal aid remains essential to protect activists from arbitrary arrest, unjust criminalization and any strategic lawsuit against public participation. In the United Kingdom, university students penalized for their activism in solidarity with Palestine noted that a lack of legal support forced them to choose between continuing their activism or defending themselves.

## VII. Repression instead of protection

39. The Special Rapporteur has observed a disturbing global pattern of States failing to facilitate, protect and ensure a safe space for young people to exercise their freedoms. Instead, States often respond to youth activists with intimidation, excessive restrictions, unjust criminalization, punishment, repression and numerous and grave human rights violations, often denying access to justice. Young activists face serious abuse, including violations of their right to life, the absolute prohibition from torture

<sup>44</sup> Submissions.

<sup>45</sup> [A/HRC/53/38/Add.3](#), para. 33; “Right of workers and employers, without distinction whatsoever, to establish and to join organizations”, in *Freedom of Association: Digest of decisions and principles of the Freedom of Association Committee of the Governing Body of the ILO* (Geneva, ILO, 2006), para. 417; and general comment No. 20, para. 45.

and ill-treatment, arbitrary arrest and detention, enforced disappearance and due process violations.<sup>46</sup>

40. Students and youth-led peaceful protests, including on high-schools and university campuses, are subjected to unnecessary and excessive force. Law enforcement frequently disregards obligations regarding the use of force, deliberately and indiscriminately deploying “less lethal” weapons like rubber bullets, tear gas and chemical-laced water cannons, neglecting the specific protection needs and vulnerabilities of young participants.<sup>47</sup> States consistently fail to provide activists under 18 with the additional protections to which they are entitled during protests and criminal justice processes under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>48</sup>

41. Consequently, hundreds of young activists, including children, have been killed and thousands arbitrarily detained in youth-led protests since 2024. In Europe<sup>49</sup> and the United States, climate justice and Palestine solidarity student movements faced systemic repression, criminalization and police violence.<sup>50</sup> During Palestine solidarity protests in Germany, law enforcement allegedly subjected youth activists, including children, to violence and arrests, and the denial of access to legal representation or family communication, as well as the disproportionately targeting racialized young men.<sup>51</sup> Law enforcement’s use of live ammunition has reportedly killed numerous young participants during youth-led protests in States including Angola, Bangladesh, Nepal, Iran (Islamic Republic of) and the United Republic of Tanzania.<sup>52</sup> In Nepal, security forces repressed youth-led Gen-Z demonstrations in September 2025 through alleged extrajudicial killings, detentions and excessive force, resulting in multiple deaths and injuries, including of schoolchildren.<sup>53</sup> In Serbia, in March 2025, authorities allegedly deployed an acoustic weapon that caused severe health injuries and psychological distress to over 100 people, including students.<sup>54</sup> States have routinely failed to provide youth assemblies with the necessary protection, leaving them exposed to attacks by third-party actors.<sup>55</sup> Racial discrimination also persists: Indigenous youth have allegedly faced violence during protests in Bangladesh,<sup>56</sup> and in Ecuador, Indigenous activists under 18 reportedly had their hair cut while in police custody.<sup>57</sup>

42. States have generally failed to conduct prompt, independent and thorough investigations into abuses against youth activism, choosing instead to deny allegations and justify them on the pretext of public order, safety or lack of assembly authorization. In some cases, officials have justified police violence by stigmatizing young people and blaming parents for allowing their participation. Angola’s authorities branded non-violent youth protests as organized “riots” and threats to

<sup>46</sup> Communications BGD 6/2024; TZA 3/2024; NPL 1/2025; AGO 2/2025; GMB 1/2025; GEO 4/2024; IDN 3/2025; SRB 6/2025; and USA 33/2025.

<sup>47</sup> Communication GEO 4/2024. See also, Human Rights Committee, general comment No. 37; and [A/HRC/55/60](#).

<sup>48</sup> General comment No. 24 (2019).

