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# SOLIDARITY IS OUR ONLY WEAPON

– THE SITUATION FOR WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

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COVER PHOTO: Kvinna till Kvinna/Ane Birk

A warm thanks to all Kvinna till Kvinna programme staff who helped with the dissemination of the survey and willingly shared their knowledge during the validation workshop. Thanks also to intern Olga Fare for your assistance. And most importantly – thanks to all the women human rights defenders and female journalist for their contribution to this report and their work.

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2021)

This publication was financed by Sida, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. The views, opinions and presentation of facts are the sole responsibility of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views and positions of Sida.

# The women's movement strikes back

Outspoken women can change the world. Sometimes change comes suddenly, while other times it requires years and years of work of the women's movement. For about a decade, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation has regularly asked women human rights defenders around the world how they are able to carry on with their activism. How secure do they feel, how much hatred do they face, and to what extent do their governments support them? Or could it be the governments that are the threat? Much has happened since we last published a report on this topic in 2018, and it is time to explore these issues once again.

In total, 334 women human rights defenders and female journalists from 74 countries participated in our survey. We also interviewed 15 experienced women activists and read a great deal of literature. We are, as always, grateful to all the activists who took the time to answer the survey and agreed to be interviewed.

One thing that struck us was that threats, hatred and even physical harassment seem to have become normalised. Living and working with threats and harassment has increasingly become something that is "part of the ordinary workday", as one women's rights activist put it. Many activists just carry on with their work, often choosing not to report harassment or threats, either out of fear of being harassed by the police, or because they have tried and deemed it pointless. When it comes to slander, they may simply not want to repeat such false information.

However, the study clearly shows that many are also more careful about what they say and how they communicate. Silencing the women's movement is one of the main objectives of disparate forces such as anti-gender movements, authoritarian governments, patriarchal religious structures, community leaders, nationalists and alt-rights. The study showed that threats also comes from within the civil society movement, with one in ten respondents having been threatened or harassed by their peers. As the survey was carried out in the midst of a pandemic, with social distancing and closed offices, it could be assumed that there would be less space for hatred and threats, but sadly the level is much the same as in our earlier investigations.

The way the women's movement strikes back (because they do!) is by joining forces and working together. Both the women activists and female journalists whom we spoke to emphasise that even though solidarity and collaboration may be challenging, it is absolutely crucial. As one Syrian activist put it: "Solidarity is our only weapon."

Photo: Viktor Gördsäter



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Petra Tötterman Andorff'.

**Petra Tötterman Andorff**  
*Secretary-General, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation*



Photo: Center for Women's Rights

A street action against gender-based violence organised by Center for Women's Rights, in Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

# Introduction

**Hatred against women human rights defenders represents a serious threat against democracy, against gender equality and against women's human rights. We know from both research and experience that a strong women's movement is key to strengthening legislation on women's rights and making sure that the legislation is followed.<sup>1</sup>**

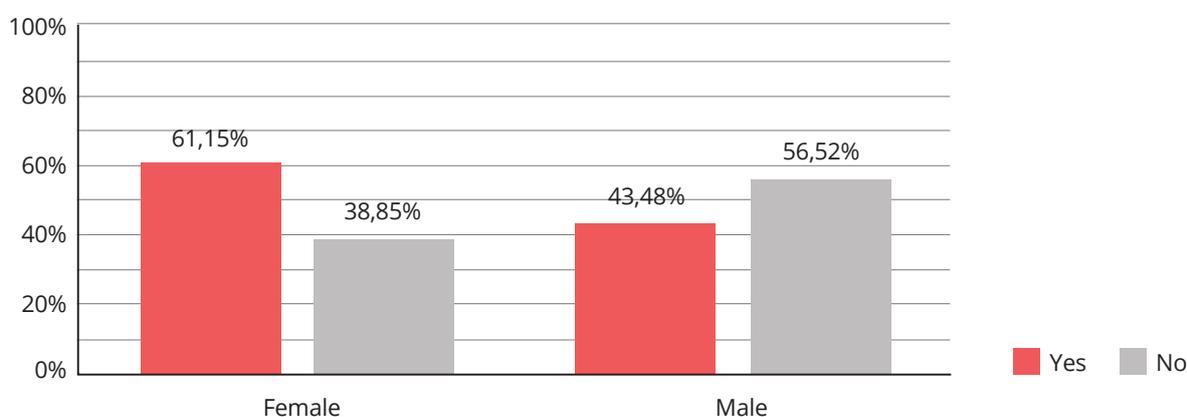
The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation has supported women's rights activists and feminist movements in conflict-affected countries for almost three decades, and being a vocal woman fighting for the rights of women has never been an easy task. With shrinking space for civil society, nationalist, right-wing and fundamentalist movements growing stronger, and with the anti-gender ideology gaining force,<sup>2</sup> it is our understanding that it is steadily becoming more dangerous in some contexts and stressful in others, to be a women human rights defender. In our efforts to promote a safer and more enabling environment for women activists, Kvinna till Kvinna has been monitoring the situation for women human rights defenders for several years. How do they perceive their space to work, what kinds of harassment and threats do they encounter, and what topics have they experienced as being most risky? This report presents an overview of which issues

are the most dangerous for activists to work on; what types of threats that are most common; and which actors are behind. It also outlines the strategies that activists use to manage and mitigate the violence and the threats, and provides recommendations to the international community on what can be done to reverse a decades-long trend of shrinking space, and how to better support women human rights defenders.

## A SENSE OF UNCERTAINTY

When Kvinna till Kvinna looked at the hatred and threats against women human rights defenders in *Femdefenders* (2014), 29 percent of respondents said they had received death threats in public spaces, and 55 percent had been threatened and harassed online. In *Suffocating the Movement* (2018), more than half of the respondents reported having suffered from violence or threats of violence due to their activism. In this year's survey, just over 60 percent of the respondents confirmed that they, or their organisation, had received threats or experienced harassment due to their work. If we separate our sample by gender, we see that 43 percent of the male respondents have experienced threats and harassment, compared to 61 percent of the females.

### Have you or your organisation been subjected to harassment or threats because of your activism/work?



<sup>1</sup> Weldon, S. Htun, M. "Feminist Mobilisation and Progressive Policy Change: Why Governments Take Action to Combat Violence Against Women", 2013, p. 231-247.

<sup>2</sup> The anti-gender movements are built by conservative and religious actors who work together in coalitions, nationally and internationally, against so-called 'gender ideology, opposing women's rights in general, LGBTQI+ people's rights, SRHR, sexual education, and gender studies.

In 2020, Human Rights Watch reported on the challenges and increased violence faced by women rights activists in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA), including death threats and even killings.<sup>3</sup> A number of studies show how women human rights defenders around the world face social and political prejudice and exclusion, and that those who challenge cultural norms on gender, femininity and sexuality are particularly at risk.<sup>4</sup> Many respondents in our survey commented on how the uncertainty about who is behind the threats compounds the feeling of insecurity. Before the explosion of social media and online hatred, people tended to know who was behind the threats. Today, they may be random social media users or organised troll-campaigns, with no visible individual or group identity: "I don't feel like I am in danger, but I have a lingering sense of uncertainty", says Anna Kamay, women human rights defender from Armenia.

We included both female journalists and women human rights defenders in this survey. Female journalists experience much the same kinds and levels of harassment, threats and violence as women human rights defenders. While we did not receive enough responses from female journalists to allow us to compare the two groups, one thing stood out. Female journalists reported higher levels of threats and harassment – 74 percent said they had received threats and harassment due to their work as journalists, compared to 59 percent of the women human rights defenders. These findings are supported by a recent UNESCO study on violence against female journalists, which stated that 73 percent of female journalists had experienced online violence and 25 percent had received threats of physical violence.<sup>5</sup>

Women human rights defenders and female journalists from Northeast Europe<sup>6</sup> report the highest levels of harassment and threats (76%), while the lowest levels are found in the MENA region (49%). We have tried to delve deeper into this large difference in numbers during interviews and validation workshops as we know, as mentioned above, that the MENA region is a difficult and dangerous place for many women rights activists. Normalisation of the threats and harassment has been one explana-

tion put forward, in addition to underreporting and impunity. "The situation for women in civil society is very tough now and there is very little protection", says one women's rights activist from Syria.

When we compare a group of activists who work within large and established civil society organisations with activists who operate independently or in more loosely organised networks, the latter group experiences a slightly higher level of threats, and significantly higher levels of death threats and arbitrary visits from authorities.

Of the 334 respondents, just over half say that they have been activists for more than eleven years, and only around 10 percent have been active for less than three years. This in itself is an indication of the resilience of the movement. The threats may remain at the same level, but the women human rights defenders continue to be outspoken, demanding their rights. To be able to continue, they need and deserve our support, argues the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association Clément Voule: "Despite their vital importance, the voices of women and their contributions to activism and civil society continue to be undervalued, under-resourced and undermined."<sup>7</sup>



<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch. "Together We Must Protect and Support WHRDs in Middle East and North Africa", 2020.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Barrett, M. "Defenders Aplenty: Access to Justice for Women Human Rights Defenders", 2020, p. 457.

<sup>5</sup> UNESCO. "UNESCO's global survey online violence against women journalists", 2020.

<sup>6</sup> In Northeast Europe respondents from the South Caucasus, Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, and Moldova are included.

<sup>7</sup> Voule, C. "Celebrating women in activism and civil society: The enjoyment of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association by women and girls", Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association, 2020, p. 3.

# Methodology

**With this report, Kvinna till Kvinna aims to contribute to a global overview of the situation concerning hatred, threats and shrinking civic space for women human rights defenders and female journalists.**

The report is based on an online survey with a total of 334 respondents, interviews with 15 women's rights activists, as well as an overview of the literature on the topic.

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation has worked with women's rights organisations in conflict-affected areas since 1993, giving us in-depth understanding and solid experience to bring into the report. There was a higher response rate in regions where Kvinna till Kvinna is active, due to our close partnership with women's rights organisations in those areas. Female journalists were reached with kind assistance of the Dutch organisation Free Press Unlimited. The respondents operate in 74 countries in Latin America, North America, South Asia, Europe, Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Sub-Saharan Africa.

