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Protecting women human rights defenders in Europe

Report¹

Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination

Rapporteur: Ms Petra BAYR, Austria, Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group

Summary

Women human rights defenders are at the forefront of the fight for human rights and gender equality. They are individuals or groups who act, in a peaceful and legal way, to promote and protect human rights. They are activists, members of non-governmental organisations, health workers, private sector actors, researchers, lawyers, students, teachers, artists, trade unionists, bloggers, civil servants, or journalists. They play a crucial role, which should be widely recognised.

In a global context of backlash against women's rights, they face multiple challenges. Women human rights defenders, in all their diversity, are exposed to gender-specific violence, online and offline, including public shaming, disclosure of personal data ("doxing"), and sexual slurs. They are often victims of intersecting forms of discrimination. The objective of harassment and violence against women human rights defenders is to undermine their credibility and discourage them from continuing their actions.

The Parliamentary Assembly should express its strong support for women human rights defenders and call on Council of Europe member States to repeal laws, policies and practices affecting women human rights defenders and unduly restricting their activities, and to end impunity for perpetrators of any kind of violence against them.

1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 15642](#), Reference 4701 of 23 January 2023.



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A. Draft resolution²

1. Women human rights defenders in all their diversity play a crucial role in promoting and protecting human rights, including women's rights and the rights of LGBTI persons, and in furthering gender equality. They are individuals or groups who act, in a peaceful and legal way, to promote and protect human rights. They are activists, members of non-governmental organisations, health workers, private sector actors, researchers, lawyers, students, teachers, artists, trade unionists, bloggers, civil servants, or journalists. They are an inspiration for societal change.
2. In a context of shrinking civic space, women human rights defenders often lack recognition and their contribution is minimised, a situation which is not helped by the extreme diversity of their status and areas of work. The Parliamentary Assembly recognises their important work, including that of young women human rights defenders, and calls for them to be given more support.
3. Women human rights defenders face multiple challenges and risks; they are often threatened and attacked for what they do, for the ideas they promote and for who they are or who they are perceived to be. In particular, they receive specific threats made against their person, both on and offline, aiming to silence them. In particular, targeted online hate campaigns have been organised against activists who denounce patriarchal systems and cultures. Women human rights defenders are often victims of intersecting forms of discrimination. Transgender women human rights defenders and those with a disability or with a minority background are particularly at risk. The Assembly strongly condemns the attacks perpetrated against women human rights defenders in all their diversity, and calls for an end to impunity for their perpetrators.
4. The rise in populism and misogyny has a negative impact on the work of women human rights defenders in Europe. Anti-gender movements see them as a threat because they challenge the so-called "traditional vision" of women in society. Considering these challenges and obstacles, it is essential to combat misinformation about women's rights and women human rights defenders and to ensure their digital safety. The Assembly recalls the responsibility of States to provide an enabling environment for women human rights defenders and to ensure their protection in line with their undertakings under international treaties.
5. The Assembly recalls the 1999 United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and the 2008 European Union guidelines for human rights defenders and stresses the importance of their implementation. It also recalls the Committee of Ministers' Declaration of 6 February 2008 on Council of Europe action to improve the protection of human rights defenders and promote their activities of and its Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)11 to member States on the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe.
6. The Assembly reaffirms its support for all human rights defenders and recalls its [Resolution 2095 \(2016\)](#) and [Recommendation 2085 \(2016\)](#) "Strengthening the protection and role of human rights defenders in Council of Europe member States", its [Resolution 2225 \(2018\)](#) "Protecting human rights defenders in Council of Europe member States" and its [Resolution 2439 \(2022\)](#) "Access to abortion in Europe: stopping anti-choice harassment". It reaffirms its support for the mandate of the Assembly's General Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders and whistleblowers. The Assembly provides an international platform for human rights defenders, and its newly-created Vigdís Prize for Women's Empowerment, launched in May 2023, will provide a further opportunity to raise awareness about the work of women human rights defenders to empower women in their countries and fields of activity.
7. In the light of these considerations, the Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States to:
 - 7.1. sign, ratify and implement the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CETS No. 210, "Istanbul Convention");
 - 7.2. implement the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders;
 - 7.3. ensure the implementation of the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights related to the situation of all human rights defenders;
 - 7.4. repeal laws, policies and practices that affect women human rights defenders, in all their diversity, and unduly restrict their activities;
 - 7.5. revise criminal codes in order to include discrimination on the ground of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and sex characteristics, taking into account the intersectional dimension, if it is not yet the case;

2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 16 April 2024.