<sup>49</sup> Including France, Germany, Netherlands (Kingdom of the), Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

<sup>50</sup> See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/05/united-kingdom-un-expert-alarmed-systemic-erosion-right-protest>; communications GBR 13/2025, DEU 2/2025; and USA 11/2025.

<sup>51</sup> Communication DEU 2/2025.

<sup>52</sup> Communications NPL 1/2025; AGO 2/2025 TZA 3/2024; and BGD 6/2024. See also <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/02/iran-un-experts-demand-transparency-and-accountability-following-nationwide>.

<sup>53</sup> Communication NPL 1/2025.

<sup>54</sup> Communication SRB 2/2025.

<sup>55</sup> In Serbia, motorcycle riders protect youth protests to prevent cars from running over students.

<sup>56</sup> Communication BGD 5/2025.

<sup>57</sup> Submissions.

public safety.<sup>58</sup> In Serbia, authorities threatened to prosecute people for spreading “panic and lies”, while denying and failing to investigate the use of a “sonic weapon” or “sound cannon” against peaceful protesters.<sup>59</sup>

43. There is a concerning trend of States detaining young people, including under 18, under anti-terrorism and national security laws, including prolonged administrative detention, excessive sentences and inhumane prison conditions. Young activists often face politically motivated detention, such as in Cuba. In the 2024 post-election protests in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, young people were arbitrarily detained and prosecuted in terrorism courts;<sup>60</sup> in the United States, non-citizen students engaged in Palestine solidarity activism were subjected to detention and deportation proceedings solely for expressing political dissent.<sup>61</sup> Belarus has reportedly subjected young pro-democracy and anti-war activists to inhumane detention, imposing up to 10 years of imprisonment while denying adequate access to legal defence and parental support.<sup>62</sup> The Islamic Republic of Iran detained young people and children in connection to nationwide protests in January 2026, allegedly subjecting them to torture, expedited trials on espionage charges and summary execution.<sup>63</sup> Israel has systematically detained without charge and subjected to physical violence and other ill-treatment Palestinian young people and children for political activism.<sup>64</sup> “The boundary between student activism and high-stakes State security was deliberately blurred” (Serbia), as law enforcement and intelligence agencies engaged in “systematic campaigns to terrorize students”, leaving detained secondary school protesters subjected to ill-treatment.<sup>65</sup>

## VIII. Digital threats and social media restrictions

44. Young people reiterated that Internet access is a prerequisite for exercising peaceful assembly and association freedoms and for civic participation. Digital connectivity remains especially critical during crises, elections and politically contested periods.

45. While digital tools facilitate youth activism – enabling engagement and trust-building, solidarity, mobilization, advocacy and fundraising – they also serve as tools for repression. Youth movements face significant threats from surveillance, biometric monitoring, privacy violations and exposure to smear campaigns or doxxing. They are also faced with arbitrary Internet and social media bans, digitally enabled physical attacks and censorship. Activism faces heightened threats on a massive scale due to

<sup>58</sup> Communication AGO 2/2025.

<sup>59</sup> Communication SRB 2/2025.

<sup>60</sup> Communication VEN 7/2024.

<sup>61</sup> See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/03/us-must-immediately-release-palestinian-rights-activist-mahmoud-khalil-and>.

<sup>62</sup> See <https://zbsunion.org/en/projects/living-when-life-is-behind-bars-the-story-of-a-young-political-prisoner>; and <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/06/belarus-un-experts-raise-alarm-over-treatment-political-prisoners-urge>.

<sup>63</sup> See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/07/un-experts-urge-iran-choose-protection-over-repression-after-ceasefire>; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/02/iran-children-among-30-people-at-risk-of-the-death-penalty-amid-expedited-grossly-unfair-trials-connected-to-uprising/>; and <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-calls-release-all-children-arrested-latest-public-unrest-iran>.

<sup>64</sup> See A/80/723-S/2026/357; and <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/israels-arrest-of-us-palestinian-student-part-of-campaign-targeting-student-movement-official/3956755>.