The survey included 20 questions and was disseminated to women's rights organisations, feminist networks, independent women rights activists and female journalist networks around the world.

The sample of organisations, women's rights activists and female journalists is partly random. Female journalists make up 13 percent of respondents, and the results have been analysed both separately and together with the rest of the sample.

Some of the 20 questions allowed for multiple selection, which means that the total in those cases adds up to more than 100 percent. We allowed comments in some of the questions, which gave us a good number of quotes from the respondents.

Quotes in the report without a name are from survey respondents or interviewees who wished to remain anonymous. The survey was conducted anonymously.

Throughout the report we use the term women human rights defenders, sometimes alternated with women's rights activists or women activists.

 If you hear all the time that you are a traitor and a bad person, you start thinking it might be true.



Palestinian Center For Peace and Democracy organised an activity during 16 Days of Activism in the village of Bradalah, Palestine.

Photo: Fadi Damadieh



# What sparks the hatred?



Globally, we are witnessing a pushback against the realisation of human rights of women, alarming levels of femicide, attacks on women human rights defenders, as well as laws and policies that discriminate. Misogyny is a common feature of violent extremism. Persistent gaps and stagnation are clear in women's participation in political leadership roles, peace and security, and economic empowerment. This regression in the realisation of the human rights of women is fundamentally political. It is about power.

ANTÓNIO GUTERRES, THE UN SECRETARY-GENERAL IN HIS REPORT ON HUMAN RIGHTS PUBLISHED IN 2020.<sup>8</sup>

## CHALLENGING POWER

When exploring what sparks the hatred and the multiple forms of threats that women human rights defenders encounter, the key motivation is undoubtedly power. Questioning power relations triggers hatred. The work of a woman activist is about challenging norms and overthrowing structures, regardless of focus. It is about changes that ultimately imply that people in positions of power will have to take a step back.

When we asked which issues put the activist/journalist most at risk, they identified the following top issues: corruption; LGBTQI+ people's rights;<sup>9</sup> combating discriminatory traditional values and anti-gender rhetoric; and anti-militarism.

There are some differences between the regions. In Northeast Europe, peacebuilding, reconciliation and working across conflict borders are more dangerous to work on than globally, whereas anti-militarism is identified as the most dangerous field of work in South Asia. In Latin America, peacebuilding is considered most risky, which is probably due to the fact that a majority of the respondents are from Colombia. The environment/climate change is also ranked much higher in Latin America than in other regions, which correlates to other reports on the situation for land and environmental rights activists.

Among female journalists, anti-militarism emerges as the second most dangerous topic globally, but as for the women human rights defenders in general, corruption is rated as number one.

Over time, there has been a slight shift when it comes to what issues provoke most hatred. In 2014, Kvinna till Kvinna carried out the first enquiry regarding the most dangerous fields of work for women human rights defenders.<sup>10</sup> At the time, the top four were to combat violence against women; to promote gender equality; to fight corruption; and to promote greater influence for women. However, all of these issues have in common that they aim to change power imbalances and social norms, posing a threat to those in power positions. The issues that are identified as most risky are not necessarily the ones that respondents state as their main field of work. The majority are working with women's human rights (43%), followed by gender

<sup>8</sup> Guterres, A. "The Highest Aspiration: A Call to Action for Human Rights", (UN), 2020, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex persons.

<sup>10</sup> The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. "Femdefenders, The hatred against women human rights defenders – online and offline", 2015.

equality work (33%). There can be several reasons for this discrepancy – choosing to avoid the most sensitive and dangerous topics is one.

### CORRUPTION HAS MANY LAYERS

Some respondents state that corruption has become more visible during the global pandemic: “Many high-level corruption cases took place during Covid-19. There is still a total lack of women’s organisations that work on corruption due to fear of government repercussions,” says one women human rights defender from Bosnia and Hercegovina.



Photo: Badrael.

Syrian activist Hunadah Al-Hariri considers corruption to include many of the issues that women activists actually work with, without specifically calling them corruption:

“There are so many things included in corruption, such as absence of rule of law and men in power positions. All could be contained within the word corruption.

SYRIAN ACTIVIST HUNADAH AL-HARIRI

Since exposing corruption often includes exposing power structures, and people in power, it is not surprising that it is considered to be dangerous to work on, as described by Sofija Vrbaski, at the Kvinna till Kvinna Serbia office: “Corruption is highest on the list. It directly attacks the political elite. If you have evidence against a politician, you will disappear. If you work with LGBTQI+ rights, you will get attacked, but you will survive.”

Corruption was also highlighted by many interviewees in the Kvinna till Kvinna report *A Right not a Gift* (2020) as being extremely harmful to women’s rights: “Corruption is no less malevolent than terror because it destroys values. Corruption has created a way of living that not only touches the political elite, but all of society. (...) People are afraid to challenge corruption, because of the accountability that they would have to face themselves,” says a women human rights defender from Iraq in the report.<sup>11</sup>

Another aspect of corruption is sextortion, a form of corruption in which sex, rather than money, is the currency of the bribe. The term emphasises the gendered abuse of power – demanding a “bribe” in form of sex from someone over whom you wield

“Fear is the biggest part of threats.

<sup>11</sup> The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. “A Right Not A Gift”, 2020, p. 43.

power. Sextortion, along with doxing, trolling, online harassment, online stalking and the nonconsensual sharing of intimate pictures, have all been identified as digitalised forms of violence against women.<sup>13</sup>

When unpacking all that corruption can stand for – the misuse of power, authoritarianism and nepotism, for example – one could say that many women’s rights organisations and women’s rights activists are working against corruption on a regular basis without even thinking about it.

## THE CONCEPT GENDER – A RED FLAG

Working to stop gender-based violence is met with resistance and threats. Sometimes it is enough to just use the word “gender” – the mere mention of the word is a red flag for many groups.

In the north of Syria, women human rights defenders describe a growing anti-gender campaign targeting anyone working on gender equality and women’s rights. Women’s organisations have received threats just for mentioning gender-based violence. The resistance can partly be attributed to a lack of knowledge regarding gendered norms and gender-based violence, but also to a resistance built on the narrative of standing up for traditional values.

Similar anti-gender campaigns have been reported in several regions: “The thing is, you cannot dissociate gender from feminism – so if they are attacking ‘gender ideology’, they are attacking us as feminists. And not in disguise, but very directly”, says women’s rights activist Jacqueline Pitanguy from Brazil.

Gender-based violence has become a pandemic within the pandemic. Victims have been locked in with their perpetrators, often with little access to support or enough privacy to call an emergency hotline.

For organisations working to support and protect victims of gender-based violence, the restrictions exacerbated the challenging situation, as confirmed by women human right defenders based in the South Caucasus: “During lockdown we couldn’t talk face to face, and it is dangerous to talk over the phone. So, it was hard to give the help we usually do.” Even though activists were afraid of providing support during the pandemic, when it was not in line with restrictions, many chose to do so anyway.

A Syrian women human rights defender describes a difficult situation: “The crimes against women go unheard, even more so than normally. Women inside Syria ... I can’t even talk about it. They are harassed just for speaking up.”



FemHouse provided aid to displaced people from Nagorny Karabakh in 2020.

## ISSUES OF WAR AND PEACE

To challenge militarism and sometimes also the status quo, and to work across conflict divides represents a challenge to existing power structures. The context decides how dangerous it is to be outspoken on these issues. Anna Kamay, women human rights defender from Armenia, has gone from being outspoken to adopting a more low-key approach: “In the beginning of the war, I was very outspoken, among other things about how stupid it was to go along with hashtags such as #WeWillWin. I got a lot of backlash for that, both hatred and people unfriending me. I now choose to be less active on social media. People are careful about what they are saying. It has gone very quiet.”

<sup>12</sup> Eldén, Å. Calvo, D. Bjarnegård, E. Lundgren, S. Jonsson, S. “Sextortion: Corruption and Gender-Based Violence: EBA Report”, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Alsalem, R. “Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective”, 2018, para. 30–42.

A woman looking at destroyed houses in the frontline regions during the 2020 Nagorny Karabakh war.



In frozen conflicts, such as the one in Bosnia and Herzegovina, engaging in peacebuilding and conflict resolution can be dangerous: “International actors have not supported the programmes aiming for sustainable peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and this issue is usually put on the margins of their political agendas. The ones still working on and leading on building peace are women’s organisations. They are very much at risk when they criticise the government”, says Bojana Mumin from Kvinna till Kvinna’s Bosnia and Herzegovina office.

For security reasons, there is a strong tendency towards keeping quiet about promoting peace, especially if the conflict is ongoing. Otherwise one risks being coined as a traitor. Ana Nemsitsveridze-Daniels from Kvinna till Kvinna’s office in Tbilisi, says hatred and harassment are silencing peace activists in the South Caucasus: “We can see that they have reduced their visibility, even more so after the outbreak of the second Nagorny-Karabakh war in September 2020.”

Covid-19 has also affected peacebuilding efforts. “When it comes to dialogue processes, these stopped during Covid. When everything happens online, it is difficult to have trust and to feel safe”, says one women’s rights activist from Northeast Europe.

## SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS

Even though sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and working against female genital mutilation (FGM) do not rank highly in the survey as most dangerous to work on, SRHR still deserves to be mentioned as it includes issues that are often highly sensitive – in most regions and contexts - not least the issue of safe and legal abortion.

Sometimes the level of risk is very much connected to who is behind the threat or an assault, as described by a women human rights defender from a country in Central Africa: “SRHR, abortion and LGBTQI+ is way too sensitive – in some cases also gender-based violence. We have a good legal framework, but it all depends on who is the perpetrator. You will be targeted at all levels, depending on who the perpetrator is. They use different techniques. If it is high level you might get summoned to explain. On lower levels they can use social media against you.”

