



**A PRELIMINARY INQUIRY: TANGIBLE PROTECTION
MECHANISMS FOR WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS
IN THE MENA AND BEYOND**

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GULF CENTER
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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THE GCHR WOULD LIKE TO THANK ALL THOSE WHO CONTRIBUTED AND MADE THIS REPORT POSSIBLE

NAZRA FOR FEMINIST STUDIES
THE REGIONAL COALITION OF WHRDS IN THE MENA
AWID
CIVICUS
THE URGENT ACTION FUND
UN WOMEN
UNNAMED INTERVIEWED WHRDS

DEDICATION



"WE HONOR THE DEAD, AND FIGHT LIKE HELL FOR THE LIVING"
(MOTHER JONES)

TO ALL THE WOMEN WHO HAVE BEEN TARGETED AND KILLED BECAUSE THEY DARED STAND ON
THE FRONTLINES OF THE STRUGGLE FOR CHANGE AND HUMAN RIGHTS. TO ALL THE UNNAMED AND
FACELESS WOMEN WHO STRUGGLED AND DIED WITHOUT THE RECOGNITION THEY DESERVE.



The Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)¹ is an independent, non-profit and non-governmental organization that works to provide support and protection to human rights defenders in the Gulf region by promoting freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. We defend the right for women to protect human rights in their own contexts. The Gulf region and neighbouring countries, i.e Middle East and North Africa (MENA), represent some of the toughest regions in the world for a woman to be outspoken about human rights. Despite those circumstances, women continue to be vocal, and we seek to guarantee our continued support and assistance to help them pursue their work.

Advocacy: GCHR advocacy projects are implemented in three different ways. GCHR has active participation in the large majority of sessions at the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council and General Assembly (GA) sessions, where we administer events in collaboration with international, regional and national partners. We also seek funding for human rights defenders (HRDs) and women human rights defenders (WHRDs) to participate as panelists. In follow-up to these side events, individual meetings between the HRDs and government and international organization representatives are facilitated. Separate advocacy missions are also administered, where we develop our advocacy plan for a more efficient outcome. Finally, we utilize social media advocacy strategies to highlight cases of HRDs in danger.

Capacity building: As we have witnessed a development in challenges and an increase in the need for tools to mitigate risks, GCHR routinely administers workshops for HRDs in the MENA region, covering 10 different countries. WHRDs specifically have participated in trainings related to, but not limited to, physical security, digital security, well-being and stress management, communications, and data visualization. We have also shifted from reactionary training to long term training and coaching, which keeps WHRDs on track of developments and capable of reaching out to a wider and more skilled network in an easier and faster way.

Research: GCHR upholds its commitment to highlighting cases of HRDs by administering joint reports on HRDs, highlighting the cases of WHRDs, and focusing on the documentation of violations carried out against the latter in the Gulf region and the neighbouring countries (including Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Iran and Egypt). Although Egypt is not covered by our mandate, we take up cases at times if partner organizations are being targeted. Our research is currently focused on the preventative approach to protection, and it aims to build a collective and comprehensive strategy for sustainable reporting and protecting WHRDs.

Protection: Through our network of partners and supporting INGOs and donors, our protection programme is designed to be cooperative, focusing on the urgent cases requiring immediate actions such as relocation scheme, assistance fund, or gaining international protection. We strive to maintain the enabling protective environment for the work of WHRDs, by following-up on their cases, providing them with well-being and security training, and establishing networks between them.

The primary researcher and author: Keshia Pendigrast is an independent researcher with the GCHR, and a graduate student at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York. Her research focuses on postcolonial feminist theory, female sexuality and liberation theology. She was born and raised in Sri Lanka and currently a resident of the United States. She has had no direct exposure to life in the MENA regions, on which most of this report is based.

The co-author: Maryam Al-Khawaja is the Co-Director of the Gulf Centre for Human Rights, a board member of the International Service for Human Rights, a member of Bahrain Watch, and one of the initiators of the Women's Network. She is a Bahraini WHRD from the MENA region, living in exile. As an internationally known WHRD, she has worked closely with WHRDs from around the world, and has conducted research on WHRDs and Women Rights CSOs through several consultations and field missions. She has won multiple awards for her human rights work.

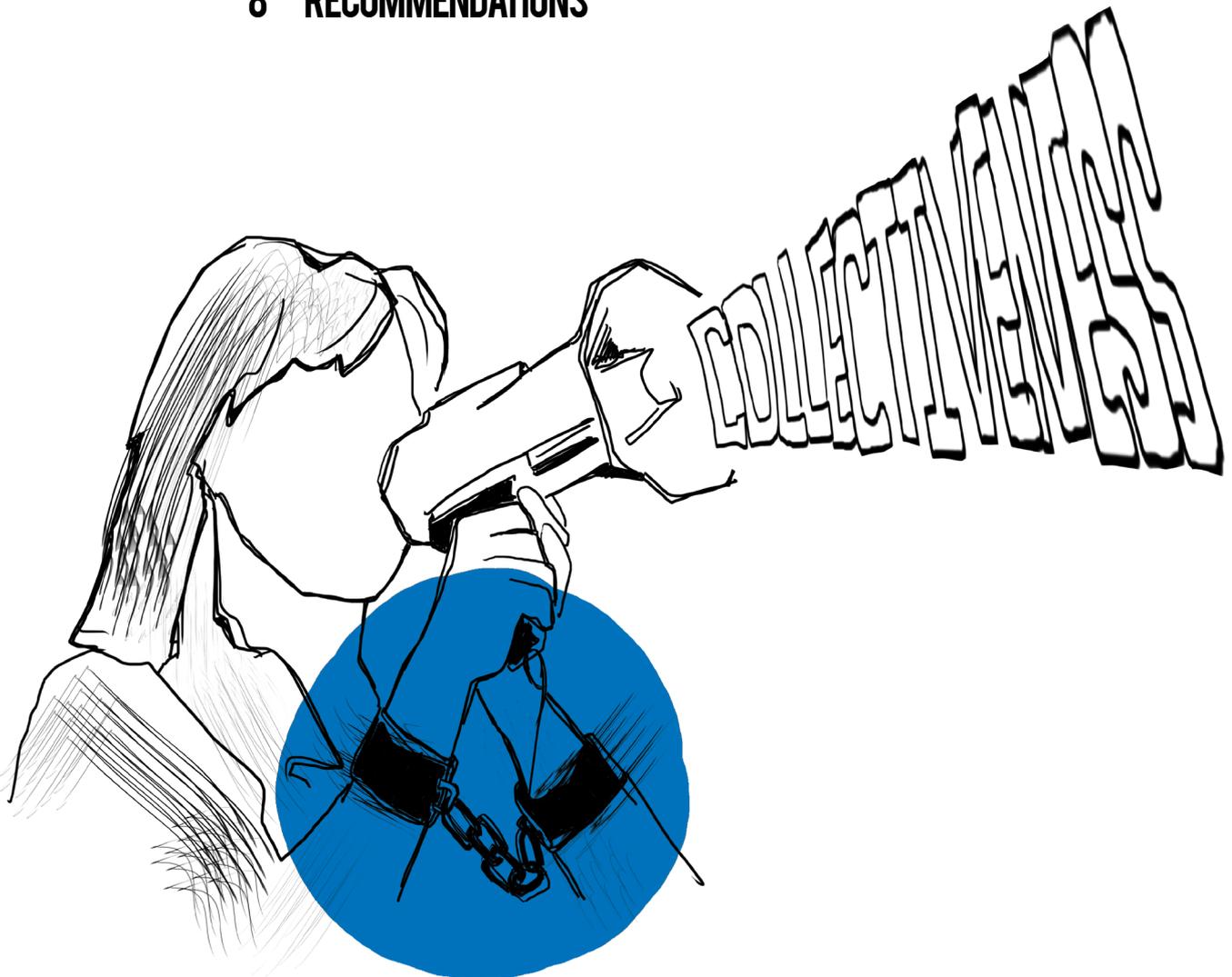
The co-author: Weaam Youssef is a human rights officer at the GCHR. She is coordinating WHRDs, research development and protection programs. She holds an MA in Applied Human Rights, has received numerous fellowships and scholarships to study issues related to women in conflict, refugee studies and migration policies. She holds a BA in English Literature and is currently pursuing a degree in Humanitarian Diplomacy. She has worked for the Arab League, the UN and CSOs. Her research focuses on issues related to human rights, humanitarianism and displacement post-conflict.

[1] http://www.gc4hr.org/page/about_us

[Report cover photo] WHRD Shaima AlSabbagh, shot and killed by Egyptian security forces during a peaceful protest, 24 January 2015. Photo credit: Reuters

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● EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is rife with political instability, a legacy of conflicts, and human rights violations. In 2016, it continues to suffer one of the worst humanitarian and human rights crises since the World War II. The recent events of the so-called “Arab Spring” opened a window of hope for the human rights activists, groups, and organizations for an opportunity to enact widespread systemic change. However, current geopolitical wars, policies and violent government regimes have increased the volatility in the MENA region: human rights violations are committed and permitted under tactics of ‘counter terrorism’ and ‘national security’. During peaceful public protests and uprisings in the region, women have taken leading roles in defending the human rights of their own and wider communities. The centrality that Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) have played in each of these movements and protests cannot be understated. Their methods of activism have taken a variety of forms: research, direct action and activism, roles in public communication, direct assistance etc. that have all played crucial roles in holding governing bodies accountable as well as in demanding change. As WHRDs in the MENA region bravely face and challenge many societal norms by their very manifestation as women who simultaneously defend human rights, they are frequently subject to threats such as judicial and online harassment, arrests, detention, abduction, kidnappings, torture, enforced disappearances and even killings. Women face particular challenges compared to their counterpart male activists; threats that take extreme forms of defamation, stigmatisation, social pressure, gender and sexual-based violence as well as marginalization and discrimination.

