

Silencing a Generation:

Youth power, the Milk Tea Alliance and the rise of age-gating laws in Asia-Pacific

June 2026



Submission to the Call for input by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association for the UNGA 81st Thematic Report on ***“Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association Youth Activism Report: Gen-Z Activism and the Future of Civic Space”***





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Submission by

Manushya Foundation



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Introduction

Every generation is shaped by its defining crisis. If the Baby boomer generation were forged by the remnants of the Second World War, Gen X by the fall of the Soviet Union, Millennials by the war on terror and the Arab Spring, Gen Z and Gen Alpha have inherited a world on the brink of an ecological collapse, information warfare, AI disruption and a mental health crisis with no infrastructure to meet it.

The rise of age-gating policies and laws around the world threatens not only the political participation of young people but also their expression and their capacity to dream of a world beyond what little remains. We at Manushya Foundation have been ringing the alarmⁱ ever since the first domino fell in Australiaⁱⁱ last year, which was later followed by other States such as the Philippines and Thailandⁱⁱⁱ that took the bait that a TikTok algorithm is the most devastating source of young people's despair. We welcome the ability to provide input to the UNSR on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association's thematic report and hope that it will not become another document that acknowledges the crisis, recommends further study and changes nothing.

1. Age-Gating Laws: Excluding a Generation from Civic Space

Following Australia's social media ban in 2025^{iv}, several Asian countries including Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines began introducing their own age-gating legislation, treating the passage of the law in Australia as a blueprint for digital repression. Whilst it is true that the introduction of age-gating policies did not arrive without a precedent. The abundance of cyberbullying, hate speech and online abuse cases are real and well-documented violations that disproportionately affect young people. We do not deny these facts, but what we strongly dispute is the repeated invocation of these harms as justification for paternalistic policies that silence young people rather than protect them. The struggles of young people are structurally rooted in poverty, discrimination, a broken education system and an economy engineered to concentrate wealth at the upper 1% whilst leaving entire generations with nothing to inherit but debt and a burning planet. This is a generation that has refused to look away. Gen Z and the succeeding generations are on the frontlines of the struggle for justice in Palestine,^v demanding that the world reckon with climate collapse,^{vi} and rejecting the logic of a capitalism that has failed them at every turn.^{vii} Age-gating policies are not designed to protect that generation but the status quo. **Age-gating is anti-poor.** The children who have the least are being asked to pay the price for a half-baked police designed with someone else's child in mind. The concept of the 'innocent child' is never extended to poor, migrant, racialised minorities whose whole identities have always been met with injustice. The 'innocent' child is a description reserved for children of the right class, the right background, the right postcode, the right skin colour, the right family bank account, the right school and sometimes, the right

surname. As for the rest, the government has only offered cages,^{viii} bullets, incarceration and death. It is enraging to watch the same states that position themselves as guardians of childhood online jail minors,^{ix} lock migrant children in cages,^x and kill teenagers^{xi} in the name of so-called law and order. The carceral violence inflicted on working class and racialised young people rarely reaches policy debates. And when young people take to the streets to force it onto the agenda, they are met with guns.

2. Youth Activism Under Attack: Repression, Resistance, and Regional Solidarity in Asia

2.1. Treating Youth as a Threat: Criminalisation, Violence and Digital Repression

In **Thailand**, we have seen how laws such as sedition, lèse-majesté, defamation and computer crime acts^{xii} are weaponised against young Thais^{xiii} who dare to demand accountability. When they took to the streets in 2020 demanding reform, they were confronted with mass arrests, alongside coordinated disinformation campaigns^{xiv} and creation of sock puppet accounts to discredit movement leaders. Between November 2020 and May 2024, at least 272 individuals including 20 minors were charged under Article 112 of Thailand's Criminal Code.^{xv} Amongst them was *Netiporn 'Bung' Sanesangkhom* who died in pre-trial detention on 14 May 2024 after conducting a hunger strike to demand judicial reform. She was charged under Article 112 in connection with a public opinion poll about royal motorcades.^{xvi}

