**UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls**

**Questionnaire on girls’ and young women’s activism**

**Submission by CREA, with Our Voices Our Futures Consortium**

**Contact:** [subha@creaworld.org](mailto:subha@creaworld.org)

**I. Nature, modalities and trends of girls’ and young women’s activism**

1. What is the normative framework related to girls’ and young women’s civic space and activism?

Young activists use the Child Rights Convention and CEDAW; however, there are significant gaps in both frameworks which young feminists try to highlight in their activism and engagement (answered in more detail below).

2. What are the main features of their activism/participation in political and public life in countries or regions you are working? Please describe, in particular, in terms of:

1. Specific issues (thematic areas) on which girls and young women are mostly engaged

Climate change, gender-based violence (in various forms), racial justice, technology , sexual and reproductive health rights, sexuality-affirmative approaches, bodily autonomy, LGBTIQ rights, especially rights of trans, intersex and nonbinary people.

Frameworks: Many young people and young feminists are using human rights frameworks to grapple with large-scale issues facing us, such as climate change, and economic inequality. Furthermore, young activists are keenly using the framework of “representation”, demanding to be seen and heard in decision-making spaces and in civic space, across spheres; they are especially cognizant about intersectionality (a feminist approach which proposes that multiple structures of discrimination and oppression are diverse and intersect to form any one person’s experience of society, power and human rights). Young people are also conscious of age as an additional dimension of power, particularly within movements, and have been pushing for young people to be heard and valued as agents and autonomous beings and as knowledgeable activists and change-makers; inter-generational or multi-generational approaches have also been adopted within movements, to acknowledge that both younger and older movement actors are bearers of experience and knowledge, and leadership abilities, and that learning should happen in a mutual way. Gender equality is also a key framework through which young people are engaging, often going beyond more traditional women’s rights approaches.

For example, girls and young women in India are leading the creation of women’s movement spaces which are intersectional and are actively addressing issues of communities and rights which have historically been excluded in feminist movements, such as sex workers’ rights, sexuality and sexual expression, bodily autonomy, issues faced by women with disabilities and more.

1. Political actors and authorities they mostly engage with

Young people and young activists engage at a range of levels -- from the local, national to international levels. In a number of countries, from India, to Haiti and Honduras, young activists are engaging local elected politicians, to directly advocate for locally-relevant policy, to impact their own communities and the places where they live. Furthermore, young activists engaging national legislators in their countries, local government and national-level government representatives. In a range of contexts, young people work with ministry representatives, such as with a ministry which is tasked with women’s issues or gender equality issues.

At the international level, young activists engage with member state representatives at the United Nations, leveraging relationships with UN member state representatives to advocate for issues which they might be at risk advocating for directly on-the-ground in their home countries. E.g. young trans / LGBTIQ activists will nurture relationships with member state representatives representing their own country at the United Nations, in contexts where public activism poses high risks and criminalisation for LGBTIQ people; young environmental / land defenders also do the same, especially from Latin American countries, where environmental defenders are at high risk.

1. Levels of engagement (grassroots, local, national, international)

Young activists engage at many levels. For example, young feminists in India engage with grassroots-local governance (Panchayati Raj Institutions in India, and local- block administration, and district level administration.

They also engage with national-level legislation and policy decision-making, often in partnership with others.

They also engage at the international level, and in multilateral spaces.

1. Main spaces for engagement (e.g. schools, community, media, online platforms, etc.)

Young activists are using online and on-ground spaces for their engagement. For example, young women in India engage in community spaces like local governance meetings, meetings of women’s groups, engagement in meetings of frontline health service providers, community events (hosted by local NGOs, local Governance and the State Government) and so on.

In many contexts, girls and young activists are very active online; they use platforms such as TikTok and Instagram to share their messages, art and movement stories.

1. Cross-movement cooperation and solidarity

Young activists and young people-led movements are particularly cognizant of eschewing silos and traditional modes of doing activist work. Many young activists are working across silos (created by funding and other structures) and trying to bring an intersectional and inclusive approach to movement work.

1. What are the forms and modalities for girls’ and young women’s engagement/activism in countries or regions you are working (specifying the country/ries or region/s)? Please provide information about any structures in place (formal and informal) and how they operate.

Young people are engaging in network-building and collectivising, especially through learning and capacity-building opportunities.

They are engaged online but also in on-ground direct action. There has been a huge return to direct action, such as protest and civil disobedience, largely led by young people, in places such as India, Lebanon and the United States.

1. What are the main trends and drivers influencing their activism in countries or regions you are working? Please explain if there are particular ways NGOs and feminist movements influence girls’ and young women’s activism.

NGOs’ work with local women leaders on building feminist leadership has accentuated the enabling environment for younger women and girls to influence their activism.