In the last couple of years, the crackdown on WHRDs in the MENA region and worldwide reached a peak and exposed an urgent need to: 1) reassess the current international protection mechanisms, 2) identify the gaps in impact and protections, 3) work on preventative measures to ensure the sustainability of protection, 4) shift from a post-violation to pre-violation methodology of actions on violations against WHRDs, and 5) enable a defensible environment for WHRDs to carry out their legitimate activities in defending their rights and the human rights of all. The work of the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) and other NGOs have documented and reported violations against WHRDs in various countries under their mandate. Protection has been demanded for WHRDs largely in reaction to a particular violation or event, on an individual case-by-case basis. This report investigates current trends and threats facing WHRDs in the MENA region and beyond by drawing on individual accounts of WHRDs, reflecting on their experiences, their daily struggle in defending human rights, and by focusing on the adaptability and mitigation measures often taken by these women to protect themselves within restrictive spaces and hazardous domains. Based on these accounts, the researchers of this report attempt to find alternatives to reactionary measures, by suggesting new tools and mechanisms to help WHRDs be protected, secure, safe and enabled.

Introduction. This report aims to initiate a discussion around various thematic areas, including the definitions of WHRDs and how these relate to definitions used by United Nations mechanisms, including by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of HRDs.

Objectives. This section encompasses several components. It introduces the researcher and co-authors’ backgrounds, and reflects on the project’s objective to establish a collective and participatory research based on objective investigation and analysis. The report establishes a feminist methodology for this research, mainly in terms of claiming the authority of designing the research processes, components and outcomes. The report also aims to address and unpack common problems in definitions, as well as to reflect a culture of reaction, while seeking to use women’s voices as main source of report narratives. The report’s main objective is to find alternatives to reaction, as in protection and proactive measures, and finally to set up a roadmap with recommendations.

Methodology: A feminist perspective. The section presents the research methodology, the research ethic and highlights the security protocols and precautionary measures taken into consideration when working with WHRDs inside or outside the region. The section also presents limitations, obstacles and time constraints, and how they were addressed.

Context. Displacement, Secrecy, Constant Assault and Disrupting Identity, characterize the general situation of WHRDs in the region, and the systematic targeting of WHRDs by both states and non-state actors. The section highlights two types of targeting. The conventional methods usually include legal approaches and their consequences, as well as social pressure. However, unconventional methods are mainly the more recent types of targeting. Those cover new modes of technology, restrictions on movements and other methods that affect the social and financial situation of the WHRDs, denial of legal and family rights, and statelessness. The accounts of the WHRDs highlight both physical and psychological harm associated with threats caused by both types of targeting. They also support the narrative of cases studies documented by the GCHR and other NGOs. The interviews provide a better understanding of certain cases through WHRDs voices, as they give a sense on how these techniques feel, impact and traumatise their well-being, and their ability to survive the struggle and to protect themselves.

Problems in Definition: Who is a Woman Human Rights Defender. The section comes as an important intervention to shed light on the dilemma of WHRD definition. The aim of the report involves identifying preventative protection mechanisms for this specific category of HRDs. Therefore this category needs to have a set of rules and/or clear criteria to be inclusive and not discriminatory. Also, it is important to distinguish and understand what it entails to be a "WHRD", which is not the same as being a "feminist", especially within a conservative society. The discussion highlights an evidential gap related to "neutrality" between the local and international circles in regards to who can identify as a defender in general. Lack of awareness and knowledge of these concepts also seems to be problematic. The WHRDs identify several issues related to WHRD definitions that might contribute to excluding a wide range of women from being WHRDs. For instance: gender or womanhood, elitism, high profile, knowledge of languages or use of technologies, being subjected to threats, documentation of series of targeting, the level of education, and being well-connected. The definitions of who can conceptually or theoretically constitute a WHRD are very restrictive, and contribute to excluding a lot of women who are part of these global movements, based on narrow understandings and technicalities.

Existing mechanisms and systemic barriers. This section examines UN and other international mechanisms to protect WHRDs. Existing mechanisms have linked the role of women to peace, security and development. UN resolution/2013 on the Protection of WHRDs is described as "a monumental step" to establish an urgent need to address protection of WHRDs in recognition to the risks their work entails. This segment also refers to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) 59/2015 failure to refer to WHRDs. The same section details resources available to provide protection for WHRDs in different ways and forms.

Step one: Building a holistic strategy. This section intends to set the initial pillars for a holistic strategy, by focusing on the main components of the strategy such as; communal approach, communal research, tackling the urgent issues with time, technology, access to privacy and safe spaces, access to rehabilitation, and establishing a culture of well-being, acknowledging that no woman should be expected to bear responsibility for providing all protection mechanisms.

Recommendations. The section presents a set of comprehensive recommendations, addressing stakeholders on various levels including the UN, its member states and allies, donors and funding agencies, International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). By identifying the main audiences for each set, the recommendations complement the report and to provide practical and focused suggestions to take the suggested mechanisms forward. Prevention is at the core of these recommendations, derived from the accounts, suggestions and the discussions with the WHRDs interviewed for this research. The proposals focus on maintaining and sustaining collaboration between different agencies to achieve the anticipated results through various tools, such as legal mechanisms, research, long term programming with a concentration on well-being, access and dissemination of information through safe digital spaces.

1

INTRODUCTION

“Women defenders have been and remain a vibrant part of the human rights movement. In several countries, women defenders are the leading force in the human rights community,”

Margaret Sekaggya, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, report to United Nations General Assembly, 2008 ².

GCHR, Nazra for Feminist Studies, the WHRD MENA coalition as well as the WHRD International Coalition have consistently raised their concerns over the dire situation of WHRDs and the extreme suppression of NGOs and individuals in the MENA region generally. In 2016, several organizations, ³ including CIVICUS, ⁴ have raised concerns about widescale repression against civil society as well as the downscaling of support around the world in the name of security and counterterrorism. During a field mission to Iraqi Kurdistan; ⁵ GCHR found that human rights issues, and in particular women’s rights, were viewed as subordinate compared to missions of fighting ISIS. Generally, the denial of human rights issues appear to be justified on the account of counterterrorism efforts, war, border controls, national security, and securing political status and capital. This has contributed to a dangerous norm that undermines and consistently violates the rights and protections of entire communities. Simultaneously however, enhancements in technology and advanced international protection mechanisms and regulations have made it more accessible to monitor, document and openly condemn such violations.

Women human rights defenders are predominantly defined as women who defend the human rights of all, or individuals of all genders who defend the rights of women. ⁶ The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders defines women human rights defenders as both female human rights defenders, and any other human rights defender who works in the defence of women’s rights or on gender issues. ⁷ Both definitions include women and girls striving for the rights of their communities in every corner of the world.

Women human rights defenders range from strategic, funded, organized collectives to advocates who act alone – unsupported and who often suffer abuses in silence. The majority of women human rights defenders are likely to be in this latter category. ⁸

Utilizing existing published research and press releases, as well as GCHR work on the ground and experience, this report establishes what have become dual norms: (1) the increased volatility and precariousness of women’s human rights defenders’ lives, and (2) the human rights field’s perpetually reactive, rather than proactive, posture. In conjunction with existing research, these assertions will also be supported by data collected from a series of interviews with women in the field, rendering women human rights defenders’ narratives as crucial sources for assessing the environment in which these women currently exist.

In addition to complementing existing research, women human rights defenders’ narratives will also be used as a source for moving human rights work in the direction of preventative and protective – rather than primarily reactionary and descriptive – measures. Ultimately the report will call for increased investments in sound protection mechanisms, preventative strategies and safe spaces to support the crucial work of women human rights defenders.

[2] <http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/about/the-whrd-movement/>

[3] <http://www.ishr.ch/news/good-practices-protection-human-rights-defenders-major-new-report>

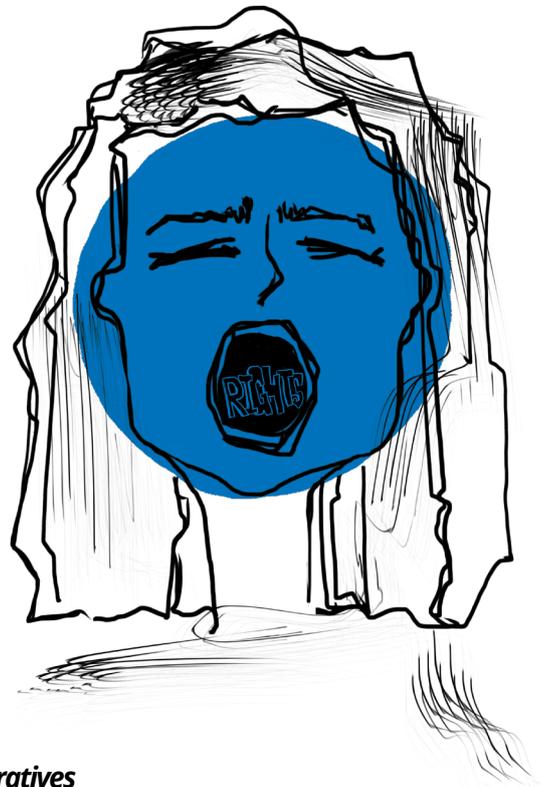
[4] <http://www.civicus.org/index.php/en/media-centre-129/press-releases/2278-civil-society-at-forefront-of-emergency-response-but-faces-dire-threats-and-funding-crisis-says-new-report>

[5] <http://www.gc4hr.org/report/view/47>

[6] <https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/what-are-women-human-rights-defenders/#.WAU9f6OZNbU>

[7] <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Women/WRGS/Pages/HRDefenders.aspx>

[8] There is no exact documentation for how many organized and unorganized women human rights defenders exist.



2.1 Establishing a Feminist Methodology of Research

This report, although initial, was conducted utilizing a fundamentally feminist methodology. That is one that enables the researchers to use their authority to make decisions about the process, content and delivery of materials.⁹ Recognizing that in 2016 women still operate under patriarchal norms, history and expertise, choices regarding the delivery of this report might seem subversive. For example, only women have been involved in the entire production of this inquiry, reports primarily conducted by women were used, and (only) women were interviewed. "Placing an emphasis on adopting a gender perspective restores a balance in societal power relations and highlights the effects of patriarchal practices and ideas that directly rob women of agency."¹⁰

2.2 Problems in Definitions

A designated segment of all interviews were centered in the definition of a Woman Human Rights Defender. A strong call to enhance the scope of who can be categorized as a WHRD was derived throughout the process of research. This segment will aim to highlight the limitations of current definitions and call for all that more expanded definitions must encompass.

