



Empowering Young Persons with Disabilities leadership in continental policy spaces through GIMAC Youth Advocacy Training and AU Policy Engagement (pre-summit consultations).

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia 6-9th February 2026



Funded by
the European Union





1. Introduction

Disabled Women in Africa (DIWA), with funding from Sonke Gender Justice and with support from the UN Women ACT Programme funded by the European Union, supported the participation of three young persons with disabilities from Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia in the Gender Is My Agenda Campaign (GIMAC) Youth Training and Pre-Summit Consultations held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The participation in the 15th GIMAC Youth Advocacy Training was designed to equip young leaders with the knowledge, skills, and tools to effectively champion the African Union Water Agenda, gender equality, and the Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystems (WEFE) Nexus.

The training was delivered through a hybrid format, combining both virtual and in-person learning to ensure accessibility and broader participation. The first two days of the training were conducted online, allowing participants to engage in foundational sessions on African Union governance structures, gender-responsive water governance, youth

advocacy strategies, and the importance of intersectional approaches to sustainable development. These virtual sessions provided participants with critical background knowledge and prepared them for deeper engagement during the in-person consultations.

Day One of the in-person component of the 15th GIMAC Youth Advocacy Training commenced on 26 January 2026 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, marking the transition to intensive, face-to-face capacity-building and policy engagement sessions. The in-person training continued over two days and provided participants with opportunities to engage directly with African Union stakeholders, civil society leaders, and fellow youth advocates. This phase focused on strengthening advocacy skills, enhancing leadership capacity, and preparing participants to effectively contribute to the GIMAC Pre-Summit Consultative Meeting and continental policy discussions.

The training also strengthened participants' understanding of the African Union Theme of the Year and its alignment with Africa's Water Vision 2063 and Agenda 2063 priorities. According to the GIMAC Outcome Statement, participants were convened to advance gender-responsive water and sanitation policies for sustainable development in Africa and to ensure that youth, women, and marginalized groups—including persons with disabilities—are recognized as key actors in shaping inclusive water governance and policy frameworks.

Through this hybrid training model, the supported young leaders enhanced their capacity to engage in policy dialogue, contribute to advocacy processes, and champion disability-inclusive, gender-responsive, and youth-led approaches to water governance, climate resilience, and sustainable development at continental and national levels.



2 Project Context and Strategic Relevance

This initiative was implemented with financial support from Sonke Gender Justice under the UN Women ACT Programme, funded by the European Union. The programme aims to strengthen gender equality movements, promote inclusive governance, and enhance the participation and leadership of marginalized groups, including women and young persons with disabilities, in policy and decision-making processes.

Supporting young persons with disabilities to participate in the GIMAC Youth Training and Pre-Summit Consultations aligns with the programme's objectives of strengthening inclusive feminist movements and ensuring that no one is left behind in advancing gender equality and sustainable development. It also contributes to building a pipeline of young disability rights leaders capable of influencing continental and national policy processes.

This engagement further reinforces DIWA's commitment to strengthening intersectional feminist leadership and advancing the meaningful participation of young persons with disabilities within African Union structures and civil society platforms.



3. Purpose of the Initiative

The purpose of supporting the participation of young persons with disabilities was to strengthen their leadership capacity, enhance their understanding of African Union processes, and ensure their meaningful participation in continental advocacy platforms.

Specifically, the initiative aimed to:

- Strengthen the leadership and advocacy capacity of young persons with disabilities;
- Support their meaningful participation in GIMAC youth training and consultations;
- Amplify the voices and lived experiences of young persons with disabilities in continental gender and youth discourse;
- Promote disability inclusion within youth and feminist advocacy spaces;
- Strengthen youth engagement in African Union policy and governance processes.

DIWA supported the participation of three young persons with disabilities from:

- Botswana

- Zimbabwe
- Ethiopia

These young leaders represented emerging disability rights advocates and contributed to strengthening youth representation within continental advocacy platforms.

6. Youth Leadership Outcomes, Advocacy Contributions, and Policy Influence

Participation in the 15th GIMAC Youth Advocacy Training and Pre-Summit Consultations resulted in significant leadership, advocacy, and policy engagement outcomes for the three young persons with disabilities supported by Disabled Women in Africa (DIWA). The initiative strengthened their capacity to engage confidently in continental policy discussions and contribute meaningfully to advocacy processes aligned with the African Union's Agenda 2063 and Africa's Water Vision 2063.

Leadership and Capacity Outcomes

Through both the virtual and in-person training sessions, participants enhanced their understanding of African Union governance systems, youth advocacy strategies, and gender-responsive water governance frameworks. They developed practical skills in policy analysis, strategic communication, and advocacy engagement, enabling them to articulate the lived experiences and priorities of young persons with disabilities in continental forums.

The training strengthened their confidence and positioned them as emerging disability rights leaders capable of influencing policy processes at national, regional, and continental levels. Participants also established strategic networks with youth leaders, feminist organizations, and civil society actors, creating opportunities for continued collaboration and collective advocacy beyond the GIMAC process.

Participation in the consultations further enabled the supported youth to move beyond symbolic representation and actively engage as contributors to policy dialogue, reinforcing their role as leaders within the disability and youth movements.

7. Key Issues Raised by Young Persons with Disabilities During the Consultations

During the GIMAC Youth Advocacy Training and Pre-Summit Consultations, the supported youth with disabilities actively contributed to plenary and breakout discussions, raising critical issues affecting young persons with disabilities, particularly young women with disabilities, in relation to water governance, gender equality, and sustainable development.

