

الشبكة العالمية  
للحقوق الاقتصادية  
والاجتماعية والثقافية



ESCR-Net  
Red-DESC  
Réseau-DESC

# WOMEN STANDING TOGETHER

Looking to the Leadership of Women  
Human Rights Defenders



*Click on icons to be redirected*

@ESCRNet

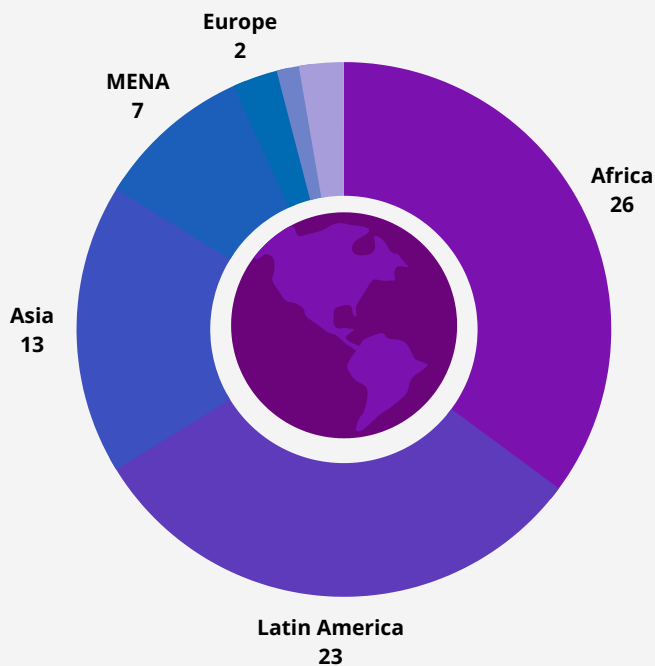


# INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Women human rights defenders in all their diversity (WHRDs) are often at the forefront of struggles for human rights, social justice and the environment, and are, as a result, frequently targeted. The threats and attacks directed at WHRDs are often gendered and reflect patriarchal norms relating to women’s perceived role in society. Similarly, as a result of patriarchal norms, WHRDs often find themselves more isolated and vulnerable than their male counterparts, at times even in their own organizations, communities and families. During the COVID-19 pandemic there has been a deterioration in preexisting conditions facing WHRDs including gender based violence.

In 2020, the Women and ESCR Working Group (WESCR) and the System of Solidarity (SOS) Advisory Group initiated a collaboration to gather inputs and collectively explore how to better support WHRDs in ESCR-Net. This was done through a survey and a series of women-only online conversations<sup>2</sup> during 2021 to understand the needs of WHRDs in the Network and to get an overview of the existing resources of members to support WHRDs as well as how members can support each other and stand collectively with WHRDs under attack.

## PARTICIPANTS



- We received a total of 74 responses in three languages, including 27 responses from social movements

1. Thank you to the women human rights defenders in ESCR-Net that generously and bravely shared their experiences in the survey and online conversations. A particular thank you to Veronica Vidal, Orfe Castillo Osorio and Cristina “Tinay” Palabay for supporting the elaboration of the survey and the online conversations. This report has been developed by Valentine Sebile and Ruben Kondrup with support from Marylu Bautista.
2. It is important to note that the information gathered does not pretend to paint an exhaustive picture of the situation faced by WHRDs, but is rather an attempt to gather insights into the situation of WHRDs in ESCR-Net and understand how ESCR-Net can better support WHRD members under threat.

# MAIN FINDINGS

---

ESCR-Net WHRD members face a variety of threats, many of which are gendered. Nonetheless, they also identified strategies they utilize to stay safe as well as ways they can stand in solidarity and support each other. Below, we share the most common responses from the survey.

Outlined below are the five most common responses to the related survey question followed by brief discussions drawing on open-ended survey questions and online conversations.

## THREATS FACED BY WHRDS

---



The attacks suffered by WHRDs often reflect the patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes that permeate society. Violence and threats towards WHRDs are often of a sexual nature, and slander campaigns targeting WHRDs are often gendered, such as “slut shaming” or labelling WHRDs as “unruly women”.

