



# IN DEFENCE OF HUMANITY:

WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS  
DEFENDERS AND THE  
STRUGGLE AGAINST  
SILENCING

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, combined with existing threats, the rise of right-wing and nationalist populism across the world has led to an increasing number of governments implementing repressive measures against the space for civil society (civic space), particularly affecting women human rights defenders (WHRDs). The increasingly restricted space for WHRDs presents an urgent threat, not only to women-led organisations, but to all efforts campaigning for women's rights, gender equality and the rights of all people. In spite of these restrictions, WHRDs have campaigned boldly in the face of mounting opposition: movements such as #MeToo #MenAreTrash, #FreeSaudiWomen, #NiUnaMenos, #NotYourAsianSideKick and #AbortoLegalYa show how countless women are working to advance systemic change for equality and justice. More WHRDs across the world are working collectively to challenge structural injustices and promote the realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Their power has been in the collective, despite constant attempts at silencing them. Furthermore, there have been WHRDs recognized for their invaluable contributions to opening civic space and protecting human rights in India, Poland, and Ireland. In the United States, WHRDs have won awards for the environmental activism, and in Iraq for their work in calling for greater accountability for sexual violence during war time.

This policy brief responds to this context and highlights how the participation of WHRDs in defending and strengthening the protection of human rights is critical for transforming traditional gender roles, embedded social norms and patriarchal power structures. WHRDs are leading actions to advance sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), socioeconomic justice, labour rights and environmental rights. Moreover, WHRDs work to ensure that women are included in political and economic decision-making processes, making clear the disproportionate effects that socioeconomic inequalities have on women and gender non-conforming people.

However, the rights to the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression are often restricted, with states using public order laws to prevent WHRDs from being able to exercise their civic freedoms fully. Saudi Arabia's cybercrime law relating to online freedom of expression was, for example, used to detain WHRD and online activist Dr Eman Al-Nafjan for her blog entries on women's activism in the country.

In the cases cited in this brief, we see trends of sexual violence, smear campaigns, defamation, social ostracism, criminalisation and intimidation against family members and children of WHRDs, consistently used as a deterrence to human rights work.

At worse, WHRDs are targeted for violence and killings. WHRDs working to advance sexual rights face risks that include physical violence and increased stigmatisation associated with their work, especially in contexts where sexual rights are constrained by cultural and religious norms. But despite these challenges, there has also been progress: in 2018, the Indian government decriminalised homosexuality, a victory for country's LGBTIQ community.

In 2017 alone, 200 environmental WHRDs across Asia, Latin America and the USA were killed for their work to protect the environment. Among those killed were Elisa Badayos and Manuelita Mascariñas in the Philippines, while Berta Cáceras was killed for her role in defending the land rights of members of the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH).

"THE PROTECTION OF THE MOUNTAIN, THE PROTECTION OF OUR ANCESTRAL DOMAIN, MEANS THE PROTECTION ALL OF HUMANITY... SO THIS IS NOT ONLY MY STRUGGLE, BUT THE STRUGGLE FOR MY PEOPLE AND OUR STRUGGLE IN DEFENCE OF HUMANITY."

BAI BIBYAON BIGKAY, TRIBAL CHIEF - MINDANAO, PHILIPPINES

The lack of access to justice and resources, together with the failure of states to provide protection for WHRDs, affects the work of WHRDs around the world. Accordingly, WHRDs need appropriate protection that is flexible to their needs. However, very little is done to respond to threats that WHRDs receive, and often, as Front Line Defenders reports, killings are preceded by receipt of a threat.<sup>1</sup> This means that protection mechanisms need to focus too on prevention of harm by perpetrators to ensure that the right to life is upheld for WHRDs and take seriously the threats that they receive. Despite efforts to implement the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the United Nations (UN) Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and the Maputo Protocol - which calls for "corrective and positive" actions where women continue to face discrimination - WHRDs still operate in dangerous contexts and are at risk of being targeted or killed. More needs to be done urgently. Protection is not only necessary for the realisation of the rights of WHRDs, but the rights of all - as their work so boldly demonstrates.

To counter the erasure of WHRDs in the current discourse and the tendency to focus on their restrictions rather than the important work that they do, this policy brief offers detailed descriptions of the work of WHRDs, centring on the human rights work for which they have sacrificed much.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following key recommendations are made to national governments to protect WHRDs and combat restrictions in their civic space:

- All states must ratify and implement CEDAW, without reservation, and pay specific attention to resourcing its implementation, as per the Maputo Protocol, to ensure effectiveness in protecting women and specifically WHRDs.
- Reprisals that WHRDs face for participating in UN processes and their engagements with other civil society organisations (CSOs) must be strongly condemned. States that make such threats against WHRDs must be strongly criticised for this behaviour.
- Any form of physical or sexual violence against WHRDs must be recognised as a form of violence against women. There must be improved preventative action, especially from the police, when WHRDs report threats and intimidation. States must conduct sensitisation programmes for law enforcement agencies, members of the judiciary and staff of national human rights institutions on the challenges faced by WHRDs.
- Digital space has opened new channels for engagement in conditions of closed civic space. Therefore, it is important that WHRDs have online space continuously available to them as a core part of their mobilisation strategy. Anti-terrorism and cybercrime laws must be amended in line with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY:

- Civil society leaders and actors must undergo rigorous sensitisation to ensure that WHRDs are able to participate equally and freely without structural or physical impediments to their work.
- Because perpetrators of violations against WHRDs are using similar campaigning and advocacy strategies, new tools must be developed to test new approaches for supporting the work of WHRDs more broadly in society.

<sup>1</sup>Report: Annual Report on Human Rights Defenders at Risk in 2017', Front Line Defenders, 2017, <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/resource-publication/annual-report-human-rights-defenders-risk-2017>



# INTRODUCTION

Across the world, WHRDs are working in precarious and dangerous contexts to advance the realisation of fundamental rights and freedoms. These women often defy societal, religious and cultural norms to push for the progressive articulation and implementation of individual and group rights. Despite the importance of their work, WHRDs continue to face challenges of silencing, violence and intimidation, not only from the state but also from their families, communities and even within the human rights movement. In many instances, these women are known not for the courageous work they do, but for the restrictions they face.

As the United Nations (UN) Commission on the Status of Women's 63rd Session addresses the theme of 'social protection',<sup>2</sup> it is important that the social protection of WHRDs covers not only the risks of violence that WHRDs face but also the risks of erasure, at a time when we need to elevate the critical role that WHRDs play in the realisation of international human rights norms and development agendas, as articulated in UN Agenda 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. This policy brief recognises and celebrates the work of WHRDs working across sectors to ensure that the rights of the individual and the collective are upheld and protected against all odds.

## DEFINING WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Who is a WHRD? The Global Fund for Women defines WHRDs as "women who defend the human rights of all, or individuals of all genders who defend the rights of women."<sup>3</sup> This definition is echoed by the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, highlighting that WHRDs face the same risks as all HRDs, but that their gender results in "gender-specific threats and violence" that often result in "stigmatization and ostracism by community leaders, faith-based groups, families and communities."<sup>4</sup> Here, we build on these definitions, defining WHRDs as all cis-gendered, heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, queer, gender non-conforming and trans women advocating for human rights across a broad spectrum including, but not limited to:

- SRHR, including the rights of sex workers
- Environmental, land and indigenous peoples' rights
- Economic rights, including rights to socioeconomic justice and labour rights
- Rights to participation in political and electoral processes
- Public spending accountability
- Human rights in conflict, post-conflict, or occupation situations

Often, due to multifaceted structural and physical restrictions, the work of WHRDs is overshadowed by the restrictions that they face, masking the gains made over decades of activists and collectives. It is important

<sup>2</sup>The Commission on the Status of Women is a UN instrument dedicated to the promotion of women's rights, monitoring and documenting the status of issues affecting women around the world. It was established in June 1946. See 'Commission on the Status of Women', UN Women, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw>.

<sup>3</sup>'What are Women Human Rights Defenders', Global Fund for Women, <https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/what-are-women-human-rights-defenders/#.XGEzpFwzY2w>.

<sup>4</sup>'Women Human Rights Defenders', UN Office for the High Commissioner of Human Rights, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/women/wrgs/pages/hrdefenders.aspx>.

to put at the centre the work of WHRDs, rather than only frame them in relation to the restrictions they experience. As the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition notes, it is "...the activity of promoting or advocating for human rights that make WHRDs defenders, not the degree of difficulty or danger they experience... WHRDs challenge violence, discrimination and injustice in all parts of the world."<sup>5</sup>

This policy brief offers analysis of the nature of restrictions that WHRDs continue to face, while also foregrounding their work and successes. In some instances, successes are measured by confronting the restrictions imposed by state and non-state actors on the exercise of the freedom of peaceful assembly; in others, success means the recognition of WHRDs through awards, which add to the existing legitimacy of their work. More rarely, in the context of the great dangers faced, success means improved policy and procedures. Though these cases are not the norm - as detailed below, civic space is closing even more - they exist as beacons for WHRDs around the world who continue their courageous work because of the urgent need for change that is driven by generations of women.

