

# Women Human Rights Defenders: Left behind in the women, peace and security agenda

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+ Twenty years on from the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, and 10 resolutions later, woman human rights defenders (WHRDs) continue to face gendered obstacles in their work. This policy brief outlines how the UN Security Council, states and donors can deliver on their commitments to protect WHRDs more effectively.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, and the subsequent resolutions that form the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, highlight the importance of women's equal participation in promoting peace and security. Women play a critical role in addressing the causes and consequences of conflict by organising and advocating for the rights of the most vulnerable. They have shaped international human rights frameworks, brokered ceasefires, coordinated humanitarian relief and led reconciliation efforts.

Women protecting rights, and those who explicitly identify as a woman human rights defender (WHRD), face gendered obstacles shaped by entrenched stereotypes and harmful cultural norms. Evidence shows that increased targeting of WHRDs correlates to an escalation in conflict,<sup>1</sup> and as such support to WHRDs is vital in advancing WPS objectives. Despite commitments to protect WHRDs through safe and enabling environments, many states are not meeting this obligation through failure to act in response to attacks against them.

It has been over 20 years since the UN General Assembly adopted by consensus the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and subsequently 10 resolutions affirming commitment to protect WHRDs. Following the recent 20-year anniversary of the adoption of UNSCR 1325, this brief outlines the challenges faced by WHRDs against the pillars of the WPS agenda and how the Security Council, states and donors can deliver their commitments to protect WHRDs.

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1. Danielle Goldberg, et al. "Global Report Civil Society Organisation Survey for the Global Study on Women, Peace and Security", 2015, <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D8PV6JTH>

# WHRDs and their Work

WHRDs are understood as women or non-binary individuals engaging in the defence of all human rights, or people of all genders defending rights related to gender, sexuality and bodily autonomy. In conflict and post-conflict contexts WHRDs operate on the frontline, being present before international actors arrive and remaining long after they depart. They gather critical data on rights abuses, monitor the activity of duty-bearers and hold first-hand insights into shifts in human rights contexts that may result in destabilisation or further exacerbate conflict. WHRDs maintain peace by advocating for people who are marginalised, challenging the root causes of inequality and pushing for reform through locally-led solutions.

Whereas some women proudly identify as WHRDs, others are unfamiliar with the term or, for their own safety, deliberately avoid promoting their work under such a label. Regardless of status or personal circumstances, WHRDs face continued discrimination for diverging from traditional gender expectations to claim their rights, challenging patriarchal structures and the status quo in the process. They also face unique barriers across each of the four WPS pillars: participation, protection, relief and recovery and prevention.

# Participation

WHRDs are delegitimised and side-lined, preventing them from meaningfully participating in peace dialogues and negotiations, crisis management and post-conflict resolutions. For their role to be taken seriously in peace processes, states and the international community must defend their legitimacy in promoting human rights, peace and security.

Continued discrediting of WHRDs and their work serves both as a deterrent and barrier to their participation and leadership in public life, one of the four pillars of the WPS agenda. Despite bringing intimate knowledge of contextual dynamics, benefiting from deeply-ingrained trust and access to the communities they represent and being known to broker agreements, unite across religious, ethnic and regional divides and broaden agendas, the skills of WHRDs are often dismissed as irrelevant in the prevention, management and resolution of conflict.

In Afghanistan, there was a 25 per cent increase in the deliberate killings of women in public roles, including WHRDs, perceived to be rebelling from prevailing gender norms in 2017. As the UN Mission there was renewed, the Security Council voted to remove provisions referencing women's rights and participation.<sup>2</sup> In 2018, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights reported increased violence towards WHRDs during the armed conflict in Colombia, noting they face "differentiated risks and disproportionate effects based on their gender... the rights they defend, their sexual orientation and gender identity".<sup>3</sup> Killings of

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2. Conciliation Resources, "Recommendations on the Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security", 2017, <https://www.c-r.org/news-and-insight/recommendations-security-council-open-debate-women-peace-and-security>

3. WILPF Colombia, "Implementing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda for Sustainable Peace in Colombia: Shadow Report CEDAW Committee, 72nd Session", 2019

WHRDs there increased nearly 50 per cent in 2019 compared to the previous year and rose dramatically since the signing of the Peace Accords in 2016.<sup>4</sup>

*"Being a woman in the context of war comes with the burden of different kinds of aggression, and women whose lives are devoted to activism are continually attacked not just for defending human rights, but also for being women. This significantly differentiates the level of risk, and the level of physical, mental and emotional impact for them compared to their male colleagues who defend human rights"*

*Peace Brigades International (PBI) Colombia*

Women human rights  
defenders are often attacked  
for the work they do:



4. UN News, "Colombia: Staggering Number of Human Rights Defenders Killed in 2019", 14 January 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/01/1055272>



While men occupy formal positions, WHRDs can be relegated to work on ‘softer’ issues, perpetuating their political marginalisation and undermining the durability of peace.

