60th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women
Women's Empowerment and its Link to Sustainable Development:
Incorporating the Realities of Women Human Rights Defenders

We are a group of women human rights defenders (WHRDs) in Afghanistan, Morocco, Palestine, and Sri Lanka working at the grassroots level to promote women's empowerment. We believe it is critical for grassroots women to have a seat at the table to achieve lasting solutions for peace, security, and economic development in our communities. Women face particular risks and have particular needs in conflict and, post-conflict/war peace building, reconstruction, security sector reform, and economic development. Prioritizing women's empowerment is critical to promote what we know are interconnected goals of peace, security, and economic development within our communities.

Resolution 1325 (S/Res/1325) recognized the importance of mainstreaming gender perspectives in promoting and maintaining international peace and security. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development likewise prioritizes women's participation in sustainable development and calls on States to create an enabling environment for women to exercise and claim their rights.

Despite the growing recognition that women's rights and participation are central to sustainable development, peace, and security, WHRDs in our communities are increasingly facing threats and violence that are preventing women's voices from being heard. The U.N. Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders noted that WHRDs who work on women's rights or gender issues face greater risk of harassment and violence, including at the hands of State agents.[1] Due to a lack of State resources for their protection, WHRDs are often forced to take their security into their own hands.[2]

Therefore, we write to draw attention to the dangers increasingly faced by WHRDs in our communities; make concrete recommendations to increase the protection of WHRDs and provide an enabling environment for women's empowerment; and urge CSW60 to include among its agreed conclusions the interconnected nature of women's empowerment with promoting sustainable development, peace and security. Our shared values of women's empowerment, women's rights, and solidarity inform our belief that WHRDs must be protected through coordinated efforts at the national, regional, and international levels.

1. Dangers Faced by WHRDs in Our Communities

- As the need to promote and defend women´s human rights increases, the availability of resources for protection of women human rights defenders needs to be adequate. In our experience, every dollar committed to the empowerment of women requires a similar investment for the protection and prevention of violence, intimidation, and deaths of human rights defenders.

---

[1] A/HRC/16/44, para. 105

[2] A/HRC/16/44, para. 99

- We have categorized WHRD in three levels considering their access to resources and recognition in the larger formal and informal structures for the protection of human rights defenders and gender advocates at the national level:

    o WHRDs at HIGHEST RISK are grassroots and frontline women activists defending and promoting human rights in their own communities, without any support networks, or visibility. WHRDs in this category are not part of a larger civil society movement and face greater risk because of their vulnerable position (e.g., minority women, internally displaced women, refugee women). Dangerous situations are often aggravated due to lack of direct contact and support of civil society organizations and international human rights organizations with the ability to help other women human rights defenders at risk.

    o WHRDs at HIGH RISK are those who are more visible to outside networks but lack emergency financial and evacuation support.

    o WHRDs at MODERATE RISK are generally visible, well connected to the international community, and able to get immediate responses if their security is threatened. They are more connected to UN human rights mechanisms and to high-level human rights bodies.

- As a result of their work, WHRDs face threats of violence against them or their families; intimidation; surveillance; and physical attacks. Perpetrators may be connected to the State, including plainclothes and uniformed officers in the police, military, and intelligence and other non-state armed groups. WHRDs face arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, degrading treatment, torture, stigmatization, and threats on account of their visibility and work. Particularly where State actors are involved, violations are not promptly or impartially investigated, and persons responsible are not held accountable.

- While all WHRDs face varying levels of risk, WHRDs in the HIGHEST RISK category are in the most vulnerable position because of their work. Lacking access to civil society groups and international networks, these WHRDs are unable to escape situations that pose a threat to their security and well-being.

- The dangerous environment for WHRDs prevents them from contributing to economic development and peace-building projects. A better safety net for WHRDs would create an enabling environment for women's empowerment and participation and would help ensure that women's voices are heard as States develop solutions for sustainable economic development, peace, and security.

- WHRDs often find ways to evacuate to safer places outside the community or country when they are at risk. This means it also curtails efforts of the WHRD movement in country. However, by leaving their communities, WHRDs affect the very goals those harassing and threatening them wanted. We are concerned that the lack of protective measures silences and isolates WHRDs who evacuate due to security concerns.

