



WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS'
SECURITY STRATEGIES

Insiste Persiste Resiste Existe

JANE BARRY
with **Vahida Nainar**

**WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS'
SECURITY STRATEGIES**

Insiste Persiste Resiste Existe

JANE BARRY
with Vahida Nainar

Responsibility for the contents of the book rests solely with the authors and the project partners: Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, Front Line - The International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, and The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation.

The project partners gratefully acknowledge financial support from the donors listed below.

IDRC  **CRDI**
**International Development
Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada**

 **OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE**
Open Society Institute


Channel Foundation
Channel Foundation

 **Irish Aid**
Department of Foreign Affairs
An Roinn Cosúil Eachtracha
Irish Aid

Copy Editor: Rick Jones, Exile: Design and Editorial Services
Design: Don Harris, dDesign Studios
ISBN: 978-0-9801598-3-7
Printed in Canada

Copyright © 2008 Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights,
Front Line - The International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders,
and The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation

This book was written for the benefit of human rights activists and may be quoted from or
copied so long as the source and authors are acknowledged.

**URGENT
ACTION
FUND**
FOR WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS


KVINNA TILL KVINNA

 **Front Line**
PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Project Partners

Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights

Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights

3100 Arapahoe Ave.
Suite 201
Boulder, Colorado
80303 USA

Tel: 303-442-2388
urgentact@urgentactionfund.org
www.urgentactionfund.org

Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (UAF) is an independent human rights foundation with a strategic mandate to support, protect and sustain women human rights defenders. We provide rapid response grants that enable strategic interventions, and participate in collaborative advocacy and research. UAF supports women defenders operating in the toughest terrains of armed conflict, escalating violence and political repression. Led by activists and inspired by feminism, UAF and her sister organization Urgent Action Fund-Africa have supported women defenders for over a decade with rapid, flexible funding in over 100 countries and territories around the world.

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation

Slakthusplan 3
SE-121 62 Johanneshov
Sweden

Tel: +46 (8)-588 891 00
info@kvinнатillkvinna.se
www.kvinнатillkvinna.org

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation addresses the needs of women in areas affected by war and armed conflict. The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation currently cooperates with women's organizations in the Balkans, South Caucasus and the Middle East. Women's organisations have great experience of the needs that exist in conflict-affected societies. The Kvinna Foundation supports their strategies for achieving change; change that entails women taking control of their own bodies, having the power to make decisions and the right to access society's resources.

Front Line International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

Front Line - The International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

81 Main Street
Blackrock
Co. Dublin
Ireland

T: +353 1 212 3750
info@frontlinedefenders.org
www.frontlinedefenders.org

Front Line addresses needs identified by human rights defenders themselves, including protection, networking, training and access to international bodies that can take action on their behalf. Front Line prioritizes the specific risks faced by women human rights defenders, by defenders of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights, and by defenders of economic, social and cultural (ESC) rights. Front Line seeks to provide rapid and practical support to at-risk human rights defenders, including a 24-hour emergency response phone line (+353 1 21 00 489), campaigns on behalf of defenders at immediate risk, facilitation of temporary relocation in emergency situations, increased visibility and recognition of human rights defenders as a vulnerable group and a small grants program to provide for defenders' security needs. Front Line also conducts research and publishes country-specific reports on the situation of human rights defenders, as well as resource materials and training packages.

Table of contents

Acknowledgements	4
Introduction	7
Understanding Threats	13
The Why: Dangerous Women	13
The What: Aims and Tactics	19
The Baseline	20
The How	24
The Who	26
Exploring Strategies	31
The Courage of Our Convictions	31
Choosing your Battles	34
Water off a Duck's Back	37
Strategic Spirituality and Symbolic Resistance	40
Family	44
Solidarity	50
Networking	54
High-Profile Security	55
International Relations	57
Staying Under the Radar	59
Bearing Witness	62
What's in a Name?	64
The Art of Disguise	66
Sugar Coating	67
Staying Mobile	69
State Protection	71
Creating Safe Spaces	74
Physical Protection	75
The Principles of Protection	76
Conclusion	81
Women Defining Their Own Security	82
Integrated Security	87
We Exist	89
Endnotes	90
Bibliography	92

Acknowledgements

Vahida Nainar is at the heart of this book. For more than a year, she travelled around the world to meet with women human rights defenders in their own countries and in exile—in Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran and Nepal. She met with Tunisian and Algerian defenders in France and Burmese defenders in Thailand.

In each place, she listened. In her quiet, easy way, Vahida drew out the powerful stories that are the foundation of this book.

Eva Zillén, from the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, gathered together the voices of old and new friends in the Balkans—from Bosnia and Herzegovina¹, Montenegro and Serbia.

In all, Vahida and Eva spoke to almost 100 women human rights defenders from 10 countries who shared their experience and advice². We thank them and their organisations for their time, their words and the courage of their convictions:

Organisations: Arche d'Alliance, Association for Women's Initiatives, ASTRA Anti-Trafficking Action, Commission Justice et Paix, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Horizonti, Humanitarian Law Centre, Karen Women's Organization, Lahu Women's Organisation, Lara, Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, Serbia (YUCOM), Liga de Mujeres Desplazadas, Ligue pour la Solidarité Congolais, Mitini, Most, Nepal Women's Community Service Center, Nepal Women's Skill Development Forum, Organización Femenina Popular, Paloung Women Organization, Promotion and Support for Women's Initiatives, Queer Beograd, Réseau des Femme de Droits et Paix, Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres, Saathi, Solidarité des Femmes Activistes pour la Protection et la Défense de Droits Humains, Solidarité Féminine pour la Paix et le Développement Intégral, Shan Women's Action Network, Synergie des Femmes pour les Victimes des Violences Sexuelles, Women in Black, Women's Association for Marginalized Women, Women's League of Burma, and the Women's Union for Peasant Development.

Individuals: Aye Aye Mint, Betty Koumba, Biljana Kovacevic-Vuco, Charm Hom, Dr. Renu Rajbhandari, Dragana Ilic, Dubravka Kovacevic, Emerita Patinio Acue, Jennine Mukanirua, Josephine Kavira Malimukona, Lepa Mladjenovic, Lily Thapa, Maja Stankovic, Mara Radovanovic, Milan Antonijevic, Mohammadi Siddiqui, Natasa Kandic, Patricia Guerrero, Prizma Singh Tharu, Radhia Nasraoui, Radmila Zigic, Sapana Pradhan Malla, Sarita Devi Sharma, Sonja Biserko, and Soraya Gutiérrez.

Andrew Anderson (Front Line – The International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders)³, Julie Shaw (Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights) and Eva Zillén (Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation) oversaw the various project phases, from research to publication.



In addition to project oversight, each of the three project partners supplied particular experience and insight drawn from years of working to protect and support human rights defenders at risk. Julie Shaw initiated and administered this project, inspired by findings and recommendations garnered from UAF's grant-making experience and its publications. Andrew Anderson and Front Line provided key contacts, logistics and security support for the trips to the Democratic Republic of Congo and Iran. Eva Zillén conducted all of the Balkans interviews and presented detailed reviews of early book drafts.

Anna Lidström, Christina Wassholm, Eleanor Douglas, Gégé Katana, Justine Masika Bihamba, Malika Zouba, Rita Thapa and Nang Lao Liang Won assisted with interpretation, local logistics and organisation during field visits. Amy Leipzyger and Ana Ghoresian (interns at the International Women's Human Rights Clinic (IWHR), CUNY School of Law, New York) provided assistance with the research.

The Channel Foundation, Irish Aid, the International Women's Program of the Open Society Institute and the Women's Rights and Citizenship Program of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) provided the support, the funding and the flexibility needed to bring this research to women human rights defenders worldwide.

Emily Utz provided substantive editorial support, guidance and much-needed humour during the writing-up phase of the study. Jelena Djordjevic offered great advice and solidarity, as always.

Rick Jones (Exile: Design & Editorial Services) contributed his expert editing skills at several phases of the study, and Don Harris prepared the study's design and layout.

Finally, we are grateful to Zoe Gudovic of Queer Beograd for inspiring the book's title, based on the song by the Parisian band, Tribad. We believe it sums up, in four words, the essence of women human rights defenders' strategies.

Insiste, soeur, sister.

Persiste, soeur, sister.

Resiste, soeur, sister.

Existe, soeur, sister.





Insiste, soeur, sister

Introduction

chapter 1

All over the world, women defend the rights of individuals and communities facing oppression, discrimination and violence. Their work is powerful, and controversial. And it often meets with bitter, and violent, opposition.

Most women human rights defenders (WHRDs) are well aware of the risks that they face. Activists know, from painful experience, the price that many pay for putting their bodies, and their families, on the line:

Working on human rights is risky. Members of SOFAD are victims of rape. It's a punishment.

And it's the risk they take because of the job.

– Gégé Katana, SOFAD, Democratic Republic of Congo

No one takes these risks lightly, but many accept them as part of the work:

We work to keep ourselves safe. But we recognise that doing our work for peace, justice and reconciliation and opposing nationalism, militarism and violence means that we cannot always be safe.

That is a risk that we are willing to take.

– Anonymous WHRD, Women in Black, Serbia

Women's efforts to defend human rights are rarely recognised. For many, the default assumption is that women are merely passive victims of violence and poverty. Seldom are women activists seen for who they often are: agents of massive change.

As a result, the extraordinary work of thousands of WHRDs, and the accompanying security risks, remain hidden behind layers of discrimination and willful ignorance.

We face

persistent

persecution.

Because we

tell the truth.

– Berenice Celeyta Alayón, Colombia⁴



The invisibility of women activists springs from the perception of women as passive victims in armed conflicts.

A good start for the international community to be able to see and take into account the threats towards women's security is to start perceiving women as actors.

– Jacobson, A.S. (2005)
Security on whose terms?
If men and women were equal, p. 49

Violence against WHRDs is infrequently acknowledged for what it truly is: a component of deliberate, calculated strategies to silence them and to stop them from conducting their daily work to change society, save lives and claim justice.

This denial of women's agency renders WHRDs invisible, and by so doing, it puts them at great risk. It is much easier to get away with humiliating, raping, disappearing or executing women who are 'just women' than attacking human rights defenders. Such attacks are presented as 'normal' violence against women. When this does not work, it is easy to suggest that WHRDs are traitors, criminals and subversives who deserve what they get.

Increasingly, though, WHRDs and their supporters are challenging the silence, and impunity, that exist in relation to violence against human rights defenders. They have begun to document the specific experiences of other women working to protect and promote human rights, including particular threats to their safety and well-being. Their efforts have gone a long way towards making the work of WHRDs—and their safety concerns—visible, recognised and valued (see the box on Increasing Visibility).

In 2006, Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (UAF) initiated a new project with Front Line and the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (KtK) to tackle a key piece of the security puzzle. We decided to try to record, and understand, the varied strategies of WHRDs to keep themselves safe and well.

Despite all of the challenges that they encounter, WHRDs keep going strong, and succeeding. Clearly, therefore, they have ways of coping with, and mitigating, security threats.

Although Front Line, KtK, UAF and others have been combating and documenting threats against WHRDs for many years, we realised that the specific security strategies women employ have not been collected and shared publicly.

Increasing Visibility

Over the past decade, several human rights organisations have significantly increased recognition of the work of WHRDs and the gender-specific challenges they face. Among them are:

- **The International Campaign on Women Human Rights Defenders**, coordinated by the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). It has organised several key consultations and developed the excellent guidebook for WHRDs, *Claiming Rights, Claiming Justice* (2007).
- **The Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on Human Rights Defenders**. Since her appointment in 2000, Hina Jilani has tirelessly and meticulously documented violations and killings of WHRDs.
- **Front Line** has paid increased attention to understanding the gendered dimensions of protecting human rights defenders, developing security training courses specifically for WHRDs and for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) defenders.
- **The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation** has worked with scores of women activists to bring us several publications, including: *To Make Room for Changes—Peace Strategies from Women’s Organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (2006) and *Security on Whose Terms? If Men and Women Were Equal* (2005).
- **Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights (UAF) and UAF-Africa** have published books and reports describing the challenges and triumphs of women and LGBTIQ defenders, including: *What’s the Point of Revolution if We Can’t Dance?* (2008); and “*THIS BODY!*” *Supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) Organising in East Africa Conference Report* (2006).
- **The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission and the Center for Women’s Global Leadership** published the very practical and powerful *Written Out: How Sexuality is Used to Attack Women’s Organising* (2005).

We also realised the importance of sharing these strategies widely, in a way that would afford WHRDs across the world an opportunity to learn from each other.

There are various reasons why we know so little about these security strategies. First, WHRDs are busy people. Many of the strategies they use to defend themselves are simply second nature, and they do not have time to stop, compile, analyse and promote them.

Perhaps more important, though, is that when it comes to safety, women often prioritise others—their emphasis is most frequently on keeping others safe, not on self-protection. However, it is often within the *very same strategies that WHRDs and their organisations use to defend others* that we find the most effective and innovative methods that they could utilise to protect themselves.

Our next task was to present those strategies in a way that would encourage activists to recognise their own resilience, to learn from each other's strategies and to strengthen their varied approaches to security. But we also needed to describe them in a way that would not heighten their burdens or exacerbate the threats.

However, writing publicly about security strategies was tricky. Revealing too many details could expose defenders to more risk. Yet revealing too little would misrepresent the depth and variety of the strategies they use—and it would make for a very short book!

In this study, therefore, we sought to strike a balance. As often as possible, we describe real situations and strategies, matched with

the names of individuals and organisations interviewed. Where necessary, though, we have changed names, locations and specific details to protect anonymity.

Finally, as mentioned above, we recognise that WHRDs have very little time for anything besides their work—they like to cut to the chase. So, we have also done our best to make this book as concise, straightforward and practical as possible, while still retaining the richness and depth of the stories that are at its core.

Front Line, KtK and UAF produced this book primarily for WHRDs themselves, in the hope that they will take away from it practical perspectives about the threats they face and a range of useful ideas about security strategies from around the world.

We begin by looking at strategies used *against* WHRDs: what is behind the threats they endure—the why, the what, the baseline, the how and the who and the context.⁵

Then we offer up a varied menu of strategies that WHRDs employ to respond to these threats. Each is presented as an option, with both strengths and weaknesses.

The final section of the book speaks both to WHRDs and to a wider audience, particularly to individuals working in organisations, institutions and governments that support human rights. Here we conclude with a series of broad, and also very specific, considerations that can help to guide the way that we think about, and support, the safety and well-being of the women who defend those rights.

Recognising Risks Faced by Human Rights Defenders of All Genders

This study focuses on the security of WHRDs. However, in the process of the research, we also came across a number of often unspoken challenges that human rights defenders of other genders face in their work.

For example, several WHRDs in the Democratic Republic of Congo told us that sexual violence was not just a tool to silence women. Their male colleagues had also been raped.

Because men are typically expected to be ‘macho’, and ultimately remain silent in the face of security threats, they often feel stigmatised and under pressure to cope alone in the aftermath of violent attacks, including sexual violence and torture.

They may also be less likely to seek solidarity and support within a community of male defenders, as Otto Saki of Zimbabwe pointed out:

We do not talk about [stress] much. You mention that you’ve been threatened, but people do not discuss it further. If you say you’ve been threatened, the feeling is: ‘so what?’ There is also denial. When the women are arrested and then released, the other women flock to the house to chat, and to talk about it. For the men, this doesn’t happen.

Violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex human rights defenders is also extremely widespread, although rarely documented, and it is often far too easily disguised as ‘common crime’.

It is important to shatter the silence around all forms of violence against human rights defenders of all gender identities. In doing so, we will help many to begin healing and to develop more effective security strategies that will benefit the entire human rights movement.



Persiste, soeur, sister

Understanding Threats

chapter 2

The Why: Dangerous Women

Women human rights defenders scare those who abuse power. They make demands that challenge entrenched beliefs and powerful institutions.

They are persistent, they will not back down, and they will not go away (although sometimes, they make the strategic choice to slip into the background to prepare to fight another day).

Women human rights defenders expose injustices by speaking the truth:

It is mostly women who bring things out into the open. Things like talking about facing the past, or when Women in Black talked about conscientious objectors in 1991. Women have opened consciences.

– Zoe Gudovic, Queer Beograd, Serbia

By speaking out against powerful people in their communities and governments, WHRDs threaten reputations:

In most cases, it is prestigious people like teachers, lawyers and journalists who commit human rights violations. When they are confronted by women activists, they feel like they have lost their prestige or status in society. That's why they fear the women activists.

– Nirmala Neupane (Thapa), Nepal Women Skill Development Forum, Nepal

When women get organised, they denounce and name actors—and they [the perpetrators] don't like that. It harms them and their image.

– Liga de la Mujeres Desplazados, Colombia

Violent, aggressive responses to women's rights work are based on fear. Fear that these women are challenging power bases, traditions—the status quo. That is a fact.

In Bosnia, organised criminal gangs complain that WHRDs are ‘hurting their souls’ with their accusations. In Hungary, a convicted gunrunner even took legal action against Iren Karmen for publishing her book *Facing the Mafia*, because, as Iren explained: ‘*He thought that my writing about his political connections hurt his reputation.*’⁶

However, WHRDs usually go beyond speaking out, and seek justice. Perpetrators find this particularly worrying, because often, they succeed. For example, when two local men brutally raped a young woman from Tuzla, Bosnia, she took the courageous decision to take her case against them to court. The group Horizonti helped her to win the controversial suit. The community responded with trepidation:

When the trial was over, we heard that there were rumours in town that ‘there is a very dangerous women’s organisation in Tuzla, they will always win. They are very cruel women.’

That is good; it means that they know that there are women’s organisations that will protect the victims—and the law.

– **Horizonti, Bosnia**

As the Horizonti example shows, women’s human rights work is not just challenging, it is also extremely effective. Sadly, though, success often results in violent threats and attacks on the women’s organisations, as members of the Young Women’s Leadership Institute in Kenya found when their work on empowering young women and combating female genital mutilation (FGM) infuriated a violent gang:

*‘If you don’t leave Dandora, we are going to circumcise you!’ read the gory message sent to activists of the Young Women’s Leadership Institute on 15 May 2007. The threat was from Mungiki, a terror gang that has been in the headlines of the Kenyan papers for a series of macabre beheadings, murders, killing of policemen, and running an extortion cartel.*⁷

While those threats are terrifying, they also serve as a powerful reminder to activists that their work is hitting home.

