

WOMEN'S PLATFORM CONVENING

CONCEPT NOTE

Date: 18 October 2025

Time: 9:00 – 13:00

Format: Hybrid

Location: Bilateral Room 5, Sir Dawda Kairaba Jawara International Conference Center, Banjul, The Gambia

Introduction

The Women's Platform, coordinated by the Initiative for Strategic Litigation in Africa (ISLA) in collaboration with regional feminist organizations, will convene a high-level session during the 85th Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR).

The convening seeks to workshop a short, usable set of feminist principles to guide advocacy and coordination; and to provide a feminist legal analysis of the AU-CEVAWG, focusing on key definitions and state obligations that can be translated into public-facing advocacy. It further aims to map anti-rights actors within the African human rights system and their influence strategies, as well as to consolidate collective next steps for effective feminist engagement.

This session represents an important moment to amplify feminist analysis of ongoing AU processes, strengthen coordination among women's rights actors, and develop forward-looking strategies for a more inclusive and accountable human rights system.

Background

The Women's Platform is a collective of feminist and women's rights organisations engaging with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR). It brings together organisations from across Africa to advance gender equality, accountability, and structural transformation through the mechanisms of the African Union (AU) and the ACHPR.

The Platform was established as a coordinated advocacy space that enables solidarity and joint strategy development, ensuring that women's rights remain central to the ACHPR's agenda and the implementation of the Maputo Protocol. It seeks to strengthen the capacity and advocacy of member organisations, deepen collaboration with the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa, and rally broader support for women's rights initiatives among civil society actors working within the ACHPR.

The Initiative for Strategic Litigation in Africa (ISLA) is a pan-African feminist organisation that uses strategic litigation to advance women's human rights and sexual rights across the continent. Established in 2014, ISLA has been at the forefront of shaping feminist and decolonial jurisprudence in Africa. It approaches litigation not simply as a legal remedy but as a political and transformative act—one that seeks to dismantle systems of oppression and affirm the rights to dignity, equality, and autonomy for all.

In this context, the 2025 Women's Platform convening builds on this foundation of feminist solidarity and strategic engagement to strengthen coordination, sharpen advocacy on emerging regional instruments such as the AU-CEVAWG, and reaffirm the role of feminist movements as central drivers of accountability and transformation within the African human rights system.

Objectives

The 2025 Women's Platform seeks to:

- To advance feminist legal and political analysis within the African human rights system, with particular focus on the AU-CEVAWG process and the identification of anti-rights actors and trends that threaten gender justice.
- To strengthen the shared feminist principles guiding collective advocacy, engagement, and coalition-building across regional and continental mechanisms.
- To sustain and consolidate the Women's Platform as a recognized feminist convening space for strategic dialogue, solidarity, and transformative advocacy within the African human rights system.
- To enhance collaboration and accountability between civil society actors and the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa through stronger monitoring, knowledge exchange, and follow-up on women's rights priorities.

Purpose of the Convening

Thematic Focus and Structure

The Women's Platform convening will be organized around three interconnected strands, each contributing to a shared goal of advancing feminist legal and political advocacy within the African human rights system.

Strand 1: Principles for Ethical Feminist Engagement with the AU Organs

Between 13 and 14 August 2025, ISLA convened a feminist roundtable bringing together leading advocates, scholars, and organizations across the African Human Rights System (AHRS). The purpose was to reflect on the challenges confronting feminist organizations when engaging with the African Union (AU) and its institutions, and to craft a shared strategic vision for transforming these spaces.

The dialogue took place at a critical moment: the AU's institutional reforms were underway, and the Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (CEVAWG) had just been adopted and was proceeding toward ratification. These two developments underscored both the opportunities and the persistent obstacles to feminist participation in continental governance. Participants observed that, despite growing recognition of gender equality in AU rhetoric, the system remains dominated by state-centric processes, opaque decision-making, and limited feminist expertise within institutional structures.

Despite these challenges, there is a long herstory of feminist actors in Africa mobilizing, producing advocacy tools and engaging with AU organs and member states, seeking to

influence outcomes on the status of women and human rights in the continent. Examples of such engagement include the key role played by Pan African Women Association (PAWA) in the formation of the AU and in the liberation of Southern Africa from colonialism and apartheid. Additionally, women organized and lobbied for the adoption of the Maputo Protocol and through the Gender is my agenda campaign (GIMAC) continue to play a role in the women peace and security sector. However, despite these contributions, feminist engagement at the AU remains constrained and unacknowledged. The lack of clear and effective systems and structures for engagement with the AU lead to overreliance of individual relational power dynamics often fueled by tokenism further marginalizing feminist organizations.

