



A tool for Diplomats

Diplomatic Support for Women Human Rights Defenders

WHO ARE 'WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS'?

Women human rights defenders ('WHRDs') are (1) women working on 'any issue related to human rights and fundamental freedoms' or (2) anyone who works to promote and protect 'women's rights and gender equality', including other gender-related issues and sexual rights.

However WHRDs are **not always described as 'women human rights defenders', nor do they always self-identify as such.** The definition is comprehensive and includes, among others, representatives of civil society and non-governmental organisations, grassroots activists, lawyers, journalists, parliamentarians, members of the judiciary, and services providers who often help ensure that women can exercise their rights'.

This document is part of a series of 'action sheets' designed for human rights defenders (HRDs) and diplomatic representatives, with the purpose of enhancing the impact of diplomatic support to HRDs.

See the full series and sources at www.ishr.ch/diplomatic-support

WHAT ARE THE PARTICULAR VIOLATIONS FACED BY WHRDs?

WHRDs are frequently targeted not only because of their activism but also because of their gender. They face violations from the perspective of two different categorisations:

- **Gender-specific violations**, which are regularly used against WHRDs as a consequence of the work they do or as a means of discouraging their engagement in human rights work. This includes sexual harassment and gendered verbal abuse (both online and offline) or physical assaults, including rape, sexual abuse and other forms of sexual violence, in both public and private spheres. They can also lead to other violations, including forced pregnancies or forced abortions, disability or long-term ill-health, and the ostracism of women by their families and communities.
- **Violations that have gendered consequences**, that may be experienced by all defenders, but have different consequences for WHRDs because different social and cultural norms govern the gender identity, sexuality, and gender role of women in different contexts.
 - **Gender-based IT-related violations** – such as online harassment, cyberstalking, violation of privacy, censorship and hacking of e-mail accounts, mobile phones and other electronic devices, with a view to discrediting them and/or inciting other violations and abuses against them.
 - **Stigmatisation and smear campaigns with the use of gender stereotypes and of pejorative ideas about sexuality** – in order to discredit their individual reputation and to question and delegitimise their work and their political agendas. WHRDs are often branded 'witches', 'baby killers', 'man-haters', 'family wreckers' and 'whores'; labelled as 'sexually promiscuous deviants' or 'anti-religious blasphemers'; or accused of promoting alien cultures and breaking up families. These attacks come from both State and non-State actors, including conservative or fundamentalist religious groups aiming to trivialise their work and discredit their motives.
 - **Legal provisions or practices restricting particularly WHRDs' advocacy and their organisational association** – including gender-based bans on dissemination of information, gender-based restrictions on advocacy activities and obstacles to register organisations; and justice systems that perpetuate discrimination based on sex and gender.
 - **Gender-specific reprisals or retaliation because of their engagement with human rights work** – often as a form of punishment, including dismissal or forced resignation from their jobs or from public office, eviction from their homes, expulsion from their families and communities, and even forced exile or migration.
 - **Other violations that may have gendered consequences** - such as attacks on life or bodily integrity, judicial harassment and criminalisation of the human rights work, arbitrary deprivation of liberty, surveillance, invasion of privacy, internet censorship and online harassment, reprisals.

WHO ARE THE PERPETRATORS OF THOSE VIOLATIONS?



Like HRDs generally, WHRDs become targets of **State agents** including law enforcement personnel and security forces and **non-State actors**, including paramilitaries, armed militias, religious extremists, private security agencies, and corporations. However, because of their gender, or their work on gender equality issues and sexual rights, they additionally face heightened risks from their own families, colleagues, communities, faith-based groups and even from the human rights movement itself.

WHY ARE

WHRDs MORE AT RISK?

■ **Challenging the patriarchy**

WHRDs are often targeted and face heightened risks because their activism challenges patriarchy and deep-rooted socio-cultural norms, traditions, perceptions and stereotypes about gender roles and sexuality, which generate hostility against WHRDs. The unique challenges faced by WHRDs are therefore driven by discrimination against women and render them especially vulnerable to gender-based attacks and threats.

■ **Prevailing culture of impunity**

Because of the societal tolerance for violence against women in general, attacks against WHRDs are often not promptly or adequately investigated, perpetrators prosecuted, or victims provided with remedy. Long-standing impunity driven by deep-rooted historical and structural inequalities in power relations and discrimination against women contribute to the normalisation and escalation of violations against WHRDs. Factors including a lack of reporting, documentation, investigation and access to justice, taboos with regard to gender-specific violations and abuses, and a lack of recognition of the legitimate role of WHRDs contribute to maintaining this culture of impunity.