2.3 Establishing a culture of reaction

It will be stipulated that part of the cultural shift that needs to be addressed is the fundamental reliance and norm of reaction in which WHRDs operate. Under the intense volatility of conflict zones, most WHRDs are thrust into environments of crisis. The constant state of crisis often prevents actors within a movement to act outside of reaction. International organizations frequently issue statements that condemn regional violations and imprisonment of WHRDs, and government implement laws that inhibit basic human rights. While this work is crucial, a collective effort (among human rights organizations) should be made to simultaneously implement preventative and proactive measures to sustain and enhance the work of WHRDs.

2.4 Narratives

Women's voices, opinions and memory will be considered primary sources in the context of this report. Firmly situated in a feminist methodology of research, the personal narratives, accounts, memories and opinions of the women interviewed for this report will be considered expertise. Their testimonies will be considered as valid primary sources into the insights, struggles and lives of WHRDs.

2.5 Alternative to reaction: Protection and Proactive measures

Alternative recommendations will be made at the end of each chapter. Each recommendation will be firmly situated under the goals of being proactive and establishing protection mechanisms. These recommendations are aimed toward international organizations such as the UN, as well as regional and local organizations actively involved in the work of protecting human rights and governments that have made advances toward recognizing and protecting WHRDs.

2.6 Moving Forward/Recommendations

This report is not meant to be an all-encompassing final exposé into the limitations of current industry practices toward WHRDs. Rather it is an inquiry into the interest and need for highlighting and dedicating resources towards protection and prevention. Next steps will be suggested based on series of interviews and will largely be directed at organizations working with and for WHRDs.

[9] Ramazanoğlu, C. & Holland, J. (2002). *Choices and decisions: doing a feminist research project*. In *Feminist methodology* (pp. 145-164). : SAGE Publications Ltd
doi: 10.4135/9781849209144.n8

[10] <http://nazra.org/en/2015/12/relationship-between-feminism-and-state-policies-elimination-violence-against-women-national>

A Feminist Perspective

A feminist method of social research is not simply an investigation of gender, or the pursuit of proving gendered power structures. Rather it assumes that we fundamentally operate in a context where gendered power dynamics are not equal. "Feminist approaches to research can be identified largely by their theories of gender and power, their normative frameworks, and their notions of transformation and accountability, even though these are not uniform. Methodologically, there is likely to be overlap with the concerns and visions of other approaches to social investigation."¹¹

Within the context of this report, a commitment has been made to be cautiously disruptive to systems and norms of patriarchal power, while holding accountable the multitude power dynamics outside misogyny. This signifies that there cannot be a singular approach to conducting and reporting this work. And all possible biases and limitations of the work have been made clear.

Details, design and ethics

Participants for the study were selected and contacted via the network of GCHR. A wide network of WHRDs were given the option to participate in the process. However, given the limited time frame of the report, only a number of activists had the capacity to participate.

In building and designing the research questions, the researcher consulted standard Oral History resources,¹² International Review Board¹³ guidelines as well as the project coordinator of GCHR. The professional and personal histories of the interview subjects were greatly considered in this process. The interview questions were grouped by basic categories: demographic data gathering, history and experience with assault and targeting, gathering their sense of definitions of terms used in the industry, naming systemic barriers and gauging notions of self-care and protection methods practiced.

The research implemented a strategy that gathered the subject's consent multiple times during the research process. The interview questions and a written consent form were sent out to subjects prior to the interview, as well as confirmed verbal consent before and after the actual interview. All interviewed subjects have given full consent for their information to be utilised for the purpose of this report. Some chose to restrict their names being used, for fear of potential threats of their name being attached to the label WHRD.

Digital security

The researcher was provided with basic training on digital security, and with all the needed protocols to mitigate digital threats and to avoid putting participants at any potential risks. This includes using encrypted communications and secure platforms as virtual venues to conduct the interviews.

Limitations and obstacles

Given the nature of one-hour interviews conducted separately to each other, the conversations between primary researcher and subject took organic directions of focus and expertise depending on the subject's career. The limitation of time was apparent throughout the interviews. The ability to schedule multiple follow-up interviews might have led to more precise details regarding the nature of definitions, threats and protections that WHRDs face.

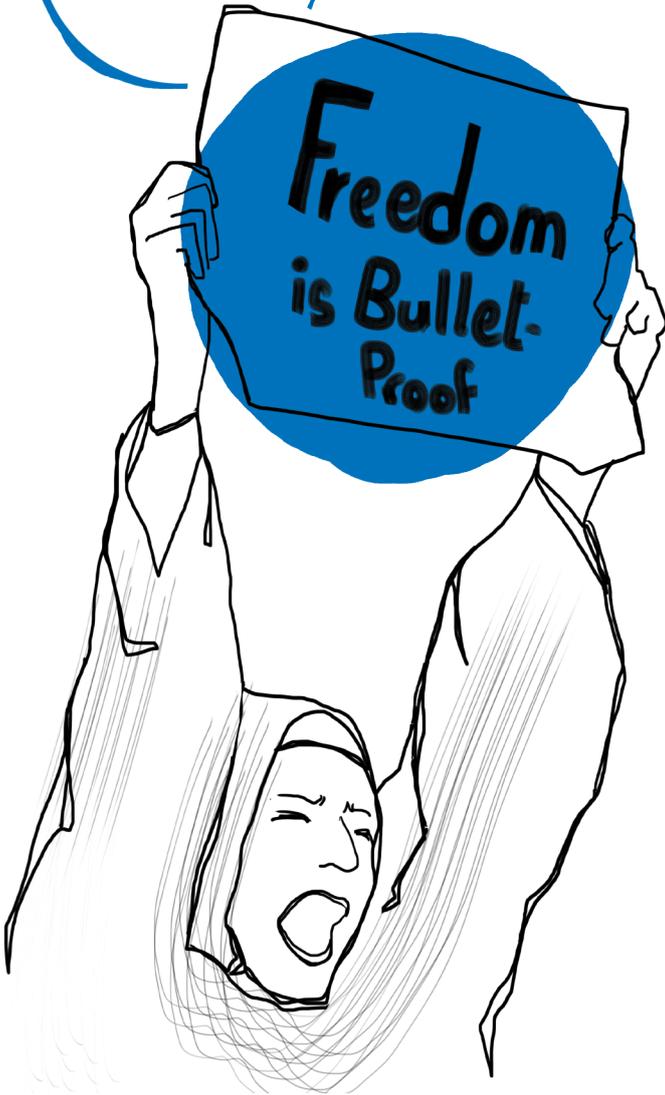
The primary researcher being from a different background has served competently in terms of an objective analysis and investigation. However, this has also resulted in some gaps in the research, mainly in focusing on the regional specificity and the situation of the WHRDs as part of this study. This has required a complementary analysis and an extensive elaboration on history, context and case studies from the region.

Therefore, this report also includes analysis based on the co-authors' expertise and experience in the field and from their international advocacy work and/or academic research. In addition, the co-authors reflect on their previous related research, as well as case studies and reports conducted by GCHR, which are also included for the sake of analysis and context.

[11] Ramazanoğlu, C. & Holland, J. (2002). *Choices and decisions: doing a feminist research project*. In *Feminist methodology* (pp. 145-164). : SAGE Publications Ltd
doi: 10.4135/9781849209144.n8

[12] <http://library.columbia.edu/locations/ccoh.html>

[13] <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/irb/>



Displacement, Secrecy, Constant Assault and Disrupting Identity

Amidst global political, economic and social upheaval, new emerging war zones, unresolved past conflicts, rising senses of fundamentalism and nationalism in the wake of such conflicts, and an increasingly politically conservative West,^{14,15} the context for human rights advocacy in the MENA region could not be more volatile. WHRDs are at the forefront of this struggle to defend human rights¹⁶ across the world. In recent years we have witnessed an escalation of attacks particularly against WHRDs, who are at an increased risk of gender-based threats, violence, and killings.¹⁷ While the rights of women remain centered in a number of ratified development goals,¹⁸ the importance of identifying and protecting women who occupy activist spaces often goes unnoticed.

Both state and non-state actors¹⁹ who target WHRDs evolve in their methodologies of attempting to silence women. When looking at the trends across the MENA region, there are both conventional and unconventional methods of targeting. The conventional methods usually include: extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, trumped up charges, torture, exile and defamation campaigns. The unconventional, or rather more recent types of targeting include: online targeting and harassment, travel bans, revocation of citizenship, refusal to renew passport, refusal to issue birth certificates or official documentation for newborn children, denial of boarding, freezing of assets, denial of employment, targeting of spouses and threats of imprisonment without their infant children.

Displacement: political exile and forced migration

Only two of the eight women interviewed live in the country of their nationality or citizenship, while the rest remain in either self-enforced or forced exile. Exile, while a solution to an immediate life-threatening environment in their native state, offers a particular set of threats and vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities can span violations of political and social rights, religious and cultural pressure, employment opportunities as well more tangible physical vulnerabilities such as assault and persecution. For example, in Lebanon, a parliamentary system based on religious demographics has warranted local authorities unwilling to provide exiled activists and refugees with rights to employment and citizenship. This denial to grant access to such privileges are legitimized by the fear that such privileges will skew local religious demographics and thus the political leadership of the country in the long term. This has a variety of tangible impacts on the WHRDs who take up said country in exile.

