

PUSHING BOUNDARIES:

The case of East and Horn of Africa's youth human rights defenders



DEFENDDEFENDERS

East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project

Published December 2022

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Cover Photo: Davis Otieno

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"You have seen what happens to youths in political rallies, haven't you? The authorities' first instinct is to clamp down on youth protests with excessive force, even when peacefully demonstrating."

UGANDAN HRD



"As a young HRD you are taking a lot of risks by doing your work but there are no protection mechanisms available."

ETHIOPIAN HRD



"The environment now is not welcoming to young HRDs voices. The government has its agenda, hence why they misinterpret and misuse laws to create barriers for young HRDs."

SOUTH SUDANESE HRD



"Young activists' movements rarely get funding; they often must collaborate with other organisations. This could be due to the lack of experience in writing proposals."

TANZANIAN WHRD



"When you advocate for rights such as gender equality, or against harmful cultural practices as a young HRD, the community will automatically think you have lost your faith in religion and your culture."

SOMALILAND HRD

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ACRONYMS

AU	African Union
CSO	Civil society organisation
EAC	East Africa Community
FGM	Female genital mutilation
HRD	Human rights defender
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
IDP	Internally displaced person
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
KOT	Kenyans on Twitter
LGBT+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender persons, and other sexual minorities
MP	Member of parliament
NGO	Non- governmental organisation
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
SOGIE	Sexual orientation and gender identity and expression
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
VPN	Virtual private network
WHRD	Women human rights defender

GLOSSARY

Youth as defined by the UN

The United Nations (UN) defines **youth** as any person between 15 and 24.¹ It describes youth as a period of transition from dependence to independence and autonomy.² Depending on the social, cultural, and economic context, the transition occurs at different times based on different social markers and life events, including education, employment, and marriage.

Children

Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines **children** as persons up to the age of 18.³

Youth as defined by the African Youth Charter

The African Youth Charter⁴ categorises youth as persons aged between 15 and 35. Although there is an overlap for people between the age of 15 and 18, who fall both in the category of "child" and "youth," for the purposes of this report, the term "youth" will be defined as per the African Youth Charter.⁵ The report will use the term "youth" and "young people" interchangeably.

Human rights defender

Young people qualify as human rights defenders (HRDs) when they engage in human rights work. According to the UN definition, the term "**human rights defender**" refers to individuals or groups who act to promote or protect human rights or strive for the protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms through peaceful means.⁶

Social mobilisation

These are organised and sustained campaigns that aim primarily to advocate for the implementation or prevention of a change in societies.⁷

Social movements

This is a process that brings people together to take collective action by raising awareness, demanding for change, pooling resources, participating actively in decision-making and cultivating sustainable individual and community involvement.⁸

1 United Nations, "Definition of youth," <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf>, Accessed 18 March 2022.

2 United Nations, "Definition of youth," <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf>, Accessed 18 March 2022.

3 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Youth," <https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/what-we-do/faq.html#:~:text=What%20does%20the%20UN%20mean,other%20definitions%20by%20Member%20States.>, Accessed 4 May 2022.

4 African Union, "African Youth Charter," 2 July 2006, <https://au.int/en/treaties/african-youth-charter>, Accessed 18 March 2022.

5 Government of Canada, "Voices at Risk: Canada's Guidelines on Supporting Human Rights Defenders," 2019, https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/human-rights-droits_homme/rights_defenders_guide_defenseurs_droits.aspx?lang=eng, Accessed 18 March 2022.

6 United Nations Human Rights office of The High Commissioner, "About human rights defenders," <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-human-rights-defenders/about-human-rights-defenders>, Accessed 4 May 2022.

7 IGI Global dictionary, "What is Social Mobilization," 2019, <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/social-mobilization/73436>, Accessed 10 October 2022.

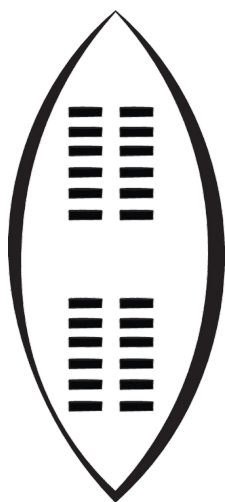
8 Britannica, "social movement," 19 November 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-movement>, Accessed 10 October 2022.

ABOUT DEFENDDEFENDERS



Established in 2005, DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project) seeks to strengthen the work of HRDs throughout the sub-region by reducing their vulnerability to the risk of persecution and enhancing their capacity to effectively defend human rights. DefendDefenders focuses its work on Burundi, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia (with Somaliland), South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda.

DefendDefenders serves as the secretariat of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network, which represents thousands of members consisting of individual HRDs, human rights organisations, and national coalitions that envision a sub-region in which the human rights of every individual as stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are respected and upheld.



DefendDefenders also serves as the secretariat of AfricanDefenders (the Pan-African Human Rights Defenders Network). AfricanDefenders aims to coordinate activities in the areas of protection, capacity building, and advocacy across the African continent, supporting the five sub-regional networks: the North Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (hosted by the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies in Tunis, Tunisia), the West African Human Rights Defenders Network (Lomé, Togo), the Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (Johannesburg, South Africa), the Central Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (Douala, Cameroon), and the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (EHAHRD-Net) (hosted by DefendDefenders in Kampala, Uganda).

AfricanDefenders leads the continental "Ubuntu Hub Cities" initiative, a holistic emergency protection and relocation programme for HRDs at risk across Africa, through its motto: "Safe but not Silent." Relocation ensures the physical and mental well-being of HRDs, while enabling them to continue their work.

FOREWORD

Like the rest of the continent, the East and Horn of Africa sub-region is inhabited by predominantly young people. Nearly 80% of East Africans are below the age of 35,⁹ and this percentage is expected to increase in the coming years.

This upsurge in number pushes young people to demand for a bigger and more meaningful participation in public affairs. From Burundi to Ethiopia, Sudan to Tanzania, young people are boldly asserting their rights, confronting manifestations of injustice, and challenging established social, economic and political norms that have historically been staked against them.

The result is that many young people have inevitably become HRDs. As we saw in the aftermath of the 2015 political crisis in Burundi, the 2018/2019 protests in Sudan or the fractious 2020-2021 electoral campaigns in Uganda, young people are increasingly leading from the front, demanding fairer and more just societies, and holding authorities to account for human rights violations committed against citizens exercising their legitimate human rights.

This report attempts to explore the situation of these youth HRDs across nine countries in the East and Horn of Africa - Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia/Somaliland, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. It assesses the promise of human rights commitments in national legal frameworks and international charters vis-a-vis the contradictions in their implementation. It also traces the persistent social and institutional biases that continue to enable human rights violations especially against young women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and other vulnerable youth HRDs, explores emerging trends in states' repressive tactics, and discusses youth HRDs' attempts to chat new channels of civic expression where traditional ones have been closed off.

It is our hope that these findings and the nuances therein will provide a better understanding of the contribution of youth HRDs in expanding the civic space in the East and Horn of Africa, the context in which these HRDs operate, the challenges that continue to afflict them, and the opportunities for all of us to contribute to engendering a safer, more open environment for young and emerging HRDs in our subregion.

I invite you to turn the pages.

Hassan Shire,

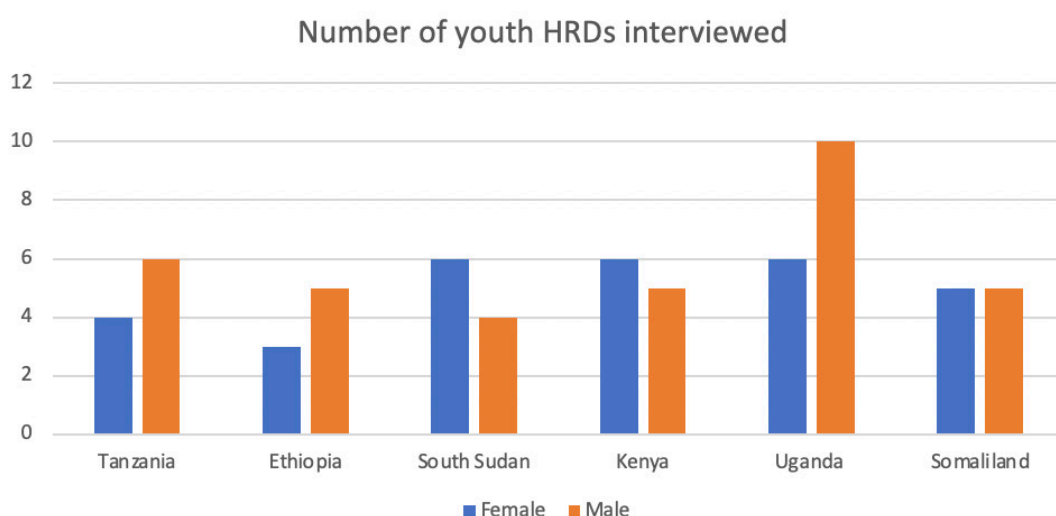
Executive Director, DefendDefenders and Chairperson, AfricanDefenders

⁹ The Aga Khan University, "East Africa Youth Surveys," 31 December 2020, <https://www.aku.edu/eai/Pages/youthsurveys.aspx#:~:text=East%20Africa%20is%20a%20very,in%20Uganda%20and%20Tanzania%20respectively.>, Accessed 10 November 2022.



METHODOLOGY

This report is the culmination of desk and field research, including focus group discussions, and interviews conducted in-person and online with 65 respondents between June and August 2022 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; Juba, South Sudan; Hargeisa, Somalia/Somaliland; ¹⁰Nairobi, Kenya; and Gulu, Lira, and Kampala, Uganda. The respondents are mostly youth HRDs between 18 to 35 years, as well as HRDs over 35 working on youth related issues. We additionally considered views from people over the age of 35 who reflected on their earlier years as activists. Finally, the report relied on secondary sources to document the situation of youth HRDs in Burundi, Rwanda, and Sudan.



While attempting to be as comprehensive as possible, this report has several limitations that must be clarified for its conclusions and recommendations to be understood in context. The findings attempt to identify broader trends in the sub-region but are by no means exhaustive. The choice of physical research locations was based on the prevalence of youth HRDs in urban centers, weighed against budgetary and logistical limitations, as well as security assessments.

