

THE STATE OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS 2026



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The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation has defended women's rights since 1993. For every woman and girl's right to be safe and to be heard. Today, we are one of the world's leading women's rights organisations, working directly in areas affected by war and conflict to strengthen women's influence and power. We work closely together with more than 100 local partner organisations in 20 countries to end violence against women, reach lasting peace and close the gender gap once and for all. The future is equal. And together, we are change.

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“Thank you for listening! Most of the time, we listen to others—but people rarely listen to us. I’m grateful for this space to share my experience.”

I believe the above quote from a women human rights defender in the Democratic Republic of the Congo summarises the report you have in your hand in a simple way. Because beyond numbers, statistics, and recommendations, there is a very human side to the topics we discuss. The activists on the frontline of gender equality, human rights, and democracy are fighting not only against authoritarian regimes, patriarchal norms, and anti-gender actors. They are also fighting for the right to be heard and listened to.

As we worked on this report, we talked to many women’s rights and queer rights activists. All of them told us that they wished the international community would *actually listen* to them, to better understand their needs and those of their communities. By failing to listen, the international community misses early warnings and insights into the security and safety context. In this era of militarisation, it will miss how security, stabilisation, and the rise

of anti-gender and anti-democratic narratives are deeply intertwined. The wars are not only fought with guns and bombs, but also with disinformation and anti-gender rhetoric to destabilise societies. If women’s rights and queer rights activists aren’t consulted, the resulting analysis will lack crucial perspectives. Many of the activists we talked to for this report testified how difficult it is to get the world’s attention. As one Syrian activist put it: “I’m tired of asking.” Add to that the fact that many of them are leaving social media platforms and declining interviews with mainstream media because of the increasing harassment, threats, and attacks they face, and you realise just how dire the problem is. The feminist movement is not just going unheard: it is also forced into silence.

Our biannual *State of Women Human Rights Defenders* report addresses this very problem by listening to women’s rights and queer rights activists and highlighting their voices. The report is unique: its scope is to monitor attacks against women’s rights and queer rights activists over time, in fragile and conflict-affected states around the world.

Our survey was answered by 795 activists from 81 countries and territories. Twenty-five activists were interviewed in depth. Many more activists and colleagues contributed with insights and data in workshops and roundtables. The picture they paint is harsh, but they have plenty of energy, ideas, solutions, and networks ready to tackle the problem. Now it is up to the international community to listen.

Photo: Katya Moskatyuk



Petra Tötterman Andorff
Secretary-General, Kvinna till Kvinna

Why do you (still) fight for
feminist peace (change)?

Pse (ende) luftoni për paqe
feministe (ndryshim)?

To close

Introduction



For the past fifteen years, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation has regularly analysed the security of women's rights and queer rights activists around the world, as well as the civic space available to them. We started doing so at a time when women's rights were high on the agenda and global democracy wasn't yet being dismantled. This past decade, however, we've witnessed authoritarianism taking root in ever more countries; women's rights, gender equality, and climate change science being questioned; and anti-gender rhetoric gaining legitimacy. Our research shows that anti-gender, anti-climate, and anti-democratic movements reinforce each other.¹ Authoritarian leaders use anti-gender narratives to reinforce the patriarchy and consolidate their power by uniting people against a common enemy—feminists and the LGBTQ+ community.

The State of Women Human Rights Defenders is a biannual report. This 2026 edition builds on the survey responses of 795 women's rights and queer rights activists from 81 countries and territories that are affected by conflict, fragility, and violence in Asia, the Americas, Europe, the MENA region,

sub-Saharan Africa, and Oceania. We complemented our survey with 25 in-depth interviews, validation workshops, desk reviews of external reports and research, and the extensive knowledge we have accumulated over the years.

Since the last edition of the report, Donald Trump has been re-elected President of the United States. He has since rapidly implemented ultra-conservative policies, much like other leaders, like Vladimir Putin, have done elsewhere.² In many contexts, advocating for women's rights and LGBTQ+ rights has become harder. In some countries, gender- and LGBTQ+-related terminology is now banned. While this shift can partly be attributed to the recent changes in American politics, it started before that. In the foreign policy and development cooperation sector, the phrase 'post-ODA world' has been used repeatedly to describe the new reality, i.e. governments around the world are cutting development aid. This has hit the women's rights movement hard. According to new research by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), just 15% of women's rights organisations say their funding is sufficient.³ In January 2026, the Trump administration expanded the Mexico City Policy⁴ even further, banning organisations that receive US funding from working on trans rights and anything related to 'gender ideology' as well as all work on diversity, equity and inclusion.⁵ Our survey shows the effect that funding cuts are having on the feminist movement: 56% of respondents said it was their most significant obstacle. As donors pull out, activists face greater isolation and vulnerability: cutting down on security is often one of the first steps that organisations are forced to take in order to survive.

Our report also charts a series of additional factors that make life harder for activists, beyond funding cuts. Increasing physical hostilities, shrinking civic

¹ The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation: *The State of WHRD 2023. Hope and Resistance Go Together.*

² For more info, see RFSU: *Global Impact of Project 2025.*

³ Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID): *Where is the Money? An Evidence-Driven Call to Resource Feminist Organizing*, p8.

⁴ The Mexico City Policy, often referred to as "Global Gag Rule" was first introduced by the Reagan administration in August of 1984. Originally targeting organisations abroad that worked with anything related to abortion it has been expanded several times, the expansion was on 24 January 2026. The Policy has been implemented by most republican presidents.

⁵ The Guardian: "Trump administration to block aid from subsidizing DEI and trans rights overseas," 22 Jan 2026.



Photo: Lora Akharonian

During the velvet revolution in Armenia.

space, and relentless digital attacks all exhaust women's rights and queer rights activists.

This year, 69% of activists said they had experienced online and offline hatred and harassment. That is five percentage points lower than 2023 but still ten percentage points higher than the figure for 2021. When analysing the data, though, we didn't see anything that indicates a decline in threats and harassment. Instead, the lower figure can likely be explained by activists' normalisation of the threats against them, and the way they have learnt to censor and silence themselves. Increasing intensity of conflict in the world is another factor.⁶ Our data shows that threats against activists that are directly linked to their activism tend to decrease when conflict increases.⁷ Activists don't necessarily face less violence in these cases, but the violence they experience is perpetrated by other actors and may not be related to their work. Some organisations in warzones actually testified that their humanitarian work had resulted in increased support from the general public.

Comparing this year's results to the data from 2021 and 2023, one of the most significant changes was the fact that more respondents viewed their own government as the main actor behind the harassment against

them. This figure rose from a mere 32% in 2021 to over 57% in 2023, which remained the same this year. Other key actors that were mentioned were traditional, community, and religious leaders, and anti-gender movements. Together, these three types of actors represent a highly efficient and toxic mix of authoritarian ambitions and patriarchal anti-gender visions.

The finding that 57% of activists identify their own governments as the primary actors behind harassment underscores how states weaponise anti-gender sentiment to legitimise restrictions on civil society and to divide societies. Strategic communication uses gendered narratives and disinformation both as propaganda to portray other countries in a certain way for a domestic audience, and in hybrid attacks on other countries to increase divides.⁸ Authoritarian actors deliberately use anti-gender narratives to consolidate their power, deflect attention from governance failures, and portray feminist movements as threats to the 'state', 'family', or 'national security', thereby justifying repression. These strategies must be understood in a larger context of ongoing gender backlash. They exploit existing social and political divisions to manipulate public opinion and influence decision-making, or to simply destroy societal unity and create a sense of chaos.

⁶ Davis, I. and Pfeifer Cruz, C.: "Armed Conflict and Conflict Management: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security." In: *SIPRI Yearbook 2025*, p3.

⁷ The question we asked respondents was "Have you or your organisation received any harassment or threats because of your work/activism? This includes both online and offline."

⁸ See for example: Bradshaw, S., and Henle, A.: "The Gender Dimensions of Foreign Influence Operations". In: *International Journal of Communication*, Vol.15:23 (2021). Hellman, M.: "Security, Disinformation and Harmful Narratives: RT and Sputnik News Coverage about Sweden". In: *The Palgrave Macmillan Series in International Political Communication* (2024).

Emerging trends



Anti-gender rhetoric and disinformation is increasingly used to destabilise societies. There is a close, uninterrupted chain between conflict, insecurity and destabilisation on one hand, and the strengthening of anti-gender and anti-democratic narratives on the other.



Legal and bureaucratic harassment. Increasing criminalisation, legal repression, and administrative and bureaucratic hurdles are used to exhaust, stigmatise, and silence activists.



Funding cuts worsen security risks. Cuts to development aid and programmatic support leave activists with fewer resources for protection, security measures, and burnout prevention.



Language policing and strategic selfcensoring. Activists increasingly shy away from mentioning 'gender', 'feminism', and 'LGBTQ+' in their proposals. Donors themselves sometimes request polished terminology, and rights language in international fora is reframed. This in turn forces activists to either compromise their values or lose access to funding.



State actors are the main perpetrators. Governments/authorities were the most frequently cited source of threats (57% of respondents), which indicates increasing state repression.



Visibility has become dangerous. Respondents report being surveilled and advised to keep a low profile. Many have reduced their public visibility, including on social media, and even hide personal identity markers.



Lack of access to authorities. Local and national authorities block access to venues, consultations, and meetings and withhold information, making it more difficult for activists to make their voices heard.



Normalisation of abuse. High volumes of online hate are becoming routine. Activists are so used to harassment that it becomes a natural part of their work.



Rise of anti-rights, family-values women's organisations. New groups that present themselves as women's organisations are gaining media access and political sway, stepping into spaces traditionally reserved for feminist actors. Sometimes, these organisations claim to have a feminist agenda; in reality, they are anti-gender and openly anti-feminist.



Loss of trust in international justice mechanisms. Rampant global impunity and double standards (e.g., uneven accountability in conflicts) are demotivating activists and weakening reliance on international protection frameworks. This development also increases the feeling of abandonment among activists.



AI and fake content. Activists worry about the consequences of AI, which can create videos and images of activists saying and doing things they never actually said or did. Together with the persistent narrative that gender equality is a threat against traditional values, this makes activists more vulnerable.

Methodology

We used a mixed-method approach for this study, with qualitative as well as quantitative components. The data comes from an anonymous online survey that was available in 14 languages from July to September 2025. We received 795 answers from 81 countries and territories affected by conflict, fragility, and violence in Asia, the Americas, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA region), sub-Saharan Africa, and Oceania.⁹ Some questions were multiple-choice, and respondents could also leave comments.

In the report, we use the terminology ‘women’s rights activists’ or ‘women human rights defender’ (WHRD) and ‘queer rights activist’. When an activist is quoted without a name, it is because they responded to the survey (which was anonymous).

