IF I DISAPPEAR

GLOBAL REPORT ON **PROTECTING YOUNG PEOPLE** IN CIVIC SPACE

If I Disappear Global Report on Protecting Young People in Civic Space

Author: Rita Izsák-Ndiaye
Visuals and Graphics: Cesar Duarte
Design and Layout: Ronald Baumann
Editing: Intertranslations

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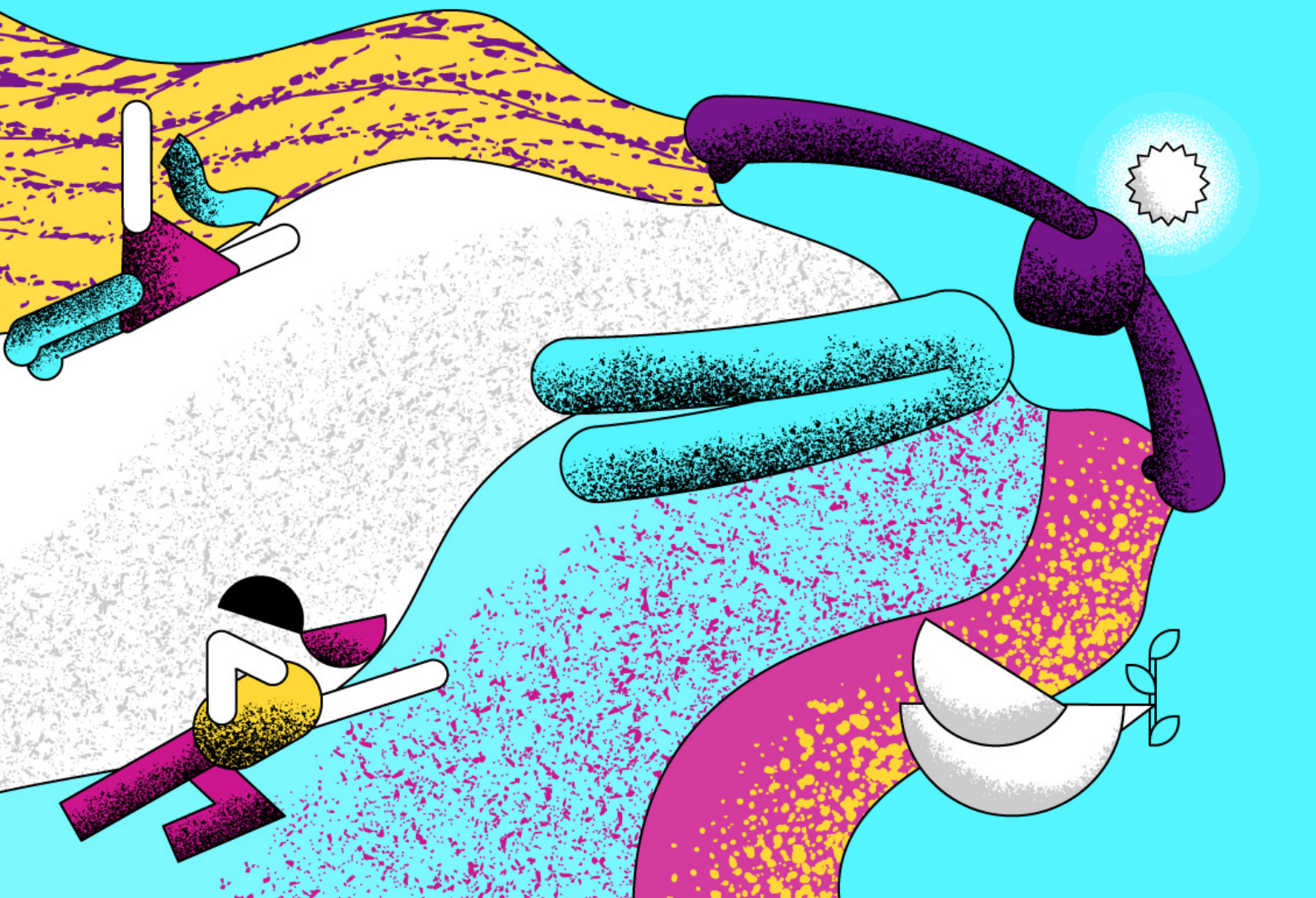any of its affiliated organizations or their Member States.

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FOREWORD BY THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Throughout history, young people have always been at the forefront of change. They challenge injustice and inequalities and push for participation and accountability. They are often extremely creative and inventive when it comes to pointing democratic deficits and discrimination. They organize peaceful protests to restrictions on access to education and employment, election results, advocate for peace and climate action, and fight for non-discrimination and equality. Countless times, youth have been successful in influencing debates of national and international importance and prompting social change.

At the same time, in many instances, youth remain underrepresented in, or totally excluded from, formal decision-making processes. This is despite overwhelming evidence that when youth are engaged, when their voices are genuinely heard and taken into account, when they are empowered and can influence decisions, there are multiple benefits for societies at large.

When young people are successful in carrying the human rights message, through youth-led and youth-serving organizations, but also in their individual capacity or as part of informal movements and networks, they increasingly face threats and attacks, offline and online. Governments and institutions, including the UN, are sometimes unprepared to deal with and adequately respond to the specific risks and age-based, as well as multiple discrimination patterns, young people are confronting.

In his Call to Action for Human Rights Secretary-General Antonio Guterres committed the UN system to pay more attention to the rights of future generations. He emphasized the criticality of space for young people to participate in shaping the decisions that will affect their future. He also pledged UN support for Member States developing protection mechanisms for human rights defenders and environmental activists, particularly young people, women and girls.

Indeed, participation will only be meaningful and inclusive when those who participate can speak their minds freely and safely and feel that they can provide candid and critical inputs and feedback. All relevant actors must therefore proactively consider and address the specific risks, threats and challenges that young human rights activists face in carrying out their efforts to protect and promote human rights. At the international level too, to honour everyone's human right to participate, we must do more to combat intimidation or reprisals that aim at preventing these crucial voices from speaking out and raising alarm.

Against this backdrop, I am confident that this report, by showcasing the personal experiences of young human rights activists, peacebuilders and community mobilizers, the dangers they face and the price they pay for their human rights work, will help all of us, in the UN, and beyond, formulate policies better suited to the needs of young activists.

To overcome the many challenges we are collectively facing, we need all the energy and creativity out there – together, let's make sure we can work towards a fairer, more equal and human rights respecting and participatory world.
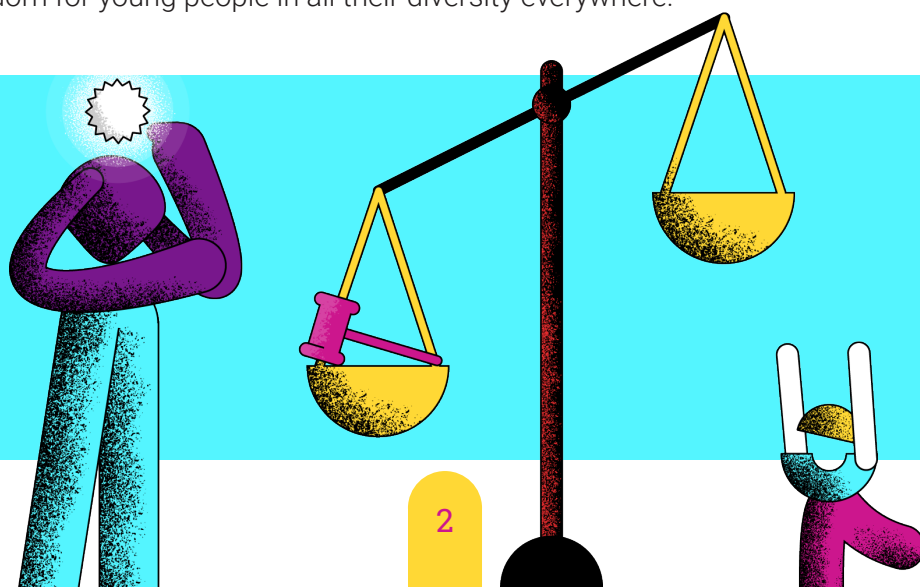
FOREWORD BY THE SECRETARY-GENERAL'S ENVOY ON YOUTH

In every corner of the world, young people drive positive impact and change towards a more sustainable, just, equal and peaceful world. It is due to their unwavering persistence and activism that we have seen significant progress in the meaningful participation of young people in decision-making, policy development and all aspects of programme implementation. As a result, young people are increasingly recognized as active global citizens and advocates for human rights, peace and security, humanitarian action and sustainable development. It is therefore critical that, despite continuous setbacks and challenges, we acknowledge the tireless advocacy led by youth, civil society and other stakeholders for more inclusive decision-making spaces where young people participate and contribute as equal partners.

While recognizing the milestones that deserve to be celebrated, young people's reality of oppression, discrimination, and human rights violations, which the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated, must be urgently addressed. With school closures and bans on public gatherings, young people lost access to the community networks that often serve as lifelines of protection when governments and other stakeholders fail to fulfil their obligations. Anger, frustration and unapologetic demand for change have long fueled young people's movements that filled our streets, news and social media. Instead of support and solidarity with young people, we have seen an alarming rise in arbitrary arrests, censorship and ruthless crackdown on young people and their rights to freedom of expression, movement, peaceful assembly and association, online and offline. In many cases, even the right to life.

In 1945, the world unanimously adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, reaffirming our collective "faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of every human being, and in the equal rights of all" to "promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom."1 More than 75 years later, as you read through this report and the testimonies of hundreds of young people, I challenge you to keep these sentiments in mind and reflect on following: What do values of freedom, dignity and worth mean if we fail the young generations of this world, the leaders of our present and future, who are simply trying to promote social progress? What message are we sending to these agents of change, if their actions to achieve a better standard of life for all are ignored, or worse, punished?

These are some of the most challenging issues of our time that we have the duty to answer and resolve. Yet, while this report presents a harsh reality of what it means to be young and challenge the status quo today, it also showcases the resilience, creativity and hope embodied by young people around the world. It is my hope this report inspires us to see the testimonies and recommendations of young people not as a burden to bear, but as a torch to guide our steps towards protecting the dignity, worth and freedom for young people in all their diversity everywhere.

ACKNOWLEGEMENTS

The Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth (OSGEY) team would like to sincerely thank everyone who contributed their time, attention, testimonies, expertise, and recommendations to this report.

We are particularly grateful to all the young people who volunteered their time to share their experiences, thoughts and recommendations. Your honesty and unwavering courage amidst uncertainty is beyond inspiring. Thank you for trusting us to present your voices in this report. We hope this report is just the first step in our collective efforts towards achieving justice for all youth, who, like yourself, put their lives at risk while advocating for the values they believe in.

This report would not have been possible without the thoughtful feedback, outreach support and expertise of the members of the Protection Working Group. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic made 2020 an overwhelming year for everyone – with many of you navigating sudden changes in work environments, cuts in funding, movement restrictions and personal challenges – you continued to show up consistently for young people globally. We are appreciative to our colleagues in the UN system at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, for their continuous guidance throughout this process; the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund; as well as the following academic and civil society organizations:

Dr. Asli Ozcelik Olcay, University of Glasgow
Foundación BogotArt/Juventudes Por La Paz
Global Network of Women Peacebuilders
Interpeace
Peace Direct
PeaceMentors
Search for Common Ground
Tobago Youth Council
Transformative Leaders Network – Africa
United Network of Young Peacebuilders
WE Organization The Netherlands
World Vision International
Youth Initiative for Human Rights Republic of Serbia

We appreciate the collaborative spirit of larger networks which also provided tremendous support with reaching out to young people in many corners of the world, such as the Global Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security, the Major Group for Children and Youth, the Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action, and others.

Last but not least, we are especially grateful for the financial support of the Government of Norway, which has been a staunch supporter of young people's active engagement in the civic space and the need for their protection while doing so.
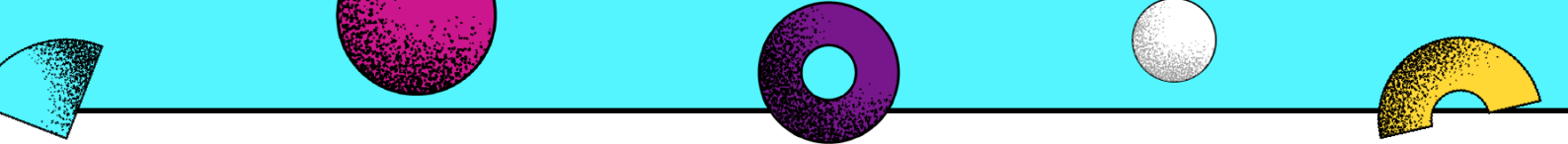
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ms. Rita Izsák-Ndiaye (Hungary/Senegal) has 20 years of experience working with human rights and youth issues in the civil society sector and in international organizations, having held positions at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the International Labour Organization, among others. She was also Chief of Staff at the Hungarian Ministry of Public Administration and Justice. From 2011 to 2017, she held the position of UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues.

Ms. Izsák-Ndiaye is currently an Expert Member and Rapporteur of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on Children and Security.

Ms. Izsák-Ndiaye led this research as an Independent Senior Human Rights Expert while collaborating closely with the United Nations Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth and the Protection Working Group under the Global Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security.

ABOUT THE PROTECTION WORKING GROUP

The Protection Working Group (PWG) was established in December 2019 as a response to reports of threats, harassment, reprisals and other forms of violence that young people have been exposed to while promoting human rights and peace in their communities. The PWG is part of the Global Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security, which is the leading platform for shaping global policy and practice, as well as coordinating collective efforts on youth, peace and security.

Co-chaired by Search for Common Ground and the United Nations Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, the PWG facilitates collaboration between more than 50 representatives from youth-led and youth-focused civil society organizations, UN agencies, funds and programmes, academia and intergovernmental bodies.

The objective of the group is to strengthen, adapt and build on the existing tools and mechanisms for the protection of human rights defenders to address the specific needs of young people in the context of civic space, as part of the global efforts to support and create safe civic spaces and promote an enabling, age- and gender-responsive environment.

ACRONYMS

EEG – Eastern European Group
GA – General Assembly
GCYPS – Global Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security
HRD – Human Rights Defenders
ICCPR – International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
OSGEY – Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth
PWG – Protection Working Group
UN – United Nations
UNSC – United Nations Security Council
UNCT – United Nations Country Team
UDHR – Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN SG – United Nations Secretary-General
UNSCR – United Nations Security Council Resolution
WEOG – Western Europe and Others Group
YPS – Youth, Peace and Security
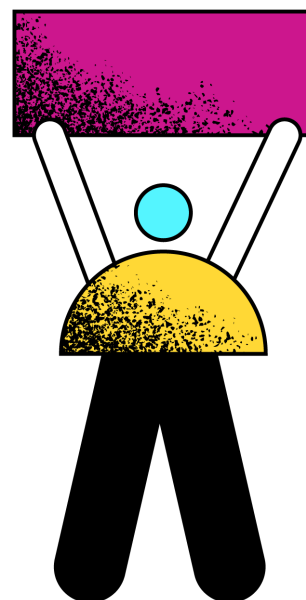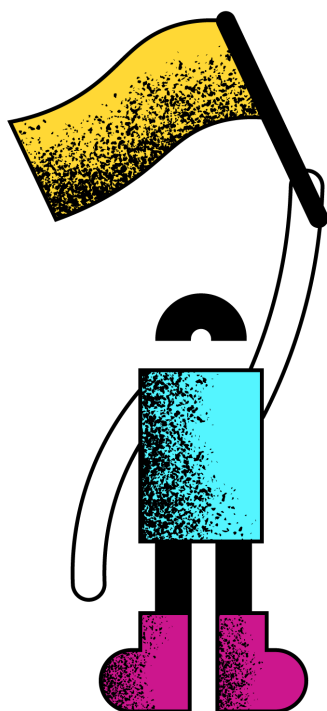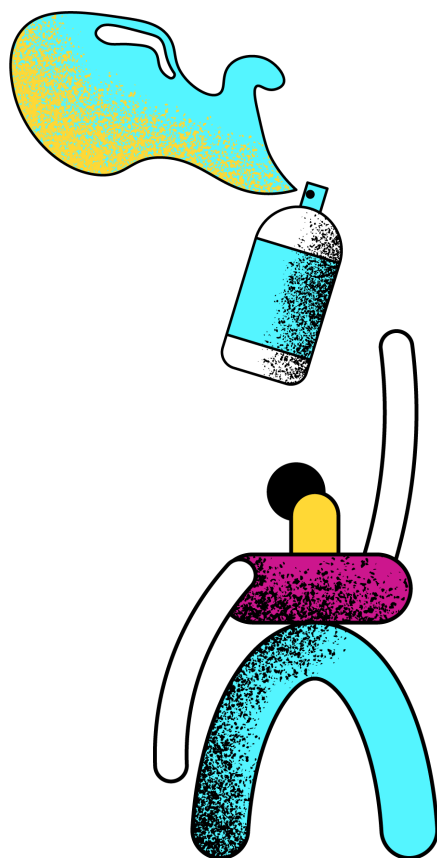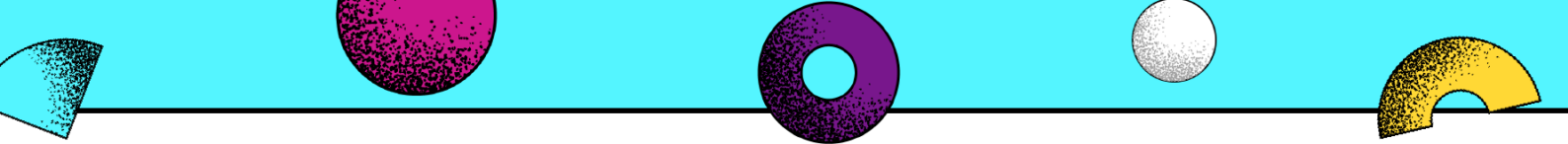
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security, mandated by the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250 and presented to the Security Council, revealed that the civic space is not safe for young people's activism.[2] Moreover, in its *People Power Under Attack: 2019 report,* CIVICUS named youth as one of the 5 groups most commonly exposed to assaults on fundamental freedoms in civic space; these findings were consistent in 2020.[3] Although individual cases involving threats against young people have been previously documented, no specific, extensive research has been dedicated to this topic and no global reports have been published analysing the various forms and gravity of threats, challenges and barriers against diverse groups of youth who are active in the civic space.

Young people have long urged the international community to strengthen protection mechanisms. However, relevant national, regional and international actors have been slow in developing and facilitating the necessary tools, processes and institutions that would provide time-sensitive responses tailored to young people's unique protection concerns, which are often not shared by more senior counterparts in the civic space. This research, which was led by an Independent Senior Human Rights Expert, in collaboration with the Protection Working Group under the Global Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security, builds on the tireless advocacy efforts of those young people, policy and decision-makers, civil society organizations, academics, artists, and others, who have tried to bring concerns about their shrinking civic space to the attention of the international community. It intends to fill some of the existing information gaps and offers recommendations for better protection of youth.

The report must be read through a human rights lens: while we refer to 'threats', 'barriers' and 'challenges' throughout this report, these are indeed in most cases human rights violations, for which the perpetrators must be held accountable. Moreover, we recall all relevant international human rights treaties, declarations, and standards, in order to remember that these young people are rights-holders, and that there are duty-bearers who are responsible for ensuring the full enjoyment of their rights and freedoms.

In our research, which was conducted between August and November 2020, we combined the techniques of survey, online group consultations and interviews, written statements and desk research, and reached out to more than 500 young human rights defenders, peacebuilders and community organizers to find out about their experiences. In our analysis, we tried to break down the different types of threats into categories so as to better understand them; for example, sociocultural, financial, political, legal, digital and physical threats (in order of reported frequency of occurrence).

Sociocultural barriers often manifest in intergenerational hostility, false and harmful stereotyping, negative discourse about youth in the media, and disapproval and rejection of their activities by their immediate and wider community. This often leads to mental health problems, questioning of self-worth, discouragement, and might even pave the way for more severe forms of threats.

Financial challenges can prevent young activists from accessing services that would help them protect themselves. Personal financial dependency on others and economic difficulties might force them to avoid discussing sensitive issues to secure their survival, while institutional financial instability makes them vulnerable to manipulation by governments and other power holders who have an interest in limiting their participation in civic space. We also received reports of frozen bank accounts as an attempt to silence vocal youth activists.

Political threats and pressures were the third most common concern. Governments, political leaders and influential actors use sophisticated methods and mechanisms to discourage and suppress young
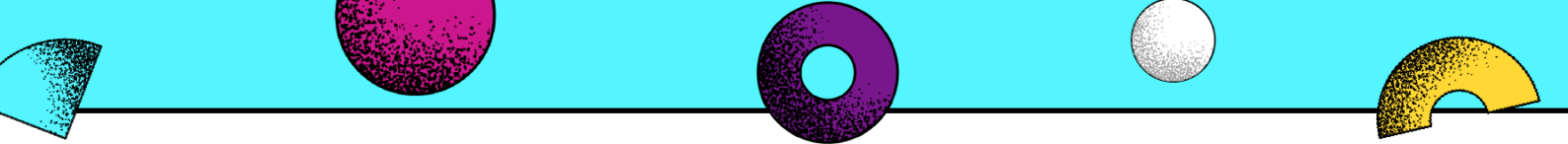
people's right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, among others, and we received reports that paramilitary, intelligence and counter-intelligence services interfered, applied further pressure and carried out political persecution and surveillance on behalf of authorities. It should also be mentioned that it is often precisely this hostility and the disappointment in public institutions and actors which push young activists towards informal and/or non-governmental movements and organizations.

Legal barriers are created by various constitutional, legislative and administrative provisions which obstruct youth civic participation, from minimum age requirements and restrictions on political participation, as well as bureaucratic challenges to establish civil society organizations, and the lack of legal provisions to protect young people; these obstacles increase their vulnerability and further shrink their civic spaces.

We also paid specific attention to the digital landscape and threats, considering that many of today's youth use digital spaces to develop their civic identities and express political stances in creative ways, claiming agency that may not be afforded to them in traditional civic spaces.[4] Our research revealed that, since young people increasingly operate in digital environments, the challenges emanating from online restrictions, privacy issues and surveillance are becoming more significant in defining and, indeed, limiting the dimensions of their space for self-organization and activism. A major challenge facing young people is the weakness and inefficiency of existing mechanisms to report online harassment and abuse, especially the difficulty in providing sufficient evidence to initiate official complaints. It must also be emphasized that threats experienced in online spaces and in a young person's physical environment are often closely related, reinforcing one another and having damaging effects on the victim.

The severest forms of threat are physical, including beatings, torture, inhuman or degrading treatment, arbitrary detention, and even the targeted killing of youth activists. Our interviewees reported feeling helpless as they did not have anywhere to turn to for support, out of fear or to avoid worsening their safety situation. Moreover, their financial instability and thus limited or lack of access to legal services, the overwhelming stigmatization of youth as violent, and the lack of authority in their societies due to their young age, put them in an even more unfavourable position to claim their rights and try to hold the perpetrators accountable.

We must emphasize that we have observed that the six categories of threats described do not come in isolated forms, but rather in cumulative, complex ways, often overlapping and transforming from one to another. Very often, when youth decide to stand up for their rights, they are initially mocked or ridiculed, but when power holders realize that young people are persistent and serious, they start using various political, legal and financial tools to discourage and stop them; the last resort is actual physical violence, which is frequently applied by law enforcement officials and, sadly, often with excessive use of force.

In the context of our research, we also identified specific subgroups within youth that are particularly affected by and vulnerable to threats in the civic space because of their distinct identity and belonging. These include young women, young minorities, youth migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons, non-citizens and stateless youth, young people with disabilities, young LGBTQI community members, and youth in rural communities. We are aware that there are other subgroups in similarly vulnerable situations (such as young indigenous peoples) but our limited capacities, which were affected by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, regrettably prevented us from gathering enough testimonies from all these groups. Members of these vulnerable groups shared with us how they are deliberately stigmatized, ignored, silenced, and threatened by harsher tools than those young people who belong
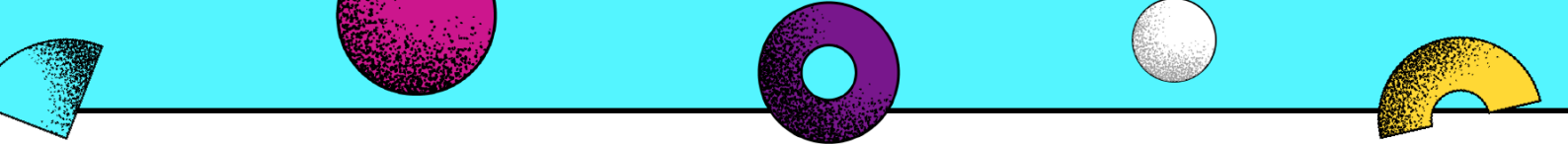
to majority and dominant communities, and how their complaints and actual reports are questioned and treated as less, or even not at all, credible. Many young people who belonged to more than one vulnerable group at the same time experienced multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination in the civic space.

