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### Promotion and protection of human rights

## Situation of human rights defenders

### Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the General Assembly the report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, submitted in accordance with Human Rights Council resolution [43/16](#).

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\* [A/78/150](#).



## **Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders**

### **Pathways to peace: women human rights defenders in conflict, post-conflict and crisis-affected settings**

#### *Summary*

In the present report, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, analyses the situation of women human rights defenders working in conflict, post-conflict and crisis-affected settings and highlights their contributions to peace and security, despite the often difficult and even hostile environments in which they work. The report contains examples of individual cases of women human rights defenders working in these contexts, as well as recommendations to States and other relevant stakeholders on providing a safe and enabling environment in which to carry out their legitimate human rights work.

In a submission for the present report, April Dyan Gumanao of Alliance of Concerned Teachers in the Philippines noted that “we work on the premise that, to achieve sustainable peace, there should be food on tables, decent work and opportunities, equality, respect for human rights and justice”.

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## I. Introduction

1. Women human rights defenders are active in every State Member of the United Nations and territory, striving to make real the aspirations contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They do this loudly and quietly, on the streets and in their homes, pushing against the weight of centuries of discrimination, disrespect and violence. Women human rights defenders who work in conflict, post-conflict and crisis-affected settings do so in the often hypermasculinized context of war. It is in that context that their work is even more necessary, but where they are subjected to additional violations because of that work and because of who they are.

2. The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, considers women peacebuilders to be women human rights defenders. She also considers the work of women human rights defenders in these contexts to be a vital contribution to peacebuilding. Some of this work relates to gender equality. Where there is greater gender equality, conflict is more likely to be resolved without violence, a State is less likely to use military force to resolve international disputes, and grievances are less likely to escalate into violent conflict. Some of this work relates to women's empowerment and participation. Studies have shown that where women are meaningfully involved in peace processes, the probability of a peace agreement lasting at least 2 or 15 years increases by 20 and 35 per cent, respectively.<sup>1</sup> Some of this work relates to the documentation and monitoring of violations against women and others with a view to seeking justice and accountability, which are essential to any transitional justice process.

3. All of this work takes courage and brings just and sustainable peace closer. However, much of it also results in physical and sexual attacks, stigmatization, criminal charges, smear campaigns, threats, harassment and ill-treatment in an environment where women's right or ability to do this work is frequently questioned, including by their colleagues working alongside them.

4. Esther Omam Njomo is a women human rights defender from Cameroon. In a submission for the present report, she states the following: "Many times, human rights defence is considered a male-dominated job given its constant exposure to threats...this has left many women human rights defenders to constantly struggle with their male counterparts to gain recognition and legitimacy within the domain." Women human rights defenders who are targets because of their identity or characteristics, as well as their work and their gender, face multiple and overlapping risks.

5. The Special Rapporteur recognizes that a lot has been done to promote women's participation in peace efforts since the adoption of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women and peace and security and she applauds this progress. She welcomes the growing emphasis that some States are placing on the role of women human rights defenders in conflict situations, and also welcomes Human Rights Council resolution 49/18 on the contribution of human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders, in conflict and post-conflict environments.

6. However, she regrets that there has not been more progress made to protect women human rights defenders in such contexts or greater efforts to support the conditions in which they can safely do their work. She believes that it is not fully recognized that an increase in the participation of women results in increased attacks against them and that while placing an emphasis on their participation is rightly championed, without measures in place to prevent attendant attacks on women human rights defenders for doing so, any gains made risk being lost. This lack of protection

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://wps.unwomen.org/participation/>.

is starkly highlighted by the continued reprisals against women human rights defenders as a result of their interaction with United Nations entities, including the Security Council.

7. For the purposes of the present report, the term “women human rights defender” refers to all women and girls working on any human rights issue, namely women defenders and girl defenders, and any person who works to promote women’s rights and rights related to gender equality. This includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) activists, as issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity are part of achieving gender equality. It also includes civil society actors working in these areas who may not self-identify as human rights defenders, for example journalists, health workers, environmental activists, private actors or development and humanitarian actors.<sup>2</sup>

8. Drawing on the definition used by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in its general recommendation No. 30 (2013) on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations, the Special Rapporteur has focused the present report on the situation of women human rights defenders in international and non-international armed conflict, the post-conflict phase and on other situations where they are killed because of their work. Although the killing of women human rights defenders because of their work may not fit within the traditional framework of conflict and post-conflict settings, the Special Rapporteur believes that the scale of attacks targeting women human rights defenders warrants discussion as they are fundamentally relating to the peace and security of women.

9. In conflict and post-conflict situations, the values contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights risk being cast aside in the hardness that pervades societies on a war footing. In a submission for the present report, Human Rights House Yerevan noted that women human rights defenders working on peacebuilding initiatives are more frequently targeted “with false narratives that democracy, human rights and pacifism have weakened the security and ‘immunity of the nation’, leading to military defeat”.<sup>3</sup> On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the Special Rapporteur urges States to resist the marginalization of women human rights defenders in such contexts and instead value them as partners in building peaceful, just and strong societies.

## II. Data and methodology

10. The present report is based on 26 consultations that the Special Rapporteur has held with human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders, in conflict, post-conflict or crisis-affected settings since she took up her mandate in May 2020.

11. Two further consultations were held with 50 human rights defenders and representatives of civil society organizations in May 2022 with the specific purpose of feeding into this report. The Special Rapporteur has also consulted with academics and specialists working on the women and peace and security agenda.

12. The Special Rapporteur has also drawn on the annual reports of the Secretary-General on women and peace and security, the reports of United Nations-mandated

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<sup>2</sup> See [www.ohchr.org/en/women/women-human-rights-defenders](http://www.ohchr.org/en/women/women-human-rights-defenders).

<sup>3</sup> Submission from Human Rights House Yerevan, quoting <https://ge.boell.org/en/2022/12/18/armenias-peace-and-security-womens-participation-and-feminist-perspectives>.

commissions of inquiry and peacekeeping missions, as well as the reports of her predecessor.

13. The Special Rapporteur issued a call for submissions in six languages, inviting relevant stakeholders – primarily States Members of the United Nations and civil society organizations, including human rights defenders – to contribute to the report. In total, she received 123 submissions: 12 from States Members, 2 from national human rights institutions and 109 from human rights defenders and civil society organizations.

14. The Special Rapporteur would like to thank all those who contributed to the present report.

### III. Normative framework of reference

15. The protection of women human rights defenders is crucial in conflict and post-conflict settings where they face specific challenges owing to their gender and the volatile nature of these environments. International law provides a framework for safeguarding the rights and safety of women human rights defenders, the aim of which is to ensure that they are active participants in and contribute to promoting peace, human rights and gender equality.

16. As mentioned in the report of the previous mandate holder to the Human Rights Council, human rights defenders operating in conflict and post-conflict areas are protected under international human rights law, international humanitarian law (which is only applicable to situations of armed conflict, including occupation), international criminal law and international refugee law. Opposable norms include obligations under customary law and peremptory norms (*jus cogens*). The Special Rapporteur recalls that international human rights law and international humanitarian law are mutually reinforcing and complementary, not mutually exclusive. Parties to armed conflict, including occupying powers, must uphold the protections these regimes afford, regardless of their position on their applicability.<sup>4</sup>

17. The Special Rapporteur will refrain from outlining the key legal protections, as well as the rights of human rights defenders, in particular women human rights defenders, to operate in conflict and post-conflict situations, as these issues were covered in-depth in the report of the previous mandate holder to the Human Rights Council.<sup>5</sup>

18. At the same time, the Special Rapporteur wishes to stress that women do not enjoy the same status as men and that this inequality is further exacerbated during conflict. Women human rights defenders face systemic and structural discrimination, economic disenfranchisement, violence and harassment, including sexual and gender-based violence. A gender perspective needs to be integrated into all legislative and policy efforts to create a safe and enabling environment for women human rights defenders in conflict.

19. For the purposes of the present report, the Special Rapporteur will reference resolutions adopted by the Security Council in relation to the women and peace and security agenda, as well as resolutions adopted by the Human Rights Council pertaining to the participation of women and the rights of women human rights defenders operating in conflict and post-conflict situations. These resolutions promote the active and effective participation of women in peacemaking and peacebuilding and cover preventing and addressing conflict-related sexual violence.