Building on these reflections, this strand will host a participatory workshop to finalize a concise and practical set of Feminist Principles for Engagement with AU and ACHPR Processes. These principles will distill lessons from the August roundtable into clear standards for ethical advocacy, transparency, and collective accountability. They are envisioned as both a moral framework and an operational guide anchoring feminist organizing in care, solidarity, and shared responsibility while enabling effective coordination across regional networks.

The session will also explore mechanisms for institutionalizing these principles within the African human rights system, ensuring they inform coalition-building, advocacy strategies, and interactions with AU organs. By grounding engagement in feminist ethics and praxis, the initiative aims to reclaim participatory spaces as sites of resistance and transformation, rather than compliance.

The Feminist Principles seek to move beyond symbolic inclusion toward substantive participation where feminist movements do not merely occupy seats at existing tables but actively reshape the agendas, priorities, and power relations that define them.

Strand 2: Feminist Legal Analysis of the AU Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (CEVAWG)

The African Union's adoption of the Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (CEVAWG) in February 2025 marked a historic moment: the first continental treaty exclusively dedicated to eradicating violence against women and girls. Yet, beneath the symbolism of progress lies a deeper crisis of representation, process, and power. CEVAWG was drafted through a largely opaque, state-driven process that marginalised feminist voices and excluded civil society actors who have, for decades, led the struggle against gender-based violence. What could have been a feminist triumph risks becoming a hollow instrument of political symbolism.

A feminist legal analysis reads CEVAWG not as a completed achievement but as a contested legal text that exposes how institutional processes can reproduce the hierarchies they purport to dismantle. The Convention's silences on core issues such as female genital mutilation (FGM), marital rape, child marriage, and intersectionality, alongside its weak articulation of state obligations and enforcement mechanisms, exemplify a broader trend where gender equality is rhetorically affirmed yet normatively diluted. Rather than setting binding standards, CEVAWG relies on discretionary language and minimalist provisions that risk perpetuating the very impunity it seeks to end. In doing so, it transforms commitments to women's rights into aspirational declarations, leaving the structural roots of gendered violence intact. The feminist

legal analysis session will approach CEVAWG as a site of struggle: an arena where feminist interpretation and mobilisation can reclaim its emancipatory potential. Drawing from the September 2025 Public Reading and Strategy Consultation convened by ISLA, Fòs Feminista, and Akina Mama wa Afrika, this session will conduct a reading of a Feminist Analysis of the Convention article by article, tracing how power, patriarchy, and politics shape what the law names and what it omits.

This analysis is not merely textual. It recognises that law is a living field shaped by advocacy, resistance, and interpretation. Feminist scrutiny of CEVAWG therefore becomes a political act and a refusal to allow technocratic processes to eclipse the lived realities of survivors. It seeks to re-centre the voices of African women and girls who have borne the cost of violence, while demanding that states move beyond aspirational rhetoric to concrete, enforceable obligations.

This strand has two objectives: critique and reconstruction. Critique, by exposing the structural and procedural weaknesses that undermine CEVAWG's transformative promise; and reconstruction, by articulating a clear feminist framework for reform that grounds the Convention in accountability, intersectionality, and justice. The session will culminate in the presentation of a Feminist Legal Analysis which includes a roadmap for AU organs and member states to strengthen CEVAWG before ratification, ensuring that it becomes not a token of progress, but a true instrument of liberation.

Strand 3: Mapping Anti-Rights Actors in the African Human Rights System

The work of mapping anti-rights actors within the African human rights system is not merely an exercise in documentation, it is an act of political resistance and analytical reclamation. The African human rights system, long envisioned as a space for advancing the dignity, equality, and autonomy of all persons, is increasingly being co-opted by actors who seek to hollow out its emancipatory potential. Operating under moralised discourses of 'family values', 'cultural authenticity', and 'religious integrity', these actors are reshaping institutional priorities, reframing rights language, and embedding patriarchal and heteronormative interpretations into the very mechanisms meant to safeguard equality and justice.