Such stigmatisation and exclusion stems from the so-called public/private dichotomy, whereby women's place in society is confined to the domestic (household) sphere as they are perceived to be less capable of adding value within the public domain.<sup>5</sup> In conservative contexts, WHRDs continue being limited by familial and religious attitudes which perceive their actions to threaten honour, culture and way of life. In Libya, WHRDs promoting local peace

and negotiating with militia leaders face ongoing threats to their physical safety, driven by a conservative rhetoric which narrowly defines their role in public life.<sup>6</sup> In Saudi Arabia, 13 WHRDs were brought to trial in 2019 accused of “promoting women’s rights” and “calling for the end of the male guardianship system”.<sup>7</sup> In Nepal, WHRDs have been accused of conducting “unnecessary” work, with most threats stemming from their families and communities.<sup>8</sup> In recent years, a renewed emphasis on anti-feminist rhetoric, demonstrated through smear campaigns and defamation, has positioned WHRDs as “guerrillas”, “traitors” or “bad mothers”.<sup>9</sup> According to research from the Association for Women’s Rights in Development, 10 per cent of WHRDs have had their workplace destroyed or equipment stolen by religious fundamentalist groups and have been branded as “bad wives or daughters” in attempts to discredit their work.<sup>10</sup>

These attitudes see the role of WHRDs diminished in male- and religiously-dominated structures so prevalent in peace processes. While men occupy formal positions, WHRDs can be relegated to work on ‘softer’ issues, perpetuating their political marginalisation and undermining the durability of peace. Libyan WHRDs recently noted that their recommendations are absent from peace discussions, resulting in “incomplete analysis” of the root causes of conflict. Driven in part by gendered stereotypes and ideological

5. Margaret Thornton, “The Public/Private Dichotomy: Gendered and Discriminatory”, *Journal of Law and Society* 18, no. 4 (1991): 448-463

6. Conciliation Resources, “Recommendations”.

7. Amnesty International, “Saudi Arabia 2019 Report”, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/saudi-arabia/report-saudi-arabia/>

8. Jennifer Allsopp, “Women Human Rights Defenders: Activism’s Front-Line”, *Open Democracy*, 25 November 2012, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/women-human-rights-defenders-activisms-front-line/>

9. UN General Assembly, “Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders: Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders”, New York: UNGA, 2019

10. Association for Women’s Rights in Development, “Ten Insights to Strengthen Responses for Women Human Rights Defenders at Risk”, 2012, [https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ten\\_insights\\_to\\_strengthen\\_responses\\_for\\_women\\_human\\_rights\\_defenders\\_at\\_risk.pdf](https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ten_insights_to_strengthen_responses_for_women_human_rights_defenders_at_risk.pdf)

and religious challenges, they have launched the “You are Missing the Full Picture” campaign to highlight their exclusion from UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and Member State-led peacebuilding processes.<sup>11</sup> WHRDs in Guatemala and El Salvador have reported experiencing discrimination and open questioning of their abilities by male counterparts,<sup>12</sup> and during the first Myanmar Union Peace Conference in 2016, female delegates’ contributions were not included in minutes, they were provided with extremely short notice of events, and informal, exclusively male, networks met in parallel to official processes to make decisions.<sup>13</sup> Religious non-state actors have also been known to impose restrictions on WHRDs’ behaviour. In Afghanistan, WHRDs have been displaced from working in several provinces due to the Taliban and in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, WHRDs have faced excessive force when engaging in peaceful protests.

**In conflict and post-conflict contexts, ostracisation is reported as the most significant security risk for WHRDs, forcing them to disconnect from their safety networks and risk burning out. *“An important strategy for the protection of WHRDs is to be in contact, to meet each other and to reflect on the violence and mechanisms we come up against”***

*Flor Goche, National Network of WHRDs, Mexico*

Actions taken by states to silence WHRDs and position them as “troublemakers” legitimises their exclusion from peace processes. Repressive states are known to reduce the environment in which WHRDs can freely operate by introducing laborious registration processes for women’s rights organisations, restricting access to international funding sources, banning passports, justifying the closure of organisations due to complex legal and taxation loopholes and disbanding meetings, to name a few tactics. In some countries, WHRDs are prevented from holding states accountable through international human rights mechanisms, being penalised for inputting into shadow Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) shadow reports and being subjected to sexism within multilateral spaces.<sup>14</sup> This not only limits their participation but also infringes on their right to protection.