*For Saida Ali, the Director of the Institute, the message was undoubtedly scary. But it was also proof that her organisation has been successful in its interventions.*⁸

In trying to understand the motivations behind these threats, Lepa Mladjenovic in Serbia reminded us that it is crucial to recognise the difference between ‘the facts and the fear’.

Violent, aggressive responses to women's rights work are based on fear. Fear that these women are challenging power bases, traditions—the status quo. That is a fact.

But this fear is often based on misperceptions as well, such as that activists who are fighting for a world without violence are really trying to create a world without men, or they are trying to turn other women against their families.

For Horizonti, the fear came when they shifted from psychosocial activities to work on domestic violence in post-war Bosnia:

We were never considered a threat when we worked only with psychosocial support—and for a wider target group. But, as we work more and more on women's rights, we become more of a threat. When we started to work with domestic violence things changed.

We have men that come and shout, 'What do you do with my wife—she's just stubborn.'

As our beneficiaries are women, we are immediately seen as an organisation that wants a society without men.

- Anonymous WHRD, Horizonti, Bosnia

The Cycle of Impunity: No Truth, No Justice

The level of sexual violence against women in the Democratic Republic of Congo is extremely high. However, the majority of perpetrators, especially in 'no-law' zones, go unpunished. In South Kivu province, for example, 14,200 rape cases were registered between 2005 and 2007 (IRIN, 2008). But only 287 were ever brought to court.

To put the numbers in perspective, that is just two per cent of registered rape cases prosecuted. And this does not take into consideration the thousands of cases that were never reported out of fear and shame.

The women who fight to expose this violence put themselves at great risk every day. They do it because if no one speaks out, we will never know the truth about the unimaginable scale of violence in their country. Survivors would suffer, and die, in silence.

If they do speak out, though, and are not protected, then often, they too will be silenced, one way or another.

If I speak the truth, someone will rape or kill me. I am not protected.

- Anonymous WHRD, DRC

This is what impunity does, and it is insidious. This is what WHRDs confront daily in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Threats as Impact Indicators

One of the things we often say in our training is that, although it sounds strange, ‘threats are almost a measure of effectiveness’. HRDs [human rights defenders] are generally not threatened or attacked if what they are doing is ineffectual. It is when they touch on powerful interests that they are threatened or attacked. When one looks at a pattern of threats or incidents then one can often discern that the threats/incidents/attacks came in response to the activities of the individual/organisation. For this reason, it is important to monitor and share information on threats because they provide information on the perpetrators and how they are reacting to what you are doing. This can inform your security plans and action strategy.

It is a natural reaction to ignore a threat. It is a kind of denial. But each threat is also the product of a calculation. The perpetrator has made some kind of rational decision (even if they may not be very rational) about whether to act against, threaten or ignore your activism. If they decide to make a threat it could be because they:

- a) don’t have the capacity to enact the threat;
- b) don’t have the capacity to enact the threat today;
- c) do have the capacity, but would prefer not to have to mobilise the resources;
- d) do have the capacity, but would prefer not to have to deal with the perceived political costs.

The form the threat takes can also provide information on the perpetrators – and how much they are willing to risk (i.e. what cost they will bear, what price they would pay). For example:

- A text message costs almost nothing.
- A phone call just as you return to your home or office can imply surveillance (and the capacity to mount such an operation).
- A hand-delivered note costs time and effort. Depending on where and how it is delivered, it can expose and identify the messenger.
- An open threat in person implies the person does not fear being caught.

– Andrew Anderson, Front Line

Women human rights defenders in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) face similar confusion and opposition:

[When we began our work] men saw us as their enemy. They said that we wanted to put them in conflict with their wives and children.

- Dogale Ndahe, SECOODEF, DRC

When we do sensitization of women in the region about women's rights, the men say you women encourage our women to strike against us and threaten them.

- Esther Tshinama, UFEDEPA, DRC

The men from the Banyamurenge accuse us of turning their wives against them.

- Gégé Katana, SOFAD, DRC

These changes mean shifts in power relations, which are ultimately about creating a fairer world for everyone, as Horizonti reminded us:

There is a great need for raising awareness of women's rights—this is not to be against men, it is better for everyone!

Of course, to those individuals and groups who violate human rights, WHRDs really are dangerous.

If women activists win their battles, there will be losers. Powerful people will lose political control, money, freedom.

Repressive regimes would fall. Organised criminal gangs would see their profits from human trafficking and drug running disappear. Politicians and corporations would be exposed for corruption. Scores of people would face trial at last, and many would spend the rest of their lives in jail.

This is why so many people—politicians, paramilitaries, friends and even family members—try their best to stop WHRDs.

Threats to WHRDS: A Typology

The guidebook 'Claiming Rights, Claiming Justice', produced by APWLD in close collaboration with the International Campaign on Women Human Rights Defenders, contains an excellent classification of the violations, risks and constraints confronted by WHRDS. These are summarised below:

1. **Attacks on life, body and mental integrity:** killing and attempted killing; disappearance; torture; cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment; rape, sexual assault and abuse; and domestic violence and excessive use of force.
2. **Physical and psychological deprivation of liberty:** arbitrary arrest and detention, administrative detention, kidnapping/abduction, and psychiatric incarceration.
3. **Attacks against personhood and reputation:** threats, warnings and ultimatums; psychological harassment; blackmail and extortion; sexual harassment; sexuality baiting; slander, vilification, labelling, and smear campaigns; hate speech; and stigmatisation, segregation and ostracism.
4. **Invasion of privacy and violations involving personal relationships:** raids of offices or homes, and attacks on and intimidation of family and community members.
5. **Legal provisions and practices restricting women's activism:** restrictive use of customary law and legal frameworks based on religion; criminalisation and prosecution; illegal investigation, interrogation, surveillance and blacklisting; laws formulated against non-governmental organisations (NGOs); and sanctions in the workplace.
6. **Violations of women's freedom of expression, association and assembly:** restrictions on freedom of association, the right to receive funding, freedom of expression, access to information, communication with international bodies, and freedom of assembly.
7. **Gendered restrictions on freedom of movement:** permission needed to travel abroad, internal travel restrictions or obstruction, denial of visas for travel, and deportation.
8. **Non-recognition of violations and impunity.**

The What: Aims and Tactics

Regardless of the reasons behind the threats, the aims are often very simple: to stop, slow down or control women's human rights activities. Those opposed to WHRDs use a number of different tactics to achieve these goals.

Isolating women is a key tactic, particularly because WHRDs draw so much of their power—and protection—from relationships and solidarity with others. There are a number of ways to isolate women directly: cut them off from the support of local, national and international sources; limit their freedom of movement; and imprisonment (in jails or in their own houses). There are more indirect, but still effective, ways of increasing isolation as well, such as planting seeds of doubt and mistrust within communities (through defamation and slander), and even among women defenders themselves.

Another tactic is to wear women down psychologically in order to discourage them from continuing their work. Sometimes this is done through persistent, constant harassment—for instance, the police visit and search offices on a daily basis for weeks on end. Other times it occurs via ongoing surveillance intended to create a climate of fear.

Frequently, threats involve careful premeditation, and are part of extremely well organised and calculated strategies. For example:

Surveillance and assassination: Operation Dragon was a failed plot to assassinate 175 activists in the Cali region of Colombia in 2004, among them Berenice Celeyta Alayón. Masterminded by Lieutenant-Colonel Julian Villate Leal, a highly decorated member of the Third Brigade of the Colombian Army, Operation Dragon involved a range of state and non-state actors, including private companies, private security groups and public security forces.⁹

Financial control: former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic used, among other things, financial, legal and administrative tactics to harass activist organisations, as Natasa Kandic described:

During 1993–99, Milosevic's strategy was to minimise the presence and action of human rights organisations in Serbia. During this time, we were often checked by the financial police. According to the law, they had the right to do this, but they chose to come to our office very often.

It was a way to harass the staff, to make them feel that it would be better not to work here and hopefully make them leave human rights work altogether. During the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] bombings, they were here in our office for six weeks, they checked every paper but they did not find anything. At the same time, (during the bombings) the Military Security Service visited the office three times; they also visited my home twice. They wanted to show that 'we can arrest all of you', and 'we will accuse you of espionage'.

Other attacks are spontaneous, such as sudden violence against women during peaceful demonstrations.

But *all* threats are rooted in society, culture, religion and traditional beliefs, and are supported by what is, or is not, considered socially acceptable in any given place. Understanding the context within which these threats and attacks happen is essential to challenging and dismantling them.

The Baseline

Front Line's 2007 Dublin Platform for Human Rights Defenders devoted several presentations and sessions to the specific security concerns of WHRDs. During one such session, a woman defender commented, with genuine confusion:

Personally, I just don't see any difference between men and women human rights defenders. I don't get it. What's the big deal?

In response, Mary Akrami summed up her reality as a WHRD in Afghanistan:

In a country where life is easily disregarded, the lives of women are considered the lowest form of life that exists. Women are seen as the property of men.¹⁰

Later, Solange (Sonia) Pierre, the Director of the Movement for Dominican Women of Haitian Descent (MUDHA), echoed Akrami's words, explaining that Haitian women and children in the Dominican Republic are seen only as a source of labour:

I am a human rights defender. A woman. A mother. But here in the Dominican Republic, they have asserted their rights, their 'droit de seigneur' over Haitian women. Our children work, they don't go to school. We have no rights. To them, we are just a source of labour.¹¹

That is the baseline. Context sets the stage for the lives of WHRDs.¹² In a world where women are often regarded as subhuman, WHRDs are fighting an uphill battle—first to be recognised as a human being, then as a defender. Every day they walk out into, and speak up in, a world that sees them as less than human. As property.

A world in which they barely exist:

The prevalent attitude in society is that women do not have much to say in society or in the family. Women are generally considered subhuman. We have no rights in any family matters. Only boys are considered 'real' children.

– Sylvie Biruru, PAIF, DRC

After we formed our group, there have been a lot of troubles. People in society treat you with disgust. They say a lot of things against us that are quite unbearable. That our group spreads ‘vikruti’ [bad morals]. That we should be beaten and set straight.

That we should not be allowed to exist.

– Anonymous WHRD, Mitini, Nepal

A world in which women are reviled as whores, simply for stepping foot outside of their homes:

WHRDs in courts or in other public places are considered prostitutes. They forbid women to wear pants—as a rule of the parliament—because trousers expose women in every way.

– Yvette Kabuo, RFDP, DRC

In Tunisia, police have beaten women activists in public, saying they are prostitutes.

– Anonymous WHRD, Tunisia

A world in which women’s bodies are commodities that are simply used up, until nothing remains:

[In the Balkans] the new elite that emerged during the wars became rich through smuggling cigarettes and selling drugs and weapons. It is especially important to stress that they became rich primarily through women, through trafficking of women, and the abuse of women in various criminal acts.

I recently met one woman, relatively young, who looked like a 50 year old. She was kept for years as a sex slave for Arkan’s troops. After her parents abandoned her, a Montenegrin soldier bought her.

We have heard terrible stories from women who were victims. They were maltreated and threatened. They were forced to smuggle drugs in their genitals (250–300 grams of heroin can be placed into a vagina). They smuggled arms and ammunition. Police knew that this was occurring, but did nothing.

Many women were transferred, after they were deemed ‘worn out’, to special places where they were used for organ harvesting. Those who were designated for organ harvesting were not older than 25 years old.

– Ljiljana Raicevic, Women’s Safe House, Podgorica¹³

Context matters because it is the foundation for anyone wanting to stop women defending human rights. It is what makes slander or dismissing human rights violations as ‘normal’ violence against women so effective. For many, slander resonates and is reassuring. It reifies a pre-existing worldview that women are less than human. All you have to do is tap into collective, subconscious beliefs about women’s worth, and their place in society.

By labelling women who challenge these beliefs as ‘crazy’, ‘sexually deviant’, ‘witches’ or ‘garbage’, their opponents are continuing a process of dehumanising, minimising and devaluing WHRDs. They are reinforcing the idea that these women are the ‘other’, functioning outside of ‘normal’ society:

The media campaign against us is based on insults. The aim is to demonise and dehumanise us by insults such as calling us ‘ugly, fat women’ and ‘lesbians’ (particularly because this is such a macho and homophobic society). We are more like totems than humans. The international community has to see what is behind this demonising of us, why we are seen as the enemies.

– Sonja Biserko, Serbia

A related strategy is to criminalise women and their human rights activities. Women who work on all sides of a conflict are called traitors or spies. Those who speak out against the government are accused of terrorism. This makes them legitimate targets of state persecution.

Both strategies work to justify further attacks against WHRDs. By discrediting these women and portraying them as ‘threats’ to society, activists are denied the possibility of support, and protection, from community members.

Uncommon Crimes

In Colombia, attacks against WHRDs have often been made to look like robberies, even though information has been removed from computers.

The way threats come has changed, and a lot of it looks like common crime. A lot of women working here are single working mothers. Some women’s homes were broken into, computers broken into and information taken.

– Soraya Gutiérrez, Colombia

Because attacks can be easily depicted as ‘normal’ violence against women, bystanders simply chalk them up as a common crime, and walk on by in silence.

Eventually it is just background noise. Another woman murdered on the Mexico border, mass rape in the DRC ... it all melts into one horrifying story, and becomes less relevant to us, as individuals. It becomes more acceptable.

Everyday there are so many urgent actions issued. So, after some time, people don't take it seriously. There are at least five incidents a week of violence against indigenous people, against Afro-Colombians, against young people. This is a disaster.

– Patricia Guerrero, Colombia

At a certain point, some people begin to believe that this violence is normal:

A judge once said about alleged traffickers: ‘oh, they are respectable people, I cannot give you their names’. And I answered: ‘Since when was it respectable to sell people?’

I don't have the same rage anymore, but I am still angry about it. If someone says this is normal ... [I scream back] it is not normal!

Our society cannot progress if this is considered normal.

– Radmila Zigic, Lara, Bosnia

When women are deliberately made invisible, dehumanised and minimised, then their lives are seen as less valuable. So who would notice if they went missing?

*Silence is violence
in women and
poor people / if
more people were
screaming then I
could relax / but
a good brain ain't
diddly if you don't
have the facts.*

– Ani DiFranco

The How

It takes a lot to intimidate an activist, as Prizma Singh Tharu reminded us:

They [Maoists] sometimes send their women to our events and meetings. After coming to our events, they would tell us it is good that you are working for women, but don't sell yourself to foreign money. I say I have never sold myself, and I never will.

I have risen through [this conflict], through struggle within my family and caste-based discrimination. And so none of this intimidated me.

– Prizma Singh Tharu, Nepal

That is why they look for other ways to get to you—they try to find your Achilles' heel. Often, it is very personal. It can be about who you are or who you love. What you fear.

Almost all women fear rape above all.

For women, the worst fear always has to do with our bodies.

– Zoe Gudovic, Queer Beograd, Serbia

Men [human rights defenders] are 'just' killed. The killing of women is much crueller. Things are done to women's bodies before and after the killing.

Many OFP members were raped before being killed. Their stomachs were cut, poles inserted in their vaginas and they were beaten to death. When we find bodies of these women, they had signs attached to them that said 'I am a prostitute'. Or their bodies showed other forms of sexual torture. It seems there is some form of perverse pleasure in mutilating women's bodies.

– Anonymous WHRD, Organización Femenina Popular (OFP), Colombia

In Colombia, after their homes were broken into and computer files stolen, WHRDs were left with an eerie warning:

Their dolls were dismembered.

They always try to give hidden subversive sexual messages and ones that enter women's private lives.

– Soraya Gutiérrez, Colombia

The threat of sexual violence is so powerful, and effective, because it raises primal fears ingrained in the psyche of women from early in life; because it often echoes reality—past incidents of violence and abuse; and because sexual violence is common, and accepted, in every society, and therefore is much easier to get away with.

Another way to get to WHRDs is through their families. First the threats:

Because of my work as an activist, the authorities have reproached and labelled my children.

– Anonymous WHRD, Tunisia

They threatened to put my children in boiling water.

– Adele Murughuli, SOFEPADI, DRC

When threats do not work, the attacks begin:

They finally got me when they threatened my children—I couldn't focus any more. They called and told me 'We have your daughter, and we are raping her now'.

– Anonymous WHRD, DRC¹⁴

They raped my sister. Threatened my children. We felt so alone then. So abandoned.

– Anonymous WHRD, Guatemala¹⁵

In 2002, the military came to rape my younger sister. She tried to escape, but eventually they got to her. Because she resisted, the soldiers said as punishment she would not be able to use her sex again and shot her in her vagina.

– Emirite Tabisha, FESA, DRC

Sometimes, what you have to lose is each other.

That is when a 'divide and conquer' strategy comes into play. A common tactic used against WHRDs in Iran is to try to pit them against each other, particularly during interrogation in prison.

In some cases, it takes little more than dropping a hint—for example, intelligence services simply imply that a human rights defender has given away information about another defender, although, of course, that information really came from surveillance. But when you are under so much pressure, it is easy to make a hasty judgement and to begin to suspect your colleagues.

To break us, [government security agents] began to buy women and create division among women. In one meeting, a woman put her phone on and the security agents heard all of their meeting. After the event, they came to pick me up, quoting me verbatim and demanding an explanation as to why I said all of it.

– Gégé Katana, SOFAD, DRC

In the present government's policy of democratic security, they have developed subtle ways of buying information. So there is always a possibility to denounce one another. Security is being aware of this, and safeguarding oneself from it.

– Camilla Esguerra Muelle, Colombia

We women's rights groups are very much divided because of overt manipulation. At the national level, the divide and rule policy is very much there.

– Anonymous WHRD, Nepal

The Who

So who is behind the threats? The list is long, and includes state actors—politicians, police, and the military—and non-state actors—paramilitaries, transnational corporations, organised criminals, neighbours, family members and even other human rights groups. As Renu Rajbhandari pointed out, that is just about everyone:

Threats come from the community as well as the army, the Maoists, sarkar [government], the police, religious groups and other human rights activists, too.