Activists that we have interviewed are named by their first name. Some of these names are pseudonyms when activists did not want to be recognised. A majority of activists did not feel secure to have their name in the report. For security reasons, we also do not use any pictures of activists.

To cross-reference and complement the survey results, we conducted 25 in-depth interviews during the autumn of 2025.¹⁰ We also organised two round-table discussions with academics, institutions, donors, and civil society, as well as a validation workshop with colleagues from Kvinna till Kvinna’s programme offices. Finally, we conducted a desk review of relevant literature and drew on our 30+ years of experience supporting women’s rights organisations in conflict-affected areas.



A dialogue and educational session with health-care workers, focusing on sexual and reproductive health and rights in Rwanda.

⁹ Central & East Asia – China, Mongolia, Republic of Korea, Tajikistan; South Asia – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka; Southeast Asia – Cambodia, Cordillera region, Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, The Philippines, Vietnam; the Americas – Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, USA; Europe – Abkhazia, Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Russia, Serbia, Ukraine; the MENA region – Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine (Gaza & West Bank), Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, Yemen; sub-Saharan Africa; Benin, Burundi, Cameroon, DRC, Ethiopia, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe; Oceania – Bougainville, Fiji, Kiribati, Micronesia, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Island. Number of respondents per region: Central & East Asia: 7, South Asia: 65, Southeast Asia: 50, the Americas: 25, South Caucasus & Eastern Europe: 111, Western Balkans: 176, the MENA region: 167, sub-Saharan Africa: 182, Oceania: 10, other: 2. We received most survey responses from Liberia, because our Monrovia office conducted a separate study at the same time, using the same survey questions.

¹⁰ Those we interviewed worked in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Georgia, India, Lebanon, Liberia, Myanmar, North Macedonia, Palestine, Serbia, Syria, the South Caucasus, Russia, Thailand, Uganda, Ukraine, and West Sahara.

Democratic backsliding and shrinking civic space

Our research revealed high levels of threats and harassment against women's rights and queer rights activists, decreasing funding, and restricted civic space. These are interlinked signs of a global development. The past decades, there has been a clear backlash against democracy and a pushback on gender equality. In 2024, elections around the world were notably violent—a sign that leaders are repressing their people to stay in power.¹¹ At the same time, civic space is shrinking: 72% of the world's population now lives in countries defined as

'repressed' or 'closed'.¹² For the first time in over two decades, autocracies outnumber democracies.¹³ In all the most recent editions of this report, around 45% of respondents indicated that civic space is shrinking. This year was no exception. The stifling of activism often manifests itself in a set way: funding gets cut, bureaucratisation increases, and legal restrictions are introduced. This is often accompanied by slander and online hate campaigns and the criminalisation of activism.

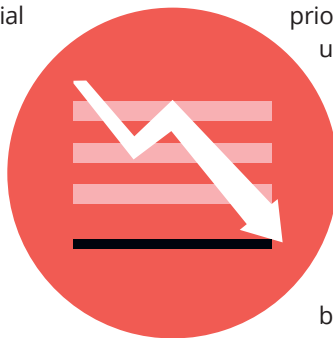
Dramatic funding cuts

Women's rights organisations around the world are facing an existential crisis as funding dries up and donor priorities shift. Donald Trump's decision to slash USAID funding was a crucial catalyst: many countries have followed suit and reduced development aid (often expanding military budgets instead). These cuts are not just about money: they result in entire communities losing access to justice, safety, and empowerment. Strapped for cash, civil society organisations are unable to respond when crises hit. "Without essential services, how do these people survive?" wondered Lebanese activist Araz.

The past years have been particularly difficult in Lebanon, Araz explained: "The pandemic, the

Beirut blast, wars, revolutions, and economic collapse have all compounded this. They've exposed the limitations of rigid funding models that prioritise long-term change while ignoring urgent needs." And it's not just rights-holders that suffer: activists too are pushed to the brink of exhaustion by the funding cuts. Araz has seen it with his own eyes: "It's a Russian roulette, most of us burn out. I'm not seeing activists who are able to work together, I'm just seeing people burning out."

In some regions, activists said the cuts have led to increased competition and foul play in civil society. One women's rights activist from North Macedonia told us how some organisations spread



¹¹ V-Dem Institute: *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?*, p41.

¹² CIVICUS: *People Power Under Attack 2024*, p7.

¹³ V-Dem Institute: *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?*, p6.

rumours among donors to discredit other organisations. In other countries, 'fake NGOs' dominate important discussions, which allows them to divert resources from legitimate civil society organisations.

In India, legal changes have prohibited organisations that receive funding from abroad from

publishing news reports or articles.¹⁴ On the face of it, this is to prevent 'foreign influence', but it silences crucial voices. "We haven't stopped working, but civic space is shrinking," women's rights activist Anitha commented. "Before, there were a lot of campaigns and activists together pushed for change. I don't see that type of work anymore."

Obstructed at every step of the way

Survey respondents said increased bureaucratisation, legal restrictions and criminalisation, along with funding cuts, were the top factors behind the shrinking of civic space. States often defend these measures, calling them necessary for regulatory or security reasons. In reality, they tend to be ways to silence opposition and dissent.

"When the Taliban returned to power, they criminalised human rights and civil and media activities. Now we're subjected to sexual violence, imprisonment, and even torture. Space for activism isn't just restricted, it's completely closed." (Respondent, Afghanistan)

As part of the ongoing criminalisation of activists in some Western Balkan countries, strategic lawsuit against public participation ('SLAPP') and legal intimidation have been normalised, not least against environmental activists. Whether the accusations are filed by corporate actors, religious institutions, or public officials, the cases all rely on the slow pace and ambiguity of judicial systems to exhaust resources and silence criticism.¹⁵

A significantly higher number of activists (31% compared to 23% in the last survey) also highlighted increasing administrative and/or bureaucratic burdens as one of the ways they were harassed. In Liberia, for example, organisations have to re-register every year and obtain specific clearances from multiple ministries, depending on their area of work. "If you work with gender or LGBTQ+ issues, it's even more difficult to pass all of these administrative hurdles," said activist Dayugar.

Public institutions also increasingly withhold information from civil society: the number of respon-

dents who had faced this type of harassment went up from 19% in 2023 to 25% this year. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, women human rights defender Dragana's organisation has had to take institutions to court to gain access to the information it needs to operate. Even then, activists can't be sure the correct information will be provided. "It's such an exhausting process. We know that there's no rule of law in our country, but this deepens the feeling of legal uncertainty and insecurity."

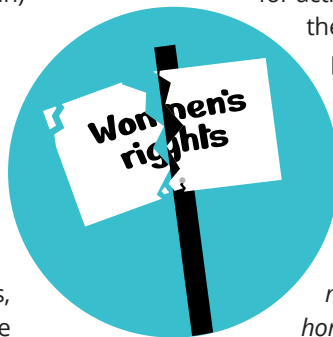
Smear campaigns are also used to make life harder for activists. One in three respondents said they had been subjected to smear campaigns and false accusations. Slander can be spread both online and offline and is often sexualised to tarnish activists' reputation.

"There's a lot of gossip since I travel alone. Some accuse me of travelling to meet men. They tell me I shouldn't leave home so often, that I should stay and take care of my husband." (Aminatou, Western Sahara refugee camp)

"They call outspoken women 'whores' and claim feminist activists destroy families and society. And of course they accuse us of importing things from the West. It's such an old playbook." (Hayma, Syria)

In Armenia, peace activists are often subjected to reputational attacks in the media by political parties. Activist Lusine described how these attacks have real consequences: "It means we constantly need to justify our work to ministries and risk losing partnerships."

Across contexts, activists describe how their speech is policed and visibility has become dangerous. Leba-



¹⁴ The Economic Times: "NGOs Getting Foreign Funding Won't Be Able to Publish News Content: MHA," 27 May 2025.

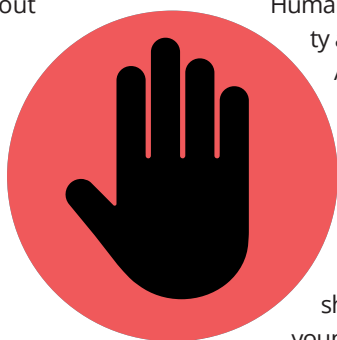
¹⁵ The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation: Women's Rights in Western Balkans 2025, p44.

nese activist Araz talks about the constant surveillance he and his peers have faced since the 2019 revolution. He's been warned to lay low and is monitored by state security. Around the world, governments increasingly use digital spaces to silence civil society.¹⁶

In these conditions, silence becomes self defence. Araz no longer has Facebook or Instagram, both to escape scrutiny but also to avoid seeing traumatic triggers. "I haven't opened my social media in the past five years. Everything's monitored."

Doors slammed in activists' faces

In many countries, women's rights and queer rights activists are left out of local decision-making spaces and institutions. Lence, a women human rights defender from North Macedonia, recounted talking with Strumica municipality about the difficulty to encourage women to participate in local consultations. The mayor bluntly responded: "You can't carry out any activities in my municipality, because you support gender equality." That was the end of their discussion. "They've closed all avenues for cooperation. When we do reach out, there's no answer," Lence sighed.



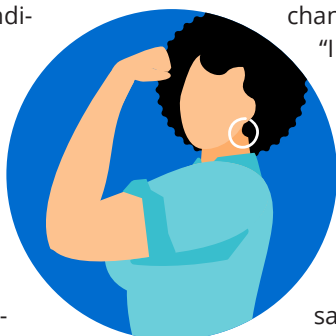
In Bosnia and Herzegovina, just trying to discuss history is enough to get the door slammed in one's face. Dragana's organisation tried to organise two panel debates at a municipal youth centre on International Human Rights Day to talk about gender equality and the anniversary of the Dayton Peace Agreement.¹⁷ "I called to ask if they had a room available on that date," she said. "The woman on the phone said they did and asked what the topic would be. I started saying 'thirty years of Dayton peace' but didn't even get to finish my sentence. 'Oh no, that's forbidden,' she said. 'It's not an appropriate topic for young people.' I was shocked."

Hayma from Syria described how the country's interim government refuses to engage with critical voices, while simultaneously trying to maintain a polished image on social media. "You see the interim president hosting TikTokers and influencers in his palace, while families of detainees and women-led groups who've been trying to meet with him for months never get a response."

The message is unmistakable: civic institutions may exist, but their doors can close without notice. When formal spaces are blocked, however, activists build new ones. Dragana's organisation founded Human Rights House Banja Luka. "A lot of organisations now organise smaller events there. They use this space because there are no other options and because it's free."

