



ISLA at the
87th
Ordinary
Session

AFRICAN COMMISSION
ON HUMAN AND
PEOPLES' RIGHTS

Communiqué

BANJUL, THE GAMBIA

1 MAY 2026

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The Initiative for Strategic Litigation in Africa (ISLA) led and participated in a series of engagements during the 87th Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) in Banjul, The Gambia. Through side events, strategic dialogues and coalition spaces, ISLA advanced feminist legal analysis and strategic litigation approaches while helping shape discussions on accountability, regional human rights standards, civic space and emerging developments affecting the African human rights system.

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Bilateral Meetings in The Gambia

A. Female Lawyers Association of The Gambia (FLAG)

On the sidelines of the 87th Ordinary Session, ISLA held a bilateral meeting with the Female Lawyers Association of The Gambia (FLAG) to strengthen collaboration on feminist strategic litigation and institutional capacity building. Discussions focused on FLAG's work in legal aid, litigation, public education and legal reform, particularly in advancing the rights of women and children in The Gambia. FLAG also shared ongoing efforts to develop a more structured strategic litigation framework, including systems for case identification, legal coordination

and feminist legal resources. The meeting explored opportunities for collaboration through ISLA's Feminist Litigation Network (FLN), knowledge exchange and support for strategic litigation systems. Participants also reflected on the growing influence of anti-rights narratives in The Gambia and emphasised the need for locally grounded responses that remain firmly anchored in women's rights and equality.



B. Women's Association for Victims' Empowerment (WAVE)

ISLA also held a strategic engagement with the Women's Association for Victims' Empowerment (WAVE-Gambia) to exchange institutional priorities and explore areas for collaboration on women's rights and accountability. Discussions highlighted WAVE's work supporting victims and survivors of human rights violations, including survivors of gender-based violence, torture and enforced disappearance, as well as its advocacy

on transitional justice implementation, psychosocial support and torture prevention. The team reflected on the gendered dimensions of transitional justice in The Gambia, including the marginalisation of sexual and gender-based violence within accountability processes and the need for survivor-centred approaches to justice and reparations. The engagement also explored opportunities for collaboration on strategic litigation, movement building, regional advocacy and responses to growing anti-rights mobilisation within African human rights spaces.



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Stakeholder Dialogue on the African Union Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls

Women's rights organisations including Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA Network), ISLA, Medica Liberia, African Feminist Research Initiative for Advocacy and Development, Mweri, Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, Centre de Développement et de la Promotion de la Femme, PRODEF asbl, Youth for Gender Equality Foundation, Caucus des Femmes Leaders pour la Promotion de la Parité en Centrafrique, MPower Mauritius, and members of the #PauseforPurpose Campaign, coconvened a side event under the Women's Platform during the 87th Ordinary Session of the ACHPR.

The dialogue served as a platform for discussion and collective reflection on AUCEVAWG's drafting process, legal framework, and its wider implications for

the protection of women's rights within the African human rights system. Presentations examined the political and institutional context surrounding the Convention, interrogated concerns about transparency and participation, and highlighted the limited involvement of feminist movements and civil society actors during drafting. Participants reflected on how such procedural shortcomings may affect the legitimacy, interpretation, and longterm effectiveness of regional instruments.

Substantive concerns were also raised, including ambiguities around state obligations, fragmented treaty architecture, and gaps in addressing harmful practices, femicide, conflictrelated sexual violence, and violence in digital spaces. ISLA's analysis underscored that while AUCEVAWG represents an important political commitment, aspects of its framework risk weakening existing protections through vague obligations, insufficient accountability measures, and inconsistencies with established regional standards.

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Discussions further explored the relationship between AUCEVAWG and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), emphasising the principle of nonregression and the need to ensure that new instruments reinforce rather than dilute existing protections. Practical challenges relating to implementation were also highlighted, including judicial capacity, accountability structures, and the importance of survivorcentred responses in conflict and postconflict contexts.

The dialogue concluded with a renewed call for coalition building, strategic engagement, and sustained advocacy through the #PauseforPurpose Campaign

and other movement spaces. Participants reaffirmed that regional instruments addressing violence against women and girls must remain survivorcentred, rightsbased, and responsive to the lived realities of women and girls across the continent.

To learn more, visit <https://aucevawg.org>



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Litigants Group General Meeting

The Litigants Group held its annual convening, bringing together civil society organisations and legal practitioners engaged in litigation and advocacy before the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. The meeting created space for participants to reflect on emerging jurisprudential developments, discuss procedural and institutional reforms, and share updates on ongoing initiatives within the Group. Discussions also included progress and priorities from key workstreams, including the Arusha Initiative, the Implementation Working Group and the Article 59 Campaign as well as persistent challenges relating to the implementation of ACHPR decisions.

ISLA presented updates on the Implementation Working Group's work, including engagement with the ACHPR's implementation unit, the development of an implementation reporting template and efforts to raise implementation gaps before the Working Group on Communications. Participants reflected on the need for case information templates, implementation hearings, stronger mechanisms for litigants

to report on state compliance and the creation of a Victim's Compensation Fund supported through contributions from state parties, donor organisations and well-wishers.

The meeting also considered ongoing advocacy around Article 59 of the African Charter and the need for a more progressive interpretation of confidentiality procedures within the ACHPR's work. Participants reflected on how restrictive approaches to confidentiality affect transparency, public accountability and the ability of litigants and communities to meaningfully engage with the communications procedure.