In the **Philippines**, young people are being red-tagged^{xvii} to silence and criminalise student movements related to women, LGBTIQ+ and Indigenous peoples. The case of *Hailey Picayo*,^{xviii} a 21-year-old activist, illustrates this repression clearly. She was accused by the Philippine military of being a terrorist whilst she was investigating a case in which security forces were accused of killing a minor. The Philippine government has also turned Facebook into an instrument of state harassment to dox, threaten and isolate young activists.^{xix}

In neighbouring **Indonesia**, youth-led protests against parliamentary corruption in August 2025 were met with tear gas, rubber bullets, and the deaths of at least 10 people, with over 3,000 detained.^{xx} On 28 August 2025, 21-year-old motorcycle taxi driver *Affan Kurniawan* was killed^{xxi} after being struck by an armoured police vehicle during a demonstration in Jakarta. His death, captured on video and widely circulated online, became a symbol of police brutality and the excessive use of force against civilians. Rather than address the demands of protesters, government officials sought to delegitimise the movement by portraying it as being orchestrated by foreign actors, despite the protests emerging from widespread public frustration with corruption and political impunity. The Indonesian case illustrates a familiar pattern across the region: when young people mobilise to demand accountability, states frequently respond not with dialogue, but with repression, disinformation and violence.^{xxii}

Since the military coup in **Myanmar** of February 2021, the junta has waged a systematic campaign of terror against an entire generation that refused to accept the theft of their democracy^{xxiii}. 19-year-old *Ma Kyal Sin (Angel)*^{xxiv} was shot in the head by security forces whilst protesting the military coup in March 2021, her grave later dug up and filled with cement by the junta in an attempt to prevent her from becoming a martyr. Further, the military has weaponised internet shutdowns and social media blackouts as instruments of war, cutting off young people from each other and from the world precisely when solidarity mattered most.

Further, we have witnessed how a sweeping social media ban in **Nepal** was imposed days before a Gen Z protest in September 2025.^{xxv} Four days later, thousands of young Nepalis took to the streets, which was received by lethal force, leaving at least 76 people dead. Amongst them was 17-year-old *Shreeyam*

Chaulagain^{xxvi} who was shot in the head whilst walking away from parliament with his hands raised. The Nepal case highlights the deep connection between social media bans and the violent suppression of youth civic participation.

2.2. Building New Civic Spaces: The Milk Tea Alliance and Regional Youth Solidarity

Yet despite these efforts to criminalise, surveil and silence youth movements, young people across Asia have continued to develop new forms of resistance and solidarity that transcend national borders. The **Milk Tea Alliance** (MTA)^{xxvii} a leaderless, borderless network of young activists across Asia, became a lifeline for young people in Southeast Asia. The MTA has demonstrated precisely why attempts to restrict young people's access to digital spaces threaten the future of civic participation itself. What began in 2020 as a hashtag *#MilkTeaAlliance* rapidly evolved into a decentralised, borderless and leaderless movement connecting young activists across Thailand, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Myanmar, Indonesia, the Philippines and beyond. More than a youth-led movement^{xxviii}, the MTA became a transnational network of democratic solidarity that enabled young people to share information, mobilise support, exchange tactics, document abuses and build collective resistance against authoritarianism. It transformed online spaces into civic spaces, proving that digital platforms are not merely tools of communication but essential sites of political participation and organisation. The MTA demonstrated that solidarity can transcend borders, languages and cultures, uniting diverse communities around shared commitments to democracy, freedom of expression, accountability and human rights. Through initiatives such as regional dialogues, online campaigns and cross-border advocacy, young people created their own mechanisms of cooperation rather than waiting for institutions to 'empower' them.^{xxix} The MTA therefore represents exactly the type of decentralised, digitally native movement that age-gating laws threaten to undermine.