The role of feminist discourse is inalienable from the work of WHRDs, building on the rights to bodily autonomy, freedom of choice and freedom from misogyny and the harms of patriarchy to realise the full human dignity of all women across the world.

The intersectional role of the women, whether individuals or collectives, at the forefront of the realisation of these rights means that their advocacy cuts across multiple spheres and areas of focus and cannot always easily be categorised. While this brief attempts to group the work of WHRDs into categories, it recognises that context plays a critical role in designing intersectional and participatory mechanisms that can support the work of WHRDs, while offering protections that are appropriate, responsive and flexible to their differing needs.



<sup>5</sup>'Gendering Documentation: A Manual for and About Women Human Rights Defenders', Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition, 2015, pg. 6, <http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/GENDERING-DOCUMENTATION-FINAL-3-min.pdf>.

"...THE ACTIVITY OF PROMOTING OR ADVOCATING FOR HUMAN RIGHTS THAT MAKE WHRDs DEFENDERS, NOT THE DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY OR DANGER THEY EXPERIENCE..."

# CIVIC SPACE RESTRICTIONS AND THEIR EFFECT ON WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

“OF 123 WHRDS INTERVIEWED [BY KVINNA TILL KVINNA], MORE THAN 60% SAID THEIR SPACE TO ACT AS AN ACTIVIST HAD SHRUNK BECAUSE OF GOVERNMENTS FEAR FOR POLITICAL CHANGE, INCREASES IN NATIONALISM INCLUDING HOSTILITY TOWARDS FOREIGN FUNDING AND CONSERVATIVE IDEALS.”<sup>6</sup>

Civic space is defined by the extent to which three fundamental rights - of association - which includes the formation of independent civil society bodies - peaceful assembly and expression. In conditions of open civic space, the rule of law and human rights are respected, and people are free to participate in electoral processes, undertake advocacy or engage with state bodies. As detailed below, civic space freedoms are stipulated in international law by the ICCPR and the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, and many states, having ratified these covenants and treaties, include provisions for these rights in their constitutions. Regrettably, the reality on the ground for civil society actors, especially WHRDs, is far removed from the vision articulated in these key texts.

Research by the CIVICUS Monitor shows that in 2018 only four per cent of the world's population lives in countries with open civic space, and a majority of countries - 111 - have serious civic space restrictions.<sup>7</sup> In 2017, 20 per cent of all civil society updates to the CIVICUS Monitor related to restrictions imposed on women involved in advocacy. Considering the likelihood that many incidences were not reported, since the underreporting of attacks on WHRDs remains a challenge, this figure may under-represent the real scale of the problem.

## TYPES OF THREATS FACING WHRDS ACROSS THE WORLD:

- Smear campaigns
- Disownment and ostracism
- Rape and sexual violence and assault
- Killings and forced disappearances
- Targeting of children and families
- Online harassment
- Financial exclusion and under-resourcing
- Self-censorship
- The rise of government-owned pseudo-civil society groups and anti-rights groups
- Misuse of anti-terrorism legislation to target CSOs
- Internet censorship

Overall, WHRDs are at greater risk of being targeted through rape and sexual violence, the targeting of their family members and gender-targeted criminalisation. This targeted repression is intimately linked to the role WHRDs play in challenging implicit and explicit gender bias in public and private spaces. By directly challenging patriarchal power structures, WHRDs face complex tiers of repression informed by their gender, sexuality, race, geography and ethnicity.

WHRDs face additional risks that are contingent on several dimensions, including race, class and sexual orientation. For Afro-descendent and indigenous WHRDs working in Latin America, the repression they face is further imbued with racist and sexist discrimination. The patterns of racial discrimination found in society at large are further compounded for women who actively challenge misogynistic dynamics within society, because they stand in direct defiance of societal silencing of their voices. Guatemalan WHRD Lolita Chavez raised concerns after she was threatened and called “a rebel Indian woman” who does not have much to offer.

“ACCORDING TO THE THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION, SAUDI ARABIA IS THE FOURTH MOST DANGEROUS PLACE TO BE A WOMAN IN THE WORLD”

In societies built on patriarchal and religious norms, the work of WHRDs is further complicated by codified discrimination based on sexuality and gender. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte has openly encouraged violence against women, aiming to demean WHRDs through derogatory statements that connect to pre-existing societal and religious norms that undermine the role of women. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, WHRDs continue to face an extra layer of risks in their campaigns for women's rights. These risks are more pronounced because by advocating for their rights, women are challenging patriarchal norms within society at large and within the confines of their homes.

According to the Thomson Reuters Foundation, Saudi Arabia is the fourth most dangerous place to be a woman in the world.<sup>8</sup> Many Saudi women are facing restrictions for their role in successful advocating for the end of the ban of women driving as part of broader calls for recognition of women's rights. However, the challenge they face is beyond that imposed by the state, because they are also ostracised, shamed and ridiculed by family members and society at large. Despite granting women the right to drive in 2018, the Saudi Arabian government continues to crack down on the fundamental rights and freedoms of WHRDs. WHRDs including Samar Badawi, Hatoon Al-Fassi, Loujain Al-Hathloul - a well-known women's rights defender and online activist - Dr Eman Al-Nafjan - founder of the Saudi woman's weblog - Nassima Al-Sada and Aziza Al-Yousef have all been arrested since the start of 2018.

States also restrict access to justice and resources for WHRDs, who already receive fewer resources and support than their male counterparts. For lawyers who are women, defending other WHRDs places them at considerable risk. In Iran, Nasrin Sotoudeh, a well-known Iranian human rights lawyer, undertook a hunger strike in protest at her unlawful arrest, intimidation of her family and the continued crackdown facing activists in 2018. On 7 December 2016, Azza Soliman, Egyptian WHRD and lawyer, was arrested on the order of an investigative judge in Case 173, which targets CSOs for alleged foreign funding. Despite being released on 14 December 2016, she has faced a freeze on her personal and organisational bank accounts and is the frequent target of smear campaigns by the Egyptian government. In August 2018, Sudha Bharadwaj, an activist who fights corruption and promotes the rights of the Dalit peoples, was arrested in India. She faces terrorism-related charges. WHRDs are often subjected to judicial persecution and criminalisation for their work in protecting basic

<sup>6</sup>Suffocating the Movement: Shrinking Space for Women's Rights', Kvinna till Kvinna, 2018, pg. 10, <http://peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/kvinna-till-kvinna-suffocating-the-movement-report-eng-2018.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup>People Power Under Attack. A Global Analysis of Threats to Fundamental Freedoms', CIVICUS, 2018, pg. 4, <https://www.civicus.org/documents/PeoplePowerUnderAttack.Report.27November.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup>Factbox: Which are the world's 10 most dangerous countries for women?', Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-women-dangerous-poll-factbox/factbox-which-are-the-worlds-10-most-dangerous-countries-for-women-idUSKBN1JM01Z>.



human rights. In January 2018, Ihsan Fakiri, a WHRD and leader of the No to Women Oppression Initiative, was arrested with at least nine other WHRDs after they participated in a night vigil highlighting threats faced by women in Sudan. They were later released but ordered to report to security services daily.

Similarly, for WHRDs advocating for LGBTQI rights in closed contexts, the risk of criminalisation of their work leads to further instances of repression. LGBTQI WHRDs are frequently subject to ‘corrective’ rape, murder and physical violence. Andrea Alaya, Executive Director of Espacio de Mujeres Lesbianas por la Diversidad and a prominent LGBTQI activist in El Salvador, was assaulted by a government official at a Ministry of Foreign Affairs office in August 2018. Even with a progressive constitution that is supposed to protect LGBTQI rights, WHRDs are at risk of violence in South Africa, with ‘corrective’ rape and murder being prominent tools of repression used in communities. LGBTQI women Noxolo Nogwaza and Motshidisi ‘Pasca’ Pascalina were mutilated and murdered after ‘corrective’ rape for their sexual orientation in South Africa. Four African countries - Morocco, Nigeria, Somalia and Sudan - have the death penalty for homosexuality, and 27 other African countries issue sentences ranging from a month to life in prison for homosexuality.

The threat of death for WHRDs serves to instil fear in them and their supporters. Too little is done to respond quickly to the threats that all HRDs receive, which often precede their murder or assault. Front Line Defenders reported that in 84 per cent of killings of HRDs, the activist previously received a threat.<sup>9</sup> In contexts of societal bias against women, the risks are even greater.

