

Diplomatic Briefing Women Human Rights Defenders under Attack: Criminalisation, Exile, and Gendered Repression

The recommendations presented in this briefing are the result of a collective process involving women human rights defenders (“WHRD”) from diverse regions and contexts, including Afghanistan, Belarus, Cameroon, Iran, Nicaragua, North Macedonia, Uganda, Western Sahara, and Sweden. Through a dedicated workshop convened during the 62nd session of the Human Rights Council, participants analysed common patterns of criminalisation, shared experiences of gendered repression and exile, identified protection gaps, and developed collective advocacy priorities.

Despite significant differences in political, legal, and cultural contexts, participants identified strikingly similar patterns of repression. Criminalisation is increasingly being used as a tool to silence WHRD through arbitrary detention, judicial harassment, restrictive legislation, digital surveillance, smear campaigns, funding restrictions, and forced displacement. Participants also highlighted that these attacks are distinctly gendered, targeting not only defenders themselves but also their families, identities, credibility, leadership, and communities.

The recommendations below reflect areas of broad convergence among participants and are offered as practical human rights-based actions that States can take at both national and international levels, and as a guide for principled engagement with other States.

Recommendations

1. End the criminalisation of WHRD

States should review, amend, or repeal laws, policies, and practices that are used to criminalise the legitimate work of WHRD including through the misuse of anti-terrorism, national security, public order, cybercrime, foreign agent, and morality-related legislation.

States should immediately cease arbitrary arrests, judicial harassment, travel restrictions, release those detained without condition, guaranteeing the self-determination of people’s and people under occupation, cease transnational repression and other forms of retaliation against WHRD. The end of the criminalisation must ensure the full realisation economic, social and cultural rights, and ensure that freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly are fully protected in law and practice.

2. Recognise and address the gendered nature of repression

States should adopt gender-responsive protection approaches that recognise the specific forms of violence and discrimination faced by WHRD, including online violence, sexualised violence and harassment, physical attacks and those on credibility, family intimidation, and reprisals against relatives and communities.

Attention should be given to the experiences of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, environmental, rural, LGBTIQ+, people under occupation and other marginalised women defenders facing intersecting forms of discrimination and violence.

Right Livelihood

Efforts to dilute, remove, or replace gender-responsive language risk obscuring the specific forms of discrimination and violence faced by WHRD and weakening the effectiveness of protection and accountability measures, including in the work of the Human Rights Council.

3. Strengthen long-term protection and prevent reprisals

States should establish and adequately resource comprehensive and effective protection mechanisms that include legal assistance, psychosocial support, digital security, relocation and visa pathways, livelihood support, and long-term protection measures for defenders at risk, under occupation and in exile.

These solutions must be created and implemented considering the specific context of human rights defender's work, by facilitating effective and expedite processes, access to information and resources. This must include a specific category for human rights defenders, that recognises the complexities of human rights work, such as sanctions, residence, and criminalisation. This protection must be sustained and comprehensive, including in exile, acknowledging the differentiated impacts affecting WHRD and incorporating gender-responsive measures that facilitate the safe relocation and integration of children and families, address caregiving responsibilities, and ensure access to legal, social, educational, and economic support systems.

States should also adopt effective measures to prevent, investigate, and respond to reprisals against WHRD engaging with the United Nations, regional human rights systems, diplomatic actors, and international civil society organisations. Guaranteeing effective and participatory engagement is essential in the protection of WHRD, including allowing country visit from UN mandates and international observers.

States should actively address the growing influence of anti-gender movements and narratives that fuel the criminalisation of WHRD, including where such narratives are reflected in legislation, public policies, institutional practices, or public discourse that undermine gender equality, civic space, and the legitimacy of women's human rights advocacy.

4. Combat impunity and ensure meaningful participation

States should publicly recognise the legitimacy and essential role of WHRD and ensure prompt, impartial, and effective investigations into threats, attacks, and acts of intimidation committed against them, their families and communities.

States should further guarantee and be held accountable for the meaningful, safe, and sustained participation of WHRD in public affairs and decision-making processes at local, national, regional, and international levels, particularly on issues affecting human rights, peacebuilding, environmental governance, land and territory rights, self-determination of peoples, including those under occupation, and sustainable development. WHRD must be part of the participation, selection, agenda setting, negotiation, monitoring and implementation of these processes.