

## Women's Human Rights Defenders

### Who are women's human rights defenders?

Women's human rights defenders (WHRDs) are both female and any other human rights defenders who engage in promotion and protection of women's rights and gender equality as well as all women working on any issue related to human rights and fundamental freedoms individually and in association with others in any region of the world.

### What are the risks and challenges faced by WHRDs?

Women's human rights defenders face all of the challenges generally experienced by human rights defenders. These challenges include threats, death threats, killings, arrests, detentions, judicial harassment, threat of criminal prosecution and other forms of criminalisation, threats of committal to psychiatric hospitals and eviction, threats of violence against family members, stigmatization, break-ins at the homes of defenders, rape and other forms of sexual violence. However, female defenders require particular attention as they are under different pressures from those confronted by men and often face gender-specific threats and violence more than their male counterparts, such as rape and sexual violence. These forms of violence can have adverse social consequences, including stigmatization, in addition to causing physical harm. Related to this, attacks against female defenders often focus on their reputation and/or their sexuality as non-conforming with dominant stereotypes of appropriate female behaviour.

Like human rights defenders generally, WHRDs become targets of state agents and non-State actors, such as paramilitaries. However, because they are women, or working on gender equality issues, they can additionally face risks from their own families and communities. Moreover, they come across multiple risks due to religious extremism, increased violence in some regions, political transition and claims of cultural relativism. Additionally, WHRDs face different circumstances because they challenge gender stereotypes, for example, women defenders often face more risks when participating in collective public action because of perceptions of the traditional role of women in some societies. In addition to the risks faced by the WHRDs themselves, their family members are also frequently targeted.

**"WHRDs are at the forefront of social movements that advocate for justice and equality. Their struggle is crucial in widening democracy and redefining economic development models, mainly through their full participation in society and political leadership."**

*Mrs. Margaret Sekaggya, in her capacity as Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, October 2013*

### What are the States' obligations in regards to WHRDs?

The obligations of States under international human rights law include the primary responsibility to respect, protect and fulfil human rights of WHRDs. As a first step to the prevention or reduction of the risks faced by the WHRDs, States should publicly acknowledge the particular and significant role played by them in the consolidation and advancement of plural and inclusive societies. States should protect women defenders and those working on women's rights or gender issues from violations perpetrated by State and non-State actors by ensuring that these violations are promptly and impartially investigated and that those responsible are punished in an appropriate manner. They should further acknowledge such violations and offer effective security measures to defenders.

Given specific challenges faced by women's human rights defenders, the State authorities should in consultation with defenders establish effective and gender sensitive protection mechanisms to facilitate their work, promote projects to improve and further develop the documentation of cases of violations against WHRDs, and increase material resources for their immediate protection to guarantee their effective physical and psychological protection.

### What can other actors do?

Non-State actors including civil society and the private sector can play a great role in enhancing protection of women rights defenders. For example the media can fulfil a vital role in support of human rights defenders, especially WHRDs, by providing information on human rights standards, reporting on violations committed against defenders and nurturing public support for defenders' work.

National and transnational corporations should act with due diligence and ensure that their activities will not infringe the rights of human rights defenders, with explicit attention to the situation of WHRDs.

Civil society can establish networks of support as a tool of informal monitoring and protection to ensure that whenever a woman human rights defender faces the threat of a violation the information is quickly shared among a wide group.

### **What are the national protection mechanisms?**

States often fail to provide adequate protection for women defenders and their work and most of them have not established specific national mechanisms to protect women's human rights defenders. The existing protection measures are often hampered by a lack of implementation, political will or gender-sensitivity. It is of utmost importance to consult women defenders in the development of laws and policies to ensure gender responsive and relevant protection mechanisms, which would also take into account violations by non-State actors.

### **What are the regional protection mechanisms?**

At the regional level, the Executive Secretary of the **Inter-American** Commission created a Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, which prepares studies, conducts country visits and encourages the Commission to adopt precautionary measures to protect threatened human rights defenders in this area. In addition, the Inter-American Court on Human Rights – the judicial body of the Inter-American system – considers cases of alleged human rights violations including those perpetrated against human rights defenders.

The **African** Commission on Human and People's Rights Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders is mandated to seek, receive, examine and act upon information on the situation of human rights defenders in Africa, submit reports to the African Commission, develop and recommend effective strategies to better protect human rights defenders and to follow up on his/her recommendations and raise awareness and promote the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders in Africa.

The **European** Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders set out the Union's policy towards defenders in countries outside the EU and contain examples of action that EU member states can take to help protect defenders. The European Court of Human Rights established by the European Convention on Human Rights hears applications alleging breaches of the human rights provisions set out in the Convention and its protocols, and issues advisory opinions.

### **What are the international protection mechanisms?**

International protection mechanisms include the special procedures of the United Nations Human Rights Council as well as complaint procedures under the different human rights treaty bodies. Special procedures intervene directly with Governments on specific allegations of violations of human rights that come within their mandates. The intervention can relate to a human rights violation that has already occurred, is ongoing, or which has a high risk of occurring (for more details see here: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/SP/Pages/Communications.aspx>).

With regard to treaty bodies, any individual, non-governmental organization, group or network may also submit communications containing information relating to alleged violations of human rights to the Committees which oversee the implementation of the main international human treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (for more details see here: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/TBPetitions/Pages/HRTBPetitions.aspx>).

### **The work of OHCHR**

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), together with the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders and other special procedures, has called for the creation and implementation of adequate and effective protection mechanisms that consider the specific needs of WHRDs and the environment in which they work. OHCHR also facilitates the implementation of the special procedures, treaty bodies and Universal Periodic Review recommendations in this area at the national level.

### **Normative Standards and Further Reading**

- [UN General Assembly Resolution on Promotion of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms: protecting women's human rights defenders, 30 January 2014, A/RES/68/181](#)
- Reports of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders: 6 September 2006 ([A/61/312](#)), 10 August 2012, ([A/67/292](#)), 20 December 2010 ([A/HRC/16/44](#)), 23 December 2013 ([A/HRC/19/55](#))
- [Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, 8 March 1999, A/RES/53/144](#)
- ["Human Rights Defenders: Protecting the Rights to Defend Human Rights", UN OHCHR Fact Sheet No. 29](#)