So really, from everybody.

– Renu Rajbhandari, Nepal

Although it varies by country and context, one thing is clear: many of these actors are connected. This makes them much more dangerous, because those linkages protect them and guarantee impunity.

Everything is linked: militarisation, lack of transitional justice and dealing with the past. Non-state actors such as the clergy are behind a revival of traditionalism and right-wing [action], and this is provoked by the state. This climate is the reason that WiB is under attack.

– Anonymous WHRD, Women in Black, Serbia

In Colombia, the ties between the government, paramilitaries and drug cartels make for a dangerous concoction, as Luz Marina Monzón explained:

There is another related phenomenon that has affected the security of human rights defenders [in Colombia]: the links of the armed conflict, which involves guerrilla and paramilitary groups, to drug trafficking, corruption and the design of anti-terrorist governmental policies. This situation means that human rights defenders are labelled as sympathisers or enemies of the guerrillas or the government, whatever is convenient to the agenda of the warring parties. In the case of women human rights defenders, they become vulnerable to violations by all parties who fight their battles on women's bodies.¹⁶

Adding transnational corporations, such as oil companies, to the mix introduces even more armed actors and increases the threats to WHRDs:

Consortium Colombia Energy came in 2002. Because the petrol companies pay the army for protection, this led to an increase in the army presence. But because there is also a guerrilla presence here, the army sees peasants and indigenous persons as allied with the rebels. So the whole area is militarised.

– Anonymous WHRD, Colombia

Then there are threats from those who are closest to you. From your family:

I do not have a husband now. He started to drink and became violent. One of the problems was that I became stronger and was seen on television. That pissed him off.

I have to be an example as a leader. How can I give advice to women if I live in the same condition? I told him that he had to choose between alcohol and family.

– Anonymous WHRD, Balkans

Even when family members are human rights activists themselves, sometimes, instead of offering solidarity, they commit violence against WHRDs, too:

Some women leaders are beaten by their political activist husbands because of their women's rights work.

– Anonymous WHRD, Burma/Thailand

Colleagues within the mainstream human rights world also threaten the security of WHRDs by denying them a voice:

Where I am working, there are other institutions that are working on human rights and feel they are the only legitimate human rights activists. They do not consider women to be activists, and whatever they work on is not considered human rights work. They feel that they are the only human rights activists and nobody need interfere in their work.

– Nirmala Neupane (Thapa), Nepal Women Skill Development Forum, Nepal

Particularly if you are working on 'controversial' issues, you face opposition from within the women's movement itself:

Women who speak up about sexuality or sexual rights are always marginalised. Always.

Even the women's movement does not recognise these rights, or support organisations working on some rights.

– Renu Rajbhandari, Nepal

What We Are Up Against

When Gustavo Petro, an opposition senator in the Colombian Congress, testified on the role of transnational corporations in human rights violations in his country, he named the perpetrators as:

'Those who dress as senators in the morning, trade in cocaine in the afternoon and give orders to the paramilitaries in the evening.'

– Griswold, D. (2007) 'Oil companies behind violence in Colombia', *Workers World*.

Finally, there are the threats that are inherent to a culture of activism that sometimes expects, and even celebrates, dying for the cause.¹⁷ Human rights defenders who give up their lives, literally or figuratively, are revered for their sacrifice as martyrs.

This culture makes it difficult to talk about or relate directly to the fear of physical attack and being killed. Instead, WHRDs deploy an array of strategies to cope indirectly with fear, including hyper-vigilance, fatalism, humour, denial and paranoia. Sometimes, they will belittle themselves for feeling it, sometimes they will belittle others. And sometimes, they will recognise it, but say, ‘what right do I have to worry about my own safety? In comparison to others, my situation isn’t so bad’.

There are often huge emotional, spiritual and physical costs to suppressing fear and facing violence on a daily basis. Of living with a constant lack of recognition or freedom. Of having to hide who you are, what you believe in, who you love—as part of your key survival strategies.

In the end, it has to show up somewhere.

As Jelena Djordjevic put it, ‘no matter what we do, it gets written down into our bodies.’¹⁸ In the end, it often comes out as illness. Heartache. Trauma. Irritability, anger or fights with lovers and family. Lost relationships. Isolation’.

And all of this is integral to women’s security.

There are often huge emotional, spiritual and physical costs to suppressing fear and facing violence on a daily basis. Of living with a constant lack of recognition or freedom. Of having to hide who you are, what you believe in, who you love—as part of your key survival strategies.



Resiste, soeur, sister

The Courage of Our Convictions

Women human rights defenders draw strength from adversity. Their activism is grounded in very personal experiences of intense discrimination, rejection and violence.

On the most fundamental level, WHRDs use the courage of their convictions to protect themselves:

When you believe strongly in what you are doing, you become stronger than you really are.

– Anonymous WHRD, Horizonti, Bosnia

During a crisis, the first thing is to have a conviction that you are doing the right thing.

– Lway Aye Nang, Paloung Women Organization, Burma/Thailand

Whenever there is a problem, we call a board meeting and have a discussion. We believe that we have done nothing wrong. And this belief has seen us through a lot of trouble. When those who threaten us realise that we are not doing anything wrong, they will slowly come to respect and appreciate us and our work.

So, basically, it is the conviction of our belief in women's rights work that has been our main source of strength and support. When we step out to do social work, we cannot be deterred by threats and the difficulties. Plus, when we have done no wrong, why should we worry?

– Sarita Devi Sharma, Saathi, Nepal

How do you deal with the stress of your job?

First, I use music, then I love dancing.

These are two ways of saying to the merchants of death that the essence of dignity is happiness.

– Anonymous WHRD, Colombia (Front Line, 2007)

Acting fearless is often a very deliberate strategy. It is confusing to perpetrators because it is so unexpected. It is intimidating. And it works:

When the paramilitaries took over Barranca, they published a manual for peaceful coexistence. The children who didn't obey [their rules] were tied up and beaten.

OFP [Organización Femenina Popular] went as a group of about 20 women and brought back the kids. Women just walked to those places and pretended that the paramilitaries did not exist. They would simply go up, untie the children, and bring them back.

The [paramilitaries] simply could not hold on to a group of fearless women.

– Anonymous WHRD, OFP, Colombia

We know that if we show that we are not afraid, we are seen as powerful and they will back off. There is a lot of research that says this. In my work as a journalist, I have written a lot about crime, public affairs corruption, and I have learnt over time that the most important thing is to show 'I am not afraid'. Sometimes there have been cases when criminals come to my office and say things like 'I want to kill you.' Then I took the phone and answered 'do you want to tell the police who you want to kill?'

It is not until afterwards that the fear comes.

– Anonymous WHRD, Balkans

Sometimes, that courage is a final act of resistance. When paramilitaries abducted the founder of OFP, Esperanza Amaris Miranda, in October 2003, she knew they would take her life, but she made sure that they could not take her body:

The paramilitaries took her from her house in a taxi. Her daughter tried to grab her but was unsuccessful. The daughter called the OFP office and asked them to come with 15 women. It was only 10 minutes since they had taken Esperanza, but they had already killed her. At the back of the paramilitaries' taxi they had saws and knives to mutilate her body and disappear it.

But the women had arrived by then and they could not do that. Esperanza escaped and ran five blocks before they shot her in the back.

Esperanza was irreverent and knew that that's what they wanted to do with her [mutilate her body and make her disappear] and therefore she ran from the taxi in order to leave evidence.

– Anonymous WHRD, OFP, Colombia

For many activists, fearlessness comes from a combination of sources. Sometimes, it is derived through a feeling that they have nothing left to lose (bordering on fatalism), and a pervasive sense that if they do not do the work, no one else will.

[I face] a lot of political pressure. But the point is not to be cowed down with these challenges. Death will come once ... no one can escape that.

– **Mohammadi Siddiqui, Fatima Foundation, Nepal**

We have no protection. But because there are so many victims here, there is a feeling that there is nothing to lose.

– **Emirite Tabisha, FESA, DRC**

I have belief in my work and a conviction that I will not be harmed. Or, I felt that okay, so I will die, but I have to continue my work.

– **Prizma Singh Tharu, Nepal**

Death is not a problem; and we don't take precautions not to die; but because it is important to work—I do what I want to do, and that is more important, because I could die anyway.

– **Anonymous WHRD, Algeria**

Using fearlessness as a protection strategy can have drawbacks, because it can mean that we do not recognise when it is time to shift gears and realise the value of feeling, and understanding, fear.

Jelena Djordjevic pointed out one of the many reasons WHRDs do not talk about fear: they often believe that they are not supposed to feel it in the first place.

There's a stigma around talking about fear, because activists are supposed to be fearless. We need to be fearless. Because if we feel fear, we are weak. And when we're weak, we're not useful.¹⁹

Sometimes, though, when WHRDs block out the fear, they block out the threats, as well. In the past, SOFAD did not take threats of retaliation for documenting sexual violence in the DRC seriously. It did not do so until those threats became a reality:

We were told: 'One day, we will finish by raping you. Then you can have a good report.'

We received anonymous letters, which we didn't take seriously before.

Now we do. Because five SOFAD women have been raped because of their work to denounce sexual violence.

– **Gégé Katana, SOFAD, DRC**

Recognising healthy fear and responding strategically is a balancing act between denial and paranoia:

What we have learned from human rights defenders is that it is important to acknowledge that fear is a natural reaction. It is part of the body's defence mechanisms. Those who are threatening us are trying to scare us. And it can feel like we are giving in if we pay too much attention to these threats.

*No, the only tired
I was, was tired of
giving in.*

– Rosa Parks, USA

But monitoring and analysing threats are an important part of any good security management strategy. Threats almost always arise out of a process of calculation and decision-making from the side of the perpetrators. Their timing, and content, can provide important information on who is making the threat, the likelihood of attack, and what is triggering the threat.

Sharing information on threats, within a structured framework—when you are looking together at how to manage security—isn't disempowering. It doesn't mean that you must stop what you are doing. It provides an opportunity to take precautionary measures where appropriate.

And it also helps to build mutual support.

– Andrew Anderson, Front Line, Ireland

As with all strategies, it is about making calculated choices.

Choosing your Battles

Women human rights defenders make strategic choices about when and how to take a stand. They know that flexibility, and adaptability, are key to staying safe.

Sometimes, that means holding firm and standing your ground. That is, making use of sheer strategic stubbornness:

Women are persistent; we do not want to give up!

– Lara, Bosnia

Like the day in December 1955 when Rosa Parks, an African-American woman, refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man, sparking the Montgomery Bus Boycott, one of the most important movements against racial segregation in the United States—and with it, the rise of Martin Luther King. In her autobiography, she explains why she risked arrest:

People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two.

No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.

– Rosa Parks, USA²⁰

Prizma Singh Tharu knows that feeling. When a major report on dislodging the King of Nepal was released, men from mainstream human rights organisations claimed all the credit for the work, ignoring the contributions of women colleagues:

They had prepared a list of activities [that they claimed were] done by men, and contended that the report was also prepared by men. They totally ignored the contributions made by women activists. This was a situation where we had been constantly struggling along with them, and despite that, there was no mention or recognition of the contributions that women activists had made.

I was sitting on the floor and I could not take that.

I stood up and said, 'What nonsense you are speaking. We fought together for this at the tu-tu may-may level [i.e. we fought tooth and nail]. It is so difficult for women to get recognised for the work they do.'

Now they can't avoid me. They have to invite me to every meeting, because they know that this woman will not leave us alone. I made them realise this.

– Prizma Singh Tharu, Nepal

Persistence pays off. When a political consultant tried to shut them down, members of Most in Bosnia decided to meet her head on, and make her an ally:

We had a lot of problems with a woman who worked as a consultant to all the mayors. She wanted to close our organisation, said that we were against Serbs and Republika Srpska and that we work with and for Muslims.

We chose to target this woman.

We talked to the women from Banja Luka and asked them to invite her when they had trainings for women in politics. We even paid ourselves for some of the trainings so that we were sure that she would be included.

And it has paid off. Now she comes to our meetings, and all doors are open. There are also people in politics from other cities that now call us and want to come to us. We are now included in different committees on the municipality level and even the police invited us when they organised a roundtable.

– Dubravka Kovacevic, Most, Bosnia

Activists also know when flexibility works to combat opposition.

In Nepal, when Mohammadi Siddiqui organised a forum to discuss Muslim women's issues, she was confronted by men who refused to attend a meeting run by a woman:

This was the first time we had an event where Wahabi and Sunnis attended in large numbers. However, there were other people who said they would not come to the meeting. They said 'Mohammadi is the coordinator ... she will be on the stage—and I will not sit next to her.'

Then I visited them again and I requested that they attend and tell us what's written [in the Qur'an]. I told them: 'I will sit on the floor and you can take the chair. I do not know anything, and you have to tell us.'

That's how I convinced them. I got them to prepare and present three papers—one on Islam and violence against women, one on child rights, and one on human rights. I told them they could write in Urdu and I offered to translate.

I also added one section on Nepali law.

It ended up being a very interesting event and all the local Muslims who were in my favour urged me to enter politics. And that's how I got elected. This showed other women the way to follow.

And sometimes, the best way to combat threats is through patience.

Water off a Duck's Back

Combating slander²¹ is another complex security challenge that requires flexible responses. Ironically, as Ndeye Nafissatou Faye pointed out, coping with slander can be even tougher than dealing with direct attacks:

*In some ways, it is easier to act against direct aggression by the army or the police. But moral and verbal abuses against women human rights defenders are more difficult to deal with. They are more difficult to prove or fight against.*²²

– Ndeye Nafissatou Faye, Senegal

It is true, the words used against WHRDs are shocking. They aim to wound, discourage and frighten women, to destroy confidence and to discredit women in their communities.

In many cases, it is vital that human rights defenders receive the necessary support to confront slander campaigns directly—the best defence is a good offence, as the saying goes. Taking legal action against slander is one strategic response that is sometimes available to defenders.

For example, when a journalist attacked women activists in articles in the Croatian media, several women's rights groups banded together to file precedent-setting lawsuits against the journalist and the state-owned newspaper. The groups also discovered some unanticipated benefits by taking such a public stand:

Women's groups receive grants for different activities concerning women's human rights, but they never had any funds for direct protection of their own rights as activists. Struggling for other women, we neglected that we might be attacked, too.

*The attack against women activists gave us an opportunity, however unpleasant, to show what happens when women are defenders of women's human rights. In addition, as a result of the attention the suit generated in the local media, the issue of violence against women has received more media attention than ever before.*²³

–Anonymous WHRD, Center for Women War Victims, Croatia

It is also important, however, to identify those moments when simply ignoring slander is most effective. As Sonia Biserko reminded us, insults are often an act of last resort, and a sign of weakness:

When someone needs to use so many ugly words to try to push someone down, it means that that person is weak, and lacks any real arguments. This ongoing slander also is proof that there is no real political opposition—no one to step up and say ‘enough!’

In Nepal, Prizma Singh Tharu decided that even when words sting, she would not let them bring her down:

When the Women’s Commission was formed, I was invited, even though I am not political. I thought I would advocate for my sector and its issues, and I will get more support from them. But then, all kinds of rumours were spread about me and my motives to be there by the various political parties. I was so disillusioned that I wanted to leave all the work and stay at home.

My husband too did not give me any reassurance. I sat in a corner and cried for a good hour and half. I never really cry but this whole incident upset me so much.

I decided that if my organisation is in jeopardy, I would even resign and work from outside. Nobody gave me any advice. I called my friends in Kathmandu and demanded to know why they did not prevent me from going or warn

me that the political environment is not good and that I should stay away from the meeting.

They said these kind of allegations happen. You should be prepared for it when you are in public serving the needs of women and speaking on behalf of women.

It has been a learning experience. Earlier I used to be bothered. Now I am used to bearing all these criticisms.

This is not to say that slander should be accepted, and absorbed. Rather, women should choose their battles carefully and strategically.

As Carrie Dann, a human rights defender and elder of the Western Shoshone Nation pointed out, WHRDs are wise enough to recognise that the best strategy is often just to let empty words pass you by, as her grandfather taught her:

Our grandfather told us this struggle would be very hard and that at times, people would be very cruel to us and that our own people may at times be the most hurtful. He told us that we would have to remain strong and that we would have to learn to let those hurtful things roll off our back, ‘like water on a duck.’²⁴

Sometimes, if you wait patiently, you will find that your opponent’s threats can backfire, and in the end, bring you recognition and respect.

Mohammadi Siddiqui found that after the Islamic Committee and community members had threatened her with a boycott and slander, her organisation had even more support:

They spread rumours that nobody should associate with us, and that particularly daughters and sisters should be protected from us. They were saying that our organisation was discussing ways to change the Qur'an and giving wrong information to the society and so on.

But by Allah's grace, more women are associated with us now than before the episode. Both women and men are now involved in training and we are doing better than ever.

It only helped us get more popular and more people now know about us and our work.

- Mohammadi Siddiqui, Fatima Foundation, Nepal

The arrests in Iran following the 2006 One Million Signatures Campaign also backfired, as Jelve Javaheri explained:

The actions of the security forces have had some unintended consequences. They have elevated the visibility of the Campaign, because with every arrest and detainment, its news is spread throughout the world. I don't think we would have attracted as many supporters and activists if the Campaign had been allowed to progress quietly. These arrests have kept the Campaign alive and high in the public's consciousness. It's true that the arrests have also caused fear but they also confirm that the Campaign is alive and active despite the pressures.

On the one hand, people are arrested, but on the other, people are still going out and collecting signatures. This has a positive impact on people who see that the Campaign and its activists are serious and committed to reforming discriminatory laws. People respect that.²⁵

*The message was to
show that we will
not submit or feel
intimidated and will
continue our work.*

*All the bad energy
of hate and
violence needs to
be confronted by
the good energy of
friendship, solidarity,
love and spirituality.*

Strategic Spirituality and Symbolic Resistance

Threats against WHRDs are often symbolic, as Sandra Moran of Guatemala noted:

We need to read the signs; we get followed, we receive threats, we receive messages written in blood. Those who persecute us also use symbols.