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11. WILPF, “Libyan Women Break the Silence”, 2018, <https://www.wilpf.org/libyan-women-break-the-silence/>

12. Corporate Justice, “DesTieRRRadas (Land-deprived): Making Visible the Struggles and Resistance of Human Rights Defenders that Confront Socio-environmental Conflicts in Guatemala and El Salvador”, 2019, [https://corporatejustice.org/destierradas-women-land-defenders-guatemala-and-el-salvador\\_2.pdf](https://corporatejustice.org/destierradas-women-land-defenders-guatemala-and-el-salvador_2.pdf)

13. Henri Myrtilinen, “Women’s Participation in Peace Processes”, 2016, <https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2016/Womens-participation-in-peace-processes.pdf>

14. Catherine Byaruhanga, “Rape and Sudan’s Revolution: ‘They Were Crying and Screaming’”, BBC News, 14 June 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-48634150>



# Protection

WHRDs face attacks from both state and non-state actors, including governments, police forces, the military, family members and fundamentalist groups. In many cases, violations are considered part of the domestic sphere and given less priority by judicial systems. In other cases, state authorities act in collusion with non-state actors or fail to translate their international commitment to protect WHRDs into gender-sensitive domestic frameworks.

The protection pillar of the WPS agenda calls for the promotion and protection of women's rights in times of conflict. This includes mainstreaming gender considerations into peacekeeping missions and providing female presence in conflict contexts, which can also encourage women to report instances of violence. Though several peacekeeping missions, such as in Darfur, Lebanon, the DRC and Kosovo, have strengthened their engagement with WHRDs, there is still a significant need to systematise integration of WHRDs' priorities into mission planning and decisions.

This is especially important given sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) continues to be used as a weapon to undermine WHRDs while seeking to control their bodies, morality and territory. The wave of attacks against Sudanese female protestors by parliamentary forces in 2019 highlights how SGBV is used to silence WHRDs, creating a climate of fear and serving as a warning to women who do not comply with traditional roles.<sup>15</sup> In the same

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15. UN Human Rights Council, "Sexual and Gender-based Violence in Myanmar and the Gendered Impact of its Ethnic Conflicts", 2019, [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFM-Myanmar/sexualviolence/A\\_HRC\\_CRP\\_4.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFM-Myanmar/sexualviolence/A_HRC_CRP_4.pdf)





year, a UN Fact Finding Mission on Myanmar highlighted the systematic use of rape by the Tatmadaw military against women and ethnic minorities, including those who protect human rights.<sup>16</sup> Rumours alone – for example, of abuse against a woman during detention – can damage the long-term reputation of WHRDs who are rejected by their communities upon release.

In 2019, 40 WHRDs were assassinated globally for advocating for the protection of human rights.<sup>17</sup> During the same year, the UN Special Rapporteur on HRDs received 181 reports of abuse against WHRDs operating across 60 states, including accusations of being terrorists, raids on offices, deportation, surveillance, arbitrary arrests, asset freezing, enforced disappearances and femicide.<sup>18</sup> International networks such as Frontline Defenders continue to run tributes for WHRDs killed in action every year. The situation is particularly dire for WHRDs challenging the behaviour of authorities in conflict-affected contexts. In Libya, WHRDs have been subjected to arbitrary arrest, abduction and torture for criticising militias following the 2011 uprising. In Egypt, WHRDs were sexually assaulted for engaging in “deviant behaviour” by protesting security forces.

In the digital era, WHRDs are also facing new and more sophisticated forms of online intimidation. The vast, transnational connectivity of the internet is enabling mass forms of slander and hostility to WHRDs across borders, making the removal of false or harmful content more challenging. WHRDs



**The wave of attacks against Sudanese female protestors by parliamentary forces in 2019 highlights how SGBV is used to silence WHRDs, creating a climate of fear and serving as a warning to women who do not comply with traditional roles.**

16. Front Line Defenders, “Front Line Defenders Global Analysis 2018”, 2019, [https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/global\\_analysis\\_2018.pdf](https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/global_analysis_2018.pdf)

17. UN General Assembly, “Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders”.

18. UN General Assembly, “Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders”.

face unlawful surveillance, cyberstalking, censorship, hacking of devices, doxxing (a practice that shares private information about a person online), and deepfake videos (whereby fake computer-manipulated images are used to tarnish the reputation of someone).<sup>19</sup>

*"Some of the perpetrators are more powerful than the government... two years ago I was really threatened. These perpetrators threatened me by sending me text messages and coming to my house during the night saying, "we are going to kill you because you are a noisemaker in this community"*

*Edith Adhiambo Ochieng, Feminist for Peace, Rights and Justice Centre*

Most countries in the world do not provide protection measures to guarantee the personal security of WHRDs, or if they do, these portray WHRDs as a vulnerable group requiring protection rather than as capable agents of change within their own right. In instances where families and community members are perpetrators, attacks are considered to belong to the household and are deprioritised by legal institutions. Though some countries, such as Mexico, the DRC, Honduras and Brazil, have introduced protective measures for the personal security of WHRDs, state-sponsored protection in conflict settings is often ineffective and places WHRDs at greater risk.