- 7.6. investigate and prosecute perpetrators – including members of police forces – of attacks and threats against women human rights defenders, online and offline, including publication of private information with malicious intent (“doxing”) and specifically gendered attacks; and collect gender-disaggregated data on these attacks;
 - 7.7. ensure that criminal proceedings related to gender-specific crimes are victim-friendly and respect victims’ rights;
 - 7.8. protect women human rights defenders from acts of intimidation and legal and administrative harassment;
 - 7.9. foster the trust of civil society in public institutions, condemn smear campaigns against women human rights defenders and counter distortion and misinformation about their work;
 - 7.10. publicly recognise the role and contribution of women human rights defenders, in all their diversity, and guarantee their protection, ensuring a secure and enabling environment in which to carry out their activities;
 - 7.11. provide predictable funding for the work of women human rights defenders, ensure transparency in the allocation of funding and allow them to access funds from international or private sources;
 - 7.12. support the participation of women human rights defenders in legislative processes, in policy and decision making on matters concerning them at an early stage of planning, and when it comes to the evaluation and possible adaptations of policies and programmes;
 - 7.13. introduce, if not yet the case, assessment of the impact of draft laws on gender equality and anti-discrimination;
 - 7.14. ensure that national human rights action plans include specific provisions on women human rights defenders;
 - 7.15. support programmes to ensure the safety of women human rights defenders at risk, including early warning mechanisms, foresee flexible funding for their activities, and facilitate the granting of visas for women human rights defenders at risk;
 - 7.16. raise awareness and train diplomatic and consular staff on the protection of human rights defenders;
 - 7.17. recognise the impact that attacks and threats can have on the mental health of human rights defenders and support recovery programmes;
 - 7.18. provide training for police officers, prosecutors and judges on gender equality and on the role, work and legitimacy of women human rights defenders;
 - 7.19. launch awareness-raising campaigns on the roles and contributions of women human rights defenders.
8. The Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States to strengthen equality bodies as important allies of women human rights defenders by securing high standards and sufficient funding.
 9. The Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States that are Parties to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court to consider proposing an amendment to the Statute in order to include the crime of “gender apartheid”, which is the institutionalisation of gender-based discrimination and exclusion of women and girls from all spheres of society.
 10. The Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States which are member States of the European Union to support the inclusion of sexual and reproductive health and rights in the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights.
 11. Noting that women human rights defenders working on the protection of sexual and reproductive health and rights have faced numerous challenges and threats in past years, the Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States to respect and ensure women’s autonomy and decision-making capacity when it comes to reproductive health and rights and, if necessary, to provide clear guidelines to doctors, pharmacists and patients in this regard, and to provide age adequate comprehensive and inclusive sex education.
 12. Considering that women human rights defenders often struggle to protect human rights and environmental rights that are infringed by private enterprises, the Assembly invites Council of Europe member States to support the preparation of a binding United Nations treaty on business and human rights in order to hold actors of the private sector accountable.

13. Inclusive feminist foreign, development, and peace policies can provide an enabling framework for supporting women human rights defenders. The Assembly therefore invites Council of Europe member States to consider adopting such policies.

14. Considering that culture can be an instrument of change, the Assembly invites its member States to earmark funding dedicated to women artists, in all their diversity, working on the promotion of human rights, women's rights and rights of LGBTI persons.

15. The Assembly encourages national parliaments to demonstrate their support for women human rights defenders through practical action such as introducing new policies, including on equal treatment, anti-discrimination, sexual and reproductive health and rights, sexual orientation, gender expression and identity and sex characteristics, empowerment of women and gender-based violence, and organising parliamentary events with their participation in order to establish and maintain dialogue.

B. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Petra Bayr, rapporteur

1. Introduction

1. Women human rights defenders and people who defend women's rights³ are at the forefront of the fight for human rights and gender equality. In addition, they often also bring forward societal change. They play a crucial role which should be widely recognised.

2. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has defined women human rights defenders as "all women and girls working on any human rights issue... and people of all genders who work to promote women's rights and rights related to gender equality."⁴ They can be activists, members of non-governmental organisations, health workers, private sector actors, researchers, lawyers or journalists.⁵

3. The Parliamentary Assembly has been working for many years on the protection of human rights defenders in Europe but has never dedicated a report to the specific challenges faced by women human rights defenders and people defending women's rights. Egidijus Vareikis (Lithuania, EPP/CD), rapporteur for the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, stressed in his 2018 report entitled "Protecting human rights defenders in Council of Europe member States" that "Special attention should be drawn to women defenders, who are often subjected to attacks due to their work on culturally sensitive issues challenging traditional customs."⁶ In its [Resolution 2439 \(2022\)](#) "Access to abortion in Europe: stopping anti-choice harassment", the Assembly reiterated "its constant support for women's human rights defenders, in Council of Europe member States and beyond, and [undertook] to protect them from undue pressure, intimidation and violence".