<sup>4</sup> A/HRC/43/51, para. 13.

<sup>5</sup> A/HRC/43/51, paras. 15–20.

They recognize the role of women in conflict prevention, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction and emphasize the need for the participation and protection of women human rights defenders.

20. Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#) was the first resolution pertaining to women and peace and security and was adopted by the Security Council on 31 October 2000. It urged states to increase the participation of women and protect their rights during and after conflicts. Subsequent resolutions further emphasized the need to protect women human rights defenders, promote their meaningful participation in all relevant matters and hold perpetrators accountable for violence against them.

21. Security Council resolutions [1888 \(2009\)](#), [1960 \(2010\)](#) and [2106 \(2013\)](#) focus on the prevention of sexual violence during armed conflict. They acknowledge the crucial work of women human rights defenders in combating sexual violence and call for their involvement in the development of strategies and initiatives to prevent and respond to such acts. Resolution [2106 \(2013\)](#) recognizes the specific risks that women human rights defenders face and calls for their protection and support.

22. The first resolution pertaining to women and peace and security to specifically refer to the need to create a safe and enabling environment for civil society, including in situations of armed conflict, was Security Council resolution [2493 \(2019\)](#). The resolution strongly encourages Member States to create safe and enabling environments for civil society, including formal and informal community women leaders, women peacebuilders, political actors and those who protect and promote human rights, to carry out their work independently and without undue interference, including in situations of armed conflict, and to address threats, harassment, violence and hate speech against them.

23. The Human Rights Council, at its forty-ninth session, adopted resolution [49/18](#) on recognizing the contribution of human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders, in conflict and post-conflict situations, to the enjoyment and realization of human rights. The resolution also called on States to respect, protect and fulfil human rights in conflict and post-conflict situations and to respect international humanitarian law and international human rights law in situations of armed conflict. As outlined below, these calls are being more honoured in the breach than in the observance.

#### **IV. Contribution of women human rights defenders to peace and security**

24. Women human rights defenders make an enormous contribution to peace and security in States in conflict, post-conflict or crisis situations. In submissions for the present report from women human rights defenders, the scale and importance of that work was highlighted, including in the four areas described below. In keeping with the Special Rapporteur's people-centred approach to her mandate, she wishes to take this opportunity to acknowledge the work being done by women human rights defenders in this context.

##### **A. Provision of services**

25. In conflict-affected areas, the breakdown of State control, redirection of resources and gender-based violence carried out by armed actors combine, creating enormous needs among the civilian population that the State cannot or does not meet. In the case of women and girls, these impacts are compounded by the structural

inequality that they face and their more limited access to financial resources<sup>6</sup> and services.<sup>7</sup> Time and again, across the world, women human rights defenders have stepped in to fill these gaps, in many cases changing the bulk of their work from advocacy to providing services.

26. The Women's Support Centre in Armenia reported that during the second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020, it had engaged in extensive humanitarian relief work to assist those affected by the conflict, including through the provision of services to victims of domestic violence, psychosocial support, the distribution of sanitary and hygiene products and the provision of seed money to women who were considering starting up their own businesses in the aftermath of the war.<sup>8</sup>

27. The inability of a State to respond to instances of conflict-related sexual violence and gender-based violence during a crisis period has resulted in this task routinely falling to women human rights defenders. For instance, the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen noted that "the already limited capacity to address sexual and gender-based violence in the criminal justice system has collapsed"<sup>9</sup> with the outbreak of the conflict.

28. As reported by Sudanese Women Rights Action, women human rights defenders in the Sudan have responded to the absence of the State in the context of the conflict by collecting donations to provide food and medical care to the civilian population and health care to survivors of conflict-related sexual violence.<sup>10</sup> Another organization of women human rights defenders from the Sudan spoke about the acute need for psychosocial support and the network of psychologists that women human rights defenders had helped to set up along border points to provide services for fleeing women and girls who had experienced sexual violence.<sup>11</sup>

29. Women's organizations in Afghanistan have assisted, and continue to assist, with the protection, relocation, rehabilitation and provision of financial support for women who are targeted by the Taliban.<sup>12</sup> This is all the more necessary in a context where women in Afghanistan have been failed by international actors.

30. This work by women human rights defenders remains vital in post-conflict situations where deeply held patriarchal values and attendant violence against women often persist. The Women's Support Centre of North Caucasus highlights that, although 20 years have passed since the Chechen Wars, violence persists, albeit in less visible ways than during the wars. The Centre provides counselling support to social workers, human rights defenders, lawyers, teachers and other professionals who help people achieve their potential in extremely challenging circumstances.<sup>13</sup>

31. The Centre for Reproductive Rights highlights that, although interim relief measures were provided to those injured during the conflict in Nepal and to the relatives of those killed, no such provisions were made for the survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, who remain psychologically and in some cases physically scarred by their ordeals.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Womens-Work-Key-Patterns-Constraints.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> S/2021/827, paras. 5 and 42.

<sup>8</sup> Submission from Advocates for Human Rights.

<sup>9</sup> A/HRC/39/43, para. 86.

<sup>10</sup> Submission from Sudanese Women Rights Action and communication SDN 6/2022, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=27518>.

<sup>11</sup> Submission from the Rafto Foundation for Human Rights.

<sup>12</sup> Anonymous submission (known to the Special Rapporteur).

<sup>13</sup> Submission from the Women's Support Centre of North Caucasus.

<sup>14</sup> See also [www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/countries/nepal/](http://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/countries/nepal/).

32. By providing these front-line and often emergency response services, women human rights defenders have developed an intimate understanding of the impact of conflict and the most urgent needs to be addressed, and have provided women with tools to aid their participation in the social, economic and political lives of their countries.

## **B. Documentation, accountability and advocacy**

33. By documenting and monitoring human rights violations, as well as violations of international humanitarian law in conflict, post-conflict and crisis settings, women human rights defenders not only contribute to processes of accountability and just peace in the aftermath, but they also secure the release of people from detention and provide life-saving interventions during conflict. Furthermore, by documenting violations, women human rights defenders are helping to secure the future gendered outcomes of any peace processes by collecting information that can be used to secure accountability for crimes committed during the conflict.

34. In Yemen, a member organization of the Women’s Alliance for Security Leadership documents violations committed during the ongoing conflict and lobbies for reparations for victims and the accountability of perpetrators. This advocacy has helped to secure the release of over 600 arbitrarily detained prisoners.<sup>15</sup>

35. In the Syrian Arab Republic, Families for Freedom is a women-led movement that seeks justice and accountability for the tens of thousands of Syrians arbitrarily detained and forcibly disappeared since the beginning of the civil war in 2011.<sup>16</sup> Rand Sabbagh, Executive Director of the Syrian Female Journalists Network, describes how the work of the network is promoting the voices, stories and experiences of women and creating a greater space for freedom of expression.<sup>17</sup>

36. The Government of Mexico recognizes family members, in particular women, who are leading searches for disappeared relatives, as human rights defenders, and states that their activities, which put them at great personal risk, “have allowed them, on many occasions, to identify the perpetrators and establish lines of investigation”.<sup>18</sup>

37. Women human rights defenders also played a vital role in developing and securing the passage of the Yazidi Female Survivors Law in Iraq in 2021, which recognizes Da’esh attacks against the Yazidi community as genocide and crimes against humanity and provides for reparations and rehabilitation for survivors. It further recognizes the use of sexual violence by Da’esh against Yazidi women.<sup>19</sup> Alleged war crimes carried out by Russian military forces are also being documented by women human rights defenders in Ukraine.<sup>20</sup>

38. In the State of Palestine, the digital rights organization, 7amleh-The Arab Center for Social Media Advancement, monitors violations targeting women human rights defenders online, in the context of occupation where rights-based physical gathering and organizing is fraught with danger.<sup>21</sup> By highlighting the restrictions and attacks faced by Palestinian women human rights defenders online, the organization is

<sup>15</sup> Submission from the International Civil Society Action Network.