Giving up or continuing the fight

Surveillance, harassment, criminalisation, and bureaucratisation erode the basic conditions for activism. But even as screws are tightened, women human rights defenders' work continues. It adapts, moves, resettles in other rooms. Almost 60% of respondents said they didn't let harassment affect their work, but nearly one in five reported being less outspoken these days. Miray, a transwoman jour-



nalist from Azerbaijan, often wonders whether change is even possible in her country. "I don't think the president needs anyone. It's impossible to do anything to him, he has all the power, all the buildings, all the big companies. He controls everything."

These days, Miray lives in exile, an existence that used to offer relative safety. Unfortunately, even that free-

¹⁶ Freedom House: *Freedom on the Net 2025*, p6.

¹⁷ The peace accord for Bosnia and Herzegovina, signed 1995.

dom is eroding: Azerbaijan's authorities have shifted from grudging tolerance of exiled activists to actively pursuing them. "They used to be okay with you leaving the country and ceasing your activism. Now, they've started asking European countries to hand activists back so they can throw them in prison. I think the government is just scared."

Everything sometimes becomes too much for Araz in Lebanon too:

"I've wanted to quit every day for the past four years. The number of people I've seen leave the country. The number I've seen dead. The amount of blood I have wiped off. But I am an activist. This is my whole existence. If someone calls me at 1 am from the hospital, I come."

Photo: Maja Janeska Ilieva



The normalisation of constant threats



As a Rohingya women human rights defender, I face constant threats and restrictions and lack protection. This has made activism increasingly difficult and dangerous.

Respondent, Myanmar

Harassment is the most common kind of attack against women's rights and queer rights activists: 44% of respondents said they had been the victim of harassment. This is in line with previous research conducted by Kvinna till Kvinna. More than one in three said their family members had been threatened too—a figure that has risen significantly these past years. The situation is most worrying in sub-Saharan Africa, where 46% of respondents said their family members had been harassed.

"It's devastating when they target your children. I received threats saying they would take my son, so I was afraid to send him to school. It deeply affected my mental health. Women who are both human rights defenders and mothers face enormous challenges. Sometimes husbands are targeted too. They threaten your closest family members to silence you." (Marie, Eastern DRC)

"I'll never forget the horrible night when they [the police] raided our flat. It will stay with us forever. The fear it created, especially the way they scared and harmed my children." (Elmira, Azerbaijan)

Like many other activists, Yirley from Colombia had to flee her home multiple times because of threats

against her and her family. Openly calling out the police, the army, and armed militias for perpetrating sexual violence has made life even more difficult for her. "They don't like it when we raise our voices," she explained.

Women human rights defenders on the West Bank face similar risks. They are harassed from all sides: by the Israeli military, the Palestinian Authority, and conservative Islamist groups. Activists report surveillance, hacking, confiscation of phones at checkpoints, and social media monitoring. Expressing grief or dissent about the genocide in Gaza can lead to arrest.

"The constant closure of gates makes it difficult to move. A short trip can take hours, including being stuck at a checkpoint. Our energy is drained from the constant pressure we are under." (Lama, West Bank)

Sexual attacks on women in demonstrations have been widely reported, not least during the demonstrations on Tahir Square in Egypt fifteen years ago. The world is currently witnessing a new wave of demonstrations, often led by young people. In Serbia, protests have been ongoing since November 2024. Women students led the International Women's Day rally and explicitly linked anti-corruption demands with women's safety and dignity. There are documented incidents of police violence and mistreatment of women students.¹⁸ One case involves a Serbian student who accused a senior police officer of assault during a protest in Belgrade. Afterwards, intimate images of her as a minor surfaced online and in pro-government media. Image-based sexual abuse has become a strategic tool of political control in Serbia.¹⁹ Amnesty International has reported a similar trend in Georgia, where the police are increasingly using gender-based violence, including sexist insults, threats of sexual violence, and unlawful and degrading strip searches, against women protesters.²⁰

¹⁸ The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation: *Women's Rights in Western Balkans 2025*, p66-74.

¹⁹ Balkan Insight: "In Serbia, Women's Sexuality is Being Weaponised to Silence Dissent," 28 Aug 2025.

²⁰ Amnesty International: *Georgia: From Insults to Assaults: Weaponizing Gender-Based Violence Against Women Protestors in Georgia, 2025*, p4.

Sometimes, harassment changes character when activists leave their home country. Vika, a feminist anti-war activist from Russia, was sent more ‘dick pics’ after she had moved to Europe. “I’ve received a lot of dirty propositions as an activist, but objectification and sexualisation seem more common in Europe,” she noted. “In Russia, it was more that they wanted to kill me.”

Fewer respondents than last time had received death threats, although the figure was still frighteningly high: from 25% in 2023 to 17% this year. In the MENA region, these threats are even more common: 31% of respondents in the region had received death threats. Nowhere had more respondents been threatened with murder than in Afghanistan, though, where 13 out of 23 respondents had received death threats. 41 of our 795 global respondents had survived an actual murder attempt.



A few years ago, I got more than a hundred death threats in 24 hours, just because I’d painted over pro-war graffiti in a children’s playground.

Dejana, Serbia

Digital violence and AI

The UN Human Rights Council recently adopted a resolution that focused on new and emerging digital technologies that risk being used to attack activists online, through smear campaigns, hate speech, disinformation, harmful propaganda, and doxxing.²¹ Online attacks often mirror and amplify offline abuse. Many women human rights defenders told us they had stopped using social media and had shifted to offline strategies instead. Syrian respondents, for example, reported how their inboxes tend to be flooded with sexual threats whenever they post anything that could be seen as a criticism of the government.

“Photos and videos are uploaded on social media without our consent, including our personal details.

This puts us in danger.” (Respondent, South Asia)
“They share your photos and attack your children and husband in smear campaigns. Then your husband asks you to stop your work.” (Brenda, Uganda)

AI has made it easy for anyone to create fake content. “There were AI videos and photos of me on TikTok doing things I’ve never done or said, and people believed them. And the people commenting were real people. That was one of the few times I was actually scared,” said activist and educator Dejana from Serbia. Some activists fear these trends will only worsen—not least as a result of the current American administration’s links with major tech companies. Dejana felt a looming sense of dread during Donald Trump’s presidential inauguration: “You could see all these tech billionaires pictured behind him, and I thought ‘OK, we are done.’”

She may be right to be worried. Protection mechanisms for women’s rights and LGBTQ+ rights are under attack by right-wing populists across the world.²² In 2024 and 2025, tech companies Meta and X dramatically reduced their numbers of staff monitoring hate speech, factual accuracy, and attacks against marginalised groups.²³ As a result of this online violence, digital security tools have become more important for women human rights and queer rights activists. Unfortunately, they don’t necessarily provide a stable sense of security. Indian activists, for example, talked about trying to avoid deepfakes, including fabricated sexual images.²⁴ “Social media is monitored here in India,” one activist said. “Sometimes when you post something, the police call straight away and raid your home. We’ve seen activists incarcerated on false charges. Evidence can be planted and your devices tampered with. How can you know your device is safe?”

Normalisation and impunity

Since we began documenting threats against women human rights and queer rights activists in 2008,²⁵ the number of activists who said they or their organisation had been threatened or harassed has continuously increased. We’ve often attributed this to shrinking civic space, declining democracy, and a rise in anti-gender rhetoric. This

²¹ ‘Doxxing’ is the act of publicly revealing identifying information about an individual (like their address, phone number, or workplace) without their consent, usually to harass, intimidate, or harm them. United Nations Human Rights Council, *Human Rights Defenders and New and Emerging Technologies: Protecting Human Rights Defenders, including Women Human Rights Defenders, in the Digital Age*, UN Doc. A/HRC/RES/58/23, 4 Apr 2025.

²² CIVICUS: *State of Civil Society 2025*, p42.

²³ BBC News: “Facebook and Instagram Get Rid of Fact Checkers”, 7 Jan 2025.

²⁴ Human Rights First: “Women Human Rights Defenders Address Digital Violence During the 16 Days of Activism”, 25 Nov 2025.

²⁵ The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, Front Line International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights – Barry, J.: *Insiste, Persiste, Resiste, Existe: Women Human Rights Defenders Security Strategies*, 2008.

year, however, fewer activists said they had been targeted because of their work: down from 75% during the last survey to 69% this year.

During the interviews we conducted and as we analysed the data, we tried to find an explanation for this finding. Ideally, it would mean there was an actual decline in harassment. But things don't quite add up: many respondents said these past years had been the hardest ever. More countries restrict civil society, anti-gender sentiment is palpable in many places, and funding for women's rights organisations is scarce.

One reason behind the decline might be that some activists have left their home countries, or that activists themselves are taking precautions and changing tactics. Many now try to keep out of the public eye both online and offline. One feminist platform in North Macedonia, for example, no longer allows readers to comment on articles that risk provoking online hatred. While this means they no longer receive abusive comments, it doesn't mean the hatred isn't there. Sometimes, activists are forced to work underground. In Liberia, queer rights activists have gone underground in reaction to a proposed anti-homosexuality bill. Many of them feel unable to publicly disclose what they work with.

Another reason behind the drop in threats against activists could be the normalisation of the situation. Pressure and harassment have simply become the

new normal. Dragana from Bosnia and Herzegovina said she simply does not recognise certain situations as stressful anymore. Dejana from neighbouring Serbia said that "the worst thing is that I'm completely used to it. Even when people tell me something's scary, I just find it completely normal. Sometimes I don't even recognise actual threats." Her words are reflected by another activist from the MENA region: "I haven't been subjected to any threats, only hostile discriminatory rhetoric based on cultures, customs, and traditions."

Normalisation seems particularly common for online threats: the activists we talked to rarely even mentioned digital attacks anymore. As one activist from the Western Balkans put it: "It is normal to have 40 hate messages. It is when it reaches 100 that people start to take it seriously". Maybe that is what is most scary, the normalisation and the invisibility it brings. In some regions, like the South Caucasus, many activists have completely silenced themselves. As one activist put it: "Civic space is closed in so many ways, I feel like [the survey results] don't reflect the urgency of the situation. It is a war on gender and we feel it on our skin."

Despite the appalling conditions many women human rights defenders operate in, perpetrators often get off scot-free. Even when activists meticulously document the harassment they face and provide evidence to the authorities, impunity is widespread.

INVISIBLE VIOLENCE LEGITIMISED BY SOCIETY

Survey responses from Uganda indicated a high level of threats towards activists: 92% said they had been targeted. Ugandan activist Rose mentioned how elections tend to lead to more threats, arbitrary arrests, abductions, and fabricated rumours. "During the last election, several strangers came to my home. Nothing really happened, but they were sent to scare me. Our office was raided too. During this year's election, one well-known women human rights defender was arbitrarily arrested for being an election observer."

Much of the harassment goes unpunished, as it does in many places around the world. "Violations against women human rights defenders are often invisible. That's because the patriarchy normalises, excuses, and even legitimises this violence."

