

# ProtectDefenders.eu 2021 Annual Report



## **The Human Rights Movement at a Crossroad**



# Forewords

PROTECT**DEFENDERS.EU**



# Victoria Fyodorova, Belarus



A year ago, I was forced to leave my country. Just like thousands of Belarusians, I was subjected to repressions because I wanted to live in a democratic state.

It must be said that the Belarusian regime has always considered human rights defenders as enemies and did not particularly want to cooperate, but what happened recently can be called a war against the entire civil society.

Repression's against the human rights movement began immediately after the outbreak of the August 2020 protests, security forces detained my colleague Marfa Rabkova from The Human Rights Center "Viasna". Now seven human rights defenders are in prison.

During 2021, hundred of searches have been conducted in the offices of a wide range of civil society organisations and private apartments of individual human rights defenders. After the raid on human rights defenders, many of them were forced to leave Belarus in order to continue their activities in safety and not be arrested.

Since July 2021 more than 300 HGOs were liquidated. On October 5, 2021, exactly on the anniversary - the 25th anniversary of our organization, the Supreme Court decided to liquidate «Legal Initiative».

This major crackdown on civil society in Belarus is yet another attempt of the regime to silence dissent, restrict fundamental human rights and stop legitimate documentation of the regime's human rights violations. The regime severely violates human rights, and we, as defenders of human rights, openly report their violation at all levels, and primarily at the international level.

It is the regime's revenge for our human rights activities. The goal is to destroy, imprison, expel an active civil society from the country.

Despite the repression, **human rights organisations continue their work, which is now more important than ever:** more people need legal help, more human rights violations need to be documented, more work needs to be done internationally to urge the regime to respect human rights and bring the perpetrators of crimes against humanity to justice.

Without the work of human rights defenders, as well as without independent journalists, Belarus will turn into a black hole. Human rights violations have not only continued, but they also intensified. In the absence of any legal mechanisms within the country and in general in the absence of the rule of law, reporting on human rights violations and crimes of the regime remains the only means.

At the international level, it is necessary to continue to support human rights organisations that are now forced to work in exile. It is important for the states, primarily neighbouring states, where human rights defenders are now located, to ensure their physical safety, to guarantee the non-extradition to Belarus and the possibility of legal stay and work. And of course, it is very important to continue to insist on the immediate and unconditional release of human rights defenders and all political prisoners.

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# Jamila Afghani, Afghanistan



My name is Jamila Afghani. I have been a woman activist in Afghanistan for the past 25 years of my life. In the past 6 years of my life, I have had to be relocated three times due to persistent threats and insecurity.

Since 2019, the political instability increased in Afghanistan, especially after the signature of an agreement between the Taliban and the United States of America. The Taliban were getting more confidence, and the war was getting harsher all over Afghanistan.

On the other hand, the government's grip was loosening, and many accidents were coming up - women activists, journalists, advocates and civil society activists were targeted, and no one took responsibility. The Taliban issued a kill list in which my name was included. I was receiving threats that put my and my family's safety under question. I had no choice

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but to leave my country temporarily for Turkey in November 2020. I stayed there until the end of March of 2021.

I received support from UAF and FLD which covered our costs until March 2021. For a family of six people, during the pandemic situation, with no other livelihood, it was difficult to stay longer. Therefore, I had no choice and was supposed to go back to Afghanistan. In my country, with all the developments going on, my life and integrity were facing great risk. I applied to ProtectDefenders.eu with the hope to get funding for the required protection. I was lucky to be granted the life-saving grant which gave us enough to cover our basic living expenses such as housing, food, communication, visa extension, travel health insurance, medical and transportation cost. This support was very helpful for me and my young children. The rented apartment had

all facilities that I could manage our daily life easily.

Throughout the year, I was able to be connected with my office virtually. I could lead my organisation, and I remained actively engaged in advocacy activities for supporting the WHRDs, peacebuilding and overall women's rights, social and political engagement advocacy activities. The grant provided by ProtectDefenders.eu has been crucial.

Supporting human rights defenders at risk, allowing them to evolve in a safer environment is key to supporting human rights movements everywhere. **I wish to thank ProtectDefender.eu for providing me with the needed financial support when I was in great need.** If today I am surviving and still contributing to the betterment of my society, it is partly thanks to ProtectDefenders.eu.

# Josep Borrell Fontelles,

Representative of the Union  
for Foreign Affairs and Security  
Policy/Vice-President of  
the European Commission



We live in dangerous times. **Core international principles and laws are openly violated and both human rights themselves and human right defenders are under growing attack.**

**All of us have a duty to speak out and act.** In this common endeavour, the EU and ProtectDefenders.eu are close partners. The war in Ukraine brings us back to some of the darkest pages in European history. We see widespread violations of international human rights and international humanitarian law. Russian military forces are responsible for indiscriminate attacks against civilians, including children and those seeking to use humanitarian corridors. Russia's war of aggression is not just an attack on Ukraine's sovereignty and democracy; it is also a violation of Ukrainians' most basic human right of all: the right to life.

Along with the unspeakable suffering in Ukraine we see in Russia that the opponents of the war are silenced by force and intimidation. We pay tribute to all ordinary citizens and human rights defenders who are protesting so courageously against

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the war and who oppose the backsliding of human rights and democracy in Russia and Belarus. And we applaud all those who risk their lives by staying in these countries to document these serious violations.

Regrettably, these are far from the only places in the world where human rights are being violated and where human rights defenders are oppressed. Indeed, in 2021, we have seen a further deterioration in many countries. According to Frontline Defenders, which is part of the ProtectDefenders.eu consortium, 358 human rights defenders were killed in 2021 and 59% of those worked on environmental, land or indigenous peoples' rights. Latin America has the sad record of remaining the most dangerous region for human rights defenders. In 2021, 70% of all killings of human rights defenders took place in the region.

In addition to threats to their lives, human rights defenders also face many other threats and attacks such as arbitrary detention, smear campaigns or judicial harassment. They are also increasingly victims of illegal online surveillance. And they have to struggle with the shrinking space for civil society, in particular through the use of ill-motivated “foreign agent” or counterterrorism laws. The EU's position is and remains clear: we oppose these practices and will continue to work in

multilateral and regional fora to outlaw them and to support the essential work of human rights defenders.

Action is what ProtectDefenders.eu is all about. **Through quick and flexible response, the consortium helps to get human rights defenders to safe places and receive the legal support they need, including essential protection measures.** I want to highlight the huge efforts of the consortium over the past year to relocate human rights defenders from Afghanistan, Myanmar and Belarus, to countries where they found a safe heaven.

**We as EU are proud to support, fund and cooperate with ProtectDefenders.eu.** And we will continue to give voice to human rights defenders and to support those at risk. To speak up against violations and to raise individual cases, publicly through our statements and bilaterally in our diplomatic contacts and in all our human rights dialogues. EU Delegations will keep monitoring trials and visiting human rights defenders in detention. We will continue to meet every day with people that promote and defend universal principles, women human rights and LGBTI rights as well, as those who fight corruption or land grabbing.

This report by ProtectDefenders.eu, a close partner, is an essential contribution to the promotion and protection of human rights of everybody, everywhere.



# Jutta Urpilainen, Commissioner for International Partnerships



*“It means a great deal to those who are oppressed to know that they are not alone”.*

With these words, which truly resonate as war rages in Ukraine, the late Desmond Tutu captured the humanity, solidarity and courage of Human Rights Defenders worldwide. **On the frontlines in crises and conflicts, they fight for freedom, dignity and equality. They stand up for those who cannot in the most difficult circumstances.** As independent watchdogs, they are key partners of the EU, and their work on the ground is a precious contribution to the defence of fundamental values cherished by the EU.