Feminist lawyering insists on exposing this ideological capture as a crisis of power and interpretation. It challenges the ways in which law and institutions are manipulated to preserve dominance and exclude difference, revealing how the anti-rights movement's appeal to 'Africanness' and 'tradition' functions as a form of epistemic violence, one that erases plural lived realities and subjugates marginalised identities. Through this lens, mapping anti-rights actors becomes a means of tracing how patriarchy, religion, and state power collude within the African Union (AU) and African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) to restrict the political imagination of rights.

This session, therefore, goes beyond identifying organisations and individuals; it interrogates how anti-rights ideologies move through structures of law and policy. It examines their footprint across the AU and ACHPR ecosystem, including the growing number of observer-status applications by groups espousing exclusionary moral frameworks, the orchestration of regional 'trainings' to disseminate anti-feminist legal reasoning, and the cross-body campaigning that promotes regressive instruments such as the so-called 'Family Values Charter' currently gaining traction at the Pan-African Parliament (PAP). These efforts overlap

with treaty reform debates where anti-rights networks seek to water down language on equality, sexual and reproductive health, and gender-based violence, effectively attempting to re-legislate patriarchy into continental norms.

From a feminist standpoint, the mapping process will also foreground how anti-rights mobilisation exploits the structural weaknesses of regional human rights systems. It will trace how these actors leverage procedural entry points such as ACHPR accreditation, participation in AU consultations, and engagement with special mechanisms to cloak themselves in legitimacy, while simultaneously attacking the very notion of universality that underpins human rights law. Feminist lawyering reads this not as a contest over ideology alone, but as a contest over the power to define whose humanity counts in law. The mapping will adopt an intersectional and decolonial methodology, documenting how gender, sexuality, race, class, and religion intersect in the production of anti-rights narratives and influence networks. It will also link the regional with the global, situating African anti-rights activism within transnational funding and religious infrastructures that have historically targeted women's autonomy, LGBTQI+ rights, and sexual and reproductive health and rights. By connecting these dots, the session seeks to reveal how anti-rights actors are not isolated agitators but components of a coordinated political project that weaponizes law to enforce exclusion.

Ultimately, this mapping will serve two feminist ends: exposure and strategy. Exposure, by making visible the invisible architectures of power that sustain the anti-rights agenda; and strategy, by equipping feminist and queer movements with the analytical tools to anticipate, resist, and reframe. The findings will contribute to the development of a regional mapping framework under ISLA's anti-rights portfolio, informing future advocacy, litigation, and knowledge production.

Expected Outputs

- A concise feminist principles document for use by women's rights advocates at ACHPR and AU levels.
- A feminist legal analysis of AU-CEVAWG, focusing on key definitions and state obligations that can be translated into public-facing advocacy.
- A mapping note of anti-rights actors and strategies for counter-engagement.
- Strengthened alliances and co-convening arrangements among feminist networks.
- A post-session dinner huddle to consolidate relationships and plan next steps.

Expected Outcomes

- Strengthened feminist solidarity and collective positioning within the African human rights system.
- Enhanced capacity and coordination of women's rights organizations engaging with ACHPR mechanisms.
- Sharper feminist advocacy on the AUCEVAWG and other regional legal standards.
- A more visible and structured Women's Platform with a clear agenda and principles guiding its engagement.

Conclusion

The 85th Ordinary Session presents a critical opportunity to reposition feminist advocacy within the African human rights system. As the African Union undertakes reforms and new instruments such as CEVANG reshape the legal landscape, it is imperative that women's rights movements speak with clarity, coherence, and conviction. The Women's Platform is both a political and strategic space that asserts the leadership of African feminists in defining the norms, language, and priorities of regional human rights work.

This convening is therefore not a stand-alone event but part of a sustained process to build feminist power and coordination within AU and ACHPR structures. Through its three strands: ethical feminist engagement, legal analysis of CEVANG, and mapping of anti-rights actors — the Platform aims to transform fragmented participation into collective influence.

By grounding advocacy in shared principles and evidence-based analysis, the Women's Platform will contribute to a stronger, more accountable, and feminist regional human rights system. The outcomes of this convening will inform ongoing advocacy in Banjul, Addis Ababa, and beyond, ensuring that the voices and visions of African women and girls remain central to the continent's human rights agenda.