<sup>65</sup> Submissions.

an expanding ecosystem of digitally enabled surveillance sustained by opaque relations between State and digital companies.<sup>66</sup>

46. A comprehensive global study<sup>67</sup> conducted by the Special Rapporteur documented how digitally enabled surveillance creates a long-lasting chilling effect and compounds harm for the exercise of a long list of concerned human rights, including freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, disproportionality affecting marginalized young people. Biometric tracking, facial-recognition and artificial intelligence-enabled identification tools exacerbate these effects, exposing activists to retrospective identification and future retaliation. The impact of digital surveillance extends beyond immediate targets, chilling broader civic participation. As noted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF),<sup>68</sup> the consequences of digital surveillance for young people and children can be far-reaching, often leading to the arrest of young activists and placing them on permanent State or educational watch lists without clear redress or removal, thereby threatening their future education, career development and opportunities.

47. Service providers' and social media platforms' non-transparent algorithmic content moderation, arbitrary suppression and shadow bans of selected voices pose another major barrier to inclusive youth activism. Digital platforms shape and control public discourse and participation, which, combined with the chilling effects of State-surveillance, erodes digital spaces as sites of authentic civic engagement.<sup>69</sup> States have also weaponized Internet and mobile network shutdowns, while pressuring platforms to suspend influential youth leaders' accounts to prevent and suppress mobilization. Cybercrime and national security-related laws are misused to criminalize digitally enabled activism while youth activists often lack access to resources to mitigate these threats.

48. Social media bans pose a de facto barrier to youth activism. Digital platforms have become a primary infrastructure for modern youth activism and democratic participation; arbitrary restrictions on access, account suspension or blanket bans structurally cut off young people from their primary avenues of communication, assembly, organization and political expression, thereby exacerbating existing exclusions. The global emerging trend towards imposing blanket social media bans on young people under 16 creates a civic-political vacuum where they can neither assemble nor digitally associate, effectively stripping them of their political agency and collective voice. Several States are adopting and imposing similar bans under the justification of protecting children from digital abuse and mental health harm.<sup>70</sup>

49. Although child protection is a legitimate objective, United Nations experts, human rights bodies and civil society have consistently documented and warned about the serious harms – including psychological and physical repression of activists and associated chilling effects – due to opaque platform design and conduct that amplifies hatred, enables digital surveillance and fuels stigmatizations and sexual and gender-based violence. These blanket bans disproportionately interfere with a range of rights, including freedom of expression, association, assembly and access to information. They are adopted without broad, youth-inclusive consultations and lack sufficient evidence to prove their effectiveness.

<sup>66</sup> See A/HRC/62/45.

<sup>67</sup> See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-freedom-of-assembly-and-association/pushed-shadows>.

<sup>68</sup> Submission of UNICEF to the report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association (A/HRC/62/45).

<sup>69</sup> Submission.

<sup>70</sup> See <https://www.unicef.org.au/unicef-youth/staying-safe-online/social-media-ban-explainer?srsId=AfmBOoqb6EprE3MEIPv0cVAzuOWdICKUKFhOkLBwOP-bov-rU-YaqmsF>.

50. Broad age-based restrictions and youth curfews are inadequate measures for addressing the structural root cause. Instead, States and companies must comply with human rights obligations by ensuring platform design and conduct respect and protect rights and freedoms, ensure transparency and data protection and strengthen oversight and accountability.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, social media bans ignore physical realities, which are not equally safe or accessible for all young people. Shutting down digital networks removes the only available “safe haven” for LGBTIQ+ young people, refugees, persons with disabilities and girls in restrictive environments. In contexts like Nigeria, where girls face structural exclusion from physical civic spaces, digital restrictions deprive them of “the only available avenue for civic voice”. Paradoxically, these restrictions expose young people to greater potential harm by forcing them to use unregulated underground applications to evade restrictions, or pushing them towards insecure physical spaces.