Sometimes these threats proceed with little or no investigation from police: Caroline Mwatha Ochieng co-founded the Dandora Community Social Justice Centre in Kenya, documenting extrajudicial killings, threats and enforced disappearances. Before her body was found in February 2019, Caroline had received several threats and had been missing for over a week.<sup>10</sup>

The challenges of ensuring a safe environment for WHRDs are also evident in the policy and legal frameworks that are meant to protect them. While the 2013 Resolution on WHRDs by the UN General Assembly’s Third Committee was a victory for WHRDs, a last minute bid for broad consensus resulted in the omission of a critical paragraph that detailed language calling on all states to condemn all forms of violence against women and WHRDs.<sup>11</sup> The paragraph also included calls for states to refrain from invoking any forms of customs, traditions or religious norms to avoid their obligations to eliminate all forms of violence against women. In the absence of clear policy wording in the Resolution on protecting WHRDs, other mechanisms must be put in place to condemn violence against women and WHRDs. Without such provisions, the consequences for advocating for basic rights preventing harassment are clear. Li Tingting is a Chinese WHRD who campaigns for gender equality and against sexual harassment on public transport. She was arrested for planning a protest on these issues in 2015. Even in their campaigns for bodily integrity, WHRDs face unwarranted risks for undertaking their work.

For several WHRDs, concerns faced when carrying out their human rights-related activities include restrictions on their freedom of expression, particularly through social media, which had provided an unprecedented opportunity for mobilisation in the past decade. However, new restrictions on online activity, including laws that heavily regulate and criminalise activism on social media platforms, for example in Egypt, Qatar and Tanzania, place undue pressure on WHRDs who are seeking new and innovative ways of organisation.

<sup>9</sup>Report: Annual Report on Human Rights Defenders at Risk in 2017, Front Line Defenders, 2017, <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/resource-publication/annual-report-human-rights-defenders-risk-2017>

<sup>10</sup>‘CIVICUS calls for urgent investigation into death of woman human rights defender in Kenya’, CIVICUS, 2019, <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/3736-kenya-investigate-death-of-woman-human-rights-defender-with-urgency>.

<sup>11</sup>General recommendation No. 35 on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No. 19, CEDAW, 2017, [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/1\\_Global/CEDAW\\_C\\_GC\\_35\\_8267\\_E.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/1_Global/CEDAW_C_GC_35_8267_E.pdf).



WHRDs also face defamation from political and religious leadership, which pressures families of WHRDs to shame them for their work. In Oman, WHRD Habiba Al-Hinai detailed how government officials made use of her own family members to silence her, with many disowning her or unable to provide financial assistance because of fear of backlash from the government. In some cases, WHRDs are concerned about threats to their children and other members of their families aimed at forcing them to stop their human rights activities. For women with children, risks include threats of sexual violence and intimidation against their children. Egyptian human rights defender Azza Soliman indicated that her son was taken from her during protests at Tahrir Square in Cairo, while Renu Adhikari Rajbhandari from Nepal received threats of rape as well as threats that her daughter would be abducted.

Online targeting intersects with the threats that WHRDs experience, as some have indicated that online groups often share their contact details and residential addresses and encourage others to kill or attack them and their children. Mexican WHRDs working on SRHR were targeted with death threats and intimidation against their children.<sup>12</sup> The psychosocial impact of these online threats are profound: Amnesty International found that at least 41 per cent of women who had been abused online feared for their physical safety, and 24 per cent feared for their family’s safety.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, research focusing on SRHR activists found that 23 out of 25 had received multiple death threats, including videos and photo campaigns calling for attacks on defenders.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup>‘Impact of Online Violence on Women Human Rights Defenders and Women’s Organizations’, Statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, 38th session of the Human Rights Council, 2018, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23238&LangID=E>.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

“AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FOUND THAT AT LEAST 41 PER CENT OF WOMEN WHO HAD BEEN ABUSED ONLINE FEARED FOR THEIR PHYSICAL SAFETY, AND 24 PER CENT FEARED FOR THEIR FAMILY’S SAFETY. SIMILARLY, RESEARCH FOCUSING ON SRHR ACTIVISTS FOUND THAT 23 OUT OF 25 HAD RECEIVED MULTIPLE DEATH THREATS, INCLUDING VIDEOS AND PHOTO CAMPAIGNS CALLING FOR ATTACKS ON DEFENDERS.”



# PROTECTIONS ENSHRINED IN THE UN DECLARATION ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

In 2018, the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders celebrated its 20th anniversary. The Declaration provides a comprehensive outline of rights, freedoms and protections that should ensure the safety of activists and groups to participate in civic space and advance human rights without fear of repression or reprisals. The principles of the Declaration have carried relevance 20 years later, where HRDs are increasingly targeted in contexts where civic space is restricted. It highlights that there should be non-discrimination on the basis of “race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”<sup>15</sup> While this provision should entail non-discrimination in protection mechanisms, WHRDs continue to face discrimination in the types of restrictions they face and states often make blanket interventions without consideration for the gendered aspects needed in protection.

While some states think that providing security to protect WHRDs against threats can form part of their protective mechanisms, there are examples, mostly in Latin America, where states provide security to WHRDs in the form of male security guards who are tasked with following WHRDs around. Many WHRDs have reported that they feel unsafe and intimidated by this form of protection, which is insensitive to the gendered risks facing women. Further, relocation of WHRDs as a protection measure can negatively affect the work of indigenous and environmental activists whose work is closely tied to their location, community and support structures. The relocation of WHRDs - whether forced or voluntary - also poses challenges for them and their families because in some cases it means they lose support and safety provided by family members, and in other cases it means uprooting children and older family members to new areas that do not have facilities available in the primary locations. WHRDs sometimes have to sell cattle, land and other types of property to cover legal costs, leading to conflict within families and communities.

Consultative protection mechanisms require that states understand these nuances by engaging in substantive, transparent and respectful discussion with WHRDs at risk and the scholars, policy-makers, CSOs and others who have worked to support them.

Progressively, the Declaration also recognises the intimate relationship between the protection of civic space and the role of individuals, groups and associations in ensuring that the rights to the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression are protected. It is also progressive in its perhaps inadvertent recognition of the role of the global political economy in civic space, linking human rights violations to racial discrimination, colonialism and foreign domination. For example, the human rights crisis and the closing of civic space in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where numerous WHRDs have been injured or detained for exercising their rights, cannot be understood in isolation to the history of the region and the political and economic influence of foreign actors in the area. These historical and contemporary injustices also point to the role of multinational corporations and businesses in subverting human rights and working in some contexts to intimidate HRDs, particularly WHRDs, who challenge them. As detailed below, many WHRDs have been fighting against land grabs and environmental degradation by businesses and states collaborating to subvert human rights.

<sup>15</sup>Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Resolution 53/144. Office of the High Commission of Human Rights, 1998, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Defenders/Declaration/declaration.pdf>.



In Article 5, the Declaration enshrines the rights to “meet or assemble peacefully, form, join or participate in NGOs [non-governmental organisations], associations or groups, to communicate with non-governmental or intergovernmental organisations.” But as with most other provisions, states have circumvented the right to the freedom of peaceful assembly. In Nicaragua, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Zambia and Zimbabwe, women have been injured, detained, sexually assaulted and silenced while organising or participating in peaceful protests. As discussed above, women have also been disproportionately affected in restrictions on internet freedoms, negatively affecting online activism which often provides an alternative space to convene and communicate freely when it is too dangerous to do so in person. The rise of cybercrime laws in countries such as Bahrain, Egypt and Tanzania have closed one of the remaining safe spaces for women to meet in contexts where physical assembly is dangerous. Laws regulating online space and internet shutdowns are also contradictory to the rights to education, human rights advocacy, information sharing and the rights to submit information to multilateral bodies on abuses, as articulated in Article 9 of the Declaration.

The Declaration emboldens and grants legitimacy to a progressive framing of human rights discourse within countries, seeing HRDs as those setting the agenda for their priorities in human rights, rather than taking a state-centric approach. However, despite generous provisions, there is still much work to be done in the realisation of the protections of HRDs, and especially WHRDs, who face additional layers of repression beyond state sanctions. In the home, in the workplace - including within the human rights community - in society at large and as citizens or stateless people, WHRDs continue to be targeted for challenging embedded social norms. These are enforced by complex power structures of patriarchy and misogyny entrenched over centuries. The Global Fund for Women writes that restrictions are “...especially true when women human rights defenders are seen as challenging the cultural or religious stereotypes that perpetuate the role of women as gatekeepers or their families and communities honour.”<sup>16</sup>

“THE DECLARATION EMBOLDENS AND GRANTS LEGITIMACY TO A PROGRESSIVE FRAMING OF HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSE WITHIN COUNTRIES, SEEING HRDs AS THOSE SETTING THE AGENDA FOR THEIR PRIORITIES IN HUMAN RIGHTS, RATHER THAN TAKING A STATE-CENTRIC APPROACH.”

<sup>16</sup>Global Fund for Women, op. cit.

# OTHER KEY INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS

Offering more nuanced provisions, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, known as the Maputo Protocol, provides a comprehensive policy framework on the protection of women, intimately linking a gender-sensitive framework with existing UN Covenants, such as the ICESCR, ICCPR and CEDAW. Specifically, the Maputo Protocol calls for "corrective and positive" actions where women continue to face discrimination and for state parties, in Article 2a, to "enact and enforce laws to prohibit all forms of violence against women including unwanted or forced sex, whether the violence takes place in private or public."<sup>17</sup> This framework provides ground-breaking terminology attributing the ultimate responsibility to states for the protection of WHRDs in ways that require interventions in the personal, social and political spheres of their lives. The Protocol goes further, in article 2j, by calling for states to "provide adequate budgetary and other resources for the implementation and monitoring of actions aimed at preventing and eradicating violence against women."