Yet, in 2021 against the backdrop of rising geopolitical tensions, conflict, and the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, independent civic society actors and human rights defenders faced deteriorating human rights situations and a shrinking civic space. Environmental human rights defenders, including those defending land and indigenous peoples' rights, are most targeted by threats, attacks and killings.

This is why I so much value the incredible work of ProtectDefenders.eu – the EU Human Rights Defenders mechanism. **It continues to save lives, protect human rights defenders, and support their human rights work in the most challenging conditions.** In 2021, ProtectDefenders.eu delivered

urgent and much-needed support to human rights defenders around the world, from Belarus to Myanmar to Afghanistan. It has shown repeatedly its remarkable ability to quickly mobilise resources in human rights crises.

I am proud of the support the EU gives to ProtectDefenders.eu and to countless other human rights defenders, including young people, women, girls and civil society organisations. This is about who we are as a Union, and the values we were founded upon – respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law.

The EU continues to deliver with strong operational and financial means. The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights has supported ProtectDefenders.eu since 2015. We will be stepping this support up over the course of the next few years with a €1.5 billion Global Europe Human Rights and Democracy programme. **This will allow us to stand with human rights defenders all over the world, including ProtectDefenders.eu.**

As Commissioner for International Partnerships, I firmly believe that human rights and democracy are essential to sustainable and inclusive development. There cannot be one without the other.

In this moment of backlash against grassroots movement for human rights and democracy, our commitment to human rights defenders goes hand in hand with our support to free and independent media, the fight against impunity and curbing all inequalities. The EU is unwavering in building a fairer, more sustainable world, promoting a human rights based approach to development and never compromising on the values we hold so dear.

“As Commissioner for International Partnerships, I firmly believe that human rights and democracy are essential to sustainable and inclusive development. There cannot be one without the other.”

# Maria Arena,

## Chair of the European Parliament's subcommittee on Human Rights



We are all observing a worrying trend in our society where the work of human rights defenders is taken as a threat. Inherently, as a society, **we need to understand that the work human rights defenders do is invaluable and remains crucial for the development of the rule of law.** They are our closest allies, especially because their work is essential to voice what is not going in the right direction and ultimately, contributes to ensuring the protection of the most vulnerable populations. Obviously, they are also a key element in ensuring sustainable development owing to their efforts and work at the grassroots level.

The establishment of the EU Human Rights Defenders Mechanism shows how strongly the **EU is committed to the protection of human rights defenders and to ensuring the**

**continuity of their work while safeguarding their lives.** The mechanism is unique worldwide also because it focuses on the core issues and provides them with essential practical support. It is not only focused on emergency and financial support but also provides training at the grassroots level.

The work of ProtectDefender.eu in 2021 has been astonishing. Their vital work has made an immeasurable impact. Since it has a broad mandate covering defenders working on all rights and freedoms, it upholds the principle of no right above all. I applaud ProtectDefender.eu for their swift response this year from Belarus to Afghanistan. The attack on Belarusian civil society and the situation in Afghanistan are important issues for the Parliament. With the 2020 Sakharov Prize being awarded to the democratic opposition in Belarus and Afghan Women being the 2021 nominees, we have always ensured vulnerable groups, civil society, and democratic leaders have our support. This unique mechanism has saved countless lives and mitigated the suffering of the human rights defence community. Looking back at 2021, with an increase of 23% in the number of assistances provided, it is proof that the mechanism is functioning efficiently. However, the increase also portrays how the space for civil society is rapidly shrinking, and defenders are in need of assistance now more than ever.

We are seeing a growth in intolerance, and we cannot allow this to become the new normal. Defenders put their lives at stake to defend human rights. They defend the very concept of the universality of human rights and this is the reason why we support their work. **Therefore, it is more important than ever that states and everyone else consider human rights defenders as partners.** Peace and Human Rights are two things that go hand in hand; we cannot have one without the other. Our advocates and defenders of peace, such as Maria Ressa and Nadia Murad, have shown us the importance of both rights and dignity and how ensuring respect for human rights is the only way to have lasting peace.

“As a society, we need to understand that the work human rights defenders do is invaluable and remains crucial for the development of the rule of law.”

# A message from the Board of ProtectDefenders.eu



Throughout 2021, ProtectDefenders.eu has proven its success in achieving positive results and our collective achievements this year have, once again, been assessed as substantive, significant, and very impactful. There is no doubt that the EU HRD mechanism has offered **crucial support to hundreds of defenders and enabled thousands of them to continue their human rights work with more security.** It has provided timely emergency responses to human rights defenders, their families, and their communities, often with a holistic or multi-pronged approach, and has shown great efficiency and flexibility by continuing to

deliver results in the extraordinary context of COVID19 and the exacerbated risks defenders have faced.

Nonetheless, 2021 was marked by a general aggravation of the situation of civil society and by severe crisis and extreme backlash against human rights defenders in specific countries, which have generated the **highest level of demand for resources ever reported since the establishment of ProtectDefenders.eu.** As a consequence, the need for a sophisticated and proactive coordination of efficient responses has been more essential than ever. This ongoing

effort has been illustrated by the coordination of support and pooling of resources for HRDs in Myanmar, for civil society and HRDs in Belarus, and for the targeted and multi-faceted response to the situation in Afghanistan. These efforts, as well as initiatives to build solidarity and co-responsibility with external partners and actors, have shown the key role that the EU HRD mechanism can play due to its positioning and expertise, but only as long as it is endowed with sufficient resources and agility to respond to these crises, and is accompanied by the necessary expressions and actions of political support from the key stakeholders.

By the second half of 2021, the Afghanistan crisis indicated an unprecedented need for the mobilisation of multifaceted support to defenders and families, at a volume with which the current mandate and resources of the EU HRD mechanism cannot cope without jeopardising its ability to maintain its response to the global community of HRDs.

**The unprecedentedly high volume of requests for support this year put further pressure on the available resources, and accentuated the discrepancy between the capacity available, and the legitimate needs of our target group.** This discrepancy continues to grow disproportionately, and in some cases defenders have struggled to find sustainable solutions due to the persistence of threats. This attests to the crucial need to consider making increased and long-term means of support available to them, to their communities, and to their families, as well as the need for the reinforcement of resources available for actors supporting HRDs, including reinforcing their technical and protection staff.

Despite these challenges, the achievements and results reported, the synergies, spill-overs and coalition-building achieved so far, and the new and emerging initiatives led by the Consortium of ProtectDefenders.eu, have built upon the EU HRD mechanism, enabling it to remain a **global reference for the protection of human rights defenders.**

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# Summary

PROTECT **DEFENDERS.EU**

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# An essential support in the midst of a global crisis



Throughout 2021, the EU human rights defenders mechanism, ProtectDefenders.eu, has delivered life-saving support and multi-faceted assistance to nearly **8,700 of the most at-risk human rights defenders and grassroots human rights organisations around the world – 23% more than in 2020**. The EU HRD mechanism's strategic, flexible, and efficient support has mitigated the ravages suffered by the human rights defence community last year, amid the pervasive impacts of the **COVID-19 pandemic** and the **most critical global and geopolitical environment for human rights defence work** reported since the creation of ProtectDefenders.eu in 2015.

Despite this **extremely adverse situation**, ProtectDefenders.eu has continued to mobilise protective support to individuals at risk, and to provide comprehensive assistance to organisations and movements confronting security threats. The support of ProtectDefenders.eu has helped human rights defenders and grassroots human rights groups to strengthen their resilience and protection globally, particularly in the most difficult contexts, making a significant contribution to their ability to continue their work.