<sup>16</sup> See <https://syrianfamilies.org/en/>.

<sup>17</sup> Consultation with women human rights defenders, 24 May 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Submission from the Government of Mexico.

<sup>19</sup> Submission from Amnesty International.

<sup>20</sup> See [www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and](http://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and).

<sup>21</sup> See communication ISR 6/2021, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=26556>.

fighting for the right of women to participate in debates regarding the occupation and future of the State of Palestine.

39. Women’s Peace Network in Myanmar reports how ethnic minority women human rights defenders in the country have documented for years the perpetration of sexual and gender-based violence against women by the Myanmar military,<sup>22</sup> which the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar found was a “hallmark of the Tatmadaw’s operations in northern Myanmar and in Rakhine”.<sup>23</sup>

40. Lasting peace is “interlinked with justice, development and respect for human rights”, and any transitional justice processes should address human rights violations in order to move towards reconciliation.<sup>24</sup> By conducting documentation, monitoring and accountability work, women human rights defenders are helping to create the conditions to build lasting peace, but are also providing a warning of potential conflict to come. As stated in Security Council resolution 2171 (2014), serious human rights abuses “can be an early indication of a descent into conflict or escalation of violence”.

### C. Promoting women’s rights, participation and agency

41. Many women human rights defenders operate in environments where, in addition to facing violence, legal restrictions, physical attack, intimidation and criminalization as a result of their human rights work, they must also battle against deeply embedded patriarchal values that do not see them as equal or legitimate actors. The Special Rapporteur believes that the work women human rights defenders do in conflict, post-conflict and crisis-affected settings to counter this, by promoting the agency of women and girls, is a key element to achieving just and sustainable peace. This work helps women and others identify and develop mitigation strategies to various forms of oppression experienced by women in conflict.

42. The Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development conducts training in the region for women human rights defenders in feminist legal analysis and feminist legal strategies.<sup>25</sup> Nazra for Feminist Studies is an organization based in Egypt that collaborates with women human rights defenders throughout the Middle East and North Africa region to build awareness of women’s rights and increase their capacity to carry out protection, support and advocacy work and to establish a foothold in the public sphere.<sup>26</sup> A network of women human rights defenders established in Burkina Faso has helped to consolidate peace in the country.<sup>27</sup>

43. The impact that women human rights defenders can have on political transition was visible following the overthrow of Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir in the Sudan in 2019. Sudanese Women Rights Action highlights that “the involvement of women and a gender perspective in the process did not come automatically, but rather as a result of women’s rights groups’ campaigning for the inclusion of women in the process. The text of the agreement reflects the ability of women to include important changes and make these agreements gender sensitive”.<sup>28</sup>

44. As noted in the 2021 report of the Special Rapporteur in which the situation of the killing of human rights defenders is analysed, Indigenous defenders are at a

<sup>22</sup> Submission from Women’s Peace Network.

<sup>23</sup> See [http://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFM-Myanmar/sexualviolence/A\\_HRC\\_CRP\\_4.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFM-Myanmar/sexualviolence/A_HRC_CRP_4.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> See [www.ohchr.org/en/transitional-justice/about-transitional-justice-and-human-rights](http://www.ohchr.org/en/transitional-justice/about-transitional-justice-and-human-rights).

<sup>25</sup> Consultation with women human rights defenders.

<sup>26</sup> Submission from Nazra for Feminist Studies.

<sup>27</sup> Submission from Florence Ouattara.

<sup>28</sup> Submission from Sudanese Women Rights Action.

disproportionately high risk of being killed as a result of their human rights work.<sup>29</sup> In certain crisis-affected areas, where structural violence is imposed on Indigenous communities and is compounded by attempts by businesses to clear Indigenous lands, Indigenous women human rights defenders and others are engaging in capacity-building work to address the root causes of conflict. This includes awareness-raising on free, prior and informed consent, the rights that they have as Indigenous Peoples and the avenues they can use to object to the appropriation of their land.<sup>30</sup> In the Province of West Papua (Indonesia), women human rights defenders are acting as mediators between local populations and the extractive industry in an attempt to reduce the scale of conflict that has arisen between the parties.<sup>31</sup>

45. In the Philippines, where human rights defenders report that they are frequently red-tagged and targeted in government counter-insurgency campaigns,<sup>32</sup> an association of women human rights defenders, known as Tanggol Bayi, works to promote a culture of respect for human rights, advance the rights and capacity of other women human rights defenders and develop strategies for their protection.<sup>33</sup>

46. Enabling women human rights defenders to continue to work, particularly as their profile, gender and work predispose them to elevated levels of risk, is a crucial contribution to peacebuilding. The organizations that provide them with security advice and training, emergency grants and sustained advocacy support must be recognized. It must also be recognized that this protection function is falling unsustainably on the shoulders of civil society and that while States are increasingly promoting the participation of women, they are not accompanying them with the necessary protection support.

#### **D. Relationship building and mediation**

47. It has been widely documented that women still fail to be systematically and meaningfully included in peace processes,<sup>34</sup> despite years of evidence indicating that the participation of women in peace negotiations increases the success of the peace agreement.<sup>35</sup>

48. Women human rights defenders from Afghanistan, Cameroon, Iraq, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen who made submissions for the present report all cite the lack of opportunity to participate in peace dialogues or negotiations. In March 2022, special procedure mandate holders of the Human Rights Council drew attention to the absence of Ukrainian women from the negotiation table, despite being at the forefront of the humanitarian response.<sup>36</sup> It is stressed in a recent joint report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls that there is a need to ensure the meaningful participation of women in different forms of dialogue with the de facto

<sup>29</sup> A/HRC/46/35.

<sup>30</sup> Submission from Women Working Group, Indonesia.

<sup>31</sup> Submission from Cooperating Organizations for West Papua.

<sup>32</sup> See communication PHL 1/2020, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=25149>.

<sup>33</sup> Submission from Karapatan.

<sup>34</sup> See <http://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2021/Proceedings-Gender-inclusive-peace-processes-en.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> See [https://cdn.cloud.prio.org/files/caa7a270-2f7a-46b7-8ecf-db366ad4def4/Backgrounder%201%20Ahmad%20and%20Tank%202020%20\\_%20Womens%20Participation%20in%20Peace%20Processes.pdf?inline=true](https://cdn.cloud.prio.org/files/caa7a270-2f7a-46b7-8ecf-db366ad4def4/Backgrounder%201%20Ahmad%20and%20Tank%202020%20_%20Womens%20Participation%20in%20Peace%20Processes.pdf?inline=true).

<sup>36</sup> See [www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/03/ukraine-protection-and-participation-women-essential-say-un-human-rights](http://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/03/ukraine-protection-and-participation-women-essential-say-un-human-rights).

authorities, alongside measures to protect women human rights defenders from reprisals.<sup>37</sup>

49. Women human rights defenders from the Syrian Arab Republic highlighted specific obstacles, including difficulties obtaining a visa to travel to a country where peace talks were taking place and not having or being able to obtain the required documents to make a visa application.<sup>38</sup> One woman human rights defender, who did not provide her name for security reasons, stated that in her experience, where women were invited to participate, it was mostly in the consultation phase, rather than directly in the negotiation phase.

50. Sofia Hamid, a woman human rights defender and journalist from Afghanistan, mentioned the lack of transparency around peace talks in her country and detailed her efforts to inform the public about what was happening in an environment where very few details were made public.<sup>39</sup> A further challenge noted was that speaking freely as a women human rights defender in many conflict situations involves risks and their security could be traded off for their participation.

51. However, despite being routinely excluded from formal peace processes, women human rights defenders do vital work at the grass-roots and subnational levels to foster understanding and develop common approaches to living in peace.