However, often the progressive policy frameworks for the protection of WHRDs are not successful because of the lack of gender-sensitive budgeting to resource the specific needs of WHRDs who face additional layers of repression. As detailed below, WHRDs challenging corruption and non-gender-sensitive public spending are at risk of being detained and harassed for their work in systems ill-equipped and under-resourced to cater to their unique needs for protection. This provision is also critical to framing the violence that WHRDs experience as violence against women, requiring that adequate protection mechanisms be afforded to victims of gender-based violence, including safehouses and access to justice and public health services. Because the violence that WHRDs is embedded in patriarchal societal values, they are indeed experiencers of violence against women, with perpetrators covering a broad spectrum. As such, the protection of WHRDs is an intervention towards ending endemic levels of violence against women.

CEDAW also makes provisions to address the specific challenges faced by WHRDs. Under recommendation No. 35 on gender-based violence against women, crimes against WHRDs are acknowledged to be a form of violence against women. Recommendation No. 35 also proposes that the media should be actively discouraged from harmful or stereotyped portrayal of WHRDs.<sup>18</sup>

There are also numerous other dimensions of CEDAW that affect WHRDs, as highlighted in General Recommendation No. 28 on the core obligation of states parties under article 2 of the Convention and General Recommendation No. 33 on Women's Access to Justice. Dimensions of discrimination recognised by CEDAW include ethnicity, race, indigenous or minority status, class and caste, among others. Such recognition of the intersectional nature of exclusion is pertinent to the realisation of protections of WHRDs who face multiple levels of repression based on their gender, sexual orientation and how these additional dimensions make them more vulnerable to being targeted by states, families and communities.

<sup>17</sup>Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa', African Commission on Human and People's Rights, 2003, pg. 4, [http://www.achpr.org/files/instruments/women-protocol/achpr\\_instr\\_proto\\_women\\_eng.pdf](http://www.achpr.org/files/instruments/women-protocol/achpr_instr_proto_women_eng.pdf).

<sup>18</sup>UN Women, op. cit.

The gendered analysis below reveals that women, including trans and gender non-conforming women, have been targeted in ways that also heighten their silencing and restrict their abilities to advance their work. War is one such example of extensive silencing: in addition to the restrictions WHRDs face in non-conflict settings, those in conflict situations experience the risk of death or injury while carrying out their work, and not only because of their work. The rise of anti-terrorism measures and discourse has also resulted in the rise of states that use anti-terrorism laws and special court procedures to silence WHRDs who choose to dissent for the realisation of their rights. This is because the 'war on terror' "...intensified discourse on family and traditional values, and governments fear of another Arab Spring or Orange Revolution."<sup>19</sup>

A further challenge across the board is that the lack of funding has suffocated WHRD-led organisations disproportionately when compared to their counterparts. A report from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) showed that while in 2011 1.2 per cent of all funding went to women's rights organisations, this figure decreased to 0.5 per cent in 2016.<sup>20</sup>

Also concerning are reports that even within the human rights movement, WHRDs often face significant hurdles from their counterparts, some of whom may reflect attitudes of internalised patriarchy, perpetuate sexual harassment and discredit the work of their female counterparts. In South Africa, the human rights movement was rocked by allegations of sexual harassment against a senior staff member at an education rights organisation that had been unaddressed by the organisation for years.<sup>21</sup> Kvinna till Kvinna's research found that women faced counterparts culpable of "forgetting to inform women of important meetings or scheduling gatherings at night-time, making it difficult for women to attend."<sup>22</sup>

Of most concern is the emerging self-censorship WHRDs practise to protect themselves from the aforementioned risks. Because the attacks on WHRDs are insidious and overt, calling into question their very identity and role in society, many opt to disengage from online and direct activism out of fear of reprisals, torture, shaming and even death at the hands of their families, communities and the state. Lack of provision of self-care mechanisms to protect the entirety of WHRDs, including their mental health, ultimately fails these women who have risked it all. More needs to be done to prevent such self-censorship, which contributes to even more erasure, feelings of shame and isolation.

"THE RISE OF ANTI-TERRORISM MEASURES AND DISCOURSE HAS ALSO RESULTED IN THE RISE OF STATES THAT USE ANTI-TERRORISM LAWS AND SPECIAL COURT PROCEDURES TO SILENCE WHRDs WHO CHOOSE TO DISSENT FOR THE REALISATION OF THEIR RIGHTS."

"UNDER RECOMMENDATION NO. 35 ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN, CRIMES AGAINST WHRDs ARE ACKNOWLEDGED TO BE A FORM OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN."

<sup>19</sup>Kvinna till Kvinna, op. cit., pg. 27.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pg. 22.

<sup>21</sup>'The Equal Education National Council Closes the Andrews Enquiry Established in Response to the Allegations of Sexual Harassment against Former General Secretary, Tshepo Motsepe', National Council of Equal Education, 2018, <https://equaleducation.org.za/2018/12/20/4955/>.

<sup>22</sup>Kvinna till Kvinna, op. cit., pg. 16.



# CENTRING THE WORK OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

## SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RIGHTS

Despite significant challenges, WHRDs have continued to make progress against the odds. In Ireland in 2018, WHRDs working in SRHR achieved a landslide victory in which 66.4 per cent of voters chose to legalise abortion in a referendum, after many years of campaigning for the right to choose.<sup>23</sup> In Swaziland/eSwatini, the first ever Pride march was held in 2018 in support of LGBTQI rights, in a context where activists are frequently targeted and harassed. In 2010, Fiji decriminalised homosexuality and in 2018, its LGBTQI groups hosted the country's first ever Pride event, a victory of freedom of assembly for LGBTQI activists around the world.<sup>24</sup>

2018 also marked a victory for sexual orientation rights in India, when gay sex was decriminalised after years of campaigning. One major campaign was led by Lawyers' Collective and the Naz Foundation, using the law to address gender-based discrimination, including gender-based violence, sexual harassment and other sexual and reproductive rights.<sup>25</sup> Alongside this great gain for LGBTQI rights, many women in India have continued to campaign for protections against high levels of sexual violence, perpetrated not only through state structures that do not offer sufficient protections, but also in society at large. WHRD Soni Sori has dedicated her work to addressing sexual violence in central India and advocating for justice for the Adivasi people in Chhattisgarh.<sup>26</sup> In 2018, she won the International Human Rights Award from Front Line Defenders. The power of collective action was also shown when five million women formed a human chain across the southern state of Kerala.<sup>27</sup> The massive protest was organised in response to experiences of violence against women attempting to enter the Sabarimala temple in Kerala, a prominent Hindu pilgrimage site. These manifestations of solidarity help demonstrate the power of movements of women rights activists to challenge patriarchal norms and promote civic space freedoms.

"IN IRELAND IN 2018, WHRDS WORKING IN SRHR ACHIEVED A LANDSLIDE VICTORY IN WHICH 66.4 PER CENT OF VOTERS CHOSE TO LEGALISE ABORTION IN A REFERENDUM, AFTER MANY YEARS OF CAMPAIGNING FOR THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE"

<sup>23</sup>'The Irish referendum, an exercise in deliberative democracy', interview with Ivana Bacik, CIVICUS, 2018, <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/3200-reimagining-democracy-the-irish-referendum-an-exercise-in-deliberative-democracy>; 'People have power, even if they don't usually feel like they do', interview with Linda Kavanagh, CIVICUS, 2018, <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/3294-people-have-power-even-if-they-don-t-usually-feel-like-they-do>.

<sup>24</sup>'What it's like planning the first Pride in a country where it's illegal to be gay', Short List, 2018, <https://www.shortlist.com/news/pride-uganda-swaziland-fiji-antarctica-homophobia/360711>.

<sup>25</sup>'India: When justice is on your side, you have to keep on fighting', interview with Anand Grover, CIVICUS, 2019, <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/3683-india-when-justice-is-on-your-side-you-have-to-keep-on-fighting>.

<sup>26</sup>'Once an acid attack victim, Adivasi activist Soni Sori wins International Human Rights Award', Think Change India, 2018, <https://yourstory.com/2018/05/soni-sori-human-rights-award>.

<sup>27</sup>'Indian women just did a remarkable thing', The Guardian, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/03/gender-activism-india-womens-wall-sabarimala-temple-kerala>.

