



## **Civicus Submission to UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders on the challenges faced by women human rights defenders (WHRDs) working in conflict, post-conflict or crisis-affected settings to inform the report to the UN General Assembly on WHRDs, Peace and Security**

### Introduction

CIVICUS welcomes the opportunity to provide input in the report on the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders focusing on the challenges faced by women human rights defenders (WHRDs) working in conflict, post-conflict or crisis-affected settings.

With the increase in conflicts, human rights defenders (HRDs) continue to operate in dangerous situations and particularly WHRDs who are part of the frontline and first responders in conflict, post-conflict or crisis settings. In this submission CIVICUS provides examples of risks, challenges and restrictions that WHRDs face while operating in these circumstances. The examples are drawn from data collected by CIVICUS Monitor as well as other additional reports published by CIVICUS since 2019<sup>1</sup>.

We have sought to respond to the given questions by discussing the following:

1. Civil Society actions focusing on WHRDs;
2. Trends and examples illustrating the challenges of WHRDs working in conflict, post-conflict and crisis-affected settings;
3. Recommendations on protection strategies and risk mitigation measures addressed to national governments, UN bodies, and civil society.

The list of examples provided in this submission should not be considered as exhaustive.

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<sup>1</sup> The CIVICUS Monitor is a collaborative research initiative and online tool that tracks civic space developments in 197 countries and territories as well as analysis on trends and threats facing civil society at the global level. For further information on CIVICUS Monitor methodology, please check

[https://civicusmonitor.contentfiles.net/media/documents/MethodologypaperMarch\\_2023.pdf](https://civicusmonitor.contentfiles.net/media/documents/MethodologypaperMarch_2023.pdf)

The CIVICUS Monitor also publishes the Watchlist, which identifies countries where intervention is still possible to prevent further deterioration in civic freedoms. Please see <https://monitor.civicus.org/watchlist/>. In addition, CIVICUS also recently launched the CIVICUS Lens, a rolling commentary and analysis initiative that provides timely analysis of global events related to civil society and citizen activism, including activism of WHRDs. Please consult <https://lens.civicus.org/>

## Civil society action and WHRDs in conflict, post-conflict and crisis settings

CIVICUS has conducted various research and convened a number of events that focused specifically on WHRDs, both directly and through members. The work and impact of WHRDs has been documented in the [2023 State of Civil Society \(SOCS\) Report](#), which shows that women's movements continued advocating for change while working to support survivors of gender-based violence and mobilising in outrage against acts of violence and failures to hold perpetrators accountable.<sup>2</sup>

CIVICUS [research](#) shows that 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. However, restrictions continue even in the presence of movements and challenges are exacerbated in conflict, post-conflict, and crisis settings.

CIVICUS refers to [WHRDs](#) as individuals/activists and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) working primarily to protect and promote women's rights, all cis-gendered, heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, queer, gender nonconforming and trans women advocating for human rights across a broad spectrum including human rights in conflict, post-conflict, or occupation situations.<sup>3</sup> The period 2020-2022 has been marked with increases in conflict including the Ukraine / Russia war, [Ethiopia](#), [Afghanistan](#), Myanmar, Venezuela, Syria and more recently the unrest in [Sudan](#) the monitoring and documenting of violations and repressions on WHRDs specifically has been led by civil society. Several strategies have been used to achieve impact: direct action, including protests, campaigns, solidarity statements, and [call to actions](#) have been used to highlight and push for action regarding WHRDs. In addition, CIVICUS tracks violations through tools and publications such as the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), [State of Civil Society Reports](#), and campaigns such as the [#StandAsMyWitness](#) where researchers, CSOs, and individuals contribute and make use as key sources of information. Around the world, civic groups that focus on WHRDs in conflict, post conflict and crisis situations have been mobilised to articulate and make aware of the circumstances that they operate in and the risks and challenges they continue to face including the increased number of violations specifically, working in contexts where patriarchy is entrenched in society and the systems, sexual (including rape) and gender based violence being caused by police, the military, religious and community leaders.