4. Former Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatović stressed in March 2023 that "Unprecedented challenges make the work of human rights defenders ever more crucial to the preservation of the democratic fabric of our societies. Solidarity with and among human rights defenders is more imperative than ever".⁷

5. In its Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)11 to member States on the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe expressed "grave concern about the considerable and increasing number of allegations and reports of threats of a serious nature, risks and dangers faced by human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders, online and offline, and the prevalence of impunity for violations and abuses against them" and called on member States to "ensure women human rights defenders are able to access specific support, funding, and protection, including against gender-based violence, and guarantee an environment in which they can work free from violence and discrimination".⁸

6. In an overall context of attacks against human rights and backlash against women's rights, women human rights defenders, in all their diversity, face multiple challenges and specific threats, physically and online. In a joint statement on the occasion of the International Day of Women Human Rights Defenders, several United Nations special rapporteurs stressed that "women human rights defenders face additional barriers of economic and structural discrimination and unique challenges driven by deep-rooted discrimination against women and stereotypes entrenched in patriarchal societies related to gender and sexuality".⁹ The guarantee of their safety should be made a priority.

3. I will use the expression "Women human rights defenders" for both in the explanatory memorandum.

4. [Women human rights defenders](#), OHCHR.

5. ["Situation of women human rights defenders"](#), report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, 40th session of the Human Rights Council, January 2019.

6. [See Doc. 14567 and Resolution 2225 \(2018\)](#).

7. ["Commissioner calls on states to support and to protect human rights defenders in the context of multiple crises affecting Europe"](#), Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 24 March 2023. See also the [report on the Round-table "Human Rights Defenders in the Council of Europe area in times of crisis"](#).

8. [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2018\)11 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe](#) (adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 28 November 2018 at the 1330th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies).

9. ["Women human rights defenders must be protected, say UN experts"](#), 28 November 2018.

7. Women human rights defenders are “routinely silenced and denied access to policy-making spaces”.¹⁰ Attacks against women’s rights are in general the first attacks against human rights and democratic structures. The aim of such attacks is to undermine the work of women human rights defenders and, ultimately, to silence them and send signals to other potential activists saying: “Don’t dare! Look what will happen to you!”. Threats are often made against their families.

8. From the demonstrations led by women in Iran to the protests against the denial of access to education to girls in Afghanistan and the fight against the devastation of the environment in South America, the work of women human rights defenders is global. In Europe as well, in past years, they have faced threats when working on access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, fight against gender-based violence, combating discrimination on the grounds of gender identity and sexual orientation and calling for the protection of the rights of migrants and asylum-seekers.¹¹

2. Aims and scope of the report

9. This report aims to shed light on the situation of women human rights defenders in Europe, raising awareness of the specific threats they face, and to recognise their contribution to the protection of human rights. I have analysed their fields of action as well as the means to ensure protection and freedom of action and expression, including in contexts of conflict.

10. I have looked into the situation of women human rights defenders who have fled countries where they were at risk for their activities and who are now living in a Council of Europe member State, and examined whether they receive adequate protection. I have also studied the situation of wives, family members or companions of political activists and human rights defenders who have become women human rights defenders due to the pressure on their families or friends. I am also concerned with the situation of women defenders of environmental human rights.

11. I have tried to take into account intersectional realities in my work. Women human rights defenders with a disability, transgender women human rights defenders or with a minority background, to name a few, are particularly targeted in their work.

3. Working methods

12. Following desk research, I held bilateral meetings with women human rights defenders and people defending women’s rights. I discussed with them their work and the challenges they face, as well as the role parliamentarians could play in supporting them, via parliamentary debates leading to sufficient legislation, awareness raising campaigns or political support for their actions.

13. On 26 April 2023 I held a meeting with Evgenia Kara-Murza. On the same day, I held an exchange with Dunja Mijatović, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights.

14. I held virtual bilateral meetings with Melike Balkan, Amnesty International researcher on Türkiye, on 5 June 2023, with Hilary Margolis, Human Rights Watch representative, on 15 June 2023, and with Ozlem Dalkiran, Protection Coordinator for Europe at Front Line Defenders, on 15 June 2023.

15. On 21 June 2023 I also met in person with Michel Forst, UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention (previously UN Special rapporteur on human rights defenders).

16. On 15 September 2023, the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination held a hearing in Paris with the participation of Hugo Gabbero, Director of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders at the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Sarah Durocher, President of the Planning familial, France, and Noémie Gardais, Advocacy Officer, Planning familial, France.

17. On 9 October 2023, I met with Justyna Wydrzyńska, a Polish woman human rights defender who created the website Women on the Net, “Poland’s first online forum supporting women seeking safe abortions, contraception or sex education”.¹² In 2023, she was a shortlisted nominee for the Vacláv Havel Prize.