When Kvinna till Kvinna investigated the security of women’s rights and LGBTQI+ activists in Liberia (2020), one of the issues that came up among those that triggered most hatred was to advocate for abolition of harmful traditional practices, such as FGM and early marriage.<sup>14</sup> Campaigning against FGM continues to be one of the most sensitive and dangerous areas of human rights activism in Liberia. Some of the survey participants in the Liberia report stated that they would avoid working with FGM.<sup>15</sup>

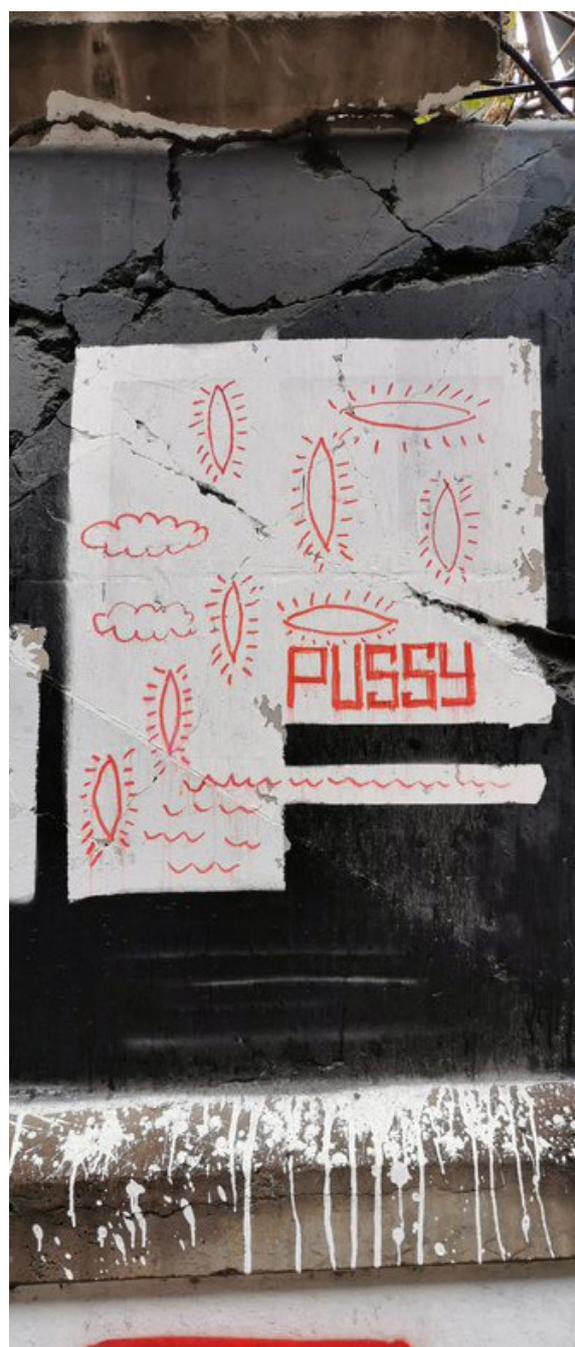


Photo: Regina Jegerova-Asterova

<sup>14</sup>The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. “The Space for Women Human Rights Defenders and LGBTQI Activists in Liberia”, 2021, p 6.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, p 7.



Queer sisters run, Georgia 2018.

## LGBTQI+ RIGHTS

In most regions, working with LGBTQI+ rights is associated with great risk. In the Kvinna till Kvinna report on Liberia, mentioned above, several women's rights and LGBTQI+ activists point out that working with LGBTQI+ rights is simply too unsafe.<sup>16</sup> Besides a lack of support from the local community, they do not trust the police to provide security. Based on previous traumatic experiences, LGBTQI+ activists do not expect just treatment from law enforcement agencies, and they fear their identity will be exposed, leading to more stigmatisation and hatred.

Working for LGBTQI+ people's rights generally involves promoting change of a largely homophobic narrative. Eka Tsereteli and Nino Kharchilava from

the Women's Initiatives Supporting Group (WISG) in Georgia say that politicians have won votes for homophobic stances for many years: "So, the hatred is still there. And as people don't have much knowledge, homophobia is widespread. And no government or political parties are working to change the narrative."

## LAND AND ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS

In many parts of the world, women are still excluded from land ownership and discussions about the use of natural resources. Land and environmental rights are one of the most dangerous fields for activists today. Environmental human rights defenders are overrepresented when it comes to deadly attacks.

<sup>16</sup> The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. "The Space for Women Human Rights Defenders and LGBTQI Activists in Liberia", 2021



Photo: Kinna Ili Kinna/Wira W. Aworba

The Global Witness report *Land and Environmental defenders: Last Line of Defence* (2021) presents a bleak picture: “Sadly, we are once again reporting the deadliest year for defenders. 227 people were killed for standing up for their land and our planet, the worst figure on record. As the climate crisis intensifies, so too does violence against defenders of the earth.”<sup>17</sup> 227 people equal more than four people a

week, yet underreporting is a common problem. Indigenous people are overrepresented among the victims, and besides the Americas, there has been an increase in deadly violence in Africa, in particular in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The recorded deadly attacks on women are lower (1 in 10), but women who act and speak out also face gender-specific threats, including sexual violence.<sup>19</sup>

## IN THE AFTERMATH OF COVID-19: THE DANGER OF DEMANDING RESOURCES FOR GENDER EQUALITY

In many countries, civil society at large and women’s rights organisations in particular have not been included nor consulted in the government’s Covid-19 response mechanism. ReliefWeb reported new data in 2021, highlighting how women have been working in the frontline, but at the same time been systematically excluded from decision-making and responses relating to the pandemic.<sup>20</sup>

Economic crises were already a fact in several countries in the MENA region before the pandemic, and an increasing number of feminist activists had been criticising the unequal economic structures, and calling for change. Women human rights defenders have been vocal on the effects of the pandemic on women and girls, both when it comes to the increased level of violence against women and addressing economic rights.

Women human rights defenders are demanding to be part of the planning for the recovery and to have a say on how the money should be spent. The fact that they have economic demands mean they are more exposed to risk. Questioning the economic structures is likened to questioning power structures and even the patriarchy.

<sup>17</sup> Global Witness. “Last line of defense: The industries causing the climate crisis and attacks against land and environmental defenders”, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Relief Web. “Women’s absence from COVID-19 task forces will perpetuate gender divide, says UNDP, UN Women”, 2021.



Photo: Christopher Herwig

# Types of threats – methods to silence women

“Threats against women human rights defenders will always also be directed at their families.”

ROSA EMILIA SALAMANCA GONZÁLEZ, WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS FROM COLOMBIA

## HARASSMENT AND THREATS COME IN DIFFERENT FORMS

The impunity for threats and attacks on women human rights defenders leads to underreporting, and it becomes clear in the interviews and the survey that the threats are often not taken seriously – both by the women activists themselves and by their communities.

What kind of threats do outspoken women rights activist and female journalists encounter? Harassment in general is most common (40%), while smear campaigns and false accusations are in second place (32%), followed by threats of physical violence (23%) and death threats (19%). 1 in 10 has experienced sexual harassment or sexual abuse due to their activism, while 16 percent have been stalked.

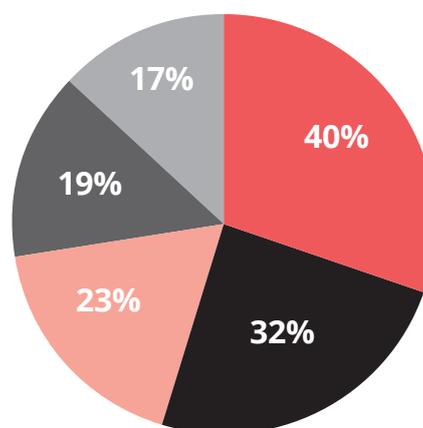
Some threats are more context-specific than others. They can be associated with a lack of legal status, for example, when working in a country without having all the needed papers in order, including work permits (e.g. many Syrian activists in Turkey) or a formally registered organisation (e.g. domestic workers in Lebanon). A Syrian women's rights activist, now living in Turkey, says: “My biggest fear is to have anything to do with the Turkish authorities. They will sexually harass me, and what can I do? Being a Syrian woman makes them think they have permission...there is no

system to protect you.” It is a situation of constant stress, but she also adds: “But I can't go around being afraid all the time.”

In addition to the threats and attacks mentioned above, a few situations were frequently mentioned by the survey respondents. These included raids and other attacks on offices, conferences being raided or stopped, detention at borders, illegal interrogation, direct threats from intelligence authorities, hate speech and social media attacks.

In Africa south of Sahara and the Western Balkans, the withholding of information is mentioned by roughly 1 in 4 of the respondents as a method of

Most common types of threats:



- Harassments
- Smear campaigns and false accusations
- Threats of physical violence
- Death threats
- Threats of violence towards someone close to you

(This question allowed for multiple selection, therefore the total adds up to more than 100 %.)

keeping them at bay. Withholding information is a well-known misuse of power. It includes not being able to retrieve information from authorities or not being invited to meetings where information is shared. It could also take place within the women's movement where some leaders with more access to power and information will intentionally not pass it on to others.

In the MENA region, the criminalisation of activism is mentioned by 1 in 4, a clear example of the shrinking space for civil society where new legislation is adopted, or existing legislation is used, to outlaw human rights activism.

In Latin America, smear campaigns and false accusations are the most common threat, with death threats in second place. Indeed 1 in 3 respondents have received death threats. Threats against someone close to you are more widespread in Latin America than in other parts of the world. Death threats are also more common in Northeast Europe than on a global level. Finally, in South Asia, stalking is the second most common type of threat, with 1 in 3 having experienced it. Arbitrary visits to organisations by the authorities are reported by 22 percent of respondents.

Photo: Private



It has not only been threats, but there have also been killings. The number of women killed has increased. At this time, I know about two or three who have been killed quite recently. It is so sad.

ROSA EMILIA SALAMANCA GONZÁLEZ,  
WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVIST FROM COLOMBIA

For female journalists, the threats are largely the same – harassment and smear campaigns top the list, followed by stalking and the withholding of information.