## IX. The dual role of the education system

51. “Barriers to participation do not come solely from political institutions, but also from family, school, academic and social dynamics that continue to reproduce adult-centred views of citizenship and the political capacity of children and young people” (Colombia). Education that is free from undue political interference and grounded in academic freedoms – recognizing that rights and freedoms are learned through practice – is foundational for inclusive democratic participation and the effective realization of assembly and association rights. Education plays a key role in civic and political formation by developing awareness of democratic values, respect for political pluralism, tolerance and critical thinking. In many countries, high schools and universities remain the primary avenues for youth mobilization and public participation, shaping political discourse, social and cultural identities and the future sustainability of democracy and human rights.<sup>72</sup> Education environments must respect and facilitate student freedoms, guarantee space for dissent and actively foster open debate. Furthermore, school discipline must be administered in a manner consistent with students’ human dignity and in conformity with international human rights law.

52. However, States and academic institutions at all educational levels have intensified undue restrictions on academic freedoms and student activism, as part of a broader suppression of civic space. This trend represents an expansion of State-level restrictions, seeking to suppress and reshape political participation from the early stages of civic formation. Youth activists identify educational institutions as critical sites where their civic rights and activism are both nurtured and increasingly suppressed. While schools and universities historically have been hubs for critical thinking and activism, young people now report a serious erosion of these “safe spaces”. The sustainability of youth activism is threatened by discriminatory and politically motivated bans and censorship on subjects and discussions,<sup>73</sup> punitive measures against dissenting students and faculty, the manipulation of public funding for the purposes of exerting political pressure on educational institutions (such as in Switzerland and the United States), or the co-opting of universities by corrupt actors

<sup>71</sup> See <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/children/getting-childrens-safety-online-right.pdf>; <https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/05/1167608>; and <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/age-restrictions-alone-wont-keep-children-safe-online>.

<sup>72</sup> See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2024/10/universities-must-respect-peaceful-activism-and-revise-repressive>.

<sup>73</sup> Some universities in Switzerland have a strict approval regime for all types of events, including academic, which are subject to detailed reviews, and even censorship, regarding topics, content and guests. See communication CHE 5/2025.

(Guatemala). Academics and students are increasingly excluded from policymaking,<sup>74</sup> signalling an authoritarian encroachment on universities, where State power is increasingly used to penalize dissent, shape curricula and restrict open inquiry.

53. In Indonesia, young people voiced concerns about the increased militarization of academic spaces, including through training and “installing military values” over democratic principles under the guise of national defence.<sup>75</sup> In Belarus, independent student activism is suppressed through State-institutionalized indoctrination, including “military-patriotic” programmes and the replacement of criminalized independent student unions with State-affiliated associations.<sup>76</sup> In the Russian Federation, the education system has been instrumentalized to spread State propaganda – often contradicting human rights – and to monitor, surveil and target students who are critical of authorities.<sup>77</sup> Such environments create fear, enforce self-censorship and suffocate the dialogue and critical thinking necessary to enable youth activism.

54. Student activism on campuses is curtailed by increasing securitization, bans and restrictions, the case of the United States being highly worrisome.<sup>78</sup> Universities have facilitated State repression, while labelling students as “terrorists” or “extremists”. Institutions increasingly collaborate with police or deploy private security to surveil and suppress student-led initiatives, turning campuses into hyper-securitized spaces and hostile environments for dissent, as in Chile and the United Kingdom.<sup>79</sup> Student peaceful protests – including encampments – related to the global Palestine solidarity movement in several European States, Australia, Canada and the United States have been met with criminalization, surveillance and disproportionate disciplinary actions, including deportations.<sup>80</sup> In some of these contexts, institutional surveillance on campuses has been expanded under the guise of fighting antisemitism.