WHRDs often suffer intersecting forms of oppression connected to their diverse identities e.g. as indigenous, women of color, sexual and/or gender expression and sexual orientation. The oppression based in patriarchy and misogyny, which relates to these intersecting identities further marginalizes and isolates WHRDs leading to increased vulnerabilities.

“

Throughout the Mesoamerican region the work of women human rights defenders and activists is attacked, with criminalization (imprisonment, false accusations...), stigmatization of their work (more in the field of organizations, movements and communities for questioning their traditional gender role), assassinations, disappearances, exile for confronting the authoritarian and repressive state among others.

- QUOTE FROM SURVEY

”



“

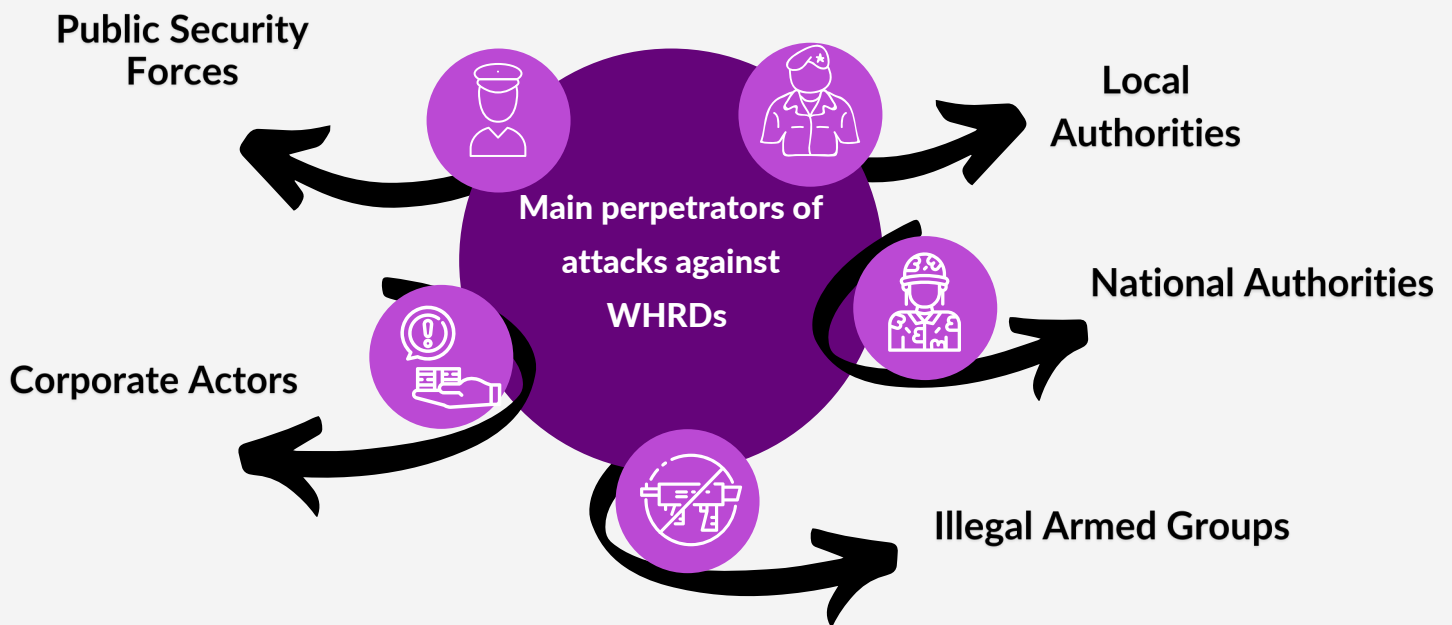
We confront gender-based state violence such as rape, killings and sexualized threats online and offline starting from the highest office of the country. We live in a very patriarchal society where state and religious institutions consider women as objects.

