



Civil Rights Defenders' Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur's Survey on the Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders

Stockholm, September 2018

I. Introduction

Civil Rights Defenders is an international human rights organization that, since 1982, defends people's civil and political rights and empower human rights defenders at risk. Civil Rights Defenders has activities in its own capacity and in closer partnerships with over 200 partner organizations in 35 countries, many of them some of the world's most repressive, on four continents.

Civil Rights Defenders welcomes the UN Special Rapporteur's Survey on the Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders. We are pleased that, pursuant to his mandate, the Special Rapporteur seeks to gather information from all stakeholders regarding the situation of women human rights defenders to inform his report to the Human Rights Council in March 2019.

In this submission, Civil Rights Defenders seeks to respond to the questions raised in the survey. Answers may if quoted publicly be attributed to Civil Rights Defenders.

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II. Recent trends or issues related to women human right defenders

Civil Rights Defenders finds that women human rights defenders (WHRDs) face the same risks and violations as other human rights defenders (HRDs), but are targeted through intimidation and attacks related specifically to their gender in many ways and contexts. Trends that have been identified through the work of Civil Rights Defenders include, but are not limited to:

- **Gender based violence, specifically sexual violence, by State- and non-State actors in repressive environments.** As the work of WHRDs in many contexts continues to be perceived by State- and non-State actors as challenging 'traditional' ideas of family dynamics and gender roles, WHRDs face an increased risk for gender based violence in addition to being vulnerable to threats as a HRD. Recently, Civil Rights Defenders has been reached by reports on WHRDs being attacked

in public spaces, facing sexual harassment and threats. Gender based violence online is increasingly prevalent for WHRDs where threats against WHRD online translate into threats and physical violence offline.

- **Emotional extortion by State actors.** In addition to the risks faced by WHRDs themselves, their family members and children are also frequently targeted. Attacks against the families of WHRDs are often seen as an effective means by which to discourage WHRDs from continuing their activism. WHRDs are thus affected by unique threats against family members that are used as means for intimidation. Recently, Civil Rights Defenders has been reached by reports on WHRDs during questioning by law enforcement and other officials have been emotionally extorted through threats against children and family members in order to produce confessions.
- **Family hostage situations by State actors.** In repressive environments, WHRDs facing immediate risks as a result of their human rights work can be forced to relocate. As WHRDs often act as primary caregivers, forced relocation may increase psychological pressure on WHRDs and impact the well-being of their families. Recently, Civil Rights Defenders has been reached by reports on WHRDs who due to external pressure and threats have been forced to relocate, but without their closest family members. Families and also children have then systematically been declined visas or travel documents to reunite with the HRD.
- **Stigmatization by State- and non-State actors.** Due to structural forms of discrimination against women, WHRDs are subject to various social, legal and customary restrictions which further limit their ability to work as HRDs. When challenging these restrictions, WHRDs are likely to be discredited and exposed to stigmatization, exclusion and public repudiation by state actors as well as members of their communities. Smear campaigns and defamation is a common method for discrediting and delegitimizing the work of WHRDs. The use of private information to belittle the work of WHRDs disproportionately affects WHRDs when compared to other HRDs.

III. Groups of women human rights defenders who face higher or specific risks

Through its work, Civil Rights Defenders has identified specific groups of WHRDs that face greater risks than other HRDs, including:

- **Individual WHRDs.** Individual WHRDs face greater difficulties than other HRDs when mobilizing to reach larger support networks. Networks play a significant role in protecting individual HRDs who are not part of established civil society organizations when targeted with attacks or threats. Without structural support, individual WHRDs have a greater risk of exposure to physical and psychosocial threats.
- **WHRDs engaged in other non-discrimination issues.** WHRDs who work with women's rights including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), LGBTIQ issues and disability issues experience intersecting forms of discrimination and are at a greater risk for violence, harassment

and attack. WHRDs belonging to or defending the rights of persons belonging to indigenous, ethnic or religious minorities are also more likely to face intersectional discrimination.

- **WHRDs lacking social support structures.** WHRDs without families, significant others or close networks of friends may face greater psychosocial insecurity. Civil Rights Defenders has worked with many WHRDs who have been forced to relocate due to their human rights work and who have lost the support of their families or communities. This displacement can manifest an increased insecurity and pressure to withdraw from public space.

IV. Main concerns and challenges that women human rights defenders face

The recent trends and issues previously mentioned – *gender based violence, emotional extortion, family hostage situations and stigmatization* – are concerning for all actors within human rights, but specifically for WHRDs, as they risk becoming instruments for clamping down on WHRDs and also silencing them from expressing their HRD arguments.