10. “We must urgently defend the rights and lives of women human rights defenders”, UN Women statement on International Women Human Rights Defenders Day, 29 November 2022.

11. “Sexual and reproductive health and rights in Europe: progress and challenges”, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024 and “Human rights of LGBTI people in Europe: current threats to equal rights, challenges faced by defenders, and the way forward”, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021.

12. “Frontline Defenders”, Justyna Wydrzyńska.

18. On 7 December 2023, the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination held an exchange of views with Naveen Hashim, a researcher on the role of women in the economic development of Afghanistan and a women's rights activist.

19. On 4-5 March 2024, I carried out a fact-finding visit to Poland during which I met with members of the government, parliamentarians and civil society representatives. I would like to express my gratitude to the Polish delegation to the Assembly and its secretariat for their support in the organisation of the visit.

20. On 21 March 2024, I held a virtual bilateral meeting with Waltraud Heller, Project Manager at the Institutional Cooperation and Networks Unit of the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency. On 22 March 2024, I held an exchange with Mary Lawlor, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, with Orsolya Toth, Human rights officer at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the United Nations, and with representatives of the NGO ASSEDEL.

4. Multiple challenges for women human rights defenders

4.1. Perception of women human rights defenders

21. The rise in populism and misogyny in Europe has a negative impact on the work of women human rights defenders. Targeted hate campaigns online have been reported by several feminist activists who denounce patriarchal systems and cultures. Women human rights defenders are attacked for who they are or how they are perceived, and for what they defend and promote.

22. Women human rights defenders face multiple challenges. Among them is the fact that their work may be perceived as a threat to established order or so-called "culture". The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders stressed that "sexual orientation and gender identity are risk multipliers".¹³ The former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders had highlighted that "women defenders often face additional and different risks that are gendered, intersectional and shaped by entrenched gender stereotypes".¹⁴

23. According to Hugo Gabbero, the work of women human rights defenders and women's rights defenders is seen as "a challenge to supposedly traditional values. Persons defending women's rights and gender equality are disproportionately affected by restrictions and attacks against civic space".¹⁵

4.2. Online and offline harassment

24. Women human rights defenders, in all their diversity, are exposed to gender-specific violence, online and offline, including public shaming, disclosure of personal data ("doxing"), and sexual slurs. The objective of harassment against women human rights defenders is to undermine their credibility and discourage them from continuing their actions. The legitimacy of women human rights defenders is too often questioned.

25. In several European countries, there is an increasing number of strategic lawsuits (or "SLAPP" for Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) targeting women human rights defenders. According to Mary Lawlor, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, SLAPPs are used as a tactic to gag human rights defenders, in order to neutralise their work while they are occupied in trying to fight the SLAPPs.

26. In Andorra, Vanessa Mendoza Cortés, a psychologist and therapist, and president of Stop Violències (SV), a women's rights organisation working on sexual and reproductive health rights, has been outspoken about her position in favour of the decriminalisation of abortion, which is illegal under all circumstances in the country. She was subjected to harassment and threats for several years.¹⁶ On 17 January 2024, she was acquitted.¹⁷

13. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, "Pathways to peace: women human rights defenders in conflict, post-conflict and crisis-affected settings", A/78/131, 7 July 2023.

14. "Situation of women human rights defenders", report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, 40th session of the Human Rights Council, January 2019.

15. Hearing held during the meeting of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination on 15 September 2023.

16. "Andorra: guarantee the right to freedom of expression for women's rights defender Vanessa Mendoza Cortés and ensure an enabling environment for women's rights defenders", Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 29 November 2023.

17. "Andorra: acquittal of activist who raised concerns about total abortion ban at a meeting 'an important victory'", Amnesty International, 17 January 2024.

27. In Azerbaijan, Amnesty International reported that “Women human rights defenders have faced threats, coercion, violations of their right to privacy and smear campaigns that are gender specific and target them as women”.¹⁸ Leyla Yunus is an Azerbaijani human rights defender, known for her relentless advocacy for political prisoners and freedom of expression. Her work extended to addressing broader human rights issues within the country. She faced persecution herself, enduring imprisonment as a result of her activism. She now lives in the Netherlands.

4.3. Physical violence against women human rights defenders

28. Repression of demonstrations of women human rights defenders, intimidation, including of family members, arbitrary arrests and detention, threats and attacks on headquarters of women human rights defenders' organisations are a reality in Europe. Women human rights defenders working on the protection of women's sexual and reproductive rights face stigmatisation, intimidation, attacks, and prosecution.¹⁹ Attacks can be physical, on honour or reputation.

29. In France, the Planning familial relies on a network of 80 associations at local level. It provides counseling to 400 000 persons a year and makes presentations in schools on sex education in order to advance the sexual and reproductive rights of all people in France. The Planning familial has filed a complaint against the French State for not providing the three mandatory sessions on sex education at school. Anti-choice movements regularly attack the Planning familial.