- QUOTE FROM ONLINE CONVERSATION

”



## PERPETRATORS OF ATTACKS AGAINST WHRDS



*\*Approximately one third of respondents pointed to practices in their organizations or communities as being problematic for their security.*

“

Women human rights defenders are in constant vulnerability in various aspects, either because our capacities are discredited and we are not taken seriously because we are women. We are also stigmatized, persecuted and harassed by various armed and state actors.

”

- QUOTE FROM SURVEY



WHRDs face threats from a range of state and non-state actors.. However, as a result of patriarchal norms and values permeating societies and at times human rights organizations and social movements, WHRDs often find themselves excluded from participating fully in organizational decision making processes. This leads to further invisibilization, discrimination and marginalization of WHRDs, making them more isolated and as a result more vulnerable to attacks.

### MAIN OBSTACLES WHRDS FACE



“

The lack of recognition of the work of WHRDs, as well as the deployment of smear campaigns about their activities, the judicial re-victimization, the lack of a gender focus in their attention and the lack of results regarding the victimizations they have suffered, place them in situations of greater vulnerability and risk of attacks.

- QUOTE FROM SURVEY

”



“

Women are not supposed to be out. They are supposed to be seen and not heard. The attacks that women face are really very vicious, with religion subduing them and even cultural attacks. These attacks morph into discrediting narratives, and women who are vocal are faced with slut shaming. They call them prostitutes. These are one of the major tools in subjugating WHRDs.

- QUOTE FROM ONLINE CONVERSATION

”



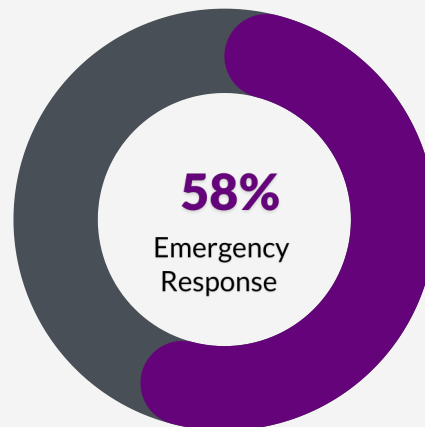
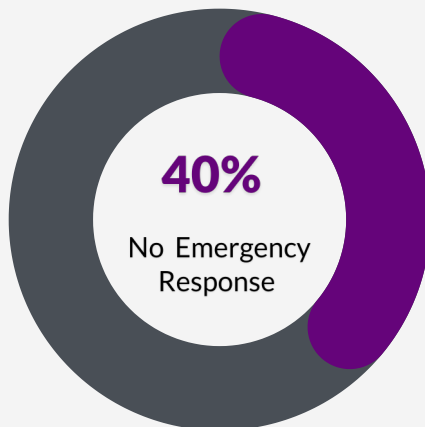
The marginalization and discrimination of WHRDs have serious impacts for their security and their ability to accessing justice. The lack of visibility and possibility to participate in decision making processes often mean that WHRDs are not heard or taken seriously. Mechanisms that are meant to protect them often do not take into account their needs or specific threats faced by WHRDs.

## STRATEGIES USED BY WHRDS TO STAY SAFE & SUPPORT OTHERS



### EMERGENCY RESPONSE IN PLACE IN CASES OF EMERGENCY:

- We asked participants if they had an emergency response in place in cases of emergency. The following graphics illustrate their responses:



“

We have been developing a more community-based self-protection strategy, generating support networks of women leaders, but also doing spiritual cultural accompaniment work.”

- QUOTE FROM SURVEY



“

The women's movement is fighting back by building strong communities and promoting transformative visions and strategies [...] the core of an effective strategy is our movement and collective strength.”

- QUOTE FROM SURVEY



WHRDs in all regions are finding support and solidarity in collective spaces whether it be quick response networks, supporting collective risk assessments and providing collective care, or safe houses for WHRDs, at times in the homes of fellow WHRDs. Networks or coalitions of fellow WHRDs provide protection and safety based on the needs of WHRDs and allow them to continue their work.



# Priorities for support to WHRDs

---

A key objective of this collaboration was to explore how the ESCR-Net System of Solidarity, guided by an Advisory Group of members, as well as the Women and ESCR Working Group in its ongoing efforts to create spaces for exchange between grassroots women leaders and horizontal spaces for women leaders in all of their diversity, can better support WHRDs in the Network and how WHRDs can support each other. The following reflect information gathered from the survey and the online conversations with WHRDs during 2021.

