Women as Human Rights Defenders
"So today, we call upon our world leaders to change their strategic policies in favor of peace and prosperity. We call upon the world leaders that all of these deals must protect women and children's rights. A deal that goes against the rights of women is unacceptable."

- Malala Yousafzai

The term 'human rights defender' is a description of an individual who acts in ways to promote and protect human rights. The work done by human rights defenders is legitimated and legal by the civil societies that they represent. Specifically, 'Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs)' are women who are active in the roles of defending human and women's rights. These women take the lead in demanding justice for victims of violated human rights; they are peacekeepers so to say. These human rights defenders have created many positive shifts in societies. For instance, to date, most of the gains in regard to women's rights have been materialized through their tireless efforts. Amnesty International [2014] explains that grass root campaigning has made several progresses towards claiming the rights of women. These campaigns are usually initiated by various independent women's rights organizations; most of these women are community activists who fight for their basic rights and freedom. Furthermore, these women activists are brave individuals who often have to break social and cultural ideologies in order to re-establish women's rights and receive necessary justice.

WHRDs are particularly vulnerable to violence for the work they do. As women they are often exposed to or targeted for gender specific risks. Thousands of these WHRDS are exposed to invasion of privacy, violation of their personal relationships, blackmail, kidnapping, restrictions on freedom of expression and physical and sexual harassment. Allsopp [2012] revealed that these threats are not just limited to one specific region, this predicament is witnessed all over the world. For instance, in her study she found that WHRDs from Kenya, Nepal and Iran have often been accused of being “prostitutes” and forms of sexual torture are commonly used against them.

The battles faced by WHRDS often challenge traditional gender roles within societies. As a result some of the general public and authorities are hostile towards them. These women frequently have to deal with the issue of stigma from community and religious leaders who believe the work of WHRDs does not honour culture and religion. A case study covering the experiences of WHRDs in Northern Sierra Leone [Anon 2010] serves as an example of how women activists face many risks; one of the main challenges arises from the culture in the region being highly dominated by men. Furthermore, male human right defenders often put down the efforts of women's human right defenders. Issues of rape are often taken very lightly in these male dominated regions and wife beating is still seen as a man's right [Anon 2010]

When WHRDs raise their voice against domestic violence, rape, harmful traditional practices and the violation of women's dignity they are often shunned as such topics are expected to be treated as private matters that are not be spoken about in public. Hence, WHRDs are seen to be ‘intruders’ on private space [Anon 2010]. The case study goes on to explain that WHRDs in Northern Sierra Leone are constantly harassed and
commonly receive threats through anonymous phone calls. Another challenge faced by these WHRDs is reliant on the lack of funds to hire lawyers for victims; this gives rise to challenges in gathering evidence [Anon 2010].

The impact of these violations on WHRDs is immense. Many situations are very serious, for example, Samar Minallah, a director of an organization which produces documentaries in Pakistan and Afghanistan about women human rights issues was targeted to be killed after someone leaked a video of a woman being beaten as men stood by. Minallah had to move house and take her children out of school in fear of having them targeted [Anon 2010]. Moreover, due to such violations many WHRDs suffer from psychological problems including stress, burn out, mental torture and depression [Anon. 2010].

Providentially, there are several NGOs with the purpose of aiding these women so that they can continue to defend human rights, without such significant risks. In addition, the advocacy on behalf of WHRDs by these organizations is prompting policy change with the aim of providing structural support for WHRDs. One such organization is Just Associates (JASS) who in 2010 launched the Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders Initiative. The initiative aims to mobilize women defenders and develop “a comprehensive and regionally-relevant response to increased violence against WHRD” [JASS 2010] and has so far involved hundreds of WHRDs in its work and has contributed to resolutions made by the UN General Assembly.

The Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition (WHRDIC) is a network of 28 member organizations including Amnesty International, the Association for Women’s rights in Development, JASS and other grassroots and international organizations that advocate for women’s and human rights and the rights of HRDs. The coalition was established with the aim of protecting WHRDs so that they may be free to safely continue their advocacy and they do this by advocating for “protection mechanisms, laws and policies that provide justice for defenders” [WHRDIC 2014]. The coalition also works with the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights Defenders to provide analysis to help strengthen the structures in place to support WHRDs.

As according to the mandate on HRDs, the role of the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights Defenders is to gather and respond to information on the situation of HRDs whilst working with governments, in order to “recommend effective strategies to better protect HRDs” [UN 2011]. The UN Special Rapporteur is also expected to “integrate a gender perspective through her work” [UN 2011]. In 2010 in a report on the situation of HRD to the UN Human Rights Council, the Special Rapporteur made specific reference to the large amount of violations of the rights of WHRD and made recommendations that these be addressed [HiVOS 2013]. In November 2013, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on WHRD – Promotion of the Declaration of the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms: Protecting Women Human Rights Defenders. The resolution
encourages states to put mechanisms in place that will protect and promote the rights of WHRDs and to bring to justice those who abuse the rights of WHRDs [ISHR 2013].

In support for the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights Defenders the European Union has released guidelines for HRDs with the aim of providing “practical suggestions for enhancing EU action in relation to this issue” [EU 2008]. The guidelines suggest ways in which HRDs can be supported and they allow intervention by the EU for “human rights defenders at risk” [EU 2008]. It is the aim of the EU that the guidelines will “assist EU missions in their approach to human rights defenders” [EU 2008], thereby addressing the risks faced by them. While the EU has established policy in regards to HRD, these are general and they have not yet adopted specific measures for WHRD. All that is mentioned on the situation of WHRD is that the risks faced by WHRD must receive specific attention. As of yet the EU has not updated policy in relation to the UN resolution on WHRD.

While the UN resolution on WHRD is a large step forward to protecting the rights of WHRD, there is still more that can be done by the UN and its member states. Due to the nature of the General Assembly, in order to reach consensus among all member states the UN resolution on WHRD is a compromise, and so it is not as comprehensive as it could have been. As reported by the International Service for Human Rights [2013], the passing of the resolution came at the expense of a crucial paragraph which called on states “to condemn all forms of violence against women and women human rights defenders, and to refrain from invoking any customs, tradition or religious consideration to avoid obligations related to the elimination of violence against women”. The resolution also does not acknowledge the risks to WHRD who work on gender issues and who advocate for sexual and reproductive rights [HiVOS 2013].

What this means is that states whose cultures and/or religions institutionalize gender inequality and the repression of women are not under pressure from the resolution to actively change in ways which will support the development of gender equality and protect WHRD. Organizations such as those that form part of the WHRDIC will need to continue their advocacy so that this crucial paragraph will one day become a part of a UN resolution. In the mean time, pressure should remain on states to incorporate the recent resolution into their own national politics so as to protect WHRDs, and the EU should release guidelines on WHRDs (just as they have for HRDs) so that there is a specific focus on the protection of WHRDs on their missions and in their policies.

Furthermore, states and the groups that support WHRD should implement measures to provide counseling and stress management to WHRD given the immense psychological issues that WHRD encounter in their work. Many WHRDs also require financial support in order to continue their work as HRDs. With such resources readily available WHRDs would be able to continue to carry out their work more easily, due to increased physical support and some of the risks posed to WHRDs would be reduced.
Finally, it must be acknowledged that the biggest barrier that needs to be broken down is that of cultures and traditions involving ideologies that institutionalize gender inequality. Such ideologies are what caused the UN resolution on WHRDs to be not as comprehensive as it could have been, and they are linked with cultures and traditions that allow for and encourage the marginalization of women, thus posing great risks to WHRDs. Groups such as the WHRDIC must continue to advocate for women’s rights in order to bring about change within states and thus the resolutions of the UN, and men should become more actively involved protecting women’s rights and those of WHRDs in order to break the continuing cycle of male patriarchy.

Bibliography