30. In 2023, there were dozens of attacks against offices of the Planning familial. A harassment raid was organised against several centres after the publication of a picture of a pregnant man. The office of the Planning familial in Gap was attacked at the same time as the Pride march. Many anti-choice websites have been created and provide fake information with negative impact on those seeking advice. In response, the Planning familial set up a new website, with an online chat, to counter misinformation.

31. In Türkiye, since May 2020, a large number of women human rights defenders have been subjected to police raids, arbitrary arrests and detention, as well as criminal investigations and prosecutions. Several lawful and legitimate activities of their associations, including women's marches, demonstrations, interviews and press releases, were described as “terrorist” or “immoral” activities.²⁰ The Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor ordered the dissolution of the We Will Stop Femicides Platform (KCDP) in December 2021 for alleged “contravention of law and morality”. The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights stressed that demonstrations' bans have particularly targeted events organised by or in support of LGBTI persons, women and environmental human rights defenders. In March 2023, she called on the Turkish authorities to “investigate all cases where excessive use of force has been used against participants of peaceful assemblies organised in recent years despite the bans”. She underlined it was “particularly regrettable that the International Women's Day march in Istanbul ha[d] been banned for the last eight years”.²¹

32. Political decisions have a direct impact on the work of women human rights defenders. The Commissioner stressed that the withdrawal of Türkiye from the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CETS No. 210, “Istanbul Convention”) has had serious consequences for the work of women human rights defenders and civil society organisations advocating for women's and LGBTI rights.²²

33. In its report entitled “Protecting civil society – Update 2023”,²³ the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights notes that “threats and attacks particularly affect organisations and human rights defenders working with minority groups, those working with migrants and refugees, those working to combat racism, and those working to promote women's rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights and LGBTIQ + rights”

18. “Azerbaijan: Gender-based reprisals against women must stop”, Amnesty International, 12 May 2021.

19. “Human rights defenders and health workers who face widespread abuse and criminalization for defending the right to abortion must be better protected”, International Planned Parenthood Federation, 24 November 2023. See also “An Unstoppable Movement: A global call to recognize and protect those who defend the right to abortion”, 24 November 2023.

20. Hugo Gabberio, FIDH, hearing held on 15 September 2023.

21. “Türkiye: reverse a critically hostile environment for freedom of expression and for journalists, human rights defenders and civil society”, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 5 March 2024.

22. “Memorandum on freedom of expression and of the media, human rights defenders and civil society in Türkiye”, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 5 March 2024.

23. “Protecting civil society – Update 2023”, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 18 October 2023.

5. Women environmental human rights defenders

34. The full enjoyment of all human rights depends on the maintenance of a healthy environment. Environmental human rights defenders are protected by the UN Declaration on human rights defenders.²⁴ During our meeting, Michel Forst underlined that there are new forms of harassment against environmental human rights defenders which restrain civic space, and new practices by the police.

35. Special attention should be paid to the situation of women environmental human rights defenders (WEHRDs). Violence against WEHRDs is multidimensional and can include “direct violence, structural violence, cultural violence (...) and ecological violence, which are combined to repress them”.²⁵ Gender-based threats and violence against WEHRDs aim at undermining their work, question their power and authority and discourage other activists from taking action.²⁶

36. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Tahira Tibold, chair of the Kruščica Local Community, has advocated preventing the construction of hydropower plants along the Kruščica river by a private investor. In 2017, during a peaceful blockade of a bridge over this river, a special forces raid attacked the protesters. It was reported that the police insulted the WEHRDs, “using sexually-loaded language, tearing their clothes or traditional headscarves, and even physically injuring more than half of the women who were not resisting them”.²⁷ There has been continued pressure on Tahira Tibold and her family. She also received death threats.²⁸

37. There is an intention to systematically discredit the voices and work of women human rights defenders, including women environmental human rights defenders. They are attacked at a personal level with a view to undermining their message.

38. I would like to mention the case of Greta Thunberg, a young Swedish climate activist, who founded the Fridays for Future international movement. She decided to skip school on Fridays as a form of strike for firmer political action on global heating. Her commitment to climate justice sparked worldwide youth protests and created an international movement of young climate activists.²⁹ Since the start of her activism in 2018, Greta Thunberg has become a prominent public figure in the fight against the climate catastrophe, addressing herself to world political leaders at the UN Climate Action Summit in 2019.³⁰ She has continuously called out politicians for their inaction on global heating, sparking criticism on their side, as they claimed that she was oversimplifying complex issues. Greta Thunberg has received numerous awards for her outstanding political activism and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. She has been relentlessly attacked about her appearance. Her opponents have criticised and mocked her for her looks and manners. As WEHRDs cannot be challenged on facts, opponents attack them on their looks or infantilise them.