In the case of Colombia's Defenders' Protection Programme, temporary relocation, mobile phones, bulletproof vests and bodyguards are provided to defenders, but these are not tailored to the specific needs of WHRDs. The programme has been criticised for employing former intelligence personnel (raising fears WHRDs could be spied on), failing to coordinate with agencies

responsible for investigating violations and placing insufficient attention on the collective and psychological needs of WHRDs. Indeed, a recent report from LIMPAL found that WHRDs in Colombia battle adverse mental health consequences for their activism, caused in part due to the country's failure to introduce a National Action Plan addressing their holistic needs, thereby restricting its implementation of UNSCR 1325 and sustainable peacebuilding efforts.<sup>20</sup>



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19. LIMPAL Colombia, "Sintonías Corporales (Bodily Harmonies)", 2020, [https://limpalcolombia.org/images/documentos/SINTONIAS\\_CORPORALES\\_DIC\\_19\\_1.pdf](https://limpalcolombia.org/images/documentos/SINTONIAS_CORPORALES_DIC_19_1.pdf)

20. Amnesty International, "Urgent Action, Women's Rights Defender Threatened with Death (Haiti)", 2017, <https://www.amnestyusa.org/urgent-actions/urgent-action-womens-rights-defender-threatened-with-death-haiti-ua-272-17/>

# Relief and Recovery

Holistic support is particularly key for WHRDs who serve on the frontline in times of conflict and humanitarian disasters. In these contexts, WHRDs are not afforded adequate physical, emotional or financial assistance to carry out their work safely and effectively, preventing key objectives of this pillar including the implementation of gender-sensitive relief and recovery systems, the strengthening of women's agency in rehabilitation efforts and their economic empowerment.

In post-disaster contexts, women and girls are at a heightened risk of sexual violence and trafficking. It is therefore imperative to include WHRDs in the design and delivery of relief and recovery programmes, ensuring the unique needs of women and the most vulnerable communities are addressed as part of rehabilitation efforts. Following the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, for example, WHRDs served as first responders, coordinating tents and medical supplies while setting up emergency hotlines for women and girls and providing safe spaces for psychosocial support. In Kenya, Covid-19 measures implemented by the government have led to an increase in SGBV in urban settlements. Through support from PBI, WHRDs have developed a *WHRD Toolkit* to document incidents and refer survivors to a 24-hour toll-free counselling service while police efforts have been redirected towards enforcement of the curfew.

WHRDs operating in these contexts, where rule of law and accountability are often lacking, face harassment and abuse which prevents them from meaningfully inputting into and delivering relief and recovery interventions. In Haiti, a WHRD received death threats due to her support of sexual violence



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survivors following the 2010 earthquake.<sup>21</sup> In Syria, WHRDs distributing humanitarian aid in refugee communities have been unfairly convicted under the country's Counter-Terrorism Law No. 19.<sup>22</sup>

Curfews and quarantine in response to Covid-19 are further restricting WHRDs' freedom of movement, association and assembly, placing them at heightened risk. As countries declare states of emergencies and exercise executive powers, new policies and legislation have been quickly introduced that can undermine human rights at a time when WHRDs' ability to mobilise and challenge them is curtailed.<sup>23</sup> Intimidation against women active in local civil society has increased, with their response to the pandemic being inadvertently politicised and threatening their ability to provide relief and recovery. In Colombia, a WHRD active in peacebuilding was assassinated in March 2020 when organising supplies for vulnerable families affected by the pandemic.<sup>24</sup> In Uganda, 23 HRDs working in a shelter for LGBTI youth were arrested and charged for acts likely to spread the virus.<sup>25</sup> In Honduras, lockdown measures have been used to restrict freedom of expression for WHRDs who have had phones tapped and have been intimidated by armed

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21. The WHRD Coalition in MENA: "The Status of Women Human Rights Defenders in Syria", 2016, <http://whrdmena.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Syria-Eng.pdf>

22. Mama Cash Foundation, "CMI! Recommendations on COVID-19 and Women's Human Rights", 2020, [https://www.mamacash.org/media/cmi/\\_cmi\\_recommendations\\_on\\_covid-19\\_and\\_women\\_rsquo\\_s\\_human\\_rights\\_2.pdf](https://www.mamacash.org/media/cmi/_cmi_recommendations_on_covid-19_and_women_rsquo_s_human_rights_2.pdf)