The Milk Tea Alliance is not the only example of how young people are reimagining political participation in the digital age. Across Asia, Gen Z activists are increasingly drawing on popular culture and digital communities to build collective identities and mobilise resistance. In Indonesia, Madagascar, the Philippines and Nepal, young protesters have adopted the **One Piece Manga Flag** as a symbol of resistance and liberation.^{xxx} Far from signalling political disengagement, these cultural references demonstrate how young people are creating new, accessible and transnational forms of civic participation.^{xxxi} What some dismiss as internet culture has become a powerful language of solidarity, identity and collective action, reinforcing the importance of protecting digital spaces as sites of freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association.^{xxxi} By restricting young people's access to the very spaces where such movements emerge and flourish, age-gating policies risk dismantling the civic infrastructure through which a generation organises, mobilises and exercises its fundamental rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association.

All the cases presented in our submission are not isolated incidents. They reveal recurring patterns visible across political systems, regimes and geographical contexts. From dictatorships to so-called democracies, governments have increasingly reached for the same playbook that treats youth dissent as a threat rather than a democratic contribution. Young activists are surveilled, red-tagged, prosecuted, detained, injured and killed for exercising their fundamental rights. Yet as movements such as the Milk Tea Alliance

demonstrate, young people continue to build new forms of solidarity and resistance that transcend borders and challenge authoritarianism. It is precisely these decentralised and digitally native forms of organising that governments now seek to undermine. Age-gating laws represent the latest addition to this arsenal of repression, seeking to remove an entire generation from the digital spaces where they organise, mobilise and exercise their rights under the pretence of protecting them.

3. Beyond Tokenism to Protection & Power: Why the United Nations Must Reimagine Youth Leadership

We would like the UNGA-81st thematic report on 'Gen Z activism and the future of civic space' to go straight to the point. Let us stop chasing each other in a labyrinth of uncertainty and bureaucracy by insisting on answering the question on how to better include young people in the systems that are failing them. This question presupposes that the systems young people are fighting against are worth being included in. That somehow a seat at the table of ecological collapse, racialised capitalism, and a Security Council paralysed by the veto powers of the very states (and their allies) perpetuating these crises is something to be aspired to. Inclusion and transformation are two different terms. We are interested in being honest about which one we are actually pursuing. Diversity and inclusion means nothing without actual change; otherwise, we are just making an oppressive system palatable.

3.1. Beyond Tokenism & Elitism

It is time for the United Nations to reckon with its own complicity. The youth delegates that the UN invites to Geneva and New York are permitted to observe but not decide. And even then, they are not representative of the lives on the ground. They are the lucky ones who could fund their own travels, are well-connected, fluent in the language of international institutions and hold the right passport. Youth participation is treated as decorations, just so the organisation can put into their annual reports that they did their due diligence by consulting young people. **If age is truly the disqualifying factor, such as whether young people are genuinely considered too inexperienced or too emotional to hold decision-making power, then someone must explain why the world is currently being run by octogenarians^{xxxiii} who will not live to face the consequences of a single decision they make.**

3.2. The Battle Has Moved Online: Why the UN Must Take a Stand Against Age-Gating

The United Nations needs to take a proactive approach and not sit on the fence when it comes to dealing with issues related to digital rights. Just because there are States that have already laid down the foundation of the age-gating laws does not mean that the battle is over. What it means instead for us is that the battle has moved, and the UN must move with it. The OHCHR's own guidance on children's online safety,^{xxxiv} whilst valuable in several respects, illustrates precisely the danger of hedged positions. We cannot leave any room for age verification systems and age-based restrictions no matter how 'targeted' and 'safeguarded' they may be. We at Manushya Foundation refuse a framework that inadvertently hands governments a human rights-launders justification for the very policies being used to suppress youth civic participation. As we outlined in our Statement on Age-Gating, we refuse age-gating without

reservations and push back on the creeping defeatism within the civil society space, and now the UN that treats the passage of the Age-gating law in Australia as an attestation of their inevitability.^{xxxv}

Conditional endorsement of age-restriction frameworks such as OHCHR's guidance, however carefully worded they may be, will be selectively quoted and used by governments to legitimise the next crackdown on dissent. The UN must be unequivocal in its stance that blanket restrictions on young people's access to digital space by itself are incompatible with the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association. There is no such thing as a 'rights-compliant' age-gating law that seeks to silence a whole generation and the next.

