

Submission to the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders
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By Lostisland

Q1: Child and young human rights defenders have undeniably played an active and vital role in civil society. Their involvement is emblematic of the changing dynamics of human rights advocacy, with young individuals demonstrating an extraordinary commitment to promoting and defending human rights. Their contributions span a wide spectrum of issues, ranging from climate change and environmental protection to gender equality, racial justice, and education. These young activists often bring fresh perspectives, innovative approaches, and an unbridled enthusiasm to the human rights arena, energizing and expanding the reach of civil society in an unprecedented way. Young activists, like Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai, have gained global recognition for their efforts. Their participation in civil society not only highlights their commitment but also underscores the need for intergenerational collaboration in addressing human rights issues.

Q1: The extent of protection accorded to child and youth human rights defenders varies significantly from one country to another. Some nations have incorporated provisions for the protection of child and youth human rights defenders within their broader human rights legislation or have established dedicated policies and action plans. However, in many cases, these protections fall short, or implementation remains a challenge.

Child and youth human rights defenders should ideally be able to access national and international protection mechanisms. While international mechanisms, such as the United Nations Human Rights Council, provide a framework for their protection, in practice, accessing these mechanisms can be challenging for young activists. National governments and relevant stakeholders should work to create an enabling environment that facilitates access to these mechanisms and ensures effective protection for these defenders.

Q2: Child and youth human rights defenders confront a range of particular risks and challenges that are distinct from those faced by adult activists. These risks include limited resources, reduced access to legal counsel, educational disruptions, and the potential for physical and emotional harm. Young activists often encounter threats and harassment from various actors, including state authorities, non-state actors, and even peers or family members who may not share their beliefs. For example, Malala Yousafzai, a prominent youth human rights defender, was targeted by the Taliban for advocating girls' education. These risks can result in trauma and psychological distress that have long-lasting effects on their well-being. Moreover, their age can make them susceptible to exploitation, manipulation, and being used as pawns in political disputes. The digital realm also presents unique challenges, as child and youth defenders are vulnerable to online harassment and cyberbullying, which can have profound psychological consequences. Overall, these challenges underscore the urgent need for tailored protection mechanisms and support for young human rights defenders.

Q3: Child and young human rights defenders often find themselves excluded from the decision-making processes in public and political affairs. The prevailing structures and systems in many countries tend to marginalize their voices, and there is limited systematic

inclusion of young individuals in these critical processes. Dedicated platforms for the participation of children and young human rights defenders are sparse, and where they do exist, they often lack the necessary resources and support to be effective. The absence of child-friendly versions of laws and policies further exacerbates the problem, making it difficult for young activists to fully comprehend their rights and responsibilities. Decision-making processes, in most cases, are not tailored to be comprehensible and inclusive for children and youth, hindering their meaningful participation in shaping policies that affect their lives. This exclusion not only deprives young human rights defenders of their rights but also inhibits the broader development of societies, as their perspectives and insights remain untapped.

Q4: Human rights education in schools is essential for nurturing a culture of respect for human rights and promoting activism. However, the implementation of such education varies widely. In some countries, human rights education is integrated into the curriculum and encouraged, fostering a sense of social responsibility among students. In contrast, many educational systems neglect human rights education altogether, missing a crucial opportunity to instill fundamental values in the next generation.

The encouragement and support of human rights activism in educational and academic settings are equally varied. In some institutions, students are actively encouraged to engage in human rights activism, and there are platforms for them to voice their concerns, mobilize, and take action. However, in other places, there are policies and practices that discourage or even penalize student activism. This lack of support for activism can have a chilling effect on students and hinder their ability to express themselves and advocate for human rights.

Q5: The extent to which policies exist to limit the discretion of educational institutions in expelling or sanctioning students for legitimate human rights activism varies across different regions and countries. In some jurisdictions, there are clear policies and guidelines in place to protect students engaged in human rights activism. These policies aim to ensure that legitimate activism is not met with punitive measures. These may include provisions that safeguard students' right to freedom of expression and association.

However, in many other regions, there is a lack of such protective policies. In these areas, educational institutions often have broad discretion to take punitive actions against students involved in human rights activism. This discretion can lead to the suppression of free expression and discourage students from engaging in advocacy for important causes. The absence of protective policies can also perpetuate a culture of fear and self-censorship among young activists, limiting their ability to fully exercise their rights and engage in meaningful activism. Therefore, there is a need for consistent and robust policies to safeguard students' rights to engage in legitimate human rights activism without fear of punitive consequences.

Q6: Ensuring that reporting systems for human rights violations are accessible to child and young human rights defenders is of paramount importance. The accessibility of such systems varies greatly depending on the specific country and context. In some regions, child and youth defenders may face significant barriers in accessing these systems due to legal and bureaucratic obstacles, lack of information, and discriminatory practices. This can undermine their ability to report and seek redress for human rights violations effectively.

Moreover, the fear of retaliation and stigmatization may discourage child and youth defenders from utilizing reporting systems. They may be concerned about the consequences of speaking out against violations, as these can include threats to their personal safety, education, or social well-being. Furthermore, in some countries, the reporting systems may not be adequately designed to address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of child and youth defenders, making them less accessible.

Efforts should be made to improve the accessibility of reporting systems for child and young human rights defenders. This includes providing age-appropriate information and support, ensuring confidentiality, and creating a safe and supportive environment that encourages them to come forward. International organizations, governments, and civil society should work together to remove barriers and protect child and youth defenders who report human rights violations.

Q7: Raising awareness among child and youth human rights defenders about existing mechanisms, platforms, and protection mechanisms is vital to empower them and ensure their safety and effectiveness in defending human rights. In many cases, there is a lack of sufficient awareness among young activists, particularly in regions with limited resources and inadequate educational systems. Educational institutions and civil society organizations should play a central role in disseminating information about these mechanisms. This includes providing training on how to use reporting systems, connecting young defenders with experienced mentors, and informing them about support networks available for their protection. Furthermore, creating accessible and age-appropriate resources and materials can help child and youth defenders understand their rights and the avenues available for addressing violations.

Awareness-raising efforts should also emphasize the importance of documenting and reporting human rights abuses, while emphasizing the necessity of their work in the broader context of social justice. In addition, it is crucial to engage with the media and online platforms to amplify the voices of young defenders and share their stories, experiences, and successes. To ensure the safety and effectiveness of child and youth human rights defenders, there should be a comprehensive approach that combines education, mentorship, and advocacy. International and local organizations should work collaboratively to develop and implement these awareness-raising initiatives, ultimately empowering young defenders to play a vital role in protecting human rights.

N/B: Lostisland.org is an international organisation, with no specific focus country. The answers provided are based on the global context.