Since we carried out this research in the year 2020, we found it important to try to assess how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the presence and activism of young people in the civic space. Almost half of the participants were forced to interrupt or slow down their work, and the ban on in-person meetings led to shrinking youth spaces where ideas are exchanged, and policies and proposals are discussed and decided. Restrictive measures also exacerbated financial challenges, led to fewer opportunities to be heard and to increased difficulties in documenting human rights violations, which require field research and personal contact. Some youth respondents highlighted issues around mental health, such as emotional anxiety, feeling of unhappiness, lost confidence, increased stress and general worries about life and survival, which made it difficult for many to continue to focus on activism. However, it must also be emphasized that, while our heavily digitalized work environment posed serious difficulties to those in need of technical equipment, internet connection, data packages and other online work equipment, several young people also reported that their work became easier, cheaper, faster and more efficient as a result of the broader shift to technology.
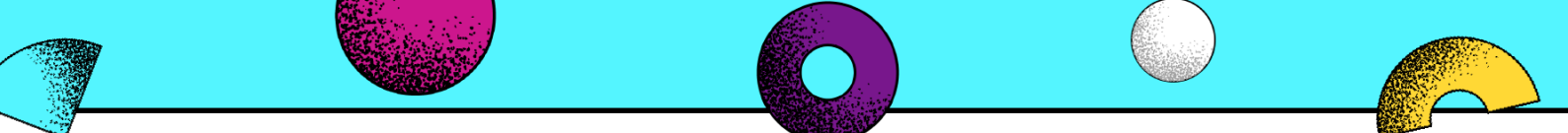
Throughout the research process, we regularly consulted young people on the recommendations that they would make to different stakeholders with the goal to provide better protection for youth in civic spaces, and this information was used to develop a set of recommendations included at the end of the report.

Regardless of the situation of the youth activists we interviewed and in which region or country, there was clearly one common problem: **the lack of dedicated mechanisms, institutions or structures to provide a platform for discussion, reporting, and for triggering accountability measures for the threats endured**. We are concerned about this structural gap as unaddressed mild threats can escalate into more severe ones; they can also become normalized, leading perpetrators of human rights violations to believe that they will escape prosecution and thus making them increasingly harmful.

At the grassroots level, many young people reported having no safe and inclusive spaces to come together and discuss the various challenges and barriers they face while carrying out their work and activism. Many of them felt isolated and helpless while facing threats and said that they were not equipped to recognize the dangers and to find strategies to tackle them.

Therefore, **we encourage the facilitation and establishment of open, safe and inclusive spaces where young activists and peacebuilders can regularly come together to discuss the challenges and threats they face and to find common solutions and strategies to overcome them. We call on national and international NGOs, States and regional and international organizations to find ways to support such youth-led initiatives and provide the necessary resources for their independent operation**.

At the level of national administration, there were very few good examples of youth structures, governmental departments or other administrative units which would be trusted and consulted by the youth in times of threats and danger. Most institutions in charge of youth affairs were reported to have limited capacity, mandates, or resources to carry out necessary and inclusive consultation processes and many of them are regarded as not being committed to protecting the youth, but rather to serving government interests. This is further exacerbated by reported tokenism, which is reflected in often sporadic, symbolic, and selective youth involvement in such structures that does not meet the standards of meaningful participation.

Therefore, **we encourage States to consider facilitating and establishing dedicated, inclusive and independent youth structures, mechanisms or institutions, by providing the necessary conditions and resources, which are mandated to secure a conducive environment for youth activism, to receive reports of threats, protect the youth, and take measures to hold violators accountable. At the same time, mainstream a specific focus on youth and their particular challenges throughout the entire administration, and consider appointing youth focal points in all major departments**.

At the level of international and intergovernmental organizations, very few young people mentioned regional multilateral organizations or the United Nations among the possible providers of protection and accountability. As discussed throughout the report, this may be due to the limited knowledge about existing and available mechanisms and mandates, including human rights procedures, but also due to prior discouraging or disappointing experiences with these systems.

Therefore, **we encourage UN Country Teams (UNCT) and regional organizations to systematically and regularly reach out to youth in their respective countries, organize open, safe and inclusive dialogues, collect relevant information and data about threats and challenges, carry out awareness-raising programmes and facilitate the reporting of such threats to relevant national and international bodies, assist States to hold the perpetrators accountable, and regularly inform other UN bodies, especially human rights procedures, on current developments**.

We hope that this report will be an important advocacy tool to raise awareness and trigger important changes in approaches, processes, policies and mechanisms until they fulfil the promises to uphold young people's fundamental rights and freedoms. It is our collective responsibility to provide them with the necessary protection to enable them to freely operate in the civic space, to influence and shape our societies according to their own aspirations, so we can all hope for a brighter and more inclusive future.

*"I don't feel protected. **I don't feel like if I disappear today something would be said** . . . It's good to say that as young people we should continue to fight, but if we don't start creating solutions to protect us, then we are all going to end up dying, or going to choose between our own safety, stability and families, or fighting for our own freedom."*

1: INTRODUCTION:
PROTECTING YOUTH IN CIVIC SPACE
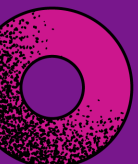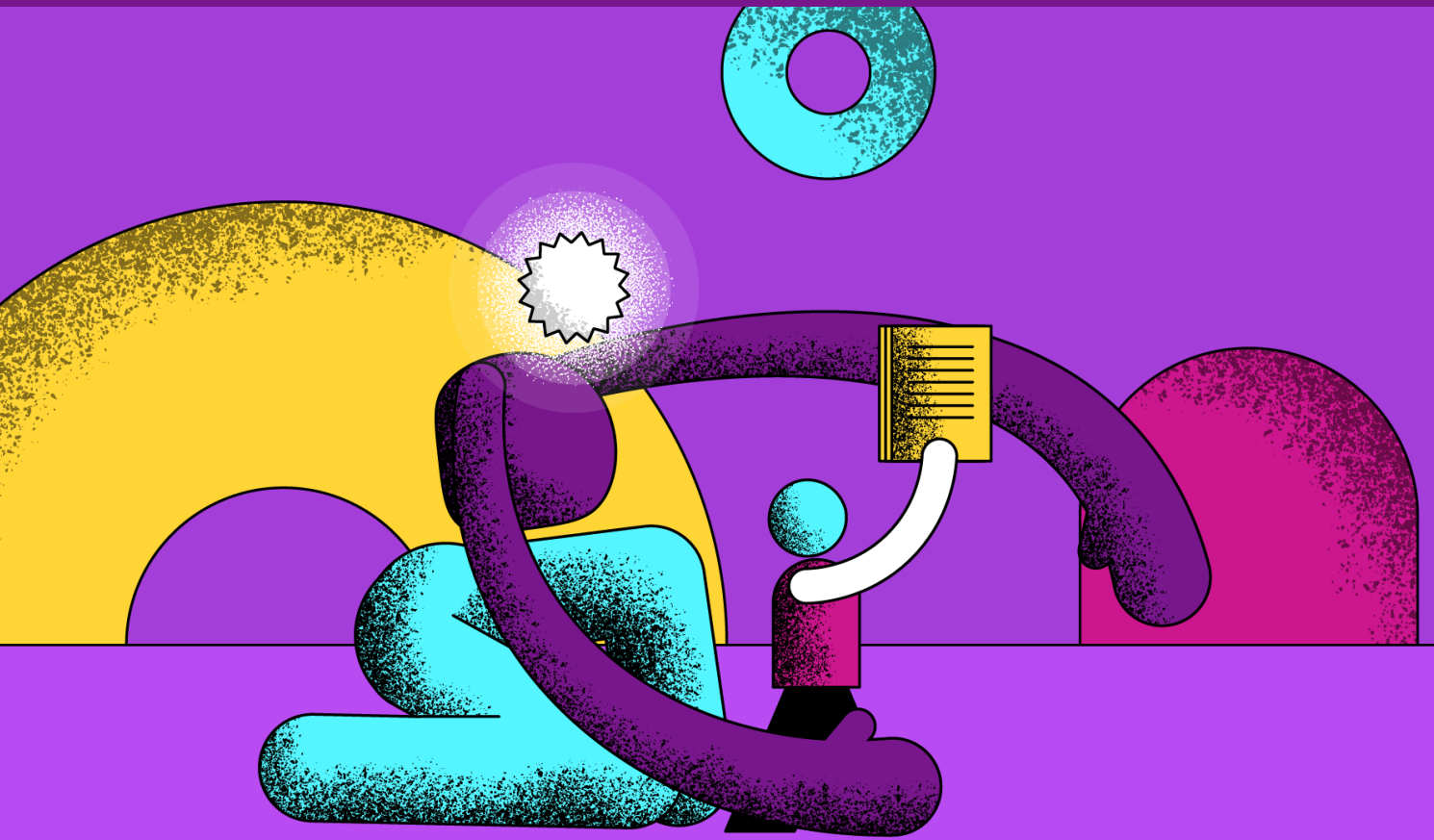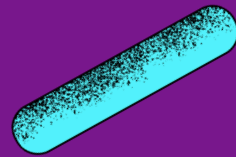
1.1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

There are 1.2 billion young people between the ages of 15 and 24, or around one in every six people globally.[5] Youth face significant challenges, arising from globalization, violence, conflicts, climate change, demographic shifts and changing labour markets, to mention a few.[6] Moreover, a serious participation gap persists; young people are often excluded from formal decision-making processes, and hence of the opportunity to effectively influence and shape their own future.[7] This exclusion is often fuelled by stereotypes of young people as agents of violence and extremism, even though studies suggest that most young people are resilient and peaceful.[8]

Consultations with young activists (including young peacebuilders and human rights defenders) at the grassroots level, which informed *The Missing Peace:* Independent Progress Study (hereinafter The Missing Peace), mandated by UN Security Council in 2018, Resolution (UNSCR) 2250 and presented to the Security Council, revealed that civic space is not safe for young people's activism.[9] Young people who work on the frontlines urged the international community to address this issue, which is why strengthening protection mechanisms was one of the key recommendations of the study. As one young person put it, "**Young peacebuilders who are working in the conflict-affected areas are risking their lives and working for peace, there should be a mechanism/process for safety of young peacebuilders**. The agenda of youth, peace and security should not be used to shrink spaces for youth-led civil society organizations, but it should be used to create more civic spaces."[10]

Throughout 2020, lack of effective protection mechanisms was a stark reality for young people who organized peaceful protests to advocate for social and racial justice.[11] Fridays for Future, Black Lives Matter, EndSARS activists, and others, often encountered sociocultural stigma, political and digital threats, and police violence without effective protection and remedy provided for such violations of their human rights; in the worst cases, some of them were murdered without the perpetrators being held accountable.[12]

1.2. FRAMEWORKS ON YOUTH AND PROTECTION

It is important to stress that rights frameworks and mechanisms that should provide protection to young people and address their experiences of injustice already exist; however, **this study demonstrates that these mechanisms often exist only in normative terms and are not accessible to youth or are inadequate at responding to young people's unique needs**. This was framed elsewhere as the "rights realization gap" for young people, who do not enjoy the rights and privileges afforded to children younger than 18 years old by the Convention on the Rights of the Child but are often not treated as adults, who are covered by numerous other frameworks under international human rights law.[13] Thus, recommendations in this study primarily aim to address this gap and work towards the realization of young people's human rights, building on the existing frameworks, primarily those discussed below.

Since the start of his mandate, the United Nations Secretary-General (UN SG) has prioritized resetting and reorienting the UN's focus on youth and working with and for young people. Youth2030, the UN Youth Strategy (hereinafter, Youth 2030), endorsed by the UN Secretary-General's Executive Committee and launched in 2018, provides the framework for this reorientation. The fourth priority of Youth 2030 calls for protecting and promoting the rights of young people and supporting their civic and political engagement in promoting peace and sustainable development.[14] Indeed, young people are often at the forefront of progressive peacebuilding and human rights movements, challenging the status quo in

their communities. **To support young people's meaningful contributions to society, the international community must ensure that youth are safe and protected when standing up for their rights**.

In the context of civic space, protection means ensuring that young people can safely exercise their human rights without risk of threats and reprisals, especially their rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, which are enshrined in various human rights instruments.[15] Protection is also one of the five key pillars of the UNSCR 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS), which was adopted in 2015, officially recognizing the significant role of young people in building and maintaining peace.[16] In 2020, UNSCR 2535 was adopted, urging Member States to "facilitate an inclusive, safe, enabling and gender-responsive environment" in which youth actors with different backgrounds can "carry out their work independently and without undue interference" while also ensuring that cases of violence against youth are investigated and perpetrators held accountable.[17] Although both of the resolutions emphasize five different pillars, it is important to stress that all of the pillars are closely interlinked; for example, when discussing solutions to provide better protection, it is also necessary to consider other pillars, especially prevention.

In his report on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS), the UN SG asked for dedicated guidance on the protection of young people, including those who engage with the UN, to be developed as part of a new common protection agenda for the UN system.[18] A call for better protection of youth in civic space was reiterated by numerous Member States during the latest Video Teleconference Open Debate on YPS of the UN Security Council in April 2020.[19]

Additionally, although this is not explicitly mentioned in any international frameworks, we also regard discouragement of exercising young people's human rights in the civic space as a protection issue, as well as the overall fearful atmosphere in which young people operate and how they feel about their safety while doing their work. More specifically, if a young person is personally and directly not exposed to threats or barriers, this does not necessarily mean that they feel safe; many of the young people we consulted reported being in a constant state of fear about what might happen; some of them suffer second-hand trauma because their peers were exposed to distressing experiences as a consequence of their activism, or they can feel unwelcome and unwanted in certain civic spaces. Therefore, the report should be read with this broader understanding of protection in mind.

1.3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

In its *People Power Under Attack: 2019* report, CIVICUS named youth as one of the 5 groups most commonly exposed to assaults on fundamental freedoms in civic space; these findings were consistent in 2020.[20] Despite the repeated calls for more efficient protection mechanisms for youth working on the frontlines of civic spaces, the international community has been slow in developing and facilitating these mechanisms.

Progress on this front has been hampered by the fact that, to date, **on a global level, there is no systematically collected data on the threats that young people face in civic space**. Individual cases involving threats against young human rights defenders have been featured in some UN and civil society reports,[21] but no specific research, on a global scale, has been dedicated to young people between 18 and 29 years old, including not only young human rights defenders but also young peacebuilders, community organizers, youth activists, and those who do not identify as belonging to any of these groups, but have still been trying to influence decisions and claim their spot in the civic space.[22]

Therefore, the extent and long-term impacts of threats in civic space against youth are still unknown.

As a first step in supporting relevant stakeholders to work towards establishing safer civic space and more efficient protection mechanisms for youth, we conducted a global research project to identify threats and challenges that youth encounter and use this information to develop evidence-based recommendations and guidance.

1.4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS

Throughout the entire process, we implemented a 'do no harm' approach, in order to ensure that our project did not put our interviewees at risk or would not further jeopardize or worsen their situation.[23] We operationalized this approach through various strategies, such as: consulting digital security expert representatives of platforms we used for consultations, in order to ensure that we were taking all the precautionary measures to ensure the safety of young participants; we briefed the young people themselves on the necessity of not sharing information from group consultations outside these discussions; we never pressured young people to share more than they were comfortable with; and when young people decided to share especially traumatizing experiences in group discussions, we followed up with them in a timely manner to ensure that their wellbeing was not disturbed because of this.

The research was conducted between 3 August and 3 November 2020 by the Independent Senior Human Rights Expert, in close cooperation with the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth (OSGEY) and the Protection Working Group (PWG). It consisted of five major parts: 1) desk research, 2) survey, 3) online group consultations, 4) interviews, 5) written statements.

The **desk** research covered various security, human rights, and development reports published by various UN organs, independent experts and various NGOs where youth were specifically mentioned.

The **survey** on the SurveyMonkey website (see questionnaire in Annex 1) was opened on 15 August and closed on 26 October after it had reached 301 youth respondents. **We received responses from 96 countries, 50% of respondents identified as female, 47% as male, 2% as "others", and 2 respondents preferred "not to tell". Among the category "others", two persons identified as transgender, one as genderqueer, and one as queer**. Most answers came from the African region (100), followed by Asia-Pacific (92), then Latin America and the Caribbean (40), Western Europe and other States (32), and finally Eastern European States (29) (hereinafter WEOG as Western Europe and Others group, and EEG as Eastern Europe and Others group). The grouping of countries throughout the research followed the classification of the UN Department for General Assembly and Conference Management.[24]

To allow for inclusive youth participation, to avoid targeting the "usual suspects" and to facilitate a trust relationship between the researcher and the youth participants who were sharing sensitive information, we used a "snowball sampling technique" where we reached out to an initial set of youth respondents (which we received through recommendations from trusted networks) and asked them to refer us to other potential youth participants from their networks.

We organized **6 online group discussions**. Five of them were regional consultations between 7 September and 14 October 2020 on the Microsoft Teams platform. **There were 115 participants from 76 countries, approximately 57% of them self-identified as female, 40% male, and 3% queer/ gender non-binary**. There were 22 participants from Africa, 23 from the Asia-Pacific region, 22 from

Eastern Europe, 22 from Latin America and the Caribbean, and 26 from Western European and Others States. On 20 November 2020, we also organized one, more targeted, special group discussion with 24 migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced, and stateless persons, who were originally mainly from the Middle East and North Africa, followed by Africa and Latin America. This discussion was initiated because of a significant gap in the literature on the experiences of displaced youth populations in civic space. In this consultation, approximately **46% of participants self-identified as female, and 54% as male**.

Interviews were conducted in November and December 2020 on Zoom with individuals and representatives of civil society organizations and various youth networks.

Written statements were submitted by 3 young men, 6 young women and one civil society organization (as a group statement); written statements were submitted when young people did not have access to internet and/or technological devices and submitted their responses through a focal point who did have access, or they preferred to submit information via WhatsApp or Telegram, rather than on Zoom or Microsoft Teams, due to security concerns. Some respondents who participated in the survey or online consultations also submitted additional written statements via e-mail to share more detailed information or provide supporting evidence for their testimonies.

1.5. TERMINOLOGY

YOUTH:
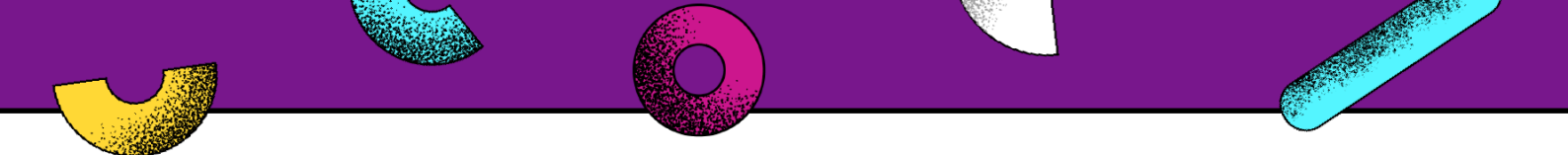
This report focused on young people between 18 and 29 years old, following the age definition of the UNSCR 2250.[25] As the situation of children human rights defenders has been the subject of other reports, priority was given to young people over 18 years of age.[26] However, some contributions were provided by people over 29 years old, and these were often taken into consideration as they reflected experiences from earlier years. There were also a few interviewees under the age of 18 whose testimonies were considered as they identified what causes may lead to vulnerability in later years.

YOUNG HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS/PEACEBUILDERS/ACTIVISTS/COMMUNITY MOBILIZERS:

The young people we spoke to would sometimes self-identify as a human rights defender, a peacebuilder, activist or a community mobilizer, but in most cases, they did not provide fixed definitions of their work, mostly because their work is intersectional. Young people often simultaneously work on human rights, peacebuilding and community mobilizing, and use fluid terms to describe their activities, which was confirmed elsewhere.[27] Therefore, throughout the report, we mostly use the term 'young people in civic space' to refer to all young people who are active in these spaces, contributing to their communities and advocating for different values.

CIVIC SPACE:

This report follows the definition of civic space as articulated in the UN Guidance Note on Civic Space, which states the following: "Civic space is the environment that enables people and groups, or – 'civic space actors' – to participate meaningfully in the political, economic, social and cultural life of their societies . . . Civil society actors should be able to express themselves freely in full security and, and affect change peacefully and effectively."[28]

It is worth noting that, although young people are using civic space in innovative ways to exercise and promote their rights, they are often excluded from certain spheres of civic space because of their age, especially from the institutional political spheres; mechanisms of exclusion vary depending on the context, but previous reports show that legal barriers for voting and running for public office, as well as a lack of quality citizenship education and sociocultural stereotypes, are often the major culprits.[29]

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT:

Civic engagement was considered widely in this research. We adopted an inclusive approach towards the three pillars of the United Nations; we covered experiences connected to humanitarian, human rights work, and activities related to peace, security, disarmament, as well as development, offline and online. The report drew on the definition of civic engagement as defined by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), which views it as "individual or collective actions in which people participate to improve the well-being of communities or society in general."[30]

We analysed information from young people acting individually or as part of a movement. They were not required to have a formal position in civil society organizations (CSOs) when they carried out their activities relevant to this report, because previous research has shown that youth leadership can be found "outside formal political institutions and youth organizations, in seemingly unorganized systems and informal movements."[31] Therefore, the study views activism in broad terms and considers the experiences of all young people who are claiming and taking up spaces in the public, political, economic, social and cultural life in their societies.

1.6. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Before reading the study, it is important to understand the limitations of our research project, **which was conducted over approximately three months**.

Given the nature of the barriers and threats that young people are exposed to in the civic space, as will be discussed in the report, we considered that youth often have difficulty trusting senior leaders and/ or representatives of different institutions. Therefore, the main method of collecting responses from young people was the snowballing technique – a method in which participants are asked to identify other potential subjects from their networks. Moreover, since asking young people about the threats and barriers they are exposed to often involves very sensitive topics and information, this technique was essential because it created a sense of trust between the researcher and the youth participants – which in most cases would not have existed had the researcher not been recommended by someone the young participant knew. However, this method's shortcoming is that **the pool of participants was not randomized, and as such, generalizations must be made with care and attention**.

Another challenge we faced was the **lack of sufficient evidence regarding regional differences and specificities**; although the original intent was to assess how threats and barriers differ depending on the cultural and regional context, our limited resources and time – especially our inability to compare regional consultation outcomes on the same basis and to follow up survey responses individually – prevented us from gaining enough insight into these specificities in order to be able to draw general conclusions in some cases.

Moreover, the majority of data was collected virtually and in group conversations; although many young people enjoyed this process, which enabled them to connect with other young people with

similar experiences, some young people might not have felt comfortable expressing especially traumatic experiences in front of everyone. Although we always encouraged our interviewees to contact us individually if that made it easier to share their stories, the limitation to rely solely on virtual communication meant that certain threats might be missing from this report. This does not mean that we perceive these issues as non-existent or non-relevant for youth in the civic space, but simply that we do not have enough data to produce relevant conclusions on that particular issue.

The fact that this research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic presented a significant obstacle to our outreach; because of mobility restrictions, we were unable to utilize the vast networks of focal points working on the frontlines, who could have conducted interviews with different groups of marginalized youth, such as: youth without access to internet and technology, youth in rural areas, in conflict settings and refugee camps (with very few exceptions). This means that, regrettably, important experiences of many young people with these particular backgrounds might not be properly reflected in this report.