[14] <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2016/07/clone.of.donald-trump-rise-wing-politics-america-1.html>

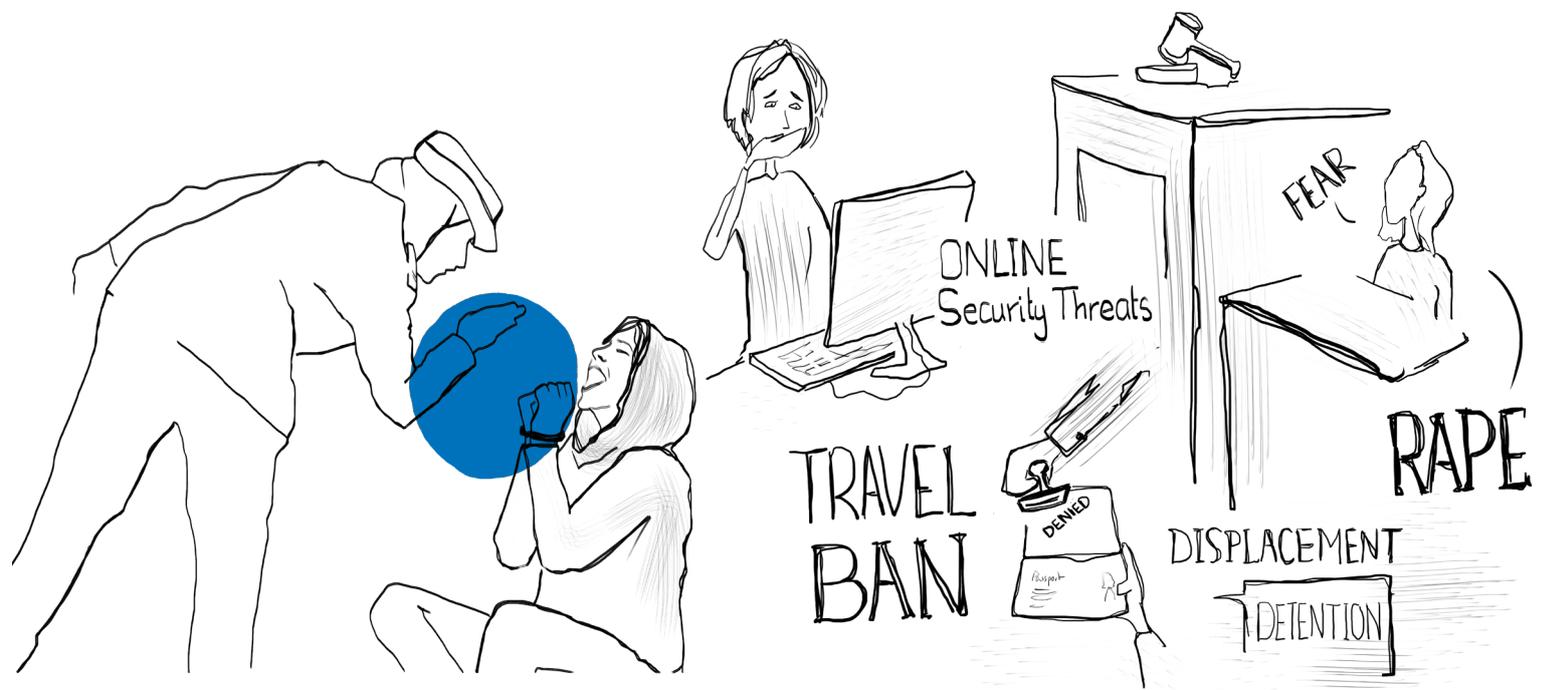
[15] http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/05/22/world/europe/europe-right-wing-austria-hungary.html?_r=0

[16] <http://www.awid.org/priority-areas/women-human-rights-defenders>

[17] <http://www.ishr.ch/news/whrds-and-parallel-worlds-un>

[18] <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>

[19] Razan Zaitouneh was kidnapped presumably by non-state actors due to her human rights activities, abducted by a group of armed men who raided the offices of the Violations Documentation Centre (VDC) in Duma, near Damascus, for info: <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1247>. Egyptian woman human rights defender Mozn Hassan was banned from travel to feminist meeting by the state in 2016, for more info: <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1303>



“In Lebanon all Palestinians are at risk because we do not have work permits at all or easily, we are not entitled to citizenship or nationality. This means we do not have the protections that nationality warrants, or the freedom to travel,” Sara Abughazal explained. “Borders are closing down, the region between Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Iraq has intensified in violence. The situation for WHRDs is only getting more and more intense.”²⁰ The increasing volatility of borders, especially in the MENA region, implies that protections for those under political and forced social exile must be enhanced. When nations enforce employment bans on refugees and exiled immigrants, it implicates WHRDs’ capacity to support the sustainability of themselves and their families, engage in local activist work, or be involved with local organizations.

Financial Restrictions that come with exile

“The cost of renewing my permit to stay here is almost \$700, and I just have more urgent obligations right now,” W (interviewee name withheld for security reasons) describes of the obstacles she faces in Lebanon. “My parents used to have regular health check-ups in Syria but cannot afford them here because we do not have any kind of insurance.”²¹ For lower profile WHRDs that are not adequately financially supported by major international organizations, the realities of financial exile can prove detrimental to their safety and productivity. Lower profile WHRDs who might lack the benefits of a significant global network, media attention, as well as financial favorability among grant donors, are especially vulnerable to the local restrictions for refugees and immigrants within their country of exile. Expanding the definition and scope of protections for WHRDs is crucial specifically for women who operate at this level.

Propelled into a life of fear and secrecy

Among the women living under exile, those that expressed an aversion to acquiring a high profile as an international WHRD described a forced life of secrecy and constant mistrust that greatly limited their ability to disclose details of their work, easily find collaborators or publish their work under their name. “I maintain a low profile because I do not want to tell people what I am doing. I don’t publish anything, I use digital security tools and I do not tell any of my friends about what I do here. Even though in general Lebanon is less dangerous than Syria, I am still always afraid.”²² W said. The volatility of living under exile has left many women unprotected and into forced lives of secrecy. This level of suppression results in: 1) women who risk everything to participate in the work of defending human rights but go unnoticed and unprotected, 2) prohibits their work from reaching broader audiences and prevents opportunities for collaboration and lastly, 3) inhibits any possibility of women reporting threats. “I feel too afraid to report, because I don’t want the story to become bigger and for my name to be out there. I feel like that will make things more dangerous for me,” W explained, “and I don’t know of any secure ways to report attacks that will ensure my identity is kept private.”²³

[20] GCHR Interview with Sara Abughazal, September 8th 2016

[21] GCHR Interview with (name withheld), September 5th 2016

[22] GCHR Interview with (name withheld), September 5th 2016

[23] GCHR Interview with (name withheld), September 5th 2016

Physical Threats and Online Tarnishing

GCHR found that every woman they interviewed had extensive experience with persistent online targeting and threats, while half had experienced some form of physical assault or pursuit.

"We live under constant threat of rape,"²⁴ Semanur Karaman of AWID says, describing the norm of expecting constant rape threats as a WHRD. Sara Abughazal, Semanur Karaman, and RZ (interviewee name withheld) disclosed moments of unidentified men following them after instances of activism, and all the women interviewed reported targeted sexual threats and verbal abuse on social media.

"We have a hard time convincing people about the implications of rape threats online. Men tend to say, 'Oh but everyone gets trolled,'" Karaman continued, "but it isn't simple trolling. Women, trans and queer activists that are in the business of defending human rights face specific violent threats as a norm. And an increase in online assault is proven to lead to a higher chance of an actual assault or death. It just isn't giggle worthy anymore."²⁵

In addition to causing physical and psychological harm, these forms of violence can have adverse social consequences, such as stigmatization and discrimination. Attacks against WHRDs often focus on their reputation and/or their sexuality as nonconforming with dominant stereotypes of appropriate female or male behaviour. As a result, WHRDs may find themselves isolated and ostracized by their communities.²⁶

Technological advances have come at the expense and at the advantage of WHRDs and appropriate support that caters to their security needs is yet to be seen. "When you use buzzwords like 'human rights' or 'activist' to describe the work that you do, the Syrian government assumes that you are against them, and they will use their resources for online defamation or worse,"²⁷ W says as she explains the danger of publicizing her activism online. At a state level, governments have ample resources to dedicate to the online tarnishing and persecution of WHRDs. An increasing access to anonymity combined with access to data and tracking have left independent and higher level WHRDs specifically vulnerable.

There are a multitude of examples of women who faced years of harassment and tarnishing by both state and non-state actors, which resulted in violence against or the death of the WHRD. On March 3rd 2016, prominent WHRD and General Coordinator of the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH) Berta Caceres was murdered. Berta's murder followed years of death threats and harassment for her work on the rights of the Lenca indigenous peoples and against the construction of a hydroelectric project.²⁸ In another case, Iraqi WHRD Samira Al-Naimi was kidnapped by ISIS and executed²⁹ by gunfire in public. Al-Naimi, an activist and lawyer, had publicly condemned ISIS and described their actions as "barbaric."³⁰ There is an urgent need to not only condemn and prohibit extreme levels of online gender based attacks, but to create specific protection mechanisms that protect WHRDs both physically and psychologically.

Unconventional methods of targeting:

As WHRDs and civil society find new methodologies to create pressure for human rights and stop violations, governments do the same. Over the past few years, the MENA region has witnessed tactics used by governments that are not as widespread or as documented as conventional tools of harassment. One example of this is the freezing of assets and the targeting of civil society members with charges related to their funding. Founder and director of Nazra for Feminist Studies in Egypt, Mozn Hassan, is a case in point. Hassan, along with other civil society members in Egypt, were first targeted in 2011 in Case No. 173, commonly known as the "NGO Foreign Funding Case." "They want to stigmatize us, they want to say publicly that those people [Nazra] are spies, that those people are not patriots."³¹ The case was reopened in March 2016, and Hassan has been under a travel ban since June 2016. It is important to note that most targeted WHRDs tend to face multiple types of violations, as in Hassan's case.

