



## STATEMENT ON THE UPR PRE-SESSION 51 ON THE REPUBLIC OF RWANDA (DIGITAL RIGHTS)

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### **i. Presentation of the organisation**

Thank you, Chair. I speak on behalf of the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), a regional organisation advancing digital rights, digital inclusion, and accountable data governance across Africa, as well as on behalf of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC). This statement draws from a desk review and on inputs received during a stakeholder consultation on digital rights in Rwanda alongside a separate but complementary submission that CIPESA made with the Pan African Lawyers Union (PALU).

### **ii. Status of previous recommendations on Digital Rights**

This review marks Rwanda's fourth cycle under the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism. In the third cycle, Rwanda underscored its commitment to freedom of expression and media freedom, receiving 32 recommendations on these issues, including 24 focused on revising legislative provisions that unduly restrict free speech and 17 aimed at strengthening protections for journalists and human rights defenders. However, implementation has remained very limited in Rwanda, restrictive laws remain unchanged, journalists continue to face arrests, digital exclusion persists; particularly for women and surveillance continues without independent oversight. Rwanda's Freedom House rating has also declined to 36/100, reflecting this deterioration.

### **iii. Overview of digital rights thematics**

Today, I will address four core digital rights themes:

1. Freedom of expression.
2. Surveillance and privacy.
3. The gender digital divide.
4. Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV)

#### **iv. Issues**

##### **Issue 1: Restrictive legal framework on freedom of expression**

###### **Challenge:**

Rwanda's 2018 Penal Code and 2018 Cybercrime Law criminalise edited content, "false information," and criticism of public authorities. Journalists and online critics have been arrested under these laws, fuelling widespread self-censorship.

###### **Impact on right-holders:**

These laws silence dissent, undermine media pluralism, and erode civic participation, affecting journalists, human rights defenders, political actors, and ordinary citizens.

###### **Recommendations:**

1. Repeal Penal Code articles 157, 164, 194, 233, and 253, and amend the 2018 Cybercrime Law to comply with international standards.
2. Withdraw cases against individuals prosecuted for legitimate online expression.

##### **Issue 2: Institutionalised surveillance and lack of independent oversight**

###### **Challenge:**

Law 60/2013 obliges telecom companies to enable real-time interception, and credible reports show the use of Pegasus spyware, targeting more than 3,500 activists, journalists and members of the diaspora. Oversight bodies lack independence.

###### **Impact:**

Constant monitoring chills activism, deters political participation, enables cross-border repression, and violates privacy rights.

###### **Recommendations:**

1. Establish an independent oversight mechanism for all surveillance operations.
2. Cease use of AI systems and spyware where they cannot be operated in compliance with human rights standards.



### Issue 3: Persistent gender digital divide

**Challenge:**

Internet penetration remains low at 34.2%, with only 38.2% of social-media users being women. Barriers include device cost, income inequality, and limited digital literacy. Rural and low-income women are disproportionately excluded.

**Impact:**

Women's exclusion from Rwanda's digital economy limits educational access, participation in governance, and economic opportunities, undermining SDG 5 and SDG 9.

**Recommendations:**

1. Implement targeted subsidies and digital-literacy programmes for women, rural communities, and low-income households.
2. Ensure universal, affordable access to devices and connectivity.

### Issue 4: Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV)

**Challenge:**

Online harassment, gendered disinformation, and targeted attacks such as the 2024 campaign against opposition leader Victoire Ingabire Umuhiza continue unchecked. The 2018 Cybercrime Law lacks survivor-centred protections and in some cases is misused against victims.

**Impact:**

TFGBV silences women, shrinks civic and political space, and inflicts psychological and social harm, undermining equality and participation.

**Recommendations:**

1. Adopt and enforce survivor-centred TFGBV protections aligned with Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).
2. Require social media and digital platforms to strengthen reporting, moderation, and accountability mechanisms.

### v. Closing remarks

CIPESA and APC urges Rwanda to prioritise rights-respecting reforms that guarantee free expression, privacy, digital inclusion, and the protection of women online. Addressing these concerns is essential to achieving SDGs 5 and 16 and ensuring a safe, open, and inclusive digital society.

Thank you.