55. Student peaceful activism often triggers disciplinary retaliation and academic sanctions, such as suspension or expulsion, which can result in long-term blacklisting and hinder future career prospects. Criminalization of student protests often causes restrictions on related associations, the suspension or dissolution of student parliaments and banning of registered organizations from campus spaces, affecting students’ association rights. In Türkiye, undue restrictions regarding the lack of recognition of LGBTIQ+ student clubs result in their “exclusion from campus venues, funding and institutional protections, effectively criminalizing their existence as ‘unauthorized’”.<sup>81</sup> In Serbia, authorities threatened student activists with losing the whole academic year if they did not end protest blockades, while supporting teachers faced wages reductions or cuts.<sup>82</sup> Fear of academic retaliation, arbitrary disciplinary punishments or stigmatization prevent students from organizing or discussing political or controversial issues; similarly, young people from India reported retaliation or stigmatization for discussing mental health or gender justice.<sup>83</sup>

56. The destruction of educational infrastructure violates international human rights and humanitarian law, severely disrupting organized civic activism. “The targeting of

<sup>74</sup> See <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/political-interference-in-academic-freedom>.

<sup>75</sup> Consultations.

<sup>76</sup> See <https://zbsunion.org/en/projects/the-state-of-belarusian-academia-2025>.

<sup>77</sup> See <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/06/russia-schools-have-turned-into-factories-of-compliance-through-state-indoctrination-and-surveillance-of-children/>.

<sup>78</sup> Communications OTH 71/2024; OTH 37/2025; OTH 60/2025; OTH 126/2025; and OTH 125/2025.

<sup>79</sup> See A/HRC/62/45/Add.1; and <https://www.campusprotest.org.uk/>.

<sup>80</sup> See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2024/10/universities-must-respect-peaceful-activism-and-revise-repressive>.

<sup>81</sup> Submissions.

<sup>82</sup> Communication SRB 2/2025.

<sup>83</sup> Submissions.

educational infrastructure – universities, schools, libraries – is a structural blow to civic formation itself, and their destruction disrupts the institutional pipelines through which youth leadership and organized civic engagement develop” (Gaza). Where girls are barred from education due to hostile environments or State restrictions, such as in Afghanistan or Nigeria, generations of girls and women are deprived of civic-political participation. Where formal educational and participation spaces are repressed, informal community education, peer knowledge networks and knowledge-preserving collectives have filled the void to sustain activism, serving as vital forms of resistance that build civic resilience. Such associations should be equally recognized, protected and supported with access to resources.

57. Besides the educational system, the sustainability of youth activism relies on an ecosystem of actors who often act as barriers rather than sources of support, specifically within domestic and societal spheres. At the domestic level, families can inadvertently or intentionally stifle youth agency, rather than recognize them as autonomous political actors. This manifests as intense pressure to prioritize formal educational resources over civic engagement, volunteerism or public protest. In restrictive environments, family structures are often weaponized to restrict mobility and digital access, stripping young people of their self-determination under the guise of protection or paternalistic authority.

58. Beyond the household, society at large reinforces this exclusion through deep-seated cultural hierarchies. “Engaging communities at the grass-roots level often requires navigating relationships with traditional authorities, including chiefs and their representatives, who may expect financial compensation or personal benefits before allowing organizations to operate, even when the work directly benefits them” (South-East Asia). Public institutions, the media and adult-led civil society groups routinely demand that young people serve as passive beneficiaries or token symbols of the future, rather than equal partners in the present. When society denies young people a legitimate, institutionalized platform to channel their grievances, it actively forces them to choose between systemic compliance and confrontational street politics, transforming what should be an inclusive democratic dialogue into a high-stakes struggle for basic recognition.

59. Youth activists have a dual perception of other civil society actors, including established civil society organizations: they are seen in many cases as playing a critical role in supporting their movements, facilitating access to resources and ensuring they can operate even in the more restrictive environments; while in other cases, those organizations reinforce existing hierarchies and thus make it difficult to establish fruitful partnerships.