In 2021, the activities of the EU HRD mechanism have been impacted by an **unprecedented increase in requests** for urgent materially protective support from defenders and communities: ProtectDefenders.eu has had to respond to, among other severe crises, the **dismantling and repression of civil society in Belarus, the consequences of the coup d'état in Myanmar** on civil society and HRDs, and the **collapse of Afghanistan** as the Taliban took over its government. Thus, significant efforts were made to reach **these most difficult countries and the most at-risk groups of defenders, who have absorbed an unprecedented level of the support delivered by the EU HRD mechanism**.

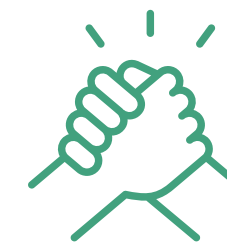
In a quickly evolving context, creative and flexible solutions and adaptations have been implemented, and this year the consolidation of the ProtectDefenders.eu consortium has given rise to new spaces to explore the privileged positioning of the EU HRD mechanism in the international community in support of defenders. This is illustrated by the launch of the first **HRD resettlement stream by the government of Canada** in partnership with ProtectDefenders.eu, the articulation



of a comprehensive response in Afghanistan through new programmes in partnership with the EU, and the steps taken towards a more **comprehensive and collective approach to advocacy** on issues of common interest.

ProtectDefenders.eu has continued to provide a comprehensive, holistic and **effective emergency protection** for HRDs at the greatest risk, including 24/7 support, and to invest in the resilience and capacity of **human rights organisations to continue their work** in adverse environments – notably through lifeline and core-funding grant-making to local actors, including communities defending rights. ProtectDefenders.eu has also ensured that international **temporary relocation capacities remain operational and accessible** for HRDs and members of their families, and has taken a significant step in **strengthening regional relocation structures** through the Shelter Initiatives program. Furthermore, and despite the prevailing limitations created by the pandemic, capacity-building activities have continued to provide access to knowledge about reinforced protection strategies for the community of defenders. Similarly, ProtectDefenders.eu has **strengthened its support to individual HRDs and NGOs through its reactive and protective advocacy work** to HRDs at risk through urgent interventions, reports, and related proactive steps, mobilising the international community in an effort that has led to multiple success stories throughout the world.

This coordinated implementation, coupled with a holistic and complementary approach between partners, actions, strategies, and programmes, continues to step up the practical support available to HRDs at risk and local human rights NGOs in a timely and comprehensive manner; the vast majority of **HRDs accessing ProtectDefenders.eu's support have reported enhanced security and protection, and highly positive outcomes**. Although the extreme situation in 2021 has pushed the mandate and resources of the EU HRD mechanism to the limit, ProtectDefenders.eu has managed to maintain and generate a consistently noticeable and positive impact on the HRD community at highest risk.



# 8,673

human rights defenders received direct support from ProtectDefenders.

# 23%

increase compared to last year

# 57%

WHRDs, defenders belonging to gender minorities, gender non-conforming, and non-binary HRDs



# 344

human rights organisations receiving direct support



# 91%

of the HRDs supported from the most difficult countries or belonging to the most-at-risk groups



# 103

countries worldwide

An essential support in  
the midst of a global crisis



**1,068**

defenders and family  
members at risk receiving  
emergency support



**3,157**

human rights defenders & 104  
local human rights organisations  
and groups receiving core support,  
seed funding, or lifeline support



**151**

individuals receiving  
comprehensive support  
within temporary relocation  
programmes



**12**

new and existing temporary  
relocation projects supported  
across all world regions  
within the Shelter Initiatives  
Programme



**954**

defenders better able to manage  
their security through training  
and capacity development



**1,099**

human rights defenders  
accompanied in fieldwork  
activities



**2,650+**

at risk supported through  
urgent advocacy and public  
mobilisation on their situation



**3,600+**

individuals assisted with direct  
guidance and 24/7 support



**99%**

of HRDs reporting a positive  
impact/enhanced capacities/  
improved security following  
support

# The grassroots human rights movement is at a crossroads



The EU HRD mechanism has been instrumental in preventing or alleviating the backlash and pushback against local organisations, and in **building a resilient environment** for better human rights protection at a **time of unparalleled global socio-economic and political turmoil**. The capacity-building and resilience of HRDs working in the most difficult contexts have been reinforced and sustained, and the situation of human rights defenders at risk has been made more visible, reflected in actions of international diplomacy. As a result, human rights defenders have felt **better equipped to navigate their work** in the face of repression and threats, and able to pursue their defence and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the local level. Defenders benefiting from the mechanism have reported **feeling supported and encouraged to continue their struggle**, as well as an **increased ability to manage their own security**, positively impacting their ability to continue advocating for human rights, mobilising for action and forming or joining social movements.

However, the **deteriorating security and conditions for defenders to carry out their legitimate work** is worsening globally. This year, the persistent and **appalling impacts of the pandemic** have been coupled with a global phenomenon of extreme **threats against civil society, reported in all regions of the**

**world**. In too many places, the **human rights defence movement is at stake and in a critical situation** – and, in some countries, at the point of **involution**, or brutal **dismantling**. Never since the creation of ProtectDefenders.eu has the global context in which defenders operate been so generally **dangerous, precarious and deteriorating**.

**Human rights work remains a high-risk activity**, particularly when it takes place in a global environment lacking democratic structures, good governance and a functioning and independent judiciary, or in the context of conflict or political unrest. This year, HRDs continued to pay a very high price for doing their legitimate and essential work. The **negative narratives** against HRDs as anti-development, terrorists, pro-revolution, etc. have also been able to spread unchecked. HRDs have faced **increased violence**, attacks and intimidation, while civic space has continued to erode, or even been dismantled, in many parts of the world.

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“Never since the creation of ProtectDefenders.eu has the global context in which defenders operate been so generally dangerous, precarious and deteriorating”



# The profound impact of the pandemic



The persistence of **the COVID-19 pandemic** has shaped the activities of ProtectDefenders.eu in 2021, even if by the turn of the year, HRDs and civil society actors managed to partially adapt to the new circumstances and adopted new working methods. Vaccine inequity, inadequate testing, and difficulties in accessing life-saving healthcare have had a direct impact on the health and well-being of human rights defenders. While human rights defenders have continued to demonstrate **extraordinary resilience in the face of such extraordinary circumstances**, they have been facing a range of **additional risks**. Repressive governments have continued to seize opportunities to further target civil society and human rights activism, imposing censorship and expanding state surveillance. Rising **authoritarianism, nationalism, militarisation, and extremism**s have intensified attacks on human rights, democracy, and information. White supremacy, racism, xenophobia, occupation, colonialism, and settler violence, intersecting with patriarchy, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, ageism, and other discriminatory systems, threaten the lives and security of marginalised groups. **Across every region, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these inequities.** Corporations and elites are consolidating their power and states are using the pandemic as an excuse to increase repression and surveillance,

erode human rights, and persecute human rights defenders. Women, trans, and gender non-conforming human rights defenders – especially those who face intersecting forms of discrimination and violence – are particularly at risk, both because they are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and because they are disproportionately targeted for attacks and excluded from decision-making.

Human rights defenders also continue to face reprisals for their work in holding governments accountable for their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. In some cases, human rights defenders have been **targeted as a result of their dissemination of information on governments' weak management of the pandemic**. Human rights defenders and human rights organisations have also faced reprisals even when abiding by COVID-19 restrictions, further inhibiting their peaceful and legitimate human rights work. Many **imprisoned human rights defenders continued to be denied access to lawyers and family members** under the pretext of COVID-19 preventive measures and restrictions. In some instances, human rights defenders were granted medical parole; however, this tends to come when the HRD has already become quite ill, rather than being

a preventive measure of granting imprisoned HRDs medical furlough, as has been done for many other detainees. Another notable trend was the transferring of detained HRDs between detention facilities multiple times in a short period, without explanation, further placing them at needless risk of contracting the virus.

