

**Submission to the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association (FoAA)
in response to the call for inputs to inform the report on the enjoyment of FoAA by women and girls
to be presented at the 75th session of the UN General Assembly**

The [Girls Advocacy Alliance](#) (GAA),¹ a joint civil society initiative of which Plan International² and Defence for Children International³ are members, welcomes the decision of the Special Rapporteur to dedicate his next thematic General Assembly report to the enjoyment of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association by women and girls.

Given our expertise, our contribution addresses questions 5 and 6, in line with our recent submissions ([GAA](#) and [Plan International](#)) to the Human Rights Committee on draft General Comment 37 (Article 21, ICCPR).

Peaceful assembly is a tool for girls and women to influence the public agenda, including those who may lack alternative means of doing so. It is our hope that the Special Rapporteur's report will give clarity on the specific steps that relevant authorities should take to facilitate girls and women to participate safely in peaceful assemblies and enjoy fully their right to freedom of association.

We recommend the Special Rapporteur to encourage all stakeholders to consider age, gender, and diversity when designing policies related to the rights of FoAA, with measures to prevent gender-based violence (GBV) and address deep-rooted discriminatory social norms.

5. What has been your and your organisation's experience in supporting girls and women in exercising the rights to FoAA?

The GAA supports youth advocates to deliver their advocacy messages at local, national, regional, and international levels, and provides information and capacity building to girls and young women who are rights advocates. They hold dialogues in their countries with political, religious, and traditional leaders on issues that affect them, including economic exclusion, teenage pregnancies, commercial exploitation, and child marriage. They engage at the international level by submitting NGO reports or making oral statements to bodies such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC), Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the High Level Political Forum (HLPF).

Using the GAA toolkit and resources, youth advocates develop a joint advocacy strategy targeting the relevant power-holders and identifying the most effective ways to deliver their messages. They organise activities to promote their rights and influence decision-makers to implement the 2030 Agenda. They deliver media messages and meet with people in their community to raise awareness. The GAA strives to ensure that participation is meaningful, safe, and impactful. We carry out our activities in line with child protection and safeguarding requirements.

What have been the biggest challenges in your work?

Girls and young women experience double discrimination based on their age and gender. Because of gender stereotypes, girls and women are often less valued and have lower social status. Just being a girl is often enough to be denied freedom of expression and an equal chance to participate. Discrimination starts in their homes and

¹ The goal of the Girls Advocacy Alliance is to ensure that governments and private sector actors make changes in their agendas, policies, and practice to end GBV and EE of girls and young women. We aim to achieve this by building the capacity of civil society organizations to hold their governments and private sector actors accountable, and by mobilising key decision-makers to address social norms and values. To this end, the GAA has an international component that conducts advocacy at the international level and provides support to local partners in ten countries in Africa and Asia. The International Programme of GAA is implemented in Geneva and New York by Plan International, Terre des Hommes International Federation, Defence for Children International, and ECPAT International.

² Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation with ECOSOC consultative status that advances children's rights and equality for girls.

³ Defence for Children International is a leading child rights-focused and membership-based grassroots movement founded in 1979 in Geneva, with a focus on justice for children and children deprived of liberty.

communities. Those on the frontline of grassroots activism face threats to their civic freedoms, GBV, and additional barriers that prevent them from organising and speaking out, including those resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic or conflict settings. They are vulnerable to violence in public spaces, which often limits their movements and activities and prevents them from becoming effective drivers of social and political change.

States should respect the rights of girls and young women to organise and advocate freely and safely within their communities, schools, and public spaces – both on- and offline. Those participating in peaceful protests, including girl human rights defenders, should enjoy at least the same level of protection against threats, intimidation, and violence as their adult counterparts. However, when protests turn violent, girls and young women often face intimidation, sexual harassment, GBV, and threats to their physical safety resulting from the use of lethal weapons.