## **X. Compounded vulnerabilities and intersectional barriers**

60. Young advocates – particularly young women, LGBTIQ+ persons, persons with disabilities and migrant young people – face deep structural exclusion, intersectional barriers and targeted campaigns that exploit sociocultural stereotypes. They are often expected show gratitude for a seat at the table rather than being recognized as equal peers. In restrictive environments for girls and young women, this exclusion is compounded by direct prohibitions on participation and male relatives controlling association memberships, travel and digital access, all exacerbated by State-level indifference to their safety, as in Nigeria. Rather than being recognized as equal peers, these advocates are frequently subjected to public narratives that vilify or minimize their contributions. Young persons with disabilities continue to face a myriad of barriers to equal sociopolitical participation, particularly persisting harmful attitudes towards impairment, which fail to recognize them as active participants with a right

to shape their own destinies.<sup>84</sup> Globally, LGBTIQ+ activism is systematically framed through the lens of public morality or national security, branding young people as threats to the family unit, child safety and State security to justify family exclusion and the banning of their organizations.

61. This hostility is heavily amplified in the digital sphere. Coordinated online disinformation and misinformation campaigns leverage algorithmic content to spread hatred, anti-rights messages and misogyny. This has enabled the concerted mobilization of reactionary youth groups on social platforms to promote violence and discrimination against young people belonging to marginalized groups, including women,<sup>85</sup> LGBTIQ+ persons, persons with disabilities and migrants. These organized anti-rights movements deepen polarization, create hostile civic environments, hijack broader youth democratic agendas and hinder inclusive participation.<sup>86</sup>

62. These intersecting vulnerabilities result in disproportionately severe impacts. Migrant young people face an elevated risk of deportation and transnational repression; young people in displacement or conflict zones confront acute safety and economic constraints; and rural young people struggle with geographic isolation and a lack of access to legal information or solidarity networks. Young people with disabilities are disproportionately likely to have their rights stripped away and be precluded from participation. Physical or attitudinal barriers can further complicate access to relevant spaces and compliance with administrative requirements for youth organizations, and certain types of impairments may expose young activists with disabilities to a heightened risk of harm resulting from the use of force by law enforcement during demonstrations. To effectively protect youth activism, these compound vulnerabilities must be explicitly integrated into all institutional accountability mechanisms, policies and protection strategies.

## **XI. A unified framework: from youth vision to actionable recommendations**

63. **Listening to young people and their diverse experience-rooted demands, the Special Rapporteur offers the below guidance. It aims to bridge the systemic participation gap and ensure that youth activism translates into actual policy and decision-making influence at the national and international levels. In all cases, policy designs and implementation must structurally include youth voices. “Protecting freedom of peaceful assembly and association rights means recognizing young people not as passive beneficiaries of democracy, but as active participants in building it.”**

### **A. Pillar 1: legal recognition and binding institutional participation**

64. **Democratic institutions must recognize young people as political actors in the present, not just citizens of the future. Young people place democratic values, accountability and transparency at the core of their engagement with authorities. To move past tokenistic inclusion, hollow consultations or “visibility exercises”, youth participation must be legally guaranteed, continuous, adequately resourced and institutionalized across all legislative processes, public consultations and policy development. Young people globally call for substantial**

<sup>84</sup> Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, general comment No. 7 (2018).

<sup>85</sup> See <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/how-to-counter-the-manospheres-toxic-influence>.

<sup>86</sup> Submission from a Youth Ambassador on Gender Equality.

and influential participation through binding decision-making bodies within governing institutions at the local, regional and national levels; positive, though limited, frameworks can be found in European youth councils, the youth participatory system in Colombia and the youth councils and committees in Brazil.

65. This requires mandatory participation frameworks that ensure the broad, equitable representation of the marginalized, rural and “seldom heard”.<sup>87</sup> States should:

- (a) Enact legal frameworks that explicitly guarantee formal, informal and unregistered youth collectives the right to assembly, association and public participation, in line with international standards, considering youth-preferred tools and languages;
- (b) Institutionalize compulsory youth and child consultations throughout the design, implementation and impact assessment phases of all laws or policies that potentially affect their rights and freedoms;
- (c) Repeal laws that criminalize informal or spontaneous organizing and remove arbitrary or blanket age-related restrictions;
- (d) Eliminate burdensome bureaucratic procedures and high thresholds to streamline the registration and operational capacity of youth-led associations;
- (e) Ensure all domestic regulations concerning persons under 18 uphold their equal rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression while protecting the best interests of the child.

