This is Personal! Young African Women's Call to Name the Harm and Share the Power



Remarks delivered by Aya Chebbi, Founder and President of Nalafem, to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW71) Africa Pre-CSW71 Ministerial Segment, African Union Headquarters, 28 October 2026

Merci Madame la Directrice,

Honorables Ministres, Excellences, Mesdames et Messieurs,

Les citoyennes et citoyens africains vous ont confié une lourde responsabilité : porter la voix de notre continent et contribuer à façonner l'avenir de nos femmes et de nos filles.

Aujourd'hui, les jeunes femmes africaines vous demandent d'assumer pleinement cette responsabilité.

Car il s'agit de nos propres vies. Celles des femmes dans cette salle. Celles de vos filles. Celles des femmes qui vous entourent. Celles de millions de femmes et de filles africaines.

Alors oui, c'est personnel.

Nous remercions la Direction Femmes, Genre et Jeunesse de nous avoir donné l'occasion de co-organiser une consultation virtuelle continentale, le 12 octobre 2026, qui a réuni près de 400 jeunes issus de 39 pays africains.

Ces jeunes ne sont pas venus simplement pour témoigner. Ils sont venus avec des solutions, des revendications concrètes et une Déclaration de la Jeunesse articulée autour de huit piliers et de vingt demandes concrètes.

Cette Déclaration n'est pas un agenda parallèle aux priorités de l'Afrique. Elle exprime ces priorités à travers les réalités, les aspirations et l'avenir des jeunes qui vivront avec les conséquences de ces décisions.

Excellencies, young people's first appeal concerns the safety and rights of women and girls. The Pan-African Youth Statement asks you to declare femicide a national and regional emergency, backed by a plan and a budget to end it, and a survivor-centred response. In 2023, Africa recorded the highest number of women and girls killed by intimate partners or family members of any region in the world.

Women and girls are not simply dying. They are being killed. This is a crime.

Excellencies, it was African women in Beijing who raised the issue of the girl child. Thirty-one years later, let us not forget her. She is still discriminated against because she is a girl. In 2026 alone, 4.5 million girls are at risk of undergoing female genital mutilation. Each year, 12 million girls worldwide marry before the age of 18, and Africa accounts for approximately one-third of them.

FGM and child marriage have not gone away. In fact, our gains are being reversed. These practices are returning where funding has stopped. In conflict, displacement

and climate disasters, families facing poverty and insecurity often marry their daughters early, and the most vulnerable girls pay the price.

We cannot speak of economic empowerment without confronting the practices that interrupt girls' childhoods, their education and their futures.

The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, ratified by 54 Member States; the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, ratified by 51 Member States; and the Maputo Protocol, ratified by 46 Member States, are clear about girls' rights. Together, they establish that 18 is the minimum age of marriage, that female genital mutilation must be prohibited, and that we are entitled to our rights without discrimination on the basis of sex.

Excellencies, Africa has already helped establish these important continental standards. This is an opportunity to demonstrate leadership by carrying those commitments forward, not with language so broad that the realities facing girls are no longer visible.

We welcome the 2024 African Union Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy and the call for laws that bring women and girls into the technology sector. Young women want to build Africa's digital future, and they want to be safe in it. But participation and protection must advance together. We cannot celebrate the opportunities of the digital economy while evidence and research show that young women face sextortion, harassment, threats, deepfakes and online abuse that silence their voices.

We must also hold technology companies and platforms accountable. The violence they enable through their policies and algorithms infringes on your sovereignty and on the lives of your women and girls.

We recognise that Member States may hold different views on terminology. But our differences over words must not weaken our collective response to the harm. If we cannot name the harm, we cannot adequately measure it, fund the response, or hold ourselves accountable for ending it.

Whether online or offline, violence against women and girls must be recognised, prevented and addressed.

Excellencies, our second appeal concerns health, education and peace. We share Africa's call for effective health services, for maternal, infant and child health, and for child nutrition in the face of climate change. We ask that these commitments explicitly recognise the distinct needs of adolescent girls and young women, including those with disabilities.

Maternal health cannot be separated from sexual and reproductive health. The young woman who cannot access health information and services before pregnancy is the same young woman that dies in childbirth.

Your Excellencies, education is the one thing you can give anyone that no one can take away. It is what equips a young woman to defend herself. Education is a sacred right for the girl child. Thirty-one years ago, the Beijing Platform for Action named discrimination against girls in education. The language you use at CSW shapes how

girls end up in classrooms, and how women end up in ministries.

We must ensure that the commitments we negotiate keep education visible, not only as a foundation for development, but as a right that shapes girls' choices, their futures and their ability to lead.

On peace and security, an issue that is too often siloed out of CSW. In conflict-affected areas across our continent, women and girls are being abducted, tortured, and subjected to sexual violence and sexual slavery. Their bodies are deliberately used as weapons of war. The youth, peace and security agenda must protect them, hold perpetrators accountable, and include and finance young women's meaningful participation in peacebuilding.

We cannot tell young women and girls to wait for peace before they can live full lives and reach their full potential. Health, education, economic empowerment and leadership must also be provided for girls in conflict and displacement.

Excellencies, our third appeal concerns intergenerational co-leadership. Africa is the youngest continent in the world. Young people are central to our demographic future, our economies and our political life. If there is not a single young person in the rooms where decisions are made, then whose future are we planning for?

The youth statement calls for more than simply naming intergenerational co-leadership. It calls for 35 percent representation of young people under 35 in leadership, national delegations and oversight bodies, including national CSW delegations, with half of them young women.

Young women must be co-leaders, doing more than taking notes.

Three in four young people we consulted said they are either not invited to decision-making or not heard when they are there. We ask that you speak at CSW of women's participation in public and political life, because young women want to vote, stand for office and lead without fear.

Finally, we urge the Africa Group to advocate for global datasets that reflect Africa as one continent. Too often, global datasets place North Africa under the Middle East and North Africa region and the rest of the continent under sub-Saharan Africa.

We need continent-wide data alongside regional data to build a complete picture of our continent and measure our shared progress.

We thank you for negotiating Africa's priorities with the world. Young people ask you to be forward-looking; to deliver a position that speaks to Agenda 2063, that names the realities it intends to change, and that says to young women that 'We see you. Your voices count. Your lives matter. And we will act on it.'

Thank you.