Death threats are, as mentioned above, the fourth most common type of threat globally, and 6 percent state that they have survived actual attempts on their lives. It has been shown that there is a connection between death threats and fatal violence when it comes to human rights defenders. The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, wrote about the prevalence of killings in many parts of the world in a recent report entitled *Final warning: Death threats and killings of human rights defenders* (2020). She states that in the case of human rights defenders, killings are often preceded by threats, even if not everyone who receives death threats will experience attempts on their lives.<sup>21</sup>

## SMEAR CAMPAIGNS AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

The kinds of threats that women human rights defenders experience are often linked to their bodies and targeting their “honour”. The aim is to spread rumours so that the women human rights defender will lose support from the community. This is thought to be one of the reasons for the proportion of female activists being so low in the statistics on threats and killings of human rights defenders, as highlighted by UN Special Rapporteur Mary Lawlor: “Some women human rights defenders may not want to report threats, including death threats, due to their highly defamatory nature, often involving women’s personal lives, including their marital status, lifestyle and religious beliefs.”<sup>22</sup>

Sometimes violence against women human rights defenders is invisible as it is hidden behind the “normal” violence against women. The same goes for LGBTQI+ activists where strategic violence to silence activists can be mistaken for the “usual” hate crimes against the LGBTQI+ community.

Several of the women interviewed for this report talked about harassment being part of everyday life, and that it was therefore not taken seriously either by others or by the women activists themselves. Hunadah Al-Hariri from Syria says that the “underestimation of sexual harassment is a threat in itself”. A fellow Syrian activist talked about a system that

<sup>21</sup> Lawlor, M. “Final Warning: Death threats and killings of human rights defenders”, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



Women journalists are also facing a lot of harassment, unwanted texts, and unwanted male attention. It can be difficult to do your work without fear of sexual harassment and sexual violence.

DOUCE NAMWEZI, KVINNA TILL KVINNA'S DRC OFFICE

## SURVEILLANCE AND HATRED ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The UN Special Rapporteur Clément Voule has called online gender-based violence “a major barrier” to women’s rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association. “Social media, in particular, has become a hostile space imbued with extreme risks for women in civil society and activism. (...) These campaigns often include the dissemination of doctored pictures, usually of a sexualised and gendered nature; the spreading of information designed to discredit, often full of harmful and negative gender stereotypes; violent hate messages and threatening messages on social networks, including calls for gang rape and for murder; and breaches of privacy.”<sup>23</sup>

Along with increasing digitalisation and increasing amounts of time being spent online, hatred and slander campaigns have followed suit. Online harassment has been a part of many women human rights defenders’ everyday lives for a long time. During the pandemic, we have witnessed even more online hatred. The Kvinna till Kvinna report *Women’s Rights in Western Balkans* (2020) shows that verbal assault and harassment during the pandemic most frequently took place on social media, followed by emails and phone calls.<sup>24</sup>

Some of the respondents pointed out that “digital surveillance and intervention” increased during the pandemic. In an internal Kvinna till Kvinna report on Covid-19, it was highlighted that countries reported that websites and phones of women human rights defenders, among others, were increasingly being hacked. Mass bugging of activists has also been reported in Colombia.

The link between online hatred and real-life attacks requires further research. A women’s rights activist from the South Caucasus says: “Hate speech online has become very harsh and serious – it also increases physical violence.” This is supported by UN Special Rapporteur Irene Khan, who in a recent report states that the problems caused by “online violence, sexist hate speech and disinformation are real and diverse, affecting the mental and physical health of those targeted, undermining their confidence and autonomy, stigmatizing them and generating fear, shame, and professional and reputational damage. In extreme cases, online threats can escalate to physical violence and even murder.”<sup>25</sup>

enables harassment: “It is difficult because it seems like the system exists almost to make harassment invisible. Because of the system, they don’t feel guilty if they are harassing a woman. They keep exporting this image to women – that a bit of joking around (which is actually harassment) is normal and just something that you should put up with as a woman.” The same seems to be true in many regions: “Sexual harassment is very normalised and not taken seriously”, says a women human rights defender from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.



<sup>23</sup> Voule, C. “Celebrating women in activism and civil society: The enjoyment of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association by women and girls”, Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association, (UN) General Assembly, 2020, para. 64.

<sup>24</sup> The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. “Women’s Rights in Western Balkans”, 2020, p. 77.

<sup>25</sup> Khan, I. “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression”, (UN) General Assembly, 2021, p. 8.

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## UNDER ATTACK: THE CASE OF FAKE ACCOUNTS

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The fact that trolls fill up the comments fields on women human rights defenders' social media accounts now and then is well-known. However, there are also examples of long-term campaigns with fake accounts on Facebook, for example, targeting activists and spreading (mostly incorrect) information about their work. This is the case in a conflict-affected region where an anonymous Facebook account is known to repeatedly spread hate speech towards civil society. A women human rights defender in the area recounts: "It affects us – nobody likes that kind of attention on oneself. It creates the image of us being traitors and the enemy who destroys traditional values, introducing Western values. It is not good to be in a naming and shaming campaign even if what is said is not true. We are very much under stress now; people are just accepting what the fake account says is the truth."



Photo: Jovana Sushko

In February 2021, over 500 activists in North Macedonia protested against sexual harassment of women on social media and the policy of impunity for this kind of violence. The sign says "It is not your fault".

## SHAMING AND DISCREDITING

Gendered disinformation is on the rise. UN Special Rapporteur Irene Khan explains it as “a subset of gender-based violence”, using “false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives against women, often with some degree of coordination, aimed at deterring women from participating in the public sphere”.<sup>26</sup>

Much of the disinformation aim to shame women human rights defenders and their organisations in different ways. Ever since the well-reported case against journalist Khadija Ismayilova in 2012, there have been several cases of people using sex tapes against outspoken women in Azerbaijan.<sup>27</sup> In the Ismayilova case, someone (likely linked to government authorities) had put cameras in her bedroom and then leaked the tape to threaten her into silence.

Women are seen as bearers of the honour and morality of their families by most of Azeri society. A dissident woman, who is shown having extramarital sex, is considered to be immoral, and this directly reflects back on her family. If it is a dissident man whose female relative is slandered via sex tapes, for example, then it is meant to belittle him, and show that he is weak and worthy of contempt. The fear of becoming a victim of such a scheme, means that many will choose to remain quiet even if they want to speak up, to avoid repercussions.

Yet the most basic assertion government authorities makes when it releases this kind of material is also the most terrifying. The bedroom is the most intimate, private place in a person's home. By filming here and releasing the footage for the world to see, they are sending out the message that they control everything, and that there is nothing people do that they cannot see.<sup>28</sup>

In many regions there is a general tendency to discredit the women's movement. The fragmentation that sometimes exists within the movement due to diverse opinions on issues such as the inclusion of transgender issues on the agenda, and the competition over scarce funds, provide an opportunity to paint a picture of a dysfunctional movement. Women human rights defenders are portrayed as women who prefer to fight each other, rather than the patriarchy. The purpose of this discourse is of course to weaken the movement. There are sev-

eral examples of campaigns to discredit women's organisations.

Irena Cvetkovikj from Coalition Margins in North Macedonia describes her participation in a televised debate with a spokesperson from the anti-gender movement. At the end of the debate, the anti-gender spokesperson presented Coalition Margins' financial report, stating how much funding the organisation had at its disposal. “This wasn't true, but it still wouldn't have been unreasonable. But for people who do not understand how an organisation like Coalition Margins works, it is a lot of money. Especially if you have very little yourself to support your family. This sum has circulated a lot and is still used against us. It has been very hard for us to deal with, also in relation to the marginalised communities we work with, who have questioned the amount of money”, says Irena Cvetkovikj.

There are different methods to discredit the movement, and some of the strategies have a long history. Norwegian academic Berit Ås popularised the five master suppression techniques in the 1970s. Two of them were “Ridiculing” and “Making Invisible”, techniques of suppression that are still often used against leaders within the women's movements. The activists are accused of not being competent and lacking knowledge on the issues. Rosa Emilia Salamanca González from Colombia says: “Gossip about our way of life, making people believe we can't do anything. Jokes about sexuality and how stupid women are... ‘they don't know what they are doing’. This just goes on and on.”

A women human rights defender from the MENA region says: “I work in a feminist organisation; I have a senior position which should give me some protection – at least one would think so. But it doesn't. Men in the same position in other organisations are not taking us seriously, nor our work. Part of their behaviour includes underestimating us and talking us down.”

## EXHAUSTION AND BURNOUT

Exhaustion and burnout are another kind of threat that surfaced in interviews and comments from respondents, which needs to be acknowledged as a security issue. Women human rights defenders

<sup>26</sup> Kahn, I. “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression”, UN General Assembly, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Lomsadze, G. “Azerbaijan reporter wins sex tape case”, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Shahmarzadeh, N. “Opinion in Azerbaijan sex is a weapon”, 2021. Giyasbayli, H. “Hackers target prominent Azerbaijani feminist wit pornography”, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Kilden Gender Research, “The five master suppression techniques”, n.d.

seem to be notoriously bad at taking care of themselves. If you are constantly exhausted it is difficult to make the right decisions regarding risks for you and for those around you. It threatens the movement itself: "The invisible risk is the burn-out of the organisations, because the continuous hate speech is exhausting! As an organisation, if we can't help the staff – this burnout is a real risk for our organisation", says one women right activist from the South Caucasus.

### **IT COMES WITH THE JOB – NORMALISATION OF VIOLENCE**

When asked if the threats affect them as activists or journalists, 44 percent say it does not. 14 percent even state that it motivates them to continue to work, while 11 percent say it does affect them as people, but not their work.

Many women's rights activists say that they expect threats – it more or less comes with the job. Following the situation for women human rights defenders over the past few decades shows that the risks and threats are part of daily life for many of them. This has led to a normalisation of the situation, making the risks less visible. It is a warning signal that the vast majority of respondents in the survey and in interviews state that threats are not really impacting their work in a negative way. A Syrian activist acknowledges the process of normalisation: "We need to watch our risk appetite; it is easy to become blind to the risks. We need an ongoing conversation to make sure we are not taking too many risks, both for ourselves and the women we represent."

When risk becomes part of everyday work, one consequence is that it becomes less relevant to perform a risk assessment. A women human rights defender from South Caucasus describes the logic of down-playing threats: "In the beginning, when we were reporting to donors, we wanted to be perfect and say that we did everything without obstacles – but obstacles tend to be risks. And we are so used to risks that we don't see them anymore. We live and work in this place and we don't see the signs."



As mentioned above, 14 percent of the respondents say that they are further motivated by the threats they receive. It is partly based on the knowledge that if you receive threats it is because you have done something right, something that makes people or authorities recognise your power. It is seen as a badge of honour. There is also the notion that activists should put themselves "out there" being on the barricades is part of the job.