Opportunities like NGO- based programs are apt opportunities (putting an example of Action Project done by young women in India during Jan- March 2020)

For example, Action project in India was a process where the young women (17-19 year old) could use the learnings from a regular program on SRHR, bodily rights and sexuality to convert it into action based activities in their respective villages. The aim was to enhance the leadership skills of these young women where they organized and worked on cross-cutting issues, early and forced marriage, access to SRHR, awareness on gender-based discrimination, and consent. As a part of this action project, a group of the older cohort in one of the intervention villages of Jharkhand began talking to the girls in the community about their knowledge and access to SRHR. These conversations revealed that a number of girls and women did not always seek medical attention on sexual and reproductive health issues as they felt uncomfortable talking to a male doctor. The young women then advocated for a female doctor, specifically for SRHR related matters, and subsequently, the district hospital appointed a female doctor. Since then, the young women from the program have recounted that since the doctor’s appointment, many women and girls in the village of Jharkhand have made their way to the hospital for much-needed consultations.

Similarly, there are many critical learning opportunities for young activists, such as the institute on Feminist Leadership, Movement-Building and Rights, India and East Africa, (CREA), the month-long residential feminist training course by SANGAT for Southasian feminists, the Sports, Expression and leadership (SELF) academy for young girls, and the It’s My Body program for young girls (CREA). These are designed to create critical thinking and feminist values among young feminists, as well as networks of young activists.

Digital rights and technology are another domain through which young people are engaging and emerging as activists and leaders; civil society organizations such as the Association for Progressive Communications routinely conducts Feminist Tech Exchange trainings, or TAKE BACK THE TECH camps (which is focused on gender-based violence and technology). These exercises create vibrant global networks of young feminists thinking and working critically on technology and digital rights. This also ensures that young people are active online, and are holding critical political spaces online.

Young people are driven by attacks on democratic structures and institutions; for example, in India, the protests against the discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act have been largely driven by young women and young structurally excluded people (such as Dalits and Muslims). Large-scale government corruption and threats to democracy are driving young people-led movements in places like Lebanon and Haiti.

1. What are the distinct experiences and shared experiences of girl and young women activists with other WHRDs of different ages, and what is the state of intergenerational interactions and movement building? Are there also any distinct trends in the way in which young women are active now, compared to previous generations of young activists?

It’s difficult to empirically say if young people’s experiences are different from those older than them in movements; however, we are seeing somewhat unique and unprecedented levels of attacks on activism and on democratic structures and spaces. Both younger and older activists in movements are mostly aware of the need for intergenerational learning and solidarity.

Environmental and land defenders, for example, are diverse in age and work across age-lines together. Feminist movements mostly try to take intergenerational approaches, but debates such as those around MeToo may have deepened existing fractures, though it would be reductive say that these are purely along the lines of age -- however, the debate about ‘due process’ vs online naming and shaming for accountability could broadly be characterised as a fissure between generations. Younger activists also tend to more frequently organize around identity (not all the time, and not all young activists), and create further silos based on identity, whereas older generations of movement actors were more likely to create solidarities and cross-movement alliances based on shared politics, outside identity alone.

1. What are the positive and inspirational examples of girl's activism in terms of:
2. Social mobilization and change - In India, as a part of the program with girls and young women, younger girls (age 12-16 years cohort) were mentored by the younger women (age group 17-19) to claim public spaces by using sports as a medium after which the former started negotiating with boys in their communities to play sports of their choice in the common playing fields in the community.
3. Influencing policies and legislation
4. Personal development and empowerment (of girls and young women)- In India, in CREA programs targeting girls and young women, we saw an increase in girls’ confidence regarding their own bodies, claiming bodily autonomy by asking for their SRHR to policy actors, local frontline health workers, claiming public spaces by playing sports that are considered masculine, making career choices and building their own sense of agency in of their own lives.
5. Solidarity with feminist and human rights movements

**II. Enabling factors and good practices**

1. What solidarity and support frameworks are available in the countries or regions of your operation that enhance girls’ and young women’s activism? Please provide information on the role of:

