



Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders:

Facing gender-based violence in defense of land, natural resources and human rights



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Key messages

- Environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs), a significant number of whom are indigenous peoples, drive necessary social change, taking on extraordinary personal risk to protect the environment and advance human rights.
- Gender-based violence (GBV) is disproportionately used against women environmental human rights defenders (WEHRDs) to control and silence them and suppress their power and authority as leaders.
- Impunity dominates the violence faced by EHRDs, particularly violence against indigenous defenders, and for WEHRDs in societies where gender-based discrimination and violence are socially normalised or permissible, there are additional barriers to accessing justice for the violence they face.
- In addition to gender identity, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation and age, among other intersecting identities, also influence social structures and cultural norms that can drive violence against defenders or deter them from accessing services and resources in response to violence. Indigenous women, in particular, face disproportionate criminalisation and state-sanctioned violence, especially when they are defending their lands, territories and resources against extractive and exploitative industries.



Women environmental human rights defenders are critical for the protection of nature and its resources – yet, gender-based threats aim to silence their work

Natural resources and ecosystem services directly support millions of people's livelihoods, providing food and water, being part of cultural and communal identities and supporting rights to life. However, increased global demand for minerals, timber, palm oil and land threaten the sustainability of these resources and the ability of people to continue surviving on, living with and conserving them. In some cases, powerful state and non-state actors exploit weak or corrupt governance structures to extract natural resources with impunity, even when doing so directly harms communities and usurps their rights to lands and resources [1].

Responding to these environment-related stressors and threats, environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs), many of whom are indigenous peoples, are organising and mobilising movements to protect their lands, territories and resources in all regions of the world. From women's participation in the Chipko Movement in India that helped set the precedent for non-violent protest against massive deforestation, to the immensely successful women-led Green Belt Movement in Kenya that empowers women in environmental conservation and advocacy, women have played and continue to play significant and critical roles as environmental defenders in these movements [2,3].



EHRDs often face enormous risks to their health, well-being and lives, experiencing multiple forms of violence or even death from powerful forces that seek to silence and dissuade their efforts. An average of four EHRDs have been killed every week since December 2015, and violent attacks and murders of these defenders continue to rise [4]. While men are more often the victims of murders, women environmental human rights defenders (WEHRDs) experience gender-based violence (GBV) rooted in misogyny and discriminatory gender norms shaped by complex socioeconomic, cultural and political structures [1].

In the last decade, violence against EHRDs has received increased international attention. However, much work is still necessary to develop gender-responsive safeguards and response mechanisms as incidents of GBV against WEHRDs are on the rise, reinforcing gender inequality in public and private spheres.



Environmental human rights defenders

(EHRDs): Any individual or group of individuals working to protect or promote human rights in the context of the environment, such as the defense of land rights, access to natural resources and the right to a healthy environment [5].

Women Environmental Human Rights

Defenders (WEHRDs): Refers “specifically to women defenders working on human rights issues related to environmental justice, land rights and access to and control over natural resources” [1].

Gender-based violence (GBV): Any harm

or potential of harm perpetrated against a person’s will on the basis of gender. Encompasses many different expressions of violence, including physical, sexual and emotional abuse sexual harassment; stalking; rape, including “corrective” rape and rape as a tactic of conflict; domestic violence and intimate partner violence; child marriage; human trafficking; and female genital mutilation [1].

Violence against women defenders

Historical and structural gender inequalities directly impact the gender-specific violations and forms of violence experienced by women defenders,

ranging from verbal abuse and harassment based on their sex, intimidation, exclusion and sexual abuse and rape [7,8].

The discrimination and violence women defenders experience often weaponises deeply rooted gender norms and roles and promotes double standards.

For example, labelling women as bad mothers and wives, spreading rumours of extramarital affairs and dismissing them as viable leaders and defenders because they are “just women” [1,9]. These types of attacks are used to discredit and trivialise the important work of WEHRDs, contributing to alienation in communities and making it more difficult for defenders to access support resources [10].

In some cases, the work of women defenders can be seen as defying sociocultural gender norms, generating violence and hostility from family members, including domestic violence and abuse, threats of divorce and separation from their children [8,10].

“Let us build societies that are able to coexist in a dignified way, in a way that protects life. Let us come together and remain hopeful as we defend and care for the blood of this earth and its spirit”

– Berta Cáceres, Lenca indigenous woman, prominent human rights defender and environmental activist, in her acceptance speech for winning the Goldman Environmental Prize (2015). In 2016, she was assassinated in her home after enduring years of death threats, repression and criminalisation directed at herself and her family [6].