52. In Indian-administered Kashmir, women human rights defenders have been working to create civil society space to foster cross-community engagement and peacebuilding efforts, although these efforts have been stymied by the authorities' crackdown on civil society organizations.<sup>40</sup> An organization in the Syrian Arab Republic has convened forums for women to discuss their barriers to participation in peace processes and to develop gender-responsive recommendations to the Constitutional Committee.<sup>41</sup>

53. Roseline Cassell, a woman human rights defender from Liberia, reports that in the aftermath of the civil war, lawlessness had overtaken all parts of the country. Through the work of women human rights defenders in training sessions, workshops, town hall meetings, stakeholder forums and peer mediation sessions, she describes an increase in the use of peaceful methods to settle conflicts.<sup>42</sup>

## V. Risks faced

54. The general challenges that women human rights defenders face and how they are affected by the risks differently than other human rights defenders were documented in the 2019 report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders.<sup>43</sup> The Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development and the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition have identified five socioeconomic constructs that “shape the struggles” of women human rights defenders, namely: patriarchy, heteronormativity, militarization, fundamentalism and globalization.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>37</sup> A/HRC/53/21, para. 101 (c)

<sup>38</sup> Submission from the Rafto Foundation for Human Rights.

<sup>39</sup> Submission from Sofia Hamid.

<sup>40</sup> See communication IND 19/2021, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=26868>.

<sup>41</sup> Submission from the International Civil Society Action Network.

<sup>42</sup> Submission from Roseline Cassell.

<sup>43</sup> A/HRC/40/60.

<sup>44</sup> See <https://defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/book3NeoWithCovereng.pdf>.

55. Over the period 2021–2022, the Special Rapporteur surveyed 81 women and transgender human rights defenders from 32 countries who participated in small group meetings with her. When asked about the most serious risks they faced in their work, 32 per cent stated that they were at risk of arbitrary detention or criminalization; 22 per cent said they were at risk of harassment or intimidation, including online; and 21 per cent mentioned threats to their physical security.

56. The Special Rapporteur further analysed all alleged violations reported in 159 communications referencing 421 women human rights defenders that she had sent to States between 1 May 2020 and 4 July 2022. The breakdown of the most commonly reported violations is as follows: 39 per cent reported arbitrary detention, arrest, imprisonment or criminalization; 10 per cent threats and/or intimidation, including online; 7 per cent judicial harassment; 7 per cent torture and/or ill-treatment; and 6 per cent physical attack.

57. The mere fact of being a human rights defender working in a conflict situation and the profile that comes with this role is “the biggest risk factor”, as outlined in a submission by the Human Rights Centre ZMINA in Ukraine.<sup>45</sup> Enaam Alnour of Women of Change Organization in West Darfur (Sudan) relates how her home “was targeted directly ... a four-wheel drive vehicle full of the Rapid Support Forces came and our house was attacked with bullets”.<sup>46</sup> Women human rights defenders in crisis settings have also borne a high cost with the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Mujeres Defensoras de Derechos Humanos (IM Defensoras) and the Centro por la Justicia y el Derecho Internacional recording 1,611 attacks against women human rights defenders in Nicaragua in 2022 alone.<sup>47</sup>

58. Sexual and gender-based violence remains an ever-present threat that women human rights defenders face. Following a visit by the Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Haiti in June 2023, he outlined how the rape of women and girls is being used by criminal gangs to “establish their control over the population”.<sup>48</sup> In a consultation with the Special Rapporteur in 2022, women human rights defenders related how the situation in the country is taking a physical, psychological and emotional toll on them.<sup>49</sup>

59. In its 2021 report to the Human Rights Council, the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen verified a case where a woman human rights defender was subjected to arbitrary detention, sexual assault and torture for four months, during which she was raped every two days, by Houthi rebels. The appalling treatment of the woman was compounded on her release by the circulation of rumours by the Houthi militia that she had been engaged in prostitution, resulting in her being stigmatized and disowned by her family and friends.<sup>50</sup>

60. In the 2022 report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara, it is noted that women human rights defenders and their female family members in Western Sahara allegedly “continued to be subjected to threats, harassment and physical violence”.<sup>51</sup> The Women Advocacy Coalition – Myanmar notes that given the lack of trust in the authorities in conflict settings, there are severely limited support services available for women human rights defenders who are survivors of sexual violence.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Submission from Human Rights Centre ZMINA.

<sup>46</sup> Submission from Women of Change Organization.

<sup>47</sup> Submission from IM Defensoras and the Centro por la Justicia y el Derecho Internacional.

<sup>48</sup> See [www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2023/06/haiti-un-expert-william-oneill-concludes-official-visit](https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2023/06/haiti-un-expert-william-oneill-concludes-official-visit).

<sup>49</sup> Consultation with the Special Rapporteur.

<sup>50</sup> [A/HRC/48/20](https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/interim-reports/interim-report-no-48).

<sup>51</sup> [S/2022/733](https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/interim-reports/interim-report-no-73), para. 78.

<sup>52</sup> Submission from Women Advocacy Coalition – Myanmar.

61. By virtue of their human rights work, many women human rights defenders become well known in their communities or develop public profiles at the local or national levels. When this often takes place in patriarchal or deeply conservative environments where gender roles are rigidly defined, the risks to women human rights defenders increase further as a result of increased militarization in a war or crisis context. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel notes that gendered threats to and harassment of Palestinian women human rights defenders by the Israeli Security Agency were “intended to trigger guilt and anxiety, insinuating that they did not fulfil their role as mothers and caregivers”.<sup>53</sup>

62. Women human rights defenders in Libya are routinely subjected to attacks, which have effectively forced them out of public life. These have included sexual and gender-based violence in the form of both physical and online violence, including threats, physical assault, abduction and murder, as well as gender-related slurs and smear campaigns, causing them reputational damage to undermine the legitimacy of their work.<sup>54</sup> In the 2022 report of the United Nations-mandated Panel of Experts of Libya, the case of two women human rights defenders was documented as follows: “Two high-profile female human rights defenders were subjected to intimidation and threats due to their engagement in public life and activism. Attackers exploited cultural and gender norms to intimidate them and their family members with threats of public humiliation within their immediate local community.”<sup>55</sup>

63. Taliban rule in Afghanistan has seen widespread efforts to obliterate the ability of women human rights defenders to work in the country, in a situation that has been labelled “gender apartheid” by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls.<sup>56</sup> The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan highlighted in his report to the Human Rights Council at its fifty-second session that women human rights defenders “face constant pressure from the Taliban, increasingly unsafe work environments, movement limitations, as well as additional expenses associated with the *mahram* requirement”.<sup>57</sup>

64. The increase in restrictive legislation designed to limit the scope of work of human rights defenders has also affected women human rights defenders. One of the most extreme examples occurred following the ban imposed by the Taliban on 24 December 2022 on working in national or international NGOs. According to a survey conducted by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), in the immediate aftermath of the ban, 94 per cent of 127 national NGOs either fully or partially ceased operations.<sup>58</sup> In the 2023 report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Support Mission in Libya, it was documented that several women human rights defenders and women activists were subjected to intimidation and assaults, both online and offline, including after 17 February, when authorities began to apply a 2022 anti-cybercrime law.<sup>59</sup>

65. In post-conflict settings, it is often a challenge for women human rights defenders to perform their work in a safe environment. Dozens of women, girls and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) human rights defenders in Colombia

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<sup>53</sup> See <http://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session53/A-HRC-53-CRPI.pdf>.

<sup>54</sup> Submission from Lawyers for Justice in Libya.

<sup>55</sup> S/2022/427, para. 44.

<sup>56</sup> A/HRC/53/21.

<sup>57</sup> A/HRC/52/84.

<sup>58</sup> See [www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/Gender-alert-3-Out-of-jobs-into-poverty-Afghanistan-en.pdf](http://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/Gender-alert-3-Out-of-jobs-into-poverty-Afghanistan-en.pdf).

