HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
DEMOCRACY

E-PAPER

#JusticeForOchanya

Nigeria's Soro Soke Generation is Still Speaking Up

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Published by the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Global Unit
for Democracy and Human Rights, April 2026

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Oluwatobiloba thanks Ayisha Yesufu, Ene Oteikwu, and Ololade Ajayi for their contributions during the semi-structured interviews, which informed the key insights in this paper.

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Executive summary

This paper examines the #JusticeForOchanya movement, an intergenerational feminist movement in Nigeria demanding accountability for the death of 13-year-old Ochanya Ogbanje, who passed away on 17 October 2018 from vesico-vaginal fistula (VVF) after enduring years of sexual abuse by male relatives. Using a qualitative case study methodology, including semi-structured interviews with key feminist mobilisers and a literature review, the research demonstrates how Nigeria's 'Soro Soke' generation – youth aged 15–29 – is transforming digital activism into civic action despite institutional constraints.

Key findings reveal that decentralised digital mobilisation, intergenerational feminist solidarity, cultural inclusivity through Indigenous language translation, and strategic political engagement generated public pressure, leading to renewed legislative attention in 2025. However, persistent challenges, including legal inertia, financial constraints, and activist burnout, underscore the gap between visibility and structural change. This paper provides key insights into youth movements in Nigeria, emphasising the integration of digital and offline strategies, the cultivation of emotional resilience as a component of movement infrastructure, and the necessity of documentation to translate activism into measurable policy reform.

1 Introduction: Nigeria's Youth Demographic and Democratic Participation

Approximately half of the world's 8 billion people are younger than 30, with the highest concentration – up to 19% of the global youth population – residing in Africa, earning the region its designation as the world's youngest continent. The Nigerian population reflects this demographic reality. With over 240 million people, Nigeria is Africa's most populous nation and the sixth most populous in the world, projected to become third by 2050. The median age in Nigeria is 18.3 years, and approximately 70% of its people are under the age of 30.

Despite this demographic weight, young people are severely under-represented in formal political structures. According to the 2025 Inter-Parliamentary Union report on youth participation in national parliaments, only 2.8% of the world's parliamentarians are aged 30 and under as young people's participation in democratic processes is restricted by political unpredictability, a lack of funding for youth development, a lack of civic education, and violations of human rights. In Nigeria, youth make up less than 1% of the country's formal political leadership, despite constituting over 40% of registered voters.

In the 2023 Global Youth Development Index, which measures youth progress in education, employment, equality, health, peace, and political participation, Nigeria ranks 172nd out of 183 countries, making it one of the five lowest-ranking Commonwealth nations. Nigeria's 2025 Global Peace Index score of roughly 2.869 placed it between 147th and 148th out of 163 countries, with security and justice system deficiencies among the main causes of insecurity.

Disappointed with the state of their countries and lacking trust in political figures and government agencies, young people around the globe are organising to ensure their governments live up to democratic standards and to hold the judiciary and legislature responsible for respecting fundamental rights. Youth-led demonstrations in Kenya and Morocco against rising living expenses, police brutality, and poor public sector management are recent examples of youth movements in Africa.

2 Nigeria's Soro Soke Generation: Speaking Up Against Injustice

According to the 2019 Nigerian National Youth Policy, youth are defined as all individuals between the ages of 15 and 29 and are deemed the most active demographic group, possessing cognitive agility, energetic goal-setting, assertive personalities, and capacity for social change.

During the #EndSARS nationwide protests in October 2020, the young 'Soro Soke generation' spearheaded a campaign against police brutality by the Nigeria Police Force's Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) unit — violations that disproportionately targeted young Nigerians despite unrelenting outcry. The Yoruba phrase 'Soro Soke', which means 'speak up' in the sense of speaking out against injustice, became a rallying cry at the #EndSARS protests, which grew into a sustained demand for accountability and better governance. Soro Soke alludes to a viral catchphrase symbolising the suppression of truth that emerged at the Nigerian National Assembly in July 2020 – several months prior to the #EndSARS protests in October – when a minister at an investigative hearing was instructed to turn off his microphone to prevent further disclosure.

Since the #EndSARS protests, Soro Soke has remained both a hashtag and an identifier for Nigeria's young generation, encapsulating their bravery, grievances, and dissatisfaction with the country's trajectory since independence.

3 The #JusticeForOchanya Movement: Demanding accountability in Constrained Systems

In October 2025, the month of the seventh anniversary of 13-year-old Ochanya Ogbanje's death, a peaceful march and a national digital campaign calling for #JusticeForOchanya were held. Ochanya passed away in October 2018 from vesico-vaginal fistula (VVF) after residing in Benue State with maternal relatives Andrew Ogbuja and his son Victor to pursue a better education. This condition was allegedly caused by years of prolonged sexual violence by the aforementioned relatives.