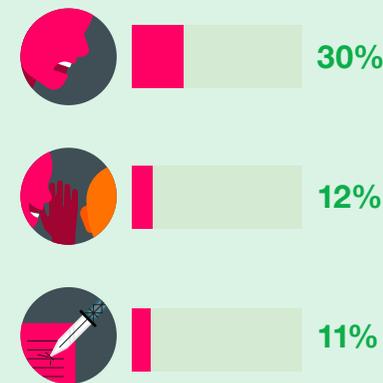
Between 2015 and 2016 in Mesoamerica, there were 2,197 documented attacks against women human rights defenders, 37% of which had a specific gender component,



meaning that part of the basis for attacks against the defender was due to being a woman.

Most of the attacks were in the form of intimidation and psychological harassment (30%), slander and defamation (12%) and threats and warnings (11%);

21 women defenders were murdered with another 44 attempted murders.



State actors were the main perpetrators of violence, with 54% of assailants identified as police, military personnel, public officials or government authorities [11].



Barriers to seeking justice

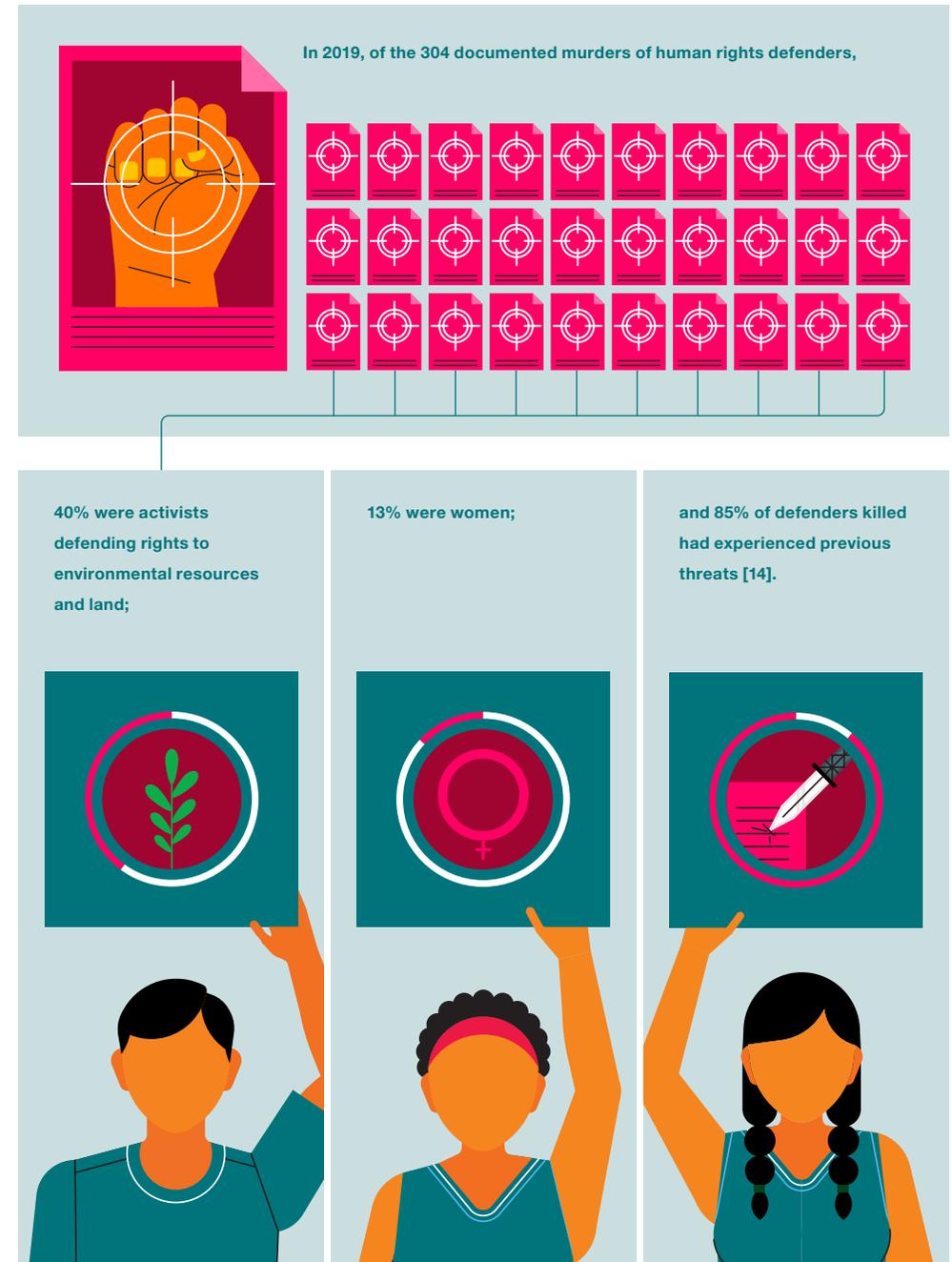
An air of impunity dominates the violence experienced by EHRDs, as perpetrators of violence tend to have strong economic and political allies, while defenders are often from marginalised communities and sometimes in remote locations with limited access to resources and services to seek justice.