However, 1 in 10 acknowledge that this situation does affect them, stating it can result in self-censorship. Some say that they are less outspoken or that they have had to leave their country. "I withdrew, choosing to become invisible", says one respondent from Indonesia. As a result of the shrinking and closing civic space, and the growing anti-gender narrative, many women human rights defenders have become used to presenting their work in a way that will meet less resistance and decrease risks, both with respect to themselves and the women with whom they work. Naz Hami, a Syrian women human rights defender says: "I am always thinking about what I am saying. It feels like someone is monitoring everything I do. You get careful about what you share. That is a big challenge when working with women in this community. It is always a matter of not putting the women at risk as well. It takes a lot of time and effort."



I don't feel safe  
anywhere.

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## **COVID -19: POLICIES AND REGULATIONS THAT TARGET CIVIL SOCIETY, MEDIA AND JOURNALISTS**

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Almost half of the respondents (46%) say that there has been an increase in policies and regulations during the pandemic that target civil society and/or the media. A number of respondents highlight regulations regarding the freedom of movement such as lockdowns and curfews, as well as those that target free speech and the right to protest. One respondent from Palestine wrote that the pandemic has led to “strict regulations that target free speech and the right to protest.” We are told that authorities use lockdown measures to restrict the movement of journalists and withhold information. Respondents also state that authorities have used the pandemic as a pretext to make it difficult for activists to work, or to increase surveillance: “monitoring the work and personnel for surveillance purposes.”

One issue that could be further discussed is the fact that civil society actors were usually not among the groups of professionals that were allowed to leave home for work during lockdowns. This had severe consequences for women activists working at shelters for survivors of gender-based violence. The following quote comes from an activist in Lebanon: “There was no official exemption process for civil society organisations to operate during lockdowns, although there were for UN Agencies. During a period of a 24/7 lockdown, our work came to a grinding halt as we fought to find ways to work around this. At one point, it was possible to order a takeaway pizza, but a local NGO was not allowed to meet people facing challenges or carry out any activist activity at all.”



Photo: Ahmed Makhar

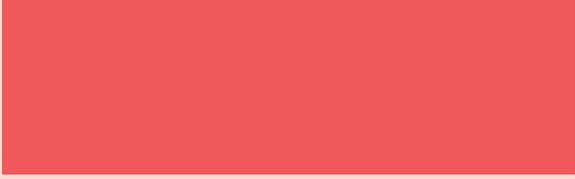


Photo: Regina Jestrova/Skterova

# Priests, trolls and governments

Threats are part of the workplace. Just as firemen face certain risks, women human rights defenders face theirs. They take them on and do not address them sufficiently. Why report it when it happens anyway? Why do risk assessments when things like that happen anyway? There are surveillance cameras everywhere in Belgrade today, and they record me on my way to my office, so they know my face. When they have years of data, then it will get scary.

SOFIJA VRBAŠKI FROM KVINNA TILL KVINNA'S SERBIAN OFFICE

## THE FACE OF THE PERPERTRATOR

Threats and hatred towards women human rights defenders do not arise in a vacuum, and it is important to identify the forces, people, groups and reasons behind this in order to counteract it.

In our survey, traditional or community leaders and religious actors are the largest group mentioned by the respondents when asked to identify who is behind the hatred. The second largest group is governments and authorities. This serves as an illustration and builds on evidence from previous research by Kvinna till Kvinna and other actors.<sup>30</sup> There is also a tendency, reported in the survey, of governments becoming more authoritarian, and of societies becoming more conservative, with an increased focus on traditional values and norms.

Other civil society organisations are in third place. Apart from these groups, a few others are singled out in the answers about who is behind the attacks. Right-wing and nationalist groups and politicians are frequently mentioned, along with anti-gender trolls and social media users, particularly in the Balkan area and Northeast Europe. In Latin America, armed groups and military forces were more commonly mentioned.

One women rights activist, who requested to remain anonymous, remembers how it was before the era of social media. There used to be different risks linked to being an activist, with lots of possibilities to control and follow a person, but on a different level. With the internet, fake news travels fast: "It is doing more harm, more than just being questioned by security services. Before I knew who was behind the threats, it could be old school mates. We could talk and explain that they had misunderstood. Now we have an enemy whom we don't know and with no possibility to talk to that person. To live and work in this type of environment, we need to be very, very careful", she says.

## WELL-KNOWN ACTORS: STATE AND RELIGION

To understand why traditional and community leaders, along with religious leaders, are identified as the principal actors behind threats and harassment, we need to look at two factors. Firstly, women rights activists are often vocal women, which crashes into traditional norms and roles put on women in many societies. Secondly, they demand gender equality and women's rights. Naturally, they become an enemy to those holding on to oppressive patriarchal structures.

In many regions and countries, the state and the church are closely connected – perhaps not on paper or in the constitution, but informally. This is the case, and increasingly so, in the Western Balkans, where

<sup>30</sup> The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. "Suffocating the Movement – Shrinking space for women's rights", 2018. Freedom House. "Freedom in the world: democracy in retreat", 2019. CIVICUS. "Civic space on a downward spiral", 2020.

there is a tendency for the church and state to move even closer to one another, mutually benefitting from each other's power. The Serbian Orthodox Church and the state are almost inseparable, says Sofija Vrbaški at Kvinna till Kvinna's office in Serbia: "In Serbia and Montenegro, I would say that the church is the state. In many cases, the Serbian Orthodox Church is exempt from anti-discrimination legislation on the grounds of religious freedom.

Church leaders can condemn LGBTQI+ persons and communities, which of course puts many people at risk. And they get away with it. We also know that it is difficult to pass laws unless the church agrees on it, especially in the sphere of human rights, anti-discrimination, or gender equality."



Photo: Giorgi Gogitishvili

The sign reads "Hate Free Street". The umbrellas were put on Vachnadze street in Georgia's capital Tbilisi, where queer activists were brutally attacked in 2013.

## LGBTQI+ RIGHTS – A SOCIAL CONFLICT IN GEORGIA

Homosexuality is a highly politicised issue in Georgia, not seldom used to divert the interest and attention of citizens from social and economic problems, explain Eka Tsereteli and Nino Kharchilava from the Women's Initiatives Supporting Group (WISG) in Georgia. In their opinion, it is correct to talk about a social conflict in society, where the church and political parties are tightly coupled on one side, and LGBTQI+ activists on the other.



Photo: Natalia Mchedlishvili

In Georgia, demonstrations were organised against Pride marches long before there even were actual Pride events in the country. The anti-Pride event in Batumi was held to prevent a Pride event that wasn't even planned.

NINO KHARCHILAVA

We obviously receive direct threats from fundamentalists. Our office address is confidential, so most threats and bullying happen online. Yet the bullying also comes from people who should be our allies, but believe we are acting in an incorrect way.

EKA TSERETELI

Central topics of women's human rights have a bearing on religion. In Iraq, housing, land and property rights for women are a no-go topic for women activists, since this is closely linked to religious leaders' reading of Sharia law, which does not allow for women to inherit land. In many contexts, LGBTQI+ rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights (not least abortion and sexual education), and in some cases even gender-based violence, go against influential religious leaders' takes on the world, making them dangerous issues to address.

## FEAR OF CHANGE

In the survey, the majority of the respondents are of the opinion that governments' fears of political change and of the power of civil society are the main reasons behind the repressive environment for civil society, and the threats and harassment they encounter. Cracking down on civil society is one way for authoritarian governments to try to control movements demanding human rights, freedom of expression and gender equality.

In Jordan, women activists working with LGBTQI+ rights are attacked in two ways. They are harassed by the government, but also by the public since many citizens support the governments' harsh treatment of activists working to promote LGBTQI+ rights. When it comes to corruption, the situation is different. The government knows that cracking down on activists fighting corruption would not render them support from the general public, which means that authorities are sometimes hesitant to act in a way that draws public attention.

Farah Baba of the Anti-Racism Movement in Lebanon, a civil society organisation focusing on providing support to migrant domestic workers and refugees, says that the majority of threats towards her and the organisation come from political parties: "Mainly from the Christian far-right parties that harass us both online and offline. Sometimes it is solely the fact that we are women. I remember a woman from the UN, who gave a very informed speech using research and statistics, and the response she got was, 'What do you know? You're only a woman.'"

## THREATS WITHIN CIVIL SOCIETY

Almost one in four respondents state that other civil society actors among the the perpetrators. Some even say this comes from within their own organisation, which can partly be explained by the fact that far from all civil society organisations are

rights-based. Moreover, in countries with authoritarian and anti-democratic governments, so called GONGOs are common. GONGOs are governmental-organised non-governmental organisations.

There are also cases of competition over funding, of disagreements on how to tackle sensitive issues, as well as quite a lot of misogyny and patriarchy among civil society organisations in general. This is not often discussed, but it is obvious from our survey that colleagues from within the movement can also pose a threat to women activists. Women are harassed by men in more senior positions. One women's rights activist describes how, at first, she did not perceive the harassment from within the civil society as such since it did not involve "touching". Many women are hesitant to report this. One women human rights defender who has followed one such case said this about the victim: "She said that she didn't want to become one of those women who is known to raise this type of issues. She did not want to be stigmatised."

Some also state that they feel antagonised by other women's organisations, particularly those that are larger and more well-established. One tactic is to withhold information, sometimes as a way of pushing back more radical, feminist forces: "I am seen as the feminist – the crazy one. There is a split within the women's movement between feminists and others. It might not be a physical threat in itself – but it is a social threat", says Syrian activist Hunadah Al-Hariri.

In the comments section of the survey, one problematic division was raised by both sides – women's rights activists saying that they have been threatened for taking a stance against including transgender persons' rights, and women activists receiving threats for being vocal on LGBTQI+ rights. One anonymous women human rights defender put it this way: "What makes me crazy now is that in feminist organisations, the anti-gender movement has captured a part of the women's movement, and since I once defended transgender women's rights before the UN, they now target me as an enemy (...); they put their energy into dividing and enforcing undemocratic practices in our feminist organisation; it takes time and energy to deal with them."



During one night in October, 2021, unidentified perpetrators spray-painted the front door of the Serbian organisation Women in Black. One text reads “whores in black”.