The **pandemic has also made communities and HRDs more vulnerable** in relation to food, healthcare needs and access to justice, and the lack of government attention and protection of HRDs has worsened in most of the countries where ProtectDefenders.eu operates; COVID has had a devastating effect **on poor and marginalised communities** defending rights. There are particular concerns relating to the medium- to long-term impacts on community-based grassroots organisations and social movements, and their ability to engage in the defence of human rights. State failure to meet obligations regarding economic, social and cultural rights is reportedly creating serious obstacles and challenges for human rights organisations, particularly social movements and grassroots defenders. In this context, it has been essential to reinforce the collective protection of grassroots human rights defenders while integrating psychosocial and gender perspectives.



**ProtectDefenders.eu has continued to express** serious concerns about increasing **numbers of attacks on HRDs in the context of increased social conflict**. Over recent years, it has been well documented that indigenous, environmental and land rights defenders are among those that suffer the highest amounts of attacks as a result of their human rights work. ProtectDefenders.eu highlights how this trend has been intensifying as a result of states looking to “revive the economy” in the context of the global pandemic. While many communities have seen their rights severely restricted and have, as a result, struggled to provide for their families, extractive corporations have been granted concessions to the detriment of communities and the environment. This has in turn led to communities resisting dispossession and displacement being violently repressed, and entire communities and regions have faced increasing militarisation.

## The profound impact of the pandemic

Defenders traditionally exposed to greater risk or vulnerability, including those working on the margins of society and without much access to resources or support, are facing particular challenges. Racial, ethnic, religious, and other minorities are disproportionately falling ill and dying due to structural inequalities. **Indigenous, environmental, and land rights defenders are especially at risk. LGBTI defenders experience increased violence** resulting from states using the pandemic as an excuse to adopt militarised policing practices and transphobic laws. **Disability rights defenders report structural barriers** to access and discrimination, including when it comes to triage and other healthcare practices. In addition, sex workers and informal, domestic, and low-wage workers' rights defenders are experiencing threats to their livelihoods. **Migrant, displaced, refugee, or stateless defenders and those affected by conflict and occupation face severe safety and security threats**, including those working in refugee camps without proper sanitation, water supplies or food. Furthermore, it is clear that confinement has particularly exposed **women HRDs to higher risks**, including an overload in care work, loss of income due to their disproportionate reliance on informal work, and increased rates of domestic

violence. Gender-based violence has been on the rise during the COVID pandemic, which has affected WHRDs through gendered attacks they face as a result of their work as well as gender-based violence in their personal relationships and respective organisations. This trend leaves **WHRDs more vulnerable and unprotected than their male counterparts, and is compounded by a generalised crisis of care and self-care in the pandemic**. Similarly, WHRDs have reported high levels of gender-based forms of state violence such as rape, killings of WHRDs and sexualised threats online and offline, sometimes promoted at the highest levels of government. WHRDs are also often the primary caretakers of dependents, such as children and sick or elderly family members, adding to the pressure they face as a result of their human rights work – and increasing the risk of burnout and the need for psychosocial support.

The pandemic has also led to a considerable increase in **digital threats**, as well as an increase in attacks on tools and services now needed to develop human rights defence work, such as online meeting platforms. Not only are some defenders explicitly targeted, but large-scale, corporate data breaches and security incidents have indirectly affected human rights work at the global level. The digitisation of human rights work, while bringing new opportunities, also brings major challenges. Because of this shift in modes of communication, many HRDs, communities, and organisations are now more exposed to harassment and hate speech, doxing, hacking, and censorship.

At the global level, one of the main threats to the human rights movement (and thus to HRDs) remains the **continually shrinking space that extends from authoritarian countries towards previously democratic ones**, across not only the developing world but also developed countries. States have also continued to use repressive laws and subservient courts to criminalise, arrest and detain HRDs in all regions, in an attempt to silence them. There is an aggravated geopolitical crisis fuelled by dictatorial, authoritarian and populist governments, which aim to impose their vision of a world without pluralism. Additionally, there is a growing technological crisis whereby the absence of appropriate regulations in the era of digitisation and globalised communication has created information chaos. Many states, on all continents, have continued to use the COVID-19 crisis to arbitrarily increase their prerogatives, retain power, control their populations, reduce fundamental rights and individual freedoms, and reduce civic space for civil societies. More generally, various legal grounds have been used to criminalise the freedom of speech of human rights defenders and hinder them from continuing their legitimate work. The judicial harassment of defenders and rights groups often results in arbitrary arrests and detention, in breach of the international obligations of states to

respect freedom of expression, which also applies on the Internet. Furthermore, “fake news” accusations and defamation are being used as a means to criminalise any criticism about authorities’ management of the crisis. It is becoming more and more obvious that governments of repressive states are using the pandemic to engage in significant long-term human rights erosions, which could last well beyond the end of the health crisis.

The pandemic has made **local CSOs more fragile, and for some, threatened their sustainability**. Yet far from supporting civil society as actors who provide support to those most in need, some states are seizing opportunities to further suffocate critical voices and challenge the essence of the right to defend rights. At the heart of today's trends is the **challenge to the very legitimacy of HRDs and their work**. This has translated into a deepening of attacks on defenders across the globe, waves of new regulations to silence HRDs and close the space to defend rights, along with a dramatically increasing trend to criminalise and detain HRDs, often at limited political costs. Moreover, the global pandemic has in many ways further exacerbated the challenges HRDs face. It is therefore more important than ever to step up support systems that can protect, support and strengthen the resilience of human rights defence movements.





# Global human rights deterioration



The trend of the **ongoing closure of civic space and backsliding of democracy** continues, and ProtectDefenders.eu partners have drawn attention to the implementation of legislative and administrative barriers across regions. At times these repressive measures appear to be copycat legislation between repressive governments. Administrative barriers can be as challenging as outright criminalisation, since they drain the organisation of resources and effectively “suffocate” civil society, either by cutting off funding or preventing CSOs from operating. Similarly, there have been brutal crackdowns on dissent and protests in several regions. This sustained and intense pressure against civil society has continued, and state and non-state actors use ever more sophisticated technology to surveil and impede the work of human rights defenders, in addition to other tactics of legal restrictions, arbitrary arrest and detention, criminalisation, attacks, and smear campaigns.

Furthermore, **counter-terrorism and national security frameworks are being weaponised to target and silence human rights defenders**, through measures such as anti-terrorism legislation. States have continued to use legal frameworks covering

the registration of organisations, money-laundering, access to foreign funding etc. under the pretext of counter-terrorism agendas to persecute defenders and limit their legitimate human rights activities. In countries like Sri Lanka and Pakistan, HRDs are at risk of administrative detention under counter-terrorism provisions in legislation, and have been scrutinised on the basis of their funding and detained on baseless charges. Similar trends have been documented in countries like Algeria, Egypt, India, Nicaragua, and Turkey. On a more general note, slander and judicial harassment have continued to be used against human rights defenders, who are often accused of being terrorists (Egypt, Israel/OPT), foreign agents or internal enemies (Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Ukraine), or threats to national security more broadly. Such fabricated accusations are used to silence or arbitrarily detain dissenters. During 2021, ProtectDefenders.eu has been made aware of high levels of criminalisation of HRDs and weaponisation of the law, often related to trumped-up charges. Often these are very serious criminal charges, such as threats to national security, terrorism, or murder.