■ **The rise of fundamentalisms, violent extremism and misogyny**

The rise or resurgence of religious fundamentalism and extremism coupled with political populism and widespread misogynistic language, have intensified the obstacles WHRDs face, increased violence and contributed to social stigma attached to the work of WHRDs.

■ **Closing space for civil society**

WHRDs are working within the current context of closing space for civil society. This trend involves the enactments of laws and practices that effectively impede human rights work, including through arduous NGO registration and reporting processes, restrictions on receiving and accessing funding, misapplication of certain laws such as counter-terrorism and public assembly laws, among others.

■ **Widespread cases of burnout and lack of support for psychosocial well-being**

For many WHRDs, self-care is a privilege, and overworking is a token of commitment. Coupled with the role that many WHRDs play as the primary family and community caregiver, the cases of stress, burn out and mental illness become widespread. Yet, there remains a lack of investment in or support for the psychosocial wellbeing of defenders or their families.

FOCUS ON

INTERSECTIONALITY

There are certain factors that make some HRDs more vulnerable than others, such as their identities, the identities of people they defend, their working area or the contexts in which they operate. Those factors can overlap and interact, intensifying and diversifying the attacks against them and producing new and different kinds of vulnerabilities. HRDs who experience those intersecting forms of oppression and of discrimination are at an increased risk of attack. It is therefore critical for diplomatic missions to **adopt an intersectionality lens and a dynamic approach**, in order to examine **how the combination of those multiple, shifting and intersecting identities affect the rights and security of HRDs, and how to provide the most effective diplomatic support for HRDs**

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DIPLOMATS

Develop a gender lens to diplomatic support you provide – avoid perpetuating gender stereotypes. Acknowledge WHRDs are more at risk of certain forms of violence and restrictions, and are more vulnerable to prejudice, exclusion and public repudiation by State forces and social actors. Diplomatic support should ensure targeted approaches for supporting WHRDs, should address the specificities and particularities of their needs, and should bear in mind that uniform responses are often not effective from a gender perspective.

Engage with WHRDs on an ongoing basis, on their own terms and always by taking into consideration their own needs, demands and expectations - this includes considering the fact that particularly local, rural and grassroots WHRDs are less aware of the diplomatic support as a protection tool and experience particular challenges in obtaining diplomatic support. At the same time, many WHRDs do not recognise themselves as HRDs, thus they may not feel entitled to receive diplomatic support.

Address the holistic security needs of WHRDs and go beyond the physical security protection – by developing or strengthening digital security policies and practices of diplomatic missions while protecting and promoting the psychosocial well-being of WHRDs.

Consider that merely receiving diplomatic support or even being in contact with diplomats can put WHRDs at risk - both in the private and public sphere. Any action taken to protect or to empower WHRDs must be at the expressed wish of and in close consultation with the WHRDs concerned, their family, or close friends and colleagues, to minimise the possibility of negative consequences for WHRDs or for their families.

Advocate for a more enabling environment for WHRDs to do their work at the local and national levels free from fear, threats, harassment or violence - with national authorities, third countries, local and international business actors and in multilateral forums. They should all acknowledge the important and legitimate role of WHRDs in the promotion and protection of human rights, democracy, the rule of law and development, reiterate the rights of WHRDs and condemn violence and discrimination against WHRDs.

Encourage and support national institutions of the host country to build their institutional capacity to respond to rights violations - by urging the authorities to e.g. explicitly recognise the work of WHRDs, document violations against WHRDs, and include information about attacks against WHRDs in their human rights reports to international and regional human rights bodies.

Increase the visibility of the human rights work carried out by WHRDs through the active use of the media or through other available channels of communication - since WHRDs are often rendered invisible due to historical and structural barriers in power relations in human rights analyses, case advocacy and policy formulation; those actions can give WHRDs moral/psychological support and increase their legitimacy and that of their work.

Draw attention to individual cases by highlighting their links with the historical and structural gender-based discrimination and violence; and take public action – if possible through alliances with other diplomatic missions, civil society organisations, and international and regional human rights institutions. This includes for example issuing communications to governments concerning the WHRD facing heightened risk, and following up on State responses.

Build capacity of WHRDs based on their particular needs - through for example organising training, workshops to develop the knowledge, network, skills, abilities of WHRDs or providing financial support.

Monitor and document HRDs' situation in the host country with the use of a feminist intersectional perspective – considering the specificities of WHRDs' experiences in defending rights, in experiencing violations and in requiring targeted remedies; bearing in mind that WHRDs themselves often do not report violations because of fear or reprisals. This includes for example collecting gender-disaggregated data and gender-sensitive information.