In Iran, a small movement has been developing of women challenging the compulsory hijab that requires women to fully cover their hair. If they do not, women face backlash that can include shaming, harassment and in some case detainment. These WHRDs are building on historical resistance since the 1970s when such propriety laws were codified. In 2018 roughly 30 women demonstrated publicly by removing their hijabs and waving them in their hands.<sup>28</sup>

In Peru, Study for the Defense of Women's Rights (DEMUS) has been campaigning for the protection of women's SRHR since 1987. In 2013, DEMUS reached a Friendly Settlement Agreement with the state in the Mamérita Mestanza case, where a mother of seven received multiple intimidating visits from officials forcing her to get a tubal ligation which she did not want. Much like for other women undergoing forced sterilisation at the time, Mestanza received inadequate pre-operative care and no medical assistance post-operation and died of complications for these reasons on 4 April 1998. The case DEMUS pursued thus sought justice for women, including Mestanza, who had undergone forced sterilisation under the government of former President Alberto Fujimori between 1990 and 2000. Many of the women affected were indigenous or peasant women from rural areas.<sup>29</sup> DEMUS also obtained a favourable statement from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), which helped to strengthen its advocacy and calls for justice.<sup>30</sup> All of these cases offer hope and strength for continued work in defence of SRHR, and broader gender equality.<sup>31</sup>

Often, victories have come from the mobilisation of strength and solidarity by WHRDs working as collectives. In the face of repression, many WHRDs must balance strategies that profile individual activists, potentially exposing them to risk, with strategies of more horizontal forms of organisation with no clear leader. As a strategy of protection, the latter approach makes it difficult for the state to target individual WHRDs. However, it is not an ideal scenario as restrictions continue even in the presence of movements.

The victories, however, come with risks. All advances have come in contexts where WHRDs face shaming, online and physical harassment and threats of imprisonment. In some cases, these threats have been followed with violence.

For WHRDs working on SRHR, there is increased stigmatisation associated with their work. In contexts where SRHRs are constrained by cultural and religious norms, WHRDs are further stigmatised by their families and friends. Stigmatisation by the state, including through restrictions on registration, police raids and confiscation of documents, opens the door to further intimidation by legitimising the use of violence against WHRDs. Gégé Katana Bukuru, who works on the rights of women and girls who have experienced sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, intentionally keeps her office papers in disarray to ensure that office searches from officials are lengthy, and police officials are unable to find sensitive information.<sup>32</sup> This buys her more time to warn partners affected by such raids of potential threats.

<sup>28</sup>'Iran: women are the thorn in the side of hardliners', interview with Jasmin Ramsey, CIVICUS, 2019, <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/3724-iran-women-are-the-thorn-in-the-sides-of-hardliners>; 'Iran: a new generation of civic-minded, courageous activists is rising', interview with Sohrab Razzaghi, CIVICUS, 2019, <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/3706-iran-a-new-generation-of-civic-minded-courageous-activists-is-rising>.

<sup>29</sup>'Advocating for women's sexual and reproductive rights in Peru, a risky fight against powerful enemies', interview with María Ysabel Cedano, CIVICUS, 2017 <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/2833-advocating-for-women-s-sexual-and-reproductive-rights-in-peru-a-risky-fight-against-powerful-enemies>.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>'Caso Mamérita Mestanza Chávez: Forced sterilizations', CEJIL, 1998, <https://cejil.org/en/caso-mamerita-mestanza-chavez>.

<sup>32</sup>Kvinna till Kvinna, op. cit., pg. 24.



For women working to protect the rights of the LGBTQI community or protect women facing violence, the risks include threats to their lives. In Honduras, Sherly Montoya was killed, with her body discovered on 4 April 2018. She advocated for the rights of transgender women as a member of Grupo de Mujeres Transexuales - Muñecas de Arcoíris. Jennifer López, a well-known Mexican trans activist who campaigned for LGBTQI rights, was murdered in May 2017. Paola Barraza was a trans WHRD who served on the board of an organisation that works on equality for the LGBTQI community in Honduras. On 24 January 2016, she was assassinated by unknown activists in front of her house.

Rights to the freedom of peaceful assembly are also often restricted by states, including through the use of public order legislation, requiring onerous permits. On 1 August 2018 in South Africa, thousands of women marched to the Union Buildings, which houses the offices of the president, to campaign against violence against women but were later charged as being in violation of their permit to protest.

Resistance against LGBTQI rights due to cultural norms and values often closes civic space for activists, even within the very bodies supposed to protect them from state violations. In 2018, after its mandate was deemed “un-African” by member states of the African Union, the observer status of the Coalition of African Lesbians, which represents 14 organisations based in 10 countries across Sub-Saharan Africa, was withdrawn by the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR). This represents a ceding of independence by the ACHPR to states that are often perpetrators of civic space restrictions and violations against human rights activists, with LGBTQI WHRDs being particularly targeted in smear campaigns by government officials. The freedom of association is also affected. In 2016, CIVICUS reported that “In Uganda, the Women’s Organization Network for Human Rights Advocacy (WONETHA), which campaigns for sex workers’ rights, had its offices raided by police officers, and documents, computers and other material were confiscated, while five staff members experienced harassment and faced criminal charges.”<sup>33</sup>

El Salvadorian WHRDs have been working to legalise abortion and ensure the rights to bodily autonomy for women. For their work, they have become targets of hate speech and misinformation campaigns by public officials. La Colectiva Feminista and La Agrupación Ciudadana, which advocate for the protection of women’s SRHR, report that 129 women had been prosecuted for abortion-related crimes, with some being charged with homicide.<sup>34</sup> Even women who have miscarried have been accused of illegal abortions and detained, as in the case of the Las 17 where seventeen women were sentenced to forty years in prison for reported miscarriages. The patriarchal values that legitimate these sentiments among politicians are also often reinforced by the faith leaders, community leaders and the media. The Serbian Orthodox Church accused women of killing more children than Hitler or Mussolini through having abortions, even though abortion is legal in Serbia. Thus, women’s bodies are continuously policed across multiple spheres in ways that call into question their rights to bodily autonomy and choice.

<sup>33</sup>‘Women human rights defenders: advancing the rights of the most marginalised and stigmatised’, Kathy Mulville, Women’s Global Network for Reproductive Rights, in State of Civil Society Report, CIVICUS, 2016, pgs. 103-104, <http://www.civicus.org/images/documents/SOCS2016/Women%20human%20rights%20defenders-%20advancing%20the%20rights%20of%20the%20most%20marginalised%20and%20stigmatised.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup>‘El Salvador and ‘Las 17’, New York Times, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/03/opinion/el-salvador-and-las-17.html>.

<sup>35</sup>Kvinna till Kvinna, op. cit., pg. 30.

“129 WOMEN HAD BEEN PROSECUTED FOR ABORTION-RELATED CRIMES, WITH SOME BEING CHARGED WITH HOMICIDE. EVEN WOMEN WHO HAVE MISCARRIED HAVE BEEN ACCUSED OF ILLEGAL ABORTIONS AND DETAINED, AS IN THE CASE OF THE LAS 17 WHERE SEVENTEEN WOMEN WERE SENTENCED TO FORTY YEARS IN PRISON FOR REPORTED MISCARRIAGES.”

## ENVIRONMENTAL, LAND AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES’ RIGHTS

Climate change and environmental degradation continue disproportionately to affect women who are indigenous or from rural areas. Often, women are custodians of their communities’ land and resources, which also face threats from corporate interests. Women are also systematically marginalised when their land and livelihoods are situated far from seats of political and economic power, exposing them to restrictions that are often undocumented or disregarded in international fora. Despite these great challenges, WHRDs working on environmental, land and indigenous peoples’ rights have continued to advocate for justice - and international frameworks are catching up. The Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean, known as the Escazú Agreement, was adopted in March 2018.<sup>36</sup> Thanks to civil society’s extensive involvement in the negotiations, the ground-breaking agreement requires that environmental protection is more closely linked to the protection of environmental rights defenders, ensuring they have access to environmental and human rights-related justice from states that are party to the Agreement.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, reiterated the integral role that the protection of HRDs, and particularly WHRDs, plays in broader goals to combat climate change. In September 2018, she launched the For All Coalition to integrate human rights and gender equality throughout all major multilateral environmental agreements, including the Paris Agreement under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.<sup>38</sup> The Coalition is an important step in highlighting the ways in which climate change disproportionately affect WHRDs, and also recognises the role of local and indigenous communities of women in the realisation of environmental protection. These international and regional agreements are critical first steps towards shaping national and local protection mechanisms to recognise the legitimacy and ensure the safety of WHRDs. Unfortunately, lack of implementation and impunity by states often leave environmental, land and indigenous peoples’ WHRDs vulnerable to further threats.

This trend is observable across multiple regions, including in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the USA. There has been a notable increase in threats, violence and killings of WHRDs in Asia and Latin America. Front line Defenders highlighted that in 2017, 80 per cent of killings took place in four countries: Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and the Philippines.<sup>39</sup> The risks were more pronounced for WHRDs working on land and environmental rights. 2017 was the deadliest year on record for environmental WHRDs, with 200 killed.<sup>40</sup> Among those killed were Elisa Badayos, Mia Manuelita Mascariñas-Green and Leonela Tapdasan Pesadilla from the

<sup>36</sup>Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean’, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2018, [https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/43583/1/S1800428\\_en.pdf](https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/43583/1/S1800428_en.pdf).