Moreover, there is no universal definition of what "youth" means. As mentioned above, the UN defines youth as any person between 15 and 24, while the African Youth Charter, defines youth as every person between the ages of 15 and 35. At the national level, the youth category differs depending on the country. ¹¹ Nonetheless, in this report, we will adopt the definition set out in the African Youth Charter.

Claims not otherwise sourced are credited to the interviews conducted by DefendDefenders, making every effort to triangulate and verify information with multiple independent sources. All sources' names and personally identifiable data have been omitted to ensure their safety and security. All interviewees were informed about the research objectives and the format of this report, and they expressed informed consent to DefendDefenders, regarding the use of the information they provided. HRDs interviewed for this report received a modest transportation refund to reach interview locations, but they did not receive any form of financial compensation for their testimony.

DefendDefenders would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to everyone who shared their testimonies, insights, and analyses.

¹⁰ This report should in no way be construed as a tacit endorsement or promotion of Somaliland's claims to political independence. For the international community, from a legal and political point of view, Somaliland is a self-governing entity within the Federal Republic of Somalia. DefendDefenders focuses on human rights promotion and protection on the ground, irrespective of territorial claims or claims of statehood. Therefore, we solely focus on the roles, needs and challenges of HRDs operating in Somaliland, in the context in which they operate, without taking any position on Somaliland's status vis-à-vis the international community.

¹¹ Except for South Sudan, which currently has no clear definition of "youth." However, the draft National Youth Policy (pending adoption) is in line with the African Youth Charter.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth HRDs form both organised and informal movements to bring about societal change or oppose injustice. The movements are formed in different ways, including, but not limited to, student strikes and protests, cultural forms of expression (literary, artistic, or musical creation), political movements, and environmental, peace, and antiwar movements.¹² As a result, youth movements have become an effective way to mobilise over relevant issues affecting them, and continue to be a significant force for societal change. However, the growth of the youth movements and the critical role played by youth HRDs to advance human rights makes them a target for attacks by both, state and non-state actors.

Desk-based research enabled the gathering of information on youth HRDs in Burundi, Rwanda, and Sudan, three countries where physical missions were not possible. On the ground research was conducted in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia/Somaliland, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda.

The study analyses the drivers that influence young people's actions as HRDs, examines the emerging trends in youth mobilisation, assesses the needs of youth HRDs and makes concrete recommendations to protect and promote their rights, as well as safeguard their civic space both online and offline.

Our findings show that compared to Ethiopia, Somalia/Somaliland, South Sudan, and Tanzania, youth movements in Kenya and Uganda are robust and more organised. Moreover, due to hostile operating environments, youth activists in Ethiopia, Somaliland, South Sudan, and to some extent Tanzania mainly work either in an individual capacity, or in existing grassroots organisations or human rights organisations that are not youth-led.

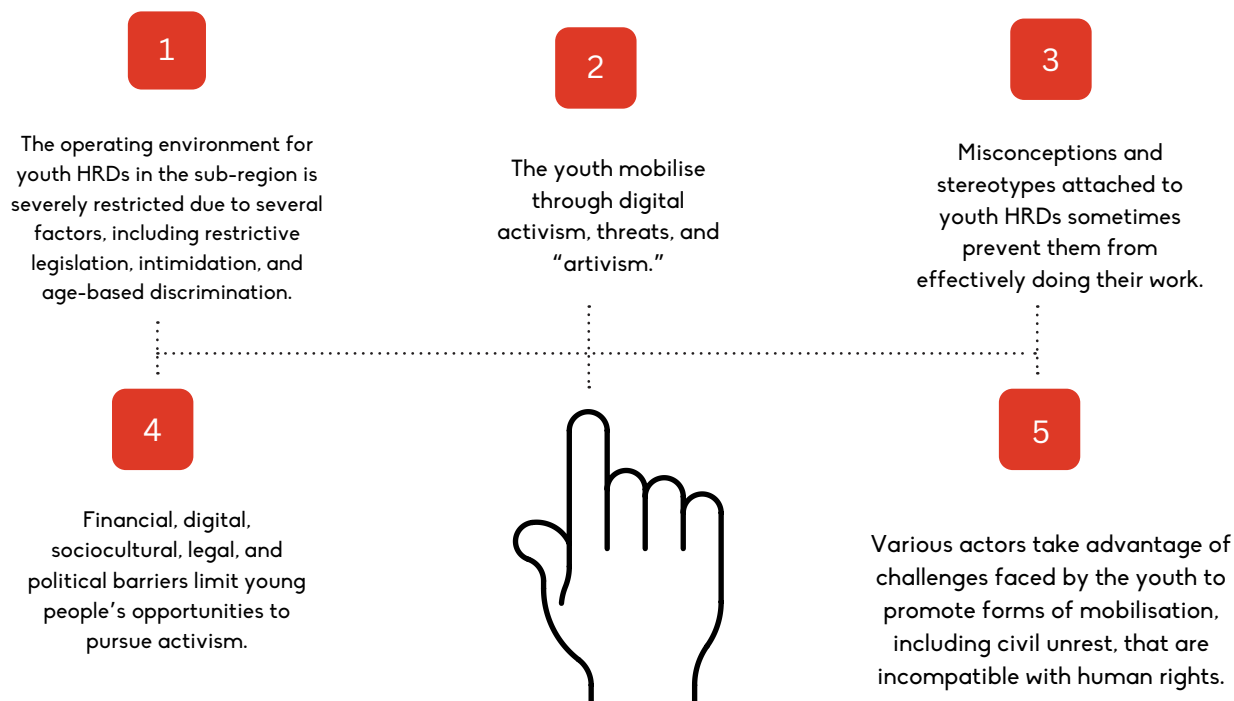
In Ethiopia, the civic space remains restrictive due to the conflict despite the favorable legal reforms to the operations of civil society organisations (CSOs). The authorities continue to target, intimidate, harass, arbitrary arrest, torture, and silence critics. HRDs described Somaliland's operating environment as dangerous. In South Sudan, restrictions on civic space, high levels of illiteracy, poverty, and insecurity are factors that limit organised youth movements. In Tanzania, youth activists apply self-censorship out of fear of repression and related persecution.

Despite Ugandan youth HRDs operating in a constrained environment, the research found that youth-led movements exist in Uganda both in rural and urban areas, where youth activists self-mobilise in associations, online groups, and physically. Similarly, in Kenya, the youth movement is vibrant. The social justice movements are largely youth-led, and most of the people who take part in physical and digital protests are young people. However, in some cases, youth activism is divided along socio-economic classes. A large part of youth activism in Kenya focuses on police brutality and extrajudicial killings, with the victims and survivors often being poor youth from informal settlements.

Further, it shows that the scale of repression to youth led activities is proportional to whether issues they are involved in are contentious or not. Youth movements focusing on gender equality, the environment, and development are relatively freer to operate than their colleagues fighting for civil and political rights who face a higher risk of repression.

12 J. Reulecke, "International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences," 2001, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/referencework/9780080430768/international-encyclopedia-of-the-social-and-behavioral-sciences>, Accessed 10 October 2022.

Throughout the course of this research, several trends became apparent:



Key recommendations offered to country governments and relevant stakeholders include:



Adopting national legislations that recognise and protect HRDs, including youth defenders.



States should ratify and domesticate the African Youth Charter, adopt the EAC youth policy, and encourage youth led initiatives as well as support platforms that aim to bring together youth civil society organisations.



Development partners should support and promote a better resourced, more equitable, and sustainable future for youth-led change.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT ANALYSIS

Approximately 16% of the world's population are young people aged between 15 and 24. This amounts to 1.2 billion people.¹³ By 2030, the total number of young people is expected to have increased by 7%, to over 1.3 billion.¹⁴ Africa has the world's highest population growth rate. The World Bank and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) foresee that the continent's population is likely to increase by 150% by 2050, from 1 billion to almost 2.5 billion. Then, 51% of its population will be under 25.¹⁵

Africa's history has been shaped by youth movements. Youths were instrumental in the fight against colonialism, and they continue to be at the forefront of social mobilisation and change through protests, associations, and creation of new avenues for expression.¹⁶ As such, youth movements have gained considerable success in the region as champions for environmental rights, women's rights, and civil and political liberties. For instance, in Sudan, the persistent and resilient youth-led resistance movements were pivotal in ousting the 30-year dictatorship of Omar Al-Bashir during the 2018-2019 Revolution.

While youth HRDs operate in the same environment as other HRDs, they face unique challenges. In its "People Power Under Attack" report,¹⁷ CIVICUS identifies the youth as one of the five groups most exposed to assaults on fundamental freedoms. According to Amnesty International, youth-led civil society groups and young people are key agents of change and contributors to the human rights movement. As a result, they remain susceptible to undue restrictions and persecution.¹⁸ Further, the exercise of government functions and leadership by predominantly older generations results in the marginalisation of youth voices, denying them both voice and recognition.

Youth HRDs challenge traditional power structures which exposes them to risks, including age-based discrimination, in addition to other forms of discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, or socio-economic status.¹⁹ Furthermore, youth engagement is also impeded by negative attitudes, societal norms, and misconceptions about civic participation.

Structural factors such as poverty, inequality, unemployment, fragile political institutions, armed conflict, the climate crisis, and health emergencies like Covid-19 have fueled widespread discontent among the youth. Young people are increasingly challenging environments and political systems perceived as failed or unresponsive. Social media contributes to the continued growth of youth-led movements. Global and regional movements like the Arab Spring, **#BringBackOurGirls**, **#Kony2012**, **#EndSars**, and **#BlueforSudan** influenced the youth to fight for their rights. In addition, digital spaces have enhanced mobilisation by creating platforms for conversations, solidarity, and uniting movements within countries and globally.

13 United Nations, "Youth population trends and sustainable development," May 2015, <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/YouthPOP.pdf>, Accessed 18 March 2022.

14 United Nations, "Youth population trends and sustainable development," May 2015, <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/YouthPOP.pdf>, Accessed 18 March 2022.

15 Open Global Rights, "The rise of youth activism in Africa," 16 December 2021, <https://www.openglobalrights.org/the-rise-of-youth-activism-in-africa/>, Accessed 18 March 2022.

