

AT RISK: WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AROUND THE WORLD



Advocating for peace, justice & equality

“Women human rights defenders 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.”

– Margaret Sekaggya, Former Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders (October 2013)

Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) face incredible risks and threats as a result of their work. They are often targets for violence and intimidation by state and non-state actors who view their work to promote human rights, gender equality, environmental justice and democracy as a threat to traditional social structures and gender roles. WHRDs often face gender-specific threats, including sexist verbal abuse, rape and other forms of sexual violence. Attacks against them may also include attacks on their family members, including their children.

THREATS TO WHRDs

ATTEMPTED MURDER prosecution and imprisonment psychological torture threats and violence against family members threats of abduction and assassination

torture sexual violence media defamation cyber attacks + illegal surveillance

UNFOUNDED ARREST solitary confinement STALKING & harassment

In November 2013 the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution for the Protection of Women Human Rights Defenders. This landmark resolution urges States to put in place gender-specific laws and policies to protect women human rights defenders and ensure that defenders themselves are involved in the design and implementation of these measures. The resolution also calls on States to protect women human rights defenders from reprisals for cooperating with the UN and to ensure their unhindered access to, and communication with, international human rights bodies and mechanisms.

BY THE NUMBERS

64 % of **women journalists** who responded to the International News Safety Institute/International Women's Media Foundation's global research project said they had **experienced intimidation, threats or abuse** in relation to their work

908 **environmental defenders** in **35 countries** have been killed since 2002, according to Global Witness

1,294 **attacks against WHRDs** in **Mexico and Central America** recorded by the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders between 2012 and 2013.

51 % **sexual rights activists, advocates, scholars and policymakers** who responded to a 2013 global survey by the Association for Progressive Communications had **received violent messages, threats or abusive comments** while working online



“We women of the community are not criminals. We’re humble women. We are just defending our lands, because we live off our lands; defending our rivers, defending our homes. Our struggle is to live well in our communities—not what the companies are accusing us of.”

– Crisanta Perez (Guatemala), who is one of eight women who had arrest orders against them for opposing mining operations on their lands. The charges were dropped due to public pressure.

Confronting Globalization: Many WHRDs are on the front lines of activism to address the effects of globalization, including the defence of Indigenous rights and land claims, as well as labor, social and cultural rights. The dearth of international restrictions on the activities of multi-national corporations—particularly companies engaged in resource extraction—puts WHRDs defending their land and resources at risk for human rights violations by private companies who generally operate with impunity.

In 2012, members of the Nobel Women's Initiative traveled to Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras to gather evidence of the impact of escalating violence on women human rights defenders. In this region, women human rights defenders face daily attacks—83% of which are against women defending their lands and natural resources. In the three countries visited, perpetrators of violence enjoy almost complete impunity. More than 95% of crimes are never punished.

In Conflict: The instability and insecurity of conflict situations often exacerbates existing gender inequalities, putting WHRDs at increased risk of gender violence by military, police or peace-keeping forces, as well as paramilitary groups, gangs and rebel forces. WHRDs play an essential role in responding to conflicts throughout the world—often delivering emergency services, supporting survivors of violence and refugees, negotiating with armed groups, and protecting their communities. Post-conflict, WHRDs work for justice and facilitate reconciliation and reconstruction processes.

In Democratic Republic of Congo, women are on the front lines of the struggle to stop rape in conflict and support survivors with immediate and long-term support, including medical, psychosocial, legal, and livelihood services. Armed groups often threaten these WHRDs with sexual violence and death for their work to shed light on the widespread use of rape as a tool of war. Many Congolese WHRDs have suffered violence and the killing of family members.

Confronting Fundamentalisms: Many WHRDs who speak out against fundamentalisms—cultural, religious, ethnic and nationalist agendas that seek to suppress opposing ideas in order to secure political power—face violence and intimidation. Fundamentalisms regularly use discrimination and human rights abuses to gain power, often resulting in restricted rights for women and harsh backlash against WHRDs defending their rights.

Since its 2014 invasion of northern Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has restricted women's rights and subjected them to rape, kidnapping and sexual slavery. ISIS has also executed women defending their basic rights. In spite of violence by ISIS and discrimination by the Iraqi legal system, WHRDs across the region are struggling for peace and supporting survivors by providing shelters, aid, medical and psychosocial care.