We have described these challenges with the hope that future research projects can consider addressing and filling these gaps. At the same time, we believe that they do not take away from the value, the main conclusions and results of this report, which is that youth across countries and regions have consistently reported the same concern: **young people working in civic spaces do not feel protected**.
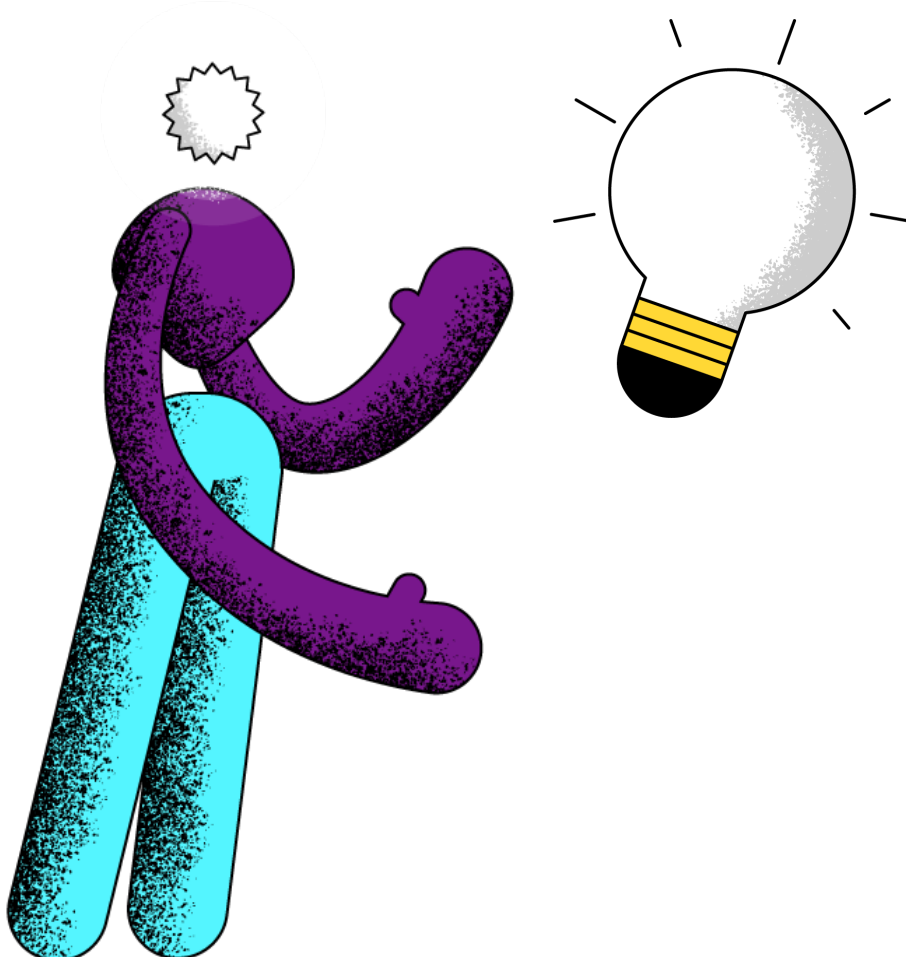
2. **BARRIERS AND THREATS** AGAINST YOUTH IN THE CIVIC SPACE
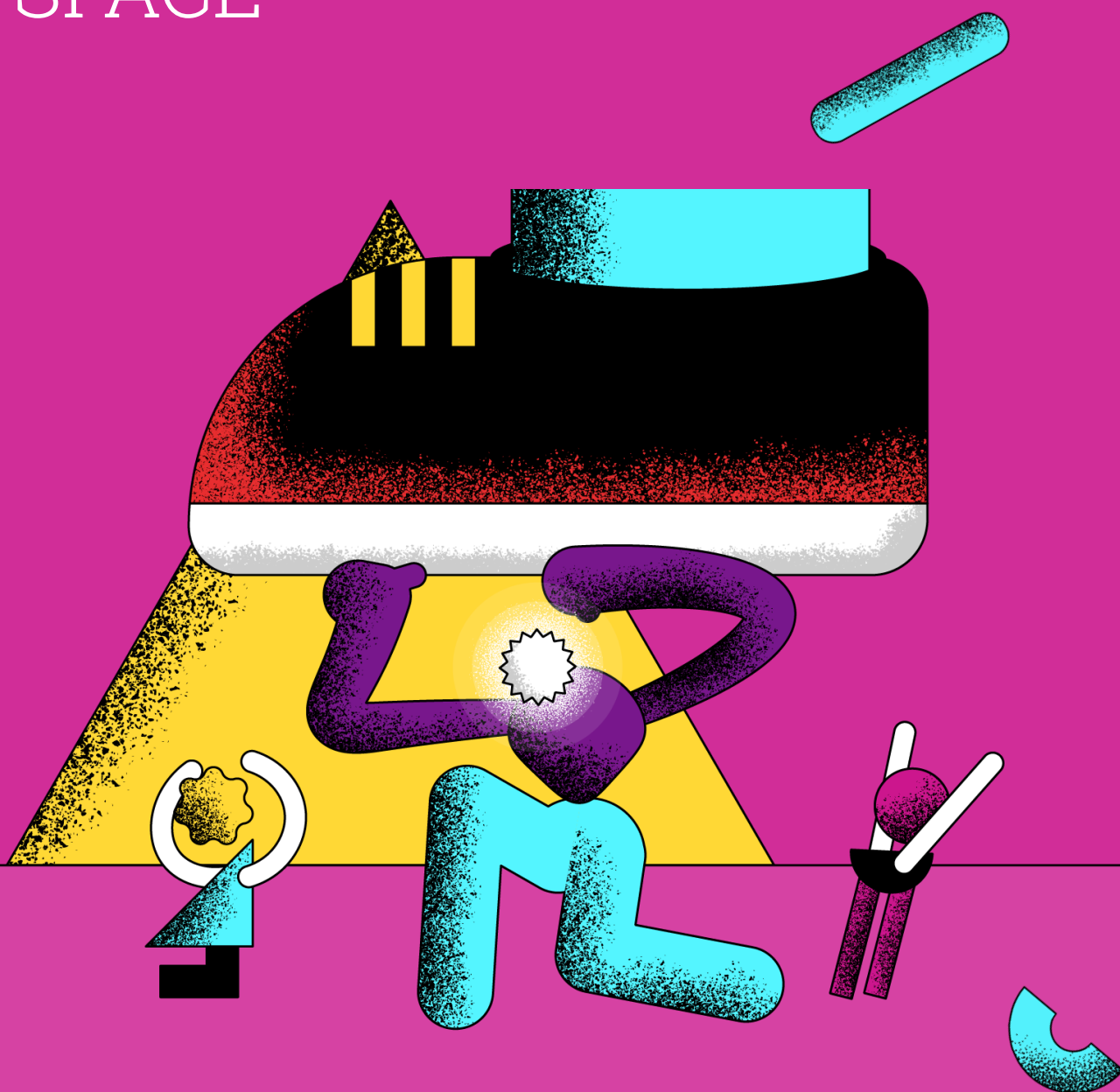
Young people's innovative contributions to civic space

Before discussing the protection challenges young people face, it is important to acknowledge and understand that **youth, their networks, organizations and movements contribute to the civic space in many unique ways**. Their innovative ways of self-organization, fresh outlook on society's most pressing problems and ability to identify often unconventional solutions can offer new and efficient ways to address human rights violations, build peace, and secure sustainable development for future generations. As the former Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, Margaret Sekaggya, has articulated, they also have a "key role to play in putting new human rights ideas and principles on the national and international agenda and advocating for increased respect for human rights without discrimination."[32]

The names of Loujain al-Hathloul, Nadia Murad, Vanessa Nakate, Greta Thunberg, or Malala Yousafzai sound familiar to many people, and the images of the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States, and the "EndSARS" protests in Nigeria, regularly popped up on our social media feeds in 2020. We have also recently witnessed new forms of digitally mediated assemblies, such as Extinction Rebellion, hologram campaigns, and many new hashtag-led spontaneous online gatherings. **These individuals and movements have once again reaffirmed that young people can find new and creative ways to mobilize, are ready to fight for their rights and claim their space in shaping our societies and the global world**.

As another study found, much dynamism in the civil society landscape resides precisely "with informal movements, including of technology-savvy youth, [who] tend to be much more rooted in society (than aid-dependent CSOs), can act swiftly (as they lack hierarchical structures) and shake up ruling elites (as they tend to have a strong mobilizing power)."[33, 34]

In many countries, complicated and costly bureaucratic rules to register NGOs further limit young people's opportunities to obtain necessary funding and pursue their activism, and exclusion from formal structures prevents them from participating in established decision-making processes.[35] Therefore, "in the absence of meaningful opportunities to participate socially, politically and economically . . . young people are strikingly creative in forging alternative places of belonging and meaning through which to express themselves."[36]

Background information on barriers and threats against youth in the civic space

It must be emphasized at the outset that while we refer to 'threats', 'barriers' and 'challenges' throughout this report, these are indeed in most cases human rights violations, for which the perpetrators should be held accountable. The right to meet or assemble peacefully, to form and participate in civil society organizations, or to communicate with non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations, are basic rights codified in various international treaties.[37] The Declaration on Human Rights Defenders also stresses that everybody is free to publish or disseminate views, develop and discuss new human rights ideas, and to advocate for their acceptance.[38] Moreover, everybody has the right to an effective remedy and to be protected in the event of the violation of their rights. It is essential, therefore, **that this report is read with all the relevant international human rights treaties, declarations, and standards in mind, to remember that these young people are rights-holders, and that duty-bearers are responsible to ensure the full enjoyment of their rights and freedoms**.

> *"The issue inherent to civic space is particularly striking young people, as they represent more than half of the population and are therefore called upon to impact and mobilize their communities. Unfortunately, that space is increasingly restricted…"*
> **Young man from West Africa**
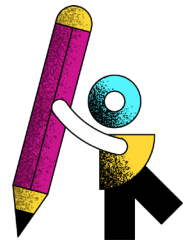
While collecting testimonies and information about the various threats youth face in civic space, we tried to break them down into distinguishable categories to better understand the most common and severe types – including digital, financial, legal, physical, political and sociocultural threats. The following sections explain each one, and the kinds of challenges young people have experienced within these categories. An overwhelming majority of youth participants stated that they had experienced sociocultural challenges, followed by financial, political, legal, digital and physical threats when acting in the civic space, and we have thus structured the following sections in that particular order.

Overall, the results in the following sections demonstrate that an overwhelming majority of young people are targeted simply because of their young age and their activism. It is also clear that there are certain countries with extremely limited civic space, many of those in civil war and conflict situations, where civil society work is not at all enabled or even tolerated.
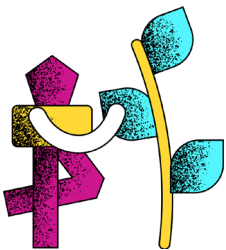
> *"Thousands of youth have been killed since the beginning of the war. They lost their ambition. They can only think about how they can survive. They have been through hard days in which they had lost a lot. It is difficult for them to think of how they can create a better life. In addition, they are not enough aware of their rights and they need to be aware and their capacities must be built."*
> **Young woman from the Middle East**

This puts young people in an unfavourable position where they have to choose between their own safety and promoting the values in which they wholeheartedly believe. As one young woman from North America shared in our consultations: *"I don't feel protected. I **don't feel like if I disappear today something would be said . . .** It's good to say that as young people we should continue to fight, but if we don't start creating solutions to protect us, then we are all going to end up dying, or going to choose between our own safety, stability and families, or fighting for our own freedom."* Although it is now well known that activism in civic space can be a dangerous endeavour for people of any age, **our study demonstrates that young people often suffer in different ways than their older counterparts, and therefore deserve tailored approaches to protection in civic space**.

Intersectionality of different categories of threats

As explained above, threats included in this study are split into different categories; however, we have observed that **these threats are not experienced in isolation, but rather in cumulative, complex ways, often overlapping and transforming from one to another**. Although we have described threats according to different characteristics (violations of civic and political rights were analysed separately

from violations of social and cultural rights, for example), we see human rights as indivisible, interrelated and interdependent and have therefore analysed testimonies using **intersectionality**; this concept encourages the understanding of dynamics and interactions of different identity categories simultaneously, with and within existing power structures.[39] The following testimony, which a young male leader from Southern Africa shared during an interview in the context of a prominent youth-led student movement, helps to understand the complexity and transformation of mild pressures into threats of a more severe nature:

- When the protest started, the first step the government implemented was to promote the following discourse in the public: *"These young people don't know what they are saying. They just don't want to take their exams."* As the young interviewee explained, *"that was an attempt to demobilize the support that the youth received from their peers and other societal stakeholders."*

- *"Then the university management and the government realized that mocking was unsuccessful because the youth were still protesting. So, the next step was to introduce verbal threats, such as 'You are going to be suspended and you cannot graduate and get a job while you are suspended.'"*

- Afterwards *"came the counter-mobilization. This is when you realize that they have started to fear you. The next, and final, stage is physical violence, which means bringing police and private security to campus. We saw the most horrific things, for example teargas cannisters being shot in the air and hitting activists on the face. Beatings, arrests. All these violent repressive strategies instil fear in the movement."* Once the movement becomes violent, *"it's very difficult to convince students and young people that we still have to go to the picket lines. No one can justify saying 'put your body at risk.'"*

This example effectively portrays the chilling journey of threats young people experience in the civic space. In the beginning – *"These young people don't know what they are saying"* – perpetrators strategically build on prominent stereotypes against youth as being immature and avoiding their responsibilities; this is covered in the section on sociocultural threats. The next step is imposing restrictions on young people's right to freedom of peaceful assembly, which is covered in the section on political threats. Lastly, *"violent repressive strategies that instil fear"* are covered in the section on physical threats. Some young people experience these threats at the same time, instead of in phases. In whichever form they appear, they are violations of essential youth rights that are necessary for safe and enabling civic space environments.

2.1 SOCIOCULTURAL PRESSURES AND THREATS

What are sociocultural pressures and threats?

In this report, when we refer to sociocultural pressures and threats against youth in civic space, we are speaking **not necessarily about violations of social and cultural rights provided under international human rights instruments, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,** but how young people's activities trigger various social and cultural responses in their surroundings.[40] An overwhelming majority, 90% of survey respondents said that they face sociocultural barriers. Almost a quarter of these respondents (23%) experience them constantly and 40% of them often.

Although sociocultural threats may seem more trivial compared to, for example, physical threats that

young people experience in the civic space, our study demonstrates that **sociocultural pressures and threats can have serious, negative consequences on young people's mental health and sense of self-worth. Moreover, such pressures might hamper their motivation for continued activism and may even pave the way for physical threats**. Specific examples of sociocultural threats in civic space and unique ways in which they impact youth are provided below.

Intergenerational hostility and its impact on spaces for voicing protection concerns

A prominent concern raised by young people was the intergenerational hostility they often encounter in civic space. As a young man from West Africa explained in our consultations, the increasing participation of youth in civic space is *"threatening to older generations who think that young people are trying to hijack their activities."* Young people also often reported being intimidated and ridiculed when participating in meetings with older activists. Intergenerational hostility towards young people is usually perpetuated by harmful customs and traditions that create misconceptions about what young people should and should not do; to quote a young female interviewee from West Africa, *"We have a tradition and culture that when the elders talk, you cannot speak up. They demand that you keep quiet."*

> *"We receive a lot of jokes, intimidating comments when we are trying to present our opinion in official meetings. We see sometimes attempts to diminish and undermine what we have to say."*
> **Young woman from Western Asia**
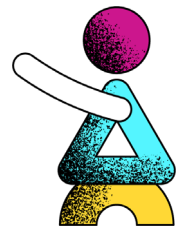
As a result, young people are often placed into exclusively youth spaces by older generations of leaders and activists; one young woman from Northern Europe shared, *"we are often put at a 'children's table,' which means we are not really heard. We would also like to participate in meetings that are not for young people only."*[41] These examples clearly demonstrate that undermining young people's maturity, expertise and commitment regarding their activities in the civic space solely because of their young age can often shrink spaces for civic engagement. The youth we spoke to often depend on personal connections, backdoor negotiations and luck to meet someone in position and influence decisions, which also applies to international spaces. As a result of such exclusion of and resentment towards young people's activism on different levels, it can be difficult for young people to access spaces where they can voice their concerns about their safety and seek intergenerational support for more efficient protection.
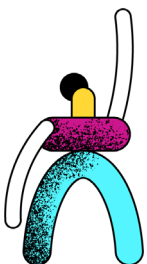
> *"Youth frustration is another issue in the civic space. Many youth-led and youth-oriented organizations who work with vulnerable young people face frustration concerning their empowerment. We say that 'You can accomplish great things.' But when they go back to their communities and realize they have no support from family, community, school and university level, they become frustrated and tell us 'But you said, I can accomplish great things'."*
> **Young woman from Central Asia**

Stereotyping of youth in media and incitement to violence against youth

In many cases, it was reported that political leaders together with the media paint a negative picture of young people. Young activists in particular are often portrayed as foreign agents, enemies, or agitators of conflict. In our consultation with young people from Eastern Europe, a young male activist described the portrayal of youth during a prominent youth-led protest against the widespread discrimination and corruption of the ruling party. As he explained, the media, which is closely connected to the government, *"started portraying youth as jobless, as caring only about destruction, creating trouble for no reason, and painting young people as simply drawing attention to themselves."* Another young woman from the same group noted that in her country young people who are advocating for human rights are presented by the media as *"traitors and hooligans."* The issue of stereotyping youth in media was covered extensively in other research reports as well, and our study demonstrates that this continues to be a concern for many young people active in civic spaces.[42]

Harmful discourses about youth in media may, and often do support the notion that the use of violence by security forces against young people is necessary, especially during public protests. As **The Missing Peace** has shown, in very diverse countries and contexts across the globe, "peaceful political organizations and legitimate organized political protests [by youth] got frequently shut down in the name of securing public order, fighting against terrorism or the prevention of violent extremism," thus "ignoring the fact that most young people are in fact not involved in violence."[43] This phenomenon will be covered in detail in the section on physical threats.

Impacts of sociocultural threats on the validity of young people's voices

Lastly, our research results indicate that **undermining attitudes towards young people can have a serious impact on the validity of their claims in society, which can be especially concerning when youth are trying to file official reports** regarding violations they were exposed to because of their activism. For example, when a young man from Northern Europe with whom we consulted tried to file a report together with other youth activists against another 40-year-old because they were receiving threats and unpleasant comments, the police *"just shook their head and moved on without even hearing us."* In other words, the difficulty of having youth voices heard and taken seriously can be a significant obstacle when advocating for more support for protection.

"Older people can be established human rights activists, but young people are easily dismissed, which is a particular challenge to young people in civic spaces."
Young man from North Africa
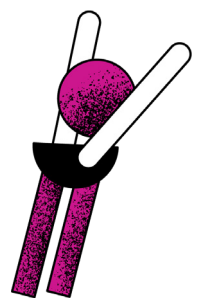
"We had a major crisis in my city, including problems with the health system. I prepared a report with pictures and evidence and I had a meeting with my supervisor. She advised me whom I can address and contact, which I did, but I did not get any reply. And that is very demotivating."
Young woman from Eastern Europe

2.2 FINANCIAL BARRIERS AND THREATS

What are financial barriers?

For the purpose of this report, we interpret financial barriers as ways in which a lack of financial stability prevents young people in civic space from enjoying their fundamental human rights, and, especially, accessing protection support. Financial barriers were the second most reported concern by young people; 88% of all the survey respondents noted that this is a concerning issue for them. This is not unknown to anyone familiar with youth activism; according to the survey carried out in the context of **The Missing Peace,** involving 399 youth-led peacebuilding organizations, limited funding was mentioned as the second most significant factor, and funding constraints play a significant role in determining the types of activities that organizations can undertake.[44] We included a few specific examples and impacts of financial barriers on protection of youth in civic space from our study below.

Financial instability and impacts on accessing protection services

In some countries, especially where it is considered dangerous, early career professionals are not paid for human rights and peacebuilding work, or are underpaid; one young woman from South America explained in our consultations that *"young human rights defenders are at risk. The salaries are low, but the risks are high. So it's very hard to work, to survive, and give your best when you struggle economically in order to do your job."* Young people who are part of formal organizations reported that youth work is mostly viewed as voluntary, so they are often not financially renumerated for their activism. Many young people who participated in our research also have student responsibilities in addition to their activism, which significantly limits their opportunities to seek additional ways to become financially stable. Moreover, they shared that the reputation of youth activists as "troublemakers" often prevents them from accessing the job market when they are older.

> *"Recently a young doctor started speaking about the inhumane working conditions in the hospital, especially during the pandemic, and he and a lot of them had to move to another country, because they were being blacklisted, unable to access opportunities for career growth, and that is pushing against the vibrancy of the system. "*
> **Young woman from the Caribbean**
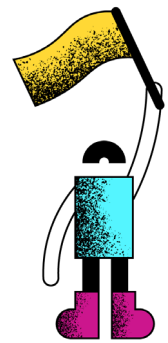
Lack of financial support for youth activism affects youth from lower socio-economic classes in particular. Two young activists from South America who did not have access to internet or technological devices submitted a written statement through our local focal point. As one of them explained, *"The situation is different for people of higher classes because they have social and financial stability. So, they don't worry about personal problems, they can just focus on activism in their areas of interest."* Therefore, young people who have more privileged financial backgrounds (in addition to racial, gender and other forms of privilege) might still be able to continue their activism even in a situation of financial precarity, whereas for other youth this often means they need to discontinue their activities.

Financial instability can be an impediment for young people to access services that would help them protect themselves from threats in civic space. For example, when young people were forcefully

imprisoned, they reported not having enough money for bail. We also interviewed two youth female advocates who had ongoing lawsuits with high-level politicians who threatened them, and they did not know how to find the necessary financial support to pay their lawyers. *"If you are being sued, what happens, who pays for this?"* asked one of them, a young woman from Western Europe, during our consultations. *"It's nice to be an activist, but it's also nice to have protection. We need support. We need funds."* she said. The issue is not lack of information, but lack of financial, institutional support for addressing the threats that they have experienced.

How economic difficulties shrink civic space

Economic difficulties can also have a detrimental impact on young people's freedom of opinion and expression, since young people are forced to avoid discussing sensitive issues to secure their survival. In other words, financial instability disincentivizes strong youth activism; *"in a small country with limited employment opportunities and serious economic difficulties, young people learn to 'play by the rules' in order to survive, so they keep their activities to smaller, shallower issues, instead of actually getting to the root of the problems"*," explained a young woman from the Caribbean during our consultations.

This is especially a concern for young activists who, unlike most older generations of activists, still live in their families' homes because they cannot afford to rent a home for themselves. In some cases, young people reported that their families disapprove of their activism (for different reasons, such as disagreement with the aim of the activism or fear of possible social and political repercussions), which in turn forces the young person to conform to the family's rules and limitations regarding freedom of opinion, expression and association. One young female survey respondent from North America shared:

"The lack of family support for and explicit disapproval of my activism severely limits how I can speak and act in my own home, thus limiting my activist abilities outside the home. Information about local demonstrations and protests has been deliberately kept from me by my mother. Democratic TV shows, radio, or general media are not allowed to play in my home so as not to upset anyone. Any of my anti-racist social media posts usually receives criticism from my family. My inability to live authentically in support of a better life for marginalized populations in my own home impacts my mental health and thus my ability to continue activism."

This example also clearly portrays what many participants in our study have stressed – the negative mental health impacts of navigating pressure from family members, primarily due to the inability to live a financially stable and independent life as a young activist.
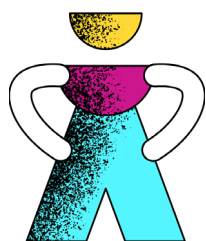
"On the other hand, social media is not expensive so in terms of better connection and more data the government has increased and targeted telecommunications. The effect is that young people have to pay more to be online which also affects digital engagements."
Young woman from West Africa

Lack of financial support from governments and interference in management of funds

Most young people we consulted were active in non-governmental organizations and movements; nevertheless, they were still exposed to government influence and interference in managing their funds. Although the youth sector in civic space is predominantly underfunded and unsupported by governments, in rare cases when governments have devoted a portion of funds to youth-led and youth-focused capacity-building programmes, some young people reported that they never received these funds; a young woman from South Asia noted that this happened *"due to the corruption of political leaders who channelled the funds among themselves."* In some cases, the government will provide funds only if the projects deal with less sensitive, cultural issues; to quote a young woman from Northern Asia, *"to get national grants is very difficult, you should follow the policy of the government, implement projects that mainly reflect the culture and language, something that doesn't come into political or public space."*

Youth primarily count on foreign donors to support them in bringing progressive topics to the table in their communities. Yet, this comes with its caveats; to quote a young man from Central Africa, *"youth are trying to promote the rule of law, governance and accountability but they are constantly facing resistance from the government which is telling the media that youth civil society organizations receive funds from international donors to destabilize the country."* This is a clear example of how financial challenges intersect with sociocultural issues to produce safety issues – the lack of government financial support leads to overdependence of youth activism on foreign funds, and as a result, this often exposes youth to harmful discourses of young people being foreign agents, and (as it was discussed in the previous section) such discourses can have worrying impacts on young activists' safety.
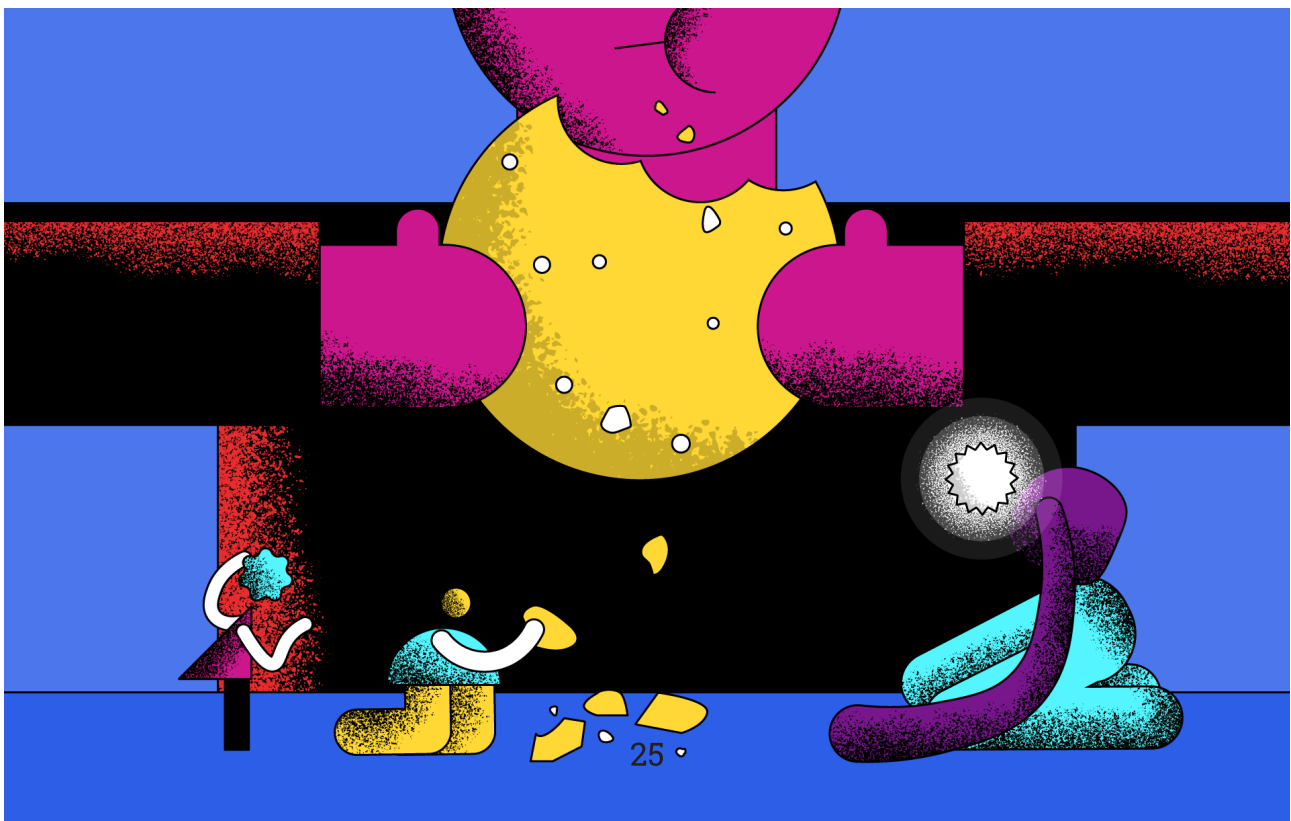
Well aware of the financial fragility of the youth sector, governments freeze youth organizations' funds as a form of retaliation, place bans on accessing foreign funding and limit bank loans that can support youth initiatives. Freezing of individual bank accounts was also reported; a young female interviewee from West Africa participated in a prominent youth-led protest that resulted in a disproportionate use of violence and killings of young people. When a judicial panel was established to investigate these violations, she agreed to contribute; as she explained, *"I agreed to be a member and represent the youth because I wanted peace and I wanted to show that we are ready to work together."* However, despite her willingness to collaborate with the government, her bank account was frozen without explanation. *"It seems that my willingness for cooperation meant nothing,"* she said. Fortunately, she managed to find a lawyer who assisted her pro-bono in filing a report.