But symbols, rituals and spirituality can also be a powerful form of non-violent resistance and protection. They allow women to create safe spaces and to spread their messages without fear of retaliation. Sometimes, they can even build a bridge to calm opponents, and to convince them to support you. For example:

The office of Sector de Mujeres in Guatemala was broken into twice in June 2006.

Following these attacks, we decided on two quick actions. First, we gathered in our office with candles and flowers to take back our space. We walked together to all the spaces the attackers violated to change the energies. Psychologically, it allowed us to enter those spaces, reclaim our spaces and continue our work.

Second, we collaborated with our friends who had also been attacked [and arranged] to gather together in a public space and hold a vigil with music, candles and flowers. The vigil began at 6 p.m. and went on until midnight. After some time we noticed that everybody joined in the vigil and participated in some form. A group of young people played drums and danced. Others read poetry, sang or performed other musical instruments. Our neighbours who normally do not participate in our activities also joined us on this occasion.

The objective was to be together with all our friends and other social movements and feel the strength of the movement. The message was to show that we will not submit or feel intimidated and will continue our work. All the bad energy of hate and violence needs to be confronted by the good energy of friendship, solidarity, love and spirituality.

- Sandra Moran, Sector de Mujeres, Guatemala

By reclaiming and reinforcing their spaces, the women of Sector de Mujeres and the members of their community created their own zone of safety. And they established powerful sites of resistance.

Members of the Algerian Assembly of Women for Democracy created their site in a cemetery, as Zazi Sadou described:²⁶

These Algerian activists are deeply engaged in the resistance against fundamentalism. They showed their resistance by transgressing the taboo that women cannot join men in the burying of the dead. They occupied cemeteries and turned them into a place of freedom and resistance.

In Colombia, their site was their home:

On 25 January 2001, we received the first threat against OFP. The paramilitaries told us to give up one of our houses for women in the barrio [neighbourhood] for use in an operation. They left messages for the women there to vacate the house by 3 p.m. that day.

We denounced this, and sent messages to other organisations and the church. We decided not to give up the keys. By 5 p.m. on the same day, 100 people representing 75 families arrived at the women's house.

We took the keys in our hands and the house, el casa, became the site of resistance. For a whole week, national and international organisations went to the house to protect it, as a symbolic vigil.

The paramilitaries constantly threatened to take over the house, but they realised that they could not forcibly storm it. We continued to work and resist, and we never abandoned that house.

Women were declared as a military objective by the paramilitaries since then. Finally, the paramilitaries came at night with trucks, pulled down the house and took away the debris.

After that, we continued to organise campaigns to collect bricks and to build a bigger and better house for their work. This new house again became the site and symbol of resistance.

All over the world, activists use symbols to get their points across, and to protect themselves. Women in Black use the colour black, and silence, to make powerful statements against militarism, and to promote peace. Activists in Nepal reclaimed the colour red through the Red Colour Movement.

True Colours

Hindu tradition and customs stipulate that after a husband dies, the wife must wear only the colour white for the remainder of her life. Her clothes are supposed to be unstitched and not contain a pattern. She is not allowed to wear any jewellery for the rest of her life. Widows cannot wear red at any cost, as it is a colour specific to married women.

In 2002, the Women for Human Rights (WHR) Single Women Group held a National Workshop to highlight the issues facing single women (i.e., widows) in Nepal and to examine the way forward. The single women participants were empowered by the knowledge that 'Colour is Our Birthright'. After this workshop, the Red Movement Campaign began, adopting the same slogan, and underlining that every woman (single or married) should be allowed to wear any colour.

The Red Movement Campaign has been very successful. Most widows are no longer forced to wear white or sober colours for the rest of their life, and instead are able to choose colours themselves. The WHR views this as a transformation of an age-old tradition and the beginning of a healing process for widows. It is a symbolic struggle that has enabled widows to resist conformity and to break free of a psychologically harmful and physically binding tradition. The choice of colour is every woman's birthright!

– Women for Human Rights,
'Red Movement Campaign',
[http://www.whr.org.np/
red_movement.php](http://www.whr.org.np/red_movement.php)

In Zimbabwe, Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) say it with roses:

Basing its activities on the principles of strategic non-violence, WOZA creates space to allow Zimbabweans to articulate issues they may be too fearful to raise alone. WOZA's actions are always peaceful; their trademark demonstration is the handing out of roses each year on Valentine's Day as a symbol of love to counteract the government's hate-filled propaganda.²⁷

Song, dance and poetry work in Colombia:

[In Colombia], there is an incredible level of fear. So if women are just invited to come to a march, they will not. But if we use ritual and symbols as a way of allowing women to rebuild and heal, women are more readily open to the idea of doing it in a march.

So we use song, dance, poetry and theatre to expose and understand the general situation—and to allow women to denounce without provoking reactions from armed actors.

– Anonymous WHRD, Colombia

For many WHRDs, it is their spirituality that keeps them strong, and safe. Indrakanthi Perera described how chanting worked to protect a friend:

Spirituality has definitely helped me to make a success of some small activist efforts. For example, when the Sri Lankan police detained a friend [a British scholar] and threatened to deport her, we went to the police station and began Buddhist chanting—the metta sutra—over and over again. At first, they threatened to throw us out ... but later, they changed so much and gave into all our requests for her safety.²⁸

- Indrakanthi Perera, Sri Lanka

When we have been beaten down, time and time again, when we have to stand by and watch our world and our people collapsing in front of us, the one thing that keeps us going is our spiritual beliefs—our knowledge of the traditional teachings.²⁹

- Carrie Dann, Western Shoshone Nation, USA

Indigenous communities are more organised, so their traditional medicine works as protection. They also work with other peasant leaders and help them with alternative medicines that work as [spiritual] protection.

- Anonymous WHRD, Puerto Asis, Colombia

I went picking vegetables on a daily wage basis on a farm to make a living. I bought things for my spiritual leaders with the money I earned. They made me concoctions to give me the strength to continue my work. I feel strong and secure when I have alternative healing and indigenous medicines, both personally, and in my work with women.

- Emerita Patinio Acue, Colombia

Family

Strategic Support Systems

For many WHRDs, their families are their first line of protection. They offer them unconditional support, in times of crisis, and every day.

These are ‘families’ in the broadest and best sense of the term: families they are born into, and the ones that WHRDs form themselves, with each other. Their friends and their colleagues.

They establish an intimate, and priceless, safety network—one that offers compassion, strength and very practical forms of protection.

When Rita Thapa began working on her vision to create her organisation Tewa, the Nepali women’s fund, she found her children to be her greatest allies:

It was as if I was possessed by the idea of founding an organisation to do the work I dreamed of ... Fortunately for me, my children were supportive and encouraging. Their undivided faith in me was poignant.³⁰

In Bosnia, Dubravka Kovacevic found that her husband’s job offered her protection in the early years, when she and her colleagues were forming the organisation Most:

Healthy families are necessary for our work.

Many of us get good support from our husbands. It is important to have support from your husband, especially if you have children, as he must be ready to take care of them more.

At the beginning of our activities, my husband’s work also protected me, as he was a journalist. He was respected. That was especially important for me as an IDP [internally displaced person].

Although the rest of her family rejected her activism and ridiculed her for it, Mohammadi Siddiqui’s mother-in-law always offered her strength and advice, albeit covertly:

My mother-in-law knew that the family would not do justice by me, so she used to support me quietly without anyone knowing. And I developed the habit of sharing every little thing with her. So there was much transparency between us.

For one very isolated activist in the Balkans, it was her father who stood by her:

My biggest support was my father, both when it came to my activism and my divorce. He would be very proud of me today.

– Anonymous WHRD, Balkans

In a world where so many others may oppose them, the kind words, and the acts, of family members sustain WHRDs, and help them to stay strong:

I have total acceptance from my family. Having this support gives me strength.

– Camilla Esguerra Muelle, Colombia

Often, however, it takes strategic interventions to gain family understanding and support, as Sapana Pradhan Malla explained:

To continue to do this kind of work, you also need an enabling environment—not only at the office, but also at home. You need support, and you have to balance many things.

When Blue Diamond [a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) organisation] held its first national conference, I took my husband with me. When he listened to everything that was being said, and heard the kinds of problems they were facing in the community, in the markets and in public places, he turned to me and said, ‘Please work for them. You need to work for them.’

Sometimes you also need to build up some kind of understanding with your family.

– Sapana Pradhan Malla, Nepal

Prizma Singh Tharu turned initial family opposition into support for her work. Her strategies? Hard work. Persistence. Constant negotiation and compromise. Patience and perseverance.

The first step was to get a foot out the door:

In the beginning, our activities brought their own problems. My brother-in-law began referring to me as a ‘neta’ [a leader], and he would taunt me by saying ‘she wears good clothes and leaves home.’ My husband told me ‘you should not eat outside, or be seen outside.’

I said, 'You men create wars and nothing happens. We women meet outside and sometimes share a meal—and that is a problem? The groups are for the benefit of us all.'

So I agreed that I would not eat outside as long as I could continue to work in the organisation. He agreed that the group was for the village and that I could continue to work for it. But he prevented me from travelling to other villages and other zillas.

Next came the balancing acts, juggling public and private responsibilities:

After a while, we received funds to implement a long-term programme, and nobody was willing to take on the responsibility of running it. So I stepped in, and agreed to take the responsibility. This entailed increased travelling, and that began to bother my husband.

Back then, my daughter was about three years old. My husband asked, 'Who will take care of her?'

I said, 'I will take her along.'

She never abandoned her conviction that the work was too important to stop:

I told him that if I take responsibility, I have to fulfil it. If I back out now, who will show the way for the rest of the women who are even more restricted and afraid?

So he got the wives of other men to talk sense to me. They told me not to displease my husband and to do as he bids. I told them, 'I will not disengage from my responsibilities towards my family. But, at the same time, I will not leave my work in the organisation. If I take responsibility, I need to complete it. I am not doing anything wrong—and the day I do, you may gladly put a stop to it and prevent me from doing so. But until then, I will continue to work.'

Over time, her perseverance, and successes, paid off:

Eventually, the programme was highly successful.

I fulfilled both my responsibilities rather successfully. Indeed, so successfully that today my husband does not interfere at all, and never says that I should not go anywhere.

This is because he cannot accuse me of neglecting my responsibilities towards my home. Plus, over time he has realised the importance of my work. He began to be acknowledged and congratulated for my work. He received feedback like ‘your wife does good work and speaks well on our issues.’ So now he does not interfere.

He even helps out sometimes.

I got him to come around by encouraging his participation. I thought if he knew what we do in our groups and about our discussions, he would be more reassured. So he got to know the burdens and concerns I carry, and how the work and our group benefit the society. Then he began to support us. Now he realises.

So commitment, honesty and continuity ensure success and confidence.

—Prizma Singh Tharu, Nepal

Many women even directly engage family members in their human rights work. WHRDs often work side-by-side with their life partners—indeed, many often build their organisations together. Other family members offer all kinds of occasional support, as accountants, drivers, guards, strategists or technicians.

Sometimes, even my

sister says, ‘Do not go out and talk.’ So

I have to ask myself:

does my activism

hurt my family?

And if I am quiet, do

I hurt myself?

So paradox and

absurdity is my life.

I like the challenges,

but I do not like

the threats.

– Anonymous WHRD,
Balkans

Paradoxes

Because family is so very precious to activists, it is also their weakness. Frequently, worries about family keep activists up at night, such as: how to support parents as they age?; how to give children enough time and love, food and shelter?; how to explain to partners that they really do love them, but they just do not have enough time for them right now? ...

Then there are anxieties about how to keep families safe from attack. Because activists' opponents know that their families are so important to them, they often try to get at them through their children, sisters, partners or parents.

They know that terrorising the children is a way to get to women human rights defenders—they know that they will fear for their children.

– Anonymous WHRD, Tunisia

Women's children and families are always involved in the threats, and that affects women more than anything.

– Sorraya Gutierrez, Colombia

For many activists, a threat or attack against a family member is often the final straw. Even if an activist may not consider her own safety a priority, a threat, or an attack, against a loved one will provoke immediate action to protect them.

Women defenders, therefore, have had to devise various strategies to protect their families in order to continue with their activism.

After being detained and harassed by the Transdniestrian State Security Ministry, Oxana Alistratov, for example, moved her daughter to a private school for safety reasons:

In summer 2004, I was illegitimately detained and questioned by staff of the State Security Ministry. They held me with my daughter (she was 10 years old).

For more than four hours, the local security service were applying psychological pressure by shouting at me, compelling me to sign false certificates about the financial organisations and the other leaders of Transdniestrian public organisations. They forced me into a room to take an examination.

Then, for the next two months, they repeatedly called my house at night (without talking). They threw acid solution, paint and petards into the courtyard of my house, where my family lives. I got a piece of paper from unknown people on which they had written 'bitch, treat syphilis'.

For about a year after that, my daughter had to stay close to me because of that experience ... Also, she had to be sent to a private school, which cost \$90 a month—and my salary is \$120.

– Oxana Alistratova, Moldova

To protect their loved ones, some women have had to make one of the hardest choices in the world. There are times when leaving is the only one way to keep your family safe:

Now I am with my husband, but I left Burma alone. I still have some family in Burma but I haven't contacted them for 16 years for fear that they will be arrested. The military can make up false cases if they want to arrest someone.

– Anonymous WHRD, Burma/Thailand

My husband was killed by soldiers. They entered the house and shot everyone. Only my husband died. Because of that, I am always in the house. I am hiding. No one is with me. All my children are in Bukavu.

– Dogale Ndahe, SECOODEF, DRC

The determined and persistent activity of the Ganja NCA [Helsinki Citizens' Assembly] has roused anger at certain levels of power. As a result, members of our organisation, my family and myself included, have been subject to repression. Both my son and I have even been charged with criminal cases. In April 2007 ... my son was held by the traffic police ... They brought charges against him and jailed him for three days. Ultimately, he too was released. In order to guarantee his safety, my son was forced to move.

– Akifa Aliyeva, Azerbaijan³¹

Finally, families can also pose extraordinary threats to WHRDs. These threats are particularly painful and effective, because they come from the people who are (or once were) closest to activists' hearts.

Sometimes threats from family members are subtle, such as cutting comments, pressure to prioritise domestic responsibilities over work, or just silence and a cold shoulder when you most need reassurance. Other times they are extreme: an estranged husband who kidnaps an activist's children as punishment for her growing success; parents who kick their daughter out of the house and excommunicate her for her work on human rights; brothers who arrange the 'corrective rape' of activists who dare to challenge cultural norms—who speak out for, and love, other women; and fathers who kill their activist daughters in the name of family 'honour'.

When another activist was in danger because of her anti-trafficking work, she used all her network for protection.

We called a press conference in support of her, and to say the same things as she did. We support each other all the time.

Consequently, activists often have to develop strategies to keep themselves safe *from* family members. In some cases, those strategies involve careful, persistent negotiations. But in the case of more direct threats, women activists usually need to separate and distance themselves from family members, moving themselves, and frequently their children, to another location—sometimes temporarily, sometimes permanently.

One practical, and effective, strategy to protect themselves against aggressive family members is to seek shelter in the academic world—for example, by taking a fellowship for further education, or a teaching position. Unfortunately, few academic institutions offering fellowships or positions to women activists include support for the relocation of children—so once again, they can only gain safety through separation from the ones they love.

While so many of these strategies are effective, paradoxically, they can also leave WHRDs feeling alone, and isolated. That is why the strategies of eradicating isolation through solidarity, and creating safe spaces of their own, are so vital for keeping WHRDs safe.

Solidarity

Because isolation is one of the most serious threats to the security of WHRDs, solidarity is one of the most effective protection strategies in the world. Here are some examples provided by interviewees:

Our strategies for protection include staying unified, working as a group and not alone.

– Anonymous WHRD, Liga de la Mujeres Desplazados, Colombia

Security is mainly unity among ourselves. There is a common network among women who know how to reach us in a given situation.

– **Anonymous WHRD, OFP, Colombia**

When another activist was in danger because of her anti-trafficking work, she used all her network for protection. We called a press conference in support of her, and to say the same things as she did. We support each other all the time.

– **Anonymous WHRD, Balkans**

I have protection from my friends. This is really important, as is having a safe place in our organisation.

– **Zoe Gudovic, Queer Beograd, Serbia**

What is good for us is that we are part of the reference group. That means that we have more power, we can get support from them and we can speak with one voice, which will make it stronger.

We are always relying on other NGOs for support and protection.

– **Anonymous WHRD, Horizonti, Bosnia**

Sometimes, solidarity is spontaneous, which is still hugely effective.

After achieving a landmark Supreme Court judgment in 2003 that criminalised marital rape in Nepal, Sapana Pradhan Malla was verbally attacked for her views on the subject. While it was not her intent to pursue the matter, Sapana found that when she spoke about it at a public event, other women suddenly shared their experiences of harassment. That won public admiration, and support, for her work:

Another challenge we faced was when we were changing the laws on marriage. At that time, we received personal and institutional criticisms and threats. I was personally criticised for our position on rape within marriage by the top political and judicial hierarchy. One person asked me how I influenced the court to get a certain decision, implying that it must have been the result of favours granted rather than an informed and just judicial decision.

There were comments saying women like me should be raped or shot. It did not affect me when the person said I should be shot. But I could not tolerate when the man (a very senior person from the judicial sector) said to my face that I should be raped.

A week later, we organised an event where the media was present to share what happened during the case, what arguments we used, and how we went about it to be successful.

I began by saying that I did not know if I could share in the success, when I myself was being victimised. When I made this statement, a number of women got up and said they were being sexually abused, harassed and victimised.

The media took up this issue in a big way with stories that were followed by letters of public support. After that, nobody dares to criticise me again in that way.

Working in solidarity also means spreading the risk:

In the territory of Uvira and Fiza, they have 50 groups, and each group has 25 women who are peace leaders. This is a strategy. If one group is incapacitated and blocked, other groups continue the work.

- Gégé Katana, SOFAD, DRC

I am not alone; there is no place in Bosnia where I cannot call someone in the middle of the night if I need a place to sleep. And among us, we DO NOT think about nationality. And that is the biggest support of all.