Ochanya's death sparked national outrage in 2018, with activists mobilising against child abuse and sexual violence in Nigeria. The 2018 campaign successfully generated awareness that resulted in initial legal processes, but it lacked sustained engagement and institutional follow-through to ensure that the perpetrators of the sexual violence that killed Ochanya were brought to book.

Andrew Ogbuja was arrested in 2018 on charges including rape and culpable homicide, and the case was transferred to the Benue State High Court; Victor Ogbuja absconded and remains at large. The trial faced multiple adjournments and evidentiary challenges over subsequent years.

Ochanya's maternal aunt and Andrew's wife Felicia Ochiga-Ogbuja was found guilty of failing to protect Ochanya and sentenced to five months in prison. In April 2022, the High Court acquitted Andrew Ogbuja, citing the prosecution's failure to meet the criminal standard of proof. This decision was widely viewed by civil society and feminist organisations in Nigeria as a systemic failure.

When #JusticeForOchanya resurfaced in 2025, following solo and collective protests by young feminists about the truncated justice process, it caught the attention of political leaders such as Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan, who submitted a petition about the case to the Nigerian Senate in November 2025, seeking legislative intervention to re-investigate the case and arrest and prosecute the suspects. Despite the principal accused's legal acquittal, the case continues to influence public discourse regarding the enforcement of child protection laws and the pursuit of justice in Nigeria for sexual violence cases and femicide.

4 Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This research employs a qualitative case study of the #JusticeForOchanya movement to analyse youth and young feminist engagement in Nigeria and to examine how young activists pursue accountability despite institutional bottlenecks. Adopting an interpretivist epistemological approach, the study prioritises meaning-making and the lived civic experiences of interview participants. This approach examines how activists, feminists, the public, media, and political allies interpreted the injustice of Ochanya's death, demanded accountability, and constructed narratives that transformed the movement into a public democratic issue.

The core research question examines the movement's function as an expression of youth democratic agency and its insights into national accountability mechanisms for sexual

and gender-based violence. Data were collected through three primary methods: (1) semi-structured interviews with key feminist mobilisers Ayisha Yesufu, Ololade Ajayi, and Ene Oteikwu between December 2025 and January 2026; (2) a literature review of relevant academic research on youth characterisation, organising, movements, governance and leadership, and the Nigerian justice system as well as of articles and news reports published by international and local media; and (3) a digital ethnography to examine public discourse, social media content, hashtag amplification patterns, advocacy graphics, and interaction between activists and public officials.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, with selection criteria that prioritised sustained engagement and strategic involvement.

Ayisha Yesufu is a Nigerian feminist and activist in her 50s. Drawing on her long-standing activism and experience from movements such as Bring Back Our Girls and #EndSARS, she used her public platform to support the movement when it first began in 2018 after Ochanya's death. She also provided intergenerational support and 'hand-holding' for young feminists who led the movement in 2025.

Through her non-profit organisation, the DOHS Cares Foundation, a femicide observatory and a sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) survivor support platform in Nigeria, Ololade Ajayi, a Nigerian feminist in her 30s, mobilised feminists during the 16 Days of Activism in 2025, organising a 'Race Against Femicide' amplifying calls for justice for Ochanya and facilitating a petition to the Inspector General of Police in Abuja demanding the reopening of the case and a renewed investigation into the perpetrators.

Ochanya's death 'really hit home' for Ene Oteikwu, a Nigerian feminist in her 20s, who is from Benue State, just like the late teenager. Oteikwu also experienced sexual abuse as a child. She played a key role in amplifying the #JusticeForOchanya movement by using her voice and social media platforms, particularly X (formerly Twitter), to raise awareness. She translated campaign messages into her local language, Idoma, and encouraged others to do the same for their local languages, making the call for justice more relatable and accessible to a wider audience across Nigeria.

The research adhered to ethical protocols and trauma-informed reporting standards throughout data collection and analysis. All interview participants provided informed consent and expressed the desire to have their contributions documented, with direct quotes attributed by name.

5 Key Findings

5.1 Digital Feminist Mobilisation

Nigeria's 45.5% internet penetration rate, which translates to about 109 million users, offers a significant resource for digital civic engagement and is changing patterns of political participation, especially among young people. Digital platforms were used as organising infrastructure for #JusticeForOchanya in complementary ways to translate personal moral outrage about the injustice into narratives that could be felt, shared, and acted upon for systemic negligence critique.

X served as the primary space for agenda-setting and gathering, amplifying, and directing information to users, media, and decision-makers.