Rose listed the criminalisation of civil society as a major problem. The Ugandan government has mandated the military court to take up civil cases—a dangerous development for women's rights activists—and the authorities use anti-terrorism and anti-money laundering legislation to freeze activists' bank accounts.

WHAT CONSTANTLY BEING UNDER ATTACK DOES TO A PERSON

Insecurity due to impunity. Impunity towards the perpetrators of harassment is widespread. “The police don’t even say they’re working on the case anymore. They can’t be bothered to lie,” one respondent said. The impunity extends to politicians and public figures who paint human rights defenders in a negative light, thereby legitimising harassment against them by ordinary people.

Donors fail to understand risks. A number of activists mentioned how many international donors don’t take activists’ needs into account. “They push for work on certain topics or activities without considering the risks this might have for our team members or the communities we work with,” said Hayma from Syria.

Emotional distress. With civic space rapidly shrinking, many organisations have been forced to make painful spending cuts. Tamta from Georgia wasn’t expecting it would be so painful to close the office. “It was very traumatic. This office was our home for quite some time.” Another respondent from Azerbaijan struggles with the crackdown on civil society: “I hate inaction, and they’ve prohibited all action. All I can do these days is write, nothing else. And I can’t even get paid for what I write, because I can’t access my bank account.” Many also mentioned how exhausting it is to constantly have to consider their personal security: who is in the room with them, what they can and cannot say.



Forced to go underground. In many places, activists working with sensitive issues have been forced to become less visible. At the same time, increased control by authoritarian regimes makes it difficult to stay under the radar.

Burnout. Many respondents said they struggle to take care of themselves. Dayugar from Liberia is aware that mental health is part of safety and security, “but sometimes when you get engrossed in the work, you forget all about that.” Hayma from Syria has experienced burnout, just like many of her peers. “We don’t have the luxury of quitting. This is not just a job, it’s at the core of my identity.”

Family members targeted. Many activists said that the thing they struggle with most is when family members are affected, either because they’re targeted directly or because they have to worry. Dejana from Serbia described having to take her mother to the emergency ward because she was so stressed about the hateful comments against her daughter. “When I said I’m used to it, she completely lost it. It’s a reminder that we shouldn’t be used to these kinds of things.”

Exile. For some activists, going into exile is the only option—albeit one with painful consequences. Vika from Russia told us she felt like she’d lost both her country and the close connection with her family. She doesn’t know whether she’ll ever see her mother again. But leaving one’s home country doesn’t necessarily equal safety. One respondent from Afghanistan had been threatened by the Taliban. “When they returned to power, I fled to Pakistan. But in the three years since, I’ve remained in a state of uncertainty.”



Underground passage in Prishtina, Kosovo.

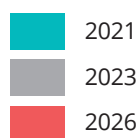
Anti-gender and the actors behind the threats

Who are the actors behind the harassment and threats towards women human rights and queer rights activists? Interestingly, the five most commonly mentioned actors are the same as in 2023: government/authorities, traditional or community leaders, anti-gender movements, religious actors, and political parties. Certain contexts are now so restrictive that it was difficult to even distribute our survey. As a result, we suspect that 'government/

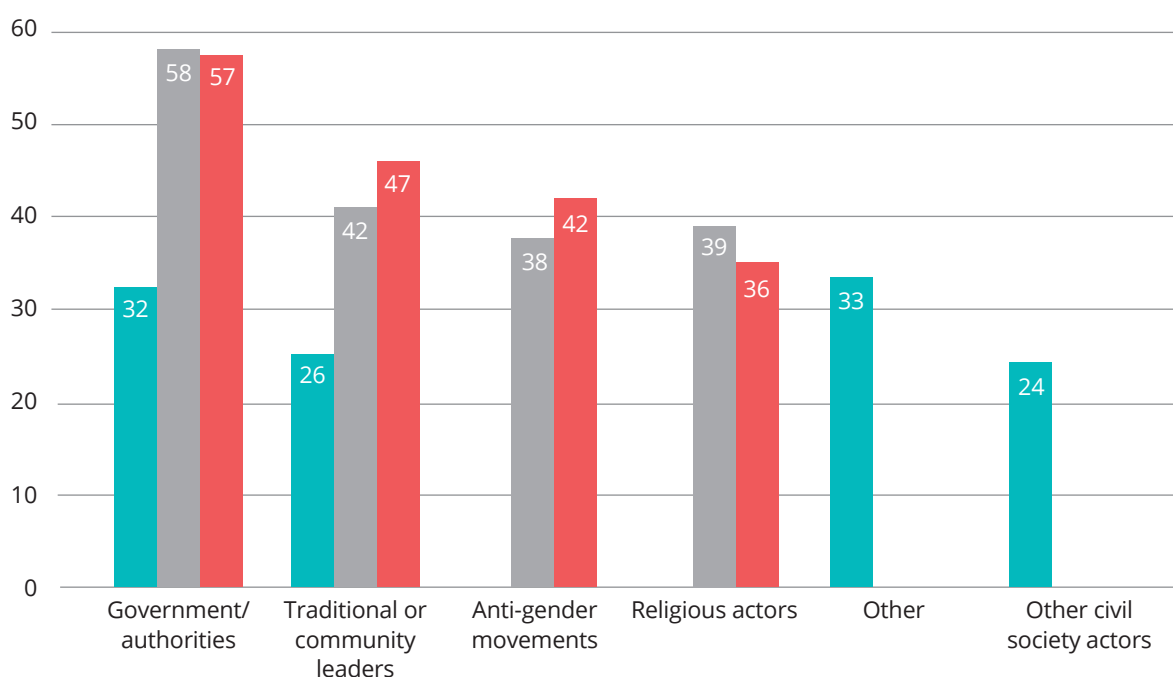
authorities' are an even more common actor behind the harassment than the data indicates. In the South Caucasus, for example, 80% of respondents listed their own government as the main threat in 2023.

One of the most common ways in which governments/authorities undermine civil society is by criminalising activists and using restrictive legislation against them. They limit activists' access to foreign

Where do the threats come from? (multiple choice question)



Percent



funding, misuse anti-terror and security laws, and legally repress activists. Governments/authorities also erect bureaucratic barriers, withhold information, and fuel smear campaigns. Add to that constant surveillance, intimidation, and a failure to address impunity, and it becomes easy to understand why many activists feel forced to censor themselves or become less visible.

Although respondents could only select three actors behind the threats in the survey, their free-text comments and the additional interviews that we conducted showed that many activists are threatened by a variety of sources. One respondent noted that limiting the choice to three was unrealistic, because “the threats stem from everything mentioned above”. Additional actors that were mentioned included ordinary citizens (Western Balkans, sub-Saharan Africa), major companies (Americas, sub-Saharan Africa), and spouses of victims of domestic violence (Western Balkans, Ukraine).²⁶ When violence occurs online, it’s harder to know who’s behind the threats. Dejana from Serbia said bots are a real problem. “These fake profiles work to support the government, and there are so many of them. In terms of quality, however, the worst harassment comes from the government and its supporters.”

What unites many of these actors is their anti-gender rhetoric: the diverse actors appear aligned in opposing women’s rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and gender equality, forming a powerful force against these movements. Ugandan activist Brenda attributed the attacks she and her peers experience to misogyny, anti-gender sentiment, and anti-LGBTQ+ hatred:



They attack us because we are women and because we speak up about human rights. As soon as a woman challenges the system traditional leaders come after her.

Brenda, Uganda

Between a rock and a hard place

In conflict-affected areas, armed groups are often listed as key perpetrators. This was the case in Ukraine, Palestine, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example. In these areas, the threats that women human rights defenders face are not necessarily related to their activism, but the overall lack of security still makes it much harder to keep defending human rights.

In armed conflicts, threats can come from many different sides. “Some areas are government-controlled while others are occupied by the M23 militia. So we’re trapped between two actors, which is very stressful,” said Marie from the Eastern DRC. Lama, activist from the West Bank, felt threatened by “the occupation, the Palestinian Authority, as well as patriarchal powers”.

During post-conflict reconstruction too, threats can come from different sides. In Syria, for example, women human rights defenders have to watch out for the government, their own community, criminal gangs, online trolls, and religious leaders. Hayma finds the latter particularly hard to deal with. “They fuel hatred in mosques during the Friday sermon, which is so dangerous. With the government, at least you can issue a statement.”

Anti-gender rhetoric erodes democracy

In March 2025, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres commented on the global rise in anti-gender rhetoric: “A surge in misogyny [...] threatens to slam on the brakes and push progress into reverse, [which is] unacceptable, immoral, and self-defeating”.²⁷ Researcher Saskia Brechenmacher has shown how anti-feminist narratives have entered the political mainstream, and how conservative and right-wing populist parties and affiliated media are adopting the same discourse. “By framing feminism and progressive gender norms as direct threats to men’s status, these actors have successfully mobilised backlash not only against gender equality but also against broader liberal ideals.”²⁸

In the spring of 2025, several family-value conferences were organised on the African continent. Ultra-conservative campaigners from the US and

²⁶ In Ukraine, ‘family members’ (i.e. abusive spouses) ranked higher than in many other places. A discussion with respondents revealed that this was likely due to a misunderstanding: respondents had listed the actors that were most dangerous to the women they worked with rather than to themselves.

²⁷ UN Women: “Remarks of the UN Secretary-General at the Town Hall Meeting with Civil Society on the Occasion of the 69th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women”, 11 Mar 2025.

²⁸ Brechenmacher, S.: *The New Global Struggle Over Gender, Rights, and Family Values*, May 2025, p15.

Europe attended to speak about 'African family values' and 'national sovereignty'. The speakers explicitly opposed abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and sexuality education. One Ugandan women's rights group noted how these conferences tried to "strip women of their basic human rights and dignity and reinforce the dominance of men in our society, using 'family values' as a vehicle".²⁹

Prominent anti-gender forces include international organisations like the World Congress of Families and CitizenGo, religious authorities, right-wing politicians, public intellectuals, journalists, and local activists, often connected to political parties or churches.³⁰ And these anti-gender forces only seem to be gaining in power: "[They are] bolder, more organized, and more transnational than in previous decades."³¹ In contrast to the feminist movement, they are also well-funded. A 2025 report by AWID showed that three global anti-rights actors received twice as much funding that year as all the 1,174 feminist and women's rights organisations combined that AWID had looked at.³² In Europe, USD 1.18 billion can be traced to actors with an anti-gender agenda in 2019-2023. More than half came from organisations inside the EU, followed by Russia and the US, with Russia being the single biggest funder.³³ These anti-gender actors have been particularly skilled at broadcasting their ideas in ways that resonate with local audiences. In Western countries, for example, those mobilising against progressive gender norms tend to lash out against cosmopolitan elitism. In the Global South, they often embrace anti-imperialist messaging.³⁴

In many contexts, anti-gender narratives aren't necessarily used to combat women's rights, but rather to polarise society and acquire or maintain political power. Crackdowns on civil rights are part of that. "For many far-right populist leaders who have successfully come to power through elections, anti-gender politics have become a tool of power consolidation and democratic erosion."³⁵ Liberian activist Dayugar has personally seen how anti-gender views help attract voters. "Political actors rely on traditional leaders to

mobilise support for them." Anti-gender rhetoric also diverts attention from more pressing issues. "[Politicians] raise these issues to divert people's attention from what people are actually affected by. And because a lot of the country is still very homophobic and traditional, it works," Dayugar added.