39. In addition to violence and threats, WEHRDs also face barriers when seeking justice. When WEHRDs call out abusive uses of force, police forces either deny these allegations, or justify the use of extreme violence by presenting it as retaliation after an attack.

6. Women human rights defenders seeking protection in Europe

40. On 7 December 2023, the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination held an exchange of views with Naveen Hashim, who shared her experience as a woman human rights defender. Naveen Hashim left Afghanistan for Europe after the Taliban takeover. She arrived in France in September 2023.

41. In the past two years, the Taliban have stripped women of their social, political and economic rights. Those who resisted faced detention, torture and even death. Ms Hashim alerted committee members to the high number of suicides of Afghan women. Thousands of Afghan women and girls had left the country for Pakistan, but many of them were sent back to Afghanistan.

24. United Nations, General Assembly (8 March 1999), “Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms”, revised in 2008.

25. Tran, D., “A comparative study of women environmental defenders’ anti violent success strategies”. Geoforum Volume 126, November 2021.

26. Castañeda Camey, I., Sabater, L., Owren, C. and Boyer, A.E. (2020). “Gender-based violence and environment linkages: The violence of inequality”. Wen, J. (ed.). Gland, Switzerland: IUCN. p.169.

27. “Stop Persecution, Whose interests do the police protect when they are beating up women?”, 2017.

28. “Woman attacked for protecting the River Kruščica. The violence against activists to be investigated” calls Arnika”, 2020.

29. “Climate change: Young people across Europe protest by skipping school”, BBC, 24 January 2019.

30. “Greta Thunberg: Who is the climate activist and what has she achieved?”, BBC, 5 February 2024.

42. Naveen Hashim called on European leaders to accelerate the evacuation process of Afghan women and girls. In her view, the slow pace of asylum procedures was one of the major problems faced by women human rights defenders seeking protection in Europe. In addition, access to humanitarian visa is very restricted or even impossible in some countries. She stressed the importance of giving Afghan women and girls the opportunity to pursue higher education paths.

43. Representatives of several Afghan civil society organisations trying to find common perspectives for a democratic Afghanistan after the end of the Taliban regime meet in the framework of the “Vienna Process”. They recently called for an amendment to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court to include “gender apartheid” as a crime of aggression. This would also cover crimes against women by the Taliban.

44. According to the report presented by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders to the Human Rights Council in 2023, 18 European Union member States accommodate human rights defenders who are at risk and 8 of them have comprehensive programmes to receive them.³¹

7. Family members becoming women human rights defenders

45. Family members of women human rights defenders can be targeted and threatened, and also need special protection. Some women human rights defenders became activists to continue the fight for human rights initiated by relatives. The Saturday mothers’ protests in Türkiye³² aim at seeking truth about the disappearances of family members in the 1980s and 1990s.

46. Evgenia Kara-Murza is the wife of Vladimir Kara-Murza, a Russian opposition activist who was arrested in April 2022 for “high treason” after protesting against the war of aggression against Ukraine. She is the advocacy director of the Free Russia Foundation, a nonprofit, nonpartisan international organisation supporting civil society and democratic development in the Russian Federation and advocating for accountability for human rights violations. Since her husband’s imprisonment, Ms Kara-Murza has been forced to live in exile with their children and has been advocating for her husband’s release. She has been denouncing the backlash against human rights defenders and activists in the Russian Federation and has been publicly calling upon the western governments to adopt sanctions. During our meeting, she insisted on the importance of repeatedly asking political leaders about the situation of human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders, in detention, to demonstrate that support is not decreasing or interest waning. Both personal and public advocacy matter.

47. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya is the wife of Siarhei Tsikhanouski, a Belarusian blogger and activist who intended to run for the 2020 presidential election in Belarus as an opposition candidate to President Lukashenka. Two days after announcing his intention to run for the election, he was arrested and imprisoned. He was then sentenced to 18 years in a penal colony in December 2021. He was accused, among other things, of “inciting social hatred” and organising actions which “seriously disrupted public order”. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya has become one of the leaders of the Belarusian opposition, taking up her husband’s fight against the regime. She advocates for European States to strengthen sanctions against the Belarusian State. She is currently living in exile in Lithuania. On 6 March 2023, she was sentenced to 15 years in prison in Belarus.

48. Yulia Navalnaya is a Russian economist married to the late Alexei Navalny since 2000. She was a member of the Russian democratic Yabloko party in the 2000s.³³ During Alexei Navalny’s career as a political activist and opposition leader, she supported him and their family.³⁴ In 2020, when her husband was poisoned, she addressed herself to Vladimir Putin directly, asking him to release her husband for treatment in Germany. Since her husband’s death in February 2024, she has taken a more prominent role in the Russian opposition: she spoke at the Munich Security Conference in February 2024 and called upon the international community to “fight against this horrific regime”. Then, she released a video on 19 February on social media, in which she stated that she would “continue Alexei’s work” and called on people to “fight and don’t give up”.