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<sup>2</sup> Please also see the following section in the CIVICUS 2016 State of Civil Society Report:

<http://www.civicus.org/images/documents/SOCS2016/Women%20human%20rights%20defenders-%20advancing%20the%20rights%20of%20the%20most%20marginalised%20and%20stigmatised.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Please consult [https://www.civicus.org/documents/WHRD\\_PolicyBrief.pdf](https://www.civicus.org/documents/WHRD_PolicyBrief.pdf), p.4. Issues WHRDs focus on encompass 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; and public spending accountability.

## Context, Contribution, risks and support to WHRDs working in conflict, post-conflict and crisis situations

Research on the civil society landscape provides information and analysis on the latest human rights violations and publications such as the [State of Civil Society Reports](#) and [People Power Under Attack](#) provide a unique perspective on the challenges experienced by CSOs and activists across the globe. Tracking of violations through the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), and advocacy campaigns such as [#StandAsMyWitness](#) gives HRDs the visibility and space to be profiled.

Advocacy work, as well as the collection of information for research through local, national and regional partners, presents risks to HRDs and CSOs. Research is compiled through input from various HRDs and CSOs on the ground collected through interviews, review of articles, statements, write-ups and statistics from different countries. According to the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), countries rated as closed are countries which are currently in conflict which include Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Eritrea, Djibouti and Equatorial Guinea, whilst countries in post-conflict and in crisis are mostly rated repressed and obstructed. CIVICUS has highlighted the [top ten violations on civic freedoms](#) as: harassment, detained protestors, intimidation, restrictive laws, attacks on journalists, protest disruption, censorship, prosecution of HRDs, and detention of HRDs and journalists. Whilst these violations occur in any context, they tend to be more prominent in conflict, post conflict and crisis situations. The latest [CIVICUS SOCS Report](#) shows that restrictions on groups advocating for women's rights and WHRDs feature in 36 percent of updates as they often face more severe pressure than other groups and HRDs.

## Trends and examples illustrating the challenges WHRDs face in conflict, post-conflict or crisis situations

CIVICUS findings show that WHRDs are confronted with specific challenges in conflict, post-conflict settings, and crisis settings. From a review of CIVICUS sources<sup>4</sup>, as well as external sources, the most severe risks WHRDs are exposed include - but are not limited to - arbitrary detention, sexual violence, harassment, abduction, smear campaigns and stigmatisation, and killing. Below are some illustrative examples from various regions.

### 1. Abduction, arbitrary detention and threat of detention

In [Afghanistan](#), activists who have been critical of the Taliban have faced arrest and unlawful detention. Women have been the main force behind civil or non-violent resistance to the Taliban; however, the Taliban suppressed the protests, and there are reports of the Taliban detaining women protesters. There has also been abduction of WHRDs by the Taliban with impunity. In January 2022, Taliban gunmen raided the homes of women's rights activists in Kabul, beating and arresting female campaigners following their involvement in demonstrations. During the same month, WHRDs Tamana

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<sup>4</sup> The CIVICUS Monitor <https://monitor.civicus.org/> including the Watchlist <https://monitor.civicus.org/watchlist/>; select country reports <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-center/reports-publications/more-reports>; and the CIVICUS Lens <https://lens.civicus.org>.

Zaryab Paryani and Parwana Ibrahimkhel were abducted from their homes in Kabul. Another WHRD, Mursal Ayar, was similarly taken from her house in Kabul's Kart-e-Naw district and Zahra Mohammadi was abducted from her office in Kart-e-Parwan in Kabul and detained by the Taliban in an unknown location.

In [China](#), the deteriorating situation of civil and political rights in 2023 is marked by the arrest and detention of a significant number of human rights defenders and lawyers. Four women are facing trial over the 'white paper' protests.

In [Myanmar](#), Htet Htet Khine, a Burmese freelance journalist and former BBC Media Action presenter, was [sentenced](#) to three years in prison with hard labour in a sham trial in September 2022 after more than a year in pre-trial detention in Yangon's notorious Insein prison.

In Saudi Arabia arbitrarily detained WHRDs include Lina Al-Sharif, who has been [arbitrarily detained](#) on false charges since May 2021 as a result of her social media activism. While still in detention, the authorities opened new terrorism-related investigations against her in 2022 because of her social media activism. Several other WHRDs [received](#) decades-long sentences in 2022, including a 34-year prison sentence handed down to Salma Al-Shehab and a 45-year sentence handed down to Nourah bint Saeed Al-Qahtani for their online activities.