[24] GCHR Interview with Semanur Karaman, September 5th, 2016

[25] *ibid*

[26] http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/SexualHealth/INFO_WHRD_WEB.pdf

[27] GCHR Interview with (name withheld), September 5th 2016

[28] <http://www.ishr.ch/news/whrds-and-parallel-worlds-un>

[29] Iraq: Lawyer and human rights defender Samira Saleh Al-Naimi, for more info: <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/758>

[30] <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/758>

[31] <http://www.quotes.net/citizen-quote/207435>

[32] <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1276>

[33] <https://twitter.com/angryarabiya/status/741366276547825664>

[34] GCHR Interview with Elizabeth Broderick, September 25th, 2016

[35] GCHR Interview with Sara Abughazal, September 8th 2016

[36] GCHR Interview with Elizabeth Broderick, September 25th, 2016

Another example of unconventional tools of targeting revolves around the case of Bahraini WHRD Zainab Al-Khawaja. She faced a multitude of threats and assaults on account for her activism: including being arrested 12 times, beaten, and shot in the leg with a teargas canister. When she attempted to renew her passport, it was confiscated, and she has been unable to retrieve it since. When her son was born at the end of 2014, the authorities in Bahrain refused to issue the child a birth certificate, thus refusing him his right to Bahraini citizenship, and rendering him non-existent within the Bahraini system. This type of harassment, related to documents and everyday practicalities, target not only the defender but their families; making their lives extremely difficult even when outside of prison. In 2016, after being released from prison, Al-Khawaja was threatened with indefinite detention without her baby son if she remained in the country, thereby forcing her into exile.³² "I cannot begin to express the pain I feel about having to leave my beloved country. In fact, I almost didn't. Prison is easier than exile for me. The regime that thinks exile will break us should know, it was in exile that my father taught us how to love our country and sacrifice for it,"³³ she says.

Disrupting patriarchal identities and power:

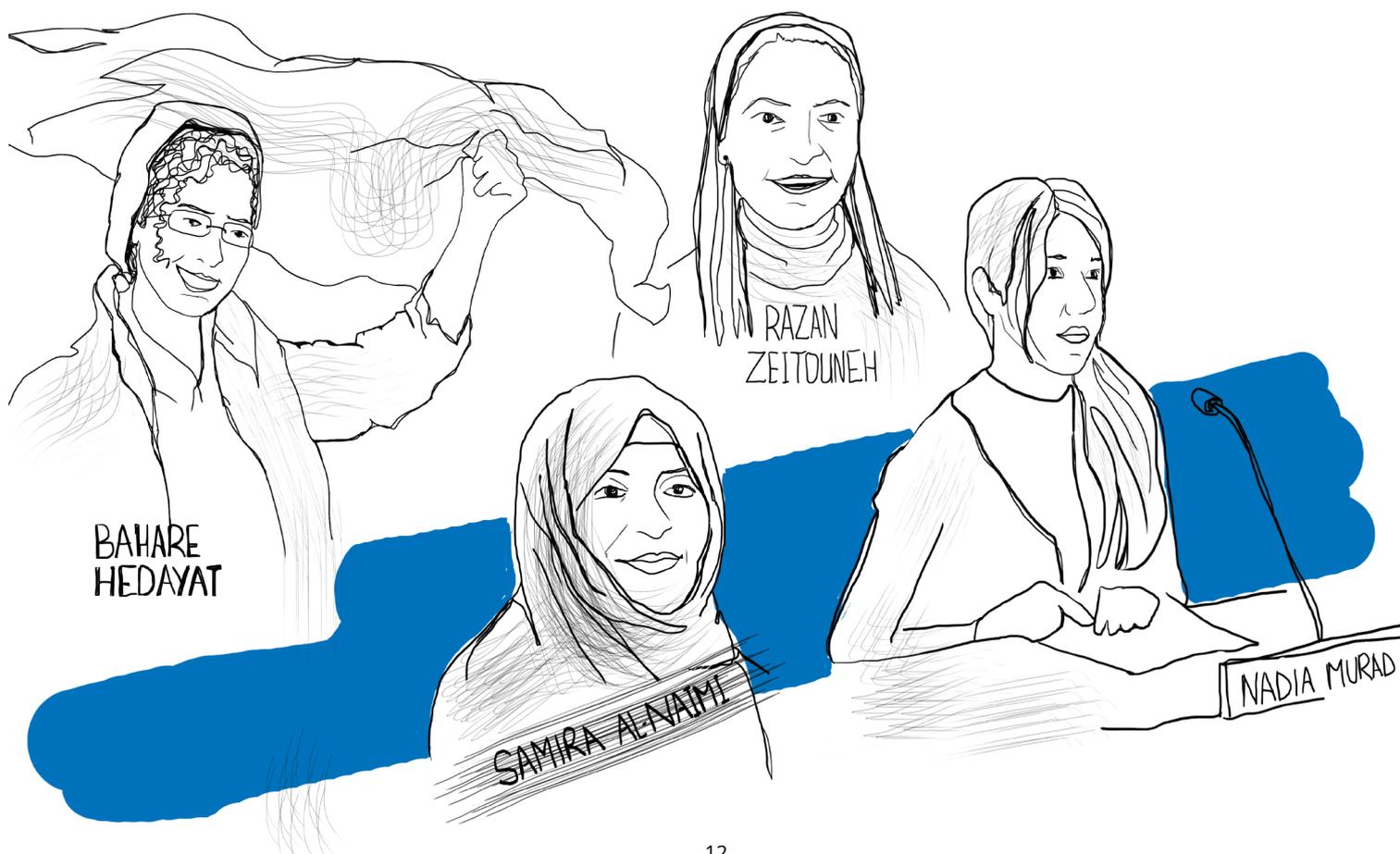
WHRDs face specific threats not only because of their actions and beliefs, but because of their fundamental identities. In patriarchal models of society, there is no space for a woman standing up for her rights outside the role of caretaker and wife, and in many cases there

is no tolerance for queer and transgender identities or women simply advocating for sexual and reproductive rights. "WHRDs face different dangers because they are targeted not only for what they do but who they are. Because almost by definition they go after the root of patriarchal systems," Elizabeth Broderick emphasizes when describing the nature of attacks and threats WHRDs face. "When you challenge a belief system of a nation and how it sees itself you're going to be subject to a lot more harassment by instrumentalities of government. Especially by male dominated ones."³⁴

"If a government or entity aims to silence a group of people for their activism, or an individual based on race, ethnicity or whatever, it usually means that there is a problem with the entity that is doing the oppression,"³⁵ Sara Abughazal adds.

Activism conducted by WHRDs is not restricted to high level assessments of global conflict zones or human rights violations. Their actions are usually propelled by direct reaction to a variety of crises. The identities that these activists hold, by nature, usually target patriarchal constructions of nationality and identity, which then result in visceral violent reactions.

"This is why I make it my business to interact with powerful men in Australia. I know I get to do that here, and that is not really the case in many other regions. But I do think it's a start. Because when you get powerful man to stand beside you, not to speak for you, you are targeting the root of the problem, patriarchal power,"³⁶ adds Broderick.



Problems in Definition: Who is a Woman Human Rights Defender?

In the process of conducting this initial report, it has become evident that one of the primary steps in calling for more robust protection and prevention mechanisms for WHRDs is to expand the definition of who constitutes a WHRD. Most of the women interviewed had varying levels of understanding and critique for existing definitions. While a human rights defender is broadly defined as an individual who works to enhance the basic human rights of a population, a WHRD generally faces specific targeted resistance to their work, simply by virtue of being a woman and an activist.³⁷

Through GCHR's work in the Gulf and surrounding region, as well as with the Women's Network, it has become abundantly clear that the term "WHRD" in many societies has become stigmatized. Similar to the negative discourse, using terminologies that are rejected and viewed as "abnormal" - such as the term "feminist" - are automatically linked to also being anti - cultural identity, anti-men, anti-society and generally tied to the LGBT community. WHRDs are assumed to be feminists. Additionally, as is the issue with the definition of HRDs generally, within the international framework, defenders are expected to play a "neutral" role as an observer and to objectively monitor and document. Locally, on the other hand, defenders are usually those who are on the frontlines, calling for and participating in protests, and pushing for political and social change. This creates a gap between the local and international circles in regards to who can identify as a defender; and tends to result in many local activists not identifying as defenders but rather as "revolutionaries" and/or agents of change.

Another obstacle, due mostly to the lack of awareness and information, is the misconstrued notion that WHRDs only work specifically on women's rights. This again causes some women who work on human rights issues, whether including or excluding women rights, to resist identifying as WHRDs.

"For us at the coalition³⁸ the definition is grounded in two principles; non-violence and non-discrimination. You cannot be a WHRD if you use violence or if you think some people are more worthy of basic rights than others,"³⁹ Abughazal states in an interview. She says that this simple, yet broad definition was utilized to expand the scope of who her organization advocated for and spoke to. However, while broad definitions of a person of any gender that engages in non-violent⁴⁰ strategies to enhance human rights⁴¹ is stated on a number of international and regional documents, in lived reality it is experienced as a far narrower, more technical and exclusive category.



Amongst the interviewed subjects, some women who lived or are currently living in exile and have experienced varying levels of online and physical threats as reprisal to their activism did not identify with the term “WHRD.” This being despite their actions and personhood fitting directly under the broader international definitions. The tactile definitions of who can conceptually constitute a WHRD are so restrictive that a large portion of women who are part of these global movements are excluded simply on technicalities.

It is widely believed, although unspecified anywhere, that in order to be considered and protected as a WHRD, one must have an established platform, reputation and record as an activist. Usually this record is established through a series of documented⁴² violations and threats by either a state or non-state entity as a reprisal to activism. “I have found the definition of WHRDs to be highly restrictive and bureaucratic, because it has turned into something so technical that people who sit in the U.N. or in high profile NGOs get to decide who gets to be a WHRD,”⁴³ Karaman of AWID explains. “In my work experience and what I know of how UN resolutions are established, in order to qualify as a human rights defender, you have to have an established track record of activities or organized civil society, or your rights have to be severely violated by state or non-state actors. I find this whole framework fetishizing. Are we saying that it is only if you are tortured and beaten that you can claim any sort of legitimacy to speak and work for your community?”⁴⁴ In the name of acquiring and establishing a definition that can be easily monitored and validated, have we accepted a definition that demands a woman to experience serious, life threatening assault and exile in order to gain a sense of legitimacy? This framework of limiting WHRDs to those who have documented activism and in many cases therefore, violations, is fundamentally prohibitive for activists who are unwilling to 1) publicly claim their activism on social media platforms but engage in plenty of grassroots work, 2) succumb to violence and shame at home as a result of their activism, to go unaccounted for, unprotected and unheard, or 3) those who simply do not have the means or resources to access international platforms such as the UNHRC.