<sup>59</sup> S/2023/248, para. 44.

were specifically targeted with gender-based violence by police as they took part in the national strikes in 2021.<sup>60</sup> According to Amnesty International, this was carried out with the express “intention to punish the victims for contravening social gender norms and going out onto the streets to claim their rights”.<sup>61</sup>

66. In the Republic of Dagestan (Russian Federation), a women’s shelter run by Marem, which is a volunteer initiative group that helps women who face gender-based violence in the North Caucasus region, was raided after it provided refuge to a survivor of domestic violence from the Chechen Republic (Russian Federation). The shelter was stormed by 20 men, allegedly police officers from the Chechen Republic, who forced the woman to return to her family and detained the women human rights defenders running the shelter.<sup>62</sup>

67. The online sphere continues to carry severe risks for women human rights defenders in conflict, post-conflict and crisis settings and the online violence that they experience deters them from engaging in sensitive or controversial issues as they fear they or their family members will then be targeted with violence.<sup>63</sup> The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar noted that pro-military actors have used Telegram and other channels to harass and dox activists and human rights defenders, with women being disproportionately impacted.<sup>64</sup>

68. In consultations with the Special Rapporteur, Ukrainian women human rights defenders informed her of how far right Telegram channels expose the identities of LGBT defenders, bloggers and researchers, which is often followed by hate and discriminatory comments by subscribers to the channels and/or the publication of their home addresses along with those of their parents.<sup>65</sup> Such threats are often not taken seriously by the police and are only investigated if physical harm is caused, making it less likely for women human rights defenders to report threats in the first place.<sup>66</sup>

## VI. Intersectionality of risk

69. A number of cross-cutting elements contribute to the increased risks that women human rights defenders working in these settings face. This is highlighted in a submission for the present report by the Government of Brazil, which quotes an analysis carried out by the Brazilian Committee of Human Rights Defenders on this issue: “What structures violence against human rights defenders is a State anchored in racism and sexism and in an economic system whereby profit and wealth for a few are worth more than the lives of certain persons. The more a person or a group falls outside the characteristics of being white, male, sexually normative and rich, the more they will suffer from inequalities.”<sup>67</sup>

70. Sexual orientation and gender identity are risk multipliers. In his 2022 report to the General Assembly, the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity noted how “women, LGBT and gender-diverse activists and human rights defenders are targeted on the

<sup>60</sup> See communication Col 6/2021, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=26409>.

<sup>61</sup> Submission from Amnesty International.

<sup>62</sup> See communication RUS 8/2021, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=26530>.

<sup>63</sup> Submission from Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights.  
<sup>64</sup> A/HRC/52/66.

<sup>65</sup> Consultation with Ukrainian women human rights defenders.

<sup>66</sup> Submission from Human Rights Centre ZMINA.

<sup>67</sup> Submission from the Government of Brazil.

basis of both their gender and/or sexual identity and their role as social leaders”.<sup>68</sup> An LGBTI organization in the Democratic Republic of Congo that supports survivors of sexual violence reports that they are at increased risk from armed groups who do not want information on their attacks becoming public. Furthermore, it reports that because of pervasive discrimination against the LGBTI population, LGBTI defenders do not file criminal complaints when such attacks do occur. A member of the organization added that “the fact I am gay exposes me to additional threats as I am seen as ‘not human’ by armed groups due to my sexual orientation”.<sup>69</sup>

71. Women human rights defenders who live in geographically remote or rural areas state that they encounter prejudice because of where they are from. A member of the Women Working Group in Indonesia comments that she is seen as “inferior” because she is “considered a ‘village person’, not from a big city”.<sup>70</sup> However, they most often also face opposition to the work they do in their local communities. Change Action Nepal reports that the level of gender-based violence is high in rural areas in particular and that women human rights defenders who work on this issue not only face opposition to their work, but are also at risk of gender-based violence.<sup>71</sup>

72. Geographical location can represent further risks to women human rights defenders in crisis settings where their locations are vulnerable to unstable communications networks or electricity blackouts, which can occur more frequently in rural areas than in capital cities.<sup>72</sup> Defiende Venezuela, which carries out investigations of human rights violations in rural areas, reports that women human rights defenders face increased risks because there are no prosecutors that specialize in gender to respond to complaints they or the women they assist may make.<sup>73</sup>

73. The ethnicity, race, religious affiliation or nationality of a women human rights defender can also pose increased challenges to their safety and security. Women human rights defenders from the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka have been subjected to harassment and the excessive use of force as a result of their work, which involves seeking accountability, justice and redress for human rights violations that occurred during the civil war in Sri Lanka.<sup>74</sup> Palestinian women human rights defenders have been targeted with threats, harassment and arbitrary detention and in one documented case, two women human rights defenders who were arrested were detained for “three to four weeks in a cell in a men’s prison, apparently a practice to intimidate women at the beginning of their detention, and in violation of the international human rights obligation to incarcerate women and men separately”.<sup>75</sup>

74. Age, professional occupation, disability and social status are additional factors that can add to the challenges that women human rights defenders face. Women human rights defenders who are children and young people have even fewer opportunities to participate in conflict and post-conflict situations. A women human rights defender from Uganda notes the difficulty of “being a young person engaging in advocacy on post-conflict-related issues since most of these are handled by cultural leaders who were present during the conflict”.<sup>76</sup> A young human rights lawyer from Yemen reported that she must inform the Ministry of Interior, before undertaking any travel, that her father or brother will accompany her. Furthermore, she is also obliged

<sup>68</sup> A/77/235, para. 31.

<sup>69</sup> Submission from Savie Asbl NGO LGBT PGEL, through Protection International.

<sup>70</sup> Submission from Women Working Group, Indonesia.

<sup>71</sup> Submission from Change Action Nepal.

<sup>72</sup> Submission from the Centro para los Defensores y la Justicia.

<sup>73</sup> Submission from Defiende Venezuela.

<sup>74</sup> See communication LKA 1/2022, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=27209>.

<sup>75</sup> A/HRC/52/75, para. 33.

<sup>76</sup> Submission from Esther M Atim.

to provide the reason for her travel, permission for which is often refused if she says it is for her human rights work.<sup>77</sup>

75. The work of journalists is particularly risky in conflict and post-conflict settings.<sup>78</sup> According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, at least five female journalists were targeted and killed for reporting in conflict zones in 2022.<sup>79</sup> In Mexico, there continue to be frequent attacks on women journalists who report on abuses of power, corruption and the drug trade. In 2022, it was reported that three women journalists were murdered in the country.<sup>80</sup>

76. A working class women human rights defender from the Northern Ireland loyalist community has written about the stigma she was subjected to within her own community because of class and patriarchy: “The idea that a woman could think for herself or do things for herself was untoward, so when I grew up, educated myself and found my voice, that did not sit well within the Loyalist Unionist Community. Yes, if you were part of a church or the faith system, then you had more of a voice, a middle class one all the same, but a voice. Working class areas, not a chance ... Many times it was said I ‘worked for the other sort’. Sometimes the comments were even worse.”<sup>81</sup>

77. Women human rights defenders with disabilities can face specific challenges related to those disabilities. A member organization of the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition states that women human rights defenders who pursue disability justice in conflict areas in Burkina Faso and Cameroon have faced resistance from patriarchal powers and local authorities and that they are more vulnerable to gender-based and sexual violence because there are no specific protection systems and mechanisms in place.<sup>82</sup> Women Enabled International also highlights that many disability rights defenders do not have strong links with broader human rights or feminist movements and so may be less plugged into the civil society protection mechanisms that do exist for women human rights defenders.<sup>83</sup>

## VII. Elevated levels of risk according to type of work

78. During times of conflict or in post-conflict or crisis settings, women human rights defenders who work on gender equality, sexual health and reproductive rights, LGBT rights, gender-based violence and conflict-related sexual violence are singled out for specific attacks. The Centro para los Defensores y la Justicia notes that women human rights defenders in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela are subjected to hate speech and intense stigmatization when working on sexual and reproductive rights.<sup>84</sup>

79. In its report to the Human Rights Council in early 2023, the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya noted that “persons were tortured, raped, arbitrarily detained and subjected to enforced disappearance after expressing their views on women’s rights and gender equality, sexual and gender diversity, the rights of Indigenous groups and religion”.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Consultation with the Special Rapporteur.

<sup>78</sup> See [www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-killings-journalists-50-2022-half-targeted-duty](https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-killings-journalists-50-2022-half-targeted-duty).

<sup>79</sup> See [www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/observatory](https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/observatory).

<sup>80</sup> See [https://ipi.media/deaths/?incident\\_type=0&years=2022&country=mexico&gender=female&search=&](https://ipi.media/deaths/?incident_type=0&years=2022&country=mexico&gender=female&search=&).

<sup>81</sup> See <https://caj.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/JN-Apr-CF-23-FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>82</sup> Submission from the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition.