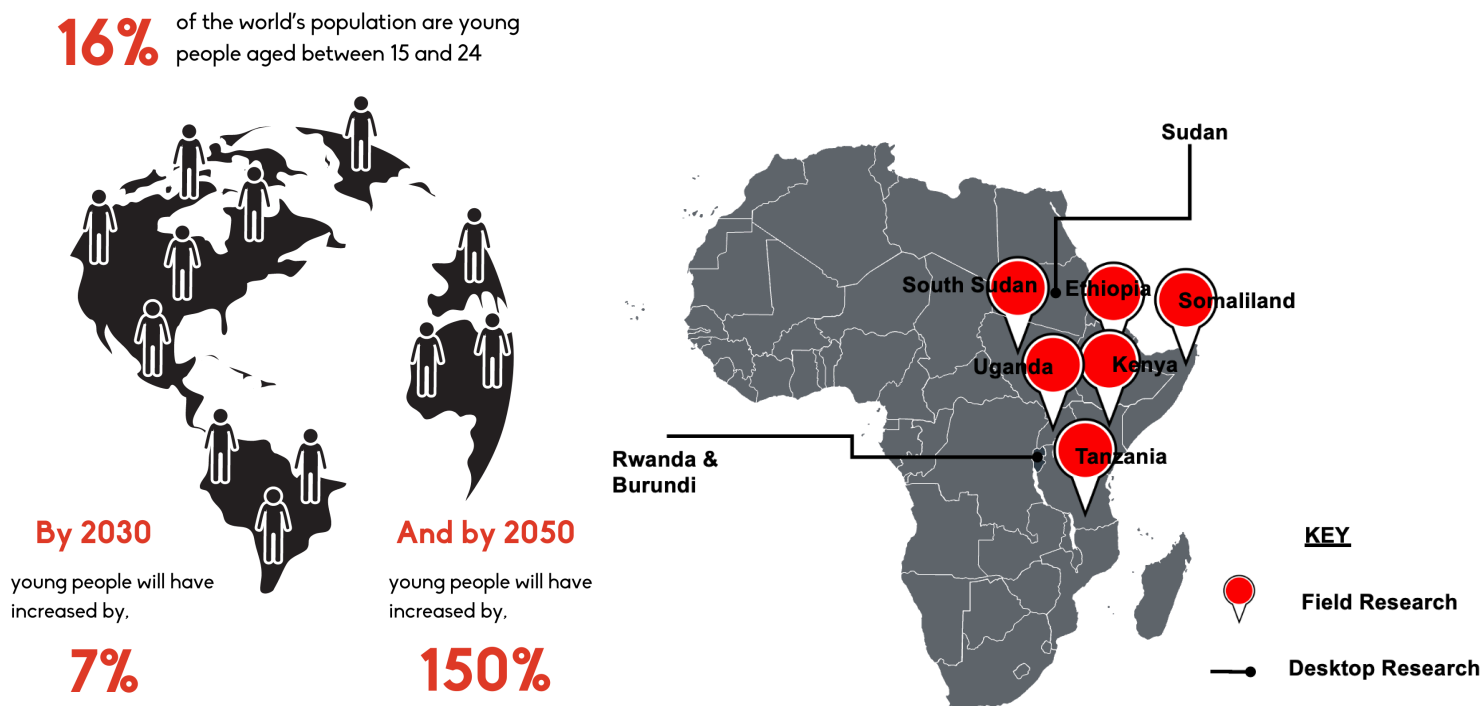
16 Ibid

17 Civicus Monitor, People power under attack, 8 December 2021, <https://findings2021.monitor.civicus.org/rating-changes.html#global-press-release>, Accessed 8 September 2022.

18 Amnesty International, "Human rights defenders under threat – a shrinking space for civil society," 26 April 2017, <https://www.amnesty.nl/content/uploads/2017/05/HRD-briefing-26-April-2017-FINAL.pdf?x18276>, Accessed 18 March 2022.

19 Government of Canada, "Voices at Risk: Canada's Guidelines on Supporting Human Rights Defenders," 2019, https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_developpement-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/rights_defenders_guide_defenseurs_droits.aspx?lang=eng, Accessed 18 March 2022.

While there is literature on the impact of youth as agents of change globally,²⁰ this study focuses on young HRDs working in the East and Horn of Africa sub-region, and encompasses the barriers they face. The report focuses on understanding their working environment in the sub-region, mainly focusing on the countries where we conducted in-person interviews.



20 Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation, "Youth as Agents for Change," 2007, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kabul/05103.pdf>, Accessed 31 October 2022; ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, "Youth and Elections," 2018, <https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/yt/yt10/yt220/election-related-violence>, Accessed 4 May 2022; Development alternative, "Towards a thriving, credible, and sustainable youth civil society," April 2019, <https://restlessdevelopment.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Development-Alternative-Youth-Civil-Society-Report.pdf>, Accessed 10 September 2022.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

At the international level, UN Security Council resolution 2250 (2015)²¹ encourages states to consider setting up mechanisms that would enable young people to participate meaningfully as peacebuilders to prevent violence and generate peace worldwide. In 2018, the Security Council adopted resolution 2419 (2018),²² which reaffirmed its commitment to fully implement resolution 2250. Resolution 2419 (2018) called on all relevant actors to consider ways to increase the representation of young people when negotiating and implementing peace agreements.

UN Security Council resolution 2535 (2020) urges member states to “facilitate an inclusive, safe, enabling, and gender-responsive environment” in which youth actors from various backgrounds can “carry out their work independently and without undue interference,” while also ensuring that cases of youth violence are investigated, and perpetrators held accountable.²³ Despite this, young activists working to promote and protect gender equality and the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender persons, and other sexual minorities (LGBT+) face additional risks because they stand up to deeply patriarchal societies, which exposes them to serious and multiple threats and risks, including harassment, sexual violence, and defamation campaigns.²⁴

Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) enshrines the right of every citizen to take part in the conduct of public affairs, the right to vote and to be elected, and the right to have access to public service. Participation is a critical component of a democratic society, and it implies ensuring that all individuals have a say in how decisions are made and implemented, among other things. According to the latest Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) report on youth participation in national parliaments, the global proportion of Members of Parliament (MPs) aged under 30 has edged up to 2.6%.²⁵ However, with half of the world's population under 30, the research exposes a significant gap in young people's political representation worldwide.

The African Union (AU), adopted an African Youth Charter in 2006 to provide a strategic framework for youth empowerment and development activities at the continental, sub-regional, and national levels across Africa. In its masterplan for a prosperous Africa, refers to its aspiration of the Agenda 2063 on an Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children. The Youth Charter therefore addresses key issues affecting youth, including employment, sustainable livelihoods, education, skills development, health, youth participation, national youth policies, peace and security, law enforcement, youth in the Diaspora, and youth with disabilities. Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda have ratified it, but are yet to domesticate it. Burundi, Eritrea, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan have neither ratified nor domesticated the Charter.

Furthermore, the East Africa Community (EAC) acknowledges in principle the fact that in all member states represented, the youth constitute the largest segment of the population.²⁶ This pushed the Community to adopt a Youth Policy to support a youth centered integration in member states by addressing youth issues in the region while assuring sustainable social, economic, and political development.

21 [https://daccess-ods.un.org/access.nsf/Get?OpenAgent&DS=S/RES/2250\(2015\)&Lang=E](https://daccess-ods.un.org/access.nsf/Get?OpenAgent&DS=S/RES/2250(2015)&Lang=E)

22 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N18/173/81/PDF/N1817381.pdf?OpenElement>

23 Youth4peace, “UNSCR 2535,” 14 July 2020, <https://www.youth4peace.info/UNSCR2535>, Accessed 18 March 2022.

24 Amnesty International, “Human rights defenders under threat – a shrinking space for civil society,” 26 April 2017, <https://www.amnesty.nl/content/uploads/2017/05/HRD-briefing-26-April-2017-FINAL.pdf?x18276>, Accessed 18 March 2022.

25 Inter Parliamentary Union, “Youth participation in national parliaments,” 2021, <https://www.ipu.org/youth2021>, Accessed 18 March 2022.

26 East African Community, “East African Community Youth Policy,” <https://www.eac.int/gender/youth/eac-youth-policy>, Accessed 10 November 2022.

TRENDS OF YOUTH MOBILISATION

Over the course of this research, we observed trends in the youth movement across the East and Horn of Africa sub-region. In this section, we examine key trends that influence how young people mobilise and contribute to change in their countries. The trends identified are digital activism, protests, and "artivism."

DIGITAL ACTIVISM

Digital activism emerged as the most common trend of youth mobilisation in the sub-region. It refers to the use of digital tools (such as the internet, mobile devices, and/or social media), to promote social and political change.²⁷ Most of the young HRDs interviewed indicated that social media has enhanced the agency, participation, and reach of youth activism. Traditional participatory methods of civic engagement are no longer completely adequate for youth HRDs, who are often marginalised and denied access to physical decision-making spaces to voice their concerns.²⁸

Furthermore, social media makes it easier and more effective for youth HRDs in autonomous movements to mobilise in high numbers, lead campaigns, and interact in real time. Youth-led movements on digital platforms mobilise quickly and self-govern through horizontal (non-hierarchical) management/operational structures.²⁹ A horizontal structure is one with limited or no level of management or hierarchy. It promotes inclusion in decision-making.³⁰

"A lot of youth mobilise through digital spaces. The youth unite and stand in solidarity with others through social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram."
-Ethiopian HRD.

Due to restrictive legal frameworks and the violent dispersal of protests, youth HRDs in the sub-region increasingly use social media in their activism. Social media acts as an additional arena that enables youth HRDs to still join in activism without being subjected to traditional forms of state surveillance and repression.³¹

This is particularly true for marginalised youth, such as members of the LGBT+ community and HRDs working on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE) issues. Youth HRDs working on SOGIE in Tanzania and Uganda indicated that digital tools and social media platforms were the safest way to do their work.³² They indicated that because homosexuality is criminalised in both countries, young activists do not feel safe going to the streets to demonstrate or assemble.

"The LGBT+ community will network and work together. Since we are not allowed to walk on the street, we use social media to campaign for our rights. We make noise online to bring global attention to our issues."
- Ugandan SOGIE WHRD.

27 Reset, "Digital and Online Activism," 08 June 2013, <https://en.reset.org/digital-and-online-activism/>, Accessed 10 September 2022.

28 Ibrahim Bangura, "Youth-Led Social Movements and peacebuilding in Africa," Routledge Studies in Peace, Conflict and Security in Africa, 24 May 2022, <https://www.routledge.com/Youth-Led-Social-Movements-and-Peacebuilding-in-Africa/Bangura/p/book/9781032182377>, Accessed 10 August 2022.