Advocates increasingly mobilise online, but face harassment and violence there too. Women are 27 times more likely than men to be harassed online⁴ and almost three quarters of women have experienced some form of online violence.⁵ As a result, girls and women self-censor and withdraw from online spaces, preventing them from assembling and becoming effective drivers of social and political change. Online GBV should be urgently addressed, as it presents a barrier to exercising the right of peaceful assembly.

These forms of violence often disproportionately impact girls and young women at the intersections of other forms of marginalisation. This includes girls and young women who are members of minority races and ethnicities, the LGBTIQ+ community, and/or living with disabilities.⁶

Beyond online GBV, girls and young women often have less access to technology and the internet than boys and men. Particularly in developing countries, they struggle to afford technology and internet access. The gendered digital divide remains largest in the world’s least developed countries at an estimated 33%⁷.

International soft law documents, including those on the rights of FoAA⁸, tend to be gender blind. Girls and young women are an important driver for challenging harmful social norms; their role should be recognised and provided for in relevant instruments, including resolutions, general comments, and reports.

GYW advocates from the Girls Advocacy Alliance participate in the HLPF and other fora, but sometimes face threats for their activism. The GAA is concerned by intimidation and its impact on engagement within the UN.

6. Can you name measures and policies taken by a State or the UN?

The role of children who identify as human rights defenders (HRDs) is increasingly recognised internationally. In 2018, the UN CRC dedicated its Day of General Discussion (DGD) to the topic of [Children as Human Rights Defenders](#). In March 2019, the UN Human Rights Council adopted [Resolution A/HRC/40/L.22/Rev.1](#) in which it first recognised children as human rights defenders and called upon States to “provide a safe and empowering context for initiatives organized by young people and children to defend human rights relating to the environment”.

Girl HRDs face particular challenges and require special protections. In July 2019, the Human Rights Council adopted [Resolution A/HRC/41/L.6/Rev.1](#) on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls. The resolution recognised girl human rights defenders and urged states “to develop, support and protect an enabling environment for the full, meaningful and equal participation of women’s rights organizations,

⁴ #DigitalRespect4Her Factsheet, European Commission, 2019: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/digitalrespect4her-factsheet>

⁵ UN broadband Commission for digital development, 2015. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2015/9/cyber-violence-report-press-release>

⁶ “Breaking the Silence: Ending online violence and abuse against women’s rights activists.” Womankind. 2018. <https://www.womankind.org.uk/docs/default-source/default-document-library/breaking-the-silence-policy-briefing.pdf>

⁷ ICT Facts and Figures 2017, International Telecommunication Union, 2017: <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ICTFactsFigures2017.pdf>

⁸ Article 21, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>

feminist groups and girl and women human rights defenders and youth-led organizations in the creation, design and implementation of all legislation and policies relevant to substantive gender equality”.

This recognition in international policy documents is an important first step. States should now reflect this in laws and policies at national level.

Do you have any examples of good practices or strategies put forward by civil society?

In 2019, a group of 23 youth advocates participated in the GAA Global Youth Meet-Up. They represented broader constituencies of youth in marginalized communities from Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Kenya, Liberia, Nepal, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, and Uganda. They spent a week in the Netherlands linking up with fellow youth advocates, exchanging capacity, building their skills, and developing joint strategies to advocate against gender-based violence and economic exclusion of girls and young women.

GAA Youth Advocates also intervened at key events including the [Level Up for Girls](#) event with Dutch Parliamentarians, the [Day of General Discussion](#) of the CRC, and the [HLPF](#).

[Girls Out Loud](#) is an innovation project implemented by Plan International providing private online spaces for girls to freely and safely discuss the issues they care about. The girls have access to private, moderated Facebook and Instagram groups. The project is currently in five countries and will soon be scaled up and expanded to others.⁹

What role can the UN play in this regard?