Officials tasked with investigating reports of violence may have a gender prejudice,

meaning that reports of violence against women defenders are taken less seriously or not properly addressed. Failing to investigate and prosecute violence against defenders further contributes to the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators and can lead to more human rights abuses [12]. There are even cases where sexual violence is used by state officials as a form of torture and social control against women defenders [10].

In many contexts, gender-based discrimination and violence are normalised or even permissible in society, fuelling violence, exclusion and marginalisation of WEHRDs in everyday life [10].

This normalisation of violence and discrimination makes it even more difficult for defenders from marginalised communities to access resources in response to the violence they face in both public and private life, including in their own organisations, communities and households [13].



Multiple and intersecting identities impact violence and access to support

Indigenous women defenders face intersecting and reinforcing forms of GBV

due to a long history of racism and socioeconomic and political marginalisation of indigenous peoples that has limited their access to institutional and legal support, including lack of national legal recognition of their rights and identity [15].

The violence used against indigenous EHRDs is often rooted in the failure of governments to recognise and respect indigenous and local land ownership rights.

Lack of legal recognition adds to the impunity enjoyed by forces seeking to seize land from customary owners and drives criminalisation of defenders by labelling indigenous and local communities as terrorists or “illegal” in their own homes [16].

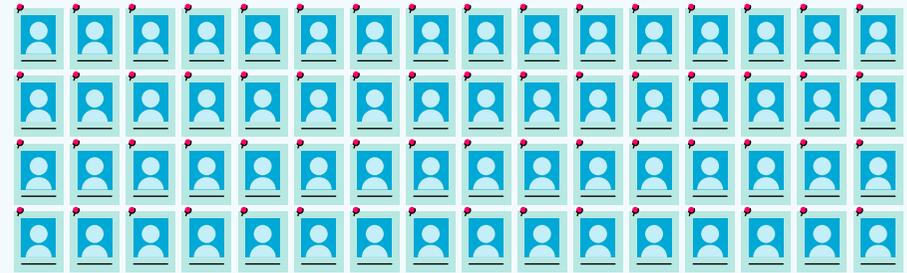
In many cases, indigenous women have no access to protection and support for the threats and violence they face because of social and legal marginalisation,

and this becomes even more complex when the perpetrators of violence are the institutions and people that are meant to be the protectors, such as the state and its agents, military and police forces [6].

LGBTI+ defenders, particularly transgender and gender non-conforming defenders, are especially vulnerable to violence

due to heightened visibility, limited or absent legal protections, criminalisation and social and cultural discrimination [14]. LGBTI+ defenders face violence and stigmatisation targeted at their identity based on what is deemed socially acceptable in a specific context to question and demonise their morality, mental health and reputation [10,12].

In 2019, 64 EHRDs were killed in Colombia – a 150% increase from 2018 –



WEHRDs are also facing growing threats in Colombia, with a 50% increase in the killing of women defenders between 2018 and 2019 [4].



Recommendations



Gender-responsive actions for CSOs:

Increase education, awareness raising efforts, research and data collection

on the gender-differentiated violence and discrimination against women, indigenous and LGBTI+ defenders [1,4,7,10,15,20].

Support the campaigns of WEHRDs by providing spaces and visibility to their global clamours for justice,

including to build awareness and mobilise resources and support; for example, facilitating events where defenders can build support networks and have platforms to share knowledge and developing mobile applications to share important resources and services to defenders [16,19,20,24,25,26].

Gender-responsive actions for states and international actors:

Leverage existing policy frameworks and agreements to support the work of EHRDs

and strengthen acknowledgment of gender-differentiated risks faced by defenders in developing new and updated frameworks and agreements [5,15,21,22,23].

Design and implement safeguards, support resources and mitigation and response strategies

to protect the safety and rights of women and men EHRDs, with consideration of gender-differentiated violence and issues experienced by defenders [10,12,16,18,19].

Tackle the root causes of violence against women, indigenous and LGBTI+ EHRDs, including: combatting impunity and corruption; securing land rights for indigenous peoples; and upholding human rights standards and safeguards [8,10,12,16].

“Women’s voices can no longer be silenced. They are at the heart of any form of progress. We must treasure and support women human rights defenders: individually and collectively they make a powerful difference for reaching gender equality.”