29 CIVICUS, Youth trends in activism and civic space expansion, August 2022, https://civicus.org/documents/Youth_Trends_In_Activism.pdf, Accessed 10 September 2022.

30 Small business, "Flat Vs. Hierarchical Organizational Structure," 12 February 2019, <https://smallbusiness.chron.com/flat-vs-hierarchical-organizational-structure-724.html>, Accessed 10 September 2022.

31 Ibrahim Bangura, "Youth-Led Social Movements and peacebuilding in Africa," Routledge Studies in Peace, Conflict and Security in Africa, 24 May 2022, <https://www.routledge.com/Youth-Led-Social-Movements-and-Peacebuilding-in-Africa/Bangura/p/book/9781032182377>, Accessed 10 August 2022.

32 DefendDefenders interview, 2022.

"Queer communities rarely go to the streets because we will be attacked. We use social media instead."

- Ugandan HRD.

"They will beat you if you try to protest. First of all, you will not even get a permit to protest."

- Tanzanian WHRD.

"The internet and social media nowadays allow the youth to advocate, educate, and speak out loudly and powerfully."

-Tanzanian HRD.

Multiple reports have documented the systemic threats Rwandan HRDs and citizens face when attempting to exercise their rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, and the Rwandan authorities' intolerance of dissent.³³ Some Rwandan HRDs, including youth HRDs, who are frustrated by the lack of critical discourse in the media, have taken to YouTube to voice their concerns about social issues, such as poverty and management of the Covid-19 pandemic.³⁴

Youth HRDs from Somaliland provided numerous instances of using social media effectively to address human rights issues and to get humanitarian assistance.³⁵ For example, one youth WHRD indicated that young people from Somaliland and the diaspora contribute money for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and locals suffering from drought and famine via social media. Another HRD mentioned an incident where a police officer attacked a woman during a protest. After the incident was captured on camera, the community expressed its outrage, and the officer was arrested.

"We voice our concerns on Twitter and Facebook. Social media can create change, especially if you post video evidence. If someone posts a video of a human rights violation, the perpetrator can be jailed."

- Somaliland HRD.

Digital activism is a powerful tool among youth HRDs in the sub-region. Twitter hashtags, social media campaigns, and online petitions have been effective in creating awareness and triggering policy changes. For example, in South Sudan, a youth HRD claimed that citizens advocated on social media for the youth enterprise funds, and the Bill was tabled in a week. In Tanzania, youth HRDs claimed that the Twitter hashtag #ChangeTanzania and online petitions have been vital for political mobilisation and reform.

"We used #ChangeTanzania on Twitter to demand that the Statistics Act be amended, and it was."

- Tanzanian HRD.

"When South Sudan had peace agreements, we created a hashtag called #SouthSudaniswatching to assert our rights as observers."

- South Sudanese HRD.

African governments have heavily invested resources to restrict access to information, as well as dissemination of ideas, by regulating the establishment and operation of both public and private media.³⁶ In Kenya, the most popular media houses are owned by politicians or Kenyans closely linked to the political establishment.³⁷ In cases where the state does not own and directly operate major media outlets, they crack down on media outlets and arbitrarily arrest critical journalists. Cas-

33 Human Rights Watch, "No Space for Criticism of Rwanda," 27 June 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/06/27/no-space-criticism-rwanda>, Accessed 23 October 2022.

34 Human Rights Watch, "Rwanda: Arrests, Prosecutions over YouTube Posts," 30 March 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/30/rwanda-arrests-prosecutions-over-youtube-posts>, Accessed 23 October 2022.

35 DefendDefenders interview, Somaliland, August 2022.

36 Ibrahim Bangura, "Youth-Led Social Movements and peacebuilding in Africa," Routledge Studies in Peace, Conflict and Security in Africa, 24 May 2022, <https://www.routledge.com/Youth-Led-Social-Movements-and-Peacebuilding-in-Africa/Bangura/p/book/9781032182377>, Accessed 10 August 2022.

37 The Elephant, "The Politics of Media Ownership in Kenya," 1 November 2018, <https://www.theelephant.info/data-stories/2018/11/01/the-politics-of-media-ownership-in-kenya/>, Accessed 10 September 2022.

es of authorities arresting journalists, raiding, and suspending media houses have been reported in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somaliland, South Sudan, and Tanzania. In this context, social media has created an alternative platform for political expression that is independent of government control.

In Kenya, youth HRDs mentioned that digital tools and applications have allowed activists to instantly document events and share written, picture, and video evidence of events online. This was particularly useful during the elections when violations against HRDs increased. For example, the Mtetezi app can be used for data collection to report incidents as well as send quick response alerts to get help.³⁸

On the other hand, critics sometimes refer to digital activism as "armchair activism," suggesting that it may be carried out from the comfort of a home.³⁹ For instance, youth HRDs in Kenya accused Kenyans on Twitter (KOT) of being "keyboard warriors" (a derogatory term applied to a person who only uses social media to express outrage or criticism, with no follow up action in the "real world").⁴⁰ KOT is a popular Twitter handle and hashtag (#KOT), which Kenyans use to comment, argue, and satirise current political and societal issues.⁴¹

"Most of KOT are keyboard warriors. All they do is complain, but they do not join organised protests." - Kenyan HRD.

In some cases, the popularity of the issue and the setting of the campaigns, as well as the integration of digital activism with traditional forms of protest determine whether online activism is successful.⁴² For example, during the protests that led to the ousting of Al-Bashir in Sudan, social media played a positive role in increasing the resilience of youth HRDs. The hashtag #blueforSudan went viral and created international awareness of the situation in the country.⁴³ Social media users turned their profile avatars blue in memory of 26-year-old Mohamed Mattar, whose favorite color was blue. Mattar was killed during an attack by security forces in June 2019.

While digital activism is the most common trend of youth mobilisation, governments in the sub-region continue to crack down on youth HRDs in digital spaces, unduly restricting the right to free expression. Draconian cybercrime laws, high taxes and data rates, digital surveillance of HRDs, internet shutdowns, and the blocking of social media outlets are used to restrict the online space for activism.⁴⁴

38 NCHRD-K developed a secure mobile app, Mtetezi (Defender), to allow for effective and efficient communication. The app also has a panic button to trigger urgent response by NCHRD-K and its partners. <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=ilabafrika.ac.ke.nchrdk&hl=en&gl=US>.

39 Makhwanya Aifheli, "Barriers to Social Media Advocacy: Lessons Learnt from the Project 'Tell Them We Are Here,'" 2018, <https://www.igi-global.com/chapter/barriers-to-social-media-advocacy/312671>, Accessed 10 September 2022.

40 Collins Dictionary, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/keyboard-warrior>, Accessed 10 September 2022.

41 Deutsche Welle (DW), "The good, the bad and the ugly of Kenya's first digital decade," 18 January 2019, <https://akademie.dw.com/en/the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly-of-kenyas-first-digital-decade/a-47133638>, Accessed 10 September 2022.

42 Makhwanya Aifheli, "Barriers to Social Media Advocacy: Lessons Learnt from the Project 'Tell Them We Are Here,'" 2018, <https://www.igi-global.com/chapter/barriers-to-social-media-advocacy/312671>, Accessed 10 September 2022.

43 The Guardian, "#BlueforSudan: social media users show solidarity for protester," 14 June 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/14/blueforsudan-social-media-users-show-solidarity-for-protester>, Accessed 10 September 2022.

44 CIVICUS Monitor, "Turbulent election period sees attacks on opposition, internet shutdown and police violence," 27 January 2021, <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2021/01/27/turbulent-election-period-sees-attacks-opposition-internet-shutdown-and-police-violence/>, Accessed 10 September 2022.

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Facebook: @ Davis Tafari





PROTESTS AND PUBLIC ASSEMBLIES

Youth HRDs continue to advocate for change through protests and public assemblies. Some youth HRDs participate in demonstrations despite harsh repression, or threats by governments.

**"After every two months, we try to organise protests. We cannot just sit on our phones. We must use protests to tell the states that we are here, and we want change."
- Kenyan HRD.**

Despite Article 21 of the ICCPR and national constitutions guaranteeing the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, enjoyment of the right remains limited in practice. Protests and gatherings continue to be unduly restricted in the sub-region. Assemblies in public places and demonstrations by political parties are usually subject to prior authorisation, even where national law enshrines a simple "notification" regime for public assemblies. (In practice, authorities interpret the relevant provisions as establishing a "prior authorisation" regime whereby protest organisers are required to request permission.⁴⁵) Meetings of political parties and spontaneous peaceful demonstrations are routinely dispersed using excessive force, including tear gas, rubber bullets and sometimes live ammunition on protestors. As a result, young HRDs and organisations often refrain from exercising their right to peaceful assembly due to the violence and fear of arrests.

Protests organised by youth in the sub-region aim to, among other things, condemn human rights violations, including civil and political rights, social and economic rights, environmental rights, gender equality rights, children's rights, education rights, health rights, refugee and immigration rights, and civic space violations.

Measuring the success of a protest, however, can be challenging. For instance, while the 2018-2019 Sudanese protests might have been perceived as successful, to date, real change is yet to materialise in the country. The youth and other Sudanese citizens are now protesting the 25 October 2021 military coup, demanding civilian rule. Moreover, the transition process largely marginalised women and youth from decision-making processes⁴⁶.

In Ethiopia, ongoing armed conflicts in Tigray and other regions have led to a shrinking civic space, with limited space for protests and public assemblies in general.

**"Peaceful demonstrations are rarely carried out, but the response protestors get is negative because these activities are viewed as anti-government."
- Ethiopian WHRD.**

In Kenya, HRDs including youth HRDs participate in the annual Saba Saba protest on 7 July to end police brutality and killings, and advocate for an enabling legal and policy environment. Some progress has been recorded because of these protests. For example, during the last Saba Saba, Kenyans protested the high cost of living. Protesters declared that they would not participate in the general election if the government did not cut the cost of food and other necessities. They used the slogan "hakuna kura bila kula (there is no election without eating)." Following the protest, the government decided to subsidise the price of maize flour at 100 Kenyan Shillings (KES) for a month.⁴⁷

In another instance, after Kenyans protested the extrajudicial killing of a Kenyan lawyer, Willie Kimani, police officers abducted Kimani's client Josephat Mwenda and taxi driver Joseph Muiruri.