<sup>37</sup>‘Escazú: a milestone on the road to ending Latin America’s environmental conflicts’, interview with Marcos Orellana, CIVICUS, 2019, <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/3725-escazu-a-milestone-on-the-road-to-ending-latin-america-s-environmental-conflicts>; ‘Escazú: the work of civil society made a huge difference’, interview with Áida Gamboa, CIVICUS, 2019, <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/3728-escazu-the-work-of-civil-society-made-a-huge-difference>.

<sup>38</sup>‘FOR ALL Coalition: For the Promotion of Gender Equality and Human Rights in Environment Agreements Statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet’, Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, 2018, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23687&LangID=E>.

<sup>39</sup>Report: Annual Report on Human Rights Defenders at Risk in 2017’, Front Line Defenders, 2017, <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/resource-publication/annual-report-human-rights-defenders-risk-2017>

<sup>40</sup>‘Attacks on Women Human Rights Defenders’, Women Engage for a Common Future, 2017, [http://www.wecf.eu/english/press/releases/2017/12/PressRelease\\_AttacksWomenHumanRightsDefenders.php](http://www.wecf.eu/english/press/releases/2017/12/PressRelease_AttacksWomenHumanRightsDefenders.php); ‘200 Environmental Women Defenders Killed’, IPEN, 2017, <https://ipen.org/news/200-environmental-women-defenders-killed-2017-activists>.



Philippines. Other WHRDs working on environmental issues who were killed include Emilsen Manyoma from Colombia, Laura Leonor Vásquez Pineda from Guatemala and Aysin Büyüknohutçu from Turkey. They were part of a growing list of WHRDs who paid with their lives for attempting to realise environmental rights in their contexts.

“2017 WAS THE DEADLIEST YEAR ON RECORD FOR ENVIRONMENTAL WHRDS, WITH 200 KILLED.”

In 2016, Berta Cáceras was assassinated for her role in defending the land rights of members of COPINH. Her daughter, Bertha Zuñiga, survived an assassination attempt on 30 June 2017 after being elected as the new leader of COPINH. Civic space is also under threat for WHRDs working on environmental justice in other parts of the world. In Uganda, since 2012, over 24 organisations focusing on land rights and environmental justice, women’s rights and corruption have been attacked. The attacks have resulted in injuries and intimidation of civil society personnel.<sup>41</sup> In April 2018, Tran Thi Xuan, a Vietnamese activist, was arrested after organising protests against corporate and government negligence following the water pollution crisis caused by the Formosa Ha Tinh Steel plant in 2016.<sup>42</sup> Despite the firm accepting liability for the loss of marine life, Xuan and seven others were charged with attempting to overthrow the people’s administration and are serving lengthy sentences.<sup>43</sup>

In the Philippines, President Duterte has used anti-terrorism and what Cristina Palabay, Karapatan Secretary General, calls “de facto martial” laws to crack down on environmental, land and indigenous peoples’ HRDs.<sup>44</sup> Since 2001, 47 Karapatan human rights workers have been killed for their work of attempting to document violations. By September 2018, 33 WHRDs had been killed since President Duterte came to power in June 2016, including Haide Flores, Teresita Pesadilla and Jean Plabial, advocates for peasant rights.<sup>45</sup> In September 2018, Mariam Acob was killed in her home. She was a grantee of the Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Rights and a paralegal at Kawahib Moro Human Rights Alliance, a member organisation of Karapatan. They counted among the 760 HRDs killed between 2001 and December 2018.<sup>46</sup>

In these moments of violent crackdown, it is essential that supporters of women’s rights activists also laud and recognise the work accomplished by WHRDs, intentionally challenging attempts to erase or discredit their work. In 2018, Joan Carling received the Champion of the Earth Award for defending indigenous and environmental rights across Asia.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, LeeAnn Walters won the Goldman Environmental Foundation Award for her work exposing the Flint Water Crisis in USA, where lead poisoning occurred over a 17-month period.<sup>48</sup> Another recipient of the award, Francia Marquez, organised a 10-day march of 80 women from La Toma in Colombia to protest against illegal mining on their ancestral land.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>41</sup>Uganda: CIVICUS condemns another break-in at the office of HRAFP, CIVICUS, 2018, <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/media-releases/3076-uganda-civcus-condemns-another-break-in-at-the-office-of-hrapf>.

<sup>42</sup>‘Eight Members of Brotherhood for Democracy Found Guilty and Sentenced’, Front Line Defenders, 2018, <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/eight-members-brotherhood-democracy-found-guilty-and-sentenced-0>.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Philippines: all positive developments have been driven by civil society’s persistence’, interview with Cristina Palabay, CIVICUS, 2019, <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/3722-philippines-all-positive-developments-have-been-driven-by-civil-society-s-persistence>.

<sup>45</sup>‘Groups condemn attacks against women human rights defenders.’ Phil Star Global, 2018, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2018/11/29/1872794/groups-condemn-attacks-against-women-human-rights-defenders#Jebzwqris7ZdY8D9.99>.

<sup>46</sup>Interview with Cristina Palabay, op. cit.

<sup>47</sup>Front Line Defenders, op. cit.

<sup>48</sup>‘Michigan woman wins environmental award for Flint water activism’, UPI, 2018, [https://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/US/2018/04/23/Michigan-woman-wins-environmental-award-for-Flint-water-activism/6621524495632/](https://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2018/04/23/Michigan-woman-wins-environmental-award-for-Flint-water-activism/6621524495632/).

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.



## BUSINESS IN HUMAN RIGHTS AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Economic justice and public spending accountability have become critical areas of focus for gender activists, given the disproportionate effects that socioeconomic inequalities have on women and gender non-conforming people. The lack of accountable or participatory public spending has led to decreased investments in safe sanitation in South Africa, resulting in violent attacks, rapes and murders of several women and girls while they were using ablution facilities.<sup>50</sup> The siphoning through corruption of public resources that could support the realisation of basic human rights remains an advocacy challenge for WHRDs working to increase state accountability. This work entails risks. In Zambia, Laura Miti, Executive Director of the Alliance for Community Action, has been an active advocate for democracy for over 25 years. In September 2017, Laura was arrested alongside five others for protesting for greater public spending accountability, after the state procured 42 fire trucks at a cost of US\$42 million. In a triumph of justice, they were acquitted on 21 December 2018 after the magistrate overseeing their case emphasised that citizens have the right to assemble and should not be intimidated by police to prevent them exercising this right.<sup>51</sup>

Often, economic injustices are perpetuated by non-state actors enabled by a system of oppression that directly targets vulnerable communities. Women who are indigenous, peasant or migrant workers are especially subject to business human rights violations, and the impunity that surrounds these. Private sector human rights violations are often sanctioned by states, further emboldening these businesses to target WHRDs. Bai Bibyaon Bigkay has fought alongside her community for indigenous land and environmental rights in the Pantaron Mountain Range in the Philippines since the 1980s. Her community experiences violence and

<sup>50</sup>‘Khayelitsha toilet killing case: State accused of ‘ambush’ evidence strategy’, News24, 2017, <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/khayelitsha-toilet-killing-case-state-accused-of-ambush-evidence-strategy-20170816>.

<sup>51</sup>‘Laura Miti, Pilato and other Protestors Acquitted’, Lusaka Times, 2018, <https://www.lusakatimes.com/2018/12/21/laura-miti-pilato-and-other-protestors-acquitted>.



forced removals from their ancestral land by mining and logging companies.<sup>52</sup> According to the Global Fund for Women, 70 indigenous people have been killed in the Philippines since 2010.<sup>53</sup> Despite land grabs and the risk of threats, Bai Bibyaon Bigkay has continued to mobilise her people and transfer the skills of resistance to the next generation.

In Thailand in October 2018, Thammakaset Co. Ltd filed a defamation complaint against Sutharee Wannasiri, a WHRD working as a human rights consultant, and Nan Win, a migrant worker from Myanmar. The defamation claim stems from online comments Sutharee made in 2017 after the company filed an earlier defamation complaint against 14 workers, including Nan Win, when they raised labour rights violations with authorities in Thailand. According to the International Federation for Human Rights, “Violations included being paid less than the minimum wage, failure to pay overtime wages, and confiscation of their identity documents, including passports.” If convicted, Sutharee could receive a jail sentence of up to six years and a fine of up to 600,000 Thai Baht (approx. US\$18,900).<sup>54</sup> The criminalisation of defamation in Thailand helps to silence vulnerable groups and penalise WHRDs advocating for human rights. The rights of marginalised migrant workers and WHRDs, often related to their safety, livelihoods and dignity, have been made secondary to the reputation of Thammakaset.

Agnes Kharshiing is president of the Civil Society Women’s Organisation, working in rural India for the realisation of women and children’s rights and calling for an end to corruption. Her work has also included the documentation of illegal mining and transport of coal in Meghalaya’s East Jaintia Hills district, where up to 18 right to information activists have been assaulted or killed since the start of 2018.<sup>55</sup> In late 2018, she was assaulted alongside Amita Sangma for documenting the illegal coal mining that is being used to extract Meghalaya’s 600 million tonnes of coal reserves.<sup>56</sup> This documentation can be used to bring justice for the district’s people, who are supposed to be protected under a 2014 ban on rat-hole or illegal mining in the area by the National Green Tribunal. However, the mines are controlled by influential businessmen and politicians who often act in defiance of the ban and respond to threats through violence, intimidation or killings.<sup>57</sup> After the attack on Agnes, civil society and the political opposition rallied behind her, calling for justice to be served on the attackers. So far, however, only two people have been detained in connection with the attack.