In recent years, ProtectDefenders.eu has witnessed an increasing **use of the**

**“censorship of HRDs by detention”** – the criminalisation and detention of HRDs across the globe, generally in an effective attempt by states to undermine HRDs’ work and silence them in all regions of the world, while at the same time creating further violations. The pandemic has also added a cynical additional layer of threat as the virus spreads rapidly in many places of detention. There have been multiple reports of defenders affected by COVID-19 in detention across the world. The deaths of the Kyrgyz defender Askarov or the Indian defender Stan Swamy due to COVID in detention are but two of these examples, demonstrating the unwillingness of the authorities to protect defenders in detention.

The global health crisis has in many ways paralysed the human rights movement, depriving it of many of its traditional tools of monitoring or fact-checking, and this has been accompanied by an almost universal breakdown of protection systems, whether domestic, international or multilateral. This situation has not only led to a rise in serious human rights violations, with complete impunity, but also to a **sharp increase in actions against HRDs**. Threats and attacks have increased in a wide range of countries, accompanied by the introduction of new rules on civil society, the increase of fake news, and the criminalisation of social media posts, as in the Russian Federation, Belarus and the countries of Central Asia, as well as large parts of South Asia and South-East Asia, the Middle East and Turkey, among others. All of these developments pose serious challenges to the protection of defenders and add to an already acute protection crisis across the world. This is evidenced in the increasing killings of HRDs, particularly in rural areas in and connection with powerful state and non-state actors, and often with the complicity of private security forces acting on behalf of business interests and elites, who are





## Global human rights deterioration

effectively outside the control of the civilian state. **Sustained attacks upon and killings of environmental, land and indigenous rights defenders** have continued to be reported, as those human rights defenders working on issues relating to indigenous peoples' rights and environmental rights continue to be targeted by non-state actors in the Americas, with national governments or authorities continuing to prove unwilling to protect defenders and hold perpetrators of abuses accountable. Environmental and indigenous rights defenders have repeatedly told local authorities that they have received threats from known and unknown individuals, often on social media networks. **HRDs monitoring and reporting on elections**, monitoring government public expenditure and responses to COVID and other ESCRs, or those reporting on **corruption** continue to be targeted by authorities around the world. Repression tends to intensify during election periods, with clampdowns on freedom of expression and detention. Increased threats have been documented against HRDs working on these issues in Zambia, Belarus, Iran, Angola and Zambia, among others.

This year, ProtectDefenders.eu has identified **death threats against HRDs** as one of the most pervasive actions against HRDs in the world, and a major barrier to the right to defend human rights. HRDs receive threats because of the impact their work is having, and most threats have a clear objective: either to stop what the defender is doing or to force him or her to do something. As death threats against HRDs and specific population groups have multiplied, they have become a ubiquitous, adaptable, and

multiform instrument deployed to highlight what is not allowed, the places where one cannot go, the facts that must be ignored or accepted. The death threat becomes a device of governance, either to ensure hegemony in an area or to tame a particular population. Thus, the threat connects directly to other strategies of domination, such as violence, fear, discrimination, exclusion, gender-based violence, forced displacement, and so on. Too often, heavily threatened defenders normalise threats and internalise their impacts. Threats are one of the more pervasive actions against HRDs and they become a major obstacle to exercising the right to defend rights. Defenders are attacked in many different ways, but threats, whether explicit or implicit, are always there. Threats often go unnoticed by the broader public, but they form part of the continuum of violence affecting defenders and become the mortar that binds together events such as the criminalisation of defenders, physical aggression, and even killing.

In 2021, evidence of the new NSO spyware being used, **online surveillance and censorship** against a range of actors including human rights defenders, journalists and politicians emerged. This has further demonstrated the power of state and non-state actors to monitor, interfere with and impede the work of defenders and others. Unlawful surveillance has led to massive human rights violations including the killings of defenders and journalists. In recent years and months, revelations of mass surveillance and online threats (e.g. the Pegasus scandal) have highlighted the importance of the right to privacy for everyone, and of data

protection online. Women human rights defenders, independent journalists and/or online activists, in particular, are regularly subjected to surveillance and harassment. In that context, women human rights defenders acting in the face of significant power imbalances can be particularly subject to online aggression – such as blackmail, extortion, persistent harassment and humiliation – which often adds to the existing discrimination and threats they face. On top of monitoring and attacking online activists, many governments and non-state actors increasingly seek to control public information and suppress expression of opinion. Restrictions affecting defenders reporting online have traditionally taken the form of slander, public attacks, and judicial harassment. This trend has continued – and sometimes even intensified – in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

HRDs continue to be stigmatised as criminals, terrorists or anti-development. In many contexts, this has led to the creation of **negative narratives regarding HRDs and human rights** more broadly. Similarly, in many countries, indigenous peoples face non-recognition as indigenous. These actions of mislabelling make indigenous and non-indigenous HRDs increasingly vulnerable to attacks, as such attacks are seen to be to some extent justified. Attacks are carried out by authorities and also by private actors, including private security companies and even fellow community members influenced by negative narratives. These narratives are often spread by government or corporate actors through both traditional and social media. Furthermore, in recent years

ProtectDefenders.eu has seen the rise of **anti-gender and anti-trans rhetoric**, including at a national level and in international advocacy spaces. These tendencies are crossing the borders of particular countries and regions and could harm the situation of LGBTI HRDs, particularly trans HRDs, both globally and locally. Similarly, **gender-based violence against WHRDs has continued to increase**, both within the home as a result of quarantine conditions, and in society at large due to the rise in authoritarianism and militarism provoked by the pandemic. Social isolation is exacerbating domestic violence stress triggers such as financial and health-related concerns. Additionally, women living under authoritarian governments are facing increased gender-based violence due a rise of militarised responses to the health crisis.

All of the above crises and negative developments have overlapped with the concatenation of three **major HRD and civil society crackdowns during 2021**, which has caused an unprecedented peak in demands, concentration of resources, and exhaustion of the EU HRD mechanism, namely:

## Myanmar

Military coup and crackdown against HRDs and civil society

13

alerts reported in 2021  
in ProtectDefenders.eu's  
index of alerts

37

emergency grants  
allocated to HRDs  
from Myanmar

4

grants to grassroots  
organisations  
from Myanmar

Myanmar's return to military dictatorship **intensified the crackdown against HRDs and civil society groups** as the military continued to use repressive tactics and systematically suppress civil and political rights.

In the aftermath of the military coup on 1 February 2021, the military conducted a **campaign of attacks and intimidation against human rights defenders and civil society groups to silence all forms of protest and dissent**. Widespread arbitrary arrests and detentions, with allegations of torture, have been recorded against human rights defenders, activists, journalists and politicians. Civil society organisations, human rights defenders and journalists who have been documenting the atrocities committed by the military have been beaten, detained, threatened, fired from their jobs or had their homes or offices raided.

Following the coup, thousands of people across the country gathered peacefully to protest the power grab and to call for an end to the military dictatorship. While the demonstrations calling for the restoration of the elected civilian government in the country have continued, violent, and often deadly, reprisals against protesters have also increased. The **police and military are using disproportionate force, arbitrarily arresting and detaining peaceful protesters**, and subjecting many of them to **torture and other acts of ill-treatment**, including blocking protesters' access to medical treatment.

The military has adopted a **double-edged strategy of ruthlessly silencing independent voices while attempting to spread disinformation to confuse people**. Internet shut-downs and disruption of service aimed at discouraging the protests and the Civil Disobedience Movement have made it more difficult to access reliable and up-to-date information. In addition, digital surveillance and curfews have further hindered attempts to verify and publicise information.