⁴⁵ See for instance DefendDefenders, "Spreading Fear, Asserting Control: Tanzania's assault on civic space," 26 June 2018, <https://defenddefenders.org/spreading-fear-asserting-control-tanzanias-assault-on-civic-space/>, pp. 21-22, Accessed on 27 October 2022.

⁴⁶ DefendDefenders, "Sudan's Women Human Rights Defenders: An Unfinished Revolution," 6 December 2021, https://defenddefenders.org/sudan-women-human-rights-defenders-an-unfinished-revolution-2/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=sudan-women-human-rights-defenders-an-unfinished-revolution-2, Accessed 31 October 2022.

⁴⁷ The Star, "Kenyans protest high cost of living on SabaSaba day," 7 July 2022, <https://www.the-star.co.ke/in-pictures/2022-07-07-photos-kenyans-protest-high-cost-of-living-on-sabasaba-day/>, Accessed 26 September 2022.

The officers were eventually held accountable: on 22 July 2022, the Kenyan High Court found three officers and one civilian guilty of murder, while the fourth officer was acquitted.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, a Kenyan HRD noted that the media plays a significant role in portraying youth HRDs as violent. The narratives and stereotypes that present the youth as rowdy and violent reinforce the idea that police officers use violence against young people during demonstrations as a necessary and proportionate response – which is often not the case.

Somaliland HRDs interviewed for this report prior to the 11 August 2022 demonstrations anticipated that the authorities' response to these demonstrations would be violent. Indeed, on that day, in response to a protest in Hargeisa over an alleged attempt to delay the upcoming presidential elections,⁴⁹ security forces fired live ammunition, killing five people and injuring dozens. In addition, approximately 100 protesters were arrested.

Several HRDs in Kenya, South Sudan, and Tanzania indicated that authorities sometimes restrict the protests by denying notifications given by protestors, when they do not simply interpret the legal framework as instituting a "prior authorisation" regime (see above remark).⁵⁰ For example, in Kenya, a police commissioner in the Rift Valley region banned election-related demonstrations during and after Kenya's 9 August 2022 polls, warning that protests during the electoral season would be "dealt with accordingly."⁵¹

In Tanzania, young HRDs raised concerns over undue restrictions to peaceful demonstrations. They noted that in Tanzania, many people do not mobilise through protests due to the fear of repression. As a result, youth activism is often at an individual level or is conducted through digital spaces.

"The regime requires you to seek prior approval for such activities, yet there is no existing legislation that requires this permission."
- Tanzanian HRD.

48 BBC, "Willie Kimani: Kenyan policemen guilty of murdering human rights lawyer," 22 July 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-62264439>, Accessed 26 September 2022.

49 Reuters, "At least five people killed, 100 hurt in Somaliland protests," 12 August 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/least-five-people-killed-100-hurt-somaliland-protests-2022-08-12/>, Accessed 7 October 2022.

50 DefendDefenders interview, 2022.

51 The Star, "Commissioner Maalim bans demos in Rift Valley during polls," 7 August 2022, <https://www.the-star.co.ke/counties/rift-valley/2022-08-07-commissioner-maalim-bans-demos-in-rift-valley-during-polls/>, Accessed on 23 September 2022.

ARTIVISM

We found that artivism (also known as artistic activism) is the third key trend of youth activism. Artivism is defined as "the use of creative expression to cultivate awareness and social change through mediums such as visual art, poetry, music, film, and theatre."⁵²

In African countries, popular arts play a significant role because they echo the opinions of those who lack means to openly express their discontent towards the government.⁵³ Historically, art and music played a vital role in the struggle for liberation from colonialists. Music served as inspiration and provided an effective tool to mobilise society to resist, and fight against colonialism.⁵⁴ Over time, artists have taken on the role of Africa's conscience and voice, particularly where civil society space is restricted.

Youth HRDs in Kenya, Somaliland, South Sudan, and Uganda use different forms of art, including, but not limited to, film, painting, graffiti, live theatre, music, and poetry, to raise awareness and push for political change. Art makes activism accessible to more people, as it is easier to understand and elicit emotions.

**"It is easier to mobilise through poetry and art. These efforts lead to more effective mobilisation."
- Ugandan HRD.**

In Kenya, young HRDs in the social justice centres mobilise the youth and the broader community by using arts and sports.⁵⁵ The consensus among young HRDs interviewed was that arts and sports bring people together. Young people are interested in the arts as a form of entertainment. As creative artists, they can use their art to send a message and as a means of social change.

The justice centres in Kenya organise football tournaments, concerts, and plays in their community to advocate for political and social issues. A young HRD who leads the social justice centre travelling theatre noted that travelling theaters have successfully educated and promoted awareness of issues such as extrajudicial killings in informal settlements and that they are gaining traction as a form of artivism. It started off in Dandora, but the team later expanded into a larger movement. Since its existence, they have been able to travel country-wide, advocating for social justice through art.

**"We are part of the arts for social justice movement. Most youths interact with music, plays, and graffiti. So, we use art to bring people together. It is a form of entertainment for the youth and educates them on political and social issues in the community."
- Kenyan HRD.**

**"We don't always announce that we are acting out a play. The actors start their script, and because we are mimicking violations that happen by showing police brutality and extrajudicial killing, some people in the community believe it is real until they realise it is a play. But at that point, we have their attention, and they learn from it. In some cases, we allow the crowd to participate at the end, asking how it should end and what type of reforms they would want."
- Kenyan HRD.**

**"Environmental HRDs in Kenya use murals and art to advocate and create awareness of environmental degradation and protect ecosystems and green spaces. The dumping sites in Mathere, and Dandora, have severely affected all citizens' well-being and health."
- Kenyan HRD.**

⁵² Art and Object, "Artivism: Making a Difference Through Art," 17 May 2021, <https://www.artandobject.com/articles/artivism-making-difference-through-art#:~:text=Whether%20you%20call%20it%20artistic,music%2C%20film%2C%20and%20theater>, Accessed 10 September 2022.

⁵³ Ibrahim Bangura, "Youth-Led Social Movements and peacebuilding in Africa," Routledge Studies in Peace, Conflict and Security in Africa, 24 May 2022, <https://www.routledge.com/Youth-Led-Social-Movements-and-Peacebuilding-in-Africa/Bangura/p/book/9781032182377>, Accessed 10 August 2022.

⁵⁴ Chikowero Mhoze, "African Music, Power, and Being in Colonial Zimbabwe," Indiana University Press, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt17w8gb6>, Accessed 29 November 2022.

⁵⁵ DefendDefenders interview, Kenya, July 2022.

"Young HRDs use art to inspire the community and to mobilise the youth to do what they can to protect the environment. We plan events and raise funds to keep green spaces that will allow children from the informal settlements to escape from their harsh realities"
- Kenyan WHRD.

In South Sudan, a youth initiative called Ana Taban, which means "I am Tired" in Arabic, was established in 2016 out of frustration with the civil war in the country.⁵⁶ A group of young HRDs decided that the prime component of the campaign would be cultural artwork performed by singers, sculptors, writers, and actors. The campaign then produced plays, songs, video clips, poetry, and graffiti in Juba. Youth HRDs in South Sudan claimed that Ana Taban is one of the most active youth-driven cultural movements that aim to address conflict, hatred, and tribalism.⁵⁷

In Somaliland, the art scene is also growing. However, young activists face repression and backlash from religious leaders and state actors.⁵⁸ Despite limited space to express oneself, activists challenge the authority of conservative Muslim clerics who believe that Islam forbids the playing of music.

"Drama is one method for people to understand human rights issues. Young HRDs use short films portraying SGBV to attempt to change harmful practices in the community."
-Somaliland WHRD.

"Hargeisa is the place for literature and language. Youth HRDs advocate through poems and singing. Women especially, mobilise the community using drums, and sing about social and political challenges."
- Somaliland HRD.

⁵⁶ Andariya, "#AnaTaban: Youth Initiative Preaching Peace," 24 October 2016, <https://www.andariya.com/post/AnaTaban-Youth-Initiative-Preaching-Peace>, Accessed 10 September 2022.

⁵⁷ DefendDefenders interview, South Sudan, June 2022.

⁵⁸ BBC, "Somaliland's poets and singers fight to be heard," 22 August 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49394351>, Accessed 10 September 2022.

Photo Credit: Anataban
Twitter: @AnaTabanSS
Instagram: Anatabanss



I LEARNED

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CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

Young HRDs are affected by socio-cultural, financial, digital, legal, security-related, and political barriers in the course of their activism.

SOCIO-CULTURAL BARRIERS

Socio-cultural barriers originate from social and cultural norms and values.⁵⁹ Youth engagement is often impeded by negative attitudes and misconceptions about civic participation, in particular when it comes to children and young people. This section details socio-cultural barriers that negatively impact youth activism.

We found that certain social norms and cultural traditions impacted youth HRDs negatively because society feels that their religion and traditions are being threatened. Youth HRDs largely consider culturally and politically sensitive topics such as access to safe abortion, the fight against sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and issues concerning SOGIE to be the most difficult issues to work on.

Youth HRDs in Uganda stated that the community often accuse them of promoting LGBT+ rights, an agenda many people consider "foreign" or a threat to the local culture and traditions. In other instances, young HRDs mentioned that tackling the issue of SGBV is challenging.

"African cultures are complex. For example, some cultures in Uganda believe that if a man beats a woman, he is showing love. Therefore, young HRDs who advocate against SGBV are faulted for opposing the culture."

- Ugandan HRD.

In Somaliland, youth HRDs pointed out hinderances by cultural norms and religious beliefs within the community. This was particularly the case when youth HRDs advocated for gender equality or created awareness on the need to fight child, early and forced marriages and other harmful practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM).

"When you advocate for rights such as gender equality, or against harmful cultural practices as a young HRD, the community will automatically think you have lost your faith in religion and your culture."

- Somaliland HRD.

MISCONCEPTIONS AND STEREOTYPES

Stereotypes are generally defined as beliefs about characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of certain groups.⁶⁰ Stereotypes can be positive or negative. For example, a subjectively favorable opinion of a social group is referred to as a positive stereotype. In contrast, a negative stereotype describes the undesirable, objectionable, or unacceptable qualities and characteristics of the members of a particular group or social category. Stereotypes lead to misconceptions about youth HRDs.