This clearly demonstrates the extent to which **young people's financial (in)stability is vulnerable to manipulations by governments, which may strategically interfere to threaten and limit young people's fundamental human rights to participate in civic space**. Our consultations showed that young people's ability to navigate economic difficulties in the civic space often depends on sheer luck and the goodwill of a small number of individuals.
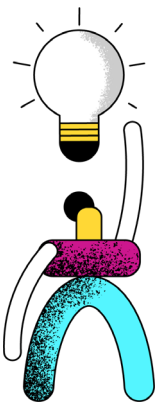
> *"Pumping money into the sector also creates its own problems because there is a very blurred line between service-based organizations and advocacy organizations. There has been a lot of funding flown to grassroots initiatives institutionalizing and bureaucratizing youth organizations on many levels. This created an attraction, especially financial attraction, to grassroots advocacy work and so large bureaucracies are taking up civic spaces, while youth-led and service-based organizations get more and more sidelined."*
> **Young man from Northern Europe**

> *"Financially, I wasn't able to get a job, or I was asked to not write too much, or deactivate my networks, not to do the research, and that was worse after my fellowship program, after which I lost my job."*
> **Young woman from Eastern Europe**

2.3 POLITICAL BARRIERS AND THREATS

What are political threats?

The political threats analysed in this study are **not necessarily violations of political and civil rights as prescribed under international human rights law, most notably in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights**, but political responses that are triggered by young people's activities in the civic space. Threats coming from political and public powerholders were the third most reported type of threats. In the survey, 85% of the youth respondents said that political barriers are a reality, 27% of those who experience them said that they are a constant challenge, and 37% said that they are frequent.

Even though different groups are subjected to restrictions and violations of their civil and political rights by their governments, it should be noted that we were informed how governments and political leaders use sophisticated methods and mechanisms to suppress young people's right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Young people reported in the interviews, consultations and surveys that paramilitary, intelligence and counter-intelligent services interfered and exercised further pressure, political persecution and surveillance on behalf of authorities. As a response, the youth we spoke to reported feeling overwhelmed and helpless in many cases.

Targeting by political/government leaders & impacts on participation in political spheres

"Young people cannot expect anything from state actors, because the state acts against you" (young man, Asia and the Pacific consultations). This sentiment was shared by many young people across different regions; they often reported being attacked and labelled by political leaders as political agitators, separatists, or opposition forces, usually via smear campaigns (both online and offline), as well as through legal and physical actions. During townhall meetings and municipality gatherings, political leaders have allegedly used their authority to silence or ignore youth voices. On the other hand, government leaders expected young people to be very vocal when they would summon them to report on their donors, budgets, social media posts, engagement with the UN and other activities.

Similar to the discussion in the section on sociocultural threats, **mechanisms of targeting youth in political spheres shrink spaces for youth civic engagement**. Consequently, many young people we spoke to became extremely careful and even reluctant to participate in events with political leaders, and collaborate with institutions, both online and offline. Disappointment was also prevalent; as one young male interviewee from North America shared, *"I don't trust the institutions, I don't have faith in the system. They will still play by their own rules. There are institutions that are supposed to investigate things like police brutality, but I don't trust it in their hands. . . they will say whatever they need to, to bypass something."* Thus, **it is often not only young people's preferred choice, but also their only option to participate in informal and/or non-governmental movements and organizations, because their fundamental right to safely participate in public and political affairs has been violated**.
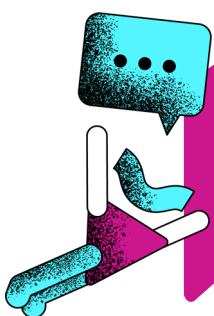
"More young people are becoming apathetic with the political situation and peacebuilding processes; increasingly, youth are seeing that actions they take don't always result in social change…"
Young woman from Eastern Europe

Exclusion of young people from political decision-making is a worldwide phenomenon. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, "young people under age 30 constitute just over 2% of the world's parliamentarians" and their global proportion has increased "by only 0.3 percentage points since 2016 (from 1.9% to 2.2%)."[45] Moreover, "seventy-six per cent of upper chambers of parliament have no MPs under age 30" and "more than 20% have none under age 40."[46] A young male participant from Africa noted in our regional consultations that there is an urgent need to *"promote participatory democracy, to ensure that young people have avenues to engage their governments, because when this is absent, young people are not able to effectively express their worries."*

This exclusion of young people from formal institutions, which fuels mistrust, can have significant impacts on protection of youth in civic space. The findings of our study indicate that it is possible that young people will start facing increased and more expressive forms of barriers and threats from society, political figures, educational and other service providers and managers, or law enforcement officers, precisely because there is a lack of formal dialogues with youth. In other words, **because young people's demands are often misunderstood, and youth are regarded as non-conforming, dangerous, or** – as a young female consultation participant from Latin America noted – *"seen as enemies of the government"* **– young people continue to be exposed to exclusion and violence** in attempts to silence their voices, which are interpreted as being threatening to formal institutions.

Government interference in young people's rights to peaceful assembly and association

Another challenge is that, despite the hostility generated by formal institutions towards young people, youth often depend on the approval of these very institutions to exercise their rights; for example, young people often reported difficulties in receiving authorizations for holding public gatherings. In cases when young people received the permission to hold protests and public events, government leaders and institutions nevertheless found ways to disrupt them. For example, we were informed that a group of politicians raided a space where young people gathered to legally discuss corruption in their country. Young people whose parents work in public administration or the government were also blackmailed with threats that their participation in public protests would result in their parents being fired.

> *"I had to create a discussion group and the Instagram page in total anonymity because my parents work in the public sector and I fear there could be repercussions towards them."*
> **Young man from Southern Europe**
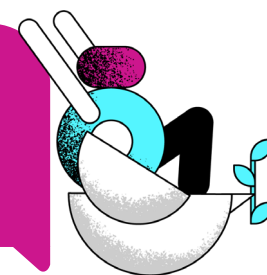
Numerous young people across radically different contexts reported that governments would use their power to turn peaceful protests into violent ones to discourage people from participating next time. *Sometimes, as we were told by a young woman during the Africa group consultations, "the government uses state actors to destabilize the protest. Young people organize peaceful protests, but in the middle of it the police and army start using tear gas. **When I was at a protest and this happened, I felt very reluctant to go again and that's how the civil space is shrinking.** There is a popular place where young people usually meet, and the government put barricades around to ensure that no one goes here."* This targeted disruption of youth gatherings may happen in contexts due to harmful stereotypes of young people as violent and threatening; this was covered in detail in the first section of this chapter.

Unfortunately, violations of youth rights to peaceful assembly and association are not a new issue. Between December 2006 and 31 May 2011, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders sent 60 communications related to violations against youth and student defenders "which were often preceded by students' and youth's organization of and participation in peaceful demonstrations, public appearances and speeches."[47] **The fact that violations of youth rights to peaceful assembly not only persist, but are increasing, means that this area should be of utmost priority to practitioners.**

Lack of effective youth infrastructures for meaningful participation in public affairs

Some young people reported that they would benefit from safe and inclusive spaces where they could come together to discuss matters of their interest. To quote a young female consultations participant from Eastern Europe, *"Youth do not have enough spaces to express their needs and the problems they are facing. The lack of infrastructure for youth is one of the biggest challenges. There are no youth centres, advisory boards in city councils, or youth parliamentary commissions at the local and national level."* This issue worsened with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the limitations of public gatherings.

"Young people today need to study the problems and needs of the region in order to alleviate the mistakes that were made previously. And for that, they must be given the opportunity to discuss among themselves because collective participatory work could be the basis for success and for overcoming difficulties in our region."
Young woman from the Middle East

On the other hand, some young people expressed that, although youth infrastructures in their communities exist and can be beneficial, their impact is limited if they are not mainstreamed into other structures; this is especially true for international organizations, which tend to be disconnected from local realities. As young female interviewee from explained, *"While there are mechanisms for formal youth participation and consultations, the next level of engagement is to break the silos and reconnect them to mainstream political discussions. There are young people with access to high-level UN meetings, but when they come back home, there is no opportunity for them to exchange best practices and participate in formal processes that would allow them to influence meaningfully national or regional policies and programmes."*

To conclude, **violations of young people's civil and political rights (especially the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly), fuelled by harmful stereotypes perpetuated by political leaders, as well as exclusion from political spheres, are an unfortunate trend that seems to persist over time, with a negative impact on the protection of young people and prevention of violence against youth**.

"In my country it is dangerous to advocate for human rights, which entails surveillance and harassment, which I have dealt with since I was a child because my mother is a human rights defender. That has impacted my willingness to advocate for the people I work with. I tend to avoid organizing or going to events, and I only give counsel in anonymous ways, when I draft legal documents, I do not sign my name or visibly litigate anymore."
Young woman from South America

"State funded NGOs are extensions of the state, but are always portrayed as community members, and they are present in larger numbers than independent activists, so youth are being overpowered."
Young woman from Western Asia

"Provocation from powerful political parties is a problem. Any meeting to discuss problems or ideas turns into media campaigns against the existence of the problems and to dismiss the capacity of the people who propose ideas."
Young man from Eastern Europe

"Repression is still continuing and if the situation stays like this, there will be even more. Young activists have been targeted and threatened by the authorities and there are limited ways to advocate for them."
Young woman from Eastern Europe

"If you are handling sensitive information that puts the government in an uncomfortable position, you might face threats from both illegal groups and also directly from the government, through different structures that can cause harm, for example military groups and other entities, intelligence and counterintelligence."
Young man from South America

"We need new models of engaging young people. You can't just rely on boards and letting people get elected because as much as you are well-intentioned, in these government positions you are often a token, so there needs to be rethinking of how youth organizations govern themselves."
Young man from North Europe

"I feel that these positions are just ceremonial, because these formal young representatives don't do anything for the youth in the country. They just find ways to always go along and do things the way these politicians want them to do. They don't actually have the right or power to exercise the demands of the youth in the country, because most of them are being controlled by the same politicians."
Young man from West Africa

"I am concerned about constant harassment of young people by parliamentarians, who are often in administrative or low-level positions, facing sexual harassment, unsafe or unrealistic work expectations, including no work-life balance, lack of explicit training for youth to remain in precarious positions within their political ranks…"
Young woman from North America

2.4 LEGAL BARRIERS AND THREATS

What are legal barriers?

In this context, we understand legal barriers to be constitutional, legislative and administrative provisions which pose a barrier to youth civic participation, which has also been discussed in other reports.[48] Barriers posed by legislation or policies are a concern for 79% of survey respondents, 40% of them only face them on an occasional basis, 14% constantly. The most significant ones relate to the minimum age requirement for political and public participation, and to freedom of association and assembly.

The usage of age to restrict civil and political rights

In 2011, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders expressed her concerns about "trends in several countries towards passing legislation that prohibits young people, typically below 18 or 21 years of age, from participating in public assemblies."[49] According to a report of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, in some countries, the minimum age requirement for voting can be 25, for candidacy and eligibility 40 years (the lowest requirements are 16 and 17 respectively).[50] These concerns were reiterated by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, who in 2018 emphasized that establishing age limits in legislation can significantly inhibit young people's enjoyment of civil and political rights; moreover, she noted that "age is one characteristic that often intersects, adds to and multiplies to discrimination based on other grounds. Together with the structural and institutional barriers that youth also face, such multiple discrimination prevents many young people from enjoying equal opportunities and substantive equality."[51] In some contexts, youth participation in public assemblies is mandated, but is ofte*n not meaningful; to quote a young female interviewee from the Asia and the Pacific region, "We tick the boxes for youth participation and youth in political spaces. Meaningful participation is another question, but mechanisms are there. The deeper question is inclusion – the space is there, but who gets the space and the seats?"*

Bureaucratic challenges for the establishment of youth NGOs

There are concerning legal barriers that further hinder safe and meaningful youth participation in civic space, which often intersect with financial challenges. These include mandatory official permission for operation, bureaucracy, or denied registration of youth CSOs. As one young woman explained during our Eastern European consultations, *"Registration of NGOs stipulates a lot of procedures, bureaucracy, and corruption, so a lot of youth activists are discouraged from following this path to continue their activism. There are also no funds available to establish an NGO, so it has to come from your own pocket ."* **In other words, the complex bureaucratic procedures and high financial costs discourage young people from establishing or operating their own organizations.**

"In the area of policy making, the government makes it difficult to legally register a civil society organization under recent law which was just adopted, so people give it up because the process is so complex."
Young woman from West Africa

This creates a vicious circle since seeking financial support from other, international sources to overcome these local legal difficulties is not an option, because "if you don't have a legal organization, then you can't apply for international funds" (young man, Latin American consultations).

Legal restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly

We also received reports about legal restrictions concerning freedom of expression and assembly and outdated laws that do not follow recent social and cultural developments. During the consultations, participants mentioned several concrete, problematic laws that are used and misused to limit youth civic space. One young person from Latin America revealed disturbing information about military misconduct to the government, after which a lawsuit was initiated against him and their office got shut down. This example reflects a broader pattern, which is that some of these laws are intentionally left vague to leave room for flexible interpretation by the government; as one young man from South Asia reported, youth are *"constantly in fear about the vocabulary that would be problematic for the government."*

"The government introduced a new law on social media which prohibits the publication of certain content on social media. As a result, they were arresting a lot of young campaigners. . . A recent antiterrorism bill was signed by the president. While it may sound like a proactive move by the government to curb terrorism, in reality, it has been used against activists to limit freedom of speech, expression, and of assembly. We have seen worsening human rights abuses and the law itself allows unwarranted arrests and silencing of dissent. In June, during the pride month, twenty peacefully protesting LGBTQI activists were arrested, brought to the police and harassed."
Young man from South Asia

"… Institutions that should represent the future, brought apartheid-era legislation to us, provisions that were used to suppress activists against apartheid, in terms of your right to freedom of assembly, the size of banners, etc. What kind of person would use such draconian systems to silence young people? Legislation is not just, particularly in our context of post-apartheid and probably in other post-colonial societies, in which it is used to silence us."
Young man from Southern Africa

These laws have been reported to provide justification for harassment, arbitrary arrest, imprisonment, or police abuse of young people. Although these laws can target anyone, whether an adult or a young person, the impacts of these restrictions are different for young people; as the former UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Human Rights Defenders noted herself, **young age adds to the severity of the violations suffered and leaves young people particularly vulnerable because youth ". . . have less means than adults, including economic ones, to defend themselves as victims of human rights violations."**[52] Indeed, the experience of a young interviewee from Central Europe clearly portrays this – when he was sued by a powerful mine company because of his environmental protest, *"the investor hired top lawyers, sued for slander and so far won more than I make in a year.*

The court proceedings cost them nothing compared to the company's income, while I can barely afford to attend the trial, much less hire a good lawyer. They managed to significantly slow down my public involvement while also threatening my livelihood."

Lack of legislation for protection of young activists

Young people in many different contexts reported that their countries do not have protective laws to ensure the safety and security of youth activists, which, often coupled with the lack of political will to hold perpetrators accountable, leads to their vulnerability and often forces them to stop activism. Although Declaration 53/144 on the rights and responsibilities of individuals to promote human rights was adopted more than twenty years ago,[53] many young people reported that national implementation is lacking. A young man from the Caribbean reported that *"as a young group, there is nothing protecting you in terms of legislation. There are no guidelines. It's just young people doing what they can on their own."*

> *"There are many instances where youth rights are violated. . . and they cannot even get legal support from their lawyers, because they are denied access."*
> **Young woman from East Africa**
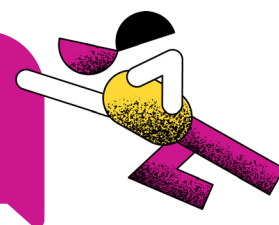
Yet, young activists can only go so far without proper legal protection. Although not all young people who are active in civic spaces encounter legal difficulties, for those who do, the ramifications can be a matter of life and death. One young woman from North Africa *shared particularly disturbing information about the environment in which she is active: "There are a lot of attacks against youth activists, who are kidnapped and murdered. Until this day it is unknown who is responsible for these deaths. This has led to a lot of youth losing faith, they feel helpless. We need policies, laws and mechanisms from the top that must reflect the situation on the bottom, to make it known that people will be held accountable for such acts."* This example clearly portrays how the **lack of effective legal provisions for investigations of violations against youth, and lack of protection of young people working on the frontlines, contributes to their vulnerability and might increase threats and human rights violations against them**.

2.5 DIGITAL BARRIERS AND THREATS

What are digital threats?

The digital challenges and threats discussed in this section refer to the violations of young people's fundamental human rights that discourage and prevent them from exercising their civic engagement in online spaces. In the context of our survey, 78% reported to have experienced some form of digital threats, 18% experienced them constantly. It has already been discussed elsewhere that "the same tools that digital activists use to express themselves can be used against them to silence, intimidate and distort their message."[54] Indeed, our research has shown that **since young people increasingly operate in digital environments, the challenges emanating from online restrictions, privacy issues and surveillance are becoming more significant in defining the dimensions of their space for self-organization and activism**.

It should be noted that the examples of threats below are not necessarily unique to young people; online harassment, violations of freedom of speech and surveillance are issues that affect many different groups who have access to internet and technological devices. However (although the number of internet users is continuously growing), research shows that most of the digital actors are youth between 15 and 24 years old,[55] and, young people aged 18-29 are more likely to engage in political discussions online compared to their older counterparts.[56] **This implies that increased use of technology can lead to greater vulnerability to threats and attacks online for young people.** Moreover, since young people start using technology at such a young age, the threats they experience can have significant negative impacts on their lives later on; for example, research has shown that surveillance of young people's data "follows them into adulthood even though their attitudes, preferences and identity may change over time."[57]

Online harassment and impacts on online freedom of speech

Throughout the consultations and interviews, as well as in the survey, young people reported that, due to their activism online, they experience cyberbullying attacks, hateful messages, sexist comments on social media, suspension of social media accounts and pressure from different actors to delete content, among other issues. Our research indicates that perpetrators can be both young people's peers, as well as adults in their communities. A young woman from South America described her experience of online platforms as *"really hostile spaces"* where she *"constantly faces threats, insults and hate campaigns"* directed at her work. At times, when young people have expressed their opinions about sensitive human rights issues in their contexts, they were subsequently questioned by the police, and even fined or arrested. One young male activist from the Caribbean shared that after he criticized the government on his social media account for deepening the digital divide in his community, he was arrested and forced to sign a letter, promising to discontinue his activism.
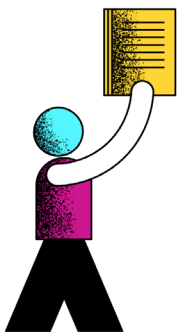
> *"I was summoned by the head of the police to attend an interrogation where they questioned my publications on my social media networks. I received threats against myself, my friends and family. I was also arrested for 12 hours and asked for a fine of 300 pesos for sharing false information on social media and I had to sign a letter of warning as I was being threatened to have a file opened against me."*
> **Young man from the Caribbean**

Digital technology provides an easier opportunity for young people who have access to the internet and technology to participate in more equitable civic engagement, and it enables them to create content that is accessible for larger audiences.[58] Moreover, there is a connection between online and offline activism: which means for example that youth who are politically active online may be more likely to also engage in 'real' offline political activities, such as voting.[59] Given the potential of online platforms for strengthening young people's civic engagement, it is imperative that relevant stakeholders, including leaders and owners of different social media spaces, take the necessary steps to ensure that young people's right to freedom of speech and safety are respected online.

Weak reporting mechanisms and lack of efficient guidelines on reporting

The young people we spoke to often noted that they experienced difficulties in reporting threats that they have received online. **One salient barrier is the weakness and inefficiency of existing reporting mechanisms, especially the difficulty in providing sufficient evidence to initiate an official complaint mechanism.** A young woman from North America reported that the *"grey area of free speech"* is often used as a justification for inaction when online threats are reported by youth; in other words, hateful speech expressed by the perpetrator is interpreted as being in the realm of the perpetrator's human rights.

Another difficulty is **the lack of clear guidelines on reporting**. One young woman from South America, whose youth collective was threatened and humiliated on Twitter, did not report this behaviour, despite the harm that it has caused her and her fellow activists. As she explained, *"my concern is that I don't know how to prove that they are actually speaking of my organization."* Although it was obvious to her and her peers that they were the target of this harassment, the perpetrators did not use exact names, but contextual clues that would only be known to young people in their networks. One young woman from Western Europe who has been promoting her activism online for years, asked during the consultations: *"Which legal steps can a young person take to protect themselves online? How to interact on social media without facing personal harassment and attacks every time? Are there measures that can be taken against those people who inspire terrorism openly?"* Young people like her continue to pursue their activities online despite threats and lack of guidance on reporting; still, it should not be acceptable that young people have to operate in such precarious online spaces.

Violations of data privacy, surveillance and government interference in digital spaces

Collaboration between social media platforms and governments was of great concern to the young people we consulted. Special Rapporteurs on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association have noted several times in the past that such restrictions placed on social media disproportionately affect young people's ability to mobilize, given that youth are the most active users of these platforms.[60] Speaking against authoritarian governments online is highly dangerous; those who do speak have reportedly been *"targeted and arrested, sometimes even put in prison for more than 48 hours"* (young woman from West Africa). Due to constant digital surveillance, some young people stopped promoting their activities online; however, they noted that this leads to a weaker interest of donors in supporting them, because they do not have the required online publicity to showcase their impact.

Online and offline connection

It is important to note that although all the threats discussed above primarily refer to online spaces, they often have a connection to, or transfer to, threats in the real world. For example, the young woman from Western Europe mentioned above, was criticized and ridiculed online by a far-right politician in her country. A week later, there was an attack on a church where people with the same religious beliefs as this young woman congregate. When the perpetrator was interviewed about his motives, he noted that he was inspired by the criticism of the far-right politician who attacked the young woman online. Thus, **threats experienced in online spaces should not be seen as less concerning, or dangerous, than threats experienced in the young person's physical environment, but instead as closely related, and often reinforcing one another.**
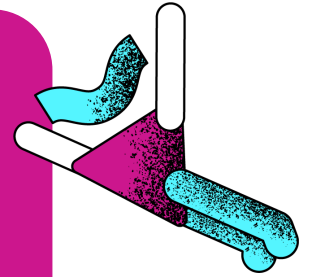
2.6 PHYSICAL BARRIERS AND THREATS

What are physical threats?

Any violation of young people's physical integrity as a result of their civic engagement was considered a physical threat for the purpose of this study. In the context of our survey, 55% of respondents reported that they have encountered such threats, and 10% said they constantly experience physical threats. Our findings were consistent with the outcomes of Margaret Sekaggya's report on the situation of youth human rights defenders from 2011, which recorded a concerning number of cases of "violations of physical integrity, including killings, physical attacks, torture, ill-treatment, enforced disappearances and excessive use of force by police and security forces during demonstrations."[61] Although young people tried to report these violations, as discussed in the previous section, lack of accountability and inability to seek legal support often prevented these cases from being addressed. Specific testimonies related to the different forms of physical threats youth experience in civic space are discussed below.

Targeted killing of youth

In most extreme cases, young people spoke of targeted killings of youth, and especially youth activists. As one young man from South Asia shared during our consultations, *"many young activists and peacemakers are being targeted by extremist groups; they have been continuously followed by them and, in the end, killed. The government intervention regarding these killings is not visible."* This issue permeates civic space, and in some cases targeted killings are not based on the human rights defenders' age. However, **in some regions, young people are targeted for killings particularly because of their age**; we heard during consultations that *"15 people were killed, between 18 and 20 years old, in protests. There is a stigmatization of young people in the region, young people are seen as the government's enemy."* (young woman, Latin America).

A young female consultations participant from Latin America informed us that the term *"juvenicide"* was coined to name the social phenomenon of the killing of youth, in a similar way that "femicide" is a term that represents the politics of targeted killings of women. More research is needed to fully understand this issue, as well as to what extent it appears in other regions. Still, it is safe to say that policies aiming to provide safety and protection to youth in the civic space need to consider the unique interplay of power and age dynamics involved in brutal violations of young people's right to life.

Violations of the right to freedom of torture, arbitrary arrest, inhuman or degrading treatment

The youth we spoke to reported being exposed to physical violence, beatings, torture and/or forceful imprisonment. These were often manifested in the actions of law enforcement officers, such as police misconduct and brutality and arbitrary arrests. Apart from government forces, paramilitary groups, cartels, organized crime groups, and extremist groups were also reported to have committed torture, physical harm, abductions, kidnappings, forced disappearances and conveyed life threats against youth.

The experience of a young male survey respondent from Southern Africa clearly portrays the difficulty of working in such conditions: *"We are seen as political activists or agents of regime change and this puts our lives at risk. Some are tortured, some disappear without a trace, some are abducted. . . This makes our work as young people very difficult. When one demands accountability from duty bearers, they are automatically considered a threat."* His experience has been echoed by many others, especially the feeling of helplessness and not having anywhere to turn to for support, out of fear of worsening their safety situation. To quote a young woman from East Africa, who participated in our consultations, *"Young people are going through a tough time. . . If they get up to fight for their rights or for policies that are supposed to help young people, they are arrested, brutally beaten, and imprisoned."*

Other forms of degrading treatment also include interference in the actual physical environments in which young people work in; security forces have allegedly raided offices, confiscated property, checked work and communication equipment belonging to youth organizations because of their activism. Some interviewees and consultation participants had to change their residence due to threats and fear from different actors. Others tried to change their locations but were prevented because of travel restrictions and passport seizures.