With the transfer of funds blocked and the banking infrastructure severely curtailed, it has been **increasingly difficult for civil society organisations to sustain their vital work**. The targeting of human rights defenders has forced them to flee their homes. Arrest warrants have been issued against several defenders and members of civil society, and many have been declared fugitives. Family members of human rights defenders have also been subjected to relentless threats, intimidation and harassment by authorities. About 40 journalists reporting on the protests have been detained, and several media outlets have been banned or shut down. Human rights defenders in rural areas, including the Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Chin and Mon areas, have also been subjected to attacks. Offices of human rights organisations in these areas have been raided and ransacked by security forces and defenders have been detained or even killed.

## Belarus

Unprecedented assault against civil society

53

alerts reported in 2021  
in ProtectDefenders.eu's  
index of alerts

40

emergency grants  
allocated to HRDs  
from Belarus

1

monitoring and field  
activity with Belarusian  
civil society

Belarus has witnessed an **unprecedented human rights crisis over the past year** with massive human rights violations. Partners have received reports of systematic, large-scale violence being used against the millions of protesters contesting the results of the disputed August 2020 presidential election, as well as cases of enforced disappearance, allegations of torture and ill-treatment and the continuous intimidation and harassment of civil society actors.

The Belarusian authorities have launched a **full-scale assault against civil society, curtailing a broad spectrum of rights and freedoms, and targeting people from all walks of life, while systematically persecuting human rights defenders, journalists, media workers and lawyers**. The crackdown is such that thousands of Belarusians have been forced or otherwise compelled to leave their homeland and seek safety abroad. However, the forced landing of a civilian plane in Minsk on 23 May, for the apparent sole purpose of arresting a dissident who was on board, signalled that nobody opposing the current government is safe anywhere.

Over the last year, numerous participants in the democratic movement have faced **widespread and systematic repression from Alexander Lukashenko's long-standing authoritarian regime**. Thousands of protesters have been detained and prosecuted, many of whom have been ill-treated and tortured. Politicians and leaders of the protest movement have been put behind bars or forced to leave Belarus. Journalists, lawyers, and human rights activists have been attacked for doing their crucial jobs. At the same time, not a single criminal case has been brought against those responsible for the violent crackdown, despite numerous reports of police brutality and misconduct. By the end of 2021, all of the official human rights organisations had been liquidated and over 30 human rights defenders – human rights activists, lawyers, and journalists, including members of the Viasna Human Rights Centre – were imprisoned. Many other human rights defenders were victims of other forms of legal harassment, including repeated detention and interrogation.

# Afghanistan

Collapse of the government and humanitarian crisis



**Systematic attacks and killings of human rights defenders were rampant across Afghanistan even before the Taliban offensive.** Since the beginning of the peace talks in September 2020, journalists and human rights defenders have been killed by unidentified armed individuals or explosive devices. The announcement in April 2021 of the complete and unconditional withdrawal of international armed forces from the country by September 2021 led to a further intensification of attacks against civilians, which resulted in an alarming increase in casualties.

Following the collapse of President Ashraf Ghani's government, with the Taliban seizing control of the country on 15 August 2021, **the lives of human rights defenders and their families are hanging by a thread.**

In the days following the Taliban's takeover, **peaceful protests in several provinces were violently repressed, house-to-house searches** for opponents and their family members were reported in some locations and women have been reluctant to leave their homes. Given the Taliban's abysmal human rights

record and the precarious situation in the country, **human rights defenders, journalists, and members of civil society – including women and children – are particularly vulnerable and at risk.**

Since the takeover, **increased attacks and harassment against HRDs, journalists, civil society actors, and their families have been reported.** Many defenders have sought refuge outside the country despite the restrictions imposed following the fall of Kabul. HRDs who remain inside the country are in urgent need of financial support to sustain themselves until they can find a safe solution to their situation, as many have been forced to halt their human rights work. The country is on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe, as extreme poverty is pervasive among the vast majority of the population.

ProtectDefenders.eu has received thousands of requests for support for Afghan HRDs and individuals at risk every month since August 2021, and is currently working on the implementation of a support programme for defenders at risk in Afghanistan.



@TheMyanmarPhotoProjectCollective

# Responding to the growing challenges faced by women, trans and gender non-conforming defenders



Over the past year, the threats and attacks against women, trans, and gender non-conforming human rights defenders have continued to increase – with the rise of anti-gender and anti-trans rhetoric, the increase in gender-based violence in quarantine conditions, and the high level of gender-based forms of state violence. ProtectDefenders.eu ensured gender-sensitive assistance, implementing the common gender strategy adopted in 2020. This strategy permeates all programmes, and involves mainstreaming gender in all aspects of the support provided. Furthermore, it applies a gender-sensitive lens throughout all of ProtectDefenders.eu's policies, communication, and monitoring and evaluation programmes.

This strategy formalises the recognition that women, trans, and gender non-conforming human rights defenders – especially those who face intersecting forms of discrimination and violence – are particularly at risk. They are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, targeted for attacks, harassed – online and offline – and excluded from decision-making. This strategy gives more consideration to the needs and contexts of women, trans and non-binary HRDs in the design, implementation and follow-up of all activities and programmes implemented and coordinated by ProtectDefenders.eu: grants, relocation, training and capacity-strengthening, accompaniment and more.

Family support is a key element when it comes to providing holistic support from a gender perspective. Indeed, WHRDs are often the primary caretakers of dependents such as children and sick or elderly family members, adding to the pressure they face as a result of their human rights work, and increasing the risk of burnout and the need for psychosocial support.

Thanks to increased outreach to women, trans and gender non-confirming defenders, 57% of the overall number of defenders supported by ProtectDefenders.eu in 2021 were women, trans and gender non-conforming human rights defenders.





# Success story

## Multi-layered support to a WHRD harassed for defending women's sexual and reproductive rights in Venezuela

In 2021, the OMCT provided multi-layered support to woman human rights defender Vannesa Rosales in Venezuela, criminalised for advocating for the decriminalisation of abortion.



Vannesa Rosales is a women's rights defender, teacher, social worker, and founder of the Open Studies of Politecnica Territorial University (UPTM), a programme focusing on nursing, integral health, crime prevention and criminology. She is also a staunch advocate for women's sexual and reproductive rights, advocating in particular for the decriminalisation of abortion.

Vannesa Rosales was arrested on October 12, 2020, without a warrant, after she helped a 13-year-old girl who became pregnant after being repeatedly raped and whose life was at serious risk. Upon her arrest, the police confiscated her personal computer and material related to her work defending women's sexual and reproductive rights. She was detained incommunicado until she was ultimately released under precautionary measures and placed under house arrest. She was facing charges of "forcing a third party to have an abortion" and "committing a crime by association", which are clearly related to her activism in favour of the decriminalisation of abortion. Her judicial process was marred by irregularities and violations of due process guarantees.

In January 2021, the OMCT in the framework of the Observatory published an urgent appeal, urging the Venezuelan authorities to end all forms of harassment against her. Shortly after, the case of Vannesa Rosales was featured in a joint report on the situation of HRDs in Venezuela.

Vannesa Rosales' case is particularly emblematic of the misuse by Venezuelan authorities of criminal law against defenders of women's sexual and reproductive rights as well as the systematic policy of stigmatisation, persecution and criminalisation against human rights defenders in Venezuela, which are widely presented as "internal enemies" by the authorities.

In February 2021, six United Nations experts, including the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, expressed their deep concern about the criminalisation of

human rights defenders and civil society organisations in Venezuela, highlighting the case of Vannesa Rosales.