The anti-gender narrative has had a significant effect on policies and legislation around the world. In Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, several anti-gender organisations signed an open letter in January 2024, opposing a draft law that would help protect women from domestic violence. They claimed the law would "introduce gender ideology". As their protest gained support, the draft law was not only scrapped: the term 'gender identity' was deleted from Republika Srpska's criminal code and the entity's Gender Centre was renamed.³⁶

Religion and politics attacking equality together

Religious actors and anti-gender movements often collaborate by framing gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights as threats to the traditional or divine order. Churches and mosques provide moral authority, organisational networks, and political influence, helping these movements to mobilise. They use religious language to legitimise anti-gender narratives, lobby for restrictive laws, and coordinate transnational campaigns. This partnership amplifies anti-gender rhetoric and strengthens its cultural and emotional appeal.

The US is a clear example of this trend. "The Christian Right has gone beyond influencing policy, it's writing it. Trump's second presidency [...] has turned American power into a global megaphone for religious extremism."³⁷ In North Macedonia, Lence is regularly derided by the local clergy. "One priest here openly accuses me of opposing family values, trying to introduce so-called Western values and wanting to change babies' gender. He says so in church in front of everyone and tells people to avoid me and the organisation." The same is happening on the West Bank. "The anti-gender movement considers

²⁹ Health Policy Watch: "Women's Groups Sound Alarm Over 'African Family' Conferences Headlined by US Conservatives", 8 May 2025.

³⁰ Korolczuk, E., Graff, A. and Kantola, J.: "Gender Danger: Mapping a Decade of Research on Anti-Gender Politics". In: *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol.34:5 (2025), p621-640.

³¹ Brechenmacher, S.: *The New Global Struggle Over Gender, Rights, and Family Values*, May 2025, p1.

³² Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID): *Where Is the Money? An Evidence-Driven Call to Resource Feminist Organizing*, p7.

³³ European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights: "New Report Exposes Funding to Anti-rights Initiatives in Europe Rise to US\$1.18 Billion", 26 Jun 2025.

³⁴ Brechenmacher, S.: *The New Global Struggle Over Gender, Rights, and Family Values*, May 2025, p18-20.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p33.

³⁶ Detektor.ba: "Zašto žene češće vode antirodne pokrete u BiH?" (unofficial English translation: "Why Are Anti-Gender Movements in BiH More Often Led by Women?"), 1 Oct 2025.

³⁷ European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights: "New Report Exposes Funding to Anti-rights Initiatives in Europe Rise to US\$1.18 Billion", 26 Jun 2025.

itself the protector of religion,” Lama from Palestine said. “It uses the fact that the Palestinian community is Islamic and calls any other discourse, like talk of human rights, ‘anti-religion.’”

Words dangerous in and of themselves

The language of the anti-gender movement is highly charged, with slogans like “Protect the family, protect children, protect tradition”. Simple, emotive messages are framed as a defence of something rather than an attack against liberal values. This narrative affects activists’ freedom of speech and what they feel comfortable calling themselves.

Katerin from Colombia mentioned how “saying you’re a feminist is a risk in itself, which it wasn’t ten years ago”. A respondent from the MENA region explained how the term ‘feminism’ is derided as a negative, Western import. “The way things are right now, it’s increasingly dangerous to call yourself a feminist in our region.” Another respondent agreed: “It is so hard to work for democratic values, women’s rights, and peacebuilding. These days, we’re labelled as foreign agents and outsiders who oppose traditional values. That is the worst for me so far.” Lence from North Macedonia describes how the rhetoric against gender equality has meant longtime professional partners now pretend not to know her when they meet on the streets.

Sometimes, women human rights defenders feel forced to rephrase the work they do. “We’ve been talking about gender equality for more than 15 years. It was a normal term, accepted by everyone. But these past two, three years, using the word gender equality has become a problem,” Lence told us.

Occasionally, donors are the ones demanding a change in language, said Dragana from Bosnia and Herzegovina. “An American donor wanted us to skip all mentions of ‘gender equality’ in our project proposal. I didn’t know what to do. We don’t want to be blackmailed that way, forced to redefine central concepts.”

Trend also affects international organisations

Language has even been changing at international organisations for a while now. Particular terms have ceased appearing in official UN publications.

Outcome documents by the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) stopped mentioning abortion around 2017. References to comprehensive sexuality education have been significantly altered in both CSW texts and UN General Assembly resolutions from 2018 onwards.³⁸

Some of these changes appear to be accelerated by political changes implemented by the current American administration, following the openly anti-gender policy, Project 2025.³⁹

One women human rights defender from Ukraine worked on a UN-funded project to promote sexual education in schools. After the US government demanded certain words be removed from federal policies, the UN agency in question no longer wanted to be associated with the project. Rose from Uganda has seen similar changes: “Our government uses the same words as Trump. The narrative is fuelling stigma and cutting funds for work on gender, SRHR, and HIV.”



We thought we’d gained these rights. Now we need to fight for them all over again.

Merita, Kosovo

This might be even more common after the US announced an expansion of the Mexico City Policy to also include to withhold or deny development aid to organisations that promote what the administration calls ‘gender ideology’ or diversity, equity and inclusion.⁴⁰ With the expansion, the Mexico City Policy affects not only foreign organisations, but also US based organisations as well as UN agencies (including those working with humanitarian aid). As money is scarce, many organisations feel forced to censor themselves. “When we draft a proposal, we’re very careful with the words we use—nothing about ‘feminism’. And we haven’t been able to write ‘LGBTQI’ for a long time,” one respondent said. “When we applied for UN funding, we used the word ‘personal development’ rather than ‘gender’. UN agencies have to report to our government, so we need to be very careful”.

³⁸ Gilby, L., Koivusalo, M. and Atkins, S.: “Global Health without Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights? Analysis of United Nations Documents and Country Statements, 2014–2019”. In: *BMJ Global Health*, Vol. 6:3 (2021).

³⁹ RFSU: *Global Impact of Project 2025*.

⁴⁰ The Guardian: “Trump administration to block aid from subsidizing DEI and trans rights overseas,” 22 Jan 2026.

Factors that affect activists' security

As we analysed the data, we stumbled across several factors that aren't directly linked to activists' work but that still affect their security. These include working in an active warzone, funding cuts,⁴¹ declining trust in the international order, the emergence of anti-rights women's organisations, pressure on environmental human rights defenders, and younger people's re-evaluation of traditional activism. Examining these issues is crucial to gaining a comprehensive understanding of the conditions that women human rights activists work in.

Being an activist in an active conflict

Living in a warzone affects everyone. Normal life is on hold, priorities change, and issues that used to be taboo are forgotten when a common enemy emerges. Some respondents who live and work in active conflict zones reported lower levels of harassment and threats linked to their activism, but worsening security conditions overall. Others described how their organisations are now considered important actors because of their humanitarian work, which awards them a certain amount of respect and protection. The number of armed conflicts in the world is at a record high since the end of WW2. In 2024, 676 million women lived within 50 km of deadly conflicts—more than twice as many as in 1990.⁴²

Below, activists from Ukraine, the DRC and Syria share their stories.

Svitlana is a women's rights activist from Ukraine. Before Russia's full-scale invasion of her country, far-right groups often threatened Svitlana's organisation. Sometimes, its events required security measures, including police protection. Since the outbreak of war, these threats have diminished, partly because organisations like Svitlana's have become a lifeline for people, providing essential aid. Many former harassers have also moved away

to join the army. Svitlana worries the reprieve is only temporary, though: there is a risk that alcoholism and domestic violence will increase once these men return from the front. "We want them to return alive and safe, but we also fear what will happen. There are training courses on how to talk to returning servicemen. There's a risk victims will be blamed: 'Why didn't you learn to talk to him correctly? You had it coming!'" Svitlana has also noticed an increase in reproductive pressure and nationalist rhetoric in Ukraine. Even before the full-scale war, billboards proclaimed that women who did not have at least three children were 'bad patriots'. Now, such rhetoric is increasingly popular.

The Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo has seen active conflict in one form or another for 30 years now. Matters escalated in January 2025, when the M23 rebel group took territorial control of large parts of South and North Kivu. Conditions are brutal for civilians—especially women and girls, said women's rights activist Marie: "They destroy women to humiliate the enemy. Women and girls are kidnapped and turned into sexual slaves." The situation is also difficult for human rights defenders, because they work on the frontline: supporting survivors, documenting crimes, and collecting testimonies. Activists risk being attacked by all parties in the conflict for speaking out about the situation. Those who can, flee. Marie and her family left the country for a while, but when she was no longer able to afford her children's school fees abroad, she had to return. Many activists have gone into hiding, forced to stay silent.

In Syria, things have changed dramatically since the fall of Bashar al-Assad. Today, there is a transitional government in place. Activist Hayma described how, initially, people could freely discuss politics and democracy on the streets of Damascus. That freedom didn't last. "We're waiting for a plan from the transitional government. So far, we

⁴¹ See the section 'Democratic backsliding and shrinking civic space'.

⁴² Aas Rustad, S.: "Women exposed to armed conflict, 1990–2024". PRIO, *Gender, Peace, and Security Policy Brief No.4*, (2025), p1.



The separation barrier in Beit Jala, Palestine, that runs through the farmland, leaving people unable to reach their land.

CHANGE

STRENGTH
STORY

**GIRLS JUST
WANNA HAV
FUNDAMENTAL
HUMAN RIGHTS**

STRENGTH
STORY

haven't seen any investment in reconstruction—neither of buildings nor the community. There are still many disappeared persons and no one to hold accountable.” During the war, Syrian civil society focused on providing basic services. Now, organisations are pivoting to monitoring, documenting crimes, and raising awareness. The situation is very sensitive, Hayma warns. It could go either way in terms of women's rights and democracy, so there is a real need for a strong feminist movement:



It's very important for us to be strong, especially in this transitional period, because this is where we lay the groundwork. But we're running out of funding and support.

Hayma, Syria

Palestine: A loss of trust in the international order

At the time of writing, there is a fragile ceasefire in Gaza. More than 90% of the Gaza strip has been destroyed, 1.9 million people have been forced to flee their homes, and an estimated 70,000+ people have been killed, with many more injured. Most of the victims have been civilians, including countless women and children. The world has watched genocide take place in real time. During all of this, women human rights defenders have continued their work, even though they too have been forced to flee and lost colleagues, friends, and family members.