The Litigants Group also engaged with a blueprint document presented by ISLA on litigating sexual and gender minority cases before the African human rights system. Discussions reflected on institutional resistance, political backlash, and the need for incremental, carefully framed and movement-led litigation strategies. Participants emphasised the importance of documentation, coalition building, defensive litigation and stronger regional litigation databases.

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Litigants Group General Meeting

This meeting will bring together members of the Litigants Group to share updates on ACHPR cases and decisions, strengthen understanding of the Commission's Rules of Procedure, and facilitate exchange on challenges and strategic priorities to improve the effectiveness of the communications procedure.

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Time : 09:00 – 14:00 GMT
Venue: Centre international de conférences



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Interrogating the Draft African Charter on Family, Sovereignty and Values

ISLA, together with partner organisations including the Centre for Reproductive Rights, Beijing+30 Platform, Equality Now, FEMNET, CHEVS, Musawah, SIHA Network and AfricanDefenders, convened a hybrid side event titled Interrogating the Draft African Charter on Family, Sovereignty and Values. The event provided a platform for critical engagement and collective reflection on the proposed Charter's legal architecture, political origins and potential implications for the African human rights system.

Presentations explored the broader political context surrounding the Draft Charter, provided article-by-article legal analysis, and examined emerging trends in lawfare, strategic litigation and family law narratives across the continent. ISLA's

analysis underscored concerns that, while the Draft Charter adopts the language of rights, it may simultaneously narrow protections through restrictive definitions of family, the framing of sovereignty as a shield from accountability, and the elevation of cultural and religious narratives as organising legal principles.

Participants further highlighted the ways in which anti-rights actors are increasingly utilising courts, constitutional interpretation and policy processes to challenge sexual and reproductive health and rights, comprehensive sexuality education, adolescent healthcare and broader equality protections. It was noted that, even in draft form, the proposed Charter appears to be shaping legal and policy discourse in certain contexts.

The side event concluded with a renewed call for sustained collective action, strategic engagement and strengthened collaboration to safeguard existing African human rights frameworks. Participants reaffirmed that debates concerning family,

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identity, sovereignty and values must not be instrumentalised to weaken protections or reverse gains secured through decades of African feminist legal and political struggle.



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Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders

ISLA, together with other Civil Society Organisations, issued a joint statement to reinstate a cancelled side event titled *“Ending the Silence on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders in Western Sahara”* scheduled for 12 May. Despite prior booking and confirmation, organisers were informed late on 11 May that the venue would not host the event.

This unilateral cancellation, without justification, raised concerns of targeted silencing of Sahrawi defenders. The signatories, which include African, European, and international organisations, stressed that such actions undermine the ACHPR’s commitment to openness and independence and urged the ACHPR to take urgent steps to ensure the meaningful participation and safety of Sahrawi defenders during the session.

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CSOs Joint Submission on the ACHPR Draft Declaration on Human Rights Defenders

On 13 May 2026, ISLA, together with a broad coalition of civil society organisations working to defend human rights across Africa, convened a meeting on the sidelines of the ACHPR 87th session to coordinate a collective response to the Commission's Draft Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. During the meeting, participating organisations agreed to prepare and submit a joint response to the draft declaration by 20 May 2026.

Subsequently, ISLA, together with a coalition of regional and international human rights organisations, submitted a comprehensive joint response to the African Commission's Draft Declaration on the Promotion and Protection of the Role of Human and Peoples' Rights Defenders in Africa.

While welcoming the Commission's initiative to strengthen recognition and protection of defenders, the submission reflected collective concerns regarding provisions that may weaken existing

human rights standards, narrow civic space or expose defenders to heightened risks. The submission advanced practical and rights-based recommendations aimed at ensuring that the proposed Declaration remains inclusive, protective and responsive to the lived realities of human rights defenders across the continent.

The submission further raised concerns regarding the conditional framing of human rights defenders, the broad reliance on undefined concepts such as "African values" and "morality", and the potential implications these approaches may have for dissent, protest movements, feminist organising, environmental defenders, journalists and defenders working on issues relating to sexual orientation and gender identity. It also highlighted concerns regarding the broader trend of restrictive and state-centric approaches emerging within regional normative frameworks and called for a more inclusive and consultative drafting process capable of strengthening the legitimacy and protective value of the proposed Declaration and called for the establishment of an ad hoc working group to revise the draft Declaration.

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Conclusion

During the 87th Ordinary Session of the ACHPR, ISLA advanced feminist legal analysis, strategic litigation, coalition building and regional engagement across multiple spaces, including bilateral meetings, the AU-CEVAWG stakeholder dialogue, the Litigants Group General Meeting, and engagements on emerging regional instruments and human rights developments.

The Session also highlighted broader concerns relating to shrinking civic space, normative regression and the protection of human rights defenders. From solidarity efforts concerning Sahrawi defenders to engagement with the Draft Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, ISLA and its partners responded through collective advocacy and rights-based interventions aimed at strengthening protections and safeguarding the integrity of regional human rights standards.

ISLA's participation reaffirmed the importance of sustained collaboration, evidence-based advocacy and movement solidarity in strengthening and protecting the African human rights system.

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