On May 28, 2021, the first hearing in the case against Vannesa Rosales took place, more than five months after the maximum period set up by Venezuelan law.

On July 21, 2021, the court dismissed the case against Vannesa Rosales. Yet both her detention and criminalisation have had grave impacts on her psychological and physical health as well as on her work as a women human rights defender. As a result, the OMCT provided medical and psychosocial support to Vannesa Rosales as well as material assistance to replace her computer that was seized by the police and move to a safer place, to help sustain her critical work in the defence of women's sexual and reproductive rights in Venezuela. Discussions are also ongoing to see how the OMCT could support further her work on providing basic sexual and reproductive health care to women in detention as part of another project.

The OMCT coordinated closely with its local partner and member of the SOS-Torture Network COFAVIC as well as the NGO 100% Estrógenos to multiply the effects of its advocacy work on behalf of Vannesa Rosales, including through a joint statement endorsed by 203 CSOs asking for justice for Vanessa Rosales. The OMCT further coordinated closely with FLD its material support to Vannesa Rosales, to avoid duplication and cover her multiple needs.

The criminalisation of Vannesa Rosales is part of a wider pattern of systematic attacks against HRDs in Venezuela. It is therefore important not only to address her individual case, but also the root causes of her harassment, including the criminalisation of abortion in Venezuela. The OMCT further aims at strengthening its protection work in favour of WHRDs in Venezuela and making more visible the issues they work on and the specific challenges they face. The case also stresses the relevance of using a coordinated and multi-layered approach to human rights defenders' protection, integrating both the advocacy and the material support dimensions.



# Success story

## Training on security for women journalists of community radios in Senegal

RSF supported the Union of Associative and Community radios of Senegal (URAC) and the International Network of Women, Senegalese section (RIF) to provide training on security to women journalists from community radios.

“Thanks to the training I have learnt how to protect myself in the workplace, what violence and “harassment mean, who to turn to if you are a victim and how to stay safe from online and offline harassment”

A participant in the workshop



In the context of a patriarchal society, where most Senegalese women are excluded from the decision-making processes within their communities, a significant increase in violence towards women has been noted. In fact, despite very strong legal measures for equity and gender equality introduced in the country, women journalists still experience violence or threats in the performance of their duties. These attacks include harassment, stigmatization, cyber-sexism, sexist hate speech, physical assault, rape and deepfake which happen both inside and outside their workplace, especially during the electoral period or massive protests.

In this serious context for women journalists in the country, and in line with the organisation's gender action plan, RSF decided to support the URAC and the RIF to provide a capacity building workshop on security for female journalists and professionals of community radios.

A three-day training session was delivered on June 23-25 to 26 female journalists and media professionals from Senegalese community radios.

The topics covered were:

- ✓ **Specific security issues of Senegalese women journalists**
- ✓ **Protection mechanisms against gender-based violence (GBV)**
- ✓ **Cyber-harassment and security in the workplace**
- ✓ **Gender representation in Senegalese media outlets**

The training contributed to equip the participants with techniques and tools to identify GBV and cyber-harassment and protect themselves against those attacks both online and in the workplace.

The survey aiming at evaluating the long-term impact of the capacity building initiative showed very positive results. **100% of the respondents declared having improved their knowledge of the topics addressed and having changed their practices at work after attending the training**, namely regarding the techniques on how to secure data and protect themselves against gender-based attacks. These results showed the importance of providing a safe space for discussion to women journalists, especially when

addressing very sensitive topics like gender-based violence. Moreover, all respondents declared having already shared the training's materials and content learnt with their colleagues and network which clearly shows the multiplier effect of this type of training.

The inclusive approach that characterised the training was a key success factor of this important capacity-building activity. The use of both French and Wolof languages was a determining element to keep the participants' motivation high and ensure that they attended all training sessions.

To better identify the needs on the field to be addressed during the training, RSF relied on the Union of Associative and Community radios of Senegal (URAC) and Senegalese section of the International Network of Women, (RIF). This partnership allowed RSF to **access the local network of the two organisations which brings together all the women working from 125 Senegalese community radios**. The partnership with URAC helped to easily select and contact the participants to the training, who were the most motivated women journalists and professionals from the community radios.





# Success story

## Strengthening legal and psychosocial support for women victims of violence in southwest Morocco

A women-led grassroots organisation was able to strengthen the operational capacity of its counselling centre for women victims of violence in the region of Guelmim Oued Noun.



During the Covid-19 lockdown, local feminist organisations recorded a significant increase in cases of domestic violence in Morocco where women were subjected to various forms of exploitation and abuse and the deterioration of their psychological, economic, and social conditions. In the region of Guelmim-Oued Noun, reported cases of violence have increased almost tenfold. In the absence of additional resources allocated in a timely manner, the local women's rights movement was reportedly unable to address this rise in psychological and legal support needed for women victims of violence.

Thanks to timely support from the EMHRF for the recruitment of a social worker and a legal

advisor, the feminist grassroots organisation was able to strengthen its operational capacity to respond to the protection needs of 75 women victims of violence in its listening centre, 10 of whom were able to assert their rights through court cases related to eviction from their homes, civil status, accusations of family neglect and physical violence. The organisation also decided to strengthen awareness-raising and training initiatives to inform vulnerable populations, especially women and girls, about their rights and the fight against gender discrimination and harassment in the economic, social, and digital spheres by organising six workshops for 126 people, 90% of whom were women from the Guelmim region.

Thanks to the support of the EMHRF, the feminist grassroots organisation has been able to respond to the growing need for protection of women victims of violence that would not otherwise have been met in southwest Morocco. As a result of this support, and thanks to the quality of the work recognised by the beneficiary communities and local institutions, the association was able to obtain additional support from the National Agency for the Fight against Illiteracy, the National Delegation for Cooperation and a like-minded EMHRF partner, the Mediterranean Women's Fund. This support has enabled the association to extend the scope of its action in favour of women victims of violence, marginalisation and exclusion, through the creation of cooperatives to ensure the financial independence of women in difficult situations.



## An unprecedented effort to support those at higher risk



This year, ProtectDefenders.eu has concentrated its mobilisation of resources in an unprecedented way to respond to the needs of defenders working in the most difficult countries in the world, and towards those groups of defenders considered to be particularly targeted: women human rights defenders, LGBTI+ human rights defenders, Environmental, land, and indigenous peoples' rights defenders, human rights defenders operating in a territory in conflict, and defenders from remote and less connected areas.

In fact, for the first time since the creation of the EU HRD mechanism, a record 91% of beneficiaries belonged to these categories or came from those countries considered to be of particular concern. Towards them, there has been a constant effort to better coordinate efforts and programmes, in order to ensure that a large number of the most at-risk HRDs benefit from the EU HRD mechanism.

Furthermore, 28% of the HRDs receiving direct grant-making support identify themselves

as isolated defenders, living in remote areas significantly far from major social, economic, and political centres, or in places lacking adequate communication and transportation infrastructure. Additionally, there has been a considerable increase in the number of supported defenders and groups previously not connected to any protection instrument or international solidarity.

This level of prioritisation of support and outreach is understood not only as the consolidation of a mandate focused on those HRDs who are most targeted, but also as reflecting the acute need for prioritisation in a context in which demands for support are much greater than the available resources. In addition, it shows the critical situation that the most vulnerable defenders face in their communities. However, such a high prioritisation of resources also implies that defenders not within these categories might be struggling to receive the support necessary to continue their vital work, despite also being at risk.





# Success story

## Outreach to at-risk HRDs in Zimbabwe

Front Line Defenders' Protection Coordinator conducted a field mission in Chiadzwa and Penhalonga, remote areas in Zimbabwe affected by human rights violations, to meet with W/HRDs and civil society actors and better understand their protection needs.