31. “Pathways to peace: women human rights defenders in conflict, post-conflict and crisis-affected settings”, A/78/131, op. cit.

32. “Police detain human rights defenders and relatives of disappeared people on Saturday Mothers/People 900th vigil”, Amnesty International, 25 June 2022.

33. “Yulia Navalnaya: Russian opposition leader’s ‘principled and fearless’ widow”, BBC, 29 February 2024.

34. “Who is Yulia Navalnaya?”, Reuters, 21 February 2024.

49. Families of human rights defenders and women human rights defenders need to be protected. Hannah Neumann, rapporteur for the European Parliament pointed out that it was necessary to extend the focus “to the networks and family of defenders because suppressive regimes often deliberately target the families to silence defenders.”³⁵ The aid to families should be concrete, such as the provision of visas.

8. Case study: the situation in Poland

50. On 4 and 5 March 2024, I went to Warsaw where I met with several ministers, secretaries of State, parliamentarians and civil society representatives. It is a time of profound change and transition in Poland, where some women’s rights activists are now holding governmental responsibilities.

51. Women human rights defenders represent a strong political force in the country. It was reported that the political change at the last parliamentary elections was due in particular to the high level of mobilisation of women and young people.

52. The priority for the new government is clearly the re-establishment of rule of law for all. The government representatives I have met with stressed that the situation of human rights defenders and women human rights defenders had been very complicated under the previous government. When he took office, Adam Bodnar, minister of Justice, apologised to all human rights activists who had been harassed, attacked or wrongfully criticised in the past years. During our meeting, the Deputy Minister of Justice indicated that women’s rights NGOs would be at the centre of the attention of the ministry. The allocation of funding to civil society organisations in past years will also be scrutinised.

53. Women human rights defenders and LGBTI rights defenders faced attacks and threats, in person and online. Offices were searched and there were several attempts to silence them.³⁶ Misinformation campaigns about women human rights defenders were organised. In addition, there has been evidence of hostile rhetoric against women investigative journalists. Six human rights groups, including Feminoteka, Women’s Rights Centre and Women’s Strike, received bomb threats via email on International Women’s Day (8 March) 2021. Federa, a reproductive rights group, received bomb threats via email on 12 and 23 March 2021. Human Rights Watch called for an investigation.

54. In October 2022, Warsaw prosecutors filed an indictment against three women’s rights activists: Marta Lempart, Klementyna Suchanow and Agnieszka Ceredereka-Fabin of the Women’s Strike collective (*Strajk Kobiet*) for allegedly “causing an epidemiological threat”, by organising demonstrations against the almost total prohibition of abortion in October 2020. While in Warsaw I met with representatives of Women’s Strike who reported physical attacks by the police against them at a demonstration. There was in fact a systematic attitude of law-enforcement officials that was against women’s rights and LGBTI rights, combined with repression. A sub-committee on the implementation of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights was established at the Sejm, which demonstrates a willingness of the parliament to ensure comprehensive implementation.

55. In March 2023, Justyna Wydrzynska was sentenced to eight months of community service following a criminal trial she underwent for sending abortion pills to a Polish woman in distress in 2020. She was accused of aiding and abetting a termination of pregnancy, which is considered a crime in Poland. Right and access to abortion are at the centre of attention. I also met with Joanna Gzyra-Iskandar, who is one of the activists in the Rainbow Halo case. On 28 March 2024, the Supreme Court dismissed her case (blasphemy).³⁷

56. Women human rights defenders spoke about the high levels of stress they have experienced and about the burnout of activists. The impact of repression on mental and emotional health needs to be taken into account when preparing policies and programmes to support their work. Pressure with regard to funding can also create a high level of stress.

35. European Parliament, “EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders”, report of the [Committee on Foreign Affairs \(October 2022\)](#), 2021/2204(INI).

36. “[Poland: Escalating Threats to Women Activists, Investigate, Protect Rights Defenders, End Hateful Rhetoric](#)”, Human Rights Watch, 31 March 2021.

37. The rainbow halo case is a criminal case against three activists accused of “offending religious feelings” in response to their displaying of posters showing Holy Mary adorned with a rainbow halo to protest increasing smear campaigns against and discrimination of LGBTI persons in Poland. See “[Poland: Rainbow Mary case underscores the need to repeal blasphemy laws](#)”, *Article 19*, 25 March 2024.