Meaningful youth political participation cannot be delivered through consultative forums, token youth councils or symbolic appointments such as the UN Youth Envoy. The world needs a binding, funded and enforceable mechanism that transfers real decision-making power to young people, particularly those from working class, racialised and Indigenous backgrounds who are most affected by the policies being made without them.

3.3. UN Cybercrime Treaty and Transnational Repression

Even at the international level, youth civic participation is being threatened. In fact, the UN itself became a site of contestation when the Cybercrime Treaty passed^{xxxvi}, representing one of the most dangerous developments in global digital governance in recent years. For young activists, the UN Cybercrime Treaty grants states broad powers that enables them to surveil via broad data preservation and access powers. The absence of robust human rights frameworks to protect the misuse of these powers against marginalised people is a gap that repressive governments are prepared to exploit. The Treaty hands governments a weapon with a UN stamp that opens doors for transnational repression and we have seen this in action when the governments of Thailand and Vietnam pledged that neither country would allow its territory to be used for political activities against the other, and committed to strengthening extradition cooperation to suppress transnational dissent.^{xxxvii}

This is how transnational repression works. Governments are using border laws and extradition framework to silence dissent that has escaped their reach. The UN Cybercrime Treaty provides it with an international legal cover that not only allows but also encourages a state to surveil, and identify any activist who flees and builds solidarity across borders, with a stamp of UN flag.

4. Private Sector and Tech Sovereignty fuelling Digital Repression

And then there is the private sector, the elephant in the room, which the UN has repeatedly treated as partners for change.^{xxxviii} This is the same private sector that has the audacity to market itself as an ally of young people whilst consistently lining their own pockets at the expense of children's lives. In April 2026, an inquest in the United Kingdom heard that 16-year-old Luca Cella Walker^{xxxix} had asked ChatGPT for the most effective way to end his life on a railway line. OpenAI's response was a press statement about improved training. This is the industry that wants to be trusted with the civic lives, the political futures,

and the mental health of an entire generation. This is the industry that lobbies against regulation^{xi} and fights transparency requirements. Rather than building protections, Big Tech has turned the debate^{xli} into a turf war,^{xlii} wherein each company lobbies furiously to ensure accountability lands on someone else. These companies built their fortunes on the backs of a generation they have consistently failed to protect. And for that, they have to pay for the harm they have caused.

Parallel to this discussion is the desire of States to move beyond Silicon Valley's technological dominance. **Whilst commendable in theory, it is increasingly being weaponised for localised surveillance, under the noble banner of sovereignty--as seen in the case of India.**^{xliii} Having local technology and storing data locally do not necessarily make it any safer, if it means that states will no longer need to negotiate with anyone to access it. And this is why child protection legislation must be scrutinised within this broader context. Age verification systems and data localisation requirements all expand the infrastructure of state reach into digital life.

5. Recommendations

This submission is a demand, from Manushya Foundation, from the young people whose stories have filled these pages and from every generation that will inherit what we leave behind.

5.1. On Age-gating policies

The United Nations must:

1. Issue an equivocal statement that blanket restrictions on young people's access to digital spaces are **incompatible** with the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association;
2. Revise OHCHR's guidance on children's online safety to remove all conditional endorsement of age-restriction frameworks that can be selectively quoted by governments to legitimise civic repression;
3. Ensure future guidance on children's safety contains NO conditional endorsement of any policies that restrict children's political participation.