## **B. Pillar 2: shared power, all-stage involvement and traceable accountability**

66. The fundamental challenge “is not a lack of youth engagement. It is a lack of power-sharing”. Young people rightfully demand a shift from occasional consultation to substantive co-decision-making and policy co-creation. “The future of civic space will depend not only on young people’s willingness to engage, but also on institutions’ willingness to share power, listen seriously and recognize young people as partners rather than merely beneficiaries of public policy” (Portugal). This shift requires:

- (a) Engaging young people from initial policy formulation – where priorities and agendas are set – through implementation, evaluation and tracking, ensuring they serve as “active architects of their future”;
- (b) Moving youth engagement out of siloed “soft” areas (sports, culture or niche “youth issues”) and integrating them as equal stakeholders in “hard” policy domains, including finance, national budgets, climate, security and peace, thereby fully valuing their agency and knowledge;
- (c) Emphasizing youth “traceability”, requiring institutions to provide transparent feedback loops detailing exactly how the inputs of young people are considered or providing a motivated justification if a different policy direction is chosen.

<sup>87</sup> Submission from Ireland.

**67. States and policymakers must:**

- (a) From early stages, establish inclusive platforms for genuine dialogue between young people and policymakers to address the concerns, aspirations and protest demands of young people;
- (b) Collaboratively design structural and policy pathways seeking solutions to address the legitimate concerns of young people;
- (c) Hold educational institutions of all levels, private technology companies and platforms and State bodies accountable if they fail to protect, or are actively involved in violating, the rights of youth activists.

**C. Pillar 3: guaranteeing safe and inclusive civic spaces**

68. For young people, the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association are the baseline infrastructure required to safeguard youth well-being. Protecting these rights means recognizing and protecting decentralized, fluid and unregistered youth networks as legitimate civic actors. Genuine inclusion also demands the recognition and support of less visible activism – such as grass-roots training, awareness-raising and peer mental health initiatives – which build the collective resilience necessary to sustain broader assembly rights.

**69. States and policymakers must:**

- (a) Respect, protect and decriminalize youth activism while ceasing its stigmatization, ensuring that young people can participate in peaceful protests freely;
- (b) Refrain from imposing unjust punishments or utilizing counter-terrorism or national security laws to stifle legitimate youth dissent and non-violent direct action;
- (c) Strengthen independent oversight, accountability and redress mechanisms to ensure independent investigations into and the non-repetition of excessive force, human rights violations and digital abuse against youth activists;
- (d) Explicitly integrate specific protection safeguards within human rights risk assessments to mitigate the chilling effects, compound harms and underlying discrimination faced by highly vulnerable groups, including young women, LGBTIQ+ young people, Indigenous groups, young people with disabilities and minority communities.<sup>88</sup>

**D. Pillar 4: recognizing and protecting digital civic space**

70. Digital platforms have become the primary infrastructure for modern youth communication, assembly and political expression. “The streets became classrooms of learning and our phones became the diaries of our generation’s journey” (Kenya).

**71. States and policymakers must:**

- (a) Protect digital infrastructure from arbitrary network shutdowns, shadow banning and targeted surveillance that risk chilling broader civic participation;

<sup>88</sup> See [A/HRC/62/45](#).

(b) Refrain from imposing blanket, age-based social media bans; instead, enforce corporate compliance with human rights due diligence, transparency and data protection standards throughout products' life cycles;

(c) Hold private platforms legally accountable for inadequate designs, digital violence, arbitrary content moderation or the amplification of algorithmic disinformation, misogyny and anti-rights narratives aimed at undermining youth activism;

(d) Ensure all digitally mediated restrictions comply with international human rights standards and do not endanger, intimidate, silence or isolate young people from civic-political life;

(e) Assess the compound harm resulting from digitally enabled surveillance, including its chilling effects on youth activism, and ensure adequate reparations, including for harmful mental health impacts.