Furthermore, there is a certain level of assumed privilege when it comes to the expectations of who a WHRD is. It is imperative that prominent human rights organizations advocate for protections of grassroots activists who do not speak English and have little to no access to international agencies. “I do not identify as a WHRD, because in order to be recognized as one you have to have a considerable following, recognition, access to and understanding of how to use social media platforms, and to be educated and fluent in English. In other words, this is usually restricted to that of a highly privileged class. And more importantly it is limited to those who are willing and able to operate under constant threat and backlash that a high profile activist status often demands. Because the more threats they receive the more recognized they are. And I do not want that.”⁴⁵

“A lot of women I work with don’t even see themselves as WHRDs. Concepts are good to acknowledge work, but if they become too restrictive and get in the way of protecting people doing the work then we need to stop and re-evaluate. How can we revive this and make it useful to our community?”⁴⁶ Karaman continues as she reflects on the impact of industry standards of defining WHRDs. If identifying those who fit within the criteria of WHRDs, and if the definitions themselves contribute to the exclusion and barriers to protection mechanisms for women activists globally, then it is crucial that the practices and definitions be expanded and transformed. It is clear that operating within the existing framework of identifying and validating WHRDs has become a fundamental barrier to the expansion of protections and to increasing the practicality and tangibility of various calls to action and justice.

GCHR as well as other organizations don’t necessarily restrict and/or limit their protection resources to those identified and specified conceptually as WHRDs. They mainly relate in their assessment on a non-discriminative and a more inclusive approach. WHRDs are women who work and strive to defend human rights of all, and/or defend their own rights as women, and carry their activities peacefully as guaranteed by international human rights law.⁴⁷ However, the main protection gap between grassroots WHRDs and INGOs lies in issues related to capacity, resources, access and networking.

[37] GCHR Interview with Elizabeth Broderick, September 24th 2016

[38] This is in reference to the WHRD MENA Coalition

[39] GCHR Interview with Sara Abughazal, September 8th 2016

[40] Every woman interviewed

[41] https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/what-are-women-human-rights-defenders/#.V_GljpMrJE4

[42] Documented here means either by way of media coverage, footage, social media trend etc.

[43] GCHR Interview with Semanur Karaman, September 5th, 2016

[44] Ibid

[45] GCHR Interview with (name withheld), September 10th 2016

[46] GCHR Interview with Semanur Karaman, September 5th, 2016

[47] <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/InternationalLaw.aspx>

EXISTING MECHANISMS & SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

In December 2013, the UN General Assembly's Third Committee adopted the first ever resolution protecting WHRDs, led by Norway.⁴⁸ This was a significant first step towards achieving recognition and protection for the work of WHRDs for their work. "The protection of women human rights defenders is essential for peace, security, development and the respect of all our human rights," says Eleanor Openshaw from the International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)'s Women Human Rights Defender Program.⁴⁹

With impressively expansive stipulations that call for action by local governments, "the resolution urges States to put in place gender-specific laws and policies for the protection of women human rights defenders and to ensure that defenders themselves are involved in the design and implementation of these measures,"⁵⁰ Nicole Bjerler of Amnesty International's UN Office in New York says. This resolution is a monumental step in nudging the international human rights community to recognize the dangerous yet urgent work pursued by WHRDs, in all of their diversity of identities and needs. Unfortunately, almost none of the women interviewed for this report, aside from those who worked for the organization AWID or the WHRD MENA Coalition, had any knowledge of the resolution or its impact.

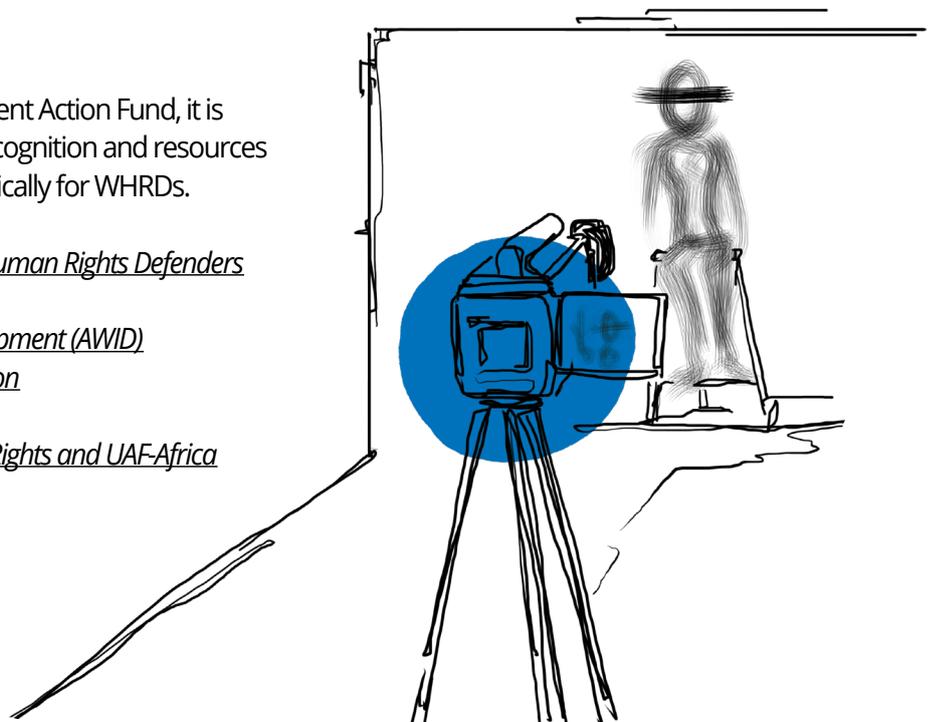
To add to that, in 2015, the Political Declaration on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women emanating from CSW 59 failed to even mention WHRDs.⁵¹ The murders of Berta Cáceres and Samira Al-Naimi, the imprisonment and then subsequent exile of Zainab Al-Khawaja, and the interrogation and repression of freedoms dictated toward Mozn Hassan, all constitute tangible examples of the distance yet to be accomplished in the scope of freedoms and protections for WHRDs.⁵²

Increased Visibility

Based on a report⁵³ conducted by the Urgent Action Fund, it is important to recognize the accelerating recognition and resources certain organizations have awarded specifically for WHRDs.

Examples of such organizations are:

- *The International Coalition on Women Human Rights Defenders*
- *Front Line Defenders*
- *Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)*
- *Middle East & North Africa WHRD Coalition*
- *Gulf Centre for Human Rights*
- *Urgent Action Fund for Women Human Rights and UAF-Africa*
- *Nazra for Feminist Studies*



[48] http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/68/181

[49] <http://www.ishr.ch/news/un-adopts-landmark-resolution-protecting-women-human-rights-defenders>

[50] <http://www.ishr.ch/node/1064/pdf>

[51] <http://www2.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/59/declaration-en.pdf?v=1&d=20151208T214833>

[52] <http://www.ishr.ch/news/whrds-and-parallel-worlds-un>

[53] <https://urgentactionfund.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/06/Insiste-Resiste-Persiste-Existe-WHRDs-Security-Strategies.pdf>

Systemic Barriers

Local legal systems, as well as ideologies of power and identity, are inherently tied to the state of human rights within a nation. Patriarchal systems of power are part of social structures of entire nations. Challenging systems of power in the name of defending human rights often means challenging the entire system of belief and identity constructed by a nation. Laws and policies are often built within a constitution to protect the identity and values of a nation. So the work of a WHRD must attempt to simultaneously transform cultural values, belief systems, local legislature as well as 'who' has the right to be protected.⁵⁴ "Even in a country like Australia, where there are strong protection laws like the Sex Discrimination Act, those laws still rely on women disclosing that a violation of their rights occurred. There is yet to be a system that forces employers and governments to inherently mandate equality. That's why a cultural response to power is so important."⁵⁵

While the UN ratification of the Resolution on the Protection of WHRDs is a critical first step, there is yet to be visible impact in individual states. "The absence of national mechanisms to protect WHRDs and HRDs in each country"⁵⁶ is the primary systemic barrier that WHRDs face, Abughazal explains. Furthermore, "anti-terrorism" laws in the MENA region have further endangered the work of HRDs. In many countries, like Bahrain and Egypt, the definition of "terrorism" is left intentionally vague and unspecific: which often renders the actions of civil society and civil organizations vulnerable to being labeled as participating in 'acts of terror'. "[Government's] frequently deem the work of 'human rights' as anti-government. Anti-terrorism laws subsequently enable governments to persecute activists under the guise of counter terrorism"⁵⁷ explains another (and unnamed) activist. When WHRDs successfully advocate for local mechanisms to protect human rights, it provides a platform for activists to advocate for their own protections. In regions such as the MENA, however, WHRDs and HRDs must first advocate for even the legitimacy of HRDs. When local governments fail to recognize HRDs, the latter are often persecuted for working "against" the government or under "anti-terrorism" laws.⁵⁸

Furthermore, with more and more anti-terrorism rhetoric fueling international policies, technology and surveillance have become prominent systemic barriers. "Privacy" is often "legitimately" compromised in the name of "national security."⁵⁹ This leaves WHRDs, especially

those with limited resources, extremely vulnerable to personal targeting when their personal information and documents are accessible to governments' surveillance and hackers.

As the severity of human rights violations increases, and conflict zones rise, a culture of crisis response becomes an industry standard among WHRDs. Under crisis, a culture of reaction is inherent. That is to say, individual WHRDs are often working under severe conditions of threats of incarceration, assault and increasing political volatility. This prevents resources from being allocated towards prevention and protection, and is rather allocated to the constant state of reaction to crisis. As Elizabeth Broderick stated: "For many WHRDs, working under intensive pressure and in volatile environments is a day to day reality. This leaves little space to imagine and create preventative protection mechanisms in which our safety and well-being is central. Responses to threats and risks faced by WHRDs are therefore often reactive and urgent. While having urgent response mechanisms in place for such situations is critical, it is equally important that we carve out space within our activism to develop preventative measures and ensure our well-being and self-care is paramount."⁶⁰

Under the current global political climate, reaction to crisis is unavoidable. However, international organizations must attempt to pursue a global culture of collectivity, so that organizations build the capacity to be both reactionary and preventative. "Unfortunately, we are too often reacting to crises. But this is precisely why we need to do more collective advocacy work - for instance the work we engage in with the WHRD International Coalition, or that other coalitions engage in at the national or regional levels - our advocacy efforts both have a reactive element, such as campaigns for the release of imprisoned WHRDs, as well as a focus on establishing better protection and prevention mechanisms - including funding that goes directly to WHRDs at the grassroots/ community level - to foster an enabling environment for WHRDs to continue to do their vital work,"⁶¹ Nathalie Margi reflects on her work at the Urgent Action Fund. In order to achieve this, though, there must be international mechanisms adopted by governments and international institutions like the UN that work towards a global strategy of prevention rather than reaction in regards to protecting WHRDs.