Although various marginalized groups are also exposed to violations of the right to freedom from torture and other inhuman treatment as a result of their activism, **evidence from previous sections demonstrates that young people's lack of financial stability and thus limited access to legal services, the overwhelming stigmatization of youth as violent and the lack of authority in their societies due to their young age, all put them in an even more unfavourable position to protect their rights and ask for institutional and intergenerational support when they are exposed to inhuman treatment.**

Violations of civil and political rights during youth-led protests

Although already briefly mentioned in the section on sociocultural and political threats, when we spoke about government interference in young people's right to peaceful assembly, it is important to elaborate in this section on the types of violent acts that are perpetrated by state actors during youth-led protests. We have already emphasized that most youth-led protests start peacefully, with the intention to end peacefully as well. However, manipulation and interference by governments often may lead to violence.

Kettling: Young people reported being exposed to extreme forms of violence during protests. *"We get kettled, even though we have the right to be there"* (young woman, North America). Kettling is a notorious technique employed by police officers, which essentially involves surrounding large protesting crowds and moving them to a pre-designated location; it was challenged in the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in 2012 as a violation of the right to freedom from deprivation of liberty, covered under Article 9 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, because being kettled often means not having access to food, water or toilets for hours on end.[62] Although the ECHR rules that kettling in the particular circumstances of the case did not amount to a breach of Article 9, it did not rule out that crowd-control techniques, including kettling, could constitute a deprivation of liberty, depending

on the type and manner of implementation of the measure in question.[63] The fact that it was already challenged as a potential deprivation of liberty and that it significantly impacts young people, who are major participants in public protests, indicates that further research is needed in order to understand its potential impact on young people's safety during protests.

Tear gas: *"We would be outside protesting peacefully. After yelling for a while, the police would unleash the tear gas. One time I was caught off guard. There was so much teargas, everyone's eyes were burning, no one could breathe, because they let off such a large amount, to the point that they could have killed someone if they didn't have anyone to help"* (young woman, North America). This testimony potentially implies that the use of tear gas **can be arbitrary, unexpected, and used in unreasonable amounts, to the extent that it may become a threat to a young person's life**. Studies have shown that the use of tear gas can produce "lung, cutaneous, and ocular injuries, with individuals affected by chronic morbidities at high risk for complications. . . and have been linked to acute and chronic pain, cough, asthma, lung injury, dermatitis, itch, and neurodegeneration."[64]
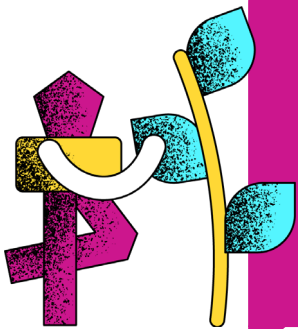
"I have had incidences where I faced physical attack during my work. For instance, I represented my organization in a peaceful assembly to campaign against the attack on women who were arrested because they were sex workers. The sex workers were even raped by police during the course of the arrest. In the course of the peaceful match, we faced police barricade and threats. Also, during the [X] assembly which my organization participated in, to campaign for government action to secure the release of the girls... police caused disruption by spraying tear gas to disperse the crowd."
Young woman from West Africa

Rubber bullets: Along with kettling and teargas, we were informed that rubber bullets are another law en*forcement strategy widely used during protests to scare and disperse the youth crowds. "The leader of the movement was shot 13 times in the back with rubber bullets from a close range. She is lucky to be walking now because it penetrated her skin"* (young male interviewee, Southern Africa). Although deemed non-lethal, research actually shows that the use of rubber bullets can be extremely harmful; one comprehensive study published in a medical journal analysed available literature on deaths and injuries from rubber and plastic bullets used in protests in the past three decades, and they found that out of 1984 people "49.1% of deaths and 82.6% of permanent disabilities" resulted from strikes to the head and neck, while out of 2,135 of those who survived their injuries "71% were severe, with injuries to the skin and to the extremities most frequent."[65] The study concluded that "given their inherent inaccuracy, potential for misuse and associated health consequences of severe injury, disability and death, kinetic impact projectiles do not appear to be appropriate weapons for use in crowd-control settings."[66]

It is difficult to underestimate the importance of protests and public gathering for young people. To quote a young man from South Europe, *"Standing up for climate change for us means life or death."* Many other young people advocating for peace and other values they believe in feel the same way. **Given that most protests and social movements are youth-led,[67] and given the extremely dangerous and potentially deadly impacts of the use of "non-lethal" weapons employed by governments during public assemblies, there is an urgent need to reassess the use of countermeasures to ensure young people's safety while they exercise their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.**

2.7. IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

During the course of our research, conducted in 2020, the dimensions of civic space were greatly shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. To better understand how the pandemic has affected the level of protection of young people's fundamental rights in civic space, we incorporated questions about the effects of the pandemic in the survey, interviews and consultations. To summarize, our results indicate that the **COVID-19 pandemic intensified existing inequalities and insecurities, which further weakened measures for the protection of youth in civic space**.

Impact of the movement restrictions on youth participation in public affairs

Almost half of the survey respondents emphasized the interruption or the 'slowing-down' of their work and activism.[68] As they explained, a major reason was the measures national authorities implemented in the countries in order to slow the spread of COVID-19, which resulted in restrictions of movement, restrictions on public and private gatherings, school closures and work from home, to name a few. Youth community centres closed, and youth festivals and other events were postponed or cancelled; even if important community events were held, fewer people attended. The ban on in-person meetings led to a lack of spaces for youth where ideas are exchanged, and policies and proposals are discussed and decided. This also meant fewer opportunities to be heard; instead, young people had to rely heavily on personal contacts as it was challenging to reach out to official bodies.

Youth mobilization was challenged due to reduced physical presence and activism on the ground; civil society organizations were often not considered to be essential service providers and thus had to discontinue their work. As a result, 17% of survey respondents highlighted difficulties in reaching particularly marginalized communities that they usually work with, including children in schools, people with disabilities, people with HIV, refugees and others. Moreover, it generally became more difficult to stand up against human rights violations as many possible responsive actions – such as documenting human rights violations, field research, evidence gathering, signature collection for petitions, access to the judiciary – were restricted or banned because of physical distancing requirements.

Despite the fact that the restrictions of movement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic applied to everyone equally, it is possible that they have impacted young people's right to participation in public affairs more severely, because – as demonstrated in previous sections – young people were largely excluded from the decision-making processes even before the pandemic. Thus, we can infer that young people's reduced ability to participate in non-formal movements and civic spaces also led to even fewer opportunities to contribute to formal and public processes.

COVID-19 as a justification for repression and the rise of youth-led protests

Some young people we spoke to felt that the pandemic served as an excuse to repress and exert control over the youth (and the rest of the) population. To quote a young woman from Northern Europe, who participated in our consultations, *"The pandemic has brought unprecedented legal power to the parliaments, which are able to shut down assemblies and democratic associations for the greater good. We agree with this, but it is also important to keep their power in check, so that their (exceptional) legal and political powers are dismantled after the pandemic."* The overwhelming restrictions on human rights (some necessary, some used to further different political agendas) have intensified existing societal problems in many different contexts, and, as a result, youth have taken to the streets to hold their governments accountable. Unfortunately, governments have often responded with an unreasonable use of violence or excessive force to deter youth from protesting.[69]

It has been noted elsewhere that, although States have the right to derogate from certain rights in time of public emergency, such a derogation must "only be taken to the extent strictly required by the exigencies of the situation, not be inconsistent with other obligations under international law, be time-limited and not discriminate."[70] Therefore, as other practitioners in the field have noted, "repressing vibrant youth-driven social movements and opposition groups" in the name of "regulating the spread of the virus" is unacceptable and against international human rights law.[71]

Increased financial difficulties

Another concern arising from the COVID-19 pandemic was related to increased financial difficulties; almost every fifth young person reported significant challenges in this area. Most young people reported shrinking funding opportunities and generally fewer available financial resources for their activism. Many contracts and projects with donor organizations were cancelled. As a consequence of the financial constraints, some had to let young staff members go. Some youth respondents talked about a lack of financial means to secure basic necessities, which in turn limited their ability to focus on activism. **Given the general financial vulnerability and instability in the youth sector before the onset of COVID-19, the recent growing economic insecurity, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic, is expected to further jeopardize young people's ability to seek protection support.**

Challenges encountered in online spaces

The youth we consulted reported cases of increased online violence, such as harassment, censorship and a general vulnerability in the context of cybersecurity. Some young people were also concerned that, with the digital shift and increased number of people on social media platforms, they now have to compete for people's attention to get important messages across. As one young woman from the Caribbean explained, *"Social media advocacy was effective when it was not overwhelmed. However, due to restriction of movement, now everyone is on social media all of the time, so your voice gets lost."* She also added that simply because people are spending more time on social media, does not mean that they are necessarily more open to receiving and responding to messages regarding young people's concerns and general social problems; in her words, *"because COVID-19 has created emotional, mental, and financial constraints on individuals, many times they are not in a position to receive and understand your messages."*

Youth unfortunately faced difficulties even in spaces that were designed for discussions on important youth-related issues. *"In the beginning, we thought that online events could make the processes more democratic because civil society gained more access to decision-making platforms,"* a young woman from Northern Europe shared during our consultations. However, she noted that some UN organized online fora, conferences and events demonstrated that this is not always the case; *"Although some processes are more accessible, a lot of debates and opinions were pre-recorded, which inhibited meaningful discussions, debates and participation,"* she explained. Young people like herself are worried that **these increased digital meetings, which might continue even after the pandemic is over, will make important decision-making processes less accessible to youth, which – combined with general exclusion from political institutions – can further isolate young people in the civic space**.

Another barrier concerning the shift to the digital world was posed by the digital divide, which manifested in difficulties with internet access (10% of all survey respondents reported this particular problem), lack of equipment (smartphones, laptop, tablet), as well as insufficient funds for internet subscription and data packages.

New opportunities for youth digital activism

It must, however, be emphasized that **several young people also found opportunities in this new digital world**, through changing the patterns of their work and relying more heavily on technology, which resulted in their work becoming easier, *cheaper, faster and overall, more efficient. To quote a young woman from South Asia, "The pandemic has turned many exciting campaign plans upside down, but nevertheless, I've loved working digitally with amazing youth across the world to think of new ideas and bring them into action."* They learned to use social media and network in more strategic ways; many youth respondents managed to creatively reinvent their activities and are now waiting to see the results. Youth reported exercising their right to freedom of opinion and expression by hosting online discussions on important issues such as racism and xenophobia, and although their right to information was challenged in the midst of a sea of 'fake news', they turned to blog posts and trusted sources instead.[72]

COVID-19 impacts on youth mental health

Some youth respondents highlighted issues around mental health, such as emotional anxiety, feelings of unhappiness, lost confidence, increased levels of stress and general worries about life and survival, which made the continued focus on activism difficult for many. *"Unexplainable inflation, fear of security, unemployment, lack of freedom, and other factors take away hope from youth and so they have no desire to attend any event related to peace or self-development" (young woman, consultations, Middle East).* It also became more difficult to find youth volunteers to work with, as fewer young people were interested and available for activism. It was reported elsewhere that a greater negative impact on violations of youth rights due to COVID-19 was found to be "associated with lower mental well-being; youth who are probably subject to anxiety or depression were also more likely to report significant impact on some of their rights, compared to those with no indication of anxiety or depression," especially the right to housing, the right to information and the right to privacy, all of which are essential for their safe participation in civic space.[73]

3. VULNERABLE GROUPS WITHIN **YOUTH GROUPS**
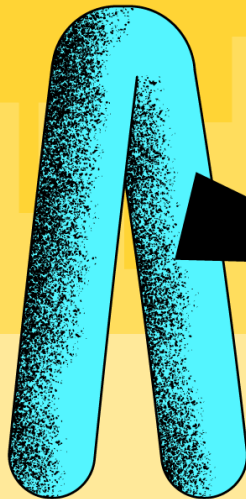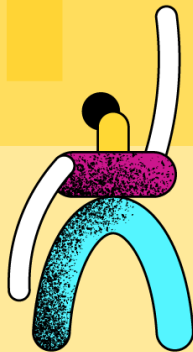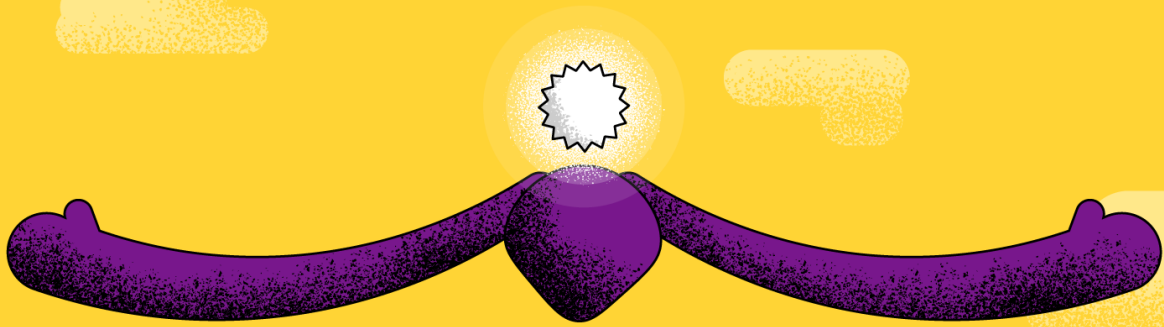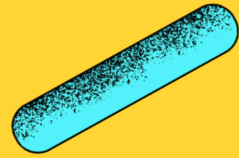
Youth and intersectionality

Before delving into the experiences of particular vulnerable and marginalized youth groups, it is important to reiterate that, similar to the way in which different categories of threats were analysed, the experiences of youth belonging to different vulnerable groups were also assessed through the lens of intersectionality. In this chapter, we have separated youth into different groups to better understand their particular difficulties, but it must be kept in mind that there were many young people who belonged to multiple groups at the same time and therefore experienced multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. Many young people with intersectional identities, whom we interviewed, shared that they often feel unsafe and unprotected as they are exposed to heightened threats and dangers. To better understand these intersectional experiences, a young, Black, female leader from North America shared the following testimony in the context of a well-known anti-racism youth-led movement:

• *"We have to acknowledge that the threats I face as a Black woman are not the same as a white male activist would face."*

• *"There is this narrative that although we (Black women) are brutalized all the time, we are still the ones who are supposed to stand up for our community."*

• *"The police have been following me, … is tracking me. When you are 22 years old, and you come from a marginalized community, how can you combat an advanced government system on that level?"*

The fact that human rights violations against minority women are often not addressed the same way as violations against majority male activists in this testimonial indicates that there is a potential correlation between young women from minorities and the type of human rights violations they face. Despite the disproportionate violence they face, young minority women are expected to stand up for themselves, often because no one else would do this on their behalf; later testimonies covered in the chapter will explain how a lack of institutional representation and inclusion contribute to this burden on young minorities' shoulders. Lastly, this example also demonstrates the difficulties young people encounter in civic space, as a result of their young age, marginalized social status, lack of resources and support, when they are exposed to threats from state actors and institutions. Therefore, **when devising protection policies and programmes, practitioners should understand both the individual and the numerous and intersecting forms of discrimination that young people with multiple vulnerable identities face**.

3.1. YOUNG WOMEN

In the context of our research, young women mainly reported the following barriers: **feminism being labelled as a Western agenda; difficulties with implementing projects aimed at female empowerment due to fear of social stigma in the community; threats from traditional men and tribal elders; online hostility; harassment in the workplace; rape threats; and a lack of dedicated protection measures** for young female victims (and women in general). Similar findings have been reported elsewhere; global research in 2015 on nearly 700 feminist youth organizations from 118 different countries highlighted that the priority issues for young female activists were gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and political and economic empowerment for women.[74] This survey also found that more than half of the respondents felt regularly unsafe or threatened because of the work they do, mainly by: members of extremist or fundamentalist religious groups; state, departmental

or provincial authorities; police; traditional community authorities; members of political parties; gangs and cartels; and others.[75]

Threats in digital civic space: bullying, hate speech and sexism

The young women we spoke to regularly reported experiencing harassment and hate speech when promoting their activism on different platforms. To quote a young woman who participated in our Asia and the Pacific consultations, *"I have faced a lot of cyberbullying, harassment, hate speech, sexist comments and body shaming online since I started my activism on defending minority religions and ethnicities."* Her example reveals that young female activists may experience a wide range of different forms of harassment that intersect with sexism, and – for young women of colour – with racism, as well as other forms of bias and discrimination.

Another young woman we interviewed, from North America, noted that online threats have been a part of her life for many years, because she started her activism at a very early age. She explained that her ideas are considered by many as too progressive and radical, which results in many of her posts being reported by more conservative-leaning individuals on social media. Unfortunately, in her experience, reporting mechanisms favour the perpetrators rather than the victims. *"There should be more protection for certain types of speech and more consequences for hate speech,"* she urged.

Sociocultural pressures and community stigmatization

Patriarchal norms that prescribe how women should behave to a large extent influence young women's opportunity to participate in activism. To quote a young woman from South America, *"There are a lot of attitudes that make young women feel unsafe and uncomfortable"* in civic space. The use of the word "attitudes" is important here, because it demonstrates that the threats that young women experience in civic space do not always manifest in physical and verbal violence but can also be felt in an overall hostile atmosphere of the civic space.

In some cases, these patriarchal norms are perpetuated and imposed by powerful individuals in the community (usually men). To provide another example, a young female peacebuilder from South Asia shared the difficulties she encounters when conducting capacity-building and mobilization programs for young women from the rural areas where a fundamentalist political movement is dominant. *"Dominant patriarchal norms in the society are another issue for young people. There are a number of threats coming from traditional men and tribal elders in the [fundamentalist political movement],"* she said. Although many young women are able to challenge these stereotypes and continue promoting their activism regardless of these threats, there are young women who have internalized such pressure from their families and community members. One young woman, who also participated in the Asia and Pacific consultations, noted that she has difficulties including young women in her programmes because of these stereotypes. As she shared, *"Girls say, 'No one will want to marry me so I don't want to participate in your capacity-building training'."*

Sexual violence and harassment

In cases when young women do gain access to decent employment and positions in the civic space, they often report experiencing sexual harassment. In consultations with young women who are active in civic space, some reported being taken on business trips with senior colleagues aiming to engage in inappropriate behaviour, being blackmailed and promised opportunities under the condition they engage in sexual behaviour.
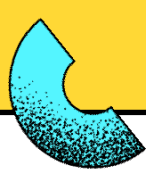
One young woman from South America shared reflections during our consultations on this topic: *"A lot of male senior leaders make young women believe that they can offer you jobs, and give you hope that there will be opportunities… So, it's very important to address the harassment of young women in the workplace, in the access to civic space, but also in protests and community buildings."* This is another situation in which different forms of threats intersect; as, **in general, young people's meaningful participation and access to decent jobs in civic space are often limited, young women may feel that they are forced to endure sexual harassment in order to secure their positions and facilitate a stable and successful future for themselves**.

This has been discussed elsewhere; as the Secretary-General's report on Youth, Peace and Security states, it has been shown that "the exclusion of young women from political decision-making and educational and economic opportunities further increases their vulnerability to discrimination, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, trafficking and child marriage."[76]

Another form of sexual harassment that we were informed about is 'corrective rape'. *"As a feminist youth activist, I was threatened with corrective rape. If I talk about something that is patriarchal, a lot of people try to silence me. If I reported it to the police, it wouldn't be taken seriously."* (young woman from the Caribbean, regional consultations). Corrective rape is a form of rape that targets the victim with the aim of enforcing heterosexual and gender norms.[77] Similar cases of sexual violence, particularly in the form of corrective rape, against young women promoting women's rights have also been documented elsewhere.[78]

It is important to note that the testimonials collected for this research imply that these incidents also occur in contexts where it could be least expected. Some young people reported being exposed to sexual harassment during gender equality trainings, which clearly demonstrates that sexism and harassment against young women in the civic space must be addressed even in spaces where there should be an awareness of this form of abuse.

> *"The threats of being both a young woman and an advocate lies in the areas of both personal and digital security. We are in constant danger of being targeted by both state forces and conservative communities and the civic space itself is not safe for us. Support is needed in terms of capacity building for ensuring our personal and digital security, protection from online and offline crimes and harassment against human rights defenders which have been rampant. Measures are needed to protect women advocates from their families, colleagues, communities, and the state."*
> **Young woman from Northern Africa**

3.2. YOUTH MINORITIES

It has been documented elsewhere that members of various minority groups, indigenous communities and Afro-descendants face increased challenges and threats in the civic space.[79] Throughout the process of consulting young people who belong to these groups, we also found that **youth minorities**

may experience unique and more severe forms of threats in civic space. In the context of our research, young people belonging to minority groups reported the following barriers: **racial profiling and sociocultural stigma which undermine their potential in the civic space; exposure to physical violence by security forces; death threats; and lack of resources to defend themselves**, among others.

To quote a young man from Oceania, who participated in our consultations, *"I have been facing racial profiling and discrimination since the age of 18, which is perpetrated by those who are supposed to protect us. I am a frequent target because of my background and my looks. Not only does this pose a threat to my work as a young activist, but it also violates my human rights."* In other words, this issue requires urgent attention not only because it shrinks civic spaces for youth minorities and thus poses a threat to the advancement of the community as a whole, but also because discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity is a human rights violation in itself.
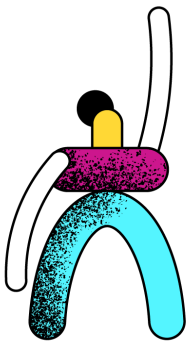
> *"We are a group of young Muslim women and we are exposed to discrimination and stigmatization and we have to endure a lot of racism as members of a minority group. Last year, we were also attacked by Islamists. It's very difficult to raise awareness on legal reforms because some extremists don't like when women are increasing their awareness or asking for rights. Last week, I was also personally attacked on social media and discredited by some of the religious leaders because they did not see me fit."*
> **Young Muslim woman from South Asia**

Double standards for youth minorities in civic space

Some young people we spoke to explained that they are often victims of racial profiling by state and non-state actors, which leads to tense interactions and relationships with law enforcement bodies. Youth minorities described being often associated with violence and gang groups, even though they were engaged in peaceful advocacy. A young man from Oceania explained how racial profiling and stereotypical labelling pose a significant obstacle to his work in the civic space: *"It makes it hard for all of us to speak up and stand up for ourselves, because when we speak up no one believes us about racism. There are a lot of things that affect the youth from an African background. On social media, when we stand up against racism, they label us as a gang. But when other minority communities do it, they call them young people. Let us all be equal to be able to stand together."*

A young minority woman from Northern Europe who participated in our consultations shared how, at the age of 18, she received death threats for a joint article that she wrote on the politics of migration in her country because she did not look white. Two other girls who joined her in writing this article, and who were white, did not receive any threats. *"Racism in my country is increasing, including on social media. I am risking my own safety, my family's safety, but also my mental health, because it hurts when you always hear that you should be killed because you are not white,"* she shared.

Other youth minorities we consulted have had similar experiences when exercising the right to freedom of expression, especially on social media. Minority and Afro-descendant youth often face different treatment on social media when their posts about issues such as racism were deleted and reported, whereas other accounts with hateful comments remained on the platforms. *"There is more protection*

for right-wing ideas on Twitter. All those white supremacists can threaten you, but their account doesn't get deleted. There is no protection for people who are more left-leaning. There are certain words that supremacists have flagged on Twitter, like Black radicalism and abolition, and they will report you [when you tweet these words], which leads to the deleting of your account," a young man from North America shared in an interview. *"Who is the freedom of speech really for? It's not equal,"* he concluded.

We also received reports that while Black youth are prevented from holding protests and are often exposed to force or violence by security forces, white supremacists can march without consequences. *"You go to protests and witness your friends being beaten. One of our founders was beaten for just filming. You don't see that at all-white marches, when conservatives are walking around armed,"* a young female interviewee from North America shared.

Lack of representation and synergy in the civic space

Young people belonging to minority groups particularly struggle with racism in the civic space because of the lack of support and of their representation in decision-making structures. The youth we spoke to shared that people with the same racial or ethnic background are in most cases largely underrepresented in political structures in their communities, which in turn discourages other young people from joining these spaces. To quote a young minority woman from Western Europe who is politically active, *"If I go to young people of colour, and ask them why they are not involved, they tell me because they feel they are not being taken seriously,"* she shared during the consultations. *"And when I go with my struggles to mostly white environments, there is no understanding. We are not sharing the same experiences,"* she explained. In rare cases when minority groups are represented in civic space structures and spaces, young people reported a lack of synergy across different structures, processes and discussions, which caused minority voices to become siloed.

> *"As a Roma myself, I feel in Europe we are so 'disconnected' from the mainstream youth structures and processes. There is a need to create better synergies..."*
> **Young woman from Eastern Europe**

This puts young minority groups in a difficult position for several reasons: **first, they experience exclusion from civic spaces because of their age**; then they encounter a **lack of understanding and solidarity from representatives in different structures who do not share the same ethnic or racial identities**; lastly, even when they overcome these barriers and become part of the system, their discussions may be **sidelined and even muted rather than mainstreamed**.

Lack of recognizing and validating the claims of youth minorities

We also often heard how young people from minority groups have issues ensuring that their concerns are recognized as valid and truthful. As one young Roma man from Eastern Europe shared during our consultations, *"When I am involved in work around equality and justice, I am told that I am subjective. . . But I know that I am qualified. My education allows me to put an objective eye on the situation."* In other words, if there are already existing negative sociocultural stigmas coupled with discrimination on the basis of one's racial or ethnic identity, it can lead to questioning of young people's honesty and legitimacy in civic space, which may lead to their further marginalization. Although most young

people experience challenges in accessing civic spaces, youth minorities have to prove themselves in multiple ways (unlike their non-minority peers), in order to be heard and given a seat at the table.