This research has shown that misconceptions about youth HRDs are common. The majority of the HRDs interviewed noted that the most common stereotypes attached to youth HRDs include branding youth HRDs as "anti-government" or promoters of "foreign agendas," vola-

59 ReijoSavolainen, "Approaches to socio-cultural barriers to information seeking," 20 February 2016, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0740818816300330#:~:text=Socio%2Dcultural%20barriers%20are%20man,giving%20rise%20to%20negative%20emotions>, Accessed 20 October 2022.

60 American Psychological association, "APA Dictionary of Psychology," <https://dictionary.apa.org/stereotype>, Accessed 23 October 2022.

tile, unruly, and lacking knowledge. Other stereotypes were related to financial gain and age. Young HRDs from the study noted that they are perceived as anti-government or associated with the opposition. This is because whenever young HRDs call out injustice or human rights violations for which state actors are responsible, the latter use this narrative as a defense mechanism or to divert attention from their wrongdoing. HRDs from Uganda noted that young HRDs are considered a threat by the government because the youth are viewed as "revolutionaries."

"You have seen what happens to youths in political rallies, haven't you? The authorities' first instinct is to clamp down on youth protests with excessive force, even when peacefully demonstrating."
- Ugandan HRD.

Two Ethiopian HRDs stated that youth HRDs are seen as a threat to the stability of the government. As a result, the authorities restrict civic space to stifle them. Many young people in Ethiopia avoid political discussions due to fear of reprisals.

"Advocating for certain human rights issues is a taboo in Ethiopia; otherwise, you will be seen as a threat to the government."
- Ethiopian WHRD.

"The Ethiopian government fears the power of the youth, and this is why they take unnecessary measures such as arrests, threats and intimidation."
- Ethiopian HRD.

Some young HRDs pointed out that people, especially in rural areas, associate human rights work with "Western influence" because most organisations' donors are Western based. Moreover, an HRD noted that the high levels of illiteracy in South Sudan prevent young people from learning more about human rights. They also argued that most people take the government's words as facts; as a result, they can easily be influenced.

"Some believe Western donors come to South Sudan to take information from us, and to fuel conflict."
- South Sudanese HRD.

Often, the society labels young HRDs, and young people as impulsive, volatile, and unruly. One youth HRD also noted that because young people often take issues to the streets, they are wrongly viewed as violent and aggressive.

"Young HRDs are perceived as aggressive in their approach and character, and sometimes it is necessary to be diplomatic."
- Ugandan HRD.

An Ethiopian HRD argued that although anger is a driver of activism, youth HRDs must operate from a solutions-oriented perspective. This is important to fight the misconceptions that young people and young HRDs are eager to resort to violence.

"There is a fear that the only way young people can express themselves is to be violent in the streets. But I think this is a misconception. They do not have the platform to express their voices and solutions."
- Ethiopian HRD.

Some Tanzanians hold the view that youth HRDs are criminals because during former President John Magufuli's government, youth HRDs were frequently arrested.

"Young HRDs are sometimes viewed as criminals in society. This is because the authorities arrest critical voices that call out injustices. Most Tanzanians will not try to understand the reason behind the arrest. As long as a young HRD has been arrested, the community will view them as criminals."

-Tanzanian HRD.

Misconceptions and negative stereotypes are harmful because they can lead to prejudice. People who are negatively stereotyped sometimes fear doing actions that could potentially confirm the stereotype.⁶¹ Misconceptions about youth HRDs create obstacles for young people, as the latter might refrain from certain activities that could be seen as confirming the stereotypes.

AGE-BASED STEREOTYPES

Age-based stereotypes affect both older and younger populations around the world and can intersect with and exacerbate other forms of disadvantage,⁶² including those related to sex, race, and disability. In practice, however, "ageism" is usually understood as being directed towards older persons. In this regard, Claudia Mahler, the UN Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, says that ageism "manifests in stereotypes, prejudices and/or discrimination against older persons based on their age or on a perception that a person is 'old'."⁶³

By contrast, African cultures often exacerbate stereotypes and discrimination against young people, who are seen as inexperienced and unwise. This negatively affects contributions made by young people to discussions, dialogues, or community development.⁶⁴ Nearly all the young HRDs interviewed for this report cited age-based discrimination as a challenge that obstructs their work to defend human rights.

"As a young person, you are not even supposed to speak when elders are speaking."

- Ugandan HRD.

"Young HRDs are not taken seriously, yet they are told they are the leaders of tomorrow."

- Ugandan WHRD.

"Young people have not experienced life long enough; they speak on the now. Young HRDs do not know what the older generation went through."

- Somaliland WHRD.

Interviewees who are outside the youth bracket sometimes took up these stereotypes. For example, an HRD stated that one of the challenges when working with young HRDs is that they "act on impulse." He argued that as an HRD, it is crucial to understand your operating environment and to act from an informed point of view rather than emotion and impulse. He added that this "comes with experience." The majority pointed out that the space is open and that older HRDs are willing to "mentor and teach" young HRDs. Some young HRDs were concerned about the intergenerational hostilities in the human rights spaces. One elder HRD even accused young HRDs of being selfish.

"Young people are individualistic and do not fight for the community. It is not a matter of activism; it is a matter of egoism for them."

- Ethiopian HRD.

61 Simply psychology, "Stereotype Threat: Definition and Examples," 13 January 2022, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/stereotype-threat.html>, Accessed 10 August 2022.

62 World Health Organisation, "Ageing: Ageism," 18 March 2021, <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/ageing-ageism>, Accessed 10 September 2022.

63 United Nations Human Rights, "Eliminate ageism and age discrimination, says UN expert," 1 October 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2021/09/eliminate-ageism-and-age-discrimination-says-un-expert>, Accessed on 27 October 2022.

64 Ashoka, "Diversity Equity and Inclusivity: Dialogue on Ageism," 28 September 2021, <https://www.ashoka.org/en-ke/story/diversity-equity-and-inclusivity-dialogue-ageism>, Accessed 10 September 2022.

Although young HRDs experience age-based discrimination, they appreciate global and regional initiatives to ensure youth inclusion. In the sub-region, some countries adopted affirmative action measures to include youth quotas in their parliament. Some political parties also encourage university students to join. This form of participation is sometimes criticised as "tokenism" because it further perpetuates the culture of "being seen but not heard."

Young WHRDs lamented that they face intersectional discrimination due to their gender and age. WHRDs face specific obstacles linked to pervasive patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles. In many African cultures, women are seen as subservient to men and unfit for labor outside the domestic sphere. That, in addition to the above stereotypes that young HRDs face, makes the work of young WHRDs more challenging.

Many interviewees lamented that they are sometimes disrespected or not taken seriously because of their gender. For example, one young WHRD from Somaliland recalled a situation where she was in the field and community members were asking her driver questions related to the project because they could not believe that she was the one in charge.

Another HRD said that she experiences hostility from the community and other stakeholders. For example, in a meeting where she was representing civic groups, she claimed that organisers purposefully failed to give her the attendance sheet.

"Experiences like that can make you feel unwelcome, and if you are not strong enough, it can stop you from being an activist. One day I was told outright that they do not want juniors or young people next time."
– South Sudanese WHRD.

DIGITAL BARRIERS

Although digital tools are often assets for activism and mobilisation, operating in the digital sphere comes with specific challenges including surveillance for all HRDs including young HRDs.

The 2021 State of Internet Freedom in Africa report by the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) found that surveillance is a major threat to African digital rights.⁶⁵ Digital surveillance of youth HRDs is more prominent as the youth increasingly work online and on social media. Nearly all youth HRDs interviewed for this report identified surveillance as a digital barrier threatening and obstructing their work.

"I know that my phone is tapped, and someone is surveilling me, so I have to be careful. However, I do not feel like my life is in danger."
– South Sudanese WHRD.

"We realised that digital space is captured. Young HRDs' social media accounts are frequently blocked. Personally, my Facebook account has been reported multiple times, and it was blocked once."
– Kenyan HRD.

In 2021, eight Rwandan HRDs, including young HRDs, were threatened, arrested, or prosecuted for commenting on current affairs on YouTube.⁶⁶ The authorities have been cracking down on bloggers and commentators. The government has also been attempting to regulate social media platforms, especially YouTube. The Rwanda Media Commission (RMC) announced plans to register YouTube channels operating as media.

65 Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), State of internet Freedom in Africa 2021, 30 September 2021, https://cipesa.org/?wpfb_dl=467, Accessed 10 September 2022.

66 Human Rights Watch, "Rwanda: Arrests, Prosecutions over YouTube Posts," 30 March 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/30/rwanda-arrests-prosecutions-over-youtube-posts>, Accessed 23 October 2022.

Additionally, some youth HRDs, in particular WHRDs, reported that they are cyberbullied and attacked by internet "trolls".⁶⁷ WHRDs in Kenya and South Sudan noted that they received hateful and sexist comments on social media. In some cases, the social media threats translate into physical attacks.⁶⁸

"Women in South Sudan face online smear campaigns. The public uses nudity and pictures to threaten young WHRDs on social media. They will photoshop your face on a naked woman and circulate it online."
- South Sudanese WHRD.

Moreover, internet shutdowns are a common practice by authorities in anticipation of demonstrations, during election periods, and in conflict areas.⁶⁹ Ethiopia, South Sudan, Somaliland, Uganda, and Tanzania have all experienced internet shutdowns or disruptions of service. In Uganda and Tanzania, internet shutdowns were imposed during election periods. In Ethiopia, multiple reports have documented internet disruptions in relation to the Tigray conflict.⁷⁰ In August 2021, internet services in South Sudan were disrupted and security forces patrolled the streets after activists called for a protest against President Salva Kiir's government. Similarly, NetBlocks, a watchdog organisation that monitors cybersecurity and the governance of the internet, documented a significant disruption of internet service by numerous providers in Somaliland during a rally on 11 August 2022.⁷¹ These restrictions negatively impact the ability of young HRDs to carry out their work.

Another challenge that youth HRDs face is restrictive legislations that aim to prevent or result in preventing digital activism. On 13 October 2022, President Museveni signed an amendment of the Computer Misuse Act, a restrictive law that curtails digital rights and threatens citizen journalism.⁷² Additionally, Facebook remains blocked in Uganda.⁷³ However, citizens and HRDs, in particular youth HRDs, resort to tools such as virtual private networks (VPNs) to circumvent the restrictions and access blocked sites.