Barriers to Community:

The idea of community can be taken to mean a simple network of people from a similar location, having a particular characteristic in common. However, when describing it in the context of this report, community indicates a group of peers sharing or having certain attitudes and interests in common, who are able to support and proliferate work and ideas. An entity that is fluid and global, and offers a space that is free of persecution. The barriers to accessing safe and supportive community can be very contextual, and would vary among lower profile activists and internationally recognized WHRDs.

Internationally recognized WHRDs are those who fall in an elite circle of activists fluent in English, with platforms to access media attention, different resources and large organizational backing and public audience. Lower profile activists are often individuals who work on the ground and focus on grassroots causes, who might have limited access to English, media platforms and often go unnoticed by larger organizations. "I wish there were a way to communicate with each other internationally, without the constant fear of our governments finding out about our work. I am always afraid to reveal my name or the nature of my work. And that can get extremely lonely," W, a grassroots Syrian activist⁶² describes what prevents her from truly engaging in community. When activists are forced to engage in extreme privacy measures, it often becomes impossible for them to safely engage with other WHRDs. Higher profile activists, who do have large platforms and backing, have obvious access to larger networks of global activists. It is important to note, however, that being high profile also takes a toll on WHRDs' ability to engage in a community. With the high profile usually comes extreme targeting and defamation campaigns; usually resulting in an emotional and mental toll, and a fear of confiding in others and participating in a community. "Truly safe spaces are hard to come by, especially when you are an internationally known activist," Karaman elaborates on her work as the WHRD coordinator for AWID. Many high profile activists, especially those from religious societies, fight battles on different levels, including denying themselves a private life at times to avoid social stigmatization and discrediting. More often than not, societies are more forgiving towards men than they are towards women, thus making it easier for women to be targeted with defamation campaigns.

If access to community is systemically made near impossible, then opportunities for collective work become even more infrequent.

[54] Based on conversations via GCHR interview with Elizabeth Broderick September 24th 2016

[55] GCHR interview with Elizabeth Broderick September 24th, 2016

[56] GCHR interview with Sara Abughazal September 8th 2016

[57] GCHR interview with (name withheld) September 10th 2016

[58] Based off of conversations during GCHR interviews with Sara Abughazal September 8th, 2016.

[59] https://www.eff.org/pages/crime-speech-how-arab-governments-use-law-silence-expression-online#ct_law

[60] GCHR follow up email correspondence with Elizabeth Broderick, October 2nd 2016.

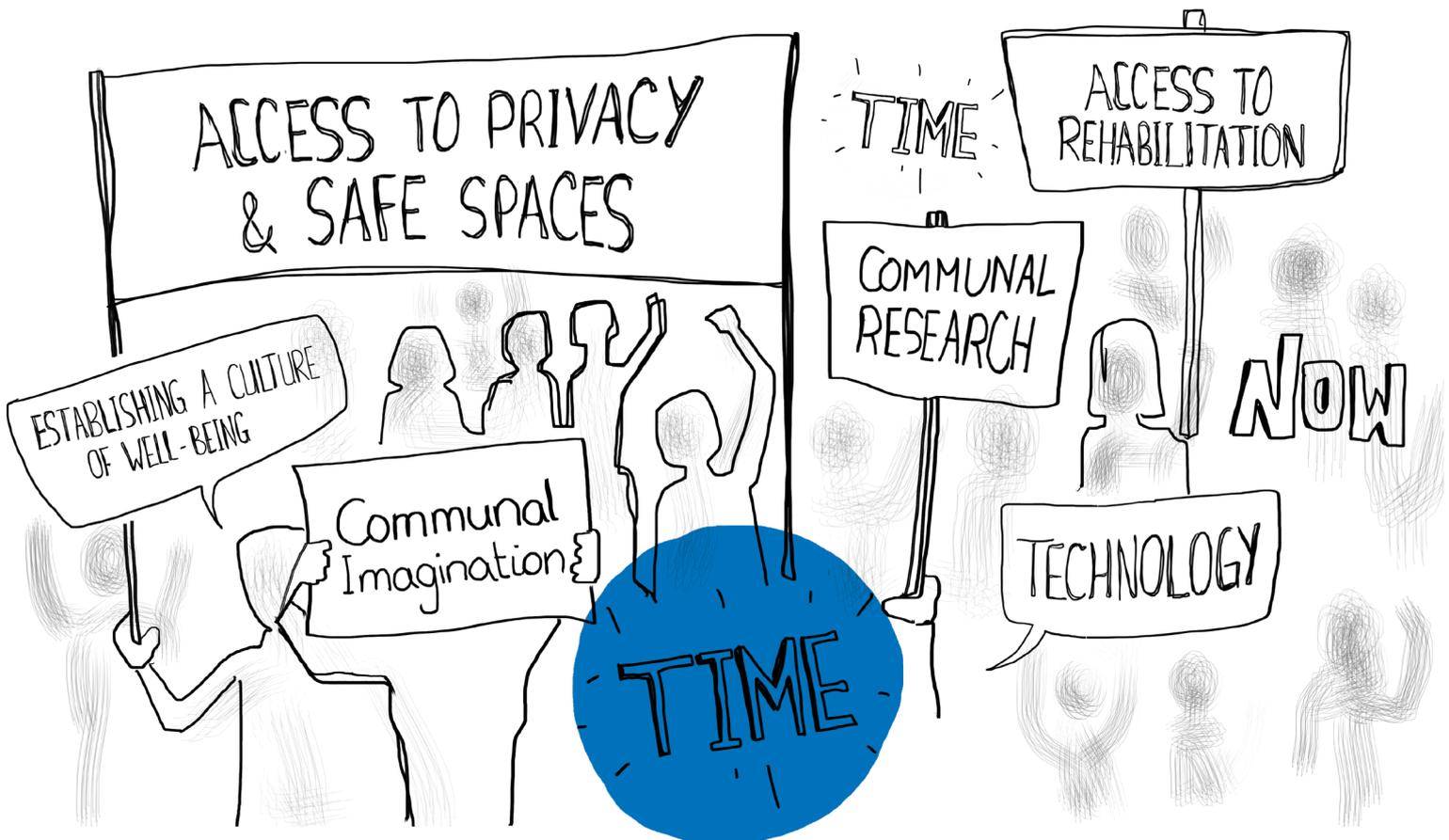
[61] GCHR email correspondence with Nathalie Margi October 1st 2016.

[62] GCHR interview with (name withheld) September 5th, 2016.

STEP ONE

Step one: Building a holistic strategy

It is apparent that this report is a preliminary inquiry into the process of answering the need for protection and prevention mechanisms specifically geared toward WHRDs: it is crucial that a wider pool of stakeholders such as INGOs and investors be included in outlining steps to move forward, including conducting a series of expansive research and reporting initiatives dedicated to these efforts. Given the complexity of the nature of threats and environments under which WHRDs operate, it is essential that the investigation related to their issues and protections be multidisciplinary: examining social influencers, political threats and implications as well as factors related to access to funding should be central to such investigations. However, this research was taken under disruptive feminist principles. Therefore, it was imperative that we move away from industry norms.



A. Communal Imagination: Every woman interviewed expressed the importance of a network of WHRDs. Furthermore, it was made clear that in order to effectively imagine all-encompassing next steps that that process must be pursued communally. No individual woman will be able to or should bear the responsibility for envisioning protection mechanisms for such a diverse population of activists. Time and resources must be collectively allocated toward the specific tasks of envisioning tangible protection and prevention goals.

B. Communal Research: More and more research into implementing nuanced protection mechanisms should be done communally. Communal research enables multiple perspectives to enter the research and analysis components of a project, that will then enable a pluralistic approach to recommendations and implementation.

C. Tackling the urgent with time: Under current circumstances of conflict, humanitarian crisis and abuse, the environment under which most WHRDs operate is often urgent. However we must not avoid tackling the urgent with patient sustained focus, resources and due diligence. It is essential that resources are committed over a length of time to combat urgent and longer systemic needs for protection. It is also critical that innovative tools are introduced in the field of urgent response. At the same time, donors must also commit to being flexible and responsive to the varying realities in the best interest of the WHRDs at risk.

D. Technology: Online targeting and abuse were a major part of each interview. As technology progresses, governments have an abundance of access to technological resources specifically dedicated to targeting those who speak out against them. It is imperative that technology be a primary focus in the steps moving forward for protecting WHRDs.

E. Access to Privacy and Safe Spaces: Access to safe collaboration spaces, practices for well-being and strategizing must be investigated through a technological lens. It is crucial for larger human rights organizations to divert resources towards building technological solutions that can provide private safe spaces for WHRDs to communicate globally; and for this to be supported by funders and friendly governments.

F. Access to Rehabilitation: Given the prevalence of trauma among WHRDs, a global effort toward rehabilitation must be made. Either by way of psychological support, temporary financial services and skill trainings as well as family support; which will drastically improve the lives and work of WHRDs. This already exists but is extremely limited due to lack of resources and access.

G. Establishing a culture of well-being: Local and international organizations devoted to the work of WHRDs must internalize a culture of well-being in order to truly advocate for self-care as a practice. Generous vacation, sick leave, maternity leave, health benefits and compensation should be strictly enforced across organizations.