i. Legal/policy and institutional frameworks

ii. Social, cultural, religious institutions

1. Collaborative initiatives, human rights and/or women’s movements -- As described above, many women’s rights NGOs are supportive of girls and young women’s activism, especially in creating learning and capacity building spaces and intergenerational sharing spaces
2. Technological infrastructures/means -- The digital space is a very important one for girls and young activists and people; however, this doesn’t mean that access to digital spaces is equal for all young people. Young people’s experiences online are also shaped by their own gender, sexuality, race, caste, class, ability and so on, where gaps in access to digital technologies still exist along all those lines. In our work in India, we also see that even in homes where there is some access to the internet, son or boy preference shapes how much girls in a household can freely access a device and the internet through the device. Access to space, private time etc. shape all girls’ and women’s experiences of the online, in these cases. Furthermore, once they are online, structurally excluded girls and young people, especially those who are sexually diverse or gender diverse, or are excluded along other lines such as caste, may be more vulnerable to harassment online, or more vulnerable to discriminatory biases of algorithms created by internet corporations in the global North.
3. Donor organizations -- There is an increased interest on the part of donors to support girls’ and young people’s activism, but many donors and other development actors are still fettered by outdated frameworks or approaches to adolescent / child rights, such as those which are protectionist or prohibitionist. It is essential for more donors to focus on funding young people’s activism directly, as well as taking a strong human rights approach to work targeting children and young people.
4. Other frameworks/ actors
5. What are the concrete ways in which the State promotes and secures girls’ engagement/activism? Are there particular issues and platforms in which the State encourages their engagement?
6. How do NGOs promote girls’ and young women’s engagement and activism in your national or regional context? Please describe which other stakeholders are very active in this area and what role they play.

* Building their capacities around concepts of gender, sexuality, SRHR, feminist leadership.
* Building and sharing knowledge resources around gender, sexuality, feminist leadership, SRHR.
* Creating an enabling environment for girls by engaging with elected women representatives from the local governance, frontline health service providers, local administration.
* Sharing financial resources; facilitating financial resourcing for young people’s efforts

1. Are there ways to assess and support girls’ evolving capacities to fully and freely participate in all spheres of public decision-making? Also, how is the diversity of girls' activism and inclusion in all human rights activism initiatives ensured (e.g. gender equality, disability, environment, LGBTI issues, etc.)?

Childrens’ and young peoples’ ability to exercise their autonomy and agency are key to protecting childrens’ and young women’s rights. Any efforts to support young people or girls’ activism must centre their knowledge and expertise and must respect their decision-making capabilities. Diverse young people -- especially those who are structurally excluded from decision-making, such as young trans and intersex people, young people with disabilities, -- must be included at all stages of designing and delivering initiatives which are meant to target girls or young people’s rights and wellbeing. A diverse range of perspectives being included in any initiative design will ensure that it is rich and inclusive.

1. What are the achievements at the national level in the implementation of laws, policies, plans and/or programs and practices relevant to promoting girls’ and young women’s engagement/activism? What roles have NGOs played in this respect?
2. Please provide concrete examples of good practices and any innovative initiatives taken by the State, NGOs and other stakeholders, and lessons learnt.

Please see number 4 of section I.

1. **Challenges and structural barriers**
2. What kind of gender and age specific barriers are affecting girls’ and young women’s participation/activism in your national context? Please indicate concrete examples of direct and indirect as well as formal and informal factors posing threats and risks for girls and young women engaging in the public space (examples of these can include stereotyping based on gender and age, restrictions on freedom of expression, speech, assembly, liberty, etc., legal restrictions to capacity to provide legal consent, legal age of marriage, etc.)

* Burden of household work on girls- gender role stereotyping.
* COVID and closing of schools and colleges has affected the mobility of girls and has further restricted networking opportunities
* Patriarchal structures existing at community, family level doesn’t allow girls the freedom of expression
* Lack of information about their rights is also restricting them to engage in movement spaces at multiple levels.
* Lack of access to technology is also posing a barrier to access information regarding their rights and the various movement spaces.

1. Are there any particular groups of girls and young women who are most affected by these barriers and why? What roles your organization and other NGOs have played to address these barriers?

* Dalit and tribal young women and girls
* Young women and girls with restricted economic resources
* Young women and girls with disabilities

1. What issues or gaps do arise with regard to existing frameworks (i.e. legislation, policies, plans, and/or programs) relevant to girls’ and young women’s civic space and activism? Are there any specific laws, policies and practices that place obstacles to their participation, activism or collective action? What role do NGOs play in response to these gaps?

Existing normative frameworks, such as CEDAW and CRC both lack substance in relation to young peoples’ bodily autonomy and integrity, sexuality and gender diversity, and don’t emphasize enough the harm which has been done by protectionist and prohibitionist approaches to child rights and women’s rights (i.e. policies designed to ‘protect’ children sometimes harm or inhibit their ability to express themselves and be considered as valid decision-makers; e.g. young people’s evolving capacities to make decisions, and sexual education is curtailed and restricted sometimes due to the criminalisation or penalisation of young peoples’ sexuality; e.g. social and cultural norms, policies or legislation which don’t value young people as being able to give or withhold consent, ultimately harms their ability to address and report violence).