In Tanzania, the Electronic and Postal Communications (Online Content) Regulations, 2020 prohibit disseminating critical public health information and generally repress online speech.⁷⁴ In Kenya, the Computer Misuse and Cybercrime Act 2018 is used to target young HRDs online.

The digital gap between urban and rural youth HRDs creates an additional barrier to digital activism. Most youth HRDs interviewed in the study ascertained that most youths in rural areas do not have access to smartphones or a stable internet connection.

"You have to question how many people have access to the internet, and WIFI, and if they have the technical know-how on using the digital space effectively for advocacy."
- Tanzanian HRD.

"Only people in the urban areas have access to the internet, so you cannot say you have reached the entire Ethiopia when advocating online. However, pushing young HRDs into the digital space can be effective when dealing with the global population. Nationally, many people can only access the radio." - Ethiopian WHRD.

⁶⁷ DefendDefenders interview, 2022.

⁶⁸ The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "The impact of online violence on women human rights defenders and women's organisations," 21 June 2018, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2018/06/impact-online-violence-women-human-rights-defenders-and-womens-organisations>, Accessed 29 November 2022.

⁶⁹ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Government Internet Shutdowns Are Changing. How Should Citizens and Democracies Respond?," 31 March 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/03/31/government-internet-shutdowns-are-changing-how-should-citizens-and-democracies-respond-pub-86687>, Accessed 20 October 2022.

⁷⁰ Access Now, "What's happening in Tigray? Internet shutdowns avert accountability," 29 July 2021, <https://www.accessnow.org/tigray-internet-shutdowns/>, Accessed 20 October 2022.

⁷¹ NetBlocks, "Internet disrupted in Somaliland amid protests over postponed elections," 11 August 2022, <https://netblocks.org/reports/internet-disrupted-in-somaliland-amid-protests-over-postponed-elections-xyMnWG8Z>, Accessed on 7 October 2022.

⁷² The Independent, "President Museveni signs into law Nsereko bill," 13 October 2022, <https://www.independent.co.ug/president-museveni-signs-into-law-nsereko-bill/>, Accessed 14 October 2022.

⁷³ CIVICUS Monitor, "Turbulent election period sees attacks on opposition, internet shutdown and police violence," 27 January 2021, <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2021/01/27/turbulent-election-period-sees-attacks-opposition-internet-shutdown-and-police-violence/>, Accessed 10 September 2022.

⁷⁴ Article 19, "Tanzania: Online Content Regulations 2020 extremely problematic in the context of COVID-19 pandemic," 19 January 2021, <https://www.article19.org/resources/tanzania-online-content-regulations-problematic-covid-19-pandemic/>, Accessed 10 September 2022.

"It is difficult for rural people to share information on human rights violations or to get information that was posted on social media because they lack access to the internet, data, and sometimes phones that have access to social media."
- Somaliland HRD.

Youth HRDs also raised concerns about the cost of internet or data. For example, one WHRD in Kenya explained that even for the youth HRD with internet access, it is costly to remain active online. This was the case in all the countries.

"Not everyone can access the digital world when it comes to activism because you need data and airtime, which are expensive."
- South Sudanese HRD.

In Somaliland, youth HRDs raised concerns over the lack of capacity related to digital security. For example, one HRD noted that while social media is an effective tool for reporting violations and mobilising youth, most youth HRD have not received any training on digital security.

"Some young HRDs may not have digital security skills, so they risk sensitive and confidential information being in the hands of policemen in case their phone is confiscated."
- Somaliland HRD.

Additionally, HRDs in Somaliland pointed out that lack of protection for the right to privacy on social media can cause distress for victims and survivors of violations. A WHRD described an incident where a young girl, who was sexually abused, was exposed online with her full name. The community was worried that such an act would expose the victim and possibly "ruin her reputation" as unmarried girls and women who are not virgins are usually viewed as "undesirable." They noted that this could have a psychological impact on the girl.

FINANCIAL BARRIERS

Youth HRDs reported financial challenges as one of the major obstacles affecting their work. These can be approached from an organisational point of view or from an individual point of view.

The majority of HRDs interviewed for this report indicated that youth HRDs and youth-led organisations face funding challenges. The numbers were overwhelming in Kenya, South Sudan, and Uganda, where nearly all HRDs interviewed identified lack of adequate funding as a barrier. Among the reasons mentioned for this situation, first, HRDs reported that registering and maintaining an organisation is costly. Second, donors have strict requirements when providing grants and funding, and many new youth-led organisations cannot match the requirements. Thirdly, youth HRDs do not have the capacity to fundraise effectively – most interviewees identified the need for capacity-development in writing fundraising proposals.

"Youth-led movements find it hard to write proposals and get funding. These might be certain things young people do not think about. They come in with passion but might not have the capacity."
- Ethiopian WHRD.

A Ugandan HRD pointed out that youth-led organisations often do not survive for even two years due to financial constraints.

"Many youth HRDs are passionate, but they do not have forethought. They come in thinking they will figure it out as they go, but it is very costly."

- Ugandan HRD.

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"Young activists" movements rarely get funding; they often must collaborate with other organisations. This could be due to the lack of experience in writing proposals.

- Tanzanian WHRD.

From an individual point of view, economic hardships affect young people's participation in activism. Young HRDs interviewed for this report noted that most young people start by volunteering or working pro bono (without charge); those who receive a salary or stipend are underpaid. Therefore, young people may lack the incentive to fully engage in activism.

"Young HRDs are not given financial support. You need transportation to do work for an HRD. For example, lawyers need money to file cases, so funds are necessary to deal with human rights works."
- Ugandan HRD.

Youth HRDs in Kenya indicated that many youth activists come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Most of the organised movements are in informal settlements because that is where most injustices happen. At the same time, youths in informal settlements experience economic hardship. One WHRD noted that it is an internal battle to remain activists in such harsh economic conditions.

"On one hand, I want to change the environment I live in for the better so that the future generation does not experience the same. But, on the other hand, there are no financial rewards for the job we do. Sometimes you are even required to give more than you have."
- Kenyan WHRD.

"Fewer comrades will join protests because of difficult economic situations. While the aim of the protest might be to lower prices for basic commodities, most young HRDs live hand to mouth, so an HRD will choose to go work for that 200 shillings to feed their family."
- Kenyan HRD.

"Young HRDs want to advance a cause, yet they do not have something to eat. So, you want to go protest, but you must work to get money to feed yourself."
- Kenyan HRD.

Another significant financial challenge for HRDs is the financial constraints to accessing legal aid services. Most HRDs interviewed for this report noted that legal services were expensive and there are not many lawyers who work pro bono. In cases where a young HRD is arbitrarily imprisoned, gathering the money for cash bail is difficult. Youth HRDs in Kenya sometimes rely on crowdfunding, or participatory online fundraising.

LEGAL BARRIERS

HRDs including young HRDs, reported several legal barriers that impede their activism, including lack of legal protection, restrictive legal frameworks that curtail civic space, and the bureaucracy involved in establishing non-governmental organisations (NGOs). They also mentioned inadequate knowledge of laws related to their work among youth HRDs.

Some young HRDs across the region emphasised that the biggest legal barrier they experience is the absence of specific laws to ensure their protection as HRDs. Unfortunately, no country in the sub-region has a specific law that recognises and protects HRDs, let alone youth HRDs. (Uganda's Parliament is considering a bill to protect HRDs, though.) Notably, legal recognition and protection of defenders is essential to ensuring that they work in a safe environment free from attacks, reprisals, and undue restrictions.

"As a young HRD you are taking a lot of risks by doing your work but there are no protection mechanisms available."
- Ethiopian WHRD.

Interviewees reported restrictive laws that curtail civic space for HRDs, including youth HRDs. In Uganda, authorities often misuse laws such as the Public Order Management Act (2013) and the Non-Governmental Organisations Act (2016) to restrict the work of youth HRDs. In Tanzania, HRDs reported that several laws restrict civic space for youth HRDs. For example, Section 16 of the Cybercrime Act prohibits the publication of "false information" (but it does not define what "false information" is). The Statistics Act (2019) requires approval by the National Bureau of Statistics where research is conducted, and data is to be published, with penalties incurred for publication of statistics that are not approved by the Bureau. This hinders human rights organisations from publishing their own data.⁷⁵

However, some young HRDs in the sub-region noted that their national constitution guarantees fundamental rights to freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and expression, and therefore enables activism. In practice, however, authorities often implement laws and decrees that are inconsistent with the constitution and nullify rights enshrined by the constitution.

**"The environment now is not welcoming to young HRDs voices. The government has its agenda, hence why they misinterpret and misuse laws to create barriers for young HRDs."
- South Sudanese HRD.**

Youth HRDs across the sub-region also expressed concern over the cumbersome procedures for registering NGOs. The challenges with registration were cited among the reasons for the low number of formal youth-led organisations. Not only are procedures extremely bureaucratic, but they are also expensive. Additionally, there is still a risk of denial of registration. In some countries, re-registration, on an annual or other basis, may also be required, usually involving the payment of new fees.

In Kenya, youth HRDs noted that one justice centre was denied registration because of the word "justice." A young WHRD explained that she was requested to seek permission from the Ministry of Justice to use the word "justice" in the name of their organisations. Organisations working to protect HRDs working on SOGIE are also often denied registration.

To combat radicalisation and the surge in terrorism, governments in the East Africa region, particularly Kenya and Uganda, have through legislation given the police broad authority, which has led to a variety of human rights violations.⁷⁶ According to Frontline Defenders, terrorism is one of the charges that governments may use to demonise and criminalise HRD activities.⁷⁷

In Kenya, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (2012), provides a vague definition of terrorism. As a result, it expands police powers and allows the state to create lists of suspected terrorists and terrorist organisations without due process.⁷⁸ There have been multiple reports documenting human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, and enforced disappearance. Since the start of the crackdown against terrorism in 2013, the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR) documented over 120 cases of human rights violations in 2015.⁷⁹ Additionally, between 2012 and 2016, HAKI Africa reported 81 cases of extrajudicial killings and disappearances perpetrated against Coastal Muslims. Most of the victims were youth, including youth HRDs.⁸⁰

As mentioned above, most young people join activism out of passion. However, several young HRDs interviewed in this report noted that young HRDs lack legal knowledge related to their field of activism. In South Sudan, interviewees cited the low literacy levels as a reason for in-

⁷⁵ See DefendDefenders, "Spreading Fear, Asserting Control," op. cit.