- Dubravka Kovacevic, Most, Bosnia

WHRDs have no support from the government authorities or from communities, only from the network of organisations. There is a feeling of solidarity among us—if anyone is in danger, others will mobilise and offer support.

- Jennine Mukanirua, DRC

Even when groups do not always see eye to eye, when the going gets tough, they come together:

Activists and groups support our work. Although they may not agree with our struggle or position, when they see that the police are involved, they [mainstream human rights organisations] will support us and show solidarity.

- Anonymous WHRD, Tunisia

It is in times of greatest stress that WHRDs will often set aside their differences and stand united. For example, in retaliation for the One Million Signatures Campaign, the Iranian government arrested and imprisoned dozens of WHRDs from an array of organisations. Prison authorities tried their best to pit the imprisoned women against each other, but to no avail. Instead, as Vahida Nainar found, they collaborated to resist effectively all

attempts to break their spirit and solidarity:

The women's movement in Iran, like elsewhere, accommodates views and strands that range from demand for rights from a human rights and secular perspective to demand for rights from a religious perspective and myriad positions in between. The 33 women arrested as a result of the One Million Signatures Campaign came from all of these perspectives.

Perhaps the authorities saw this as an opportunity to break the movement and get women to speak against each other.

It was incredible how women were in such solidarity with each other in the prison. How they broke into song about liberation, women's rights and freedom, despite their sometimes serious differences on how to go about the business of defending—or rather, in Iran's case, reclaiming women's human rights.

– Vahida Nainar, India

Sometimes, though, if you are relying too heavily on a small group of people, this can lead to a feeling of isolation from 'ordinary people'—and this can be exhausting, as well.

There is no support system. It is the three of us in the room and a small group of friends offers support. In this group, we are pretending that everything is okay; we refuse to be afraid to walk around the town. We pretend that we are leading a normal life, while knowing that we are not.

– Biljana Kovacevic-Vuco, Serbia

That is why larger networks, nationally and internationally, can be so effective.

Creating and Building Regional WHRD Solidarity Networks

All over the world, groups of WHRDs are building networks to stay strong and connected. Some, such as the international Women in Black network, are well established.

Others, inspired by the International Campaign on Women Human Rights Defenders, were formed in 2005 and 2006. They include:

- Nepal's National Alliance of Women Human Rights Defenders Network; and
- The International Coalition for Women's Human Rights in the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Networking

Building strong networks is part of an inherently feminist approach to collective action, as Vahida Nainar pointed out:

Within and among organisations, and within international networks, WHRDs adopt a particularly feminist approach to organising—collective action—both as an integral method of political action, and as a way of staying secure.

Networks can offer particularly effective support to those groups that must work with a low profile:

We associated ourselves with MINGA³² and others to deal with lack of visibility of the struggle—that’s one form of protection.

– Anonymous WHRD, Puerto Asis, Colombia

Renu Rajbhandari emphasised that as women in Nepal become more active, and therefore, more visible, they are more at risk. In response, her organisation and others formed the Nepal’s National Alliance of Women Human Rights Defenders Network (NAWHRD) to make the work *even more visible*:

One of the new issues is that the women who are empowered and now work as human rights activists are now being threatened. So we have this whole issue of getting them recognised as human rights activists, and making their work public—i.e. making their work visible.

That’s how we got associated with the Women Human Rights Defenders Campaign. I was involved with organising the campaign in Nepal, as well as with the issue of UN Security Council 1325. We started this campaign and already, 600 groups around Nepal are part of it. These are not only women’s groups, but also organisations from a larger campaign and a wider network.

At the first national consultation women from 62 districts came, but after they went you must see that, they felt really energised.

Because they felt that they are not alone. That there are other WHRDs facing the same problems.

– Renu Rajbhandari, Nepal

We do sometimes turn to our international networks, such as the Women in Black Network, when support from abroad is particularly useful. About a year and a half ago, Women in Black – Belgrade was the subject of an investigation into whether the organisation facilitated prostitution. Additionally, all of our financial transactions were being closely scrutinised.

We contacted our friends and supporters abroad [Amnesty International and Women in Black] and urged them to write letters to the Serbian embassy in their country and to their country's embassy in Belgrade. This solidarity and international pressure caused the government to stop its spurious investigations.

– Anonymous WHRD, Women in Black, Serbia

Networks also offer practical protection in emergencies:

When WHRDs travel, particularly to conflict regions, they follow emergency contact procedures, such as leaving their contact information and their itinerary with one or more persons who are capable of activating support and assistance networks in the event of a crisis. They agree on a communication message and method in advance, to use as and when needed.³³

– Vahida Nainar, India

High-Profile Security

Calling on international partners for support can be a powerful strategy for WHRDs, particularly because it can make the price of committing direct violence against them too high.

OFP said that Colombian paramilitaries know that it has international connections, and that intimidates them. When a paramilitary group confronted one of its staff members, she refused to speak with them, and instead made a few telephone calls. The paramilitaries soon received a message from their commander:

'She has international support and the political cost is high'. So they had to leave her alone.

Soraya Gutiérrez of Colombia sees this kind of high-profile activism as a double-edged sword:

It's very relative and has both sides. I am the first woman president of my organisation in 25 years, and that has increased my vulnerability.

But on other hand, we (the collective) received a significant award from the UN. And that's protection. So it's half and half.

Ultimately, though, she agreed with her colleagues from OFP that maintaining a high profile is a good security strategy:

Our decision as a collective is to be high profile, open and transparent. So if something happens, at least there will be a political cost.

Higher profile may prevent harm. Or if not, at least there will be consequences.

Parvin Ardalan, an Iranian feminist activist, was given the Swedish Olof Palme Award in early 2008. Iranian authorities banned her from travelling to Sweden to receive it. Her sister accepted the award on her behalf, and stated in her speech:

I, too, am aware that by receiving this award, I will be subject to greater pressures and accusations at home.

I believe that bestowing this honour upon me is not only an act of recognition for the individual struggles of women's rights activists in Iran, but an honour acknowledging the collective actions of the women's movement as well as other social movements in Iran. The granting of this award demonstrates that the efforts of those who work to defend equal rights and freedoms in Iran—despite the many ups and downs their struggles entail, and the patriarchal obstacles along their path—has indeed been effective.

And yes, today our demand for justice has resonated with the international community.³⁴

I think my high profile affords me protection. The authorities won't visibly harm me because they would fear international reactions. They don't want the image of Tunisia to be tarnished. So they do more surveillance and monitor communications—because the government wants to keep up the appearance of order.

– WHRD, Tunisia

The usefulness of a high profile changes, however, when the political context shifts, and when state or non-state actors are less concerned about international approbation. For example, another activist in Tunisia said:

I am a high-profile, visible activist. That makes me more vulnerable, but also [in the past] it has provided me with more protection.

Before, I knew that if I saw something, I would draw attention to it—as a result the police didn't insult or beat people when I was around because they knew I would draw the international media.

But now, they are beating everybody publicly.

– Anonymous WHRD, Tunisia

International Relations

International organisations—human rights groups, donors, solidarity networks, humanitarian organisations, institutions, and governments—all have a key role to play in protecting WHRDs. Women defenders know that, and work strategically to build and utilise these relationships.

Our organisation has international accomplishments. This is important as it alerts the government and tells them that international eyes are watching them. This makes women secure.

– Anonymous WHRD, Liga de la Mujeres Desplazados, Colombia

International human rights organisations give us a lot of support. They campaigned after each wave of repression by writing letters to our officials.

It had results.

It even made Boris Tadic, the President, talk with us, but he has never made a public statement about it. Some embassies here are more active on these issues than others are. We write to them regularly and their support is important.

– Sonja Biserko, Serbia

International Support to WHRDs in Colombia

Luz Marina Monzón describes the relationship between human rights defenders and the international community as a key strategy for protection:

‘The human rights movement in Colombia started a process of ongoing, constant and fluent flow of information with international organisations on the issue of violations and attacks against human rights defenders in the country, which are obstacles to the legitimate work for the defense of human rights.

‘This process continues and as a consequence of this struggle, several human rights organisations made systematic recommendations to the government on the mechanisms needed to guarantee the legitimate work of human rights defenders.

‘A number of high profile international and regional offices are involved actively. These offices include the United Nations Human Rights Commission, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and the UN Special Rapporteurs on Torture and Extrajudicial, Arbitrary and Summary Executions. All these offices have also issued declarations and recommendations to the Colombian government on appropriate measures to protect human rights defenders.’

– Monzón, L.M. (2005) *Four: Governmental and non-governmental strategies for the protection of women human rights defenders in Colombia*, p. 63

Solid Proof

Some WHRDs told us that they use identity (ID) cards issued by international solidarity organisations. These cards can be invaluable in proving to potential attackers that the human rights defender has the support of international advocates, and should therefore be left alone or the international human rights community will intervene on her/his behalf. Front Line developed official ID cards for human rights defenders as a practical tool to keep them safe. The ID cards function as both a form of 'activist accreditation' and as proof of international solidarity.

According to Front Line, armed actors seeking to use force or unlawfully detain human rights defenders may think twice if they know the possible repercussions of attacking an internationally recognised activist. The Front Line ID card also sets out the latest practical security measures, and has a photograph and signature of the defender, the name and contact details of Front Line, and the names of Front Line's Leadership Council. In addition, it emphasises that the latter has consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations.

We have actually been to Spain quite recently and met with the foreign ministry and the Basque parliament. This is for protection, the more well known our action is, the more secure we are.

- Anonymous WHRD, Balkans

We inform the Commission on Sexual Violence or MONUC [United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo] of the threats we receive.

- Adele Murughuli, SOFEPADI, DRC

Even if you do not quite have the connections you claim, a bit of exaggeration can go a long way towards defusing threats. When one WHRD prepared to return home from temporary exile, she was told to stop her activism or face the consequences:

I was presented with an ultimatum by local police: 'You can go back if you organise exhibitions of handicrafts made by women, but you have to forget talking about facing the past and talking women into feminism.' I lied, or stretched the truth a lot, and said, 'I am going back home, and all the European institutions will be informed as well as Amnesty and other international NGOs. I have already the support of all female members of the European Parliament.'

The first thing that I did when I got back was to contact the OSCE [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe]. I asked them how many women would be monitoring the events in our country and got the list. I called all these women to a meeting and told them my story. We made a strategy that they would talk about me.

So, for example, whenever she had a meeting with authorities, a Spanish colleague always asked, 'Where is this activist who is our friend?'

This gives you some kind of immunity and it makes them think that you are more important than you really are. And that affords security.

When I saw two plain-clothes policemen were following us, I told them: 'Foreign embassies will blame the President for everything that happens to me or my family, or me even if it is just harassment in the street, our president will be blamed for it by all foreign embassies.'

These are the strategies that saved my life.

- Anonymous WHRD, Balkans

Staying Under the Radar

Women's human rights work is about making the hidden visible. Women human rights defenders work on facing the past, exposing lies, naming crimes and perpetrators, and finding the disappeared. They bear witness and protect witnesses.

To uncover the truth, women often need to maintain a low profile, out of the public eye. Staying under the radar, like all strategies, has its pros and cons. But it often works to keep WHRDs alive, active and effective.

We don't publicise our work.

- Anonymous WHRD, DRC

We speak openly about [a particular organisation] only when the case is big, and we are interrogated by many police officers.

- Anonymous WHRD, Burma/Thailand

We keep a low profile, and take on a higher profile as necessary for protection.

- Anonymous WHRD, Colombia

...almost all WHRDs

are very careful

about how they

communicate with

each other, and with

the outside world

In the DRC, a consistent refrain among almost all activists who have been working on violence since the start of the war is that *working in the open is not an option*:

We have to work incognito on these issues.

Before the war, there was no need to hide. Complaints were never resolved, but we could complain openly. Now the work I do is very quiet. So any action cannot be traced back to me.

- Anonymous WHRD, DRC

We do not work openly. But in the courts we are recognised, and we are in danger.

- Anonymous WHRD, DRC

We document sexual violence cases, but we do not report them. We do not advocate openly or speak openly about our work. If a defender speaks publicly, she cannot live there for more than two months. She is forced to leave.

- Anonymous WHRD, DRC

Keeping a low profile can mean distancing yourself from the people you are working with:

When victims of sexual violence visit us, we try not to be seen together.

- Anonymous WHRD, DRC

When returnee women from the villages where we were working wanted to come to the city, they dressed in traditional Bosnian Muslim clothing, making it clear they were ethnic minorities. One returnee woman, Nezira, told us, 'If we meet you in the city, do not say hello to us, you might experience problems if you do that.'

- Anonymous WHRD, Most, Bosnia

Some WHRD groups manage to stay public, but shield staff by using an organisational spokesperson:

[We are dealing with] threats towards the organisation, rather than to individuals within the organisation. So we have one person who is responsible for public relations. She never speaks about specific cases, and she does not work directly with clients. This is a strategy to keep the rest of the staff more 'invisible'.

- Anonymous WHRD, Serbia

We strategise and choose one person as our spokesperson, someone who speaks the language and who can speak on behalf of all of us.

- Anonymous WHRD, Burma/Thailand

Another way is to be strategic in the timing of your public actions:

We [LGBTIQ people] want to be visible.

So this year [2006], during our festival, we went out at 6 o'clock in the morning, hanging out in the streets to show that we exist.

But we went out early in the morning—at a time that would not give them an opportunity to kill us.

- Anonymous WHRD, Queer Beograd, Serbia

Finally, almost all WHRDs are very careful about how they communicate with each other, and with the outside world:

In the evenings, we discuss our work by phone, using coded language—and the phone numbers of network members are always stored as codes and not names.

- Anonymous WHRD, DRC

We don't make contact through e-mail, phone or post. We only send messages physically, through trusted people.

- Anonymous WHRD, Burma/Thailand

We use general e-mails, i.e. Hotmail and PGP inscription. In the course of our work, we care about the safety of the informant, followed by the safety of the information.

- Anonymous Burmese journalist, Thailand

Safe Communications: Resources

Front Line, together with Tactical Technology, has published a practical package of software and training materials for human rights defenders called *NGO in a Box: Security Edition*, as well as a manual entitled *Digital Security and Privacy for Human Rights Defenders*.

Details are available at <http://security.ngoinabox.org/> and <http://info.frontlinedefenders.org/manual/en/eseccman/index.html?q=manual/en/eseccman/>.

In some countries, WHRDs hold conversations with their cell phones switched off and batteries removed. They have developed the habit of addressing a corner of the room and saying flattering things about religion or national politics. Just in case.

– Vahida Nainar, India

I know my phone is tapped, so I use my calls to journalists and other organisations as a way to publicise it.

– Anonymous WHRD, Tunisia

Bearing Witness

The matter of public profile becomes most complicated with regard to documenting, and publishing, reports of human rights violations. Keeping documents safe requires careful, strategic planning.

Many organisations minimise the consequences of the confiscation of key testimonies by keeping copies outside the office—sometimes internationally, sometimes in other people’s homes, sometimes in safe-deposit boxes.

Protection of documentation is protection of the organisation. Documentation we had in Kosovo was taken, but we always have documentation in several places.

– Natasa Kandic, Serbia

One way to protect documentation is never to carry it on your person:

We document more in the mind than on paper. As the internet is everywhere, we send reports by e-mail, so when we travel, we carry no published material on us.

– Josephine Kavira Malimukona, LSC, DRC

When WHRDs publish the testimonies they have gathered, it is often safest to do it in partnership:

During the war, there were many cases of sexual violence. But since the rebels were strong, we could not denounce the cases clearly. We would document the cases and pass the information to human rights organisations, such as Human Rights Watch [HRW], which published ‘War in War’, saying there was a war of rebels, but also a war against women. We submitted the report to the authorities in the name of HRW, not in our name. We did this to protect ourselves.

– Anonymous WHRD, DRC

Jennine Mukanirua of the DRC also publishes through partner organisations, and is sure to handle all information with care:

How do I stay safe? By being prudent. If I get any information about violations, I verify it first. I have to know whom to report before speaking out. Otherwise, it may put the victim at risk. Then I inform partners who are protected and can publish the information without being exposed.

But when an organisation's name is not on the publication, it does not receive the recognition, respect and support that goes hand in hand with publicity—and that is part of a vicious circle that can keep a defender at risk. When women's human rights work is successful, and public, the resulting visibility and credibility ensures more international support and funding, which in turn strengthens protective networks:

We were given more funding to create more groups in the region. Our credibility increased, and we were trusted with more programmes and more funding.

– **Anonymous WHRD, Women's Association for Marginalized Women (WAM), Nepal**

The Price of Publicity?

In 2002, the Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) and the Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF) published a concise, hard-hitting report called *License to Rape: The Burmese Military Regime's Use of Sexual Violence in the Ongoing War in Shan State*. The report detailed 173 incidents of rape and other forms of sexual violence, involving 625 girls and women, committed by Burmese army troops in Shan State, mostly between 1996 and 2001.

License to Rape provided clear evidence that the Burmese military regime allowed its troops to commit rape with impunity, systematically and on a widespread scale, in order to terrorise and subjugate the ethnic peoples of Shan State, making rape an officially condoned 'weapon of war' against the civilian populations.

While the report was an extraordinary indictment of the Burmese government, SWAN paid a high price for its publication:

The report generated a lot of publicity and advocacy. The Thai authorities asked us to close down the office and move, because it was causing problems for official relations between the Thai and Burmese governments. We had to go underground. Even now we cannot organise our own workshops and meetings and we cannot invite other organisations.

– **Interviews with Burmese human rights defenders, UAF grantmaking documents**

What's in a Name?

Women human rights defenders often assume different identities to keep themselves safe. Sometimes this means changing your name:

Names can often give away a person's nationality, ethnicity, religion, caste and race. If your name identifies you as a minority, it can make you a target. For example, one woman human rights defender in the Indian state of Gujarat, where Muslims are a persecuted minority, had to change her name in order to rent office space in a safe neighbourhood.³⁵

– Vahida Nainar, India

Other times, it means taking advantage of outdated traditions that require women to change their 'maiden' name when they are married, or divorced, to protect themselves and their families:

The good thing is that my daughter and I do not have the same surname—I am divorced. That makes her safer.