“ACCORDING TO THE  
GLOBAL FUND FOR  
WOMEN, 70 INDIGENOUS  
PEOPLE HAVE BEEN  
KILLED IN THE  
PHILIPPINES SINCE 2010.”

## ELECTORAL PROCESSES AND POLITICS

The rise of the right-wing across the world has left analysts and policy-makers surprised and unprepared for their sweeping wins during elections. These wins not only represent a shift to nationalist and populist politics, but also the closing of civic space, with misogyny and violence targeted against women and the LGBTQI community. Brazil’s 2018 election demonstrated how far-right politicians can assume power in more established democracies, often supported by large pockets of society that hold and enforce their views. President Jair Bolsonaro ran an aggressive campaign that encouraged violence, directly targeting women, indigenous and Afro-descent communities, LGBTQI activists and civil society more broadly.<sup>58</sup> In the Brazilian context of high rates of femicide and attacks on LGBTQI activists, police brutality that directly targets people of Afro-Caribbean and indigenous descent, and a failing justice system, campaign statements further added to the multiple tiers of societal restrictions WHRDs face. Reports indicated that in a 10-day period of campaigning there had been over 50 attacks by Bolsonaro supporters against opponents.<sup>59</sup>

The costs of participation remain high for WHRDs seeking to stand office. Marielle Franco was an influential black lesbian councillor advocating for the rights of the most marginalised in Brazilian society. She fearlessly highlighted the disproportionate levels of killings and police brutality targeting black people in the favelas, and directly challenged conservative politics that perpetuated gender, class and race inequality. In 2018, while travelling in her car, she was killed by two armed suspects, both of whom reportedly had ties to Bolsonaro.<sup>60</sup>

Beatriz Borges is the Executive Director of the Justice and Peace Centre, where she works to defend democratic values and human rights in Venezuela. Her work and that of her colleagues has consistently called attention to the massive violations of human rights enforced by Venezuelan authorities, including during the 2018 election campaign, in which the government failed to offer “the minimum guarantees and conditions necessary to be considered fair, equitable, transparent and respectful of human rights.”<sup>61</sup> This was demonstrated by the killing and detainment of activists deemed threats by the state. In February 2018, WHRD and human rights lawyer Geraldine Chacon was held incommunicado by the state and continues to face charges that limit her ability to leave the country and increase her risks of rearrest.<sup>62</sup>

Under the presidency of Abdull Yameen, civic space in the Maldives rapidly deteriorated between 2013 and 2018.<sup>63</sup> In the run up to the September 2018 elections, restrictions included the arrest of prominent politicians and the imposition of a state of emergency that granted the government sweeping powers to crack down on the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Changes to the Associations Regulation resulted in limitations on access to funding for CSOs, while over 141 protesters were brutally attacked and detained on 16 March 2018, and protesters faced up to 13 years in prison under the Anti-Terrorism Act. Activists at the

<sup>52</sup> ‘Defend her Rights to Ancestral Land’, Global Fund for Women, <https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/defendher/#baibi-byaonligkayanbigkay>.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Thailand: Judicial harassment of Ms. Sutharee Wannasiri and Mr. Nan Win’, International Federation for Human Rights, 2018, <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/thailand-judicial-harassment-of-ms-sutharee-wannasiri-and-mr-nan-win>.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Who is Agnes Karshiing’, The Hindu, 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/who-is-agnes-kharshiing/article25527147.ece>.

<sup>56</sup> ‘In Photos: As Activist Recovers from Attack, Illegal Coal Mining Continues in Meghalaya’, The Wire, 2018, <https://thewire.in/rights/meghalaya-illegal-coal-mining-agnes-kharshiing>.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Brazil: the new government has come to establish a regressive, anti-rights agenda’, interview with Paula Raccanello Storto, CIVICUS, 2019, <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/3714-brazil-the-new-government-has-come-to-establish-a-regressive-anti-rights-agenda>.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> ‘Suspects in Marielle Franco’s Murder Have Ties to Bolsonaro Family’, Vice Brazil, 2019, [https://broadly.vice.com/en\\_us/article/yw8zwv/suspects-in-marielle-francos-murder-have-ties-to-bolsonaro-family](https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/yw8zwv/suspects-in-marielle-francos-murder-have-ties-to-bolsonaro-family).

<sup>61</sup> ‘Venezuela: crisis demands a combined humanitarian and human rights response’, interview with Beatriz Borges, CIVICUS, 2019, <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/3704-venezuela-crisis-demands-a-combined-humanitarian-and-human-rights-response>.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Stand with Geraldine Chacón’, Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/take-action/venezuela-geraldine-chacon>.

<sup>63</sup> ‘Repression in Paradise: Assault on the Rule of Law and Fundamental Freedoms in the Maldives’, CIVICUS and Voice of Women, 2018, <https://www.civicus.org/documents/PolicyBrief.MaldivesApril2018.pdf>.



Voice of Women Maldives campaigned extensively to highlight the extent of these civic space restrictions, placing a special focus on information-sharing for women ahead of the elections. In a surprising outcome, Abdull Yameen lost the election to Ibrahim Mohamed Solih and several HRDs have since been released.

Positively, there has also been an opening of space for civil society in Ethiopia and new opportunities for WHRDs to participate in the process of reform.<sup>64</sup> Meaza Ashenafi, the former Director of the Ethiopian Women's Lawyers Association, which was Ethiopia's most prominent women's rights group, has been appointed as the country's first female Chief Justice. These developments came after years of oppressive rule in which many WHRDs campaigned for greater protections for women in closed civic space. The provision that no more of 10 per cent of funding for CSOs should come from foreign bodies gave the state broad control over the activities of CSOs and made them dependent on state resources in trying to advocate for women's rights, at odds with customary laws that stood in contradiction to national policy. As Ethiopia reforms, WHRDs will continue their work, recognising that while participation in national politics is important, so too are provisions to protect grassroots women's rights activists at the coalface of change.

The crisis of democracy is evident not just in the global south, but also through the rise of right wing, conservative and populist forces across the world. The election of far-right governments represents a threat to global south civil society, which may have its resources cut or face additional thematic restrictions not in line with conservative values. In the USA, policies of the Trump administration are actively seeking to curtail SRHR for WHRDs: the 2017 US policy, 'Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance', requires that CSOs that receive US funding do not engage in abortion-related activities.<sup>65</sup> In Europe the rise of the right wing has also resulted in policies to cut social spending and curb migration that have negatively and disproportionately affected women, including in France, Poland and the UK. Many far-right and nationalist political movements also have patriarchal and traditionalist views as core pillars of their work, often based on narratives that romanticise an imperial past.<sup>66</sup>

The nodes of oppression across the world are more closely aligning, but so too is the resistance embodied by the feminist movement. Observing this trend, Lopa Banerjee, Director of the Civil Society Division at UN Women, writes:

"Democracy is failing us today. Mostly it is failing the women of the world, the young, the poor, the refugees, the asylum seekers, those living on the margins yearning for peace and hope... Against all odds, people, in particular, women, are organising and mobilising, on the streets, in communities and on the internet, to demand justice, equality and dignity, so long denied. And so, we find ourselves in the #MeToo moment. From #MeToo to #Time'sUp to #NiUnaMenos to FeesMustFall to BlackLivesMatter to #JusticeForNoura to successful campaigns against 'marry your rapist' laws, all over the world, in different ways and across different issues, this is a moment of reckoning by women. From Ireland to Turkey to Lebanon to India to South Africa to Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, the United States, Sudan and in a multitude of other countries, women are speaking out at scale and upturning entrenched discriminatory norms that normalise, accept and justify discrimination against women and girls."<sup>67</sup>

<sup>64</sup>'Ethiopia: the need for comprehensive, speedy and inclusive reform', Fisseha Tekle, Amnesty International, in 'Democracy for All: beyond a crisis of imagination', CIVICUS, 2018, <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/re-imagining-democracy/stories-from-the-frontlines/3279-ethiopia-the-need-for-comprehensive-speedy-and-inclusive-reform>.

<sup>65</sup>'Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders: Report by the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders', United Nations Human Rights Council, 2019, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G19/004/97/PDF/G1900497.pdf?OpenElement>.

<sup>66</sup>'Britain's imperial fantasies have given us Brexit', The Guardian, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/03/imperial-fantasies-brexit-theresa-may>.

<sup>67</sup>'Bending the arc of democracy', Lopa Banerjee, UN Women, in 'Democracy for All', op. cit., <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/re-imagining-democracy/overviews/3345-bending-the-arc-of-democracy>.



## WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN CONFLICT ZONES

Across all these cross-cutting thematic areas, conflict and war negatively impact on the work and wellbeing of WHRDs. Added to the heightened risks of harassment, death and violence, conflict - and often times when peace is being mediated - erases the work of WHRDs even further by placing them in harm's way - through targeting by weapons, cutting off resources and increasing precariousness - even while they do their work, in addition to the threats they face because of their work.

In December 2013, two WHRDs, Samira Khalil and Razan Zaitounh, were kidnapped alongside Wa'el Hamada and Nazem Hamadi in Douma, Syria. Razan had a long history of writing on human rights in Syria, documenting on the ground reports at the start of the large-scale protests that took place in 2011. She frequently received threats and her home was raided in May 2011, after which her brother-in-law and husband were arrested for three months.<sup>68</sup> Across the world, her work is still shared, despite attempts to silence her, but her whereabouts and condition, and those of the others kidnapped with her, remain unknown.

<sup>68</sup>'Syria: We remember Razan, Samira, Nazem and Wa'el five years after their kidnapping', CIVICUS, 2018, <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/3663-syria-we-remember-razan-samira-nazem-and-wa-el-five-years-after-their-kidnapping>.



During the conflict in Myanmar, sexual violence and rape were used as weapons of war, targeting women with little or no recourse to justice. This gendered crime against women compounds the discrimination that survivors of sexual violence experience in an already patriarchal society built on silencing and shaming women. Tin Tin Nyo and the Burmese Women's Union have been advocating for greater police and military action in ending sexual violence targeting women. They have also been campaigning for greater women's representation in peace processes, from which women have been systematically excluded from participating. Advocating for women's rights was not seen as a priority in the peace process: when working at Women's League Burma, Tin Tin and colleagues planned to release a ground-breaking report on sexual violence in Myanmar, but were discouraged by politicians who saw this as "derailing the peace process."<sup>69</sup> Regardless of this political pressure, the WHRDs released the report, paving the way for their voices to be heard as part of the peace process.

The pressures of global restrictions have not stopped international, regional and local movements of WHRDs despite the great risks. For decades Saudi Arabia has oppressed and silenced WHRDs who call for an end to the male guardianship system that curtails the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, expression and movement for women across the country. Many WHRDs have gone through great risks to escape the closed space that polices most aspects of their lives, and many have remained in the country and continued to support the call for human rights. In early 2018, several WHRDs were detained by Saudi authorities for their activism. Those detained included women who had campaigned for the right to drive, and have since been subjected to torture, sexual violence and intimidation, even after the driving ban was lifted. An international coalition of WHRDs has been actively campaigning for their safe release and for an end to the male guardianship system, garnering more than 243,000 signatures online. The campaign has particularly targeted countries that continued to sell arms to the country despite the use of arms on civilians domestically, and as part of the proxy war Saudi Arabia has been fighting in Yemen, contributing to a humanitarian crisis and further violence against WHRDs. This added level of scrutiny has resulted in several countries ceasing their sale of arms to Saudi Arabia, but the work continues to support the courage of Saudi women's rights activists still detained by a violent regime.

In a victory of recognition, Nadia Murad won the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize for her work as a 'powerful and outspoken survivor' of sexual violence in northern Iraq where countless women have been targeted.<sup>70</sup> Murad is also a victim of war crimes, and has spoken up on behalf of other victims, including young Yazidi girls and women who have been subject to sexual violence and war by the Islamic State of Iraq (ISIS) since 2014. Her courage has shed light on the systemic nature of abuse that has been used as part of a war strategy.<sup>71</sup> It is critical that her work is acknowledged to highlight the ways in which sexual violence is weaponised in conflict.

"THE PRESSURES OF GLOBAL RESTRICTIONS HAVE NOT STOPPED INTERNATIONAL, REGIONAL AND LOCAL MOVEMENTS OF WHRDS DESPITE THE GREAT RISKS."

<sup>69</sup>'Tin Tin Nyo', Global Fund for Women, <https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/defendher/#tintinnyo>.

<sup>70</sup>'Nobel Peace Prize: Congolese doctor and Iraqi survivor recognised for efforts to end wartime sexual violence', interview with Susannah Sirkin, CIVICUS, 2018, <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/3660-nobel-peace-prize-congolese-doctor-and-iraqi-survivor-recognised-for-efforts-to-end-wartime-sexual-violence>.

<sup>71</sup>'The Nobel Peace Prize for 2018', The Nobel Prize, 2018, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2018/press-release/>.

## THE WAY FORWARD

Given the numerous risks entailed in meeting in person around the world, it is important that WHRDs have online space continuously available to them as a core part of their mobilisation strategy. Digital space has, for example, opened new channels for engagement in the MENA region where women are still heavily restricted from equal participation in civic space.

There is a need to condemn strongly the reprisals WHRDs face for participating in UN processes, and for engaging with other CSOs. Travel-bans and house arrests have heavily curtailed the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression of WHRDs by limiting their freedom of movement and curbing their participation in critical accountability processes. A UN report on reprisals in 2017 documented that reprisals had increased from 20 to 29 cases in that year.<sup>72</sup>

Further, threats against the children and families of WHRDs must be strongly condemned, for being in violation of the rights of the child, while also serving to silence dissent by WHRDs. States that make such threats against WHRDs must be strongly criticised for this behaviour.

Finally, any form of physical or sexual violence against WHRDs must be recognised as a form of violence against women, and such repression should be subject to appropriate channels of condemnation, requiring scrutiny from the international community. Separating attacks on WHRDs from broader violence against women ultimately fails to recognise the layers of exclusion and risk that exist even within the human rights community.

<sup>72</sup>'Cooperation with the United Nations, its representatives and mechanisms in the field of human rights', UN Human Rights Council, 2018, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/247/10/PDF/G1824710.pdf?OpenElement>.



# RECOMMENDATIONS TO NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

States must implement <b>gender-sensitive protection mechanisms</b> that account for multiple dimensions, including the race, class, caste and indigenous status of WHRDs.	All states must <b>ratify and implement CEDAW</b> , without reservation, and pay specific attention to resourcing its implementation, as per the Maputo Protocol, to ensure effectiveness in protecting women and specifically WHRDs.	WHRDs must be protected from reprisals for engaging in UN processes and civil society processes abroad, and <b>governments that commit any form of reprisals should be condemned</b> in the strongest terms.	There must be <b>improved preventative action</b> , especially from the police, when WHRDs report threats and intimidation.	<b>SRHR should be upheld</b> and all restrictions that WHRDs face on registering associations to advance these rights should be removed.
The <b>slandering, stigmatisation and delegitimisation of WHRDs should be strongly condemned</b> , and greater accountability should be ensured of those in power who call for violence against women.	<b>Anti-terrorism and cybercrime laws must be amended</b> in line with the ICCPR, ICESCR, UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and all other progressive international frameworks that recognise and protect the work of WHRDs.	States must <b>conduct training and sensitisation programmes for law enforcement agencies</b> , members of the judiciary and staff of national human rights institutions on the particular challenges faced by WHRDs, and develop national action plans for the protection of WHRDs.	States must work to <b>enable regional and international human rights mechanisms</b> , including the UN Human Rights Council, IACHR and the ACHPR, to ensure the free and equal participation of WHRDs in their work.	<b>Protections offered to WHRDs must include components of self-care and access to social protection</b> , as per CEDAW guidelines on preventing violence against women. Laws must be amended to recognise threats against WHRDs as physical, structural, social and psychological violence against women. Social protection should include protections against self-censorship.

# RECOMMENDATIONS TO CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society actors and leaders must <b>undergo rigorous sensitisation to ensure that WHRDs are able to participate equally and freely without structural or physical impediments to their work</b> . Protection mechanisms, such as anti-sexual harassment and gender discrimination plans, must be developed, resourced and implemented across organisations, with a particular focus on intersectional feminism.	Because governments and perpetrators of violations against WHRDs are using similar campaigning and advocacy strategies, <b>new tools must be developed to test new approaches for supporting the work of WHRDs more broadly in society</b> . Greater attention must be paid to shifting public discourse around WHRDs and creating an enabling environment for them to continue their work without fear of repression.	<b>Greater attention must be paid to elevating the work of WHRDs in contexts of erasure and silencing</b> . This must include a balanced focus on the restrictions that they face and the often-unacknowledged work that they continue to do. These considerations must be balanced against the risks of identifying individual actors that makes them vulnerable to threats; advocacy campaigns must actively seek consent.
--	--	--

Policy Brief by Masana Ndinga-Kanga, Crisis Response Fund and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Advocacy Lead at CIVICUS. Thanks to Josef Benedict, Nohad Hajj, David Kode, Lesego Moshikaro and Lyndal Rowlands for their invaluable contributions in making this brief possible. Edited by Andrew Firmin.

COVER IMAGE: Protest over the increase in tuition fees at Wits University. GettyImages

OTHER: Pixabay; Wikimedia.org



# CONTACT US



[civicus.org](https://civicus.org)



[info@civicus.org](mailto:info@civicus.org)



[/CIVICUS](https://www.facebook.com/CIVICUS)



[@CIVICUSalliance](https://twitter.com/CIVICUSalliance)