⁷⁶ Open Society Justice Initiative, "Counterterrorism and Human Rights Abuses in Kenya and Uganda," 2013, <https://www.justiceinitiative.org/uploads/1b-4cef46-0f2f-498a-a16c-cfced9897ae/counterterrorism-human-rights-abuses-kenya-uganda-20130403.pdf>, Accessed 10 November 2022.

⁷⁷ FRONT LINE DEFENDERS, "FRONT LINE DEFENDERS GLOBAL ANALYSIS 2021," 9 March 2022, https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/2021_global_analysis_-_final.pdf, Accessed 10 November 2022.

⁷⁸ Mazrui, et al, "Countering Violent Extremism in Kenya: Between the Rule of Law and the Quest for Security," January 2018, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333207581_Countering_Violent_Extremism_in_Kenya_Between_the_Rule_of_Law_and_the_Quest_for_Security_edited_by, Accessed 10 November 2022.

⁷⁹ Freedom House, "Online Survey: Kenya's Antiterrorism Strategy Should Prioritize Human Rights, Rule of Law," November 2018, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Final_PolicyBriefKenya_11_14_18.pdf, Accessed 10 November 2022.

⁸⁰ HAKI Africa, "What do we tell their families," December 2016, http://haki africa.or.ke/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/HakiAfricaWDWTF_V14.pdf, Accessed 10 November 2022.

adequate legal knowledge. An HRD from Somaliland claimed that unless young HRDs study law or acquire degrees related to human rights in school, they are unlikely to have adequate knowledge of the laws pertaining to their work. A Ugandan HRD noted that authorities target young HRDs because they can "easily be intimidated," and most do not know their rights.

"A young HRD needs to either have the legal knowledge to know their boundaries of what they can and cannot do or they need to have a lawyer who can advise them."
- Ethiopian HRD.

POLITICAL AND SECURITY CHALLENGES

Our research confirmed that young HRDs sometimes face political and security challenges including lack of sufficient political representation, political persecution, intimidation, and surveillance for speaking out.

As mentioned above, participation is a critical component of a democratic society. Yet, both globally and regionally, there is strong evidence that the participation of young people in formal, institutional political processes is relatively low.⁸¹ At the national, regional, and international levels, there have been various efforts to strengthen youth political participation. Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda have national youth policy frameworks that address issues affecting the youth including encouraging active participation of youth in the development process. Despite this, young people in the sub-region are significantly underrepresented in national politics and decision making.

The under representation can be attributed to the lack of trust in government institutions. Young people have little faith in formal political processes, political institutions, and leaders.⁸² According to CIVICUS, studies from the past ten years demonstrate a decline of youth involvement in formal structures.⁸³ Young people are increasingly investing their energies in informal networks, rather than in formal structures such as youth councils or parliaments. Additionally, some young people lack access to information on political processes.⁸⁴ Furthermore, young people lack the financial resources required to run political campaigns.⁸⁵

Some youth HRDs face stigmatisation, reprisal attacks, and both direct and indirect threats. A young HRD in Tanzania explained that it was common for youth activists living with their parents to stop their activism. This is because some families are afraid of the risks and threats associated with activism, so they ask their children to stop or move out. Similarly, a Kenyan WHRD stated that her mother told her: "You will not kill me in my own house because of the work you are doing."

Additionally, we found that challenges and discontent facing the youth can be manipulated by various actors to promote forms of mobilisation, including civil unrest, that are incompatible with human rights.

A report from Mercy Corps found that political violence is primarily fueled by experiences of injustice, such as discrimination, corruption, and mistreatment by security forces, rather than poverty.⁸⁶ The report found that young people's need for purpose can be exploited to make them agents of unrest. This has sometimes been the case in Burundi, Ethiopia, and South Sudan, where young people have joined rebel movements or militias. In Somalia and Kenya, some young people have joined terrorist movements such as Al-Shabaab. Since 2015, Burundi has experienced significant insecurity due to the Imbonerakure, the

81 Inter Parliamentary Union, "Youth participation in national parliaments," 2021, <https://www.ipu.org/youth2021>, Accessed 18 March 2022.

82 ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, "Youth and Elections," 2018, <https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/yt/yt10/yt220/election-related-violence>, Accessed 4 May 2022.

83 CIVICUS, Youth trends in activism and civic space expansion, August 2022, https://civicus.org/documents/Youth_Trends_In_Activism.pdf, Accessed 10 September 2022.

84 ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, "Youth and Elections," 2018, <https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/yt/yt10/yt220/election-related-violence>, Accessed 4 May 2022.

85 Ibid

86 MercyCorps, "YOUTH & CONSEQUENCES-Unemployment, Injustice and Violence," 13 February 2015, <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/youth-consequences-unemployment>, Accessed 25 September 2022.

youth wing of the ruling National Council for the Defense of Democracy-Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) party.⁸⁷ The Imbonerakure have committed gross violations, including extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests, and torture of members of the opposition, journalists, and people perceived as critics and their families.

Moreover, young people may be involved in unrest because of anger at corruption or misconduct by security or law enforcement personnel. They may become disillusioned with public institutions and look for solutions outside of their countries' political institutions. A study in South Sudan confirmed that if the government addressed these challenges, the youth would direct their energy to meaningful engagement.⁸⁸

"When avenues of expressing yourself are closed, and civic space is closed, people are frustrated, and resort to violence. That is why it is important to bring the youth into decision-making spaces."
- South Sudanese HRD.

Youth HRDs in the sub-region emphasised that the governments in the region would reduce youth vulnerability to violence, drugs, crime, and radicalisation if they focused on improving education and other public services, creating employment opportunities, and creating platforms for youth participation.

⁸⁷ The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), "Impunity, the Imbonerakure, and Instability in Burundi," 25 October 2018, <https://acleddata.com/2018/10/25/impunity-the-imbonerakure-and-instability-in-burundi/>, Accessed 23 October 2022.

⁸⁸ Civil society consultation with South Sudanese youth at national, sub-national & diaspora "Understanding the causes of youth unrest in South Sudan & proposed remedies," November 2021, Accessed 26 September 2022.

CONCLUSION

Young people in the sub-region continue to be at the forefront of social movements and contribute to effecting change in their respective countries. Youth-led organisations offer new and effective ways to address human rights violations, foster peace, and ensure sustainable development for future generations. Youth HRDs are creative and self-organised, and they provide a fresh perspective to society's most pressing issues. They frequently identify innovative solutions.

However, like all HRDs, youth HRDs face challenges in effectively carrying out their work. These challenges are socio-cultural, legal, political, and digital. In many instances, they lack a platform to voice their opinions without fear of repression. Their efforts are often frustrated by hostility from state and non-state actors. Nonetheless, youth HRDs continue to mobilise and campaign through demonstrations, digital activism, and activism. Even as governments and authorities continue to restrict other avenues of mobilisation, youth HRDs in the region are resilient and steadfast in their activism.

Youth HRDs' efforts often go unnoticed. This can demoralise them and negatively impact their activism. States in the sub-region should recognise that the youth, as the largest demographic group, must be fully mainstreamed into the spheres of governance and decision-making. Therefore, governments, civil society organisations, and development partners must acknowledge the crucial role played by youth HRDs and support their efforts to exert social change and progress.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering these findings, DefendDefenders formulates the following recommendations.

To the governments in the sub-region

- Adopt national legislation that recognises and protects human rights defenders, including youth human rights defenders. Ideally, this should be in form of national laws on human rights defenders that includes a section on youth defenders, including youth women defenders;
- Ratify and domesticate the African Youth Charter;
- Adopt the East African Community youth policy;
- Conduct public awareness campaigns to sensitise the public and key stakeholders on the meaningful contributions made by youth human rights defenders to tackle stereotypes and age-based discrimination;
- Desist from any stigmatisation of youth human rights defenders, and publicly condemn attacks against youth human rights defenders, including gendered attacks against youth women human rights defenders;
- Ensure that there is an intergenerational dialogue and platform for engagement;
- Review, amend or repeal laws that can be misused to unduly restrict young people's rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, opinion and expression;
- Systematically fight impunity for attacks against human rights defenders including youth human rights defenders, and hold perpetrators of violations accountable; ensure that youth do not face reprisals for their work;
- Raise awareness among public officials on youth inclusion and the danger of youth stereotypes through capacity-building and awareness training;
- Provide space in official and public communication and mainstream media platforms for young people to express themselves;
- Guarantee representation for youth human rights defenders at parliamentary and executive level and ensure diverse youth representation throughout all layers of decision-making;
- Provide opportunities for youths to join vocational schools and training; and
- Support setting up of human rights defenders protection mechanisms or desks with national human rights institutions such as national human rights commissions.

To development partners

- Strengthen awareness-raising, training and advocacy efforts and legal compliance on the laws affecting human rights defenders;
- Provide capacity building on physical and digital protection tools, as well as on proposal writing and fundraising;
- Consider providing core sustainable funding to youth led organisations, including increasing funding for youth projects and programmes in addition to making sure that they are suitable and accessible to various youth movements and structures;
- Support exchange programmes for youth human rights defenders within and outside the region;
- Encourage youth led initiatives and support platforms that aim at bringing together youth civil society organisations and development partners to create a better resourced, more equitable, and sustainable future for youth-led change; and
- Invest in programming with a focus on the role of youth in social, economic, and political development, especially in conflict affected countries.

To young human rights defenders

- Continue to engage in the promotion and protection of all human rights, including by monitoring developments, reporting on situations, and engaging in capacity building, awareness-raising, civic education, and advocacy activities, among others;
- Build networks and cooperation with other youth organisations locally, regionally, and internationally to enable youth human rights defenders to learn from a broader movement; and
- Encourage senior human right defenders to provide mentorship to younger human rights defenders. This will facilitate a safe platform for experience and knowledge sharing to build the resilience of young human rights defenders and strengthen their work.

Defenddefenders (the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project) seeks to strengthen the work of HRDs throughout the subregion by reducing their vulnerability to risks of persecution and by enhancing their capacity to efficiently defend human rights.

Defenddefenders is the secretariat of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network, which represents thousands of members consisting of individual HRDs human rights organisations, and national coalitions that envision a sub-region in which the human rights of every individual as stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are respected and upheld.

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