The Special Rapporteur should clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of policy-makers and the UN to protect and support activism by girls and young women by:

- Ensuring girls and young women, and their groups and associations, can safely organise, assemble, and speak out **in public spaces and online**;
- Highlighting the promotion and protection of GYW advocates within UN spaces, ensuring that these spaces are truly accessible for GYW, and holding to account perpetrators of intimidation and reprisals;
- Recognising and mitigating the impact of the **gendered digital divide** on access to the internet for girls and women, reducing their ability to participate, leading to further marginalisation; and
- Supporting girl-led groups and young feminist associations with **flexible multi-year funding and non-financial support**, especially for grassroots and informal networks of girls and young women in communities.

How do you view the feminist movement and the challenges it faces?

The feminist movement faces many challenges that limit participation in public and professional life, including:

- Unequal share of unpaid domestic labour;
- Threats, harassment, and GBV on- and offline;
- Lack of access of feminists, particularly young feminists, to power-holders and decision-making spaces;
- Gendered stereotypes perpetuated by society, media, and power-holders;
- Patriarchal structures, including the ‘glass ceiling’;
- Intersecting discriminations, such as those related to age, gender, economic or social status, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, or migratory status;
- Underfunding and barriers in accessing funding.¹⁰

⁹ More details can be provided upon request.

¹⁰ This is set to worsen as the impacts of COVID-19 reduce funding streams to civil society, putting their sustainability in jeopardy. Pre-COVID-19, only 1% of gender-focused international aid reached women’s organisations, a tiny fraction of which will have reached girl-led groups (AWID, 2019, Towards a Feminist Funding Ecosystem). They also face many barriers in accessing funds due to registration challenges, lack of bank accounts, limited technical, administrative and financial capacity, etc.

These challenges could be addressed by:

- Addressing to age, gender, and diversity dimensions that impede enjoyment of the rights of FoAA;
- Promoting the participation of girls and young women (GYW), both off- and online, in political and civic spheres;
- Guaranteeing their right of access to information that is appropriate to their age, evolving capacities, and local language;
- Providing secure access to the internet for GYW and including digital literacy and security in national curricula;
- Consulting with GYW on the support they need and providing support mechanisms, safe spaces, and networking and mentorship programmes;
- Implementing awareness campaigns on social norm change, tackling discriminatory gender biases, and encouraging boys and men to share the burden of family care and household work;
- Enabling girl-led groups and young feminist associations to register officially if they wish through updated laws and administrative practices;
- Ensuring that GYW enjoy at least the same level of protection against threats and intimidation during peaceful protests as their adult counterparts;
- Ensuring that law enforcement agents are aware of the rights of GYW to FoAA and trained to take their specific needs and vulnerabilities into account, particularly in the context of policing of protests;
- Improving monitoring, reporting, and prevention of the threats and risks faced by GYW in exercising their rights of FoAA, on- and offline;
- Encouraging social media platforms to strengthen GBV reporting mechanisms, in consultation with GYW;
- Maintaining and building on existing internationally-agreed language that recognises the role of girl HRDs and the need to create enabling environments for their participation in decision-making;
- Adapting existing tools and mechanisms for the protection of HRDs so that they account for the specific needs and vulnerabilities of children HRDs, with particular attention to girls;
- Ensuring that CHRDs, especially girls, are connected with appropriate groups and networks and operate in a safe and enabling environment with the support and protection of relevant partners and institutions;
- Providing adequate multi-year financial and/or material support to build organisational capacity of girl-led groups and young feminist activists and associations; and
- Supporting and funding small, remote, non-digital, marginalised, minority organisations and those working on sensitive issues.

What are notable examples of women’s activism or women-led organizations and movements?

The GAA¹¹ promotes the rights of girls and young women by empowering and supporting young advocates to engage with the Treaty Bodies, Special Procedures, and other accountability mechanisms on issues related to GBV and economic exclusion. A video introducing the GAA can be viewed [here](#).

¹¹ GAA is an initiative of Plan International Netherlands, Terre des Hommes Netherlands, and Defence for Children - ECPAT Netherlands, in cooperation with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The GAA programme runs from 2016 to 2020 in ten countries in Asia and Africa: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, the Philippines, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Uganda. More information on specific activities in countries can be provided upon request.