<sup>83</sup> Submission from Women Enabled International.

<sup>84</sup> Submission from the Centro para los Defensores y la Justicia.

<sup>85</sup> A/HRC/52/83, para. 68.

80. In 2022, the international NGO Front Line Defenders reported that 49 per cent of all threats recorded by the organization in Afghanistan were directed against defenders working on women's rights.<sup>86</sup>

81. Women human rights defenders in the Sudan who have been documenting conflict-related sexual violence face severe threats and intimidation,<sup>87</sup> while in the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic "any work on gender equality and feminism and awareness about women's rights is seen as a red flag".<sup>88</sup> In a report on conflict-related sexual violence in South Sudan, one women human rights defender told Amnesty International that "it is difficult to know exactly who works on conflict-related sexual violence, in part because activists fear speaking about it amid the shrinking civic space".<sup>89</sup>

82. The Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq describes the challenges of establishing and operating women's shelters in the country: "For the ruling patriarchal groups ... the only explanation of women's safe houses, or rather places where only women reside without a man, is that they are brothels, or places where women will be sold to brothels."<sup>90</sup> The Organization subsequently had human trafficking charges issued against a number of its senior staff. An advocate for the participation of women in public life, in particular through sports and exercising in public space, Riham Yaquoub, was murdered in Basra (Iraq) in 2020.<sup>91</sup>

83. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, four women human rights defenders who are working on capacity-building and education for women in disadvantaged or vulnerable situations across the country were detained<sup>92</sup> and subsequently sentenced to over two years in prison.<sup>93</sup>

84. Other women human rights defenders report that engaging in international advocacy, documenting human rights violations or working on accountability are particularly risky for them. Women human rights defenders who work in Myanmar, the Philippines, the State of Palestine, the Sudan and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) all report that in the context of the crises in their countries, engaging with international actors can heighten the risks they face.<sup>94</sup>

85. According to a women human rights defender in Yemen, documenting violations in custody "exacerbates risk", as does "contact with victims and their families who may be threatened with re-arrest if they testify or allow ... women human rights defenders to document the violations they experienced while detained".<sup>95</sup> Since the coup in Myanmar, women human rights defenders who have been leading efforts on justice and accountability have seen the risks they face escalate.<sup>96</sup> Women human rights defenders in Sri Lanka seeking justice for human rights violations carried out during the 25-year civil war continue to face challenges in this regard.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Submission from Front Line Defenders.

<sup>87</sup> Submission from Sudanese Women Rights Action.

<sup>88</sup> Submission from Women Now for Development.

<sup>89</sup> See [www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr65/5569/2022/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr65/5569/2022/en/).

<sup>90</sup> Submission from the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq.

<sup>91</sup> See communication IRQ 5/2020, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=25572>.

<sup>92</sup> See communication IRN 19/2022, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=27573>.

<sup>93</sup> See [www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/prison-sentences-four-members-call-iranian-women-ngo-2](https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/prison-sentences-four-members-call-iranian-women-ngo-2).

<sup>94</sup> Submissions from Enaam Alnour, Women's Peace Network, Karapatan, 7amleh- The Arab Center for Social Media Advancement and the Centro para los Defensores y la Justicia.

<sup>95</sup> Submission from the International Civil Society Action Network.

<sup>96</sup> Submission from Women's Peace Network.

<sup>97</sup> See communication LKA 7/2020, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=25694>.

86. As noted in the 2022 report of the Secretary-General on women and peace and security, human rights defenders who work at the intersection of access to land rights, environmental rights and/or Indigenous Peoples' rights face a multitude of overlapping risks.<sup>98</sup> Human rights defenders who work on these issues in pockets of a number of countries, including Brazil, Colombia<sup>99</sup> and the Philippines,<sup>100</sup> are targeted with extreme violence. A Guarani-Kaiowá Indigenous leader who has been spearheading a campaign to reclaim Indigenous lands in Brazil described in a consultation with the Special Rapporteur the threats of sexual violence and death threats that she and her children face owing to her opposition to ranchers planting soya beans and raising cattle in Indigenous territories.<sup>101</sup>

## VIII. Good practice

87. A number of States that, along with the European Union, express support for human rights defenders in their foreign policy and through their interventions at the Human Rights Council have carried this support through to their approaches to the women and peace and security agenda. The Special Rapporteur welcomes the submissions made to the present report, which highlight that the promotion and protection of women human rights defenders have been integrated into their action plans on women and peace and security, including by the European Union,<sup>102</sup> Germany,<sup>103</sup> Ireland<sup>104</sup> and Netherlands (Kingdom of the).<sup>105</sup> The Special Rapporteur believes that this emphasis on women human rights defenders in such approaches is vital as it recognizes not only the important role that they play in contributing to the women and peace and security agenda, but also the risks they face in doing so.

88. The Caucus for Human Rights and Conflict Prevention, a small group of States Members of the United Nations that is committed to placing human rights at the centre of conflict prevention, is welcome in this regard. In a statement to the Security Council Open Debate on protecting participation in 2022, the Caucus highlighted the “essential and meaningful contribution of women human rights defenders ... to defend and advance peace and human rights across the globe” and recommended steps to close the protection gap.<sup>106</sup> The Caucus is co-chaired by Germany and Switzerland and includes the following members: Albania, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Gabon, Guatemala, Japan, Mauritius, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Sweden, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Uruguay.

89. In its submission for the present report, the Government of Brazil pointed to steps it is taking to confront the challenges of “structural machismo, institutional machismo and the inequality of gender relations” in the country, which contribute to frequent attacks on women human rights defenders. As part of developing a new national plan for the protection of human rights defenders, the Government will hold public hearings to assess the needs of human rights defenders, including “women human rights defenders, Indigenous Peoples, Quilombola communities, LGBTQIA+

<sup>98</sup> S/2022/740, para. 68.

<sup>99</sup> See [www.hchr.org.co/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Territorial-Violence-in-Colombia.pdf](http://www.hchr.org.co/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Territorial-Violence-in-Colombia.pdf).

<sup>100</sup> See communication PHL 6/2021, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=26768>.

<sup>101</sup> Consultation with the Special Rapporteur.

<sup>102</sup> Submission from the European Union.

<sup>103</sup> Submission from the Government of Germany.

<sup>104</sup> Submission from the Government of Ireland.

<sup>105</sup> Submission from the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

<sup>106</sup> See [www.aplusforpeace.ch/protecting-participation-addressing-violence-targeting-women-peace-and-security-processes](http://www.aplusforpeace.ch/protecting-participation-addressing-violence-targeting-women-peace-and-security-processes).

communities ...”<sup>107</sup> According to figures from the NGO Justiça Global, between 2019 and 2022, there were 292 attacks on women human rights defenders in Brazil and 25 women human rights defenders, including 9 transgender women, were murdered.<sup>108</sup>

90. The Government of Ecuador reports that its Ombudsman is collaborating with the Ministry of Women and Human Rights on an early warning and rapid response system to help to prevent human rights violations, including against women human rights defenders, on the northern border of the country.<sup>109</sup> The Special Rapporteur welcomes this work but understands that the legislation needed to enact the mechanism is not yet in place.

91. Promoting and facilitating the participation of women human rights defenders in discussions, debates and events relating to women and peace and security at the national, regional and international levels are key to better integrating women human rights defenders into this agenda. In this regard, the Special Rapporteur welcomes steps taken by States to give women human rights defenders space to address these issues, including through the hosting of side events on the margins of the Commission on the Status of Women,<sup>110</sup> during the high-level week of the General Assembly<sup>111</sup> and, crucially, through the opportunity to address the Security Council.