23. Women's International Peace Centre, "Humanitarian Funding, Partnerships and Coordination in the COVID-19 Crisis: Perspectives from Local Women-led Organisations and Women's Rights Organisations", 2020

24. Neela Ghoshal, "Uganda LGBT Shelter Residents Arrested on Covid-19 Pretext", Human Rights Watch, 3 April 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/03/uganda-lgbt-shelter-residents-arrested-covid-19-pretext>

25. PBI UK, "UK Lockdown in Perspective: Kenya and Honduras", 2020, <https://peacebrigades.org.uk/news/2020-08-05/uk-lockdown-perspective-kenya-and-honduras>

men visiting their homes.<sup>26</sup> The pandemic will have a long-lasting effect on conflict contexts such as Afghanistan, where UN Women has warned that women are at increased risk of violence but remain significantly excluded in the design and delivery of relief and recovery services.

*“WHRDs are front liners in this crisis but nobody takes care of them. The government does not provide a clear strategy on how psychosocial support will be offered and who will access it. People are expected to perform but they go home hungry to their families after spending the entire day in their community supporting others”*

*Naomi Barasa, WHRD in Kenya*

Economic empowerment of WHRDs is key in maximising their role in relief and recovery, helping to protect them and guarantee their ownership of responses. In these contexts, the majority of WHRDs work on a voluntary basis and rely on informal, low paid or insecure work to fund their activism. Covid-19 is likely to restrict income further due to redistributions of supply chains and the illness or mortality of other household earners. In a survey of WHRDs in the Indo-Pacific region, 88 per cent of respondents noted that Covid-19 has impacted the scope of WPS work they can deliver, with loss of income being their greatest immediate and long-term concern.<sup>27</sup> Other studies show that funding for women's rights organisations has been among the first to be cut following the pandemic.<sup>28</sup>



Curfews and quarantine in response to Covid-19 are further restricting WHRDs' freedom of movement, association and assembly, placing them at heightened risk. As countries declare states of emergencies and exercise executive powers, new policies and legislation have been quickly introduced that can undermine human rights at a time when WHRDs' ability to mobilise and challenge them is curtailed.

26. Monash University Gender, Peace and Security, "Mapping the Impact of COVID-19 on Women, Peace and Security Practitioners in the Indo-Pacific Region", 2020, [https://www.monash.edu/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/2209496/COVID19-and-WPS-Research-Brief\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.monash.edu/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/2209496/COVID19-and-WPS-Research-Brief_FINAL.pdf)

27. Women's International Peace Centre, "Humanitarian Funding"

28. Kvinna till Kvinna, "Suffocating the Movement – Shrinking Space for Women's Rights", 2018, <https://kvinnaillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/2-Suffocating-the-movement-ENG.pdf>

More broadly, funding for women's rights has suffered in the current geopolitical era. Isolationist politics has seen a number of donors introduce regressive policies on women's rights and refrain from funding sensitive issue in order to preserve bilateral relationships and avoid promoting state scrutiny. This leaves WHRDs who are addressing the most hard-line issues without key allies nor access to funds for legal fees.

## Key funding issues

- **A global survey of WHRDs found that major donors are increasingly channelling funds through large INGOs or UN bodies rather than to local organisations based on their priorities.<sup>29</sup>**
- **Only 0.2 per cent of bilateral aid to fragile and conflict-affected situations from 2016-2017 was provided directly to women's organisations.<sup>30</sup>**
- **When funding is available, it is often donor driven and project-oriented, with time-intensive reporting requirements and a lack of flexibility to cover core costs.<sup>31</sup>**
- **In 2018, WHRDs from 19 countries issued a call to action noting the need to prioritise support for locally-led strategies, more coordination at regional and international levels and enhanced self-protection strategies.<sup>32</sup>**

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29. UN Security Council, "Women, Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary General", S/2019/800, 9 October 2019.

30. Esther Luigi, "1325 and Beyond: Ways Forward for the United Nations", 2020, <https://www.wiisglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/1325-and-Beyond-Ways-Forward-for-the-United-Nations-Esther-Luigi.pdf>

31. Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition, "We've Had Enough: A Call to Action to Protect Women Human Rights Defenders & Their Communities", 29 November 2018, <https://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/2018/11/29/weve-had-enough-a-call-to-action-to-protect-women-human-rights-defenders-their-communities/>

32. Urgent Action Fund Latin America and Caribbean, "Impunity for Violence against Women Defenders of Territory, Common Goods and Nature in Latin America", 2018, [https://fondoaccionurgente.org.co/site/assets/files/1073/resumen\\_ingles\\_web.pdf](https://fondoaccionurgente.org.co/site/assets/files/1073/resumen_ingles_web.pdf)

# Prevention

Finally, prevention requires the strengthening of women's rights under national law and prosecution of perpetrators violating these. Despite WHRDs being afforded a robust normative framework developed over several decades – including the WPS agenda and frameworks such as CEDAW – the ongoing impunity of perpetrators and inconsistent enforcement of legislation creates an environment that sanctions and normalises their discrimination.