Oteikwu described X as a relational space, framing online engagement as affective: 'Twitter let me say things plainly and push people to act.' Yesufu similarly emphasised how digital platforms spurred people to respond: 'Tweets and online commentary brought attention to Ochanya's case even before legal action could start.'

Facebook, in turn, was used to share visuals that facilitated intergenerational engagement, while TikTok and Instagram enabled mobilisation through short-form video content, including explanatory commentaries critiquing judicial decisions, which circulated widely and generated emotional resonance from younger demographics and influencers. A petition titled '#Justice for Ochanya' on change.org launched in October 2025 by an individual named Ossai garnered over 4,000 verified signatures as of March 2026. Another petition launched within the same period by Marja Hands, titled 'Nigerian Feminist Demand Justice for Ochanya Elizabeth Ogbanje', gained over 215,000 verified signatures in five months.

The interview participants emphasised that sustained offline advocacy beyond moments of virality is essential to pursuing accountability and legal redress. Yesufu concluded, 'Without follow-up and sustained pressure, even high visibility cannot guarantee justice.' Sustaining stakeholder engagement offline was Ajayi's focus through the DOHS Cares Foundation in 2025: 'Even though everyone saw it online, that didn't automatically mean the case would be reopened. We had to push physically, go to Abuja, submit petitions and follow up.'

Digital platforms played a crucial role in spreading awareness for the #JusticeForOchanya movement when it first emerged in 2018 and in reigniting and intensifying it in 2025, coordinating offline actions and consolidating activist messaging, with women playing prominent leadership roles throughout the mobilisation.

5.2 Indigenous Narration

Translation is intrinsically political according to Oteikwu, who explained that 'people felt responsible' when campaign materials were translated into regional Nigerian languages like Igbo, Yoruba, Idoma, and Pidgin English. The campaign reframed the issue as a common national civic concern and expanded engagement beyond English-speaking digital elites by making content about the case accessible across Nigeria's diverse linguistic spectrum.

5.3 Intergenerational Solidarity

Intergenerational collaboration was both a strategic and ethical foundation of the movement. Rather than waiting for formal organisational leadership, young feminists mobilised themselves and amplified messaging autonomously. Ajayi contrasted this with the earlier campaigns since 2018 that were perceived as NGO-centric. She observed that young protesters 'didn't wait for instructions. They were in the streets, talking to their peers, making sure everyone knew what happened. It was a collective awakening.' Yesufu similarly noted that Gen Z feminists were 'fearless and organised, able to mobilise online without needing validation from older activists or men', highlighting a generational shift toward a self-determined, accountability-driven feminist movement.

Participants described a deliberately flattened leadership structure that prioritised shared responsibility over singular visibility or hierarchical control. Ajayi explained, 'Older feminists, younger activists, legal practitioners, and community members – we all worked together. There was no one face; everyone had a role.'

This decentralised approach, reflective of feminist values and particularly of collective care and shared responsibility, strengthened the movement's legitimacy, reduced the risk of reprisal associated with individual leadership, and reinforced collective ownership of the campaign, but it also complicated coordination, especially in terms of legal follow-up and institutional engagement.

Yesufu stressed humility and reciprocity: 'Older and younger feminists must recognise what each brings to the table; we learn from each other's strengths and mistakes. There is no monopoly on wisdom or courage.'

5.4 Emotional Resilience

Emotional resilience constitutes a vital, though often invisible, infrastructure for sustaining feminist and youth movements over time. Ajayi stressed activists' palpable persistence in the face of institutional failure: 'You could see people refusing to give up. Even after the acquittal, even after the delays, even when it felt hopeless. That persistence, that refusal to let her be forgotten – that's how we kept going.' This persistence was cultivated through regular check-ins online amongst activists about the case, public memorialisation of Ochanya, virtual shared processing of grief and frustration, and celebration of incremental victories such as media coverage or legislative acknowledgement.

Oteikwu viewed youth activism as fundamentally identity-shaping, cultivating empathy, political consciousness, and resilience that extend far beyond individual campaigns. Even in the absence of clear legal victories, young feminists reinforced both collective and individual senses of purpose by using their social media accounts to disseminate content that raises public awareness of sexual and gender-based violence, consent, and child safety. This emotional resilience, combined with intergenerational mentorship and hybrid digital–offline movement coordination, formed the foundational support system for the movement's long-term sustainability.

5.5 Documentation and Data Politics

Participants highlighted documentation as both a political and strategic imperative for achieving long-term structural reform. Ajayi stressed that the routine misclassification of femicide cases, which are often recorded as domestic disputes, maternal mortality, accidental deaths, or generic conflict casualties, has systematically erased gendered motives and facilitated impunity by obscuring patterns of violence against women and girls. She stated emphatically, 'If it's not recorded properly, if the violence isn't named for what it is, it's like she died for nothing. Her death becomes invisible to policy, to law, to history.'