> *"There have been rising cases of sexual violence and murder of minor girls, especially Dalit and tribal girls. This has been very worrisome and challenging as the police authorities do not do their jobs as required, there are many social hierarchical barriers that come in the way of justice and safety. The law machinery is also very slow in granting justice to the girls and the family."*
>
> **Young woman from South Asia**

3.3. YOUTH MIGRANTS, YOUNG REFUGEES, INTERNALLY DISPLACED YOUTH, NON-CITIZENS, AND STATELESS YOUTH

During our thematic consultation with displaced youth who are active in civic space, young people belonging to these groups described several specific challenges and barriers that emanate from their special status. For some of them, who became refugees and asylum-seekers because of their activism in their home countries, new barriers and restrictions for their fundamental rights in the civic space are an unfortunate continuation of the situation they escaped from. However, despite their resistance and relentless claims of fundamental, civic and political rights, the youth we consulted **expressed disappointment with the lack of international support and solidarity for creating more enabling and safer civic environments for displaced youth populations**.

Due to the alarming lack of information and studies on experiences of displaced youth populations in civic space, it is important to note that much more research is needed in order to truly understand the best ways to support displaced youth, in order to facilitate their ability to safely and freely exercise their human rights, and especially the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

> *Key problem is that we lack platform to speak and we don't have a proper civic space. It is difficult to reach out to vulnerable communities, especially in rural areas, and you must be very privileged to have access to technology. I get phone calls from the university to remove content, our voices can be invalidated by older and more powerful people. There is a lack of support network. I think the civic space is not really connected to the youth, there is a lack of collaboration which could provide a better structural change in the society."*
>
> **Migrant man from South Asia, currently in Northern Europe**

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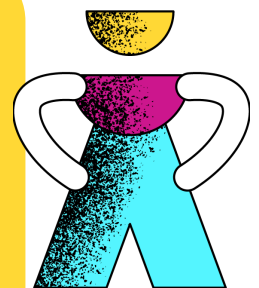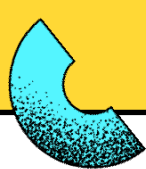
Lack of meaningful inclusion in decision-making processes

Although token participation was reported by young people with various identities, this concern was particularly prominent among displaced youth who are active in the civic space. They reported how their **special legal status often overpowers their other identities**, which manifests in different ways on their work in the civic space; for example, displaced youth are invited and expected to speak about issues only relating to their situation of displacement. To quote a young man, originally from the Middle East, currently in North Europe, *"I work on peacebuilding, but I am always expected to talk about refugees and work with refugees. Whenever there is a training for peacebuilding, no one is reaching out to me."* Token inclusion of displaced youth populations into discussions that relate solely to displacement significantly shrinks their civic space opportunities and undermines their capacities to contribute to other equally important topics.

Rampant discrimination against displaced youth in the civic space is also visible in the lack of inclusion during distribution of resources. Even when they submit applications for government funding for activities for displaced populations, resources may be allocated to youth organizations whose members do not have migrant backgrounds. A young migrant woman from West Africa, who currently lives in Western Europe and whom we consulted, shared that when COVID-19 started, her organization (comprised of young migrants) wanted to support migrants most impacted by the pandemic: *"We applied as an association on behalf of 30 people. But not a single migrant, refugee or asylum seeker who wanted to participate was selected. It was discrimination because mostly [citizens from a country in Western Europe] participated in the end."*

Inability to participate in the civic space due to legal restrictions

Young people's activism in the civic space is difficult even for youth who have a legal status in their country. However, for young, displaced populations, the inability to work legally in their new country of residence presents an additional difficulty for their participation in the civic space. It was already documented elsewhere that, "despite evidence to the contrary, migrating young people (particularly young refugees and young people forced to migrate internationally for economic reasons) are frequently viewed as a drain on the social security system and a source of cheap competition with locals for scarce jobs,"[80] rather than as human beings with a great potential to contribute to civic space in their new home.

As one young man, originally from the Middle East and currently in South Europe, shared during the consultations, *"We cannot work, no one can get tax numbers here, we cannot take pictures, we cannot record, cannot make complaints in the police station or the court, otherwise it will turn against us."* This demonstrates that it may be difficult for young, displaced activists to do human rights work as it is dependent on documentation and collaboration with legal institutions; as the young man above explained, *"We need safety and freedom to represent the situation here."* The same experience has been echoed by youth in other regions as well; a young migrant man internally displaced in West Africa noted during the consultations that *"Young refugees and migrants are victims of various violations but do not say clearly what is wrong with their community out of fear of suffering consequences."* However, when some displaced youth defenders and activists would attempt to document these kinds of violations, their evidence would get confiscated by authorities.

Legal restrictions pose an issue for other activities in the civic space as well. A young stateless woman from East Africa, who is currently in Northern Europe, shared her frustration during our consultations with the limits forcefully imposed on her activism in the civic space. "I *am politically active. I study political science. I volunteer. I am accepted in a lot of organizations, but I am still not allowed to vote.*

When politicians make decisions that affect your everyday life, you should be allowed to vote." **This sentiment was shared by other young people as well, who felt that they are responsible citizens, yet deprived of certain fundamental human rights that shape and influence their own lives.**

Hate speech, xenophobia and death threats

Although many youth we consulted reported experiencing hate speech in different forms and spaces, this was especially a concern for young migrants and refugees, who are exposed to this form of discrimination from their peers, prominent politicians and other community actors and leaders, both online and offline, but especially on social media, whenever they try to raise their voices in civic spaces. Perpetrators usually use the young person's vulnerable legal status as a means to threaten or blackmail them; young people reported that they were often faced with the *"Either you agree to what we say or you leave the country"* ultimatum when they try to express their ideas or beliefs (young male refugee from the Middle East, currently in Southern Europe).

A young queer migrant from South America shared that politicians in his country of current residence have publicly stated that people like him are parasites and should be killed. *"You can imagine how we feel when these very words are spoken,"* he said. *"I received death threats, threats that I am going to be deported, even though I have never done anything wrong."* Displaced youth from other regions also reported receiving an overwhelming amount of death threats because of their activities, which they find particularly hurtful considering the amount of work they have invested in order to improve things in their new country of residence.

Given the effect these experiences of hate and rejection have on the mental health of young people, it is reasonable that some of them choose to withdraw from the civic space in order to reduce their visibility and exposure to future similar discrimination and exclusion.

Participation of displaced youth in civic space in conflict-affected areas

The young people we spoke to emphasized that **activism in the civic space is especially a challenge for displaced youth populations who live in conflict-affected areas**, where exercising their rights to freedom of speech or peaceful assembly can pose fatal consequences. To quote a young refugee woman from the Middle East, currently residing in Western Asia, *"We want a country where we can speak about our issues without being bombed, sieged or arrested."*

Stateless youth living in conflict-affected areas reported that civic space activism is especially difficult because the special autonomy laws that were governing their regions, and that provided certain measures of protection, were revoked by the parliaments of those regions; as a result, there is no accountability for the arbitrary detention and harassment of youth in these situations by state and security forces. As a young stateless man from South Asia noted, *"We are facing statelessness. Our identities are in dispute. Our ethnicities are in dispute. In the meantime, young people are languishing in jails, and facing huge pressure."*

3.4. YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

"All of the issues that affect young people, such as access to education, employment, health care and social services, also affect youth with disabilities, but in a far more complex way. Attitudes and

discrimination linked to disability make it much more difficult for young people to participate in local activities. Some of this is linked to gender and age, but there are also other elements of discrimination, which deny young people with disabilities their voices."[81] This statement effectively summarizes the civic space experiences of the young people with disabilities that we consulted, from very different regions. **Young people with disabilities who are active in the civic space expressed concerns about the various additional barriers youth with disabilities face when acting as human rights defenders, peacebuilders and activists.**

As one youth activist with a disability explained elsewhere, discrimination against them often stems from stigma and is "grounded in false assumptions about the capability of youth with disabilities to contribute to public life, thus ignoring their potential to contribute to the community."[82] Unfortunately, data that looks specifically at the situation of youth with disabilities in the civic space is scarce, and more research is needed in order to fully understand their needs and carve out solutions together in partnership with them.

Attacks on freedom of speech

The youth with disabilities that we consulted explained that, for young people with disabilities who often do not have access to important platforms and decision-making processes, social media is a unique channel for expression of their experiences, as well as critique of the status quo in their societies. However, these spaces can also present threats for their safety.

A young woman with a disability from Eastern Europe, shared that she used her social media profile to criticize a member of parliament for his statement regarding the rights of people with disabilities, and she, in turn, received a threat from her own service provider. *"Many youth with disabilities, who don't have the platform to voice their concerns and don't know how to publicize it, are afraid of criticizing service providers, even if they have issues with the services, because they are afraid that the service providers will retaliate against them by denying them services. This is why we see very few complaints from young people."* This reflects the particular vulnerability of young people with disabilities, who are largely dependent on various service providers, which may make them more cautious of voicing their problems, further limiting their willingness and opportunities to participate in civic spaces, including exercising their right to freedom of speech and of opinion.

Some of the young people we spoke to noted that there are gaps in the legal protection provisions for youth with disabilities. A young woman with a disability from Northern Europe who tried to report hate speech and hate crimes cases was unsuccessful in doing so. *"The police are often reluctant to charge anyone with a disability hate crime. This means that a law that is designed to protect us offers us no protection. Until these crimes are taken seriously, and people are held accountable for their criminal behaviour, we will continue to be exposed to threats and abusive comments,"* she shared.

Inadequate physical infrastructures for participation in the civic space

It has been analysed elsewhere how architecture and different infrastructures in communities are responsible for limitations on the rights of people with disabilities in general.[83] Young people with disabilities whom we spoke to also emphasized this issue and explained how it limits their ability to participate in the civic space. *"Inequalities still exist in basic areas such as public accessibility and transportation, which prevents young people with disabilities from full civic and social participation,"* shared a young woman from Oceania. *"While equal access to political and electoral processes such as voting for young people with disabilities is important, significant obstacles such as inaccessible*

polling stations and election materials continue to persist for youth with disabilities," she noted. In other words, in order to ensure sustainable and effective participation in the civic space by young people with disabilities, the physical infrastructure of the places in which decisions are being made must be adapted to their needs.

Lack of inclusion in political and decision-making processes

As previously mentioned, young people with disabilities are rarely consulted on important processes which shape their everyday lives. *"Young people with disabilities are building their confidence, visibility and knowledge, but their opportunities for participating in decision-making forums or community activities are still severely limited. Elected officials rarely solicit the input of young people with disabilities"* (written collective statement, Oceania). Although the vast majority of young people we spoke to expressed concern about the lack of inclusion in political and decision-making processes, **this is even more concerning for young people with disabilities, who often suffer exclusion and marginalization in every area of their life, thus making the creation of special measures for their inclusion and participation and their protection as urgent as ever**.

3.5. LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, QUEER, INTERSEX YOUTH

Youth members and advocates for LGBTQI+ communities described in interviews, consultations and survey responses a concerning gap – almost a vacuum – when it comes to civic space structures protecting them against threats and harassment. LGBTQI+ youth we spoke to shared that their rights are often seen as a set of luxury rights, a Western agenda; their concerns are not seen as valid or worthy of discussion, and the LGBTQI+ agenda is often used by far right and populist movements for mobilization of discrimination and exclusion. As one young LGBTQI+ activist from Oceania explained, *"We are the young people who are being harassed, stigmatized, and made to feel like we can't actually participate in activism despite the fact that a lot of the time we will be directly impacted by the decisions that are being discussed."*

The examples discussed below will portray the intersectionality of barriers for young LGBTQI+ people who, in addition to overcoming age-based exclusion from and stigmatization in political and decision-making structures, simultaneously have to tackle various sociocultural, physical, legal, political and financial barriers that affect them in their personal lives, if they want to exercise their civil and political rights.

Discrimination against LGBTQI+ youth in the civic space

Denial of identities in the civic space, especially for transgender, non-binary and gender diverse young people, were often reported by young people. To quote a young LGBTQI+ interviewee who works in North and Eastern Europe, *"Trans, non-binary and gender diverse young people are misgendered and being referred to with their dead names (the names they are given at birth but not using anymore and with which they do not identify). Why would you engage in a space that denies your identity?"* Such experiences can be deeply hurtful and traumatizing to young LGBTQI+ leaders and can demotivate them from further participating in civic spaces in order to prevent being re-traumatized. Moreover, young people described that raising concerns about these matters is often frustrating because their experiences are not recognized as valid human rights issues and so they have difficulties in garnering support and solidarity. As the young LGBTQI+ leader above explained, LGBTQI+ youth are excluded by

"cis-gender, middle-aged, white, gay men who do not put youth as a priority", and others who believe that particular issues of LGBTQI+ youth are considered to be too sensitive and too political.

Other forms of discrimination can manifest through ridicule, stigmatization and invalidation of young LGBTQI+ activism. During our consultations, a young LGBTQI+ activist from South Asia, who is also from a religious minority, shared experience of working as a peacebuilder: *"When we are advocating for peacebuilding, we face discrimination within the wider community. People are not trusting us, just because of our identity. They say I have brought something from the Western world…"* This example is important because it shows how **hostility towards LGBTQI+ youth can hinder not only their advocacy for LGBTQI+ related issues, but for broader issues as well, such as peacebuilding and community mobilization, which significantly shrinks opportunities for participation and meaningful contributions for this group of young people**. If their advocacy for matters that affect themselves and their entire communities are looked down upon and disapproved, how can they participate in the civic space safely?

Narrative trap of legal progress

The young LGBTQI+ leader from Eastern Europe also noted that in institutional settings, this denial of identities, as well as other cases of discrimination and abuse against youth LGBTQI+ leaders and activists is often masked by narratives of legal progress; frameworks that allow same-sex marriage, protection from hate speech and hate crime against LGBTQI+ populations are often used to distract the public from the reality of experiences of young people belonging to these groups. This sentiment was emphasized by young people in other regions as well; *"it has to be recognized that, for example, legalizing same-sex marriage does not mean that the opinion of the public will automatically change, or that the prejudices will disappear,"* shared a young LGBTQI+ activist from Oceania in consultations. In other words, political leaders, policy and decision-makers, as well as the wider community, should not look at legislative provisions exclusively in order to determine whether a community is protected and has made progress towards accepting and including more LGBTQI+ youth, but should instead create safe spaces in which young LGBTQI+ people can share their perspectives, based on their lived experiences, as an indication of whether progress has been made and what is yet to be done to ensure their protection.

LGBTQI+ youth, family exclusion and homelessness

Many young LGBTQI+ people often encounter discrimination and exclusion in their own family homes, from family members who disagree with or disapprove of their sexual orientation and gender identity, which leads youth to leave their homes.[84] Although some young people in this community manage their independency successfully and have other support systems, others face homelessness and significant economic, social and other barriers during crucial development periods in their lives.[85] **From the perspective of protection in the civic space, this can create significant vulnerabilities for young LGBTQI+ people, who not only struggle to fulfil their basic needs, but are also often excluded from civic spaces where they can seek solidarity and voice their concerns.**[86]

A young LGBTQI+ activist from Western Europe shared the story of leaving home at the age of 15 because of family's disapproval of her sexual orientation and gender identity. Although homeless, she became an activist and tried to advocate for other people in the same situation as herself. However, during her stay in a homeless shelter, she was exposed to sexual abuse and violence by her service provider. *"When I reported this, I received threats. The person I reported against told me to be silent,"* she shared during the consultations. She had to navigate the fraught and ineffective legal system, prejudices and judgments, dealing with her trauma, financial and other barriers, while also navigating the civic spaces in which she exercised her civil and political rights.

LGBTQI+ youth and legal barriers in the civic space

Although many young LGBTQI+ youth we consulted experienced discrimination that clearly violated their human rights, reporting these cases and seeking accountability was immensely difficult, in some cases even impossible. One young LGBTQI+ activist originally from Western Asia shared experience of being targeted by a radical Islamist newspaper after being a guest lecturer at a university on LGBTQI+ rights. *"I was afraid because my university lecturers were probably readers of this newspaper. I am not out to my family, and I was afraid what would happen if my family saw. But I was afraid to go to the court because the newspaper is believed to be close to the government. As an LGBT and a young person, they don't let you do much."*

Other LGBTQI+ youth we consulted emphasized that in some regions, even young LGBTQI+ people with privileged backgrounds have difficulties successfully reporting these cases. A young LGBTQI+ activist from South Asia shared that she has received multiple death threats, rape threats and has been surveilled as a result of her activism. *"The police has been very unhelpful and this comes from someone who has a lot of privilege. I come from an upper-class family and from an income level where I can exert some influence on politics. But in these scenarios, the police are unhelpful. For two months before the lockdown, I didn't leave the house much because I was receiving so many threats."* Although legal barriers are experienced by young people belonging to many different groups and communities, it is clear that LGBTQI+ youth need tailored and urgent support in this area, given the disproportionate discrimination they are exposed to, as well as disproportionate exclusion from support structures and networks in the civic space.

"I often think about representation at higher levels at the UN and I can't think of a single queer person there. There are definitely people who are queer, but they don't speak about it, there is no one in senior position, and that matters. If I see myself represented somewhere, I will feel more engaged to work with them."
Young LGBTIQ leader from Eastern Europe

3.6. YOUTH IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

It became clear throughout the research that youth in rural areas experience many unique and complex challenges in their attempts to exercise their civil and political rights in civic space. There have been regional studies examining young people's civic participation in rural areas, but more research is needed in order to understand the specific challenges they encounter with regards to protection (or lack thereof) in the civic space.87 Approaches to protection for youth living in rural areas must be created with particular care because evidence in our research shows that these young people understand civic engagement in a different way compared to some of their counterparts in urban areas; as one young woman from South America shared during our consultations, *"in rural areas, young people don't identify themselves as activists and leaders. They see it as part of their culture and identity."*

Discrimination against youth in rural civic space

"Many of the youth defenders and activists in rural areas are threatened or die and the government does not respond to this violence because they are not in urban areas," shared a young woman from South

America during our consultations. Since the existing data on threats and violence in the civic space is mostly not disaggregated on the basis of age, even less so on the basis of geographical location and physical environments, it is difficult to determine the rate at which youth who are active in civic space in rural areas are exposed to discrimination and violence, and their protection needs. However, it is reasonable to expect that because they are 'out of sight' of the institutions (police, courts, human rights institutions and others), which are mostly concentrated in urban areas, threats and abuses against youth in rural areas may go unnoticed and unreported.

Other protection-related concern is their lack of contacts and networks, to quote a young man from South America who participated in our consultations, *"Young people living in rural areas are usually not well connected to international networks, and their options for protection mechanisms are quite limited. It's very difficult to access their needs, and even if they find the space to broadcast their message – it's likely that it will put them in a difficult situation."* It should be noted that it is difficult to identify the needs of youth in rural areas not because of the lack of desire of these young people to share their opinion, but because they are systematically excluded; the young people we spoke to explained that youth from urban areas are often selected to speak in public events at the expense of excluding youth from rural areas.

Concentration of institutional civic structures in urban areas

Youth in various regions raised concern that many organizations which are essential for young people's civic engagement are concentrated exclusively in urban areas. A young woman from the Caribbean shared during our consultations that *"the UN is another multilateral organization that is concentrated in urban areas, so youth outside of major cities have limited access to opportunities to speak out, and when they do, they are in more danger than other people would be."* She also explained that because the few larger, more established organizations that can protect their activists are heavily based in urban areas, **youth in rural communities are left behind and left to their own means to secure protection**.

Lack of access to resources for safe civic engagement

Young people reported in consultations that youth living in rural areas often do not have access to digital technologies, which can affect not only their access to education, but can also be a significant impediment to their safe civic engagement. Since more young people are shifting their civic activities to online spaces, particularly during COVID-19, this means that youth in rural areas who do not have access to these online civic spaces do not have access to important political and civic information, networks and organizations that could provide protection support and guidance. To quote a young man from North Africa who participated in our consultations, *"If you cannot access information for decision making, it impacts the way you are supposed to express yourself. The ability to have freedom of expression comes with informed decisions."*

Studies examining young people's civic engagement in rural areas in specific regions at times underestimate the contributions and potential of these young people by describing them, for example, as "generally less experienced in civic and political life and largely disengaged from politics; have few, if any, opinions about current affairs; and are less likely to believe that civic engagement like voting and civic institutions . . . can benefit the community."[88] **It will be important to analyse the structural, institutional and resource gaps that have led to the civic disengagement of youth of rural areas (where these trends are visible), and understand how to provide safer spaces for them.**

4. CONCLUSIONS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. CONCLUSIONS

Young people, their networks and movements can contribute to the civic space in many unique ways. Their creative and innovative ways of self-organization, their fresh outlook on society's most pressing problems and their ability to identify often unconventional solutions can offer new and efficient ways to address human rights violations, build peace, and secure sustainable development for future generations. However, **despite their strong potential to change our societies into better, young people often receive harsh criticism, pressure, backlash and threats in all spheres of life, including in the civic space**.

There have been reports that examined the issue of protection of youth in civic space in one region (Europe),[89] surveys that have dealt with this topic from the perspective of a particular youth group (young women),[90] reports that analysed the protection issue from the perspective of a particular youth agenda (youth, peace and security),[91] and many others that mentioned individual cases of threats against young people on an ad-hoc basis.[92] All of this prior knowledge provides invaluable information, on which we tried to build on while also filling certain gaps. However, **this was the first attempt to analyse protection-related challenges that youth experience in the civic space on a global level, covering all world regions, including multiple groups of young people** (youth minorities, displaced youth, youth with disabilities, LGBTQI+ youth, young women, youth in rural communities and others), and **analysing multiple barriers and threats** (sociocultural, financial, political, legal, digital and physical), **as well as intersections between them**.

In-depth engagement with the issue of protection of youth in civic space on a global level, accomplished through an extensive literature review process, consultations, interviews and surveys with diverse groups of young people, was timely and needed in order to understand and showcase the extent and nature of young people's challenges in the civic space. As it has been stressed and demonstrated throughout the report, this is not a new or an unknown issue to young people, who have historically been at the forefront of social movements, and, as a result, at the forefront of exposure to targeted violence, harassment and oppression by various actors, in many cases fuelled by stereotypes and prejudices about young people's age. However, young people and different stakeholders and practitioners in this field, many of whom are members of the Protection Working Group which initiated this report, have lacked substantive evidence and documented human rights violations on a large scale, to demonstrate the urgency of this concerning issue.

Therefore, **as this report's main contribution, for the first time, there is strong evidence that shows that young people across regions, gender, racial, ethnic, class and other lines, experience concerning threats, harassment, violence and other forms of human rights violations because of their age and the nature of their civic engagement**. Needless to say, the threats and challenges they experience differ depending on many different factors, but it was made clear that the civic space is shrinking for young people. While this report tried to divide these various threats into distinguishable categories to better understand the most common and severe types, it was often emphasized that threats do not come in isolated formats and on one-off occasions but rather in cumulative, complex ways and often overlapping, transforming from one to another; moreover, it was often explained that pressure and intimidation usually start in mild forms and transform into actual threats of a more severe and harmful nature when the authorities see that young people are not retreating.

Our own research has identified particular gaps, which we hope further research will attempt to tackle. Especially with regards to a more in-depth understanding of the regional differences, more traumatic experiences that are not readily shared in group settings, experiences of youth with no access to
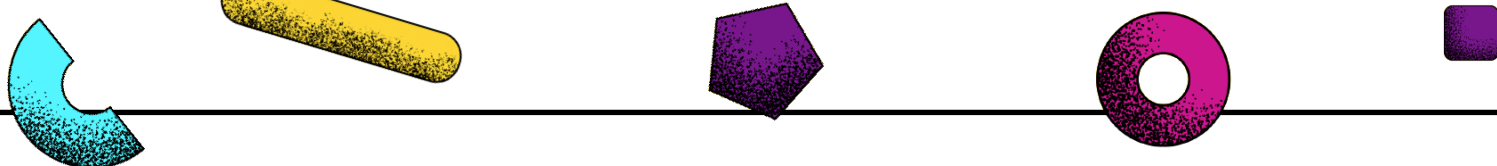
internet and technology, youth in rural areas, extreme conflict settings and IDP/refugee camps; **more research is needed in order to fully understand the insecurities and threats these young people experience in the civic space**.

To conclude, sociocultural pressure, financial challenges, political threats, legal barriers, digital and physical threats are all realities faced by young people in the civic space. One structural problem became clear: young people do not know where to go to share their concerns, fears and seek support. It will be, therefore, critically important to include them in existing bodies as well as to create dedicated local, national and international mechanisms, structures and institutions, which will pay special attention to protecting young people, monitoring their situation, providing them with a safe and inclusive space for dialogue and exchange, facilitating the creation of protection policies and mechanisms, and representing their interests and requests to other formal power structures and decision-making mechanisms. As the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights emphasized: "mechanisms should be accessible and include young women and men from all backgrounds and take into account how intersecting forms of discrimination affect the ability of all youth to participate, in particular youth with disabilities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex youth and young migrants, as well as minority and indigenous groups and young people from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds."[93]

This report is just a first step in creating knowledge and expertise that can help strengthen the role of youth in safely and meaningfully guaranteeing peace, security, human rights and development. **We call on our partners and allies to join us in this collaborative effort to provide the youth with the attention and care they deserve, not only to help them take the lead, but to give us all a better chance for a future in a more prosperous, just, progressive and inclusive world.**

4.2. THE JOINT YOUTH APPEAL

Throughout the research process, we regularly consulted young people on the recommendations that they would make to different stakeholders with a view to providing better protection for youth in civic spaces, and this information was used to develop a set of recommendations included at the end of the report

Regardless of the situation of the youth activists we interviewed and in which region or country, there was clearly one common problem: **the lack of dedicated mechanisms, institutions or structures to provide a platform for discussion, reporting, and for triggering accountability measures for the threats endured**. We are concerned about this structural gap as unaddressed mild threats can escalate into more severe ones; they can also become normalized, leading perpetrators of human rights violations to believe that they will escape prosecution and thus making them increasingly harmful.