## THE ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENT

The division within the movement plays well into the hands of a growing, transnational anti-gender movement. Several recent articles<sup>31</sup> have shown that this movement is well-organised and well-funded, working on national, regional and international levels (e.g. UN) to undermine women’s and LGBTQI+ people’s rights. It has been described how the anti-gender movement uses the differences between women’s organisations to weaken the feminist movement. For example, during a session at the 2019 UN Commission on the Status of Women, an anti-gender actor organised a seminar with women who identify as feminists, but are vocally opposed to transgender rights.<sup>32</sup>

The Civicus alliance, which monitors the state of civic space, notes in its State of Civil Society Report (2020) that as the forces opposing human rights and gender equality have prioritised the international arena, especially to be present in UN human rights and gender equality institutions,



There is no place to breathe.

they are partly taking over the space of civil society organisations.

The Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, a research and advocacy organisation, has produced a report entitled *Power over Rights: Understanding and countering the transnational anti-gender movement*, which argues that anti-gender actors do not mobilise “against gender or the rights of women and LGBTQI+ as such, but (...) use them to reinforce or increase their power, and to maintain or promote social and political hierarchies that benefit them.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, the crackdown on the women’s movement is more of a method than a goal in itself.

A third of respondents in our survey identify an increasing influence from anti-gender forces in their society. CitizenGo, a platform for ultraconservative campaigners launched in Spain in 2010, has been organising raids and social media attacks against abortion clinics in various countries including Nigeria, Niger, Tanzania, Kenya and Malawi.<sup>34</sup> CitizenGo describes itself as “pro-family” and a defender of life, family, freedom, and dignity, with links to the World Congress of Families, an organisation that arranges international conferences to create alliances between “pro-family” groups.

Even though online campaigns are the main focus of CitizenGo, it also operates offline, organising summer camps and events at the UN, for example. CitizenGo has also flown an orange airplane over Spain with a banner warning “they are coming for our children”, and an orange bus has toured the country with messages such as “boys have penises, girls have vulvas, don’t be fooled.”<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Sosa, L. “Beyond gender equality? Anti-gender campaigns and the erosion of human rights and democracy”, 2021. Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy. “Power over rights - Understanding and countering the transnational anti-gender movement”, 2021. Zaremborg, G. “Feminism(s) and anti-gender backlash: lessons from Latin America”, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Denkovski, D. Bernarding, N. Lutz, K. “Power over Rights: Understanding and countering the transnational anti-gender movement”, 2021, p. 50.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 35.

<sup>35</sup> Whyte, L. “They are coming for your children – the rise of CitizenGo”, 2017.



Irena Cvetkovikj, Coalition Margins

## NORTH MACEDONIA: “WHEN THEY USE MY DAUGHTER IT BECOMES REALLY HARD”

North Macedonia has seen a positive democratic development since a new progressive government was elected in 2017. During the past year, however, things have changed. The anti-gender movement has gained strength and influence. There is no simple reason as to why, according to Irena Cvetkovikj, Executive Director of Coalition Margins. However, it all began when the Minister of Education and Science, who has a background in civil society, promoted an educational reform to introduce gender equality as a key component, and include comprehensive sexual education.

“This sparked a huge mobilisation within the anti-gender movement, giving them an opportunity to mask themselves behind the label of ‘concerned parents’.”

Coalition Margins had been part of developing the reform, and was hit hard by the reactions and attacks.

“The anti-gender movement calls themselves ‘the general public’; they say ‘we are the people’. This puts the government in a difficult position, since they want to be open and inclusive, and do not want to be associated with civil society organisations such as ours, when we are portrayed as the enemy.”

Irena Cvetkovikj explains how the anti-gender movement is dividing the women’s movement, in being supportive to more conservative women’s organisations, those who prefer to talk about biological sex and not gender.

“They spend a lot of time on social media, time that we do not have. My name comes up a lot, and I am used to it. I am used to threats and fake news. But when they use my daughter and they attack my motherhood, then it becomes really hard to deal with. I am called a demon and a danger to our children.”

## IN ALLIANCE

The anti-gender movement has been widely discussed and described in recent years. It seems to be growing fast, and in some cases the government can be the driving force behind the movement. One such example can be found in Brazil. Long-time women’s rights activist Jacqueline Pitanguy is taken aback by the rapid developments in the country.

She woke up one morning to find that the Minister of Family, Women and Human Rights, who was irritated by an interview that Pitanguy gave in Marie Claire magazine, had tweeted that Pitanguy “defends the killing of babies”. “It took me by surprise. I sit quietly here in my corner, running a small NGO. But I have learned that we should never underestimate them. They know exactly who



House in Kigali, Rwanda. A landmark remembering the killing of ten Belgian peacekeepers in order to provoke the withdrawal of the UN forces, which cleared the way for the full scale of the genocide.

their enemy is. I had to shut down all my social media accounts”, recounts Jacqueline Pitanguy

The tweet was followed by a massive hate campaign against Pitanguy, but it did not come entirely out of the blue. President Jair Bolsonaro belongs to the anti-gender, fascist movement, and he has been very vocal on where he stands during his presidency.<sup>36</sup> “Nowadays, when Brazil goes to the UN, we sit with Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan”, says Jacqueline Pitanguy.

### MILITIA AND ARMED GROUPS

18 percent of the respondents globally say that armed groups and militia are behind the threats. This is the most common answer in Latin America, with almost 40 percent mentioning militia/armed groups. In some countries in the MENA region, armed groups are also frequently mentioned. In Iraq, women human rights defender Deena Altai, who took part in the pro-democratic demonstrations before the pandemic, lives with constant threats from different militia groups: “The police get information on where I live, and then the militia have access to any information they want and need. All my friends and I receive threats on our front doors, or they



Jacqueline Pitanguy

<sup>36</sup> During Bolsonaro’s mandate, Brazil has become an important centre for anti-gender and anti-abortion policy agendas, working closely with the Trump Administration in the USA. See, Corrêa, S. “Anti-Gender Politics in Latin America”, Sexuality Policy Watch, 2021, p. 63.

threaten our families. They check our workplaces and threaten us there, and also approach our colleagues. As a result, people at work ask us not to be so vocal in fighting for our rights.”

In Syria, the lack of a functional state gives groups that are against women’s rights a lot of space to act with total impunity: “The situation of war makes non-state actors very powerful. When you look at different armed groups and what they are doing to women in terms of violence and forced marriage, no one can say no to them – they are too powerful. And women have to pay”, says one Syrian activist.

In Colombia, the peace agreement in 2016 did not have a unifying impact. Indeed, it was rather the opposite according to Rosa Emilia Salamanca González: “The polarisation during the conflict and through the peace agreement also has a gendered and intersectional angle. There are so many connected conflicts – political, social and economic – that add to the political armed conflict. And then you have the narco-traffic and different armed groups that can be hired by different political interests.”

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Douce Namwezi from Kvinna till Kvinna’s DRC office says: “Anyone can be behind attacks on women activists. Anyone who has a gun is someone who has the power to come to your house and kill you.”

## FAMILY MEMBERS

Threats also come from within the family, or from the husbands of the women supported by the organisations, who are often the perpetrators of violence. 1 in 10 respondents name family members as being behind the threats and harassment, and some specify their husbands or friends.

Threats from family members are likely to be significantly underreported, and women activists whom we talk to say that it is difficult to talk to colleagues and friends if you yourself are a victim of domestic violence. The rationale behind not talking openly about the situation is tied to the image of the activist. It is seen as a problem if a women’s rights activist is herself a victim of violence, as this would make her look weak.

One women’s rights activist, tells how her ex-husband has been harassing her on social media: “He created a network on Facebook with his friends to make me appear dirty. They acted together to sully my reputation, saying I was not a worthy person and could no longer serve any society!”

During this period, she was afraid to have the organisation’s office located in certain unsafe areas, for fear of being attacked by people close to the ex-husband. This, in turn, made life very difficult for her since she and the organisation did not have enough resources to establish an office in a more secure location: “Now I do my job underground and in my house where very few people can come”, she says.



Photo: Kvinna till Kvinna/Regina Jęgorowa-Skierowa

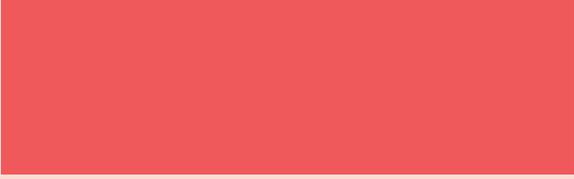


Photo: Reson Organisation, Iraq

# Shrinking civic space and how it affects women's activism

The threats and harassment that many women human rights defenders and female journalists face, must be discussed in the context of a shrinking civic space.<sup>37</sup> In many parts of the world we have seen a negative democratic development over the past decade or two, including state-inflicted restrictions and surveillance for civil society organisations, greater difficulty in accessing foreign funding, as well as limitations on the right to freedom of expression and assembly. The list goes on and on. Civil society works and operates in an increasingly hostile environment.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, authoritarian regimes have weakened the UN, allowing for non-democratic leaders to reverse the agreed language on human rights and gender equality.

Shrinking civic space is a gendered phenomenon, where societies with restricted civic space “actively promote patriarchal values and traditional gender roles and identities”, as discussed by Kate Bishop in *Standing Firm: Women and Trans-Led Organisations Respond to Closing Space of Civil Society*.<sup>39</sup>

In Jordan, the situation of shrinking space has been discussed in terms of two levels – one targeting all political movements, the other specifically targeting feminists or women's rights activists: “As a result, what we have is double closure. In reality, in Jordan, the feminists (...) are also political activists”, explains Dr Salma Nims from the Jordan National Commission for Women in the Kvinna till Kvinna publication, *Impact of shrinking space on women organising in Jordan*.<sup>40</sup>

Another layer is that in many deeply patriarchal societies the civic space is the only sphere where women have access, when other decision-making forums are closed to women. When the civic space is narrowed or even closed, there is often almost no opportunities for women to influence their communities and move women's rights forward. Laurel Weldon and Mala Htun have shown that a strong feminist movement is the most efficient way to improve women's rights over time, as, for example, with respect to legislation on gender-based violence.<sup>41</sup>

In the Kvinna till Kvinna report *Suffocating the Movement*, 60 percent of respondents said they had experienced a shrinking space for their activism. When we asked the same question in 2021, this development had been ongoing for more than a decade.

