CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS: Volume 31, Issue 1: Women human rights defenders

Gender & Development (G&D) is a unique journal, offering a forum for the sharing of experiences and analysis between feminist activists, scholars, and women leaders across the globe working in research, policy and practice. The first issue of G&D of 2023 will be published in March, focusing on women human rights defenders.

The Context

The world is fraught with intersecting crises: a global health crisis, a surge in economic inequality, rising right-wing political fundamentalism, climate change and environmental degradation, expansion of markets, neoliberal reforms and curtailment of public services, and wars and mass-based violation of human rights. All these disproportionately affect the socio-economically vulnerable groups, especially in the global South (and North). It is in these difficult times that social justice groups and movements continue their powerful efforts to rise against divisive forces, corporations, fundamentalist groups and totalitarian governments, while protecting the rights of the marginalised and vulnerable. Women human rights defenders constitute an integral, though often invisible and unrecognised part of these efforts.

According to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), women human rights defenders (WHRDs) could include individuals (women and gender and sexual minorities), as well as organisations and movements. They have been at the forefront of social justice movements, and have been pivotal in maintaining peace and security, advocating for the protection of the environment, working towards gender justice and sustainable development and initiating transformative political change. The work of such individuals and organisations often involves operating in unsafe, politically unstable and highly militarised environments which often places them, their allies and their families at grave physical risk.

The recent resurgence and normalisation of right-wing, nationalist, and fascist politics have contributed to increased violence against political activists and human rights defenders. Amongst them, WHRDs have been especially targeted. The reasons for attacks against WHRDs are complex and range from widespread misogyny and what is perceived as challenging of patriarchal, religious, and familial norms; weak law enforcement and judicial systems; the presence of strong-armed groups and violent extremism; humanitarian crisis; militarised states; increasing authoritarianism and shrinking civic space; and organized crime among many.

While data on the number of women human rights defenders killed is often difficult to enumerate, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders presented at the 46th Human Rights Council in 2021 reported that 100 human rights defenders were killed in 10 member states between 1 January 2019 to 30 June 2020 alone, among which 17 were women human rights defenders. According to the OHCHR, Colombia alone witnessed the killing of 400 human rights defenders since 2016, the highest in any country in Latin America. Among these 49 were women and

69 were indigenous leaders[1]. Other countries like Afghanistan have also witnessed a crushing of political dissent, particularly in the form of silencing of voices of WHRDs. A Human Rights Watch press report[2] reported the unlawful arrests and abductions of WHRDs by Taliban forces which the latter has denied. Democratic Republic of Congo, a country marked by two decades of armed political conflict has witnessed over 7000 cases of human rights abuse, including sexual violence and assault, in 2020 alone according to the United Nations Joint Human Rights Office[3]. In Pakistan, four women journalists and bloggers were killed in 2019[4]. Many women human rights activists in the eastern and north eastern parts of India have faced harassment, incarceration and custodial torture due to an increase in military, police and para-military presence, as well as the long-standing insurgency[5] [6]. WHRDs in strict political regimes like China and military regimes like Myanmar also face heavy reprisals, intimidation, censorship, restrictions in mobility and fear or harassment or arrests[7] [8].

Women journalists around the world are also subjected to arbitrary arrests, legal harassment, physical and sexual harassment, online violence, threats and intimidation. The Coalition for Women in Journalism has reported the murder of 11 women journalists in 2022, 64 imprisonments and 23 major organised troll campaigns against women journalist[9]. WHRDs who are forced to leave their countries, continue to face trans-national repression, risk to their lives and intimidation of their families in increasingly brazen attempts by the governments to stifle dissent. In July 2021, Iranian agents conspired to kidnap a women's rights activist Masih Alnejad from her home in Brooklyn[10]. These audacious acts of transnational repression, in which governments reach across national borders to silence opposition among diaspora and exile communities, demonstrate a dangerous disregard for international law, democratic norms, and state sovereignty.

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[1] Human Rights Watch (2021, 10 February). "Left undefended: Killings of rights defenders in Colombia's remote communities" https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/02/10/left-undefended/killings-rights-defenders-colombias-remote-communities (accessed on 18 May 2022)

[2] Gossman, P (2022, 24 January). "Afghan Women's Rights Activists Forcibly Disappeared". *Human Rights Watch.* https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/24/afghan-womens-rights-activists-forcibly-disappeared (accessed on 18 May 2022)

[3] Protection International (n.d). "Democratic Republic of the Congo - The Dire Working Environment for Women Human Rights Defenders,"https://www.protectioninternational.org/en/news/dr-congo-dire-working-environment-women-human-rights-defenders (accessed on 18 May 2022)