– Anonymous WHRD, Balkans

I am not divorced yet as protection for my family. People here know that I live alone, but they also know that I am still married so they do not really know what to think. If I am divorced, then anyone can feel free to make a pass at me, and to think that I am a 'whore'. Next year my daughter will be 18 years old, maybe I will divorce then.

– Anonymous WHRD, Balkans

In Serbia, while homophobia prevents most LGBTIQ defenders from being 'out' in public, some dodge violent threats by using modern language:

Younger lesbians use the term 'queer' instead of lesbian. No one knows what it is in Serbia, so they can use it as a disguise in this homophobic society.

– Lepa Mladjenovic, Serbia

In Colombia, lesbian WHRDs stay safe in rural areas by hiding their sexual identity:

For me and for other lesbian women, security is a matter of perception. Our internal sense is that we do not feel secure. We have to internalise certain operational norms that make us invisible.

For example, if we go to rural areas, we would not reveal our sexual identity.

There is a huge presence of paramilitaries—the supplementary form of the army. They are incredibly intolerant. That’s the precautionary norm we’ve developed.

– Anonymous WHRD, Colombia

In Thailand, Burmese WHRDs hide their ethnicity every day:

When we look for office space to rent, we are asked if we are Lahu from Thailand or from Burma—and if we answer that we are from Burma, then we are not welcome. When we speak our language, we have to whisper. We have to be careful about how we speak, and dress—and generally be low profile.

– Anonymous WHRD, Thailand

While changing the language you use or hiding your true identity are often useful security strategies, they can also take their toll:

Nowadays we do not have many problems with our work.

Like with Alma (one of the activists). We could not say her name out loud in the streets before. She became Nela [a Serbian name].

The first time we went to Gorazde about nine years ago, we shouted her name out loud. It was such a relief for her to hear her real name!

– Dubravka Kovacevic, Most, Bosnia

Gay men have a social existence here. But as such, they can also be more exposed to hate crimes. It’s easier for women to hide their relationships. But if you don’t exist socially, how can one talk about rights?

– Camilla Esguerra Muelle, Colombia

Shifting identities can protect you, but this does not have to mean changing who you are at your core:

While walking in the streets, people [men] could come up and say things like ‘If I fuck you for three weeks you will not be a lesbian anymore.’ Can I be free here? I get my share of hate speech just walking in the streets.

When I had so much fear, I did think about what I could do—so I changed my hairstyle.

But I did not change myself.

– Zoe Gudovic, Queer Beograd, Serbia

The Art of Disguise

Sometimes women do their human rights work undercover, as teachers, preachers, aid workers or villagers.

In Bosnia, a group of internally displaced women formed an organisation called Most (Bridge) in Visegrad, an extremely nationalistic town. Despite the tense climate, the women working at Most opted to focus on the sensitive issue of right of return for displaced ethnic minorities. To stay safe, when they travelled outside of Visegrad, they assumed a 'neutral' identity as humanitarian aid workers:

When we started to work with returnees, we could not say in the city that we were going to the Muslim villages. We pretended that we were humanitarian workers.

In some situations, they simply played dumb:

Just next to where we got our first space was the Orthodox Church. We had to play roles as stupid: 'We are just housewives that meet for knitting and cooking.' A way to keep our security was to act as stupid women.

- Anonymous WHRD, Most, Bosnia

Sometimes WHRDs use the cover of religion to do their work:

When I go to the field, I pretend to be a preacher doing church work. When I preach, I also do my real work.

- Anonymous WHRD, DRC

When members of our organisation are inside Burma, they identify themselves as religious women and use this to talk about the situation of women in the state.

Otherwise, if you talk, you go to jail the next day.

- Anonymous WHRD, Burma/Thailand

Other WHRDs are protected within the academic world:

My strategy has not been to use the media, or to be highly visible, but to be more in the academic and policy space.

- Anonymous WHRD, Colombia

Instead of taking on another identity, some just blend into their surroundings like chameleons:

At the time of a crisis, when I have been detained and questioned, I try to concentrate only on pretending to be a villager.

– Anonymous WHRD, Lahu Women’s Organisation, Burma/Thailand

We go without a mission order, pretending to be on a family visit.

– Anonymous WHRD, DRC

I travel with poor clothes to resemble a peasant.

– Gégé Katana, SOFAD, DRC

In some places, we don’t wear t-shirts that show we are activists. We dress like locals and create friendly relations with the people.

– Anonymous WHRD, PFENDE, DRC

Sugar Coating

Sometimes, when the issues that WHRDs are championing spark controversy, they just present them as a more palatable package. In Nepal, challenging property rights was perceived as threatening the Hindu religion. Sapana Pradhan Malla responded that it was about challenging social structures, not religious beliefs:

We faced a lot of challenges when we took up the issue of property rights. We were criticised a lot for this work and received many threatening calls, all anonymous. At that time, the Hindu Federation also started protesting against our movement and our demands. That was very scary for us.

*So instead, we said we were challenging the **social structure**—and we did not use the word Hindu religion. We did not want to offend them. Plus, by not saying Hindu, we were also implying that Buddhist women or Muslim women should also have these rights.*

So sometimes, we have to be strategic about how to lead or take on our own movement.

– Sapana Pradhan Malla, Nepal

In Serbia, after a failed Pride festival in 2001,³⁶ WHRDs developed a new strategy for taking action, using culture, art, and a common theme to establish a safe space for LGBTIQ activism:

In 2004, people wanted to organise another pride parade. So we talked about what it meant to be queer in Serbia. And we decided to organise our first festival in May 2005, to open up the possibility for people to have space and to feel safe.

We used culture as a strategy to raise the question.

We called the Festival 'Stop violence in the streets', in order not to single out queer issues. It was not the right time to talk only about lesbian rights; with this action, we included violence against everyone. Lots of people came to support us, and again, in 2006, so many people came. That is because we do not close the doors on different issues. We have a feminist approach that includes being against xenophobia, homophobia, etc.

– Zoe Gudovic, Queer Beograd, Serbia

Sometimes, they just make the package unappealing:

In some of the villages, the husbands wanted to know what was happening in our meetings [with women]. So we tried for three years to find a way to meet with women without interruptions by their husbands, without them coming there as well. We tried several things ... and then we came up with cooking.

We asked the husbands to help, but it was beyond them to do anything involved with cooking. So they left. And we could get on with our meetings.

– Anonymous WHRD, Most, Bosnia

One of their strategies was to continue to cook, make clothes and do other things that women do. At the same time, we help women to understand the reality of their situation and their rights.

– Emerita Patinio Acue, Colombia

When we meet, we cultivate together, and we use the time also to discuss violations.

– Josephine Kavira Malimukona, LSC, DRC

Staying Mobile

WHRDs are very careful about when, and how, they travel. They never take freedom of movement for granted. They find strength in numbers:

Last year, a man found our office—he was banging on the door ... and that was unpleasant. Afterwards, we started to leave the office together in the evening, and we met on a corner in the morning so that we all came to the office together. We did that for a few months.

– **Anonymous WHRD, ASTRA, Serbia**

We move around in big groups.

– **Anonymous WHRD, Peurto Asis, Colombia**

WHRDs in many countries travel with other women or with male family members, friends or colleagues.

We in Lara never go alone to an event. There are always at least two of us. We always give strength to each other and stay together.

– **Lara, Bosnia**

When we go to the barrio [neighbourhood], women come out to meet and escort us.

– **Anonymous WHRD, OFP, Colombia**

We work through our problems in teams, not alone. We also have some men who support our work and they have accompanied us to resolve specific issues.

– **Sarita Devi Sharma, Saathi, Nepal**

There is no protection for WHRDs. We have to be accompanied by men as a form of protection.

I have been threatened, especially when we go to court. So I must be accompanied by men. If I go alone, they will accept and listen to me, but not take the matter seriously. Unmarried women in particular are not considered reliable and are treated as of bad character.

– **Betty Koumba, CJP, DRC**

Women go to all extremes to ensure that they are free to travel. Women from Nepal's Women's Association for Marginalized Women knew that there was only one way to break out of their isolation, to do it themselves:

We come from villages that were very isolated and neglected. There were no development projects and the government did not have any plans to end the isolation of these villages. There was no way planes could land there.

So we mobilised and cleared the fields ourselves. We marked the area and created a runway to enable planes to land. This was to show women's empowerment and to break our isolation—to make our villages accessible to outsiders. We were keen to have an exchange of goods, ideas and services—to allow them to go in and out of the area.

The government was impressed with our efforts and the district official reinforced our markings with official barricades, and reinforced the area to make it a permanent airport. Planes continue to land there even today.

Tricksters and Poker Faces

Almost every society tells the story of a trickster, a legend about a goddess or god (such as Brigid/Celtic, Loki/Norse, Eshu/Yoruba, Hermes/Greek), a mortal (such as Scheherazade, court jesters, the Slavic 'fools'), or an animal (such as Brer Rabbit, the fox, coyote, raven). They use various forms of trickery to bend reality and perceptions. They shape-shift their appearance, tell stories, act foolish, and use humour, riddles or sleight of hand to distract. Or they simply maintain straight faces in the midst of chaos. Often they are revered as sacred, because the noble trickster challenges boundaries, and aims to help people understand important truths that they could not otherwise accept.

Women human rights defenders are the cleverest tricksters of our time. Their strategies incorporate laughter, dancing, singing, a rainbow of colours, flowers, silence, art, culture, cloaks and disguises.

When confronted by a soldier or an armed intruder, they can immediately conjure up a protection strategy by weaving a tale with a poker face. By claiming friendship with the most influential human rights activists in the country, or kinship in a nearby village. By saying: 'My colleagues will be back any minute', 'I am dialling the Minister of Women's Affairs right now', 'The police are on their way'. By feigning illness or menstruation. By exaggerating international links, or denying them entirely.

Using the deceptively simple, the soft and the unthreatening, or bold-faced, outrageous lies, women human rights defenders change our world.

State Protection

When it comes to state protection, some WHRDs demand it, some use it cautiously, and some reject it outright.

Here is the paradox: states are legally responsible for protecting human rights defenders, yet frequently, it is the representatives of these governments who pose the greatest threat to human rights defenders. This is because either they are the direct perpetrators of human rights violations, or they are complicit in the abuses committed by non-state actors, such as organised criminal networks, religious institutions or paramilitaries.

For many women, therefore, calling for state protection would just play into the hands of the government that opposes them, as Claudia Julieta Duque explained, drawing on direct experience:

Since my return to Colombia in 2006, I have had protection from the state, consisting of an armoured car and one non-armed bodyguard. During this period, I discovered that the bodyguard—supposedly reliable and recommended, but paid by the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS) [the secret police in Colombia]—actually delivered intelligence reports on my work, some meetings and my conversations.

These reports contained false information and accusations—not only against me, but also against the Foundation for the Freedom of the Press. When I asked DAS about this situation, they answered that all bodyguards must present reports on their work. But they avoided answering my questions about the lies and false accusations made against me.

After that, I decided to reject state protection, due to the hypocrisy of the protection measures that really had become a surveillance system of my entire life.

**- Claudia Julieta Duque,
journalist and WHRD, Colombia**

*Why would I have
state protection?*

That's like putting

Dracula in charge of

the blood bank.

**- Berenice Celeyta
Alayón, Colombia**

In Algeria, another WHRD echoed Claudia's point that state protection is simply another mechanism for state surveillance:

I would never lodge a complaint [with the state]. My neighbours tell me when I am being watched. There is no protection from the state, and there is no question of even asking for it. This police state is not helping me, it is watching me. I don't trust them—if I asked for help, they would just watch me more.

In conflict-affected countries, dictatorial states are often new, weak and corrupt, and are intrinsically linked with armed groups and organised crime. In these contexts, impunity reigns—human rights defenders who dare to speak out against such regimes are in direct opposition.

As human rights defenders in a time of transition in a post-conflict society, we should take responsibility for what we choose to do. We cannot believe that we should be protected. In a post-conflict society, there is no rule of law. That is what we are fighting for.

I do not expect the police to protect me. But I want them to protect the witnesses.

– Natasa Kandic, Serbia

Women in Black is adamant that it will never enjoy the support of the current Serbian government, and believes that state protection endangers its personnel and their work:

We do not expect the state to protect us. They are the primary threat to our security.

They offer false protection at vigils. The police who come in full armour and stand between the activists and the public ... just separate us from the wider society.

This is not protection; this is something totally different. This is a police strategy left over from the time of Milosevic. They are trying to show somehow that we are doing something dangerous. They also make us more invisible.

We do not trust protection from the state.

– Anonymous WHRD, Peurto Asis, Colombia

Some groups demand protection from the state, but on their own terms:

We had discussed [our situation] with the government, which decided we needed protection. The government suggested we install iron, electronic-controlled doors, bullet-proof cars and armed bodyguards. We refused, saying we want preventive security, not reactive security.

The government didn't understand how we [OFP] could want protection without arms. [But, in the end, it agreed], and designed special doors and provided cars without dark shades and bodyguards without arms.

So we did not allow the state to militarise our public events or our offices. We demanded protection, without militarising the space we occupy.

– Anonymous WHRD, OFP, Colombia

Biljana Kovacevic-Vuco demands state protection on principle—because it is the job of the state to protect its citizens, and human rights defenders in particular. She, and her organisation YUCOM (Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, Serbia), insist on this protection even though they do not necessarily believe that they will get it.

It is important to demand support and security from the mechanisms that are there to provide it!

– Biljana Kovacevic-Vuco, YUCOM, Serbia

Similarly, in Colombia, Patricia Guerrero believes that using state protection is about ensuring accountability. Whether such protection is effective or not is less important than that it guarantees that the government will be held to account if she is attacked:

The threats against us began when we started working on the city of women. First I was threatened. So I fought for my protection and said that the government is responsible for my protection. The government representatives said, 'yes, we will protect you—but first you have to prove that there is a threat against you.' So the state security organisation conducted an investigation to assess my threat 'level'. I face a middle level of threat, so they gave me a car, a radio and a bodyguard for myself. It was ridiculous because I wanted security for my organisation, but it was not possible to get that.

I believe it is the government and the state that are responsible for my security. If something happens to me, my family can go to the state and demand to know what happened to me.

– Patricia Guerrero, Colombia

Creating Safe Spaces

Women human rights defenders' workplaces are not simply offices. They are the spaces where they gather to meet, to strategise, to plan, as well as to work and rest. They are the spaces where they guard the truth, the documents containing the testimonies: the names, dates and places, the stories of violations. And they are the spaces where they support, and protect, other women.

For all those reasons, throughout the world, many women's organisations are very careful about how they protect these spaces. In Thailand, few of the Burmese activist groups disclose their office address. Similarly, in the Balkans, several groups do not put their organisation's name on the door (or nearby), and none of the LGBTIQ groups publicises their address:

As a security measure, Labris and other lesbian/gay organisations never write their address anywhere. If you do get the address, the name of the organisation is not visible at the door.

– Lepa Mladjenovic, Serbia

Security cameras are a good deterrent to potential intruders and provide a record of any attacks:

We have a security camera at the front door of the building. For three days in a row, we saw police officers from a special unit in front of our building, looking at the names listed on the outside, [looking for] mentions of ASTRA's name. We recorded the police officers information and sent it to all police stations in Belgrade.

– Anonymous WHRD, ASTRA, Serbia

Once you do get to the door, there is the next level of protection:

In the reception at the office, visitors have to specify their objective. If it isn't clear, we won't receive them.

– Sylvie Biruru, PAIF, DRC

We never have visible things in the office that reveal our work.

– Justine Masika, SFVS, DRC

In most countries, women running crisis centres and shelters usually go a step further to keep these locations safe and protected:

Only three staff know the location of our crisis centre. It's existence has never been publicised, it is known only through word of mouth.

– Anonymous WHRD, Burma/Thailand

Physical Protection

WHRDs employ a range of strategies to protect their offices, homes and bodies. Sometimes what you wear keeps you safe:

One day when I was travelling, I ran into a soldier who wanted to have sex. I told him I had my period. He asked me to show him. He touched me and felt my pad—women wear pads when they travel in the field even if they don't have their period. He believed me and let me go, but only after I gave him money for beer.

- Anonymous WHRD, DRC

Even now, she could be arrested. Any event being organised, they assume it's by Gégé and SOFAD. They call up and insist that it's me.

I'm never sure when I will be detained or asked to climb into a truck. That's why I always wear trousers and not a skirt—its one of my protective measures.

- Gégé Katana, SOFAD, DRC

Some WHRDs find guard dogs effective:

I have bought two dogs. I live together with my daughter, so the dogs are my protection. One day a drunken man came into my house while I was watching TV. My dog noticed him and went after him. He claimed it was just a mistake but I was not sure. A husband of a victim of domestic violence came and threatened me in my house; he wanted to get in but the dogs scared him. Dogs are very good—not even the police can come in.

- Dubravka Kovacevic, Most, Bosnia

Self-defence training

is good to build

strength and not have

fear. To develop a

strategy to build your

body, to be able to go

out and work on

the streets.

I want to go out in

schools and teach

girls that they have

the right to be

protected out in the

streets, because we

are taught to have

our body as service

to others—we need to

learn that our bodies

belongs to us.

-Zoe Gudovic, Queer
Beograd, Serbia

Sometimes, human shields offer the best protection:

Members of Peace Brigades International have lived in women's houses and accompanied us as protection. Peace Brigades' accompaniers come from different countries. Behind each one is an embassy that supports them. So taking a Peace Brigades' member along is like having an embassy behind you.

– Anonymous WHRD, OFP, Colombia

Other WHRDs hire professional guards to stay safe. This is a tricky decision, particularly if the guards are armed. First, it conflicts with the feminist principles of security—that weapons only add to insecurity. Second, it is complicated on a practical level, because of all of the issues that arise in hiring and managing armed guards. Often, they are ex-military, or ex-paramilitary—trained by the same forces that pose an ongoing threat to WHRDs. And what happens if they shoot someone, or if they are shot in the line of duty?

It is an option of last resort. But sometimes, it is the only choice available to WHRDs.

