
'I get harassed by police officers, judges and families of the victims. Sometimes I have to leave my house in the middle of the night to retrieve women from police stations. I do this work because what we do is very important. We protect victims of violence from being abused again.'

Noor Marjan, Acting Director of the Afghan Women's Skills Development Centre, March 2010



WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS

Women's human rights defenders



Members of the Solidarity Movement of Women Human Rights Activists (SOFAD), based in Uvira, Democratic Republic of Congo. Through a grassroots network of women, SOFAD campaigns against sexual violence, provides assistance to rape survivors, educates local communities on women's and children's rights, and lobbies government for reform. © Private

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ON THE FRONT LINE

A women's human rights defender is anyone, male or female, who defends women's rights. Because of gender discrimination, women's human rights defenders face particular risks for focussing on women. And if they are female (and most of them are), they also risk punishment from the family, the community and the state for defying social conventions on what is acceptable behaviour for women.



Ana María Pizarro, Juanita Jiménez, Martha Munguía, Mayra Sirias and Yamileth Mejía – five of the nine human rights defenders who faced legal action for assisting a nine-year-old who obtained a legal abortion. The other four are Luisa Molina Arguello, Violeta Delgado, Marta María Blandón and Lorna Norori © AI

Despite overwhelming challenges, women's human rights defenders put their own lives at risk to defend human rights.

They are often the most active agents for positive social change in their communities. Some try to uncover the truth when their loved ones have been subjected to enforced disappearance, some are community activists fighting for basic economic and social rights, such as the right to own land or the right to clean water. They campaign against torture and domestic violence, for equal treatment at work, for education for themselves and their children, or for access to credit so that women can build up businesses. Many women's human rights defenders are professionals, such as doctors and journalists. Many work for the rights of minorities, or for access to essential health care. Many fight against restrictions on women's sexual and reproductive rights and for the right to make their own choices and decisions – including if, when and who they will marry, if and when they will have children, and who with.

I TAKE ONE DAY AT A TIME

'You can't be an active woman in Afghanistan and not feel threatened. It is part of my daily life. I never know what is going to happen next. In the last five years, many high profile Afghan women have been killed for trying to raise the profile of women or defend their human rights. I take one day at a time but try to work on issues that will have a lasting effect.'

Shinkai Karokhail, 36, Afghan MP since 2006 and chair of Afghan women parliamentarians.

VIOLENCE, HONOUR AND HUMILIATION

'I am not asking for sympathy, I want your solidarity.'

Estefany, raped and made pregnant by her uncle when she was 17, Nicaragua

Those opposed to women's rights use a range of methods to intimidate, discourage and prevent women from organising to defend their human rights. Attacks on women's human rights defenders can range from harassment and verbal abuse to physical assault, including rape and other forms of sexual violence. These can lead to further human rights abuses, including forced pregnancies or forced abortions, disability or long-term ill-health, and the ostracism of women by their families and communities. But social tolerance of violence against women in general often means that attacks on women's human rights defenders are not taken seriously.

Serious sexual assaults are often intended to target women's 'honour', to humiliate and discredit them. Domestic violence can be used to control women and put pressure on them to stop their human rights activism. Family members may claim that the work of women human rights defenders brings shame on the whole family or community, and so use violence and threats to restore 'honour', often with the support or approval of the authorities.

Misogynistic language is used to manipulate attitudes and prejudices about women's sexuality, with the aim of embarrassing and humiliating them into submission. Women's human rights defenders have been branded 'witches', 'snakes'

and 'whores', labelled as sexually promiscuous deviants or anti-religious blasphemers, and accused of promoting alien cultures and breaking up the family. The labels are intended to trivialise their work and discredit their motives. They may face dismissal or forced resignation from their jobs or from public office, eviction from their homes, expulsion from their families and communities, and even forced exile or migration.

Many women's human rights defenders are subjected to arbitrary detention and imprisonment. Allegations of mental illness are sometimes used to confine women in mental health institutions, as a form of punishment or to silence dissent.