The 1998 UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders outlines the responsibility of states to protect HRDs and ensure they can carry out their work in a safe and enabling environment. In 2013, the first resolution on WHRDs was adopted by the UN General Assembly, outlining the steps that states must take to respect and support WHRD activities, ensure their participation in public life and provide gender-sensitive remedies to WHRDs whose rights have been violated. In resolution 72/247, adopted in 2017, the General Assembly expressed concern regarding the systematic discrimination faced by WHRDs and reiterated calls for states to take practical steps to protect them.

These commitments build on obligations under international human rights law, including General Comment No. 36 on Article 6 of the ICCPR which emphasises the duty of states to protect HRDs from violence, threats and reprisals, and CEDAW's General Recommendation No. 35 which calls on states to prevent the harmful portrayal of WHRDs in the media. Further, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Sustainable Development Goals recognise the role of WHRDs in delivering gender equality and the Yogyakarta Principles highlight that everyone has the right to promote the rights of persons of diverse sexual orientation and gender identities.





Photo: Jorge Royan (CC BY-SA 3.0)

However, the aforementioned resolutions are still regarded as contentious and during negotiations several states argued that the texts should not create special privileges for certain groups of defenders such as women. Though there are examples of good practice, such as the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights' (ACHPR) adoption of the Resolution on Measures to Protect and Promote the Work of WHRDs, a significant number of countries still lack formal legislation or WPS National Action Plans supporting WHRDs in line with their international human rights commitments. When these do exist, they often lack the political will or capacity to consistently enact them or carry out due legal processes.

A 2018 report on WHRDs in Latin America drew attention to a cycle of impunity, including dismissal of complaints lodged by WHRDs, investigations conducted based on gender stereotypes and sexism within authorities.<sup>33</sup> A study conducted by the ACHPR found that violations against WHRDs are commonly justified, with both state (police, politicians, judges) and non-state actors (armed groups, communities and family members) enjoying immunity. WHRDs across all sub-regions of the continent continue lacking access to justice and reparations due to inadequate trials, loss of police records and delayed legal proceedings.<sup>34</sup>

*"Visibility is important. We need to draw attention to violations... letters from other countries really work. It must be understood that it is wrong for this to happen anywhere"*

*Rosalina Dionicio, United Peoples' Network of the Ocotlán Valley*

33. Urgent Action Fund Latin America and Caribbean, "Impunity for Violence against Women Defenders of Territory, Common Goods and Nature in Latin America"

34. African Commission on Human and People's Rights, "Report of the Study on the Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders in Africa", 2016, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/54668622/report-of-the-study-on-the-situation-of-women-human-rights-defenders-in-africa>

# Security Council Response

WPS groups argue that the Security Council's 'mismatch' between ideals and action when it comes to WHRDs represents one of the clearest gaps in implementation of the WPS agenda.

A 2018 report from Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) highlights that the “political rhetoric” on women in statements, resolutions and policy documents rarely translates into action, and that peace processes suffer as a result of the exclusion of WHRDs who have monitored, organised and provided redress in the lead up to and during conflicts.<sup>35</sup> In 2017, an open letter from almost 400 civil society organisations as part of the Security Council Open Debate on WPS noted that “it is not enough to express support for the WPS agenda and then remain silent in the face of brutal crackdowns and attacks on women civil society and WHRDs”.<sup>36</sup> Resolution 2493, unanimously adopted in 2019, urged Member States to recommit to the WPS agenda, including by creating a safe environment for WHRDs. Despite recognition from Secretary General António Guterres that attacks against WHRDs had increased, the United Kingdom's Special Representative expressed disappointment that language on HRDs in Resolution 2493 was not more ambitious given their status on the frontline.