Key issues raised included:

1. Accessibility of Water and Sanitation Infrastructure

Participants emphasized that water and sanitation infrastructure across many African countries remains inaccessible to persons with disabilities. They highlighted the need for universal design standards to ensure that water points, sanitation facilities, and hygiene infrastructure are accessible, safe, and inclusive.

They further stressed that inaccessible infrastructure limits independence, dignity, health, and participation in education, livelihoods, and community life.

2 Meaningful Participation and Leadership of Young Persons with Disabilities

Participants highlighted the lack of institutionalized mechanisms to ensure meaningful participation of young persons with disabilities in water governance and policy decision-making processes.

They emphasized that young persons with disabilities are often excluded from leadership platforms and consultations and called for structured mechanisms to ensure their representation in decision-making bodies, advisory platforms, and governance structures.

3. Financing and Resourcing of Disability-Led and Youth-Led Organizations

Participants raised concerns about the lack of predictable and sustainable financing for youth-led and disability-led organizations, which limits their ability to engage in advocacy, policy monitoring, and programme implementation.

They emphasized the need for dedicated and ring-fenced funding to support youth leadership, disability inclusion, and gender equality initiatives.

4. Safety, Dignity, and Gender-Based Violence Risks

Participants highlighted that young women with disabilities face increased risks of gender-based violence, harassment, and safety threats when accessing water and sanitation facilities, particularly in rural and underserved areas.

They emphasized the importance of integrating safety, dignity, and gender-responsive measures into water governance and infrastructure planning.

5. Data, Evidence, and Accountability

Participants emphasized the lack of disability-disaggregated data in water governance and development planning, which contributes to invisibility and exclusion.

They called for improved data collection, monitoring, and accountability mechanisms to track progress on disability inclusion.

6. Reflection of Youth Disability Advocacy in the Final GIMAC Outcome Statement

The issues raised by the supported young persons with disabilities were reflected in the final GIMAC Outcome Statement, demonstrating the impact and effectiveness of their participation in influencing continental advocacy positions.

The Outcome Statement explicitly calls for:

- Disability-inclusive indicators and accountability mechanisms within water and sanitation policies;
- Institutionalized leadership and participation of women and youth in water governance structures;
- Gender-responsive and inclusive financing aligned with Africa's Water Vision 2063;
- Collection and use of disaggregated data to inform inclusive policy development;
- Safe, accessible, and inclusive water and sanitation infrastructure that advances dignity and equity.

Furthermore, the GIMAC Outcome Statement emphasizes the importance of ensuring that marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities, are meaningfully included in planning, budgeting, and implementation processes, and calls for accountability frameworks that explicitly integrate disability inclusion within continental water governance strategies.

These reflections demonstrate that the contributions of young persons with disabilities were successfully integrated into the final advocacy framework, strengthening disability inclusion within continental gender and water governance discourse.

7. Strategic Impact of Youth Participation

The participation of young persons with disabilities contributed to strengthening disability inclusion within youth-led continental advocacy processes and ensured that their lived experiences informed policy dialogue and outcome documents.

This engagement:

- Strengthened the leadership pipeline of young disability rights advocates;
- Increased visibility of youth with disabilities within African Union-related processes;
- Contributed to shaping disability-inclusive advocacy priorities;
- Strengthened youth engagement in gender equality and water governance processes;
- Advanced the objectives of Sonke Gender Justice and the UN Women ACT Programme in strengthening inclusive feminist leadership.

The initiative represents a critical step in ensuring that young persons with disabilities are not only present but actively shaping Africa's policy future.

Profiles of Supported Young Leaders with Disabilities

Young Leader from Botswana (Rowena Dinah koloi)

The young participant with low visual impairment Rowena Dinah koloi from Botswana demonstrated strong leadership potential and active engagement throughout both the virtual and in-person components of the 15th GIMAC Youth Advocacy Training. During the consultations, she contributed to discussions on inclusive water governance and emphasized the need for accessible sanitation infrastructure and meaningful participation of young persons with disabilities in national water committees.

Her contributions reflected lived experiences from the Botswana context, particularly highlighting rural access challenges and the importance of disability-inclusive policy implementation. Through this engagement, the participant strengthened her advocacy skills and expressed commitment to engaging national stakeholders upon return, particularly in advancing youth and disability inclusion in water and climate governance processes.



Young Leader from Zimbabwe (Sukoluhle Mhlanga)

The young participant with physical disability Sukoluhle Mhlanga from Zimbabwe actively engaged in discussions related to gender-responsive water governance and the intersection between disability, youth leadership, and economic empowerment. She highlighted the link between inaccessible water infrastructure and the economic marginalization of young women with disabilities, particularly in rural communities.

During breakout sessions, the participant raised the need for dedicated financing and structured representation of young persons with disabilities in governance and advisory platforms. Her engagement demonstrated growing confidence in policy articulation and strengthened her ability to connect national realities with continental frameworks such as Africa's Water Vision 2063 and Agenda 2063.

The training enhanced Her capacity to strategically frame disability inclusion within broader gender and climate justice discussions.



Young Leader from Ethiopia (Martha Zenebe)

The young participant with Physical Disability Martha Zenebe from Ethiopia played a critical role during in-person consultations in Addis Ababa by emphasizing accessibility, safety, and accountability within water and sanitation systems. She raised concerns about the heightened risks faced by young women with disabilities in accessing water services, including exposure to gender-based violence and exclusion from decision-making processes.

Her contributions were particularly impactful during discussions on governance and accountability, where she advocated for disability-disaggregated data and measurable indicators within water policies. Participation in the training strengthened her policy literacy and positioned her as an emerging advocate capable of engaging both national and continental platforms.

