



Advancing Women's Rights Through Strong Human Rights Institutions in Africa

International Women's Day 2026

Each year, International Women's Day invites reflection on the progress made toward gender equality and the work that still lies ahead. Across Africa, legal frameworks protecting women's rights have expanded, women's leadership is increasingly visible, and regional human rights systems continue to evolve. Yet the everyday reality for millions of women and girls remains marked by inequality, violence, and barriers to justice.

The gap between commitments and lived experience raises a critical question: **what makes women's rights real in practice?** Laws and policies are important, but without strong institutions capable of monitoring, enforcing, and defending those rights, progress remains fragile. This is where **National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs)** play an indispensable role.

Across the world, NHRIs serve as independent guardians of human rights. They investigate violations, advise governments on reforms, support victims seeking justice, and provide a platform for dialogue between states, civil society, and communities. For women and girls facing discrimination or abuse, these institutions often represent one of the most accessible avenues for accountability.

But the significance of strong human rights institutions goes beyond responding to individual violations. They shape how societies understand and address structural inequalities that affect women. From gender-based violence and harmful practices to unequal access to land, health care, and economic opportunities, women's rights challenges are deeply interconnected with broader governance and development issues.

This is why strengthening NHRIs across Africa remains a priority for the **Network of African National Human Rights Institutions (NANHRI)**. Through regional cooperation and partnerships, NANHRI works to enhance the capacity of these institutions to respond to evolving human rights challenges—including those that disproportionately affect women.

One area where this institutional engagement has proven particularly important is **sexual and reproductive health and rights**. The ability of women and girls to make decisions about their bodies, health, and futures remains central to achieving gender



equality. Yet across many countries, cultural norms, legal barriers, and limited access to services continue to restrict these rights.

Initiatives such as the **Solutions for Supporting Healthy Adolescents (SHARP)** project illustrate how human rights institutions can help address these challenges. By bringing together governments, civil society organizations, youth advocates, and development partners, the initiative supports NHRIs in promoting rights-based approaches to adolescent health across several African countries.

However, the significance of such efforts lies not only in the programmes themselves but in the broader principle they represent: **human rights institutions can help ensure that policies affecting women and girls are grounded in accountability, participation, and dignity.**

The role of NHRIs is equally critical in other areas affecting women's rights. Across Africa, women human rights defenders continue to face threats and intimidation while advocating for justice and equality. At the same time, economic developments—from large-scale infrastructure projects to mineral extraction—often carry gendered consequences for communities, affecting women's livelihoods, land rights, and access to resources.

In these contexts, human rights institutions can serve as important safeguards. By monitoring state and corporate practices, promoting responsible business conduct, and amplifying the voices of affected communities, NHRIs help ensure that economic progress does not come at the expense of women's rights.

Equally important is the role these institutions play in expanding civic space and encouraging inclusive governance. Women's participation in decision-making processes remains uneven across the continent. Human rights institutions can help address this imbalance by advocating for policies that promote equal representation and by ensuring that women's perspectives inform national debates on development, justice, and public policy.

None of this work happens in isolation. Advancing women's rights requires partnerships—between governments, civil society organizations, regional institutions, and development partners. It also requires listening to the voices of women and girls themselves, particularly those from marginalized communities whose experiences are too often overlooked.

This is why multi-stakeholder dialogue has become a central feature of efforts to advance women's rights. When governments, human rights institutions, community leaders, and



young people come together to address shared challenges, solutions become more inclusive, more informed, and ultimately more sustainable.

Yet despite the progress made, the work remains unfinished. Across Africa, women continue to face violence, economic exclusion, and systemic discrimination. Climate change, conflict, and economic pressures are creating new vulnerabilities that disproportionately affect women and girls. Responding to these challenges requires institutions that are not only independent but also adequately resourced, accessible, and trusted by the communities they serve.

Strong human rights institutions cannot, on their own, eliminate gender inequality. But they can ensure that the pursuit of justice remains anchored in accountability, transparency, and respect for human dignity.

On this International Women's Day, the message is clear: advancing women's rights requires more than promises. It requires institutions capable of turning those promises into reality.

By strengthening NHRIs across the continent, Africa is investing not only in the protection of women's rights but also in the foundations of more just, inclusive, and resilient societies.