The Principles of Protection

Impartiality: Working On All Sides

In conflicts, WHRDs are rarely politically neutral because they take the side of the victims—they are often the first to speak up and denounce perpetrators of human rights violations. However, they usually work in a way that is impartial and non-discriminatory. That means that when they speak out about human rights violations, they denounce atrocities committed by *all parties to a conflict*. And when they support individuals and communities affected by conflict, they work with everyone who needs their help, regardless of nationality, race or ethnicity. This can help to keep them safe.

Working in the interest of all, without being partisan, is protection.

– Yvette Kabuo, RFDP, DRC

Another important reason why WAM's work was not seriously affected by the conflict is that we were helping women victims and internally displaced persons of both camps, i.e. those victimised as a result of Maoist activities and those victimised by the army. We respected, and treated, all women equally, and no one could claim any discrimination from our side. Neither side wanted to deprive victims of their camp WAM's services. So equal treatment of all sides worked.

– Anonymous WHRD, WAM, Nepal

At some point, women here became convinced that it is possible to develop a dialogue and the country together. Therefore, we chose WHRDs to work with us who can speak to all sides of the conflict—this is one objective of SOFAD.

- Gégé Katana, SOFAD, DRC

We weren't threatened because we worked with women affected by all sides. We decided that we would help Maoist women in need and those affected by Maoist attacks—i.e. those who support the government and the army. We treated them equally, our doors were open to all.

- Sarita Devi Sharma, Saathi, Nepal

By working on all sides of a conflict and turning away from nationalism, WHRDs also throw off the mantle of protection provided by maintaining status quo. Standing up and standing out can be dangerous in these contexts, and raise suspicions that women are unpatriotic, guerrillas, spies or traitors.

Ours is the only organisation working with Maoist widows. When they first come to us, we fill in the profile, and after that no one can ask how the husband died. Since we get support from the government, they ask us who our beneficiaries are. Because we have health and education programmes for widows and their children, the government categorises this as supporting the Maoists. Sometime we receive questions from the Maoists, and they suspect us of spying for the army.

- Lily Thapa, Nepal

The military accuses me of being in collaboration with the Mai-Mai, because we work with everyone, the Mai-Mai and the Banyamurunge.

- Gégé Katana, SOFAD, DRC

Consequently, WHRDs have to walk a fine line to stay safe in conflict zones, particularly when interacting with armed forces.

Engagement with Armed Actors

Some activists simply refuse to engage with armed actors, state or non-state:

If we are called to a meeting by any armed actor, we never go.

– Anonymous WHRD, Colombia

For many, this is a core operational principle:

We function on two major principles: 1) autonomy; and 2) civility. No armed actors, legal or illegal, are allowed inside our houses or offices, and that includes armed police officers.

– Anonymous WHRD, OFP, Colombia

What happens, though, when one's work requires it? For many other WHRDs, they must try to find ways to negotiate these relationships, without compromising their principles.

In 1998, I began working on the forced recruitment of children. I had to go alone and negotiate with guerrilla leaders to release them. The guerrillas treated me well when I was negotiating with them, and made sure I was not seen by other actors.

– Anonymous WHRD, Colombia

My character is to make friends even with combatants, and that works as a strategy to relax them. When I arrive somewhere, I present myself to the chief of the area, and explain the objective of our work and describe it. We show that we are not politicians, but human rights defenders. This works sometimes because if the chief knows what you are here to do, he may even accompany us and speak to the military heads.

– Esther Tshinama, UFEDEPA, DRC

We had to negotiate with the Maoists when they confronted us. We told them, 'If you don't like our work, we could pack up, but you have to explain who will do this work and provide these services [after we leave].' Since they did not always have answers to our questions, they let us be.

– Renu Rajbhandari, Women's Rehabilitation Centre, Nepal

Active Non-Violence

Women human rights defenders face violence constantly—violence against other women and men, and violence directly against them.

Yet, one of the key strategic principles guiding their response is *non-violence*. Integral to this approach is a conviction that ‘militarised security’—that is, the use of weapons—simply creates more insecurity:

Security is not a matter of having bodyguards. Politics must change so that there is real security.

– Biljana Kovacevic-Vuco, Serbia

Security is to be protected, to be able to do our work freely without disturbance. Peace brings security. Arms always create insecurity. We need protection, but not through arms. Here there is always insecurity.

– Anonymous WHRD, PFENDE, DRC

But non-violence is not simply a passive stand, it is also an action-oriented strategy, as Jelve Javaheri of Iran explained:³⁷

I’m the kind of feminist who lives and tries to work in the specific cultural and religious context of Iran. I think if anything, I am a feminist who is action-oriented.

By action-oriented feminism, I mean that we have to analyse the situation and daily realities and act accordingly, while not losing our values.

For example, I don’t believe in carrying arms, but I will go to prison if I have to. They are the minimal conditions we set for ourselves, seemingly obvious, yet very important. I don’t want violence to break out. I don’t want people to be deceived. These human values need to be maintained and reproduced so they are not lost in today’s world.

And it means ensuring that by empowering women, there is no need for arms to enforce peace:

Women have to empower themselves to get power positions in these municipalities, not only in the city but also in other areas, to develop policies in favour of women and children.

Because we don’t want the police or the army behind us—that way one can only be targeted. That’s no security.

– Anonymous WHRD, Liga de la Mujeres Desplazados, Colombia



Existe, soeur, sister

When we started to research this book, we thought that we knew a lot about WHRDs already. We fully expected that such strong, amazing women would have an array of extraordinary strategies to keep themselves, and others, safe.

As it turned out, we did not know the half of it.

While listening to their stories, we discovered so much that was unexpected and powerful about women's strategies. While WHRDs draw on an impressive range of tools that we typically associate with security—bodyguards, bars on windows, security cameras, private drivers—so many of their security strategies are far less obvious. These strategies are innate, intuitive and woven *directly* into the fabric of women's activism—often they are natural extensions of what WHRDs do instinctively.

Their instincts and approaches are frequently correct, yet WHRDs may not recognise them as integral to their strategies. This is because they live in a world that constantly negates women's extraordinary intuition, rather than recognising it for what it is: a rapid assimilation, assessment and analysis of information on many different levels, triggering an almost instantaneous reaction.

As a result, they are seldom understood and articulated as 'formal' strategies, either by WHRDs themselves, or by their supporters. And that is why they are so rarely shared, documented and acknowledged.

Their instincts and approaches are frequently correct, yet WHRDs may not recognise them as integral to their strategies.

To uncover, develop and strengthen these strategies, WHRDs need:

Safe spaces—Spaces that are *truly* safe, filled with trust and support—places that are physically and psychologically safe. Places to seek shelter, to be alone, or in the company of other human rights defenders. They must be able to establish these spaces in strategic locations—nearby, in their country, in their region and internationally.

Time—Time to reflect, discuss and assess all aspects of their lives, work, safety and well-being. Time to regain energy, strength and perspective, to rest and recharge. Time ‘away’ from daily work, which must be respected, valued and supported. It is during this time of reflection that so many of the instinctive security strategies can be uncovered, recognised and developed.

Each other—Solidarity, but in the most honest sense: support that is without judgement, agendas or strings. This includes support from donors that truly takes into account the realities and risks that WHRDs face—and how the way in which donors interact with WHRDs can really help to protect them, or put them at even greater risk. Funding that comes with strings, such as requiring WHRDs to identify publicly with a foreign government, even in countries where such an affiliation simply confirms suspicions that they are ‘Western spies’. Support that comes from true solidarity—support that is flexible, adaptable and responsive to how women see, and define, their own security—security that keeps WHRDs safe.

Women Defining Their Own Security

Everyone contributing to this study was asked: ‘What does security mean to you?’ Across the world, words were echoed, and answers revealed, loud and clear, a set of interlocking priorities.

For WHRDs, security is the ability to conduct their work freely, without restrictions:

To feel free to work without fear or danger.

– Adele Murughuli, DRC

To be able to live and work in peace. To serve as a lawyer and not have the constant feeling that my physical integrity will be constantly threatened.

Without physical integrity and respect, there are no rights and no freedom.

– Anonymous WHRD, Tunisia

An ability, an opportunity, to continue to do the work. To be able to defend rights. Not giving in, and not putting anybody unnecessarily at risk.

– Anonymous WHRD, Colombia

To live in peace, quietly without fear. With freedom to speak, to travel, to work without any obstacles. If in my work, I have no fears, it's security.

– Anonymous WHRD, Colombia

No obstacles—the freedom to do anything. No obstacles to travel. The right to be protected by the government.

– **Anonymous WHRD, Burma/Thailand**

To have the means to work without obstacles. To have protection from the government that allows me to network with other associations and collaborate with judicial and political authorities.

– **Yvette Kabuo, DRC**

Security is the right to work in safe spaces:

Women do not experience peace because of the regime, because of discrimination and because of violence.

Women have no chance to express what they want.

Women need space to express their experiences, because the community does not recognise or encourage women to speak out about violations.

Women want to build communities and solve conflict in their own communities. They want to live together with different and diverse communities.

– **Nang Yain, Women’s League of Burma, Burma/Thailand**

In their own spaces:

Buying a house and enclosing it is the only way for organisations to feel secure and protected.

– **Gégé Katana, SOFAD, DRC**

Security is ownership of our community land.

– **Anonymous WHRD, Colombia**

Without the constant, grinding need to justify the work, or themselves:

I am tired of explaining what we are doing. If we worked with micro-credit it would be okay, it’s money. But what we are doing is not considered important at all.

— **Anonymous WHRD, Horizonti, Bosnia**



We have achieved a lot, but we have to offer a lot of justification as to why we want some things changed.

— Lily Thapa, Nepal

Security is not having to explain my work. That I'm human.

Staying in Thailand, I never feel protected. I feel protected when I sleep at night. I never feel personal security. I dream about Burma a lot ... About a free and democratic Burma.

– Lway Aye Nang, Burma/Thailand

Security is to be able to travel without fear:

Another means of protection is to have the transport to move quickly when something happens among members of SOFAD.

– Gégé Katana, SOFAD, DRC

Travelling is part of feeling safe. Not having papers causes you to be always fearful of arrest by the Thai authorities. It is also the fear of being handed over to Burma. With no status, if we were robbed, met with an accident, or raped, there is no process, nowhere to report it.

– Anonymous WHRD, Burma/Thailand

Victims of violence live far away from us, and we have no means of reaching them, unless we walk long distances.

So, for us, security is the availability of means of transport and communication.

– Dogale Ndahe, SECOODEF, DRC

Security is staying sane, and healthy:

Activists burn out due to all the stress in us. It produces anger, fear and grief.

– Zoe Gudovic, Queer Beograd, Serbia

Psychosocial support is important. It's a tough context, and there are demands to appear to be strong, prioritising victims all the time. So this is an important measure for both men and women.

– Soraya Gutiérrez, Colombia

Security is solidarity:

What gives us support? Energy from sister organisations! We can call them for help. For instance, we have connections with another shelter where we can take women.

- Dubravka Kovacevic, Most, Bosnia

Being widely accompanied, not being isolated, being part of a national/international network. That all gives me a sense of security, of a growing movement involving more and more people.

- Anonymous WHRD, Colombia

Security is being able to do the work, and being able to take care of the basics for one's self, and one's family:

Security is freedom. Personal safety, peaceful existence. Not having to worry about finding shelter and food.

- Nang Yain, Women's League of Burma, Burma/Thailand

Security is respect of *all* rights, not just some rights for some people and none for others:

We need to bridge the hierarchy gap that has been created between civil and political rights and socio-economic rights. This is a critical issue right now in the process of constitution-making, in which civil and political rights will get the status of fundamental rights. But what about socio-economic rights?

Once that barrier is broken, we can become one community.

- Sapana Pradhan Malla, Nepal

Despite the enormous impact of the struggles of WHRDs throughout the world, their work is often marginalised by international and national institutions, and even by actors within the human rights arena. One key reason for this is that WHRDs regularly work on economic, social and cultural rights. This includes the rights to education, adequate housing, food, water, the highest attainable standard of health, and work (and at work), as well as the cultural rights of minorities and indigenous peoples.

Traditionally, however, mainstream human rights groups have viewed work on this body of rights as 'softer', and less important, than civil and political rights violations, such as extrajudicial killings, torture, 'disappearances' and unfair trials.

- Vahida Nainar, India

Security is to have justice, and recognition:

We need justice and reparation and compensation. And for the rest of the world to know what happened to the internally displaced women of this region.

– Patricia Guerrero, Colombia

Sometimes, security is also about having the ability to leave the work. This can take the form of a respite, or a sabbatical:

I don't want to leave the country, but I would welcome a respite of two to three months to think—and there has to be support for that.

– Soraya Gutiérrez, DRC

Or it can be a temporary, or permanent, evacuation. That means first, getting organised, putting plans and options in place:

One thing that is very clear to me is that we [women human rights defenders] don't have a safety net. I proposed creating at the district level or even the regional level some kind of space where women can move and hide—i.e. an evacuation process and space.

So there is a need to provide a safe forum in which to discuss a safe space for hiding out and some kind of emergency rescue support mechanism. A woman human rights defender should not be burdened with details of evacuation.

– Renu Rajbhandari, Nepal

[You need a] network of people to provide real help at the precise moment ... like what Urgent Action Fund does, providing the money you need to leave the city, to buy a ticket, when you have to go.

One strategy is to have a permanent conversation with the embassies of other countries, such as Canada or Switzerland. Because [without that], they don't believe women. When you go there to get a visa, you have to lobby, and you have to prove that you are under threat. Violence against women is not grounds for getting a visa or asylum. Political persecution is acceptable, but violence against women is not.

Patricia Guerrero, Colombia

Integrated Security

It is clear that WHRDs need security on their own terms.

Not in the centuries-old, ‘traditional’ sense of security, which is rooted in the set, militaristic concepts of war and conflict, which are inextricably linked to weapons, armed forces and patriarchy. A stand-alone concept that is somehow separate from other parts of their lives. This type of security is simply *disconnected from the reality of human rights defenders’ lives*. It does not work because it is not the right conceptual framework.

Stasa Zajovic, from Women in Black, called for a collective approach to redefining security and peace:

Women, especially Women in Black Network activists, are interested in developing a completely different concept of security from a feminist and anti-militarist standpoint.³⁸

During a workshop with dozens of WHRDs from across Serbia, Women in Black took this call one step further, defining security as:

Freedom from constant threats—The absence of war, living without fear and violence, freedom of movement, stability, security, smiling children, homes, going for a walk at night unimpeded, etc.

Economic security—Employment, food, social justice, the absence of oppression, etc.

Political security—Democracy, freedom of thought, freedom of choice, legitimacy, the rule of law, solidarity, the United Nations, etc.

Environmental security—Eco-friendliness, environmentalism, unpolluted air and water, etc.

Health security—Health protection, accessible medical treatment, etc.

*Women human rights
defenders define their*

own security.

*And they create their
own security.*

Across the world in Colombia, women working with OFP echoed these words, and offered a name for this concept: *integrated security*.

For us, security has to be integrated, which means employment, social well-being, development and national sovereignty in terms of natural resources. Security is not only for the individual, but also for the community.

This concept of integrated security recognises that women's security is about everything. That justice and reparation are as important as gaining the right to communal land, as freedom to speak, travel and to work without any obstacles, and as access to spiritual leaders. It is about not having to explain your work. Or that you are human. It is all connected.

The concept breaks down artificial boundaries between the 'public' (open, real, important, hard, serious) and the 'private' (closed, hidden, soft, less significant) sides of security. And it links them together. Real life is not separate, so security should not be, either.

Every aspect of the life of a WHRD affects how she thinks about security—and whether she thinks about it at all. Her health, happiness, well-being, stress levels. Her family. Whether she can keep her job and pay her bills. Her identity, who she loves. How she feels about herself—her sense of worth and self-respect. Whether she feels expendable, particularly in comparison to others.

Integrated security is about unlocking all of these issues, recognising their importance to and relations with each other, and then looking at security from a fresh perspective.

If we change the way we all think about security, we can support WHRDs in building even more, even better, integrated security strategies.

The first step is recognising women for their amazing work—affirming and celebrating their very existence.

We Exist

Lack of recognition is one of the single most important threats to the security of WHRDs. Conversely, when we celebrate WHRDs, we help them to be safe.

Every time we ignore, minimise or dismiss women's human rights, we endanger WHRDs. We become part of the problems they face. Whether we are bystanders, who stay silent as women protestors suffer tear gas or imprisonment, or we work for an international organisation that says 'yes, of course women's rights are important, but not at the moment. Right now, we need to finalise this peace deal, change this regime, negotiate this loan, secure this amnesty deal ...'.

It is a deliberate choice.

When we support WHRDs in coming together, to form and strengthen networks, nationally and internationally, we are aiding them in breaking free of their isolation.

When we recognise them, and their work publicly—through awards, multi-year funding, documentaries, press statements—and privately—through diplomatic channels, confidential grants, quiet visits, telephone calls—we are building a protective shield around them.

One that WHRDs can count on.

In the long term, if international actors do not see women who are working for change ... it will make these women's lives less secure. People who want change are often disapproved of by their own authorities ...if the international community also turns away, the women become more isolated.

– Jacobson, A.S.
(2005) *Security on whose terms?*
If men and women were equal, p. 30

Endnotes

Acknowledgements

1 Hereinafter referred to as Bosnia.

2 Eighteen activists were interviewed during the initial feasibility study phase of the research and more than 75 during the subsequent field research phase.

3 Hereinafter referred to as Front Line.

Introduction - Chapter 1

4 Front Line (2007) *Testimonies of Human Rights Defenders at the 4th Dublin Platform*.

5 We also collected a rich and diverse body of testimony on the range of threats WHRDs encounter in different contexts, such as: war and organised armed violence; religious extremism; repressive governments; and organised criminal activity. However, we chose to focus this report on the motivations behind these threats and women's response strategies, as *Claiming Rights, Claiming Justice: A Guidebook on Women Human Rights Defenders* (published in 2007 by the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development) provides an excellent, detailed analysis of dangers to WHRDs.