Civil society briefings to the Security Council serve as the primary mechanism through which WHRDs can have a voice within UN processes, but the state holding Presidency has the discretion to select less contentious representatives.<sup>37</sup> WHRDs' fundamental mission to hold those in power accountable means that their work is often challenged by states on the Security Council and, due to the General Assembly's no-objective procedure,

35. GAPS, “Prioritise Peace: Challenging Approaches to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism from a Woman, Peace and Security Perspective”, 2018, [http://gaps-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/GAPS-report\\_Prioritise-Peace-Challenging-Approaches-to-P-CVE-from-a-WPS-perspective.pdf](http://gaps-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/GAPS-report_Prioritise-Peace-Challenging-Approaches-to-P-CVE-from-a-WPS-perspective.pdf)

36. NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, “Open Letter to Permanent Representatives to the UN: Recommendations on the Security Council Open Debate on WPS”, 2017, <https://www.womenpeacesecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/CSO-Open-Letter-to-UN-Member-States-on-WPS-16-October-2017-English.pdf>

they can be discredited or excluded from formal processes without a reason. Though organisations such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) facilitate engagement between WHRDs and the Security Council during in-country missions, a fear of reprisal or financial barriers continue to restrict the meaningful participation of WHRDs in these processes.

Though scholars have argued that the WPS agenda has increasingly prioritised protection from sexual violence in conflict at the expense of other aspects of the agenda,<sup>38</sup> the adoption of Resolution 2122 in 2013 signalled a more integrated approach to women's peace, security and human rights. This Resolution outlines measures that states can take in line with CEDAW to ensure women's human rights are protected before, during and after conflict. On the same day that the Resolution was passed, CEDAW released General Recommendation No. 30, meaning states are legally bound to report on progress towards implementing National Action Plans on UNSCR 1325. Though it has been argued that this was an attempt to draw the Security Council back to a rights basis and emphasise women's agency in peacebuilding processes, and despite hopes that strengthened links between CEDAW and the WPS agenda may have the potential for brokering a more powerful regulatory regime that could benefit WHRDs, real benefits have yet to be witnessed:

- WHRDs were not referenced in any outcome documents adopted by the Security Council in 2018 or 2019. Though referenced in reports on Guinea-Bissau and South Sudan in 2018, these referred to the number of WHRDs attending UN-facilitated events rather than more meaningful analysis of their contribution or challenges.
- Currently, attacks against WHRDs are not tracked in WPS indicators.

**WOMEN  
HUMAN RIGHTS  
DEFENDERS**  
were not referenced  
in any outcome  
documents adopted  
by the Security Council  
in 2018 or 2019.

**ATTACKS  
AGAINST  
WOMEN  
HUMAN RIGHTS  
DEFENDERS**  
are not tracked in  
Women, Peace and  
security indicators.

**85%**  
of all references to  
the Women, Peace  
and Security agenda  
in UN-mandated  
missions focus on  
sexual and gender-  
based violence.

**10%**  
of Member States  
and Regional Groups  
acknowledged the  
work of women human  
rights defenders.

**+** “political rhetoric” on women in statements, resolutions and policy documents rarely translates into action, and peace processes suffer as a result of the exclusion of WHRDs who have monitored, organised and provided redress in the lead up to and during conflicts.

- More than 85 per cent of all references to the WPS agenda in UN-mandated missions focuses on SGBV, risking reinforcing perceptions of women as victims and undermining their active participation in decision-making.<sup>38</sup>
- During an open debate on sexual violence in conflict at the Security Council in 2019, only 10 per cent of Member States and Regional Groups acknowledged the work of WHRDs, and Switzerland was the only state to highlight violence committed against them.<sup>39</sup>

38. WILPF, “Introduction to the Four Pillars of UNSCR 1325”, 2018, [https://www.wilpf.org.uk/introduction-to-the-four-pillars-of-unscr-1325/#\\_ftn6](https://www.wilpf.org.uk/introduction-to-the-four-pillars-of-unscr-1325/#_ftn6)

39. PeaceWomen, “Security Council Open Debate: Sexual Violence in Conflict”, 2019, <https://www.peacewomen.org/security-council/security-council-open-debate-sexual-violence-conflict-april-2019>

# CONCLUSION

The ongoing harassment, criminalisation and assassinations of WHRDs severely restricts progress against the WPS agenda. WHRD networks argue that implementation across all four pillars has been piecemeal. Attention and funding has disproportionately focused on the protection and promotion of the rights of women in comparison to the specific protection and meaningful participation of WHRDs defending these rights - most of which are grassroots community members themselves. A lack of public recognition of the legitimacy of WHRDs, and ongoing impunity for perpetrators, enables attacks and reprisals to continue without consequence. Recent trends in international aid, including framing gender, human rights and conflict as cross-cutting priorities within the broader development discourse, has led to the deprioritisation of funding for the critical, stand-alone work of WHRDs, limiting their ability to forward-plan and build sustainable movements across all four WPS pillars. A comprehensive system to ensure WHRD's inclusion in all four WPS pillars must go beyond their protection from acts of violence and provide an enabling environment to ensure they are fully able to engage in the defence and promotion of human rights in conflict and post-conflict contexts.