2. Concrete Recommendations to Increase the Protection of WHRDs in our Communities and Create an Enabling Environment for Women's Empowerment

Recognizing the importance of protecting WHRDs, the U.N., international community, international donor agencies, and regional human rights bodies should consider the following concrete recommendations.

- *Preventative* measures to proactively protect WHRDs:

    o Strengthen national, regional, and international mechanisms to reinforce legal protections for WHRDs;
    o Combat impunity for violations against WHRDs through national, regional, and international avenues, ensuring State and non-State actors accused of violations against WHRDs are promptly and impartially investigated and prosecuted, in full accordance of international due process standards;
    o Repeal and modify laws and policies that restrict the activities of WHRDs or punish WHRDs, gender advocates, feminist organizations;
    o Ensure robust rights to assembly, association, and expression;
    o Create secure independent information channels to enable WHRDs to quickly disseminate information about individuals at risk within civil society or to the international community, while ensuring that any channel is independent from the government;
    o Create secure monitoring channels by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders to enable the international community and UN human rights mechanisms to securely track and monitor the security situation of WHRDs;
    o Strengthen national human rights institutions and ensure their independence from State organs. Encourage national human rights institutions to create secure reporting channels to permit documentation of violations against WHRDs.
    o Train WHRDs on information security, encryption tools, physical security, and other measures to protect against surveillance;
    o Train WHRDs on emergency evacuation procedures and sources of emergency funding.

- *Urgent response* measures to mitigate the effects of threats, intimidation, attacks, and other human rights violations against WHRDs:

    o Create one or more general funds that are not linked to any project, can be quickly mobilized to WHRDs serving in remote communities, and accessible by local organizations that must put into effect a safety plan for the at risk WHRD;
    o Strengthen informal and formal networks of women's groups that handle relocation, find safe houses, and develop safety plans for at-risk WHRDs;
    o Ensure that those who document violence against WHRDs use a gender perspective;
    o Promote programs that can quickly and flexibly deploy physical and psychological protection to affected individuals;

- *Follow-up* measures to provide support, ensure safety of affected WHRDs, and monitor the situation:

    o Facilitate temporary visas and economic support for WHRDs needing emergency relocation;

- o   Connect relocated WHRDs to human rights organizations and relief organizations that can offer support;
- o   Lobby WHRD's home country for implementation of human rights resolutions and standards;
- o   Condition economic development and peace and security reforms on the protection of WHRDs.

3. Recommended Conclusions for CSW Regarding Safety of WHRDs

We believe women's empowerment is closely tied to efforts to promote sustainable development, peace, and security. In that vein, the 60th CSW should include the following recommendations among its agreed conclusions to recognize the importance of protecting WHRDs:

- We support the inclusion of a stand-alone paragraph on the role of women human rights defenders in the promotion and protection of human rights. WHRD need the creation of an enabling environment to carry out their work free from harassment, intimidation, and violence by state and non-state actors.
- The defense of women´s human rights requires adequate and diverse sources of funding, including resources to respond to risk and threats in an effective way.
- It is imperative to reaffirm the process of claiming, realizing, and restoring human rights of all women and girls is a crosscutting issue, closely linked to sustainable development and women´s empowerment.
- The importance of real participation of women's youth-led, and feminist organizations and women human rights defenders in sustainable development and its relation to women´s empowerment must be emphasized throughout the agreed conclusions.
- A holistic approach of the implementation of the 2030 sustainable development agenda, international human rights agreements, and the Beijing Platform for Action also requires inter-connected issues such as ending the arms trade, discriminatory macro-economic policies that maximize inequality, and the devastating effects of militarization in the world.
- Recognizing the critical role of WHRDs in promoting women's empowerment, the international community bears a responsibility to protect WHRDs and create an enabling environment for their work.
- The agreed conclusion document needs to include a reference to the on-going targeting of WHRDs, the culture of impunity. Shrinking spaces and funding are obstacles for women and organizations promoting and defending the human rights of all women and girls and hinder the implementation of the 2030 sustainable development agenda.

The Center for Women's Global Leadership endorses this document.