92. Ireland reported that, during its presidency of the Security Council in September 2021, it had invited “16 female civil society briefers” to brief the Council, which was the highest number of women human rights defenders that had done so during any presidency.<sup>112</sup> In this context, the Special Rapporteur welcomes the “Presidency Trio for Women, Peace and Security” initiated by Ireland, Kenya and Mexico during their respective presidencies of the Security Council in September, October and November 2021. This initiative pledged to prioritize women and peace and security during each presidency and was subsequently signed by Albania, Brazil, France, Gabon, the Niger, Norway, the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom. One of the outcomes is that an increased number of women human rights defenders were invited to address the Council between September 2021 and September 2022.<sup>113</sup>

93. Strategies that champion women human rights defenders in this process must also include steps to respond to the risks they are subjected to as a result of their participation. In addition to political support expressed through resolutions and statements at the Human Rights Council and the Third Committee of the General Assembly and through public and private bilateral diplomacy, practical measures to assist women human rights defenders in mitigating the risks they face must also be implemented.

94. One of the recommendations contained in the United Nations Community Engagement Guidelines on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace, which were published in 2020, is that “the United Nations should develop measures to actively protect women human rights defenders and peacebuilders under persistent threats and direct targeting for challenging such traditional gender and cultural norms”.<sup>114</sup> The

<sup>107</sup> Submission from the Government of Brazil.

<sup>108</sup> See [www.global.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Na-Linha-de-Frente-.pdf](http://www.global.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Na-Linha-de-Frente-.pdf) (available in Portuguese only).

<sup>109</sup> Submission from the Government of Ecuador.

<sup>110</sup> Submission from the European Union.

<sup>111</sup> Submission from the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

<sup>112</sup> Submission from the Government of Ireland.

<sup>113</sup> See [www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2022-12/women-peace-and-security-one-year-of-shared-commitments.php](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2022-12/women-peace-and-security-one-year-of-shared-commitments.php).

<sup>114</sup> See [www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/un\\_community-engagement\\_guidelines.august\\_2020.pdf](http://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/un_community-engagement_guidelines.august_2020.pdf).

Special Rapporteur hopes that steps are being taken to develop such measures and would appreciate an update on their status.

95. Funding is therefore essential, and the support provided by a number of States to the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund funding window for women human rights defenders is welcome in this regard.<sup>115</sup> The funding provided by the European Union Human Rights Defenders Mechanism and ProtectDefenders.eu and the consortium of States that finances the Lifeline Embattled CSO Fund are two further examples of good practice where much needed financial assistance can reach women human rights defenders, including those working in conflict, post-conflict or crisis-affected settings. This type of funding and support can enable women human rights defenders to receive training in digital protection and risk and security management, implement security plans and go into hiding when the level of risk they face severely escalates. It is crucial that any funding mechanism for women human rights defenders is informed by and responsive to their security needs, even if those needs do not fall into set categories, and is flexible enough to cater for women human rights defenders in conflict and crisis settings.

96. In a context where women human rights defenders often face life-threatening risks, the announcement by the Government of Colombia in 2022 of a significant increase in funding for the Comprehensive Programme for Safeguards for Women Leaders and Human Rights Defenders and a coordinated road map to strengthen women's security was welcome.<sup>116</sup>

97. There are of course situations where women human rights defenders are left with no option but to temporarily leave their home country as a result of threats and attacks they receive because of their work. In such circumstances, the Special Rapporteur welcomes the growing number of rest and respite or temporary relocation opportunities that States offer to human rights defenders.

98. At present, 18 European Union Member States accommodate human rights defenders who are at risk. Eight of those Member States have comprehensive programmes in place to receive and accommodate human rights defenders (Czechia, France, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, Netherlands (Kingdom of the), Poland and Spain) and two have been looking into developing similar initiatives (Finland and Luxembourg). A further two have dedicated access to visas for human rights defenders from Belarus and the Russian Federation (Estonia and Latvia).<sup>117</sup>

99. While these programmes are valuable, some human rights defenders find it difficult to access them owing to the limited publicly available information. In addition, women human rights defenders from conflict-affected settings face difficulties in obtaining visas, as they must prove that they intend to return home after completing the programme. For instance, in one case, a woman human rights defender had to return to her conflict-affected home country to gather documents as proof for a short-term visa application, which highlights the hurdles they face.

100. In consultations and submissions for the present report, women human rights defenders noted that they could not consistently rely on States for protection support when in danger and highlighted the value of forming their own coalitions. As stressed by a NGO that operates in the Syrian Arab Republic, "women human rights defenders networks for feminist solidarity are the most effective method we find that enables us to protect women human rights defenders under threat because feminist solidarity is

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<sup>115</sup> See <https://wphfund.org/>.

<sup>116</sup> S/2022/1004, para. 64.

<sup>117</sup> European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, "Human rights defenders at risk - EU entry, stay and support", available at <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2023/human-rights-defenders>.

so multifaceted and can provide so many different kinds of support”.<sup>118</sup> However, as noted by WYK Advocate, the support such networks can provide is necessarily limited: “In the face of draconian measures, physical brutality and structural violence, such solidarity networks serve a minimal purpose in effect.”<sup>119</sup> The Special Rapporteur believes that solidarity networks are one element of protection, but they must also be complemented by support from States that champion women human rights defenders.

## IX. Protection gaps

101. As outlined above, women human rights defenders who work in conflict, post-conflict and crisis-affected settings face multifaceted risks in extremely difficult circumstances, often without effective State-led protection mechanisms.<sup>120</sup> Much of the emphasis on Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) and ensuing resolutions is focused on the equal participation of women in political and peace processes and the aftermath of armed conflict. There has been less focus on dealing with the deeply gendered fallout of this increased participation and the visibility of women and of women human rights defenders, as described above.

102. The high number of reprisals targeting women human rights defenders who brief the Security Council was noted in the 2022 report of the Secretary-General on women and peace and security,<sup>121</sup> while his annual reports on reprisals for cooperating with the United Nations serve to highlight dozens of examples of human rights defenders, including women, who have been targeted because of their interaction with the human rights protection system.<sup>122</sup> In January 2023, a Malian women human rights defender who, while briefing the Security Council criticized human rights abuses committed by “Russian military partners” of Mali, had her credibility and legitimacy questioned by the Transitional Minister for Foreign Affairs of Mali following her intervention. She subsequently faced a smear campaign, online abuse and a complaint for slander and high treason in connection with her statement at the Security Council.<sup>123</sup>

103. Attacks on women human rights defenders are underreported, and available data do not accurately reflect the actual situation. While this may be due in part to the nature of sexualized attacks and the reluctance of survivors to report them, references to human rights defenders, in particular women human rights defenders, in reports to the Security Council remain very low. The Special Rapporteur considers that peace operations should be mandated to pay specific attention to civic space and in particular to the violations committed against women human rights defenders in conflict and post-conflict settings. In this regard, the Special Rapporteur welcomes the reference in Security Council resolution 2570 (2021) on Libya to “the need to protect women, including those participating in public spaces, from threats and reprisals” and the reference in Security Council resolution 2626 (2022) on Afghanistan, adopted in 2022, to monitoring and reporting specifically on “violations, abuses and reprisals committed against women, including against those who protect and promote human rights”.

<sup>118</sup> Submission from Women Now for Development.

<sup>119</sup> Submission from WYK Advocate.

<sup>120</sup> For an overview of State laws, policies and mechanisms for the protection of human rights defenders, see also [A/HRC/46/35](#).

<sup>121</sup> [S/2022/740](#).

<sup>122</sup> See [www.ohchr.org/en/reprisals/annual-reports-reprisals-cooperation-un](http://www.ohchr.org/en/reprisals/annual-reports-reprisals-cooperation-un).

<sup>123</sup> [S/2023/236](#), para. 46 and [www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2023/02/mali-meeting-under-any-other-business.php](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2023/02/mali-meeting-under-any-other-business.php).