57. Rebuilding trust in law-enforcement will necessitate long-term efforts. I was informed that the parts on human rights and anti-discrimination had been removed from the curriculum of police officers. Investing in training of the police on equality and non-discrimination will have long-term benefits.

58. I am impressed with the determination of women human rights defenders and of LGBTI rights defenders I have met with during the visit. A dialogue needs to be held regularly between parliament, government and civil society representatives. Long-term and sustainable change cannot be done in one day and can be limited until next presidential elections. Poland is now on the path from an illiberal democracy to a more liberal democracy.

9. Concrete measures for increasing support for women human rights defenders

59. Several support mechanisms already exist for women human rights defenders. The FIDH has set up an observatory for their protection, providing emergency material assistance and organising solidarity and fact-finding missions. The observatory also organises training and capacity-building seminars. In addition, it serves as an early warning mechanism, issuing urgent appeals, press releases and open letters aiming to mobilise international attention. A global system of financial and legal support for women human rights defenders could be created.

60. At our hearing, Hugo Gabbero recommended establishing a specific channel of communication for human rights defenders with the Council of Europe. He called on the Council of Europe to consider setting up an early warning mechanism for defenders at risk, including women human rights defenders and women's rights defenders, which could be similar to the one set up for the safety of journalists.

61. Investigation and prosecution of the persons who intimidate, pressurise, threat and attack human rights defenders should be ensured. In my view, the Assembly should call on member States to repeal laws, policies and practices affecting women human rights defenders. There can be no impunity for any form of violence against women human rights defenders, in all their diversity. Counter terrorism laws, for instance, cannot be used to undermine human rights and advocacy work.

62. Countering violent hate speech against women human rights defenders is also of importance. Human rights defenders should have the possibility of carrying out their activities in an enabling environment, which can require the provision of security during demonstrations if needed, or personal security following threats and attacks.

63. Feminist diplomacy, foreign, development, and peace policies are additional tools which could be used to protect women human rights defenders. By shedding light on the importance of their work, ensuring protection and allocating grants for their activities, feminist diplomacy is a clear signal of support for women human rights defenders.

64. Support for initiatives such as the Initiative Marianne and the Prix Simone Veil should be further encouraged. The Initiative Marianne was launched in December 2021 with a view to providing support to human rights defenders, in France and in other countries.³⁸

65. Support to families of human rights defenders matters. Considering the level of threat, it would be important to ensure support and protection for families.

66. Countering misinformation about women's rights is another way to support women human rights defenders. The integration of comprehensive sex education in school curriculum is important.

67. The provision of visas and support for asylum requests are concrete ways of supporting women human rights defenders. We can welcome the fact that several Afghan women human rights defenders have been welcomed in Council of Europe member States and supported for their asylum requests.

68. Parliamentarians also have a responsibility in supporting human rights defenders and women human rights defenders, by holding public debates, providing platforms for their advocacy via hearings and asking for concrete support by governments. They can contribute to communicating about the work of women human rights defenders and co-operate with the media. Messages of solidarity matter but are not sufficient.

69. International assemblies, such as the Assembly of the Council of Europe, provide an international platform which can amplify the message of women human rights defenders and take a clear stand against those attacking them.

38. [L'initiative Marianne pour les défenseurs des droits de l'Homme](#).

70. The newly created Vigdís prize could also be used to give visibility to the work of women human rights defenders for the empowerment of women in their countries or field of activity. On 17 January 2024, Neva Tölle, a Croatian national who spent decades working to protect women from domestic violence, was awarded the Council of Europe's Raoul Wallenberg Prize 2024 in "recognition of her pioneering role, courage and determination in providing assistance to victims and in promoting change in public perception, legislation and policies to prevent and combat domestic violence".³⁹

71. The Assembly could also consider calling on Council of Europe member States that are Parties to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court to amend the Statute in order to include the crime of gender apartheid.

10. Conclusions

72. "Women's rights defenders, through their admirable work and courage, are actively contributing to building societies free from prejudices and discrimination against women and girls and their entitlement to sexual and reproductive health and rights. Threats and harassment against women's rights defenders must be prevented, investigated and sanctioned, while their efforts to promote and protect sexual and reproductive rights should be encouraged and supported", stressed former Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, on 8 March 2024.⁴⁰

73. It is time for the Assembly to express its strong support for women human rights defenders and to acknowledge their vital contribution to the global fight for human rights. We need to pay tribute to their work, dedication and for inspiring change. As members of parliament, we can call on our governments to do more to support women human rights defenders and ensure their protection and an enabling environment. Women human rights defenders can be drivers of positive change in society.

39. "Croatian pioneer receives Raoul Wallenberg Prize for her work protecting women from domestic violence", Council of Europe, 17 January 2024.

40. "Full realisation of women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights – an imperative for empowerment and gender equality", Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, 8 March 2024.