1. Are there particular threats girl and young women activists in your country or region experience in relation to their work? In particular, in terms of:
2. being prosecuted and punished for their activism -- Young activists pushing for comprehensive sexuality education, or who are challenging criminalisation of young people’s sexuality are discredited, bullied and harassed
3. facing intimidations, harassments, and attacks (direct or indirect, online or offline, sexual or physical)
4. lacking access to justice and reparations for violations of their rights -- Because young people and those are legally considered children are not seen as decision-makers, or as not being able to give and withhold consent, young people and girls are at risk of not being able to adequately seek redress when their rights are violated, or when they face violence. Young people are also highly stigmatised for attempting to express their gender or sexuality, once again creating silences, and impunity for perpetrators, when they face violence.
5. Are there particular concerns that may arise with respect to girls’ and young women’s access to technology and other infrastructures, and the corresponding divide? What role do NGOs play in response to these gaps? -- There remain significant gaps in access, which are gendered, class-ed and so on (please see Section II question 1, iv). Girls and young women’s ability to access and use technology meaningfully is enabled by their with their ability to access free, private time and space, and their ability to exercise their autonomy. Young women and girls are subject to widespread surveillance -- from the family, community, and more broadly, the state and its mechanisms (e.g the Police etc.). There are a vast number of technologies which now facilitate or enable these types of surveillance of girls and young people, which do not fundamentally centre their autonomy (e.g. ‘women’s safety’ or ‘child safety’ apps which can be used by parents or members of the family. These apps, like many other initiatives or interventions focused on children’s or young women’s safety, define ‘danger’ and ‘safety’ in very narrow, and subjective ways, while proposing that they are neutral or objective. Many times, they do not respond to data gathered over many years by women’s rights organizations and activists, which show, for example, that women and girls’ most frequently face violence in intimate spaces, such as in the home. They reassert dominant ideas and narratives about women’s and children’s safety, such as ‘the home as the safe space’, parents as knowing best (when in some cases, parents are abusive or negligent of their child’s needs), which erase the autonomy and decision-making capabilities of young people.

Some feminist NGOs are trying to interrupt or challenge these narratives. The Internet Democracy Project has studied and published their analysis of a number of women’s safety apps: <https://genderingsurveillance.internetdemocracy.in/intro/>. Organizations such as Partners for Law in Development in India are also trying to push back against more traditional ideas of child rights and young women’s rights, such as through their work on early and forced marriage.

1. What are the challenges, in your national/regional context, in the recognition and protection of girls as human rights defenders? What negative trends undermine their evolving capacities and interests at the family, community, and State levels? How do NGOs (including your organization) promote and work with girl human rights defenders?
2. What are the main challenges in ensuring the following?
3. Safe space for engagement - restriction to girls in accessing these safe spaces.
4. Inclusion of diverse groups of girls and young women and those from marginalized communities
5. Access to resources, infrastructures, networks and platforms - Lack of access to technology, restriction on mobility of girls, violence / reprials, including family violence
6. Collaborative programs with different stakeholders - Burden of primary job on the stakeholder, conservative mindset and not prioritising issues of women and girls.
7. **Emerging issues**

1. Are there new emerging issues related to girls’ and young women’s engagement at community, national and international levels? -- Fear of criminalisation, incarceration, penalisation or persecution for collectivising and demanding their rights, especially direct action such as protest
2. What are the impacts of digital advancements and major shifts in digital activism on girls’ and young women’s engagement/participation? -- Often times, further impunity is granted to perpetrators of harassment of girl and young feminist acitivsts, by the nature of the digital sphere. Girls and young feminists must be capacitated to understand and respond to these threats, including on how to employ methods such as anonymity and digital security to their own advantage.
3. What are the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on girls’ and young women’s activism/participation?

Negative impact, restriction on mobility, no access to public spaces, no access to technology, no access to private time and space, and limited access to opportunities to be with those who support them, limitations on their ability to collectivise

1. Please provide information on other recent national, regional and global developments and concerns with respect to girls’ and young women’s movements.

**V. Recommendations/ the way forward**

1. What concrete measures should be adopted and implemented to ensure girls’ and young women’s meaningful participation, activism and collective action at all levels?

Building capacities, providing knowledge regarding these spaces, movement spaces should reach out to the most structurally excluded girls and young women.

1. What concrete measures should be adopted to address systemic gender-based/age-based discrimination and challenges affecting girls’ and young women’s engagement in the public and political life?

Engagement with the system- building capacities of frontline health service providers, elected representatives, policy actors.

Building capacities of girls in building skills like negotiations, knowledge around their rights and how to assert these rights.

Advocacy by women leaders at various levels, be it local governance, state governance and National Level

1. What concrete measures should be introduced to improve solidarity, support, collaborations towards creating an enabling environment for girls’ and young women’s engagement in the political and public life?

Networking amongst local NGOs

Cross movement alliances at local level

Building more and more young women and girl leaders

1. What particular roles should NGOs and feminist movements play towards the promotion and protection of girls’ and young women’s meaningful participation, activism and collective action?

Build spaces where they can share their change stories, stories of collectivisation, shifting people’s perspective, systemic change etc.

Collectivisation of girls and young women at all levels; freedom to associate and assemble without fear or punishment