At the grassroots level, many young people reported having no safe and inclusive spaces to come together and discuss the various challenges and barriers they face while carrying out their work and activism. Many of them felt isolated and helpless while facing threats and said that they were not equipped to recognize the dangers and to find strategies to tackle them.

Therefore, **we encourage the facilitation and establishment of open, safe and inclusive spaces where young activists and peacebuilders can regularly come together to discuss the challenges and threats they face and to find common solutions and strategies to overcome them. We call on national and international NGOs, States and regional and international organizations to find ways to support such youth-led initiatives and provide the necessary resources for their independent operation**.

At the level of national administration, there were very few good examples of youth structures, governmental departments or other administrative units which would be trusted and consulted by the youth in times of threats and danger. Most institutions in charge of youth affairs were reported to have limited capacity, mandates, or resources to carry out necessary and inclusive consultation processes and many of them are regarded as not being committed to protecting the youth, but rather to serving government interests. This is further exacerbated by reported tokenism, which is reflected in often sporadic, symbolic, and selective youth involvement in such structures that does not meet the standards of meaningful participation.

Therefore, *we encourage States to consider facilitating and establishing dedicated, inclusive and independent youth structures, mechanisms or institutions, by providing the necessary conditions and resources, which are mandated to secure a conducive environment for youth activism, to receive reports of threats, protect the youth, and take measures to hold violators accountable. At the same time, mainstream a specific focus on youth and their particular challenges throughout the entire administration, and consider appointing youth focal points in all major departments*.

At the level of international and intergovernmental organizations, very few young people mentioned regional multilateral organizations or the United Nations among the possible providers of protection and accountability. As described in the report, this may be due to the limited knowledge about existing and available mechanisms and mandates, including human rights procedures, but also due to prior discouraging or disappointing experiences with these systems.

Therefore, **we encourage UN country teams and regional organizations to systematically and regularly reach out to youth in their respective countries, organize open, safe and inclusive dialogues, collect relevant information and data about threats and challenges, carry out awareness-raising programmes and facilitate the reporting of such threats to relevant national and international bodies, assist States to hold the perpetrators accountable, and regularly inform other UN bodies, especially human rights procedures, on current developments. UN agencies and mechanisms should also pay specific attention to youth issues and protection challenges**.

Below, we share some testimonies from young people who participated in our research, which informed the recommendations section.

Most participants in this research suggested that there should be more spaces and financial resources to enable youth to come together. These included the following testimonials:

"We need more platforms like this, and governments should use their budget to bring youth periodically to the table, we need to legitimize young people's opinion."
Young man from Southern Europe

"Youth should be supported through inclusion in research, scientific and creative projects. There should be more youth centers, sport spaces and other community spaces for youngsters to come together, unify and share their ideas."
Young woman from Eastern Europe

Some urged for increased support for youth involvement in general:

> *"Work not only with young people, but work on creating more enabling environments for them. Involve parents, local government representatives, teachers, all the key actors in the daily lives of young people, so that they are able to perceive youth as full-fledged partners."*
> **Young woman from Central Asia**

> *"What young people need is credibility, because we're doing a lot of good work, and when youth organizations are recognized by the UN, they can go a long way…"*
> **Young woman from South Asia**

> *"We as young people should emphasize our inherent right to live in safe places without any threats especially while practising our civil work. We want a country where we can speak about our issues without being bombed, sieged or arrested. We have to also strongly emphasize our right to shape the future of our country by including us in any discussions about reconstruction…"*
> **Young woman from the Middle East**

> *„How can we ensure that youth are addressed in the context of intersectionality? The UN has its own idea about what a youth leader is and tends to pick up a very visible leader, but you can be a leader even if you are not an excellent orator or if you do not excel in academic institutions. I would like to see more young people from diverse backgrounds involved and change the narrative of what is a young leader."*
> **Young woman from South America**
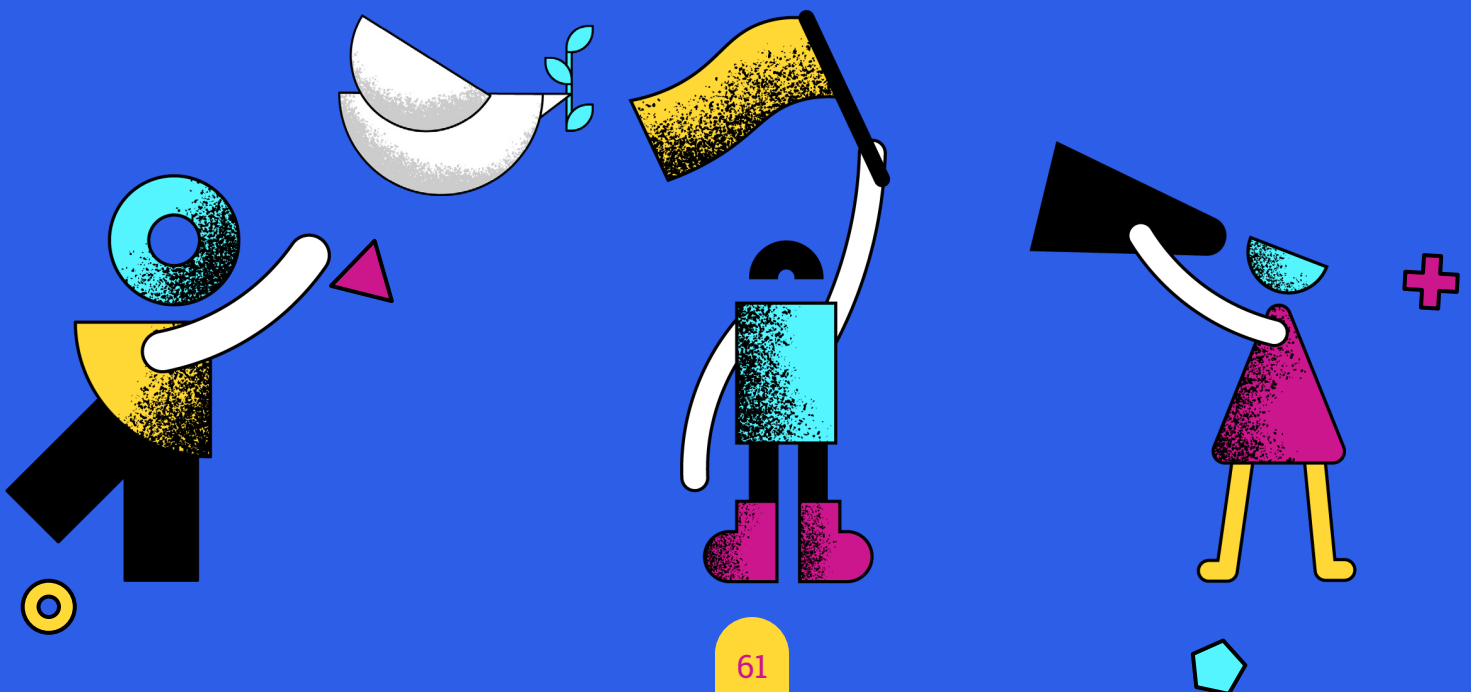
The inclusion of youth individuals and organizations in formal structures was also often proposed:

"All countries should include democratically elected youth in their delegations, to give them an opportunity to voice their opinions in all political processes. If we are not included, we face a lack of funding to participate, so the important voices of the youth would be lacking, and this is an important democratic problem."
Young woman from Northern Europe

"There is an urgent need for basically embedding youth in the public discussion and thus being recognized as authority."
Young man from Eastern Europe

"There is a need to have strong CSO presence in parliaments and political decision-making processes, while remaining independent."
Young man from Eastern Europe
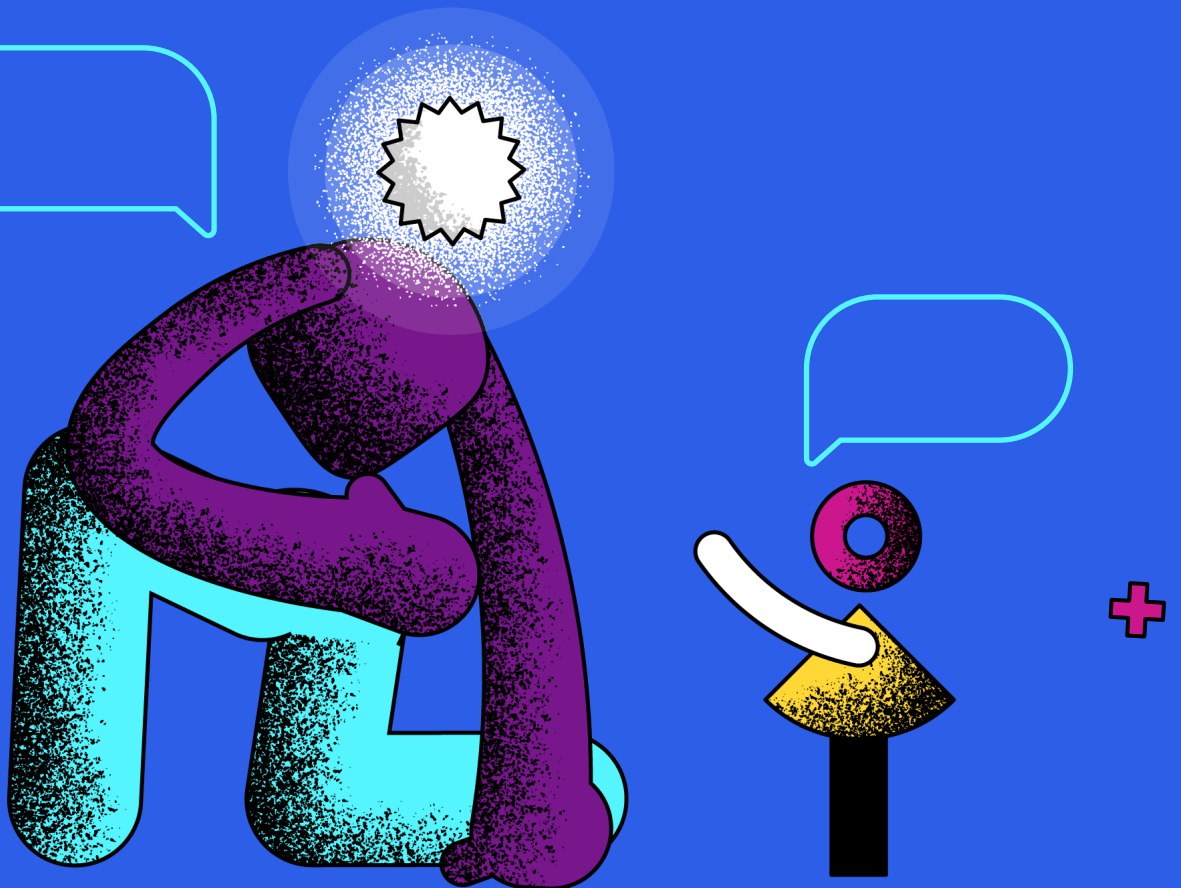
Youth have suggested that the States should establish various forms of protection and accountability mechanisms:

> *"Protection is needed for students and young people because they are targeted by the governments and the police."*
> **Young woman from Eastern Europe**

> *"Young human rights activists and actors must be better supported by the authorities, with clear protection policies to promote freedom of expression, which should not be an opportunity for some to misinform or disrespect."*
> **Young man internally displaced in West Africa**

> *"It would be important to have some kind of helpline, email for free legal action dedicated for young people."*
> **Youg woman from Western Europe**

> *"There were dozens of youth people and activists who died, and it was not possible to know who were the killers or if they were followed before that. There is a need to let everyone else know, if we can't prevent the massacres from happening, at least we can know who is responsible and ensure that no further massacres are held."*
> **Young man from South America**

> *"Create a toolkit and international guide for the protection of activists, peacebuilders, territory defenders, adapt to cultural relevance of each country, and be inclusive."*
> **Young woman from South America**

> *"We are lacking policies, laws, and accountability mechanisms that would be specific to conflict zones; they need to ensure that people can practise their rights, that they can go to the streets without facing any threats."*
> **Young woman from North Africa**

There were several expectations of the international community:

"There is a need for the international community to investigate cases of torture of young people."
Young woman from Eastern Europe

"We need policies, laws and mechanisms from the top that must reflect the situation on the bottom, to make it known that threats are not okay, that you will be held accountable by the international community."
Young woman from North Africa
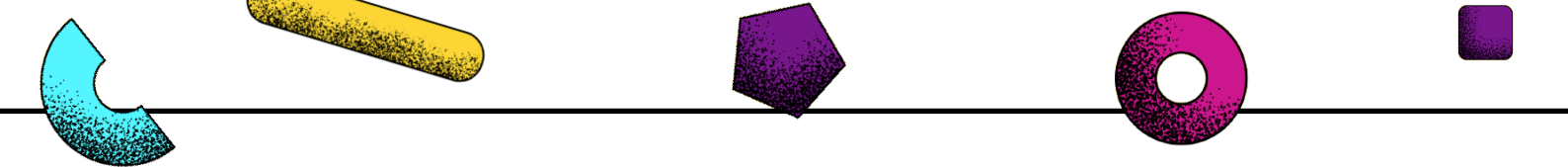
"The international community needs to work more effectively; the Special Rapporteurs need to come and work more closely with the governments to address the issue of shrinking civic spaces."
Young woman from South Asia

"The only thing we can do is to encourage our generations to join the fight and protect as much as we can. So I want to encourage the UN Youth Envoy Office to interact and cooperate with special procedures within the UN system to effectively address the added challenges of young activists and human rights defenders in the country."
Young woman from South Asia
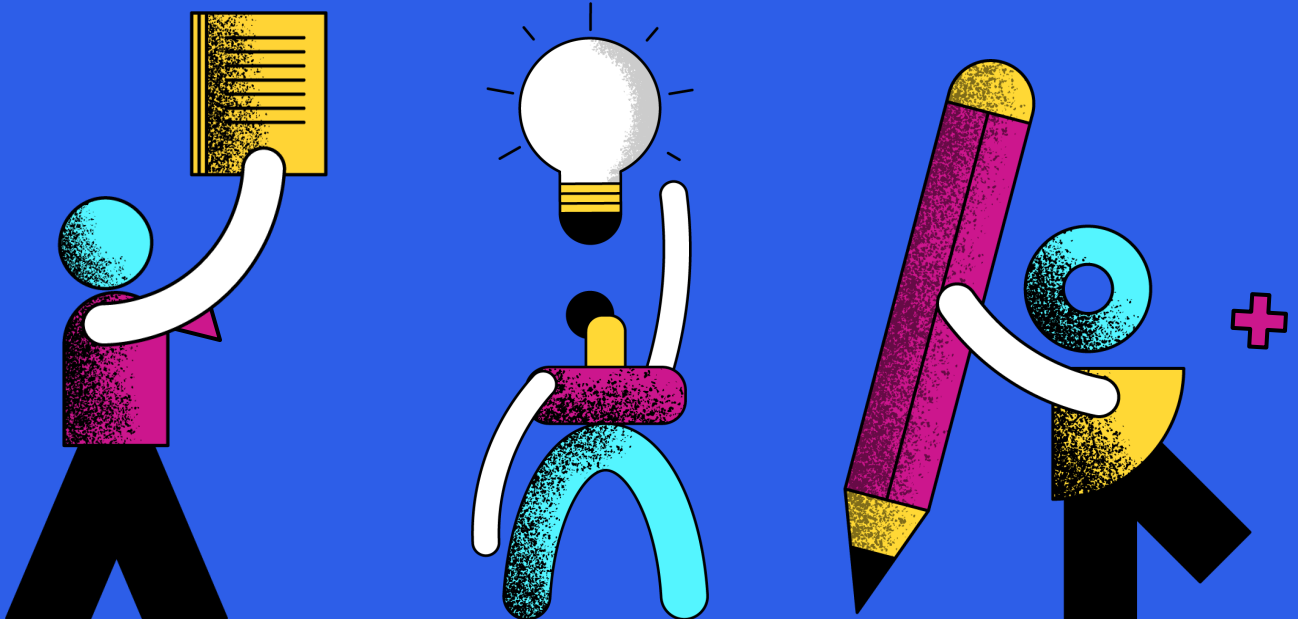
"International organizations should also support human rights defenders who are facing statelessness. Our position is that we don't have a state, our identities are disputed, our ethnicities are disputed, and we fear the federal government. Young people are suffering, they are languishing in jails, and are facing huge pressure."
Young man from South Asia

"The UN, as an international body, especially the youth departments, should raise voices and talk about these young people who suffer from atrocities. You need to raise the voice of youth who are facing repression in different places of the world."
Young man from South Asia

"It is important to create international protection mechanisms that are independent of governments, and that can provide a quick and rapid response on the ground, because sometimes when it comes to these kinds of threats, it's a matter of days whether you can save your life."
Young man from South America
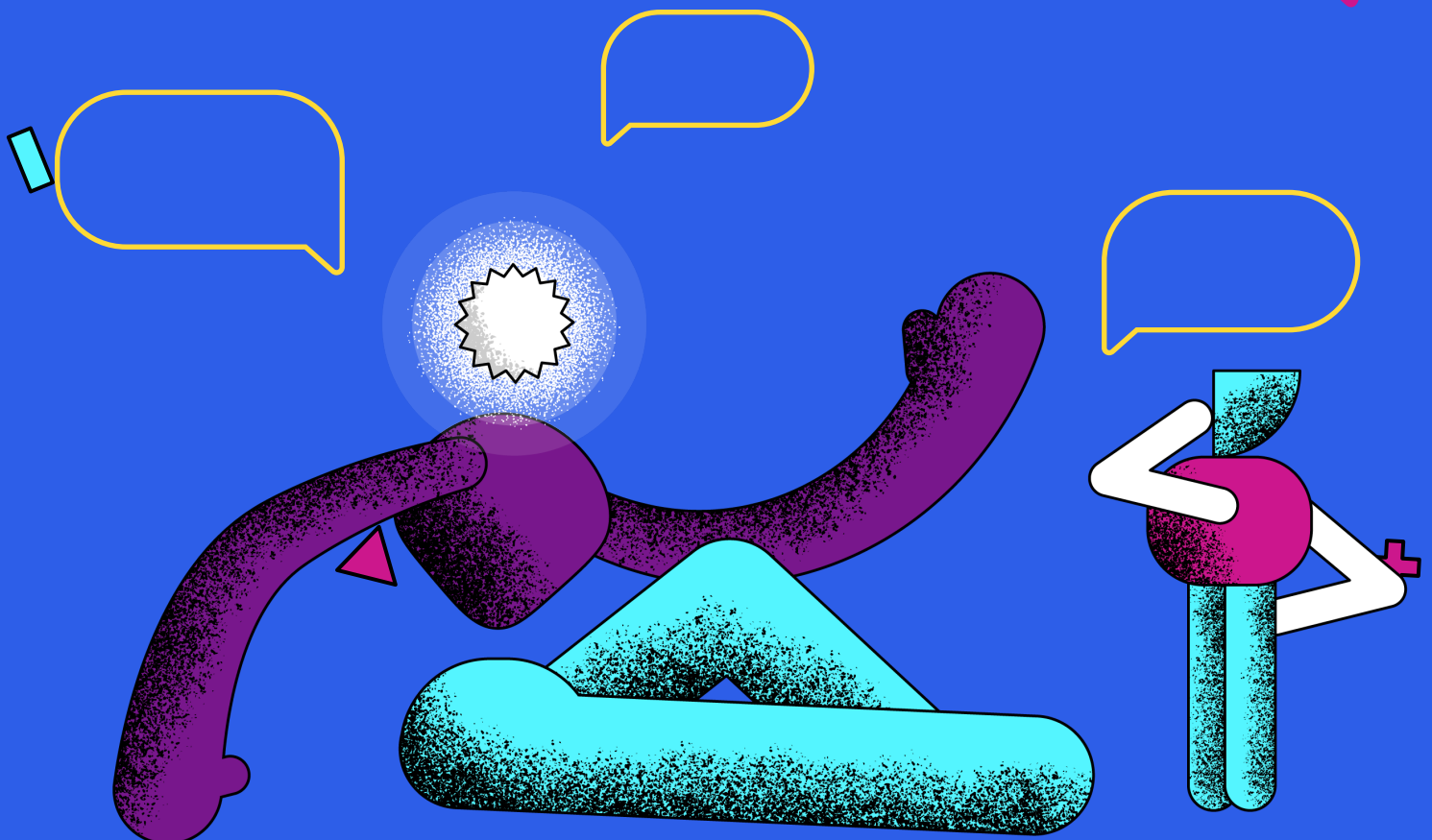
There were other recommendations, focusing on various important aspects of youth operating in the civic space:

"We need global pressure on social media, because social media is the reason why hate speech is increasing. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, are not doing anything to make the world a better place, but a much more unsafe place. If the platforms don't do anything by themselves, the politicians need to apply global pressure. If we do something about our legislation, the issues will still remain. So the UN or EU should do something together to put pressure on these platforms."
Young woman from Western Europe

"One of the biggest issues is that there is no standard civic education in this country. When I was in school, there were only a few schools that taught civic education, including why you vote and why it's important and how the government works. There can only be one solution, increase civic engagement and education in this country."
Young woman from North America

"Prioritize mental health support for youth"
Young woman from Eastern Europe

"We need to find opportunities in which youth from rural areas can share their message regarding their protection needs through networks and different actors, and, while keeping their identities anonymous, still inform them about what is happening on the ground."
Young man from Latin America

4.3. RECOMMENDATIONS TOWARDS ENSURING SAFE CIVIC SPACE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

The following recommendations were created in collaboration with young people, partners from civil society, international and regional organizations, and the Protection Working Group members, building on existing protection agendas, including but not limited to the Common Protection Agenda outlined in the Call to Action for Human Rights; the "3Ps" framework from the UN Guidance on Civic Space; recommendations in *The Missing Peace:* Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security; *Safeguarding Civic Space in Europe* by European Youth Forum; International Civil Society Action Networks' Operational Guidance, and others.

PREVENTION:
Implementing Prevention Measures to Recognize and Deter Threats Against Youth in the Civic Space and Promote Safe and Enabling Environments for Youth Participation

Objective: Implement proactive, timely measures to recognize and tackle issues that may lead to harmful practices and further violence and discrimination against youth (which include, but are not limited to stereotyping of youth in media as violent and aggressive; financial instability and unpaid work in civic spaces, which increases their vulnerability and prevents youth from seeking services for protection, legal support, etc.; violation of young people's right to association by posing bureaucratic challenges for establishments of youth NGOs or creating a generally unconducive or restrictive environment; ambiguous laws or loopholes that may impede or violate young people's civil and political rights; and interference with the enjoyment of the right to peaceful assembly, for example by targeted disruption of youth gatherings).
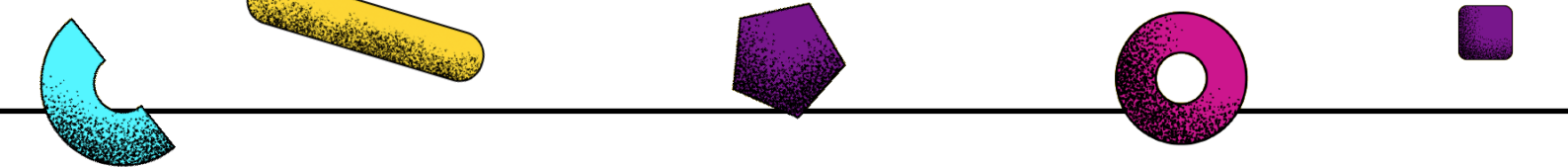
States should:

1. **Review, amend and repeal any controversial laws** that can be misinterpreted and misused to limit young people's universal and fundamental rights of freedom of peaceful assembly and association, opinion and expression, participation in public affairs, to ensure that youth do not face reprisals for their work (for example, laws that prevent participation in public assemblies for children and adolescents younger than 18 should be revised, in order to encourage participation in public affairs from an early age; national legislation should align the minimum voting age with the minimum age of eligibility to run for office; laws that prevent political participation of stateless and displaced youth should be amended);

2. Implement the **Declaration on Human Rights Defenders nationally and explicitly include young people in designing and establishing relevant protection measures and mechanisms that are age-sensitive** and build on the lived experiences of young people in a particular context. Adequate legislation and reporting procedures, including early warning indicators, should be put in place to ensure that they can trigger protection measures, and that there is better accountability for prosecution of perpetrators of threats against youth;

3. Work closely with traditional and social media to **promote the positive role of young people and disseminate successful stories of youth work** and youth-led initiatives, with the full inclusion and participation of young people, to tackle the prevalent stereotyping of youth in the media; regularly and publicly recognize the work of young people in the civic space in order to build the credibility and reputation of youth contributions to the civic space, through awards, media articles, public events, and similar initiatives;

4. **Provide space in official and public communication and media platforms for young people for self-representation**, to enable them to present their views, aspirations and recommendations, own the narratives about themselves, and minimize false or distorted media portrayals;

5. **Train public officials, law enforcement bodies and members of the judiciary on human rights standards to prevent misconduct, abuse, discrimination and violence against youth;** raise awareness among public officials on youth inclusion and the danger of youth stereotypes through capacity-building and awareness training. Ensure that these training sessions are implemented on a continuous, rather than one-off basis, and that these actors are aware of the protection concerns youth experience in the region;

6. In the context of the human rights reporting mechanisms, **collect and present relevant updates, information, data** which are appropriately disaggregated (on the basis of age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.), and recommendations about the situation of youth in the civic space, prepared in close consultation with them;

7. **Allocate enough financial resources in budgets to ensure that youth organizations are financially supported**, decent salaries are paid for their work and they have access to internet and technological devices in order to facilitate their connection to their networks, the government, and the international community. These resources are critical for ensuring that young people can access protection support in civic spaces;

8. **Ban unpaid internships** everywhere, but especially in fields related to human rights, peace and security, humanitarian assistance, sustainable development and climate change;

9. **Map existing legislation that presents an obstacle to registration of youth NGOs** and revise them if necessary; while also providing explanatory information to youth on the registration processes through youth-friendly public guidelines, hotlines, focal points, in civic education courses, etc. should they wish to register their organizations.94 Registration of NGOs, however, should not be mandatory in order to enjoy their rights, given that some young people prefer to operate in non-formal structures.

