

Youth Consultations on Access to Justice

**Key findings and policy implications
ahead of CSW70**



**Authored by: Sarah Meijer
Youth Representative CSW 70**

Context and scope

In January 2026, I conducted youth consultations in the Netherlands to inform youth input for CSW70, focusing on how young people experience access to justice in practice and where gaps exist between legal protections and lived realities. In total, 29 young people contributed through two focus groups, six in depth interviews, and an anonymous survey. Together, these inputs provide a coherent picture of how young people navigate, avoid, or disengage from justice systems. Participants shared experiences related to sexual and gender based violence, including sexual assault, harassment and stalking, domestic and relational abuse, online intimidation, as well as discriminatory or dismissive treatment by authorities. Several also described institutional rights violations in contexts such as asylum reception, housing, education, youth care, and access to legal support. Across all inputs, young people described recurring barriers to justice, highlighting not a lack of rights on paper, but systemic failures at the moment those rights are meant to be exercised.

Key findings

1.

Uncertainty about seriousness, evidence, and reportability prevents reporting

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Young people often hesitate to report harm because they are unsure whether what happened is serious enough, whether it qualifies as a crime, or whether reporting is possible without clear evidence or identified perpetrators. This uncertainty acts as an early barrier, stopping many young people before they ever engage with formal justice systems.

I didn't know where to start, or whether it even made sense to go to the police.

- Sexual assault in public space, perpetrators unknown

Fear of not being believed, shame, and lack of clarity about rights and procedures were repeatedly described as reasons to delay or avoid reporting.

2.

Young people expect not to be taken seriously and act accordingly

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Many participants anticipated that their report would be dismissed or deprioritised, particularly in cases involving relational, psychological, or digital harm. In some cases, this expectation was reinforced by explicit discouragement from authorities.

I was treated as if I was trying to ruin the reputation of two men. I was discouraged from continuing, even though I was the one who had been harmed.

- Sexual violence, police and prosecution response

Rather than feeling supported, young people described being framed as unreliable, exaggerating, or harmful to others' reputations, reinforcing decisions not to proceed.

Key findings

3.

Lack of follow up makes reporting mentally unsustainable

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When reports do not lead to timely follow up, reporting becomes emotionally exhausting and discouraging. Delayed contact was described as reopening wounds during recovery, while lack of communication created uncertainty and distress.

When they contacted her months later, it completely set her back.

- *Sexual violence, delayed recontact during recovery*

Several young people described feeling responsible for keeping their case alive by repeatedly calling, checking in, or asking for updates themselves. This ongoing self advocacy was experienced as retraumatising in itself.

4.

Responsibility for evidence is shifted to young people

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Young people described that the burden of proving harm and keeping cases active often rests with them, even in unsafe or severe situations. This expectation is particularly harmful in cases involving sexual violence, online abuse, or ongoing threats.

We were expected to collect evidence ourselves.

- *Serious violence, including lethal incidents*

Lack of evidence was frequently used as a reason not to act, even when harm and risk were clearly described.

5.

Relational violence is dismissed due to narrow interpretations of consent

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Violence within relationships is often reframed as voluntary or mutual, especially when affection or emotional attachment is present. This leads authorities to disengage despite escalation and clear patterns of coercive control.

They said it was a voluntary relationship and left

- *Loverboy-like dynamics involving a minor¹*

Several young people reflected that part of the harm lay in being made to doubt their own bodily autonomy, emphasising that it took time to realise that their body was still their own, even within a relationship.

Key findings

6.

Access to justice depends on privilege and status

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Young people with legal knowledge, language skills, financial resources, or institutional contacts were better able to navigate justice systems than those without. Those lacking these resources were more likely to disengage, even when harm was serious.

Without contacts at the municipality, we would probably have lost the case.

- Asylum reception and housing context

Access to justice was particularly fragile for young people dependent on institutions or adults, including asylum reception, youth care, or family structures. Age based requirements, such as the expectation to involve parents when reporting before the age of sixteen, were described as a significant barrier rather than a protection mechanism.