In [Sudan](#), restrictions imposed on women involved in advocacy included attacks, intimidation and arbitrary use of law present serious threats to the safety and stability of women's groups in the country. As [documented by](#) the Sudanese Women's Monitor (SUWRA), in December 2022, the office of Alharisat, one of the prominent women's groups, was raided by plain clothes officers who presented a warrant for violations of the city garbage disposal law. Similarly, in January 2023, the newly opened office of another women's group was raided.

Arbitrary detention can also come as a consequence of deregistration. In [Zimbabwe](#), the 2022 PVO Amendment Bill was passed. Before the new bill has come into effect, the authorities have arbitrarily [deregistered](#) at least 290 CSOs and since March 2022, the government has embarked on an intimidation campaign against CSOs. In parallel to this, there have been several cases of disruption of activities by CSOs and detention of CSO staff: a women's empowerment meeting organised in May 2022 by Transparency International Zimbabwe and Shamwari yeMwanasikana was [disrupted](#) for alleged failure to notify local authorities and three CSO staff members - Benevolence Taguta, Tracy Mutowekuziva and Lisa Matakawere - were arrested.

## **2. Sexual violence and abuse**

In Sudan, women protesters have been particularly [targeted](#) with violence and sexual abuse. Sudan's military government continued its crackdown on democracy protests and activism following a second coup in October 2021, killing scores of protesters and

detaining hundreds of people, often subjecting them sexual violence. In June 2022 two women protesters were arrested and sexually assaulted by police.

In 2022, the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on [Libya](#) noted that WHRDs face threats of sexual violence as “tactics used to terrify and silence activists.”

## 2. Harassment

In China, in March 2023, state security [police surrounded the home](#) of rights activist Li Wenzu and her rights lawyer husband Wang Quanzhang. According to Radio Free Asia (RFA), the police blocked their door and prevented them from going out. They also used open umbrellas and shone their flashlights at their security cameras to stop themselves being captured.

## 3. Smear campaigns and stigmatisation, including in the media and social networks

- In [Palestine](#), 22 smear campaigns were [documented](#) against activists for their participation in protests after Nizar Banat’s death and 18 of those campaigns targeted women.
- In Guatemala, since her arrest WHRD Delia Adelina Leal Mollinedo has reportedly been targeted by smear campaigns and public stigmatisation in the media and social networks.

## 4. Killing and execution

- In [Iran](#), the women-led mass protests demanding the end of theocracy have been met with brutal force, including indiscriminate killings and executions along with mass arrests. Moreover, the status of feminist activists and WHRDs remains a particular issue of concern, as the authorities continue repeatedly to sentence and imprison WHRDs, keeping them in jail. In April 2022, WHRD Narges Mohammadi was re-imprisoned.
- In [South Africa](#) and [Honduras](#), the gains of environmental women campaigners have gained some international recognition of their work, but at high costs: for some, these costs sometimes include their lives.

Specific aspects of WHRDs identities and the ways in which these aspects intersect increase the risks that they are exposed to. One illustrative example comes from a current [CIVICUS Watchlist](#). In [Iran](#), those arrested during the recent protests and who are currently in prison include almost 400 WHRDs. Among those arrested are over 600 students, according to FEMENA, which says the majority remain in prison, and notes that **women students** “who are open at the forefront of university protests, are targeted by security forces and universities in a multitude of ways”.

The **nature of the human rights issue** WHRDS advocate for also has implications in terms of their safety and security. For WHRDs working on *SRHR*, there is increased stigmatisation associated with their work. Stigmatisation by the state, including through restrictions on

registration, police raids and confiscation of documents, this opens the door to further intimidation by legitimising the use of violence against WHRDs.<sup>5</sup> Studies also show that in high conflict settings such as [DRC](#) the gender-specific nature of attacks against WHRDs is particularly strong, with stigmatisation of WHRDs working on issues that may be considered sensitive (such as SRHR as well as support for victims of sexual violence). CIVICUS findings indicate that WHRDs advocating for *LGBTQI rights* in contexts assessed as closed, 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. Examples come from El Salvador and South Africa.<sup>6</sup> In [Guatemala](#), WHRDs who work to defend their *communities’ land rights*, the rights of the LGBTIQ+ community and of Indigenous women are particularly at risk.<sup>7</sup>

**Ethnicity** is another element that increases risks for WHRDs in crisis settings assessed as ‘closed.’ In [Tajikistan](#), in May 2022, human rights defender [Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva](#), representative of the Pamiri minority in Dushanbe, was detained by security officers at her home in Dushanbe.