**72. Companies and digital platforms must:**

(a) Review digital services, content moderation, algorithms and data architectures in direct consultation with diverse young people to ensure they protect rights by design;

(b) Enforce robust data-protection standards to shield young people from arbitrary, unlawful State-sponsored spyware (which is intrinsically harmful to human rights), retrospective identification, biometric profiling and doxxing;

(c) Ensure that access to and the use of essential digital services and infrastructure, including social media platforms, are not conditional on the pervasive surveillance of young people.

## **E. Pillar 5: safeguarding educational institutions and academic freedom**

**73. When academic institutions relegate activism, including protests off-campus or away from classroom spaces, they neglect a fundamental truth: human rights, including of peaceful assembly, association, participation and expression, are learned through practice, not just theory. Civic participation and dissent are not distractions from education, but essential, practical mechanisms for developing citizenship and life skills. To ensure the sustainability of human rights and democratic systems, educational institutions must proactively foster healthy environments that champion viewpoint diversity, open inquiry and respectful dialogue.<sup>89</sup> Universities and schools must be upheld as vital arenas where democratic values are actively exercised and safeguarded, rather than stifled. Academic freedoms need to be respected at all times.**

**74. Educational institutions must:**

(a) Respect, protect and facilitate the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, expression and academic freedom both on and off campus, including political dissent;

(b) Allow for the renewal of youth leaderships and refrain from coopting their associations;

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<sup>89</sup> See <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/association/statements/20241004-stm-sr-association.pdf>.

(c) Review and reform all norms and institutional practices that restrict activities used for critical thinking and civic education (including the creation of formal or informal associations and peaceful assemblies), in collaboration with the academic community;

(d) Strictly refrain from using surveillance and profiling tools and from implementing arbitrary disciplinary punishments – such as suspension, expulsion or the revocation of scholarships – to restrict, dissuade, suppress or penalize students for peaceful political dissent or participation in independent student unions;<sup>90</sup>

(e) Implement specific protection safeguards addressing gender-based violence and the distinct needs of marginalized young people, including LGBTIQ+ persons, Indigenous groups or young people with disabilities;

(f) Ensure that organizations representing such marginalized youth communities are provided institutional protection and can access adequate funding mechanisms.

## **F. Pillar 6: resource access, autonomy and intergenerational solidarity**

75. “We don’t really identify with being Gen-Z protesters. We are just activists who happen to be young people” (Latin America). Sustaining youth activism requires intergenerational dialogue based on mutual respect and sufficient funding. Extractive or gatekeeping approaches do not respect the autonomy of youth-led movements. Young people aim to transform the historic weight of exclusion and stigma into collective action and evidence-based activism. Leadership development programmes and training in countering misinformation and disinformation, as well as communication advocacy, negotiation and civic engagement, can prepare young people for active, effective participation.

76. States should take the steps necessary to protect peer-to-peer financing and crowdfunding mechanisms, ensuring that anti-money-laundering and counter-terrorism financing frameworks are not misused to freeze crowdfunding efforts; while also refraining from the stigmatization and criminalization of such groups based solely on their receiving foreign funding. Donors and civil society organizations must:

(a) Implement flexible, simplified and direct funding models – including core funding, microgrants and youth-led donor management – aimed at ensuring that funding requirements and procedures accommodate diverse youth grass-roots movements and decentralized structures;

(b) Provide accessible emergency legal support, including pro bono representation, to protect young people from arbitrary arrest and detention, unjust criminalization, strategic lawsuits against public participation and institutional reprisals.

77. Develop holistic support systems that actively mitigate the impacts of widespread activist burnout and trauma, including by integrating comprehensive mental health-care and psychosocial support directly into core funding frameworks.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

**78. Countering digital-space risks requires a deliberate reinvestment in physical environments. Policymakers must ensure that offline spaces offer adequate, safe and accessible opportunities for young people to gather, organize and enjoy offline activities without fear of surveillance or harm.**

**79. Policymakers must urgently address the underlying causes and agendas of youth protests, which means taking immediate action to resolve the lack of viable economic opportunities and systemic financial constraints facing young people globally.**

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