# Policy Recommendations

## STATES

- **Develop holistic protection packages for WHRDs to sustain themselves, their organisations and wider movements. These should recognise differential and intersectional needs and be properly institutionalised.**
- **Conduct more systematic documentation and analysis of trends in WHRD violations – including publicly and privately, by different actors - in order to tailor responses.**
- **Combat impunity by processing complaints made by WHRDs in a timely manner, guaranteeing thorough, independent investigations of reports of violence against WHRDs, and ensuring effective remedies for WHRDs, including reparations.**
- **Sensitise and build capacity among officials, including law enforcement agencies, government representatives, judicial staff and security forces, to carry out impartial, fair investigations without revictimising WHRDs. These should be documented and free from prejudices.**
- **Ensure National Human Rights Institutions have the resources, freedom and mandate to document and monitor attacks on WHRDs, and to investigate and disseminate findings in a responsible manner.**
- **Review and reform legislation that harms or restricts WHRDs and domesticate international commitments to protect WHRDs. These should explicitly recognise the intersectional challenges faced by WHRDs, including those from religious and ethnic minorities and the LGBTI community. Learning can be taken from ISHR's Model Law.**
- **Ensure responses to the Covid-19 pandemic uphold international human rights law, including protection of civic space, freedom of assembly and information for WHRDs to carry out their work.**

- **Defend the legitimacy of all WHRDs and their role in promoting human rights, peace and security.** This can be done by running awareness-raising campaigns on the value of their work; providing platforms for them to voice their perspectives; publicly acknowledging the discrimination they face and condemning all attacks against them and integrating training on WHRDs into schools and programmes for public officials.
- **Ensure that WHRDs involved in peace processes receive equal information and resources, and that they have an active role in negotiations rather than a consultative position.**

## DONORS

- **Regularly consult with grassroots WHRDs outside of large INGOs to ensure funding is based on their articulated needs rather than pre-determined priorities – this should include their meaningful consultation in the design and delivery of tailored relief and recovery interventions.**
- **Promote flexible funding arrangements within a common framework of peace, security, human rights, gender and development, ensuring that the complex dimensions of WHRDs' needs can be targeted and allowing for interventions to respond to emerging and unprecedented challenges.**
- **Provide direct funding to WHRDs and their networks where feasible, including through making use of rapid response mechanisms and urgent action funds to support legal aid, emergency relocation, protective accompaniment and medical support.**
- **Integrate the needs of WHRDs into humanitarian assistance, protection and recovery programmes, including through provision of holistic care, psychosocial assistance, support to livelihoods and self-protection and collective care strategies.**
- **Provide core, multi-year funding to support WHRDs to grow, build sustainability and adapt their work to address the gendered impact of Covid-19. Funding should be accessible to individual WHRDs and smaller, less established networks and seek to minimise jargon and bureaucratic proposal processes.**

- Provide infrastructure and digital technology so the most hard-to-reach WHRDs can operate remotely and maintain access to communities during Covid-19.
- Invest in regional funds that create safe spaces for WHRDs to convene, share best practice, build momentum across countries and strengthen their collective voice to push for reform within regional and international human rights processes.

## SECURITY COUNCIL

- Explicitly acknowledge the role of WHRDs in advancing international human rights, peace and security, promote them as agents of change and challenge Member States that may question WHRD's role within the WPS agenda.
- Ensure effective follow-up, implementation and accountability for recommendations to states concerning the security and protection of WHRDs.
- Invite and consider more independent and diverse sources of information as part of Security Council processes, including informal WHRD networks and those operating outside of closed contexts, and provide financial and visa support for less well-established WHRDs.
- Make full use of online consultation processes to ensure that WHRDs in more remote communities can receive reliable information and share their experiences during Covid-19 and beyond.
- Invite WHRDs not only to share their stories and to be consulted in sessions, but to actively direct discussions and drive recommendations.
- Mandate consultations with WHRDs during Special Rapporteur missions and peacekeeping operations as part of conflict prevention and early warning efforts, including strategies to address threats.
- Acknowledge the online security, emotional safety and economic wellbeing of WHRDs in future resolutions.

## About the Author

Amy had advised on international programming and policy for a range of INGOs as well as the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the World Bank. She has evaluated interventions on Women, Peace and Security in the DRC and developed a multi-year portfolio of projects working with WHRDs and lawyers to document and prosecute cases of sexual violence in Myanmar through funding from the UK's Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative (PSVI). Previously she worked with WHRDs in Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos through funding from the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, and she serves on the Board of Peace Brigades International UK, an organisation providing protective accompaniment and legal support to HRDs across Africa, Asia and Latin America.

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