Just over 40 percent of the women rights activists and female journalists stated that their space to act has shrunk even further during the past five years. While 6 percent consider the space to have been completely closed for the past five years, 22 percent said they have seen no changes. A quarter of respondents said that their space to act increased during the past five years, though some of them explain that this is due to them now working in diaspora. The results of the survey on how the shrinking civic space manifests itself, indicate that the space remains limited for more than 9 in 10 of the respondents.

<sup>37</sup> Kate Bishop describes the phenomenon as a “closing space” that is “characterised by state-sponsored restrictions on the fundamental rights of freedom of expression, freedom of association and freedom of peaceful. See, Bishop, K. “Standing Firm. Women and trans-led organisations respond to closing space of civil society”, Mama cash and Urgent Action Fund, 2017.

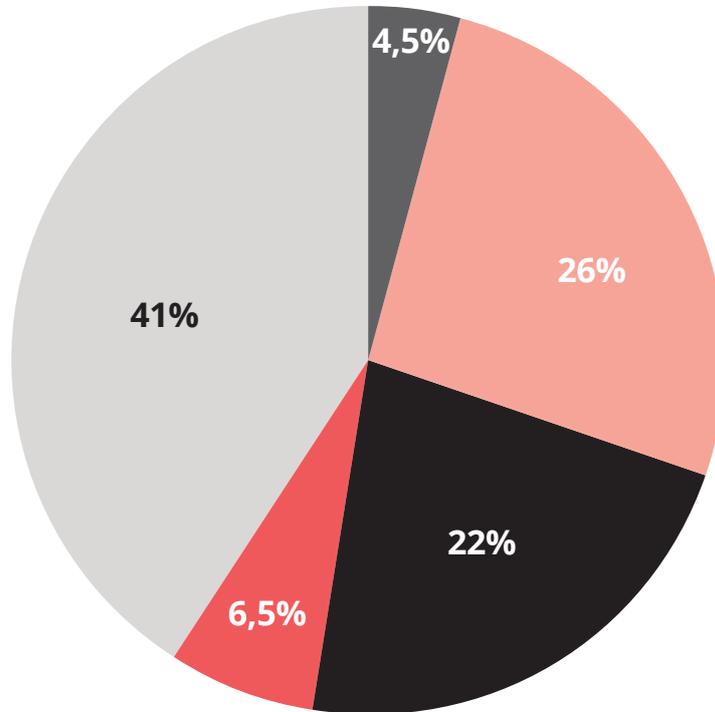
<sup>38</sup> CIVICUS. “Civic space on a downward spiral”, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Bishop, K. “Standing Firm. Women and trans-led organisations respond to closing space of civil society”, Mama cash and Urgent Action Fund, 2017, p. 6.

<sup>40</sup> The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. “Impact of shrinking space on women organising in Jordan”, 2021, p. 31.

<sup>41</sup> Weldon, S. Htun, M. “Feminist Mobilisation and Progressive Policy Change: Why Governments Take Action to Combat Violence Against Women”, Gender & Development, 2013, p. 231-247.

**How do you perceive your possibility to work as an activist/journalist?**



- My space to work as an activist/journalist has shrunk in the past 5 years.
- The space to work as an activist/journalist has been closed for the last 5 years or more.
- I have the same space to work as an activist/journalist now as I had 5 years ago.
- My space to work as an activist/journalist has increased in the past 5 years.
- Other.



## FINANCIAL OBSTACLES AND CRIMINALISATION

The main constraints concerning space for women's rights activists are financial obstacles. There are several reasons behind this, one being that many donors increasingly favour funding larger organisations or multilaterals such as UN Women or other UN agencies. One respondent argues that a change in donor policy is "increasingly directing money to institutions rather than organisations", making it even more difficult for smaller organisations or groups to survive. This is supported by findings from the Kvinna till Kvinna report *Supporting Feminist Organising: Experiences from the Middle East and North Africa* (2021), which highlighted the challenges of finding funding for small and new feminist groups. Funding modalities have simply not been designed to support a new and emerging feminist movement.<sup>42</sup>

Overall, even though women's rights organisations and feminist movements are crucial actors for increased gender equality and women's rights globally, they receive only 0.5 percent of bilateral official development assistance (ODA) according to the OECD.<sup>43</sup>

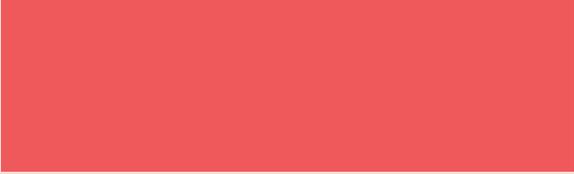
Another reason has to do with state-imposed restrictions against receiving foreign funding, justified by arguments accusing the donors/funding organisations of trying to promote a "Western agenda" in the respective country in one way or another. In some countries, governments have to approve each project of an organisation in order for them to be eligible for funding, and quite often this is very time-consuming.

Almost one third of respondents in our survey say that growing nationalism has contributed to shrinking the civic space, by leading to a rejection of foreign funding and "Western ideas". One activist working in Bangladesh says: "The work of activists is heavy monitored in Bangladesh, and the rules for receiving foreign currency have been amended."

The second most important obstacle globally according to respondents is increased bureaucratisation with long and complex registration processes, difficulties in opening bank accounts and a growing number of reporting requirements, which often leads to more control from the authorities. Impunity for violence and threats is mentioned by many, in addition to criminalisation of activism and other legal restrictions.

<sup>42</sup> The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. "Supporting feminist organising experiences and learning from the Middle East and North Africa", 2021.

<sup>43</sup> OECD. "Aid in Support of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment", 2021.



Liberian women's rights organisation WORIVA organises Community Rights Committee groups in the communities to work against gender-based violence.



Photo: Mubashir Saiti

# Moving forward – feminist strategies for survival

“ I am here and able to do this work today because of feminists who came before me. It is slow work, but we are in a better place than we were a hundred years ago. Before we could never talk about the LGBTQI+ community – now we are fighting for their rights. The solidarity is important. I know that if I need something there will be a feminist somewhere who will help.

SYRIAN WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER

## WORKING TOGETHER

When the space for activism shrinks, one way to overbridge increasing difficulties to carry out work could be to join forces and collaborate with other actors within the women’s movement. When asked if the development of a shrinking civic space has led to increased collaboration between women’s rights organisations, half of the respondents said this was indeed the case. They mention collaboration through networking, organising, and helping each other with, among other things, advocacy, media coverage and developing joint campaigns to oppose anti-gender movements. One activist commented: “The movement becomes so small that it is necessary to unite various sectors, unions, journalists, LGBTQI+, and women, among many others.”

Working together to push an agenda or support another activist (e.g. by not signing an article with only one name) can be a way to protect oneself and one’s organisations from attacks, unwanted publicity,

restrictions and surveillance. “To get around certain obstacles, we work in platforms or networks”, says one respondent from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. An Indian activist states that in her context, all civil society organisation and women’s organisations “with similar ideology” are involved in more joint campaigns supporting each other. An activist from Liberia describes increasing collaboration and networking among women-led organisations, encouraging one another not to give up on the activism, and not to “pay attention to ongoing threats”.

The comments in the survey show that female journalists and women’s rights organisations work together in solidarity on specific topics related to women’s rights and freedom of speech. According to one respondent, “feminist journalists have supported women’s organisations in publicly denouncing attacks.”

Syrian activist Hunadah Al-Hariri stresses the importance of solidarity and joining forces within the feminist movement: “The one weapon we have is solidarity among each other. We don’t need to think the same to be in solidarity, nor do we need to agree on everything the person stands for. (...) Just one word of support can make change happen.”

One respondent from Sierra Leone argues that the intersectional perspective is important when the women’s movement joins forces: “The issue of uniting under one cohesive movement is a challenge. We live in a very ageist society, so a lot of older women believe they should take the lead when that mentality in itself is a by-product of patriarchy that needs to be unlearned. There should be no social hierarchy in feminism, especially in the women’s movement. In addition to unity, both inclusivity and diversity measures also need to be taken into consideration to ensure all our voices echo as one.”

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## FARAH BABA FROM LEBANON

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Farah Baba from Lebanon gets a lot of her strength from knowing that she and her organisation, the Anti-Racism Movement (ARM), are supported by other NGOs. In Lebanon, she says, the collaboration between different movements and NGOs increased after various crises. Aside from the pandemic, Lebanon has faced a devastating explosion in the harbour of Beirut, and a severe political and economic crisis.

“My organisation started doing relief work, which we hadn’t done before. And NGOs that had previously not done much advocacy and lobby work for migrant workers’ rights turned to us for support.”

She has also learnt how to deal with the stress of constantly feeling attacked on a personal level.

“Now, I understand that I do not have to react and respond to everything. I have started worrying less. It is reassuring to be surrounded by other activists – we support and help each other, share experiences on how to be secure and safe online, and how to act if someone gets arrested.”

One network stands out for Farah Baba in terms of supporting and helping her to structure her life as an activist – that is the Women Human Rights Defenders Coalition in the MENA Region.

“They have tried to teach us to make sure we take care of ourselves. Since women are always expected to do the care work and make sure everyone is okay, this creates an extra layer of stress for us activists. Many activists in the feminist movement are burned out. I have learned to pick my battles. My main strategy now is to make sure I get some rest.”



Photo: Anti-Racism Movement

## KEEPING SAFE

There are several strategies to stay as safe as possible. A Syrian woman human rights defender stresses the need to be careful with sharing information, not to let people know who attended meetings or to who works at the organisation: “In certain areas of Turkey, it is good to be careful and not say anything about the country. And you need to be careful with documentation. When we are in Nusra, Syria, we always carefully consider how we describe the contents of what we are doing.”

In many contexts, even though activism might not have been totally restricted, working to change gender norms has always been met with resistance,

and women human rights defenders are used to finding ways to protect themselves. This could involve organising workshops on handicrafts, while using the time to discuss burning issues: Women have constantly developed coping mechanisms and used safe spaces like food production or spaces to discuss political matters. This allows for engagement across generations, as well as skills sharing, while also seeking solutions to violations”, says one respondent from Namibia.