Member States must:

4. Immediately repeal all blanket social media bans and age-gating legislation that restrict young people's access to digital civic space, recognising that such laws are incompatible with the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association;
5. Refrain from treating Australia's social media ban as a legislative blueprint and resist regional pressure to introduce copycat age-gating measures;
6. Address the root causes of online harm through platform accountability legislation rather than blanket exclusion of young people from digital space.

5.2. On Criminalisation of and Death of Youth

The United Nations must:

7. Establish a dedicated monitoring mechanism for the criminalisation of youth dissent globally, with mandatory reporting obligations for Member States;
8. Recognise leaderless, decentralised and digitally native youth movements as legitimate expression of rights to freedom of assembly and association, entitled to the full protection of ICCPR.

Member States must:

9. Immediately and unconditionally repeal all laws used to criminalise youth dissent, including lèse-majesté, sedition, computer crime acts and anti-terror legislation that have been demonstrably weaponised against young activists, protesters, and human rights defenders;
10. Release all youth activists currently detained under such charges, including those held in pre-trial detention, and drop all pending prosecutions;
11. Establish independent, transparent and time-bound investigations into all instances of lethal force used against young protesters in all contexts where security forces have killed or injured young people exercising their right to peaceful assembly;
12. Enact immediate legal prohibitions on red-tagging, enforced disappearances, and the use of social media platforms by state actors to harass, surveil, and isolate young activists;
13. Guarantee the right to legal representation for all young activists facing prosecution, with specific protections for those under 18;
14. Cease all internet shutdowns and social media blackouts used as instruments of political repression.

5.3. On UN Tokenism and Youth leadership

The United Nations must:

15. Dismantle the current model of youth participation at the UN entirely and rebuild it from scratch with young people, not for them, and not as an afterthought to processes already decided by Member States;
16. Negotiate a standalone binding international treaty on youth political participation that establishes enforceable rights to decision-making power for young people in all public processes that affect their lives;
17. Impose a moratorium on all OHCHR guidance, resolutions and frameworks that contain any conditional endorsement of age-gating policies and age verification systems;
18. Establish an independent review mechanism to monitor the human rights impact of the UN Cybercrime Treaty as it is implemented by Member States, with particular attention to its use against youth activists and human rights defenders.

5.4. On Big Tech, Private Sector and Tech Sovereignty

The United Nations must:

19. Stop washing Big Tech's feet by treating it as a force for good. This industry has accumulated extraordinary wealth by monetising the attention, data and political energy of young people;
20. Begin negotiations on a binding treaty on digital platform accountability, establishing criminal liabilities for executives of companies whose platforms demonstrably contribute to the suppression of civic space, a treaty that the industry cannot lobby, litigate or PR-campaign its way out of;
21. Establish a UN mechanism with investigative and sanctioning powers over Big Tech companies that cooperate with state repression of civic space, mandating the separation of social media platforms from their advertising and data monetisation arms and recognising that their business model is incompatible with human rights;
22. Begin negotiations for a binding agreement establishing a mandatory levy on the global profits of Big Tech companies, administered through an independent international mechanism insulated from corporate lobbying and Member States capture, with revenues ringfenced exclusively for youth mental health, digital safety and civic education. These companies built their fortunes on the backs of a generation they have consistently failed to protect. And for that, they have to pay for the harm they have caused;
23. Remove Big Tech from multi-stakeholder governance processes where they exercise undue influence over the rules designed to govern them.

If read fully and with an open mind, the demands in our submission do not require new frameworks, new working groups or new consultations. **But they do require political will, something that has been absent for so long from our institutions that somehow it became the 'new normal'.** Gen Z and Gen Alpha did not inherit a broken world by accident. It was broken for them profitably and strategically. The least the world owes them is the freedom to fight for something better without being shot or scrolled out of existence.

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