Understanding Threats - Chapter 2

6 Front Line (2007) *Testimonies of Human Rights Defenders at the 4th Dublin Platform*.

7 UAF-Africa (2007), *Sex Matters*, p. 59.

8 Ibid.

9 Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights (1998) '*Operation Dragon: An Assassination Plot Targeting 1998 Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Human Rights Award Laureate Berenice Celeyta Alayón*'.

10 Front Line (2007) *Testimonies of Human Rights Defenders at the 4th Dublin Platform*.

11 Ibid.

12 And, for that matter, for *any* defender working to support women's human rights and gender justice.

13 'Women, Peace, Security—Conference organised on 31st October to commemorate the 5th anniversary of the passage of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. Panel discussion: Attacks on human rights defenders, female human rights defenders, and peace activists', Center for Cultural Decontamination, Belgrade, Serbia, 31 October 2005.

14 Front Line (2007) *Testimonies of Human Rights Defenders at the 4th Dublin Platform*.

15 Ibid.

16 Monzón, L.M. (2005) 'Governmental and non-governmental strategies for the protection of women human rights defenders in Colombia'.

17 This section is adapted from Barry, J. with J. Djordjevic (2008) *What's the Point of Revolution if We Can't Dance?*

18 Inspired by Winterson, J. (1992) *Written on the Body*.

Exploring Strategies - Chapter 3

- 19 Barry, J. with J. Djordjevic (2008) *What's the Point of Revolution if We Can't Dance?*
- 20 See http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/about_king/encyclopedia/parks_rosa.htm.
- 21 We use the term slander here to refer to activities such as sexuality baiting, vilification, labelling and smear campaigns—some of the forms of ‘attacks against personhood and reputations’ listed in *Claiming Rights, Claiming Justice* (APWLD, 2007, pp. 64–69). In addition, the excellent *Written Out: How Sexuality is Used to Attack Women's Organising* (International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission and the Center for Women's Global Leadership, 2005), offers an in-depth analysis of the use of slander and defamation against women activists.
- 22 Real, M.J.N. and M. Chai (eds.) (2005) *Resource Book on Women Human Rights Defenders*, p. 42.
- 23 UAF grantmaking records (September 1997–October 2003).
- 24 Front Line (2007) *Testimonies of Human Rights Defenders at the 4th Dublin Platform*.
- 25 Keshavarz, N. (2007) ‘Interview with Jelve Javaheri’.
- 26 Real, M.J.N. and M. Chai (eds.) (2005) *Resource Book on Women Human Rights Defenders*, p. 65.
- 27 Women of Zimbabwe Arise (2007) *Defending Women—Defending the Rights of a Nation*.
- 28 Barry, J. with J. Djordjevic (2008) *What's the Point of Revolution if We Can't Dance?*
- 29 Front Line (2007) *Testimonies of Human Rights Defenders at the 4th Dublin Platform*.
- 30 Thapa, R. (2002) ‘Tewa—Doing the Impossible: Feminist Action in Nepal, The Founder's Story’.
- 31 Front Line (2007) *Testimonies of Human Rights Defenders at the 4th Dublin Platform*.
- 32 MINGA is a Colombian human rights organisation that offers extensive accompaniment and legal aid to victims in war zones (<http://www.mingaong.com.co>).
- 33 The majority of protection grants made by UAF–Africa to WHRDs in the region are for safe means of transportation and communication.
- 34 Adapted from Amani, E. (2008) ‘International Women's Day–Solidarity in Struggle’. See also Gabriel, J. (2008) ‘Iranian women celebrate the award of the Olof Palme prize to Parvin Ardalan’.
- 35 Discussion with an activist in Gujarat, India.
- 36 According to Lepa Mladjenovic, 40 people were injured during the 2001 parade, and hence another parade was not held until 2005.
- 37 Keshavarz, N. (2007) ‘Interview with Jelve Javaheri’.

Conclusion - Chapter 4

- 38 Zajovic, S. (2005) ‘Women, Peace and Security: Fieldwork experiences—workshops, interactive lectures, campaigns, performances’.

Bibliography

Amani, E. (2008) 'International Women's Day–Solidarity in Struggle', International Solidarity Network with Iranian Women's Movement, 8 March. <http://www.iran-women-solidarity.net/spip.php?article206>.

Amnesty International (2005) 'Women Human Rights Defenders at Risk', AI Index: ACT 77/011/2005, 1 March. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ACT77/011/2005/en/dom-ACT770112005en.html>.

— (2006) 'East Africa and the Horn of Africa: "Defending the Defenders": A Human Rights Defenders Conference, 30 October–4 November 2005, Entebbe, Uganda'. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AFR04/001/2006/en/dom-AFR040012006en.html>.

Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) (2003) *Consultation on Women Human Rights Defenders with the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General on Human Rights Defenders. April 4–6, 2003, Amari Atrium Hotel, Bangkok, Thailand: Report*, APWLD, Chiangmai. http://www.apwld.org/pdf/Final_Report_on_WHRD.pdf.

— (2007) *Claiming Rights, Claiming Justice: A Guidebook on Women Human Rights Defenders*, APWLD, Chiangmai. <http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/pdf2007/book3NeoWithCover.pdf>.

Barry, J. (2005) *Rising up in Response*, Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, Boulder, CO.

— with J. Djordjevic (2008) *What's the Point of Revolution if We Can't Dance?*, Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, Boulder, CO.

Bechler, R. (2006) 'A different shade of red in Nepal', Open Democracy, 9 June. http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-resolution_1325/nepal_thapa_3628.jsp.

Bernal, M. (2006) *Self Care and Self Defense for Women Activists*, Artemisa, Grupo Interdisciplinario en Género, Sexualidad, Juventud y Derechos Humanos and Elige, Red de Jóvenes por Derechos Sexuales y Reproductivos. English edition of the manual translated by Sharmila Bhushan and printed by CREA (<http://www.creaworld.org>).

Collis, V. (2005) *International Consultation on Women Human Rights Defenders, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 29 November–2 December 2005: Proceedings*. <http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/pdf/WHRD-Proceedings.pdf>.

Commission on Human Security (2003) *Final Report of the UN Commission on Human Security*. <http://www.humansecurity-chs.org/finalreport/>.

Front Line (2007) 'Attempted assassination of prominent Mexican human rights defender'. <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/attempted-assassination-prominent-mexican-human-ri>.

— and Enrique Eguren (2005) *Protection Manual for Human Rights Defenders*, Front Line, Blackrock, County Dublin, and Peace Brigades International—European Office, Brussels. <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/manuals/protection>.

— and Tactical Technology (2005) *NGO in a Box—Security Edition CD*, September. <http://security.ngoinabox.org/html/en/index.html>.

— and D. Vitaliev (2007) *Digital Security and Privacy for Human Rights Defenders*, Front Line, Blackrock, County Dublin. <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/manual/en/esecman/>.

— (2007) *Report on the Fourth Dublin Platform for Human Rights Defenders*, Front Line, Blackrock, County Dublin. <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/files/en/4th%20Dublin%20Platform%20Report.pdf>.

— (2007) *Testimonies of Human Rights Defenders at the 4th Dublin Platform*, Front Line, Blackrock, County Dublin. <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/files/en/4th%20Dublin%20Platform%20Testimonies%20Booklet.pdf>.

Gabriel, J. (2008) 'Iranian women celebrate the award of the Olof Palme prize to Parvin Ardalan', openDemocracy, 17 February. http://www.opendemocracy.net/blog/jane_gabriel/olof_palme_prize_parvin_ardalan.

Griswold, D. (2007) 'Oil companies behind violence in Colombia', *Workers World*, 27 August. <http://www.workers.org/2007/world/colombia-0830/>.

Human Rights First (2005) 'Alert Issued: June 15, 2005'. http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/defenders/alert062805_mai.htm?source=ga_adv.

— (2006) 'Support Sudanese Rights Group Facing Persecution', *Defenders Alert*, 3 May.

— (n.d.) 'Protecting Human Rights Defenders: Analysis of the newly adopted Declaration on Human Rights Defenders'. http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/defenders/HRD_un_declare/HRD_declare_1.htm.

Integrated Regional Information Network (2008) 'DRC: Majority of rapists go unpunished', 18 March. <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=77340>.

International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission and the Center for Women's Global Leadership (2005) *Written Out: How Sexuality is Used to Attack Women's Organizing*, Revised and Updated, New York, NY. <http://www.iglhrc.org/files/iglhrc/WrittenOut.pdf>

Jacobson, A.S. (2005) *Security on whose terms? If men and women were equal*, Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, Stockholm. http://www.iktk.se/files/File/Rapporter/security_on_whose_terms.pdf.

Keshavarz, N. (2007) 'Interview with Jelve Javaheri', International Solidarity Network with Iranian Women's Movement, 30 December. <http://www.iran-women-solidarity.net/spip.php?article123>.

Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2006), *To Make Room for Changes—Peace Strategies from Women's Organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, Stockholm. <http://www.iktk.se:16080/publikationer/rapporter/pdf/Roomforchanges.pdf>.

McNeill, D. (2008) 'Korea's "comfort women": The slaves' revolt', *The Independent*, London, 24 April. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/koreas-comfort-women-the-slaves-revolt-814763.html>.

Monzón, L.M. (2005) 'Four: Governmental and non-governmental strategies for the protection of women human rights defenders in Colombia'. In M.J.N. Real and M. Chai (eds.) *Resource Book on Women Human Rights Defenders*, APWLD, Chiangmai, pp. 62–63. <http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/pdf/WHRD-Resource-English-press.pdf>.

Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights (2005) *Steadfast in Protest: Annual Report 2005*, International Federation for Human Rights, Paris, and World Organisation Against Torture, Geneva. http://www.omct.org/pdf/observatory/2006/obs_annual_report_2005_eng.pdf.

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2004) 'Human Rights Defenders: Protecting the Right to Defend Human Rights', *Fact Sheet*, No. 29. http://www.protectionline.org/IMG/pdf/factsheet_29_en_UNHCHR.pdf.

— (n.d.) 'Declaration on Human Rights Defenders'. <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/defenders/declaration.htm>.

Real, M.J.N. and M. Chai (eds.) (2005) *Resource Book on Women Human Rights Defenders*, APWLD, Chiangmai. <http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/pdf/WHRD-Resource-English-press.pdf>.

Rey, G.H. (2006) 'Colombia: Displaced Women Build New Lives, Brick by Brick', Inter Press Service News Agency. <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=34194>.

Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights (1998) 'Operation Dragon': *An Assassination Plot Targeting 1998 Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Human Rights Award Laureate Berenice Celeyta Alayón*, Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights, Washington, D.C. http://www.rfkmemorial.org/human_rights/1998/Operacion_Dragon_SUMMARY.pdf.

Roberts, D.L. (2005) *Staying Alive: Safety and security guidelines for humanitarian volunteers in conflict areas*, International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva. [http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900SID/RURI-6LJUCY/\\$FILE/icrc-safety-30jan.pdf.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900SID/RURI-6LJUCY/$FILE/icrc-safety-30jan.pdf.pdf?OpenElement).

Sadou, Z. (2005) 'Five: Strategies of a network in supporting women human rights defenders'. In M.J.N. Real and M. Chai (eds.) (2005) *Resource Book on Women Human Rights Defenders*, APWLD, Chiangmai, pp. 64–66. <http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/pdf/WHRD-Resource-English-press.pdf>.

Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) and Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF) (2002) *License to Rape: The Burmese Military Regime's Use of Sexual Violence in the Ongoing War in Shan State*. <http://www.shanland.org/resources/bookspub/humanrights/LtoR/>.

Thapa, R. (2002) 'Tewa—Doing the Impossible: Feminist Action in Nepal, The Founder's Story', Sixth Annual Dame Nita Barrow Lecture, Centre for Women's Studies in Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Toronto, November. <http://www1.oise.utoronto.ca/cwse/Rita%20Lecture%206.pdf>.

United Nations (2002) *Promotion and Protection of Human Rights: Human Rights Defenders. Report submitted by Ms. Hina Jilani, Special Representative of Secretary-General on human rights defenders, pursuant to the Commission on Human Rights resolution 2000/61*, Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, Commission on Human Rights, 58th Session, E/CN.4/2002/106, 27 February. [http://www.unhchr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/\(Symbol\)/E.CN.4.2002.106.En?Opendocument](http://www.unhchr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/(Symbol)/E.CN.4.2002.106.En?Opendocument).

— (2005) *Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the Office of the Internal Services. Investigations by the Office of Internal Oversight Services into the allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse in the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC)*, A/59/661, 5 January. <http://www.monuc.org/downloads/0520055E.pdf>.

United Nations Department of Safety and Security (2006) *Be Safe Be Secure, Security Guidelines for Women*, <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/gender/docs/RES/524/F591305003/Security%20Guidelines%20for%20Women%20from%20UN.pdf>.

United Nations General Assembly (1993) 'Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against women', Article 1, Proceedings of the 85th Plenary Meeting, Geneva, 20 December.

Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights-Africa (2007) *Sex Matters*, UAF-Africa, Nairobi.

Van Brabant, K. (2000) *Operational Security Management in Violent Environments*, Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN) Good Practice Review No. 8, Overseas Development Institute, London. <http://www.odihpn.org/report.asp?id=2108>.

Winterson, J. (1992) *Written on the Body*, Vintage Books, New York, NY.

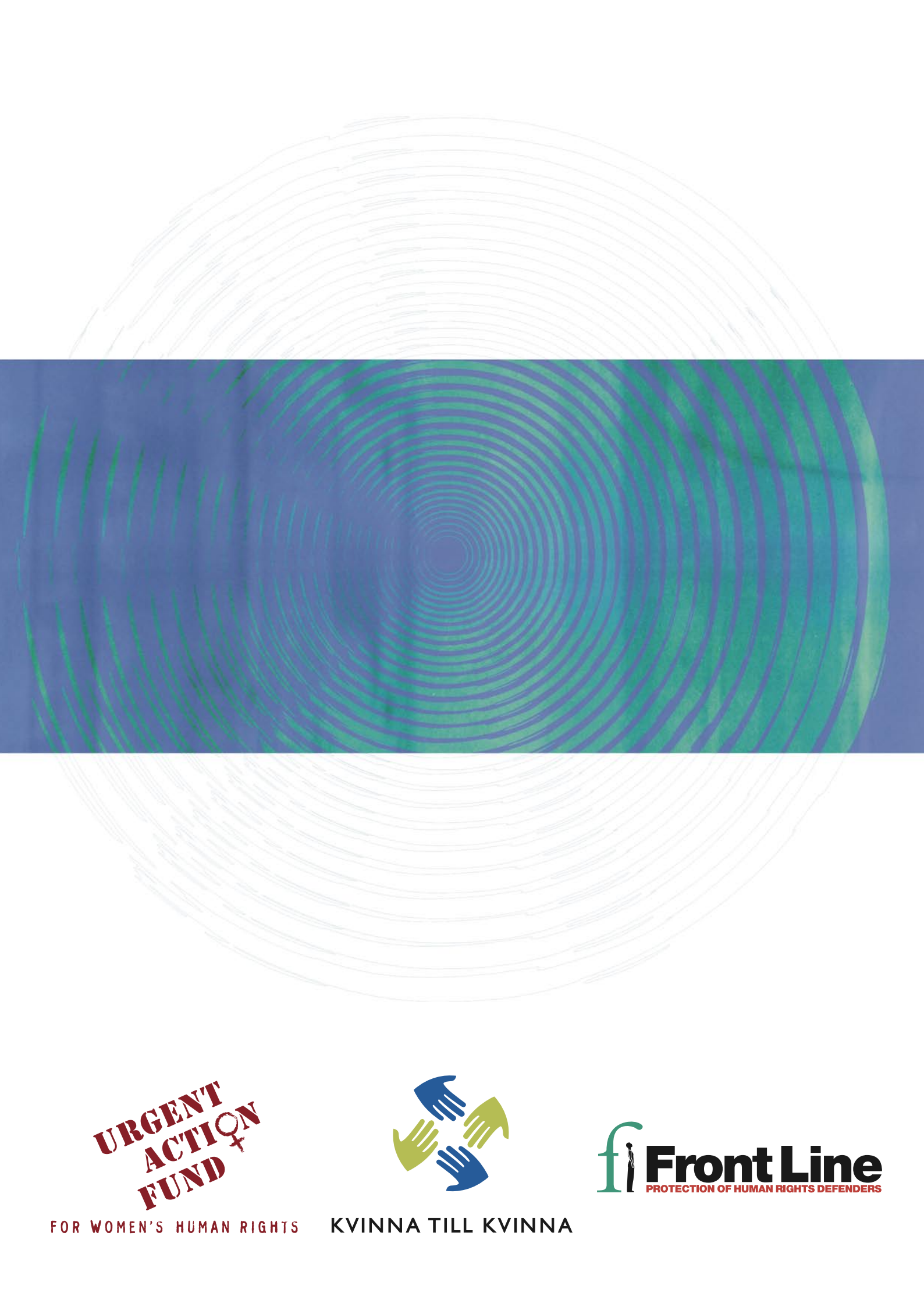
Women's Human Rights Net (2004) 'An Interview with Sandra Morán', November. <http://www.whrnet.org/docs/interview-moran-0411.html>.

Women of Zimbabwe Arise (2007) *'Defending Women—Defending the Rights of a Nation': A Preliminary Report on Political Violence against members of Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA)*, Women of Zimbabwe Arise, Harare. <http://wozazimbabwe.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/10/preliminary-report-political-violence-against-woza-women.pdf>.

'Women, Peace, Security—Conference organized on 31st October to commemorate the 5th anniversary of the passage of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. Panel discussion: Attacks on human rights defenders, female human rights defenders, and peace activists', Center for Cultural Decontamination, Belgrade, Serbia, 31 October 2005.

Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC) (2006) *First National Consultation on Women Human Rights Defenders, A Report, 3–4 March 2006*, WOREC, Balkumari, Lalitpur.

Zajovic, S. (2005) *Women, Peace and Security: Fieldwork experiences—workshops, interactive lectures, campaigns, performances*, Women in Black, Belgrade. http://www.zeneucrnom.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=199&Itemid=54&lang=en.



**URGENT
ACTION
FUND ♀**



fi Front Line
PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

FOR WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS

KVINNA TILL KVINNA