The movement's advocacy for a stand-alone femicide bill in Nigeria sought to address this documentation crisis by legally codifying trauma support services for survivors and families; financial remuneration for families of femicide victims; and integrated data collection systems across health facilities, police stations, and mortuaries to ensure accurate classification and tracking of gender-based killings.

Yesufu emphasised the importance of archiving feminist interventions and creating repositories of collective memory to ensure that women's leadership and organisational labour are not excluded from historical records and to enable future generations of activists to learn from and build upon their work: 'We need to write our own histories with our own hands; otherwise, our contributions vanish, and future generations don't know what we fought for or how we fought.'

5.6 Political Engagement and Institutional Barriers

The movement leveraged cross-sectoral and political alliances to amplify the campaign's reach and impact. Ajayi noted, 'We engaged legislators, ministries, civil society organisations, lawyers, media organisations, and even male allies who were willing to use their platforms and access.'

However, participants identified significant systemic barriers that constrained the movement's efforts to achieve judicial accountability, namely procedural complexities that disadvantaged the victim's family and evidentiary gaps resulting from inadequate forensic samples and poor evidence preservation by law enforcement. Ajayi highlighted the substantial financial burden borne by the victim's family and activists for transportation

to court hearings, document preparation, legal fees, and sustained follow-up over multiple years; such costs were often paid through self-funding by activists and supporters.

To increase reach and sustain public pressure, petitions, non-violent protests, and strategic alliances were symbolically important, but they were insufficient in the absence of persistent institutional follow-through and political will for new legal proceedings. As Yesufu asserted, 'Our anger must turn into representation; without decision-making power within institutions, the cycle of injustice continues. We need feminists in legislatures, in courts, and in police leadership, not just on the streets.

6 Policy Recommendations and Conclusion

The #JusticeforOchanya movement shows how youth-led feminist activism can use digital mobilisation, cultural storytelling, and offline advocacy to turn a neglected case of sexual violence into a larger demand for judicial accountability.

The campaign demonstrates the power of feminist networks, the importance of intergenerational solidarity, and the impact of civic campaigns in influencing public discourse and maintaining pressure for justice, even when legal results are limited. This provides essential insights for feminist youth movements and organisations in Nigeria, including the following:

Digital and Offline Mobilisation: While digital infrastructures enable rapid awareness-raising and coordination of civic campaigns and movements, they are unsustainable without strategic offline action, including activist meetings, institutional engagement, financial and legal support, and media coverage to obtain structural outcomes.

Creativity and Cultural Diversity: Artistic expression, narrative storytelling, and multilingual translation expand participation in civic movements beyond elite spaces; deepen moral and emotional engagement with political issues; and ensure that people of diverse dialects and people with disabilities can access, understand, and contribute to civic discourse.

Intergenerational Solidarity: Ethical mentorship models, distributed leadership roles, and reciprocal collaboration strengthen civic capacities across generations, support emotional resilience, and foster sustainable youth engagement in democratic processes. Intergenerational movements are more resilient, more inclusive, and more effective than age-segregated organising models.

Strategic Navigation of Institutional Constraints: Procedural complexity, political interference, and inadequate legal infrastructure and resources shape the outcomes of movement efforts. Youth movements must strategically engage allies within formal institutions while also maintaining realistic expectations about systemic limitations and building long-term plans that do not depend solely on immediate judicial or legislative victories.

Emotional Resilience as Movement Infrastructure: Collective healthy coping mechanisms and holistic physical and digital support systems are essential for the longevity of youth-led campaigns. Movements that respond systematically to the emotional labour and psychological toll of activism on young people and feminists are more likely to sustain participation over time.

Evidence and Documentation: Enhance the collection, handling, and analysis of forensic evidence and provide evidence-handling training to first responders, including law enforcement, medical professionals, and representatives of sexual assault referral centres (SARCs). Establishing stringent data collection systems and pursuing legislative advocacy for accurate classification of violence are necessary to convert fleeting visibility into quantifiable, long-term accountability (e.g., a stand-alone femicide bill and a publicly accessible, live, sexual and gender-based violence nationwide tracker and database).

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Imprint

Published by
Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Global Unit for Democracy and Human Rights, Brussels
Av. des Arts 7/8, 1210 Brussels, Belgium

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Place of publication: https://www.boell.de/de

Release date: April 2026

Editor: Alexandra Rongione

Layout: Kathleen de Meeûs