International and regional organizations should:

1. Provide **information about existing protection mechanisms before they engage with young people in public events and undertake joint activities with them (at local, national, regional and international levels)**, and raise awareness among the youth on their rights when exercising their human rights (especially when protesting, for example), to ensure that they can assess the legality of the responses and actions. A focal point, which the young person can contact if they are exposed to threats, should also be provided beforehand;

2. **Disseminate information** on regional and international mechanisms that can be used to better prevent threats and violations against young people in the civic space, including early warning procedures, and where they can report cases to trigger early and necessary protection measures;

3. **Develop dedicated guidance on the protection** of youth in civic space looking specifically at the situation **in conflict and recent post-conflict settings,** to further strengthen the protection link between peace and security, humanitarian action and human rights, given that young

people's experiences in these settings are radically different to their peers whose lives are not shaped by conflicts;

4. **Allocate enough resources (financial and otherwise) for protection-related capacity-building training**, specifically tailored to young people's needs and experiences. This should be implemented through collaboration with young people, civil society, and educational institutions.

Civil society organizations should:

1. **Provide available funds** for youth projects and programmes and make sure they are suitable and accessible for various youth movements and structures, which often function in informal settings, provide support for transportation, digital tools, and Internet due to the new ways of operating after the COVID-19 pandemic;

2. **Work closely with youth and youth organizations** to ensure that their concerns, visions and recommendations are included in reports, especially for regional and international organizations, in the course of their **country review reports and monitoring exercises**, including to UN Treaty Bodies and the Universal Periodic Review.

Youth should:

1. **Build networks and cooperation with other youth initiatives and organizations**, especially with those working with underrepresented communities or on concerns relating to marginalized groups (such as young women, youth with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ youth, migrants, refugees, displaced youth populations, minority and indigenous youth), to increase the overall weight and presence of youth voices, and therefore **strengthen the ability to influence decisions**. Through these networks, youth organizations can strengthen advocacy activities and outreach to international organizations working on human rights, in particular the UN, as well as regional organizations such as the EU, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights;

2. **Undertake** regular, collaborative and inclusive **risk and resilience assessment exercises, to document the kinds of threats and challenges they are facing**, and liaise with civil society organizations, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations to ensure that this information is included in relevant reports. Civil society organizations should provide capacity-building training to young people on how they can conduct these assessment exercises and report to relevant authorities. Young people should also prepare parallel reports and submit relevant information to regional and international monitoring bodies;

3. **Develop their own safeguarding policies that would inform all youth members on how they can take precautionary measures to protect themselves**, as well as where they can seek support in case they are exposed to threats. These policies should explain how to access basic protection tools and resources for young people, develop mitigation strategies, referral pathways, and create a budget for incident responses.

Social media and tech companies should:

1. Proactively **provide training and knowledge materials to young people who are active in online civic spaces**, to help them understand the kinds of threats and attacks they might face and to educate them about the safety and privacy protocols, reporting guidelines and the conditions of enjoying safe and efficient online activism. They should acknowledge the unique and specific digital protection needs of distinct youth groups by considering different youth's identities and vulnerabilities. For this purpose, accessible immediate assistance (such as a 24/7 hotline) can be established for youth who are exposed to digital threats and in need of immediate, reliable information;

2. **Undertake regular consultations with a diverse group of young people in order to understand the trends of threats that appear in online civic spaces**, and adjust their reporting mechanisms if needed;

3. Ensure that **there are no double standards applied in their content moderation policies** and processes.

PROTECTION:
Providing Time-Sensitive Protection Measures When Youth Are Exposed to Threats in the Civic Space

Objective: Implement accessible, time-sensitive, youth-friendly protection mechanisms, when youth are exposed to different threats (socio-cultural, political, legal, physical, economic, psychological, digital, etc., including, but not limited to, being targeted by political leaders and state actors, online harassment and surveillance, unlawful restrictions on the right to association and peaceful assembly, excessive use of force, torture, reprisals for cooperation with international organizations, targeted killings of youth activists, and others).

States should:

1. **Thoroughly and impartially investigate** threats, attacks, acts of intimidation, hate speech and other human rights violations, and bring perpetrators to justice, and provide time-sensitive responses and follow-up to young people's reports of human rights violations;

2. Publicly and firmly condemn any violations, abuse and threats committed against youth operating peacefully in the civic space, and emphasize that claiming and fighting for their rights is a human right; if young people are exposed to threats because of their work in the civic space, **communicate messages of solidarity and call for urgent action by relevant authorities;**

3. **Re-evaluate existing mandates/protection mechanisms, with the inclusion of** young people active in the civic space, **to ensure that protection responses are age-sensitive and follow young people's recommendations, and that these mechanisms are known and accessible to all youth in the civic space;**

4. **Include youth in the existing protection mechanisms on a national level.** Appoint **independent youth focal points** within relevant entities which would coordinate the entity's response to reports of threats and establish relationships with government actors who can mobilize law enforcement officials.
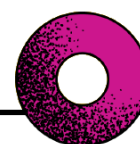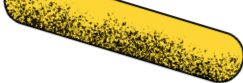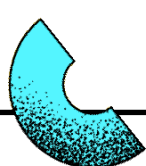
International and regional organizations should:

1. **Set up an independent protection mechanism for youth**, to allow for immediate reporting of threats and attacks against youth. Existing protection mechanisms can provide inspiration.[95]

   This mechanism should either be created or enforced by **including young people into existing mechanisms**; in any case, consultations with a diverse group of youth to ensure that their specific needs are reflected are essential.

   These mechanisms should provide **legal, political, financial and psychological support during the process, for the individual, as well as for the individual's family members** when needed. Consideration should be given to make **relocation support available in the severest cases, when needed.**

   Dedicated protection mechanisms should also be able to channel financial and technical assistance for youth who are not formally organized or registered with the government due to security concerns, bureaucratic or other challenges, regardless of young people's legal status.

   Information about these mechanisms should be regularly sent to different youth organizations, for example through focal points of different global networks, in order to ensure that youth working at the grassroots level are aware of their existence and know how to approach them;

2. **Re-evaluate existing mandates/protection mechanisms, with the inclusion of** young people active in the civic space, **to ensure that protection responses are age-sensitive and follow young people's recommendations, and that these mechanisms are known and accessible to all youth in the civic space**;

3. **The United Nations** should ensure that the legal and policy frameworks of the Member States guarantee the effective promotion and protection of the human rights of youth, including the inclusive, full and effective participation of youth in decision-making;

4. **The United Nations should** encourage United Nations departments, agencies, funds and programmes to include specific information on youth into various thematic and progress reports.

Social media and tech companies should:

1. **Thoroughly and impartially investigate** threats, attacks, acts of intimidation and hate speech and bring perpetrators to justice; guarantee that there are no double standards applied in their content moderation policies and processes, and all hate speech and instigation to hatred is treated in a just, effective way and assessed on an equal footing.

PARTICIPATION:
Providing Meaningful and Safe Participation Opportunities to Ensure Inclusion and a Safe Civic Space for Youth

Objective: Create opportunities for meaningful and safe participation, especially intergenerational participation, for youth in the civic space (youth voices are being ignored in decision-making processes, especially youth from vulnerable communities and rural areas; intergenerational hostility/patriarchal and paternal norms are being used to exclude youth from civic spaces/decision making spaces; lack of physical and accessible infrastructures to enable participation of youth with disabilities in the civic space; etc).

States should:

1. **Include civic and human rights education into the national curriculum so children and young people from an early age understand how governments work** and what rights and opportunities they have to influence/participate in public, political, economic, cultural, social and other affairs in their country;

2. Consider introducing **quotas in national parliaments and other decision-making bodies at all levels (as well as delegations to regional and international intergovernmental organizations) with the aim of increasing youth participation**. The representation should have an adequate gender balance, and ensure the participation and inclusion of minority, indigenous and other underrepresented youth communities;

3. **Collect data at all levels to systematically and regularly track youth participation**, representation and inclusion in political processes and institutions, which could be achieved by creating focal points within public institutions;

4. Facilitate the access of youth individuals and organizations to regional and international bodies, in particular the United Nations, its representatives, and human rights mechanisms; **Include or increase youth representation**, especially of those from organizations and movements without ECOSOC accreditation for access to UN events, within their delegations to all **relevant regional and international forums**;

5. Establish or strengthen, on the one hand, accessible and inclusive youth structures, such as local youth councils, youth parliaments or other dedicated youth mechanisms and institutions, while ensuring, on the other hand, that all other governmental and administrative bodies **mainstream** a youth focus and youth perspectives throughout their operation, with the inclusion and representation of young people, to avoid parallel and disconnected institutions and the creation of silos.
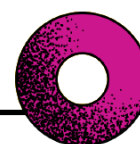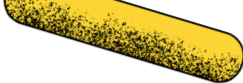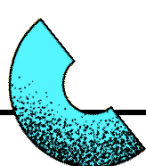
The UN should:

1. **Establish a consultative mechanism** for young people (especially including marginalized youth groups, such as young women, youth with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ youth, migrants, refugees, displaced youth populations, minority and indigenous youth), which should meet annually and make recommendations on all issues on the agenda of the Human Rights Council and other relevant UN bodies, drawing special attention to protection issues in the civic space. This mechanism should ensure structured, meaningful youth participation, with direct institutional links to the Human Rights Council and other relevant UN bodies.

Civil society should:

1. **Initiate regular consultations with youth organizations and individuals, who are active in the civic space to understand the challenges they are facing, to explore opportunities for collaboration and support,** and proactively build trust with them, (including marginalized youth, such as young women, youth with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ youth, displaced youth populations, minority and indigenous youth). These discussions should have a clear follow-up plan and operational guidance for monitoring and accountability to ensure that young people's concerns are incorporated and appropriate responses are tailored;

   Ensure that such consultations are accessible and inclusive (with sign language and interpretation and accessible physical infrastructures, such as elevators, ramps, etc.) and that youth from rural areas can attend them as well (by facilitating transportation or internet access for example);

2. **Attend and participate in youth-led events, projects and initiatives to express support**, facilitate intergenerational relationships and foster a community in which young people feel comfortable sharing their concerns and seeking protection support when needed;

3. **Critically examine governance structures** to assess and ensure diverse youth representation throughout all layers of decision-making, so young people have access to inclusive and transparent decision-making opportunities at the community, sub-national and national levels, including regarding decisions on access to basic services, such as education, mental health, psychosocial, sexual and reproductive health services.

All actors should:
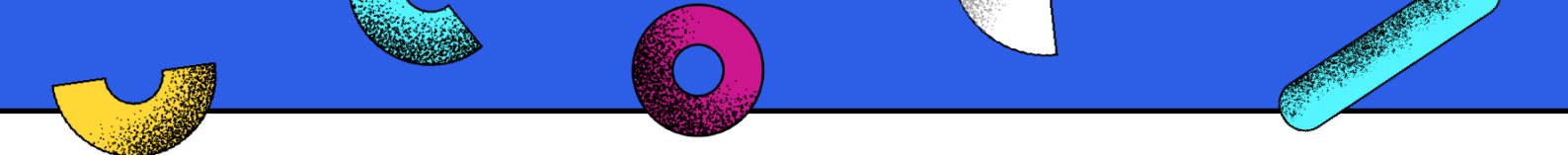
1. **Learn and understand the meaning and criteria for meaningful youth participation and address tokenistic practices by involving youth in programmes, projects, meetings and structures only if the participation is meaningful** and the person and their cause also benefit from such participation.[96]

Endnotes

1. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," United Nations, https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/.

2. UNFPA – UN/PBSO, Graeme Simpson, The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security, Mandated by the Security Council (2018), https://www.youth4peace.info/system/files/2018-10/youth-web-english.pdf, see e.g. "Dealing with Injustice and Human Rights," starting on p. 101. (from here and after: The Missing Peace).

3. CIVICUS, People Power Under Attack 2019, a report based on data from CIVICUS Monitor (December 2019), https://civicus.contentfiles.net/media/assets/file/GlobalReport2019.pdf. The report also emphasized regional differences and that youth were the main targets in the African continent. It is also worth mentioning that 39% of reports of civic space violations in Africa featured the disruption of protests; CIVICUS Monitor (2020), https://findings2020.monitor.civicus.org/uneven-crisis.html.

4. UNICEF, Rapid Analysis: Digital civic engagement by young people (2020), https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/media/706/file/UNICEF-Global-Insight-digital-civic-engagement-2020.pdf

5. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2019: Highlights (2019), ST/ESA/SER.A/423, https://population.un.org/wpp/Publications/Files/WPP2019_Highlights.pdf.

6. For more detailed information, see e.g., various Youth Issue Briefs published by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/issue-briefs.html.

7. United Nations General Assembly resolution, Youth and Human Rights: Annual Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, A/HRC/39/33 (28 June 2018), https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1640929?ln=en.

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9. Ibid, see Section 3.5. "Dealing with Injustice and Human Rights," starting on pg. 101.

10. Ibid, p. 102.

11. UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth and UN Human Rights Experts, Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, "Joint Statement on Recent Violent Escalations During Youth-Led Protests Around the World" (30 October 2020), https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2020/10/joint-statement-on-recent-violent-escalations-during-youth-led-protests-around-the-world/.

12. See e.g. Joint statement by 41 civil society organizations on Nigeria's excessive use of force on protesters: Human Rights Watch, Nigeria: End Excessive Force Against Protesters (October 2020), https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/22/nigeria-end-excessive-force-against-protesters; Amnesty International, "USA: The World Is Watching: Mass Violations By U.S. Police Of Black Lives Matter Protesters' Rights" (2020), https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AMR5128072020ENGLISH.PDF; direct interviews carried out in the context of this research.

13. The Missing Peace, p. 14.

14. United Nations, Youth 2030: The United Nations Youth Strategy (2018), https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/youth-un/.

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16. United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 (UNSCR 2250), Youth, Peace and Security (YPS), S/RES/2250 (9 December 2015), https://undocs.org/S/RES/2250(2015).

17. United Nations Security Council Resolution 2535 (UNSCR 2535), Youth, Peace and Security (YPS), S/RES/2535 (2020), para. 5, https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2535(2020).

18. United Nations Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on Youth, Peace and Security, S/2020/167, (2 March 2020), https://undocs.org/en/S/2020/167, art. 76 (d).

19. "Youth, Peace and Security – Security Council Open VTC," UN Web TV (27 April 2020), http://webtv.un.org/meetings-events/general-assembly/general-debate/71st-session-%5Ball-languages%5D/watch/youth-peace-and-security-security-council-open-vtc/6152419696001/?term=&page=458.

20. CIVICUS, People Power Under Attack 2019, a report based on data from Civicus Monitor (December 2019), https://civicus.contentfiles.net/media/assets/file/GlobalReport2019.pdf. The report also emphasized regional differences and that youth were the main targets in the African continent. It is also worth mentioning that 39% of reports of civic space violations in Africa featured the disruption of protests; CIVICUS Monitor (2020), https://findings2020.monitor.civicus.org/uneven-crisis.html.

21. See e.g. The thematic and country reports of the UN Special Rapporteurs on the situation of human rights defenders, on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; the annual reports of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Cooperation with the United Nations, its representatives and mechanisms in the field of human rights, or the reports of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on human rights defenders, available in the archives on the website of the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights: https://www.ohchr.org/en/HRBodies/SP/Pages/Welcomepage.aspx.

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27. See e.g. The Missing Peace.

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29. Youth and Human Rights, A/HRC/39/33, paras. 33–39.

30. UNICEF, Digital Civic Engagement, p. 6.

31. The Missing Peace, p. 43.

32. United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Margaret Sekaggya, A/HRC/19/55 (December 2011), available at: https://www.ohchr.org/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/regularsession/session19/a-hrc-19-55_en.pdf, para. 100.

33. ECDPM (Jean Bossuyt and Martin Ronceray), Claiming back civic space – Towards approaches fit for the 2020s? (May 2020), https://ecdpm.org/wp-content/uploads/Claiming-Back-Civic-Space-Towards-Approaches-Fit-2020s-Report-May-2020-ECDPM.pdf, p. 20.

34. Ibid.

35. See e.g., The Missing Peace, section "Constraints" on p. 42.

36. Ibid, p. XI.

37. UDHR; CRC; ICCPR (see endnote 15).

38. The Declaration's full name is the "Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms", A/RES/53/144 (1999), https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N99/770/89/PDF/N9977089.pdf?OpenElement.

39. Sumi Cho, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw and Leslie McCall, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications and Praxis," (2013). Signs, Vol. 38, No. 4, https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/stable/pdf/10.1086/669608.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A9e92b1e7a91538f27e310f6b27059027

40. United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (Paris, 1948), https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/; United Nations, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (1976), https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cescr.pdf.

41. Young women are undoubtedly in an even more difficult position to have their voices heard and, therefore, a whole section is dedicated to them and their specific experiences later in the report.

42. See e.g. The Missing Peace, "Debunking Assumptions" Chapter starting on p. 17.

43. Ibid, p. 15.

44. Ibid, p. 42.

45. Inter-Parliamentary Union, Youth Participation in National Parliaments: 2018 (2018), https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2018-12/youth-participation-in-national-parliaments-2018, p. 3.

46. Ibid.

47. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, A/HRC/19/55, paras 102-103. All these cases related to violations against youth and student defenders working on a very wide range of issues, "including torture, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, impunity, freedom of religion, minority rights, students' rights, youth rights, education, women's rights and gender issues, trade policies and other economic issues, environmental and land issues, peacebuilding and democracy promotion" (para 102).

48. See e.g. European Youth Forum, Safeguarding Civic Space for Young People in Europe (2020), https://www.youthforum.org/safeguarding-civic-space-young-people-europe; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN World Youth Report on Youth Civic Engagement (2016), https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2018/12/un_world_youth_report_youth_civic_engagement.pdf.

49. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, A/HRC/19/55, para. 107.

50. Youth Participation in National Parliaments 2018, table on pg. 24. The report describes that "the Nordic countries lead much of the world in electing younger MPs: the share of MPs under the age of 30 exceeds 10% in Norway, Sweden and Finland. Their share is also around 10% in the single or lower chambers of San Marino, the Republic of the Gambia, Montenegro and in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. The only upper chamber approaching that level is Bhutan, at 9.1%," p. 3.

51. United Nations General Assembly resolution 39/33, Youth and Human Rights: Annual Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, A/HRC/39/33 (28 June 2018), https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1640929?ln=en, para, 32.

52. United Nations General Assembly, Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on human rights defenders, Hina Jilani, A/62/225 (August 2007,) https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/606583?ln=en, para 70.

53. United Nations, Declaration on Human Rights Defenders 53/144 (1999), https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/RES/53/144.

54. Digital Civic Engagement by Young People, p. 17.

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ANNEX

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Protection of Young People in the Civic Space
Survey commissioned by the UN Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth (OSGEY)

With responding to the questions below, you will help us better understand what kind of challenges, barriers and threats young people face when defending human rights, mobilizing communities or acting as peace building agents. Our aim is to formulate appropriate guidelines and recommendations to various stakeholders regarding how to better protect young people in the civic space.

We are using these data for analytical and statistical purposes. If you wish to allow us to reference specific information from your response (for example if you share concrete case examples or testimonies with us), please provide us with your contact details so we can get back to you. We will contact you if we need further information or if we plan to publish specific information for which we will seek your approval.

1. Can you tell us which country or countries you work in? ....

2. Please tell us your age ....

3. What is your gender? ....

☐ Female

☐ Male

☐ Other:..

☐ I prefer not to tell

☐ Here you can specify "other" if you wish so...

....

....

....

....

....

4. Are you acting individually or as part of an organization?

☐ Individually

☐ Part of an organization

5. What are the specific issues you focus on?

☐   Youth participation in public and political affairs

☐   Youth participation in social, economic and cultural affairs

☐   Right to education

☐   School to work transition

☐   Freedom of expression

☐   Freedom of association, peaceful assembly

☐   Employment and social protection

☐   Access to health

☐   Sexual and reproductive health and rights

☐   Gender equality

☐   Violence against women

☐   Environmental rights, climate justice

☐   Fight for equality and against racism (rights of minorities, indigenous peoples)

☐   LGBTI rights

☐   Right to land

☐   Right to truth, transitional justice

☐   Sustainable development

☐   Migration, asylum-seekers, IDPs, refugees

☐   Peace building, peacekeeping

☐   Digital rights

☐   Other (please specify) ....

....

....

....

....

....

....

....

....

....

6. What is the biggest concern or fear you have in your life at this moment where you feel that your active participation in the civic space is most required? Is it poverty, inequality, unemployment, climate change, violence, privacy, racism, corruption, etc? Please name only ONE, we will make a word cloud.

....

7. Does your work focus on the specific situation and rights of any of the following groups?

☐   Young girls and women

☐   National or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities

☐   LGBTI communities

☐   Indigenous peoples

☐   Migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, IDPs

☐   Non-citizens, stateless persons

☐   Youth with disability

☐   Other (please specify) ....

....

....

8. What activities do you carry out most often to defend those rights? Please choose the most relevant ones, up to 6 activities.

☐   Journalism (blogs, articles, social media posts etc.)

☐   Investigation and reporting of violations

☐   Human rights education and training

☐   Peaceful assembly

☐   Advocacy at national governments

☐   Advocacy at non-state actors, corporate actors

☐   Advocacy at regional and international multilateral organizations, monitoring bodies

☐   Support of victims of human rights violations (legal advice, counselling, rehabilitation support)

☐   Strengthening State's capacity to prosecute perpetrators

☐   Arts and culture

☐   Community advocacy

☐   Other (please specify)

....

....

....

9. What barriers and threats have you experienced while carrying out these activities and how often?

	NOT AT ALL /NEVER	OCCASIONALLY	OFTEN	CONSTANTLY
Sociocultural, including stereotyping, pressure or stigma				
Legal, including barriers posed by legislation or policies				
Political, including hostility against youth defenders, disabling environment				
Physical (violence, torture, harassment, imprisonment, travel restrictions)				
Financial (general dependence on adults, lack of accessible funds, lack of resources for bail-outs etc.)				
Digital (online harassment, surveillance, violation of privacy)				

Other (please specify) ....
....

10. Please highlight any specific and concrete challenge, case or incident that you have encountered or are facing now.

....

....

....

11. What tool, action, or other form of assistance would you need to feel and be better protected against these challenges and threats?

....

....

....
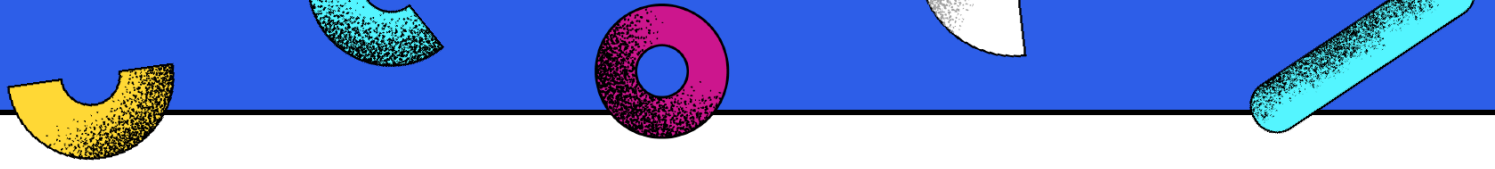
12. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your work and activism?

....

....

....

13. We are trying to reach out to as many young activists in the civic space and young human rights defenders as possible. Please share names and contact details of OTHER PEOPLE who should be part of this research.

Name ....

Organization (if applicable)..

Country ....

Email Address ....

14. You can submit this survey anonymously or you can provide us with your name and contacts below if you agree that we can contact you in the future again.

Name ....

Organization (if applicable) ....

City/Town ....

Country ....

Email Address ....

Phone Number ....

*15. We are planning to organize regional virtual consultations of young activists so we can better identify common challenges, violation patterns and protection needs. Please tick this box if you are interested to participate in such a group discussion and make sure you provide a contact detail!

☐   Yes

☐   No

Contact detail: ....

WE SINCERELY THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS SURVEY!

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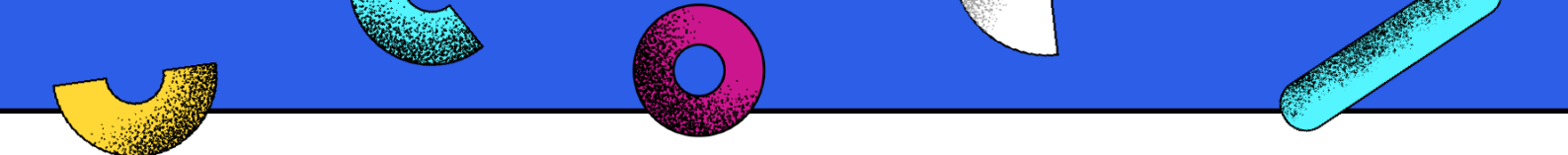
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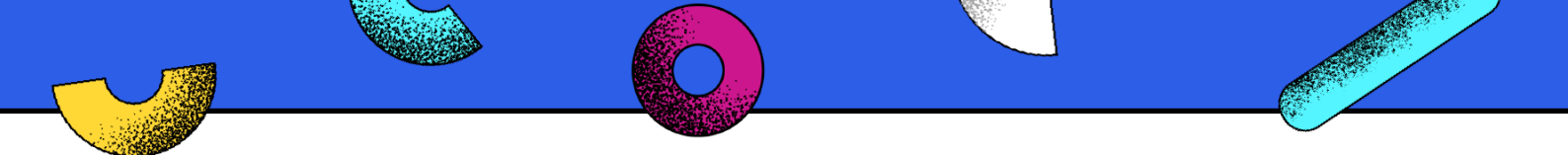
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