In the line of work of Civil Rights Defenders, physical and emotional threats continue to be the major challenge for WHRDs, as they limit the possibility for WHRDs to engage in efficient human rights work. However, digital spaces are increasingly important platforms for most HRDs today and we clearly see how online threats and gender based violence online limits the space for WHRDs to work through digital means, which limits the impact of their overall human rights work.

V. Good practices and protection measures

The particular challenges and threats that WHRDs face call for gender-specific interventions and protection measures. Civil Rights Defenders has through its work identified several good practices and measures for protection that would support WHRDs to carry out their work safely, including:

- **Flexible funding modalities for WHRDs and their families.** As WHRDs have a diverse range of needs, funding for WHRDs must be flexible to address the needs identified as relevant by the HRD to support themselves and their families. Donors should consider that WHRDs have unique living conditions who often are residing in countries with restrictive legislation, to which funding for WHRDs should be responsive to these conditions. In addition, while rapid support to WHRDs at immediate risk is crucial for sustaining human rights movements, flexible and multi-year support for preventive measures that address root causes needs greater investment.
- **Integrated approach to security and support for WHRDs.** An integrated approach to security should involve both short and long term cross-cutting responses for WHRDs that include psychosocial counseling, health services and financial support. Psychosocial support can help WHRDs cope with the continual psychological pressure from the stigmatization and harassment. As threats against children and family members of WHRDs is not uncommon, protection measures must also take into consideration extending support to the family of the HRD. Civil Rights

Defenders has recently noted that integrating trainings on psychosocial security with other relevant protection measures like digital and physical security is not only helpful for an individual HRD, but also helpful for reducing vulnerabilities and strengthening security on an organizational level.

VI. Strengthening the movement for women's rights globally and better enabling women to participate in the promotion and protection of human rights

Civil Rights Defenders has through its work acknowledged that supporting women and WHRDs must be adjustable and Defender-centric, in which it is driven by the needs identified by the individual or organization. Civil Rights Defenders note the following is needed to:

- **Increasing visibility and knowledge.** Strengthening awareness of the challenges and threats for women's organizations and WHRDs at all levels is necessary for not only to hold duty bearers accountable for an enabling environment for civil society overall, but also to stimulate dialogue at local and national levels to contribute to the legitimation of the work being done and to counteract the negative discourse. Increasing visible recognition of women's human rights work and providing women and WHRDs the safe spaces to raise this dialogue is greatly needed.
- **Accessibility and usability of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).** Greater investment in WHRDs and women's rights accessibility in the digital space is needed to ensure digital literacy and access to information. Investment from the private sector is greatly needed to better enable and protect WHRDs when carrying out their work online.
- **Expanding funding modalities.** WHRDs and women's organizations do not have the resources or space they need to set out and implement their own concepts of security and protection. Many women, including WHRDs also lack sustainable financial autonomy. Ample funding for women-led projects that women identify as important is necessary to sustain WHRDs work in the public space.

VII. Recommendations for the Special Rapporteur

Civil Rights Defenders recommends that the Special Rapporteur focuses on the following in his report:

Recognition and support for WHRDs and their work

- Increased visibility and recognition of the diverse and important work carried out by WHRDs is needed, with particular focus on recognizing WHRDs contributions to developments at local and national levels.
- Provide WHRDs leading positions at the local, national, regional and global level to increase visibility and public awareness about the legitimacy and importance of their work.

Protection and security mechanisms


- Protection measures and strategies must place the needs of WHRDs regarding their own security and their families at the center when aiming to address their situation.
- An integrated approach to security includes not only physical protection but also measures that support the wellbeing of WHRDs and their families, including psychosocial support and access to other health services.
- Increased support is needed for WHRDs (both individuals and organizations) who are at a greater risk for intersectional discrimination and to WHRDs that may be less accessible due to geographical location, language and cultural norms and practices.

Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

- WHRDs need greater access to and literacy in ICTs as digital spaces are increasingly important for their work.
- Greater investment in training on the risks, responsibilities, tools and strategies to protect WHRDs and their networks when using ICTs is needed.

Funding for WHRDs

- Greater resources are needed to support WHRDs when facing temporary relocation and judicial processes. These resources should be comprehensively provided to cover costs identified as relevant by the HRD and their family.
- Donors should invest in flexible multi-year support to WHRDs and women's organizations working with civil and political rights to strengthen organizational capacity, integrated security measures, networks and advocacy.



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