Activists from the West Bank report surveillance, hacking, confiscation of phones at checkpoints, and monitoring of social media activity. Even expressing grief or dissent about the genocide can lead to arrest. Lama said: “The Palestinian Authority even stopped demonstrations against the genocide. They see it as support of Hamas. But it's not.” In many countries around the world, pro-Palestine protesters have been similarly met with vilification, violence, and arrest. According to

CIVICUS, authorities in at least twelve European countries banned protests in solidarity with Palestine. Around 10% of all civic space violations that CIVICUS recorded in 2024 were related to Israel and Palestine.⁴³

“Israel is shaming, blaming, and trying to close human rights organisations that document its violations,” Lama from the West Bank told us. She cited how Israel has targeted the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights because of the organisation's report on rape and sexual harassment.⁴⁴ Israel has also made it more difficult for international organisation to work in Gaza, increasing its control and preventing international actors from entering the territory. At the same time, the US has placed sanctions on Palestinian human rights organisations that collaborate with the International Criminal Court.⁴⁵

Many activists from the MENA region expressed disappointment. “Everything we worked for, like ratifying and signing conventions and upholding human rights, has failed us,” one activist said. Core principles of international humanitarian law, which is meant to protect civilians and reduce suffering, are increasingly ignored by global politicians. UN institutions and other global bodies seem powerless. CIVICUS warns that the world is entering an era of impunity, in which perpetrators of mass atrocities evade accountability even after ceasefires.⁴⁶

The growing lack of trust in international humanitarian and human rights law is a global problem. As Lama said: “The international community has a responsibility to hold the Israeli occupation accountable for its crimes against Palestinians and ensure justice is applied.”

The emergence of anti-rights women's organisations

The emergence of anti-gender, pro-family-values organisations across Europe, Africa and the Americas has affected many activists.⁴⁷ These organisations partner with local groups, religious institutions, political parties, and informal citizen initiatives, and coordinate across borders.⁴⁸ Some blatantly frame themselves as women's organisations. As these organisations become more popular, space for women's

⁴³ CIVICUS: *State of Civil Society 2025*, p10.

⁴⁴ Palestinian Centre for Human Rights: “PCHR Documents Testimonies of Systematic Rape and Sexual Torture in Israeli Detention against Released Palestinian Detainees”, 10 Nov 2025.

⁴⁵ Al-Haq: “Al-Haq, PCHR, and Al-Mezan Condemn US Sanctions and Call for Global Solidarity to End the Genocide in Gaza and the Oppression of Palestinians”, 5 Sep 2025.

⁴⁶ CIVICUS: *State of Civil Society 2025*, p12.

⁴⁷ Examples include the International Organization for the Family, Family Watch International, the Alliance Defending Freedom, the Center for Family and Human Rights, The World Youth Alliance, and CitizenGo.

⁴⁸ Brechenmacher, S.: *The New Global Struggle Over Gender, Rights, and Family Values*, May 2025, p18-20.

rights organisations shrinks. For several years now, the presence of vocal anti-gender groups has increased at the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).⁴⁹

Serbian activist Dejana described how anti-gender groups have similarly infiltrated the feminist movement in her country. One organisation was founded by young female activists who call themselves feminists but also say that there's no such thing as gender, because they oppose trans rights. "They're smart and well-spoken, so the media gives them space. It's reached a point where it seems like they're the ones fighting for women in this country."

Women lead over half of the anti-gender organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is easier to espouse anti-abortion views when women are the messenger, since they have more legitimacy to speak about the 'natural role of women'.⁵⁰

Women environmental human rights defenders—Double the threats

Environmental, climate, and land rights activism have always been among the most dangerous issues to focus on for human rights defenders—not least for women and indigenous people. Women human rights defenders who work to halt climate change continue to face significant threats.⁵¹ Every week, three environmental human rights defenders disappear or are murdered.⁵² And this is likely only the tip of the iceberg.

Just over 13% of those we surveyed said they work with environmental issues. That is an increase of more than four percentage points since our last poll. Activists increasingly focus on climate issues because the planetary crisis is affecting us all.⁵³ At the same time, more respondents than last time found being an environmental human rights defender highly risky, especially in the Americas. There, 40% said environmental issues were the most dangerous issue to work with. This is in line with findings from Global Witness, an organisation that monitors disappearances of environmental

human rights defenders: 82% of the cases that the organisation documented in 2024 took place in Latin America.⁵⁴

ATTACKED FOR TRYING TO PROTECT RIVERS AND FORESTS

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, dozens of movements have emerged to protect natural resources from exploitation. Women human rights defenders often lead these initiatives, methodically organising communities in non-violent ways—a stark difference with the historically extractive practices of state and corporate actors. Environmental activism has become a rare unifying platform in a politically divided landscape. In Republika Srpska, Dragana heads an organisation that works on both women's rights and environmental protection. "The situation for activists and informal groups isn't good. They try to prevent the destruction of rivers, land, and forests. A lot of violations against them are related to their attempts to protect natural resources."

Links between extractive industries and national governments are a particular obstacle for many climate activists. A Ugandan activist described a case involving an East African oil company that evicted community members from their land. At a demonstration, many protesters were unlawfully arrested.



The citizens who were arrested weren't allowed to contact a lawyer, as the police said the protesters were a 'public nuisance'. They keep finding ways to criminalise our work.

Activist, Uganda

PARTICULARLY DANGEROUS TO BE A FEMALE CLIMATE ACTIVIST

In her latest report, Mary Lawlor—the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights

⁴⁹ European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights: "New Report Exposes Funding to Anti-rights Initiatives in Europe Rise to US\$1.18 Billion", 26 Jun 2025.

⁵⁰ Detektor.ba: "Zašto žene češće vode antirodne pokrete u BiH?" (unofficial English translation: "Why Are Anti-Gender Movements in BiH More Often Led by Women?"), 1 Oct 2025.

⁵¹ CIVICUS: *People Power Under Attack 2024*, p13.

⁵² Global Witness: *Roots of Resistance: Documenting the Global Struggles of Defenders Protecting Land and Environmental Rights*, 2025, p16.

⁵³ The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation: *Feminist Movements and Climate Justice in the Middle East and North Africa (2022)*, and *Gender, Women's Rights, Environment and Climate Change in Rwanda (2022)*.

⁵⁴ Global Witness: *Roots of Resistance. Documenting the Global Struggles of Defenders Protecting Land and Environmental Rights*, 2025, p 17.

⁵⁵ UN General Assembly: *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders – 'Tipping points: human rights defenders, climate change and a just transition'*, UN Doc. A/80/114, 4 Jul 2025.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, paragraph 85.

defenders—highlighted the hostilities that environmental human rights defenders face. She described how many states criminalise and restrict climate activism.⁵⁵ Lawlor also recognised that the planetary crisis disproportionately affects women and marginalised groups, and that women are often “at the forefront in movements addressing climate change [...] in extremely difficult contexts”.⁵⁶ While much of the repression against environmental human rights defenders goes unreported, this is particularly true for gendered harassment, like sexual violence and misogynistic slander. Women are targeted not only as environmental activists, but also for being outspoken and for challenging traditional gender norms.⁵⁷

INTERSECTION WITH INDIGENOUS RIGHTS

In many contexts, environmental issues (including land rights) intersect with the rights of Indigenous Peoples. Often, indigenous women activists are at the forefront of these struggles.

Naw works with Indigenous Peoples’ rights in Asia. She explained how language barriers, visa restrictions, and a lack of resources prevent indigenous women from participating in global advocacy forums. Important discussions about climate and biodiversity are also often inaccessible to indigenous women due to a lack of information and participation. As a result, their voices go unheard both nationally and internationally. “Many of the issues that indigenous women raise are interlinked, like gender-based violence, land rights, environmental issues, militarisation, and growing criminalisation. Sometimes, state actors are behind the harassment, evicting us to expand national parks, for example. At other times, it’s companies that want to access natural resources.”

Pirawan works for the same organisation. Many countries in Asia have large indigenous populations, but few recognise them or respect their rights. “It’s difficult to work when you’re only seen as a national security threat, not a rightsholder,” Pirawan said. “You’re not consulted when new laws or policies are drafted. Sometimes they’ll invite us, but when they don’t provide funding, transport or interpretation, there’s no way for us to join. Many countries in the region use the law to criminalise indigenous peoples. When they come to take our land for corporations to exploit, this is always done by men. In some contexts, like Myanmar, Bangladesh, and the Philippines, they use rape to force

us. But we don’t view land as a commodity: we see it as something that cannot be monetised. Land is for sharing, it belongs to the creator.”

Young people and activism

Another recurring theme that emerged in our conversations with activists was the way the younger generation is questioning and even distancing itself from traditional activism. This shift doesn’t appear to be due to apathy, but rather a complex mix of disillusionment, economic realities, and changing perceptions of impact.

Miray from Azerbaijan reflects on how she’s shifted away from organisational activism. “I’ve seen a lot of problems with organisations. Funds are accessed by a handful of people who don’t share. It’s a monopoly.” These days, posting personal videos on social media with stories about her own life feels more transformative than participating in formal structures:



I’m not really talking about activism anymore, just myself and my own life. I feel like this helps more than activism.

Miray, Azerbaijan

A more general distrust in many societies has also affected younger generations’ enthusiasm for activism. This distrust has partly been fuelled by authorities’ discrediting of women’s rights organisations, which they call corrupt and elitist. Lusine from Armenia became an activist over a decade ago by getting involved in street protests. “It was the most inspiring phase of my journey,” she reminisced. Later, she started working in Armenia’s NGO sector and discovered how institutionalised it was. While established NGOs offer structure and resources, many say they make it difficult for new activists to enter the field. “There’s a lack of mentorship and solidarity,” Lusine said.

Araz from Lebanon also points to economic hardship and shifting expectations as a reason young people aren’t engaging in activism: “The economic crisis is a factor. In my days, we used to volunteer for free in our spare time. To the newer generation, unpaid activism feels like a privilege they can’t afford.”

⁵⁷ Center for International Environmental Law: “COP30: Why Protecting Defenders Is Central to Climate Justice”, 5 Nov 2025.

Finally, systemic injustice and global double standards dampen motivation. When young people see activists get punished while politicians escape accountability, activism as a tool for change feels hollow and frightening. Dragana from Bosnia and Herzegovina believes the growing distrust in international human rights mechanisms discourages younger generations.

That said, many young voices are critical and do want to make a difference. But they question whether traditional activism makes a difference, whether it is inclusive, and whether it aligns with their values and realities. Perhaps for them, the future of activism lies less in formal structures and more in decentralised storytelling.