104. The inclusion of specific references and steps to protect and support women human rights defenders in national action plans on women and peace and security remains limited. Of the 104 States that have adopted at least one national action plan, only 18 make reference to women human rights defenders, which again serves to highlight that the integration of women human rights defenders into the women and peace and security agenda and the protection that they sometimes need are frequently overlooked.<sup>124</sup>

105. Women human rights defenders have highlighted a number of protections gaps that they believe must be reduced so that they can continue to perform their work in these contexts. They include the following:

(a) The continued failure by many States to recognize the legitimate work of women human rights defenders and their right to participate, a failure that is compounded when there is no reference to women human rights defenders in United Nations debates, resolutions and statements that concern them;

(b) The lack of progress in ensuring accountability for online violence against and the stigmatization of women human rights defenders, which frequently leads to ostracization, which has profound impacts on their personal and professional lives;

(c) The fact that online and offline threats, intimidation and the harassment of women human rights defenders do not tend to be taken seriously in conflict settings when reported to the police, leading to a situation where they go unreported. In her 2021 report to the Human Rights Council, the Special Rapporteur noted the link between online threats and offline attacks;

(d) The lack of sufficient access to flexible funding. Numerous submissions to the present report highlighted the onerous application and reporting requirements that women human rights defenders were too often unable to meet in their contexts;

(e) The limited availability of sustained digital security training for women human rights defenders in conflict, post-conflict and crisis-affected settings;

(f) The paucity of psychosocial support for women human rights defenders in their own settings who have experienced trauma and who urgently need this support to enable them to continue their work;

(g) The limited consistent political responses and capacity in cases of reprisals against women human rights defenders who interact with the United Nations;

(h) The lack of accountability for violations against women human rights defenders, including by States that fail to follow through on their commitments to women human rights defenders, through, for example, trial monitoring, prison visits and high profile invitations to embassies and by frequently and visibly raising cases with the relevant Government;

(i) The difficulty in rapidly securing short-term visas to allow women human rights defenders to retreat to safer locations at times of increased risk;

(j) The adoption of a one-size-fits-all approach to protection that does not recognize the overlapping and intersectional layers to women human rights defenders. For example, funders of the temporary relocation of women human rights defenders do not always recognize the role that many of them play as primary caregivers and the additional funding needs that may be required as a result or the additional support that may be needed by women human rights defenders with disabilities;

(k) The underreporting of attacks against women human rights defenders. This gap is highlighted by the near total absence of any recorded attacks against women

<sup>124</sup> See [www.wpsnaps.org/](http://www.wpsnaps.org/).

human rights defenders in reports on the situation of a number of States in Central Africa where there are United Nations missions.

## **X. Recommendations**

106. The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders makes the following recommendations to Member States:

(a) Condemn, frequently and publicly, attacks on women human rights defenders and acknowledge and celebrate their work as legitimate and essential to contributing to just, sustainable and lasting peace, and refrain from using language that stigmatizes, abuses, disparages or discriminates against them;

(b) Ensure law enforcement, government officials and the judiciary receive appropriate training relating to the work and legitimacy of women human rights defenders and the gendered impact of violations against them;

(c) Increase or commence awareness-raising programmes on the rights and roles of women human rights defenders;

(d) Adopt and implement gender sensitive human rights defenders protection laws and policies that account for the conflict, post-conflict or crisis context;

(e) Monitor, compile and disseminate statistics on attacks on human rights defenders, in line with Sustainable Development Goal indicator 16.10.1, including disaggregated data on ethnicity, race, sexual orientation and gender identity, disability, gender, geographical location and other relevant characteristics;

(f) Incorporate the protection, promotion and support of women human rights defenders into national action plans on women and peace and security;

(g) Invite women human rights defenders to participate in events at various and multiple United Nations forums, working closely with them and relevant experts on risk assessment and protection planning before, during and after the event to mitigate potential reprisals;

(h) Adopt or amend visa policies to facilitate the timely issuance of temporary humanitarian visas to human rights defenders who are at severe risk and make this information easily accessible and understandable;

(i) Provide flexible, long-term funding to women human rights defenders, taking into account the limitations they may face in official registration or when living in territories where banks are sanctioned;

(j) Provide funding, technical support and visibility for the development of networks of women human rights defenders at the local, regional and national levels.

107. The Special Rapporteur makes the following recommendations to the United Nations:

(a) Incorporate specific training on the protection of women human rights defenders and their rights and the gendered impact of violations into capacity-building carried out with law enforcement officials and the judiciary;

(b) Ensure that all United Nations entities, including those working in the peace, humanitarian and development sectors, recognize and raise awareness of the work of women human rights defenders and the risks that they face and

ensure that human rights advisers are mandated do so, where relevant, as a core part of their work;

(c) Equip United Nations country teams with the means necessary to provide more effective and timely responses to women human rights defenders at risk, in accordance with the Secretary-General's call to action for human rights,<sup>125</sup> including through the funding of psychosocial support;

(d) Celebrate, frequently and publicly, at the local, regional and headquarter levels, the work of women human rights defenders as legitimate and essential to contributing to just, sustainable and lasting peace and challenge smear campaigns targeting them and narratives designed to delegitimize women human rights defenders;

(e) Issue guidance notes on the protection, promotion and participation of women human rights defenders in conflict, post-conflict, and crisis settings;

(f) Include specific references to the protection of women human rights defenders in Security Council resolutions and mandates for peace operations and ensure that any United Nations mission in a conflict, post-conflict or crisis-affected situation is mandated to monitor and report on violations targeting women human rights defenders;

(g) Ensure that all United Nations spaces are safe for women human rights defenders to access, including through the development of gender sensitive guidelines on risk assessment and protection planning for women human rights defenders who choose to interact with United Nations entities;

(h) Condemn publicly each act of reprisal, where there is consent to do so, including naming the State concerned, immediately after verification and task the resident coordinator, where applicable, with personally raising the case with their counterpart and reporting back on any developments;

(i) Increase the capacity of the Assistant Secretary-General to respond to reprisals against women human rights defenders, in particular where there is a need for protection following engagement with United Nations human rights bodies.

108. The Special Rapporteur makes the following recommendations to the civil society organizations:

(a) Sensitize constituent communities to the work and legitimacy of and risks to women human rights defenders and push for their equal representation, including within the human rights movement;

(b) Collaborate further on data collecting relating to attacks on women human rights defenders in conflict, post-conflict and crisis-affected settings;

(c) Facilitate networking and experience sharing opportunities for women human rights defenders working in conflict, post-conflict and crisis-affected settings;

(d) Help to build the capacity and increase the capability of women human rights defenders and their organizations to conduct risk assessments, develop security plans and protocols, and mitigate and respond to threats in order to increase their safety and resilience;

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<sup>125</sup> Available at [http://www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/atoms/files/The\\_Highest\\_Aspiration\\_A\\_Call\\_To\\_Action\\_For\\_Human\\_Right\\_English.pdf](http://www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/atoms/files/The_Highest_Aspiration_A_Call_To_Action_For_Human_Right_English.pdf).

(e) **Ensure the necessary support persons/resources for women human rights defenders with additional needs in any provision of assistance;**

(f) **Provide funding to women human rights defenders to participate in high-level events at the national, regional and international levels, recognizing the historic and systemic obstacles to their equal representation at such events;**

(g) **Ensure information relating to emergency assistance and protection support is in an accessible format and translated into local languages, depending on the context.**

## **XI. Updates since 2021 on the long-term imprisonment of human rights defenders**

109. Communications on the issue of the long-term imprisonment of human rights defenders were sent to 24 States in 2020 and 2021. Since her last update on the release of human rights defenders in these communications, the Special Rapporteur is pleased to note that the Mexican human rights defender Fredy Garcia was acquitted of all charges and released in July 2022.

110. She further welcomes the early release of Saba Kord Afshari, Yasaman Aryani, Farangis Mazloum and Monireh Arabshahi in the Islamic Republic of Iran, along with the acquittal of Hoda Amid and Najmeh Vahedi on all charges. In Egypt, Ibrahim Ezzedine, Mohamed Ramadan, Ramy Kamel Saied Salib and Amr Imam were all released in 2022, having been held in pretrial detention since 2018 and 2019.

111. She remains deeply distressed and disappointed, however, by the continued imprisonment of human rights defenders serving 10 years or more in 17 countries, as indicated in her 2021 report, namely: Bahrain, Belarus, China, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, Russian Federation, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Türkiye, United Arab Emirates and Viet Nam. This includes Mohamed al-Roken, Hadif Rashed Abdullah al-Owais and Salim Hamdoon al-Shahhi in the United Arab Emirates, who have been dishonourably kept incarcerated despite completing their 10-year sentences in 2022. Echoing the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights' call to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by releasing all those arbitrarily detained, the Special Rapporteur renews her call to the above States to free the human rights defenders that have been imprisoned.