– Bahia Tahzib-Lie, Human Rights Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands [17]

Key resources

Publication Title	Entity	Synopsis	URL
<p>Our Rights, Our Safety: Resources for women human rights defenders</p>	<p>JASS – Just Associates (2020)</p>	<p>This manual was written by women activists and human rights defenders for women, girls, youth and gender non-conforming people fighting for and defending their rights. The manual outlines several modules for defenders to celebrate their and strengthen collective vision and strategies for advocacy.</p>	<p>[click here]</p> 
<p>Toolkit for the European Union on women human rights defenders</p>	<p>Front Line Defenders (2020)</p>	<p>This toolkit was written for the European Union but can also serve as an example and resource for states and international actors to support the safety of women defenders. The actions presented in the toolkit were identified by human defenders as the most needed and effective ways to assist defenders and their work.</p>	<p>[click here]</p> 
<p>Gender-based Violence and Environmental Linkages: The violence of inequality</p>	<p>IUCN (2020)</p>	<p>This publication establishes that patterns of gender-based abuse, discrimination and violence are observed across environmental contexts, including in access to and control of natural resources; environmental pressures and threats; and environmental action to defend and conserve ecosystems and resources. This publication aims to inform rights-based, gender-responsive approaches to environmental policy, programmes and projects.</p>	<p>[click here]</p> 

Publication Title	Entity	Synopsis	URL
<p>Challenging Power, Fighting Discrimination: A call to action to recognise and protect women human rights defenders</p>	<p>Amnesty International (2019)</p>	<p>This resource details key challenges affecting women human rights defenders and shares stories from defenders to highlight their strength, courage, determination and resilience. The report concludes with several recommendations for states, businesses and financial institutions, intergovernmental and regional organisations and donors to promote a safe environment and address violence and inequality faced by defenders.</p>	<p>[click here]</p> 
<p>Gendering Documentation: A manual for and about women human rights defenders</p>	<p>Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition (WHRD-IC) (2015)</p>	<p>This publication is an important resource for safely and respectfully documenting the experiences of women human rights defenders. The manual focuses on the purpose and importance of documenting these experiences to advance protection and promotion of defenders and their work.</p>	<p>[click here]</p> 

Strengthening networks of and support to WEHRDs

Women defenders find strength, support and inspiration in ReSisters Dialogue

In September 2019, women defenders from rural and indigenous communities across Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand gathered for a four-day event in Klong Sai Pattana, Thailand. The event was the second ReSisters Dialogue dedicated to featuring the stories and campaigns of rural and indigenous women and their defense of human rights and natural resources. Women shared their stories of advocacy—from resisting eviction from communal lands, to educating their communities about their rights, to protecting land and water from mining pollution—and the challenges and threats they face in response to their advocacy, including violence from police, arrest and imprisonment. However, the Dialogue was much more than sharing challenges, as Judy Pasimo of the Philippine organisation LILAK (Purple Action for Indigenous Women’s Rights) stated, “These conversations among ReSisters need to happen every now and then... To give ourselves pause, but also to inspire each other, and to lend much needed support for each other and each other’s struggles.” This event fostered a safe space for defenders to share their victories, be reminded that they have a strong network of support and are not alone, and to realise the strength of their collective action. “The solidarity among women who are also defending their rights and fighting for a cause that is very important in continuing our struggle,” shared Jennevie Cornelio, a participant from Upi Maguindanao, Philippines. “What we are fighting here is not just our own struggle. It is not a personal struggle or just for a certain community. This is for everyone.” Read more about the 2019 ReSisters Dialogue and view a short video about it [here](#) [25].

Connecting women defenders to critical resources during a global pandemic

The COVID-19 global pandemic has had major direct impacts and ripple effects for people around the world, increasing health risks to vulnerable communities with weak or limited healthcare infrastructure; disrupting livelihoods and income; and changing the ways in which people and communities can interact and seek support. The pandemic has aggravated the health risks and violence against defenders, with powerful economic interests taking advantage of limited communication, services and reporting mechanisms to increase extraction of natural resources without protest. In Latin America, at least six defenders were been killed from mid-March to April 2020. Fundación Plurales and Women’s Funds of the South recognised the immediate need to address the gap in information and services, particularly for indigenous WEHRDs, and developed a mobile application to strengthen defenders’ capacity to access information and report threats. The app expands the flow of communication and action between defenders in Argentina, Bolivia and Paraguay, providing geo-referenced data, photos, voice notes and news, along with the ability for defenders to submit complaints and data about threats to their environment. Read more about the initiative [here](#) [26].

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You can access the other tools [online](#).