It's very demotivating for young people: they see how the law applies differently to those in power and the rest of us, both in Bosnia and around the world.

Dragana, Bosnia and Herzegovina



Photo: Lara Koncar

Spotlight on the South Caucasus—rapidly changing contexts

The South Caucasus is experiencing turmoil. It is one of the regions where we have seen the most significant change since our last report. Russia's war against Ukraine has reshaped alliances in the region and created economic opportunities for authoritarian elites, while democracy and human rights are increasingly sidelined. International actors have largely failed to protect democratic space and meet the needs of civil society, and civic space has rapidly closed down. Women human rights defenders are on the frontline of this struggle, facing targeted repression. To fully understand what is happening to those who defend women's rights and queer rights in the South Caucasus, we need to take a closer look at the changes that the region has undergone.

Geopolitical and economic realignment

Russia's war against Ukraine has accelerated geopolitical realignment in the region. Many of the policy and societal changes in the region are directly linked to the war. Former EU-favourite Georgia signed a strategic partnership with China in 2023, expanding cooperation on trade, education, and infrastructure. Meanwhile, Turkey and Azerbaijan are lobbying for a modern-day Silk Road. While borders have been shut for decades between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the ongoing peace negotiations between the two countries present a real possibility of new transport and transit roads and open borders.⁵⁸ Armenia traditionally allied itself with Russia; while Russian influence remains significant, the country is now cautiously seeking closer ties with the EU.⁵⁹ The upcoming elections in the summer of 2026 will play a decisive role in

shaping the country's future geopolitical orientation. Azerbaijan, by contrast, continues to boldly repress human rights defenders, journalists, and civil society organisations. The EU has mostly turned a blind eye, because it depends on the country for energy—pragmatism trumps human rights.⁶⁰

Increasing authoritarianism in Georgia

Georgia used to be the most civil society-friendly of the South Caucasus countries. From an EU perspective, the country was the region's bright and shining star. In December 2023, it was granted EU candidate status. That process stalled in 2024, though, following contested elections during which many violations were reported. After the Georgian Dream party claimed victory, it adopted a 'Law on Foreign Influence', which had initially been withdrawn following widespread protests in 2023.⁶¹ Ever since, anti-democratisation has been unprecedented in its speed and efficiency.

Georgia has been undermining its democratic institutions for years. Power is consolidated in the hands of oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, 'honorary chairman' of the ruling Georgian Dream. Public consultation is non-existent: decisions are made by an elite group of politicians who have been in power for over a decade. The ruling party maintains the appearance of pluralism by creating proxy parties to try and convince the public and international observers that the country's democracy still functions. Power is entirely centralised, however, and state institutions are largely non-functional.

The war in Ukraine has also benefited Georgia's elite economically: laws were passed to enable the

⁵⁸ European Parliament "Progress in the Process of Normalisation of Relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan", *Delegations – European Parliament*, 11 Aug 2025.

⁵⁹ Eurasianet: "Armenia and EU Set Agenda for Closer Relations", 3 Dec 2025.

⁶⁰ Heinrich Böll Stiftung: "The EU and Azerbaijan as Energy Partners: Short-Term Benefits, Uncertain Future", 5 Nov 2024.

⁶¹ Civil.ge: "Georgian Dream's FARA Takes Effect", 31 May 2025.

KNOWING HOW TO SURVIVE

Tamta is a longtime human rights defender from Georgia who has always been outspoken. She explains that even though the feminist movement saw the writing on the wall, it was still taken aback by Georgia's lightning-swift shutdown of civil society.

"We weren't prepared for the quick development. We felt we were strong and well connected and thought they were weaker intellectually. Instead of planning ahead, we kept being loud and visible. That made us a target."

Many organisations were forced to go underground. Today, they continue their work as best as they can. Tamta is still in the public eye, but admits that she's thought about moving abroad.

"If I'd start facing real physical threats, I might relocate. I don't think being thrown in prison would destroy me, but it might make others afraid of continuing this work."

Tamta remains hopeful: Georgian civil society has suffered so many setbacks over the years that it has learnt to adapt. She believes organisations need to be pragmatic now, while still holding on to their values and dignity.

"We know how to survive, while the government doesn't. That gives us the energy to continue."

country to become a transit hub for sanctioned goods.⁶² An 'offshore law' adopted in 2024 ensures their assets are safe from sanctions.

Georgian activists forced to go underground

These days, civic space in Georgia is all but erased. Civil society organisations are forced to register as 'agents of a foreign principal' to receive international grants, which sows division in the sector. New anti-LGBTQ+ provisions, the removal of gender quota, amendments to the country's abortion law, and other legal restrictions against civil society mirror similar laws drafted in Russia, Belarus, and Azerbaijan. Gender-equality frameworks have been dismantled and the term 'gender' has been removed from laws and policies.

Since Georgia's dramatic shift, individual activists have been intimidated, harassed, and have had their bank accounts frozen.⁶³ Women are at the forefront of the resistance, but they are disproportionately targeted through smear campaigns, slander, intimidation, and sexual violence in detention. State propaganda paints feminists as 'enemies of the nation', 'foreign agents', and 'childless spinsters stealing our future'.

A choice between exile or silence

In Azerbaijan, civil society has been almost fully dismantled. Most activists are in exile, in detention, or silenced. While small-scale social enterprises survive in rural areas, there is no space for advocacy.

"Ten years ago, when the crackdown first started, we put ourselves out there, thinking that that would change something and that the international community would listen and act," Azerbaijani activist Elmira told us. "But no one came to our aid. That made us lose hope in the future and weakened our resilience." Today, it is nearly impossible to engage in activism in Azerbaijan. In recent years Elmira has witnessed so-called 'GONGOS'—organisations that are closely linked to or controlled by the government—take over civic space. "They killed independent civil society and left nothing but artificial marionettes, which are stronger than ever. I dedicated my entire adult life to this organisation—how could I just shut it down? So we're trying the best we can."

Miray from Azerbaijan was targeted in November 2023. At the time, the government was cracking down on civil society, imprisoning numerous human rights defenders. One day, as she was heading to the

⁶² Forbes Georgia: "Georgia's Role in Sanctions Evasion: A Transit Hub for Russia?", 24 Oct 2024.

⁶³ Amnesty International: *Georgia: From Insults to Assaults: Weaponizing Gender-Based Violence Against Women Protestors in Georgia*, p4.

⁶⁰ Heinrich Böll Stiftung: "The EU and Azerbaijan as Energy Partners: Short-Term Benefits, Uncertain Future", 5 Nov 2024.

⁶¹ Civil.ge: "Georgian Dream's FARA Takes Effect", 31 May 2025.

grocery store with a friend, an anonymous user messaged her on Instagram. “Be careful as you’re walking down the street with your friend,” the message read. “You’re in danger.” Later, a woman came to Miray’s home, asking strange questions. The next day, Miray was followed in the street. “That’s when I understood I needed to leave the country. The only option left to Azerbaijani activists is to move abroad and then may be share content online. Anything else is impossible. They even imprison people just for commenting on TikTok or Instagram!”

Calling for peace considered treason in Armenia

Armenia remains a more open environment—at least for now. Women’s rights organisations in the country are still able to provide services and engage in policy dialogue. But discussing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict or the country’s upcoming elections is risky.

Lusine’s organisation promotes peace, feminism, and environmentalism. She emphasises how political those ideologies are in Armenia. In the 2010s, activists focused mostly on women’s rights and gender-based violence. Since the pro-democracy Velvet revolution in 2018 and the second Karabakh war in 2020, the focus has shifted. “Peace is more political now, even more sensitive than gender. Advocating peace is often seen as weakness or betrayal.”

Even though Armenian human rights defenders still have the legal and political room to speak out, they do face censorship. Openly promoting peace, especially on social media, often attracts hatred and accusations of treason. This leads to self-censorship, as activists navigate a complex environment that can quickly turn hostile. Lusine explained how activists have to profile themselves very carefully, depending on the audience and context. Strategic choices are necessary to avoid

backlash and stay safe. “I filter where I speak and which hat I wear when I do. I usually present myself as a human rights defender rather than an activist.”

Strange phone calls and hacked accounts

In Abkhazia, grassroots organisations work under difficult circumstances. Small, community-based women’s rights groups try to build trust across ethnic and social divides. Their work is often transformative but cannot be openly documented or presented. These activists are affected by the war in Ukraine as well as the situation in Georgia.



Georgia’s new laws affect us a great deal. International organisations limited their work in the region as a result, which has left us with less money and fewer contacts. It’s very sad.

Respondent, South Caucasus

Activists in Abkhazia are regularly cyberattacked: their accounts get hacked and they receive strange phone calls from unidentified numbers. One respondent described working life to us: “Before any meeting, we always have to check who else will be there. Will I be able to say my name, what organisation I work for? It’s exhausting. But we’re so used to it now that it almost feels normal. As you were interviewing me, I realised that even though I’m not doing anything wrong by talking to you, I still don’t want you to spell out my name.”



Street view in Armenia.

Photo: Maja Brand

Timeline: Legislative changes in Georgia⁶⁵

Electoral changes

(2024-2025)

Election monitoring is restricted and the structure of the Central Electoral Commission is changed.

Broadcasting law amended

(2024-2025)

The government gives itself the mandate to dictate broadcasters' coverage and prevent them from receiving foreign financing.

LGBTQ+ rights curtailed

(2024)

New laws severely restrict queer people's rights in terms of education and healthcare. LGBTQ+ 'propaganda' and pro-LGBTQ+ demonstrations are banned, as is trans-affirmative healthcare.

Foreign Agents Law

(May 2024)

Civil society or media organisations that get at least 20% of their funding from outside Georgia are considered 'organisations that carry out the interests of a foreign power'. A first version of the law was introduced in February 2023, but withdrawn after widespread protests.⁶⁶

Parliament elections in Georgia

(26 October 2024)

2024

⁶⁵ OC Media: "The Legislative Changes That Have Shaped Georgia's Authoritarian Slide", 30 Oct 2025.

⁶⁶ BBC News: "Georgia Drops 'Foreign Agents' Law after Protests", 9 Mar 2023.

Restrictions on foreign grants

(April 2025)

Civil society organisations need state consent to receiving funding from outside of Georgia. The government starts to investigate and freeze prominent NGOs' bank accounts.

Foreign Agents Registration Act

(April 2025)

The ruling party goes one step further than the Foreign Agents Law. The new law also targets individuals.

Crackdown on gender measures

(April 2025)

Banning political parties becomes easier. Critics warn this could lead to a ban on all opposition parties.

Civil society involvement in public decision-making no longer mandatory

(April 2025)

Legislation to end the mandatory participation of civil society organisations in public decision-making processes.