[4] Chaudhry, DR (2020, 9 September). "UN expresses concern over treatment of scribes and human rights defenders in Pakistan". https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/un-expresses-concern-over treatment-of-scribes-and-human-rights-defenders-in-pakistan/articleshow/78009678.cms?from=mdr (accessed on 18 May 2022)

[5] People's Union of Civil Liberties: Chhattisgarh Mahila Adhikar Manch (2021, 13 March). *Economic and Political Weekly.* https://www.epw.in/journal/2021/11/letters/harassment-and-arrest-human-rights-defenders.html and Kumar,S (2022, 9 March). (accessed on 18 May 2022)

[6] "Soni Sori and Bela Bhatia: Human Rights Crusaders for Tribals and Women in Conflict-ridden Bastar". *Newsclick.* https://www.newsclick.in/soni-sori-bela-bhatia-human-rights-crusaders-tribals-women-conflict-ridden-bastar. Accessed on 17 May 2022(accessed on 18 May 2022)

[7] Frontline Defenders (2020, 3 November) 40 years after ratifying CEDAW, women human rights defenders in China still face reprisals. https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/statement-report/40-years-after-ratifying-cedaw-women-human-rights-defenders-china-still-face (accessed on 18 May 2022)

[8] OHCHR (2021, 19 July). "Myanmar: Human rights defenders under siege, say UN experts". https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/07/myanmar-human-rights-defenders-under-siege-say-un-experts (accessed on 18 May 2022)

[9] Coalition For Women in Journalism: Press Freedom tracker 2022. https://www.womeninjournalism.org/ (last accessed 6 June 2022)

[10] Pannett, R (2021, 14 July). "Iranian intelligence agents plotted brazen abduction of Brooklyn dissident journalist, US prosecutors say". *The Washington Post.* Masih Alinejad: Iranian intelligence agents plotted to kidnap dissident journalist in Brooklyn, U.S. prosecutors say - The Washington Post (last accessed 6 June 2022)

The significant contribution of WHRDs towards mobilising progressive social and political change is increasingly being recognised. According to a 2015 Global Study[11] on the Implementation of the United National Security Council Resolution 1325 (adopted in 2000) by UNWOMEN titled *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325*, there is increasing evidence that shows that women's participation contributes positively towards the conclusion of peace talks and the implementation and durability of peace agreements. However, there remains resistance to meaningful involvement of women as peace brokers, negotiators, mediators and signatories. Where there is participation, there is risk of tokenism and peripheralisation of women due to prevailing socio-cultural norms and lack of political will on the part of the state.

In 2021 a coalition of international human rights organisations across the global South brought together 45 human rights defenders from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Palestine, Myanmar, Indonesia, Philippines and Cambodia on a virtual platform, to share their work and vision, and collectively demand that the international community recognise and respect their contribution in 'preserving humanity and the environment' and protect their rights.'[12]

Given the tremendous contribution of WHRDs in advancing the social, political and cultural rights of women and marginalised groups, the states and the international community must ensure their protection, report and investigate crimes against them, and create an enabling environment that is characterised by recognition of their work, strong democratic local institutions and support to women's coalitions, alliances and movement building efforts.

Call for contributions

For this issue of *Gender and Development* we will examine the role of women human rights defenders, their commitments towards advancing and protecting humans rights and freedoms; the factors that lead to them being threatened, persecuted and/or killed; their strategies of resistance and assertion; their collective efforts towards building social and political stability in fragile contexts and in leading cultural, political and social transformation; and steps that the national governments and the international institutions need to take to recognise and support their work and provide protection to them, their families and their networks.

This issue also hopes to further build on *Gender and Development's* July and November 2021 double issue titled *Feminist Protests and Politics in a World in Crisis* which aimed to generate learning around building sustainable, equitable and inclusive movements steered by transformative feminist leadership in a context marked by political crisis, fundamentalism and intolerance.

The key themes and related questions that March 2023 issue wants to address are:

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[11] UN Women (2015) "Preventing conflict transforming justice securing the peace: A global study on the implementation of United Nations Security Coucil resolution 1325" https://wps.unwomen.org/pdf/en/GlobalStudy_EN_Web.pdf
[12] International Service for Human Rights (2021, 25 October), "Women human rights defenders protect our communities and the environment. Do you have their backs?" https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/women-human-rights-defenders-protect-our-communities-and-the-environment-do-you-have-their-backs/ accessed on 18 May 2022

Key themes and questions:

