



Women human rights defenders' individual and collective action has been pivotal pushing for change across a wide spectrum of rights, including in the context of prevention, peace and security and sustainable development. They have been, and continue to be, at the forefront of social justice movements that have and continue to benefit everyone.

WHO ARE WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS?

Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) are:

- all women and girls working on any human rights issue, and
- anyone of any gender who promotes women's rights and rights related to gender equality

This includes lesbian, gay, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) activists, as issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity are part of achieving gender equality. WHRDs can be, among others: feminists, indigenous leaders, community organizers, grassroots activists, students, girls, teachers, journalists, artists, bloggers, trade unionists, parliamentarians, judicial actors, civil servants, private sector actors, protestors, doctors, health service providers – and **YOU!**

WHRDs may not always see or identify themselves as human rights defenders for various reasons. Despite their diversity, however, there is a frequent commonality in their experience because attacks against them are often rooted in gender-based discrimination and follow similar patterns.

Although efforts to shrink and reduce civic space – including freedoms of expression, assembly and association - affect all defenders, they **disproportionately impact WHRDs** who have historically had very limited civic space to begin with. WHRDs also face **additional and gender-specific obstacles, risks, violations and/or their impacts**, which are shaped by:

- Who they are and how they identify (e.g. women, girls)
- Who they support and identify with (e.g. the feminist movement)
- What they are working to advance (e.g. the rights of women and LGBTI people)

WHAT SPECIFIC CHALLENGES DO WHRDS FACE?

WHRDs face gendered risks and violations, such as threats of sexual assault, rape, harassment and killings. Common patterns

of attacks on WHRDs' integrity and reputation have been documented across geographic regions, including intimidation and psychological harassment, slander and smear campaigns. For instance, WHRDs are subject to misogynist comments directed at their "morality", sexuality, bodies, gender identity and reproductive or marital status. They also face accusations of promoting notions of "gender ideology" or "foreign values", which fuels hateful narratives based on gender stereotypes.

"Women human rights defenders (...) face immense risks, particularly when their work focuses on gender, sexuality and sexual and reproductive rights. But their work builds, stone by stone, the bridge that every society can cross in order to achieve equality and break down harmful stereotypes. We can help them build that bridge. In fact, not only can we do this – we must"

Michelle Bachelet, High
Commissioner for Human Rights

In addition to violations by State actors, armed non-State actors, private sector actors and online actors, **WHRDs often face violence and discrimination within their families and communities, organizations and movements.** This discrimination can range from lower visibility, recognition and remuneration to violence and abuse. **People close to WHRDs, including family members, may also be targeted in an effort to silence and threaten** the defender and her work.

WHRDs are often marginalised, not recognised, unseen and underfunded. In denial of their right to participation, they are frequently silenced, belittled and denied access to policy-making spaces. A small fraction of funding provided by donors in support of gender equality goes directly to WHRDs.



Technology has a positive transformative potential. It can be an enabler for human rights, empowers defenders of all genders and ages and facilitates their interconnectedness. However, **harnessing web-based technologies and digital platforms by WHRDs requires efforts to bridge the gender digital divide, including equal access to digital devices, digital literacy, gender-responsive platforms and addressing prejudices, discrimination and exclusion.** Online

spaces have become an increasingly hostile environment for WHRDs leading to grave rights violations offline in some cases. Attacks are often sexualized and discriminatory in nature with widespread impunity.

WHRDs are also often targeted because they belong to feminist or gender equality networks and movements, with attacks against them meant to serve as warnings to other WHRDs. Many attacks against WHRDs form part of an **anti-rights agenda, which seeks to demonize and generate hostility against them.** The **risks and challenges faced by WHRDs are also intersectional.** For certain groups of women, based on other aspects of their identities, such as age, religion, ethnicity, class, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity, the obstacles and risks they face manifest in distinct ways.

WHAT ROLE CAN THE UNITED NATIONS PLAY?

WHRDs are key agents of change and important partners and intermediaries. The UN's engagement with them and support in relation to the civic space in which they operate is fundamental to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals, advance peace and security, and respond to humanitarian crises and health emergencies.

The **UN-wide Guidance Note on Civic Space** under the **Secretary-General’s Call to Action for Human Rights** presents a unique opportunity for enhanced UN leadership, at both headquarters and field levels. It commits the system to stepping up efforts around participation, protection, and promotion of civic space. For each of these areas, there are gender-specific elements to reflect on and take into consideration concerning WHRDs.

Our collective commitment to support WHRDs is particularly relevant now, given the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the establishment of six transformative Action Coalitions to accelerate gender equality, including one dedicated to Feminist Movements and Leadership.

PARTICIPATION

- ✓ Consult and meaningfully involve WHRDs in the design and implementation of policies and programs. This includes safe, accessible and confidential feedback loops, to ensure these policies and programs are gender-responsive, equally accessible and available to WHRDs in all their diversity.
- ✓ Support WHRDs to participate in UN intergovernmental fora, UN meetings and other international, regional and national decision-making spaces and take account of gender-specific barriers (e.g. gender unequal caregiving responsibilities, discriminatory gender norms, stigma), in collaboration with WHRDs.
- ✓ Ensure that WHRDs participating in events are supported and protected: assess and address gender-specific security and risk factors they, as well as their families or other people supporting them (including online) may face, respect their concerns and informed choices, and have gender-sensitive protection options and referrals available (see also on **reprisals** below).
- ✓ Ensure communications channels with the United Nations, online and off-line are transparent, inclusive, accessible, safe and responsive to WHRDs, particularly those most at risk of being left behind.
- ✓ Reach out and engage with grassroots WHRDs and beyond well-known civil society organisations and “heads of organizations” or “community leaders”, which often excludes WHRDs.
- ✓ Regularly disseminate and circulate information about the UN, its work and opportunities in accessible formats and languages to a diversity of WHRDs and networks they are part of and continuously assess whether this actually reaches WHRDs in all their diversity and if there are gender-specific barriers to address.
- ✓ Support and respond to WHRDs who seek to contest exclusions and restrictions on participation, consultation and access to information and UN mechanisms.