What this means internationally (for CSW70)

Although these consultations were conducted in the Netherlands, they reflect dynamics that are internationally relevant to CSW70 discussions on access to justice for women and girls:

Legal rights alone do not ensure access to justice in practice.

Even in contexts with strong legal frameworks, access is shaped by implementation, institutional culture, and prioritisation.

Justice systems are poorly aligned with the realities of adolescents and young adults, particularly at the first point of contact.

Early interactions strongly influence trust, reporting behaviour, and long term engagement.

Credibility and outcomes are shaped by intersecting factors such as age, gender, migration status, language, and socio economic position. Harm is least likely to be recognised when young people are both young and dependent on institutions, including asylum systems, youth care, or educational settings.

Trauma uninformed procedures and delayed responses actively discourage reporting.

Justice processes themselves can become a source of secondary harm.

Young people frame justice not only as accountability, but as prevention of repeated harm.

Failure to act on early reports enables continued victimisation.

Solutions highlighted by youth

Across all inputs, young people consistently emphasised the need for:

- Clear, youth friendly information about rights, reporting options, and consequences before harm occurs.
- Low threshold reporting pathways where young people know they will be heard and taken seriously, regardless of perceived severity or immediate evidence.
- High quality first contact, including calm, validating, and gender-transformative communication.
- Guaranteed follow up and transparency after reports, including clear timelines and updates.
- Institutional responsibility for investigation and evidence collection, rather than shifting this burden to young people.
- Recognition of coercive control and relational abuse beyond narrow interpretations of consent.
- Equal access to justice regardless of migration status, language ability, or institutional power.

Concrete policy recommendations

Member States are encouraged to:

- Integrate age appropriate legal literacy into education systems, including information on reporting options, procedures, and rights related to sexual and gender based violence, digital harm, and coercive control, and review age based reporting requirements to ensure that minors can seek help and report harm without mandatory parental involvement where this poses a barrier to safety or autonomy.
- Ensure youth responsive, gender-transformative, and trauma informed justice pathways, including sensitive first contact and limits on repeated interviews.
- Guarantee follow up, transparency, and communication after reports, through minimum standards for acknowledgement, timelines, and status updates.
- Prohibit practices that shift evidence collection to victims, ensuring institutions take responsibility for investigation, including digital evidence.
- Strengthen institutional responses to relational and domestic abuse, explicitly recognising coercive control and preventing dismissal based on relationship status or mixed communication.
- Address unequal credibility and discriminatory treatment in justice processes, including through independent oversight mechanisms.
- Ensure access to independent complaint mechanisms in institutional settings, such as asylum reception, with explicit protection against retaliation.

Overall takeaway

Young people often hesitate to report harm because they doubt whether it will be taken seriously, believed, or acted upon. Barriers to reporting sexual and gender based violence already arise long before any institutional contact, shaped by uncertainty, shame, lack of information, low expectations of support, and prior experiences of dismissal or discouragement. When early contact with authorities confirms these fears through dismissal, silence, or procedural burden, young people learn where the system draws its line, and often decide not to cross it again.

Across consultations, young people framed access to justice primarily as a tool for prevention rather than punishment. Acting early, setting boundaries, and preventing harm to others, including future victims, were consistently seen as more important than conviction alone. This was particularly evident in experiences of relational violence, technology facilitated forms of harm (TFCBV), and sexual violence, where delayed or absent responses allow harm to escalate, spread, and affect multiple people.

Although grounded in experiences from the Netherlands, these dynamics reflect broader global patterns in access to justice, including age based credibility gaps, the minimisation of non physical harm, and the compounding effects of intersecting forms of marginalisation and institutional dependency. For young people, being able to say “this is not acceptable” and having that boundary recognised by institutions is central to norm setting and prevention. Strengthening access to justice for young people is therefore not only about protecting victims, but about determining which lines society chooses to uphold, now and in the future.

¹ The term “loverboy” is commonly used in the Dutch context to describe a form of grooming in which a perpetrator uses emotional manipulation, dependency, and affection to exploit or control a victim, often a minor or young person. Internationally, this is understood as a form of coercive control and exploitation rather than a consensual relationship.