## Protection gaps: Recommendations for States, UN bodies and civil society

CIVICUS presents below a number of recommendations for States, the UN and other international bodies and civil society to enhance protection and risk mitigation measures.

### National governments

- Further recognise and respect the role of WHRDs in their commitments on human rights and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, and adopt WPS National Action Plans including support to and protection of WHRDs.
- Put in place practical measures to support and mitigate risks faced by WHRDs by facilitating the approval of applications for asylum, temporary relocation, or protected status due to gender-related persecution.
- Take all protection measures necessary to enhance digital and physical security of WHRDs, in consultation with civil society and tailored to the specific context and needs of the affected individuals.
- Develop guidelines on the protection of WHRDs addressed to members of security forces and officials in the judicial system processing complaints; those should include reference to instances where families and community members are perpetrators.

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<sup>5</sup> Please consult [https://www.civicus.org/documents/WHRD\\_PolicyBrief.pdf](https://www.civicus.org/documents/WHRD_PolicyBrief.pdf), p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.9.

<sup>7</sup> In December 2020, the Maya Q’eqchi’Jalan-Trans rights defender Roberta Pitán was assaulted while trying to catch the bus that she routinely took home. This followed also increasing online harassment of Maya Q’eqchi’Jalan-Trans defenders in the region. Frontline Defenders also outlined the case of another woman human rights defender, Delia Adelina Leal Mollinedo, who was detained and charged in apparent reprisal for her work.

- Take more proactive measures to conduct effective investigations into all cases of attacks, harassment and intimidation against WHRDs and prosecute perpetrators, including from (other) HRDs.
- Draft and implement specific legislation protecting WHRDs in consultation with civil society.
- Strengthen existing national protection mechanisms and programs for WHRDs at risk by implementing protection measures with a gender-sensitive approach that guarantees that all protection measures are designed and implemented in consultation with beneficiaries including in conflict and post-conflict settings.
- States that are Troop Contributing Countries to UN peacekeeping missions should, through their in-country presence, strengthen their engagement with WHRDs in the field and integrate WHRDs' priorities and protection into mission planning and decisions.

### UN bodies

- Fund initiatives aimed at preventing and responding to gender-based violence, including towards WHRDs, in humanitarian emergencies.
- Issue guidance notes on the protection, promotion and participation of WHRDs in conflict, post-conflict, and crisis settings.
- Strengthen protection mechanisms ensuring that Resident Coordinators and UN country teams can provide more effective and timely responses to WHRDs at risk on the ground.
- Monitor and document, in cooperation with other international bodies, violations against WHRDs in conflict settings and generate information on violence and gender-specific impacts against WHRDs.
- Integrate, where possible, a gender perspective into *all* reports, resolutions, recommendations on the protection of HRDs, including a special section on conflict, post-conflict, and crisis settings.
- UN peacekeeping missions should support WHRDs' participation in the dialogues that may result in local peace agreement between communities.
- UN peacekeeping missions should address the selection processes and representation of WHRDs in relevant stages of the mission-facilitated political processes.

### Civil society

- Civil society organisations operating in conflict, post-conflict and crisis settings should design and provide specific protection and accompaniment programs for WHRDs.
- Civic society organisations operating in these settings should share regular information with UN and Special Representatives and Rapporteurs.
- Develop indicators to measure progress towards increased WHRDs access to the justice system in conflict, post-conflict and crisis settings.
- Increase the recognition of WHRDs through documentation, as well as dissemination of documentation and drafting of practical guides for those wanting to undertake documentation, with a special focus on conflict and post-conflict settings.