Defending sexual rights: Pride parade in Hong Kong, 2009
© Amnesty International/Jerome Yau

VIOLENCE FROM THE FAMILY

Tina Machida is a lesbian activist for Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) who despite death threats pushes for social reform in Zimbabwe. Her parents and husband abused her because of her work and sexual identity. Her parents attempted to 'cure' her from her so-called illness by arranging her marriage to a man they knew was consistently raping her. Tina only escaped by running away from home.

UP AGAINST THE LAW

Women's human rights defenders may face legal harassment intended to disrupt their work and cripple their organisations. Some have been imprisoned on politically motivated charges.

Human rights defenders find their activities restricted by national law and by the way the judiciary functions in a given country. In many places, their work is also affected by customary laws and legal frameworks based on religion and culture, promoting strict notions of gender roles and behaviour.

Those who work for sexual and reproductive rights are often targeted because their activism is seen as threatening religious, cultural or honour codes. When these codes are protected by law, promotion of certain sexual and reproductive rights can become a criminal offence – leaving defenders of these rights at risk of prosecution and imprisonment. For example, in places where abortion has been criminalised, advocates of the right to end a pregnancy when a woman's life or health are at risk face prosecution.



Girls in secondary school, Kabul, Afghanistan
© UNHCR/Lana Slezic/GlobalAware

SECRET EDUCATION FOR GIRLS

During the Taliban's regime in Afghanistan, where girls' education was banned, Shaima Khinjani set up a secret school for girls in her basement – over 100 learners would come each day. This was at great personal risk to herself and her family, yet she continued to run this school until 2001 and the fall of the Taliban.

Source: *Peacewomen*

THREATENED BY COURT ACTION

In October 2007 a legal complaint was filed against nine human rights defenders in Nicaragua for assisting a nine-year-old girl who was raped and made pregnant in 2003 and obtained a legal abortion. (Nicaragua's total ban on abortion came into effect in 2008.)

Ana María Pizarro, Juanita Jiménez, Luisa Molina Arguello, Marta María Blandón, Martha Munguía, Mayra Sirias, Violetta Delgado, Yamileth Mejía and Lorna Norori belong to various organisations that work with survivors of domestic violence and sexual abuse; promote sexual health and women's rights. The complaint, brought by a non-governmental organisation backed by the Roman Catholic Church, accused them of concealment of rape, crimes against the administration of justice and other misdemeanours.

In April 2010, after two and a half years, the nine women received formal notification that the investigation against them had finally been closed. It caused prolonged stress and anxiety to the women and their families, and also disrupted their work.

HELD ON A TRUMPED-UP CHARGE

Two female women's rights human rights defenders, Dr Isatou Touray and Amie Bojang Sissoho of the Gambia Committee for Traditional Practices (GAMCOTRAP), were arrested on 11 October 2010, and charged with theft. They were denied bail and detained pending trial.

Both women have for many years been active in the promotion of gender equality, rights of women and children, particularly in the fight against female genital mutilation and discriminatory practices. Dr Touray is also Secretary General of the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children and a board member of Women Living Under Muslim Laws.

The Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition is calling for their immediate release and for their right to the due processes of law including a free and fair trial.

DEFENDING THE DEFENDERS

Women's human rights defenders put themselves on the line when they work to promote and protect human rights.

Governments have an obligation to protect them, as well as to challenge and eliminate discrimination against women. Until this is done, defenders will always face additional risks and challenges because they are women, as well as for what they do.

The UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (1988) recognises the importance of human rights defenders and of their work. It specifies that states have responsibility to protect and promote space for this work. It also lays out the basis on which human rights defenders can seek redress for violations committed against them. The Declaration is not, in itself, a legally binding instrument. However, it contains a set of principles and rights which are enshrined in other international instruments that are legally binding, including the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights. Amnesty International believes that working with women's human rights defenders assists and strengthens government work in all areas, such as in the areas of counter-terrorism, climate change and economic policies.

The UN Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end it. Signatory states are legally bound to 'pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women'.

The European Union also has guidelines on protection of human rights defenders, for use by EU member states' diplomatic missions. It is essential that the gender-specific recommendations of the European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders are implemented.

OUR WORK

Amnesty International campaigns for governments to pay special attention and implement practical measures to support human rights defenders because of the critical role that women's human rights defenders play in building a more inclusive, just, equal and secure society, and the additional risks they face while defending their rights.