- What is the role of human rights defenders in maintaining peace and democratic freedoms, preserving local cultures, identities and livelihoods, challenging gender and climate injustice, and envisioning a better future for their communities?
- What political and individual/collective strategies do they use to do their work?
    - How are they participating in groups, movements and political processes?
    - How are WHRDS placed among wider women's rights and social justice movements and what strategies are being used to build and bridge regional and global networks?
    - What challenges/tensions WHRDs face within the social justice movements? What strategies do WHRDs use to create and guard feminist spaces within the social justice movements?
    - How are gender justice movements, cross-issue coalitions, and alliances helping strengthen, link, and support human rights and social justice across geographies
    - What tensions if any are there how are these managed?
    - What is the role of digital technologies, particularly social media in these processes?
- What kinds of violence do WHRDs experience by the state and non-state groups and what are the implications of this violence on WHRDs and other vulnerable groups such as women belonging to indigenous communities, black women, members of minority communities like Muslims, Dalit and Adivasi women, BIPOC, and LGBTQI groups?
    - Violence such as physical and sexual violence, threats, intimidation, abductions, and enforced disappearances, prosecutions, surveillance, arbitrary detention and imprisonment, custodial torture, deaths
    - Implications of such violence like denial of access to critical political processes, vital resources, and technologies, disruption in girls' education, restrictions in mobility and pursuing of livelihoods, online harassment, intimidation of families, etc.
- What kind of laws and regulations are used by the state authorities to persecute WHRDs?
- How is this violence gendered? How are the experiences of violence different from men HRDs?
- How does this violence affect the work and lives of WHRDs as well as their collective networks/movements?
- How are the increasingly shrinking civic spaces, curbs on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly affecting WHRDs?
- What are the reasons (political, social, economic, historical) for rising violence against human rights defenders, especially WHRDs?
    - What is the role of neo-colonialism, neoliberalism, geopolitics (political and military interests of powerful northern countries and groups within the south, extractive industries, trade agreements, foreign aid, development models etc), and now the global health crisis; in shaping local conflicts in countries, especially in the global South, and how do these affect WHRDs and their work?
    - Any link between the increasing violence against WHRDs, and the increasing authoritarianism and decreasing democratisation? How do civil-military relationships and local war economy affect increasing violence against WHRDs?
- What are the various strategies that WHRDs are using at the global, regional, national, and local levels, to sharpen their resistance against violence and discrimination, and strengthen their presence in the face of backlash?
    - Political and collective mechanisms that women deploy to fight against violence, discrimination, intimidation, and incarceration.
    - How are digital technologies as well as other technologies being used in mobilising women human rights defenders against violence and abuse?
    - How do these strategies reflect the position/identities of different groups of HRDs?

- What is the relationship between the State, non-state actors, the international community, and WHRDs?
    - How is the state engaging with WHRDs, providing them protection against violence, and being (or not being) accountable to them?
    - How is the international community protecting human rights defenders? What are good practices regarding this? How can we focus on good examples and forward-looking strategies in each space?
    - What are the international, national and local level response and accountability measures that are in place or ought to be in place, to protect human rights defenders, and investigate the attacks against them? What has worked well and what has not?
    - What opportunities and scope are there for WHRDs to engage with the state, reactionary forces, and other groups to build and maintain peace- what are the factors that shrink or facilitate these processes?
- Steps and recommendations/good practices and promising strategies for governments, policymakers, lawmakers, and international actors to recognise, support, and protect IWHRDs
- How can we design innovative and sensitive research methodologies to understand and capture the voices of WHRDs in politically unstable and violent contexts?
    - Innovative research designs and methodologies employed and challenges faced while conducting research in politically sensitive contexts.
    - How can we highlight the voices of WHRDs, what they value, how they conceptualise peace, the challenges they face in trying to achieve these, and their aspirations for a better future?

Submissions

We want to hear from women's rights activists, gender justice advocates, community and grassroots leaders, human rights activists, civil society organisations and networks, feminist economists and researchers, academics, policymakers, and development and humanitarian practitioners from all generations, identities, and backgrounds who are directly involved in work related to human rights, conflict prevention, peace building, mediation, feminist leadership, and movement building, to contribute to this critical theme. We especially invite contributions that share empirical-based research and practice-based recommendations.

Please send your abstract of 250 words with details about your research and preliminary findings in an email attachment to **genderanddevelopment.south@gmail.com** as soon as possible and latest by **15 July 2022**. Please include your name, contact details as well organisational affiliation, if relevant. We will contact you by mid-June if we would like you to develop your abstract into a full article (of around 7,000 words plus references). Guidelines for contributors can be found here. Please read this guidance carefully.

G&D is a unique journal which acts as a forum for the sharing of analysis and experiences between feminist and women activists involved in research, policy and practice in the areas of development and humanitarian aid. For more information on the journal, visit: www.genderanddevelopment.org.