A woman human rights defender from the Democratic Republic of the Congo recounts that her organisation, in collaboration with others, created a platform for the protection of women being

exposed to threats and other forms of violence. In a war-torn country such as the DRC and Iraq, with a very unstable society and a high degree of violence, it is essential for women human rights defenders to support and safeguard each other. Deena Altai, a women's rights activists in Baghdad, has been targeted by militia as a consequence of her fight for democracy: "Other human rights activists protect us by communicating with the prime minister; they gave him our names and said that the militia had information on us, and had threatened us and our families. We have also faced threats by giving interviews, and naming the militias and people behind the threats. We will not go backwards and be silenced again."

### TAKING CARE OF ONESELF

Something that is often forgotten but kept coming up is the need for women human rights defenders to take time to care for themselves. Integrated security is a concept developed by Kvinna till Kvinna and Urgent Action Fund, that deals both with external and internal threats and safety. One key method in integrated security is to provide safe spaces for women activists to discuss how the high level of threats and insecurity affect their daily lives.

Taking time off from work might seem essential to many but is not always a given for women human rights defenders. Iraqi activist Deena Alta describes the toll it takes: "Sometimes I am so tired because this work needs to continue all the time. I sometimes take a day off, to refresh my mind and myself so I can continue my work. Without these breaks I can't go on; I get so tired. But we must carry on



Photo: Kvinna till Kvinna

Safe space used during one of Kvinna till Kvinna's workshops on integrated security.

with our work so we can't take more than one day off." A Syrian activist living in Turkey paints a similar picture: "I haven't taken a vacation during the seven years I have been in Turkey. I am tired."

Naz Hami, an activist from Syria, has her own way of coping and keep going: "There is no place to breathe in this area, so that is why I write to try to tell the women's stories. That is what I do. But another thing is that I have a few very close friends and family members who accept me and my ideas."

How does one find the strength to carry on? One activist in an area of the South Caucasus that has been in and out of conflict for decades puts it as follows: "It is our lives. If we can't change it, we will leave the same situation to our children. We forget about our wellbeing, health and physical needs."

Her colleague adds: "Sometimes people burn out, especially now during Covid when it was like we were living in a cage, deprived of social contact. But then we see what we have achieved. And if not now, when? If not us, then who?"

” The movement will be stronger when women realise that we need to help each other, no matter who we are and where we come from.

” The solidarity is important. I know that if I need something there will be a feminist somewhere who will help.

# Victories for the feminist movement

Despite threats and harassments, the feminist movement keep on working. Below is just a few examples of what they achieved during 2019–2021.

In January 2021, abortion was decriminalised in South Korea, a decision that was in part prompted by the rise of the #MeToo movement in the country.

In September 2021, advocates of women's sexual and reproductive health and rights achieved a major victory when Mexico's Supreme Court ruled that penalising abortion is unconstitutional, meaning that courts can no longer prosecute abortion.

In July 2020, Sudanese human rights activists and the anti-female genital mutilation movement achieved a decades-long goal when Sudan's Sovereign Council banned female genital mutilation making it punishable by three years in jail.

In June 2019, the Botswanan LGBTQI+ community and leading non-governmental group LEGABIBO, successfully advocated for a decriminalisation of same-sex relations to the Botswana's High Court, which ruled in favour.

In May 2019, tens of thousands of people in Taiwan braved pouring rain to demonstrate in favour of same-sex marriage outside the parliament. The passing of the bill was a historic moment for the Asian LGBTQI+ rights movement, by making Taiwan the first country in the region to legalise same-sex marriage.

In 2019, Tunisia's #MeToo movement #EnaZeda, (see photo) prompted thousands of women across the country to share their experiences of sexual harassment and violence. Women's rights organisation Aswat Nissa offered a safe space for the discussions by starting the #EnaZeda Facebook group. In just a few weeks, 25,000 people had joined, sharing their own experiences of sexual harassment and violence directly or anonymously.

In August 2019, Liberia's women's movement achieved a massive victory when the Domestic Violence Bill was approved. Liberian women's organisations had campaigned for the bill for many years. After countless sit-ins, marches, and advocacy meetings, it was finally passed.

The bill "only yes means yes" was approved by the Spanish government in March 2020, making Spain the 10th European country to define sex without consent as rape.

In March 2020, Sierra Leone overturned a ban on pregnant girls attending school and sitting exams. Since 2015, many pregnant girls have been stigmatised and denied their right to education, damaging their prospects of future employment.

For half a decade, women's rights organisations in Palestine have been advocating against child marriage. In November 2019, these efforts finally paid off, when the Palestinian Authority government passed a new law, setting the minimum age for marriage to 18 years.

In Lebanon, women were key mobilisers of the October 2019 movements against political corruption and economic inequality, which forced the prime minister to resign.

In 2019, the women's rights movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina got a long-awaited win, when the parliament in Republika Srpska amended its Law on the Protection against Domestic Violence and fully criminalised domestic violence.

Sources: Amnesty, 2021. Civicus, 2020. Global Citizen, 2020. Reuters, 2021. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, 2020. Kvinna till Kvinna's Annual Reports 2019. CNN, 2019. CBS news, 2019.

La Honte doit  
changer de Camp  
#EnaZeda

الحصانة  
لعمهاك  
النسيانية  
مستش

واتك الجنسية  
#EnaZeda

Non c'e

#Ena

لا يبقاريل ولا ص  
القانون

#EnaZeda

معارش ساكنة  
على الامتد  
#EnaZeda

#EnaZeda

# Conclusion and recommendations



Neither gender equality nor women's freedom of expression can be promoted if spaces for women to organize are not protected.<sup>44</sup>

As shown in *Solidarity is our only weapon*, the level of threats against women human rights defenders continues at a high level, even though the restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic made it difficult for women's rights organisations to carry on with organising activities, manifestations and advocacy events physically. The impunity is widespread for crimes against women human rights defenders, and many activists witness that they do not feel that the harassment and threats are recognised

as a real problem. It has become a part of many women's rights activists lives. The normalisation of the situation is ongoing, both by activists who ignore the issues as a method to cope and to not self-sensor themselves, and by their societies and the international community that do not sufficiently stand up in solidarity.

The way forward requires a mix of recognition, solidarity and funding. Women's rights organisations, networks and activists are crucial for increased gender equality, and women's access to human rights. The work women's rights organisations carry out to combat gender-based violence, to advocate for legislation that protects women's rights, to build capacity and to combat economic inequalities is crucial for the development of a country, as well as to safeguard democracy and human rights for all. All the international community needs to do is support them, listen to them and fund them.

Photo: Wolobah Sall



A group for girls' rights organised by WORIWA, Liberia.

<sup>44</sup> Khan, I. "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression", 2021, p. 12.

# KVINNA TILL KVINNA CALLS FOR...

## ON FUNDING FOR SECURITY AND PROTECTION



Donors should recognise the unique and gendered risks and threats faced by women human rights defenders. Invest in structures and programmes dedicated to the protection of women human rights defenders, both financial grants and resources dedicated to rapid, emergency responses. All program budgets should include a contingency line to respond to emerging and on-going security threats.



Donors need to improve in flexibility and innovation when choosing funding instruments and modalities to support women human rights defenders, in order to meet today's challenges of shrinking space and anti-gender rhetoric. This requires knowledge about the context. Long-term support and core funding should be prioritised whenever possible, as it enables organisations to be more resilient and it provides protection.



Donors should support the organising and work of local protection and emergency organisations and networks, and mechanism such as networks of safe houses. It is important to remember that also safety mechanisms need to have a gender perspective. Women human rights defenders face specific challenges in for example relocating to a safe space as they are often responsible for their children.



Donors must make resources available to address security from a holistic angle including stress-management for the organisations. We need a more holistic approach to prevention and protection, which also includes psychosocial support mechanisms.



Donors and governments need to increase efforts to facilitate and fund women's rights activists' presence in regional and international fora (such as the EU, AU and the UN) in order to strategically push back antigender forces' presence in these spaces.

## ON PRESENCE AND INFLUENCE

Donors and governments should promote solidarity within the women's right movement by facilitating networking and safe spaces for discussions and strategising.

Within the UN, strategic coalitions to strengthen the space for civil society are needed. Governments can promote the possibility for civil society's shadow reporting and actively highlight restrictions on civic society.

Donors and governments must work to bridge the digital divide and to ensure that internet is affordable, safe, and accessible for women human rights defenders, including those living in rural areas and in poverty, for example by financing equipment and training in digital security.

International and regional organisations, such as EU and UN, should always meet with women's organisations, urban and rural, when visiting a country. This is crucial to acknowledge the importance of their voices. Bear in mind that GONGOs can put outspoken women activists at risk and may have a different agenda.

The EU must review and update EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders from 2008 to include a clear gender perspective and an awareness of the deteriorating situation for women human rights defenders and link it to other relevant guidelines and the EU Gender Action Plan. The revision needs to be done in consultation with civil society.

Donors and governments need to increase efforts to facilitate and fund women's rights activists' presence in regional and international fora (such as the EU, AU and the UN) in order to strategically push back anti-gender forces' presence in these spaces.

## ON SECURITY AND IMPUNITY

Governments must publicly condemn and duly investigate smear campaigns and online harassment against women human rights activists. Those in power who advocate for or support violence against women in public life must be held accountable.

Governments and authorities should build capacity on how to arrange safe online meetings and consultations that allow for meaningful and safe interaction with women's rights organisations. Ahead of meetings, context specific analyses and adaptations might be needed in order to make sure the event is meaningful, safe and allows for a variety of organisations to take part. Social media companies, in consultation with women human rights defenders, should establish easy to access and rapid response mechanisms to remove threatening context from social media, as well as to close down accounts that threatens activists or spread false information.

The EU-Commission must put forward a proposal to make offline and online gender-based violence a crime. We also encourage other regional organisations and governments to update their definitions of gender-based violence to include online violence, including sexual and psychological harassment, cyber-bullying, cyberstalking, non-consensual disclosure of sexual images, sexist hate speech online and new forms of online harassment and threats online.

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**For all women's rights,  
in every corner of the world.**