PROTECTION

- ✓ Effective protection depends on a good understanding of context. Undertake a context analysis and mapping of civil society actors and ensure that there is a specific focus on, and consultation with, a diversity of WHRDs. Consider:
 - Who are the WHRDs at risk and why? Are they part of different movements or networks?
 - What measures of protection are supported through movements and networks (e.g. self-care, collective security measures, solidarity, effective referral pathways)?
 - Do WHRDs know and engage with UN protection measures and mechanisms?
 - Can WHRDs reach out to the UN on protection in an equal, safe, gender-responsive and accessible manner? How is the UN supporting WHRD's specific protection needs?
 - Who are the other key protection actors (e.g. NHRIs, equality commissions, other State protection mechanisms where appropriate, WHRDs networks, diplomatic community)?
- ✓ Ensure that a protection policy and framework is in place and known to UN staff and entities.
 - It should be gender-responsive, intersectional and build on informed consent; ensure confidentiality; not raise undue expectations; do no harm; ensure security (incl. digital).
 - Consult WHRDs in its design and implementation to ensure it is responsive to their situations - avoid assumptions about "vulnerabilities" and "needs" of WHRDs.
 - Ensure effective and regularly updated referral pathways to competent services, UN entities, WHRDs/civil society networks and diplomatic community, and follow-up.
- ✓ Regularly monitor and assess the public discourse and overall environment for WHRDs, which involves addressing restrictions targeted at WHRDs (e.g. laws that restrict their movement, policies that limit their funding, or laws that criminalize the issues on which they work).
- ✓ Assess also how restrictions on civic space more broadly specifically impact WHRDs (e.g. prevailing gender norms can lead to different experiences).
- ✓ Document cases of violence, intimidation, and threats against WHRDs, including their gender-specificities (nature of attack and/or impact, targeting of the collective/feminist movement) and follow up in a coordinated manner.
- ✓ Document and report acts of intimidation and reprisal against WHRDs for cooperation with the UN, including their gender-specificities to the [UN Reprisals mandate](#).
- ✓ Recognise that WHRDs often face risks from actors other than States, including non-State actors and other actors in the private sphere, including in or close to their homes.

THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY HAS URGED

"States to acknowledge publicly the important and legitimate role of women human rights defenders in the promotion and protection of human rights, democracy, the rule of law and development as an essential component of ensuring their protection, including by publicly condemning violence and discrimination against women human rights defenders," and "to take appropriate, robust and practical steps to protect women human rights defenders and to integrate a gender perspective into their efforts to create a safe and enabling environment for the defence of human rights."

PROMOTION

- ✓ Publicly recognise, promote and support WHRDs in all their diversity.
- ✓ Implement initiatives to highlight the work of WHRDs and the gender-specific challenges they face and how these can be addressed. This can be done through, among others: public campaigns, statements, and communications; participating in and inviting WHRDs to events; and using the good offices of the Secretary-General and senior UN officials.
- ✓ Accompany WHRDs in demonstrations, judicial proceedings, meetings with public authorities to offer support, legitimacy and a form of protection, and visit WHRDs in places of detention.
- ✓ Leverage the UN’s convening power to provide civic space for WHRDs, help build solidarity between movements, as well as bring together WHRDs in all their diversity - including as part of broader civil society engagements - in meetings, events and consultations.
- ✓ Ensure that gender-sensitive language is used in public communications and that harmful gender stereotypes and biases and assumptions about the “vulnerabilities”, needs or condition of WHRDs are avoided. Support other civil society and media partners in doing the same.
- ✓ Support specific and flexible funding towards WHRDs, particularly WHRDs most at risk of being left behind, and help donors and WHRDs connect.
- ✓ Draw on different initiatives and processes, such as, among others, the 2030 Agenda, the Beijing+25 Generation Equality Action Coalitions, the Spotlight Initiative, and the drive towards localization in humanitarian settings, to mobilize support for WHRDs.
- ✓ Promote an enabling environment for WHRDs including civic space, which involves a plurality of WHRD voices and is responsive to the gender-specific obstacles and attacks WHRDs may face. This includes promoting equal access to international, regional and national decision-making fora, including online, and how these civic space platforms are designed and implemented.



USEFUL RESOURCES

- 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 human rights defenders” [A/RES/68/181](#) (2014)
- UN Secretary-General, [A Highest Aspiration: A Call to Action for Human Rights](#) (2020)
- UN [Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space](#) (2020)
- Reports of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders with a focus on WHRDs, [A/HRC/16/44](#) (2010) and [A/HRC/40/60](#) (2019)
- OHCHR, [Women human rights defenders](#)
- OHCHR, Information Series on Sexual and Reproductive Health & Rights, [Women Human Rights Defenders](#) (2020)
- Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition, [Gendering Documentation: A Manual for and about Women Human Rights Defenders](#) (2016)
- Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID), [Our Right To Safety: Women Human Rights Defenders’ Holistic Approach to Protection](#) (2014)
- Observatory on the Universality of Rights (OURs), [Rights at Risk](#) (2017)