RECOMMENDATIONS



The United Nations:

- Build and cultivate a secure, protected environment for WHRDs and their work: focusing on the creation, the tangible implementation and ensuring sustainability of said preventative and protections mechanisms, specifically tailored for WHRD's. This can be part of phase two of this report in developing a preventative strategy.
- Existing UN Human Rights mechanisms should specifically recognize the role of WHRDs globally: specifically their efforts around protecting and advocating for human rights, gender equality, resisting various forms of extremism, and building sustainable peace and reconciliation strategies. Therefore it is crucial that the nature, work and specificity of WHRDs be a fixed item on every human rights agenda and periodic reporting mechanisms.
- UN resolutions should include calls and action to increase the rights and protection of women and girls. Calls must include stipulations to protect WHRDs as well.
- The protection mechanisms should be holistic, comprehensively coordinated and inclusively implemented, based on cooperative and complementary approaches.
- While recognizing and appreciating the roles and efforts of both of UN Special Rapporteurs (SR) on the Situation of HRDs, and UNSR on Violence Against Women; both roles are mandated to be reactionary and responsive. Therefore it is recommended that the mandates be revised to include mechanisms specifically to prevent violations against WHRDs working on promoting and protecting human rights.
- Recognize the limitations and gaps of existing definitions and work on awareness campaigns about the definition of WHRDs to combat the existing stigmatization of the term.
- The definition of WHRD must be all-encompassing and nuanced, in manners that are representative of an array of risks and violations.
- Protection mechanisms must be envisioned and implemented based on the nuanced multiplicity of the experiences of defenders, especially grassroots activists who lack significant media platforms and networks at regional and international levels. A commitment to persistent communication and collaboration with WHRDs, in ascertaining their distinct needs and obstacles, will be crucial to this process and its impact.
- High priority should be given to dedicating resources to building and maintaining safe digital spaces for collaboration. While government entities have exorbitant resources for targeting activists, it is crucial that the UN bodies push for the development of regulations to ensure safe digital spaces.
- Make protection/reporting mechanisms accessible to WHRDs who have limited access to resources. This can be implemented and monitored by local or regional UN offices, via consultation meetings and in cooperation with NGOs and their grassroots networks
- In light of the current humanitarian crisis in the MENA region, safe spaces for disclosure of exiled and displaced status should be a focal point for locally operated UN agencies and non-profits.
- Address the issue of restrictions on movement and ensure that protection mechanisms consider freedom of movement as an integral part of empowering, engaging and protecting WHRDs.

Member States of the United Nations:

- It is crucial to call for and bring attention to issues surrounding national and demographic identity in relation to structures of patriarchy, nationalism, extremism and violence. (eg. What does my national identity look like in the absence of deep patriarchal and sexual violence?) For as long as entities feel that their very identity is threatened by the activism of WHRDs, the severity of threats and assaults is likely to continue and intensify. Therefore, reimagining identity is vital.
- Member states who locally had/have women leadership⁶³ in defending, and enhancing the human rights situation in their country should take a leadership role to support the WHRDs movement everywhere, being themselves implicitly led by WHRDs.
- Access to legal protection and related resources including services, trainings on local systems etc. is crucial.
- Male diplomatic leaders should be involved in attempts to disrupt patriarchy; i.e. Male diplomats should be compelled to no longer agree to any ratifications that do not specifically call for the protection of women, or should be compelled to no longer sit on panels where women are absent. This should in no way be taken to mean that men should speak on behalf of women, but rather should be compelled to take tangible steps to disrupt patriarchal power dynamics.
- Include WHRDs in the process of developing policies and strategies on women rights and the protection of WHRDs.

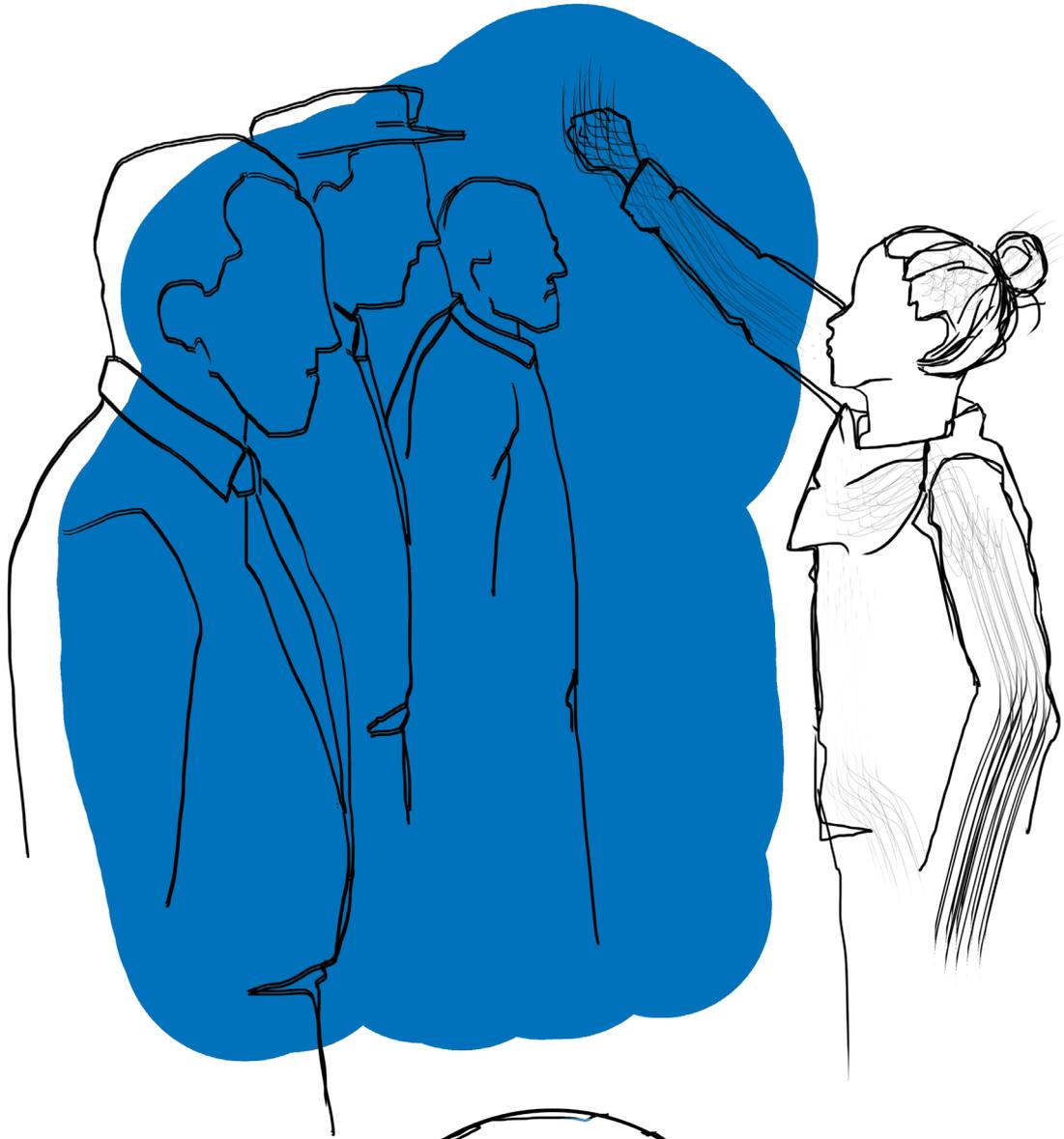
[63] Scotland, Germany, Ireland, Malta, Argentina, Liberia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Norway, Switzerland, Mauritius, Croatia, for more info: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/30/about-one-in-ten-of-todays-world-leaders-are-women/>

Funders/Donors:

- Financial resources must be made available for WHRDs on multiple levels, and should respond to their needs and demands. Often, having a medium takes away certain specificities and many protection indicators obliterate technicalities and bureaucracy. There needs to be a more direct relationship between the funder and grantee, without the obstacle of bureaucracy and the donor must apply flexibility to be able to respond to the needs of the WHRDs in various restrictive contexts.
- It is crucial that financial networks be made available for the most financially vulnerable under exile, as well as marginalised WHRDs in urban or rural areas.
- Resources must be allocated to psycho-social support at local and regional levels for WHRDs facing threats, harassment, ostracizing impacts, tarnishing of their reputation and shaming tactics.
- Investment in developing and enhancing women networks and networking opportunities should be prioritized; cultivating community and networking is a proven prevention and collaboration mechanism for WHRDs.
- Expand research as an evidence-based approach for monitoring and documenting the threats and targeting techniques of WHRDs, to contemplate, anticipate and update the existing measures to be more responsive and preventative.
- Establish a culture of complementation and cooperation rather than competitiveness by encouraging multidimensional multilayered equal partnership for designing and implementing long term projects.
- Develop back up plans to continue supporting WHRDs when they are targeted with freezing of assets and/or criminal cases due to foreign funding.
- Play a role in raising pressure to protect WHRDs who are targeted and at risk.

INGOs and CSOs:

- Develop better mechanisms to reaching and supporting WHRDs who do not have access to international platforms and are not high profile.
- Protections mechanisms should be supported by collective long term programs and projects to enhance accessibility, coordination and resource mobilizations as well as capacities exchange; to maximise the outcomes and achieve protection objectives.
- It is indispensable to create an efficient dissemination strategy for the best practices, toolkits and protection mechanisms to ensure that there is widespread access for WHRDs to these preventative measures and all levels of protection mechanisms.
- Consider partnering with academia to maximise the impact and reach different audiences, as well as to contribute to knowledge sharing and diffusion of experiences.
- Organizations that focus on the work and protections of WHRDs should attempt to derive protection mechanisms and resources for WHRDs who maintain low profiles on social media.
- There is a need for exposure and publication of the volume and severity of online harassment and threats faced by WHRDs.
- Strategies to categorize activists as WHRDs should not be damaging and exclusionary simply under the guise of simplicity.
- Focus on employing equal or higher resources into maintaining digital security for WHRDs, but more importantly create safe cyber spaces for globally dispersed WHRDs.
- Address issues of patriarchy, sexual harassment and lack of gender equality within the organizations themselves by providing mechanisms for complaints and accountability.



**BEFORE
IT'S TOO
LATE**