## CONNECTING WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

WHRDs across regions are finding strength in local, national or regional collectives. In our conversations with members, the importance of creating safe spaces for women human rights defenders to connect with each other was raised repeatedly. This includes women-only exchanges where women feel free to share their grievances and their strategies for addressing these grievances<sup>3</sup>. Due to the permeating presence of patriarchy, women are, at times, not comfortable speaking up, which makes the creation of safe spaces even more important. Similarly, there is a need to create or connect with platforms on both regional and global levels where women can build cross regional solidarity, share their best practices and break the isolation that so many women human rights defenders face.

## CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT AND MUTUAL LEARNING

There is a strong awareness of the risks related to digital security and surveillance and how this affects women. In the survey, 51% of the participants responded that ESCR-Net should prioritize facilitating capacity development and training related to specific, technical issues such as digital security. There is a sense that capacities need to be expanded in these areas and that WHRDs need better access to tools and understanding of how to avoid surveillance.

Similarly, there was a desire from members to learn from each other across regions. In the survey, members expressed that they would be interested in mutual learning on issues related to WHRDs, sharing of practices related to community-based protection strategies, and sharing of tools, research and resources related to protection of WHRDs.

## VISIBILIZING WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND THEIR STRUGGLES

In conversations, the visibility, or rather lack of visibility, of WHRDs was raised repeatedly. As mentioned previously, marginalization and invisibility (at times even in their own movements and organizations) are contributing factors to the increased vulnerability of WHRDs. The survey<sup>4</sup> and subsequent conversations clearly highlighted that WHRDs must be increasingly visible through campaigning, media work and/or urgent actions. Members expressed interest in supporting the amplification of the voices of WHRDs as well as support to countering harmful narratives as well as mobilization and campaigning to support WHRDs in imminent danger.

---

3. ESCR-Net has previous experience with organizing women only spaces that could provide important learnings going forward, such as in-person exchanges for grassroots women leaders as well as a dedicated WhatsApp group for grassroots women leaders.

4. This was the highest priority in terms of supporting WHRDs identified in the online survey.

## CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

- Women human rights defenders suffer the same attacks as their male counterparts, but often the attacks are gendered, such as attacks on families, gendered slander including slut shaming, sexual violence etc. The perpetrators vary, but one thing that stands out and seems particular to WHRDs are the attacks or exclusion that they at times suffer at the hands of their own organizations and movements, often as a result of patriarchal attitudes. This in turn makes women more vulnerable and isolated, and their work and challenges become invisibilized. Similarly, women face particular obstacles in accessing protection or justice due to lack of adequate opportunities, lack of trust in existing mechanisms, and narratives that undermine women human rights defenders.
- Women human rights defenders look to each other and their allies in times of crisis. It is important to connect WHRDs, including by creating safe spaces for women human rights defenders to come together, share experiences and show solidarity to break the isolation that many of them face. These spaces can be national, regional or global, as well as in-person or online.
- There is a need to make visible the struggles and contributions of women human rights defenders, as well as the gendered attacks that they suffer, both regarding the attacks themselves and their impacts on women.

ESCR-Net commits to continue to provide in-person and online safe spaces for WHRDs in the Network to exchange best practices and strategies as well as deepen cross-regional solidarity among WHRDs.

We will work to ensure that our collective solidarity work is guided by a strong, intersectional feminist analysis including by ensuring the presence of WHRDs in the System of Solidarity Advisory Group, by highlighting WHRDs in proactive advocacy, and through periodic discussions with and amongst WHRDs in the Network.

Similarly, we will support WHRDs in accessing solidarity and protection resources including by ensuring that WHRDs in the Network are familiar with the System of Solidarity as well as facilitating access to protection resources that are sensitive to the needs of WHRDs in all their diversity, such as guides, online training, security grants and relocations. This includes reaching out to national and regional WHRD networks.