A series of protest-related restrictions are introduced

(2025)

Including the criminalisation of face masks at demonstrations.

Opposition parties risk being banned

(May 2025)

Banning political parties becomes easier. Critics warn this could lead to a ban on all opposition parties.

2025

Coping strategies

Many of the activists we talked to described difficult working conditions. Still, almost everyone was determined to continue with the work they did. For many, activism is more than just a job: it is their life.

To be able to keep going, activists have to be flexible and clever. Below is a list of creative ways women human rights and queer rights activists use

to deal with harsh circumstances, conflict, limited civic space, and hostile anti-gender forces.

"Woman human rights defenders before us achieved so much, and they had a difficult time too. So we don't have the right to stop even if things are difficult. We have to fight this war for the next generations, so they'll see that change is possible."

Support networks

When you're under pressure, it's easy to feel weak and alone. Sharing experiences and supporting each other can help.

In the DRC, women's rights activists have set up a network to advise each other when incidents occur. "You have to share with others and learn. So we developed this network to face the current situation," one member explained. Similarly, the Network of Indigenous



Women in Thailand has created safe spaces to collectively heal from trauma. Workshops involving activists' husbands and village leaders have increased understanding and support for women's activism. Meanwhile in Ukraine, Svitlana's organisation organises a retreat every four months, often in combination with a training. "The whole team goes, because we understand that we also have to care for ourselves. This work takes a huge toll on you physically and psychologically."

Media and publicity strategies

Another way of coping is making strategic decisions regarding what to share in public, and who to present as the face of an organisation.

The peace work that Lusine from Armenia does is very sensitive. Her organisation decided to keep that part of its operations out of the spotlight. "Media-wise, all of our peacebuilding activism is underground." To avoid angry online comments, the organisation designed an animated kitten that spreads information through a podcast. The kitten can talk about sensitive issues, because who would attack a cute cat? "It was a way



to continue communicating without putting names and faces to our work," Lusine explained. Pirawan from Thailand uses a similar tactic: "We keep a low profile. We know our website is monitored, so there's a risk local officers will stop by. We act normal and share our work, but we don't talk about everything we do."

The Syrian Feminist Journalist Network, meanwhile, has developed a guide about hate speech and the role that the media plays. They start conversations about fake news and about the challenges that come with the construction of a new Syrian state.

Clever communication

Activists in many countries have to be careful with the language they use. Sometimes, avoiding certain words is a conscious strategy. Lusine carefully chooses her words when communicating with municipalities or ministries. “We say our programme is about ‘human security’ rather than ‘feminist peace’.”

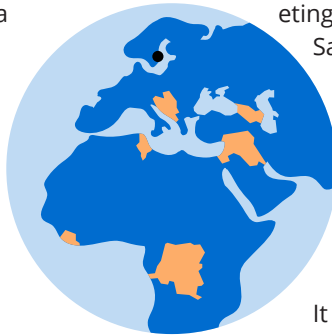


Tamta from Georgia takes a pragmatic, data-based approach. “Our academic approach is a kind of protection. As feminist leftists, we provide a structural critique, so data is a shelter for me.”

Travelling

Travelling abroad can be a relief and a source of new energy, but it can also be stressful: wondering whether you might be interrogated at the border or find out at the airport that you’re banned from travelling.

Two activists shared that last time they had to travel for work, they brought yoga mats and claimed they were going to a retreat rather than a me-



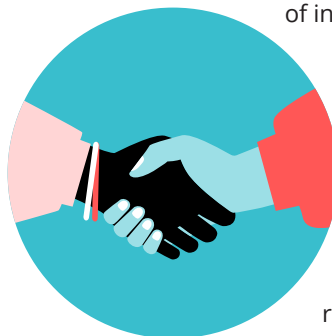
eting. Another activist from a West Saharan refugee camp often feels unsafe when travelling. Because she’s a Muslim woman with traditional clothes, people tend to question why she’s travelling without a husband. “After Covid, I figured I could keep wearing a mask and hide my face without people asking why. It gives me more privacy so I can move more freely.”

Forging strategic relationships

Brenda from Uganda fosters strategic relationships with human rights institutions, diplomatic missions, and ministries to try and avoid or delay potential attacks.

Sometimes, it helps to engage and talk with people with very different beliefs. Dayugar from Liberia recalled a dialogue in Kenya between groups that disagreed. The team invited vocal anti-gender speakers, including religious, political, and community leaders. They discussed human rights and gender and engaged in team-building activities. By the end, a bond had been created and

the two sides were able to have an honest conversation. “Some became allies in the end,” Dayugar recalled. “Programmatic funding for these kinds of initiatives helps a whole lot.”



Aminatou from West Sahara has strategically opted not to participate in any protests, not even peaceful ones, because it would only be dangerous. Instead, she focuses on her fellow Sahrawi people. “Every week, we host a tea ceremony in the refugee camp and talk about topics like climate change, job opportunities, and peaceful ways to solve conflict.”

SELF-CARE STRATEGIES



A movement is only as strong as the people who are part of it. We asked activists how they take care of themselves. This is what they answered:

- ▶ Kickboxing – “It makes me feel strong”
- ▶ “Sleeping outside and looking up at the stars in the desert”
- ▶ A social media detox
- ▶ Getting help from friends in the comment field on social media
- ▶ Muting comments on social media posts
- ▶ “Going to a café by myself without my phone and just sitting there for an hour or two to clear my head”
- ▶ Using ‘collective laughter’: seeing the humour in a tense environment
- ▶ Watching silly Netflix shows, “even though my activist self judges me for it”
- ▶ Doing absolutely nothing
- ▶ Dancing
- ▶ Giving culinary lessons
- ▶ “Knowing how to scream loudly. It gives me a sense of security”
- ▶ “Talking to people who understand what I’m going through”
- ▶ “Staying in my bubble of safe and supportive people”
- ▶ Doing fun things with my colleagues
- ▶ My cat
- ▶ Being angry, “because it’s okay to be angry in this world”
- ▶ Talking to a psychologist or therapist – “It’s expensive, but worth it”
- ▶ “Listening to myself”
- ▶ Bi-weekly supervision for the team with a feminist psychologist
- ▶ Being less visible, declining media requests
- ▶ Taking holidays and only working half day on Fridays



Training on feminist leadership, bringing together women from Lebanon, Jordan, Tunisia, and Palestine.

Recommendations



When the full-scale invasion started in 2022, lots of funding came to Ukraine [...]. But they hardly ever talked to us during the planning stage. This de-values our work and expertise.

Svitlana, Ukraine

As evident in this report, global anti-gender movements and shrinking civic space are undermining human rights as well as activists' ability to operate safely and sustainably. Women's rights and queer rights activists face constant legal harassment, surveillance, digital attacks, and physical threats. Funding is often short-term and comes with rigid rules and endless bureaucratic requirements.

Often, international donors' approaches are disconnected from local realities. The data collected for this report shows that, to reverse these trends, the EU, UN, nation states, donors, and international NGOs must:

- defend agreed-upon gender equality norms, language, and commitments,
- finance long-term movement-building and holistic security,
- embed local feminist expertise in policy and programme design, and
- ensure protection mechanisms and rapid support are accessible and gender-responsive.

The following recommendations are based on what activists themselves expressed in the survey and the interviews we conducted, as well as on the insights we accumulated over the years.



Photo: Lara Koncar

Intergovernmental and regional organisations



Speak up against authoritarian regimes when activists are attacked or freedom of expression and assembly is threatened.



Defend established gender-equality language. Provide guidance to delegations and partners on using agreed language in negotiations and communication.



Guarantee participation of women human rights defenders in delegations and negotiations and remove participation barriers for indigenous activists and those who do not speak English. This includes providing visas and reimbursing travel costs.



Provide long-term, flexible funding to grassroots organisations. Shift from short-term grants to multi-year core funding. Simplify reporting: require only basic reporting for grants below a certain threshold. Allow budget to be reallocated to emergencies.



Make consultations with women's rights organisations mandatory. Require participatory design (consultations, feedback loops, compensation for time) for all interventions. Ensure there is budget for this and that the process is documented. Create accessible formats and establish accessibility standards for all events and grants.



Protect civic space. Integrate gender equality into rule-of-law, media freedom, and civic space programmes. Include protection mechanisms for women human rights defenders in reforms of the justice and security sectors. Include risk assessments and security measures in programme appraisals. Fund watchdogs and legal aid.

Donors



Demand context-specific programming. Co-design calls with local experts and avoid templates that span too many countries with divergent risk profiles. Require a context-safety analysis and disqualify proposals that ignore local risks.



Provide emergency and rapid-response funding. Create standing funds for evacuation, relocation, and medical and legal support. Make sure emergency support to leave the country is gendered and children are able to flee with their mothers.



Budget for holistic security (including psychosocial support and digital security). Ensure there is a 'security and care' budget for all programmes.



Reduce administrative burdens and extend grant duration. Ensure reporting is proportionate to grant size; switch to annual reporting with limited quarterly check-ins. Ensure budgets are flexible. Favour two- to four-year grants. Streamline audit requirements.



Support safe spaces and networks. Finance peer networks, retreats, and solidarity exchanges, both locally and across borders. Protect participants' anonymity and establish security protocols.



Keep supporting activists in places where civic space is closed or shrinking, even if doing so is hard and does not offer an immediate return on investment. Avoid funding government-organised NGOs.



States



End legal harassment. Outlaw intimidation lawsuits that are intended to silence activists (so-called 'SLAPPs').



Ensure that **protective laws explicitly cover women human rights and queer rights defenders** and address gender-specific risks and retaliation.



Protect civic space by ensuring that domestic legal frameworks fully guarantee **freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and expression**, and by repealing or amending laws, including defamation provisions, restrictive assembly regulations, and foreign agent laws, that are used to target or criminalise women's rights activists.



Build comprehensive protection mechanisms for women human rights and queer rights defenders.

Offer rapid-response support (hotlines, relocation, safe houses) and legal aid and set up specialised protection units.



Reduce burdensome or discriminatory procedures surrounding **registration, reporting, and compliance** for civil society organisations, particularly those that support or are led by women human rights defenders.





Thank you

First and foremost, a heartfelt thank you to all the activists who took the time to answer our survey. Without you, we would not have been able to write this report. A big thank you also to the interviewees who shared their experience and wisdom with us. Your contributions were essential. Equally, this report wouldn't have been possible without our Kvinna till Kvinna colleagues, who supported us with their knowledge, contacts, and analyses. We also want to thank our peers and colleagues who took the time to meet us and share their thoughts and knowledge. A big thanks to the individuals and organisations in Sweden and abroad who helped disseminate our survey among their contacts. You are the reason the survey reached so many countries around the world.

And finally, the warmest thank you to all the women's rights and queer rights activists around the world who tirelessly work for change, day after day.

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8. MART

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