In September 2021, FLD's Protection Coordinator (PC) travelled to Zimbabwe to meet with HRDs in Chiadzwa and Penhalonga, areas affected by the extractive industry – specifically diamond and gold mining. Since the mid-2000s, Chiadzwa has become a magnet for illegal diamond smuggling and trading. In response, the government deployed the military to crack down on informal mining. However, increased militarisation has led to serious human rights violations including forced labour, child labour and killings of community members. In the Manicaland Province, opencast gold mining has led to environmental degradation and the destruction and invasion of local farmers and indigenous peoples' lands.

The outreach mission allowed FLD's Protection Coordinator to travel outside of the capital and meet with a range of actors including indigenous people's rights defenders, environmental defenders, WHRDs and other local actors including mineworkers unions and labour rights defenders, resident/communal associations, and research initiatives and to better understand the range of threats and risks that HRDs are facing in this region, and their different protection needs.

The FLD PC identified follow-up support priorities with HRDs including a protection grant for a HRD at risk, which is at the final stage of approval. Since the mission, the PC has referred HRDs at risk to the regional Digital Protection Coordinator and the Security Advisor for physical and digital

security support and anticipates further requests for protection support. HRDs expressed ongoing appreciation for the support from FLD, particularly over the past two years in the context of the pandemic. During the mission, we also received the good news of the acquittal of the Masvingo 9; HRDs who had been charged with "intent to promote public violence" and on whose case FLD had advocated.

The PC met with some embassies in the capital who have taken an interest in HRDs working on governance, rights to public services and trade unions and will continue to engage with them on the role they can play concerning the protection of HRDs.

This mission reinforced the importance of FLD's mandate to reach out to the most excluded and hard to reach HRDs. Remote based community HRDs expressed how they feel isolated and excluded due to the tendency of international actors to only support and engage with city-based HRDs. Rural HRDs, who may not always self-identify as HRDs, are at the forefront of defending communities' rights against powerful business and political interests but receive very little support. These HRDs were surprised that an international organisation was there to listen to them, acknowledge their work and offer protection support. The mission enabled us to expand our HRD network in the country, strengthen our protection work, and ensure that our international advocacy on business and human rights is informed by contexts like Zimbabwe.

# Success story

## Relocation of Sudanese LGBTIQ+ HRD

A Sudanese LGBTIQ+ HRD living in exile in Egypt worked towards having the death penalty in Sudan lifted for people suspected of having same-sex relationships. His contribution led to the formal lifting of the death penalty for people in same-sex relationships but started receiving threats because of his work. The severity of the threats resulted in his relocation out of Sudan to Egypt.



Between 2015 and 2016, he volunteered with Gederef University Student Association (GUMSA) to build capacities of Sudanese LGBTIQ+ community on sexual health and on understanding the scope of the concept of Queer by members of the LGBTIQ+ Community, within a highly religious Sudanese society. In 2018, he set up the Sudanese Gay Assembly, one of the vocal Sudanese Organizations defending the rights of members of the sexual minority fraternity in Sudan, and a strong advocate for reforms integrating gender inclusiveness, fairness, and tolerance vis-à-vis the sexual minority fraternity.

He pursued the goal of achieving a strong LGBTIQ+ movement in Sudanese society through virtual capacity building on tools to deal with social resistance from the religious brotherhood and members of radical Islam, ad hoc confidential meetings with the identified members of the LGBTIQ+ community in Khartoum-Sudan. The overall purpose of the online engagements was to strengthen the Queer movement in Sudan amidst hostilities targeting sexual minority groups from conservative actors in the Sudanese society.

Irahman Elkheir mentioned Fabo Elbaradei's work contributed to the lifting of the death penalty for people suspected of same-sex relationships. This decision was welcomed with satisfaction by rights groups. However, Fabo ElBaradei faced severe threats after an interview he gave to the UK-based online media Reuters media on his analysis of the lifting of the death penalty by the Sudanese transitional government. Threats against him intensified so much that on 31st January 2020 he fled to Cairo-Egypt for his security. DefendDefenders provided him with both financial

and technical support as a contribution to his safe relocation to, and integration in Cairo-Egypt.

Fabo Elbaradei received support from ProtectDefenders.eu through DefendDefenders at a moment he was facing critical security threats and challenges triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic which contributed to his failure to integrate into Cairo-Egypt. DefendDefenders' intervention which was designed after a thorough risk assessment of Fabo's situation encompassed safe communication, safe transport, safe housing, and a stipend used to cover the cost of meals, medication, and other living expenses. The immediate result was his ability to recover safely within a short period of time.

Fago Elbaradei was safe in Cairo-Egypt. Following the emergency DefendDefenders/ProtectDefenders.eu intervention, he was able to re-organize coordination of actions of the organization Sudanese Gay Association he was leading from his safe house in Cairo, and he was able to keep safe by following DefendDefenders security guidelines.

In the assessment of protection requests, considerations related to the effects of the Covid19 pandemic on HRD's ability to be risk-free and self-reliant were key. Special focus was also put on gender and health-specific vulnerabilities. The identification of psychosocial needs of an HRD seeking protection support called for immediate action. Guidelines on basic safety and security standard operating procedures in physical security, digital safety and wellbeing are shared with HRDs as soon as interactions between the protection program and the HRD kicks off.

# Success story

## Supporting Honduran fisherfolk leader in accessing security grant and relocation

Through collaboration with Consortium partners, a remotely-based Honduran fisherfolk leader was able to secure a temporary relocation and protection for his house after receiving death threats.



In June 2021, a Honduran fisherfolk leader, based in a remote fishing village, was threatened by a man that came to his house. The man told him to watch his back and that he would kill him if he saw him in the street. He was convinced that these threats came as a result of the Fisherfolk leader's opposition to industrial fish farms that undermine the livelihoods of small-scale artisanal fisherfolk in the area. Fisherfolk communities have been under pressure from industrial farms, environmental degradation and recent COVID-19 restrictions preventing them from fishing to provide for their families. ESCR-Net and Front Line Defenders collaborated with the HRD to find potential solutions to the immediate threats he is facing.

The HRD was able to relocate temporarily within Honduras with part of his family to get respite from the immediate threats he had received as a result of his human rights work. On more long-term security, a security grant was given to provide security measures for his house including a video camera and strengthening of his doors and windows.

The temporary relocation and security grant have led to an immediate and substantial improvement in the material security of the HRD. By being able to leave his hometown

for a few weeks, he was taken out of the dangerous situation and given some respite with his family. Nonetheless, the threat persists and while he was away, his 14-year-old son was attacked and beaten.

ESCR-Net reached out to fellow Consortium partner Front Line Defenders, and together, initiated the process of identifying ways to support the HRD. ESCR-Net accompanied the HRD in the process and supported with strategizing and facilitating the contact to Front Line Defenders with whom the HRD had no previous contact. ESCR-Net facilitated interpretation support for a call between the HRD and a protection expert from Front Line Defenders to think of security measures to be taken at the HRDs home.

A general observation of lessons learned relates to the importance of accompanying HRDs in the process related to engaging with protection mechanisms. Often HRDs are under a lot of pressure and may not be in the best mental space to make decisions about their security. It is often useful for them to have someone to strategize with and think of potential solutions, even if only temporary ones. At times, HRDs are also too humble or perhaps concerned that asking for too much will lead to them being denied any support.







# Programmes

PROTECT**DEFENDERS**.EU



# 2022



# Protection grants

Urgent material and financial support to respond to security threats



During 2021, ProtectDefenders.eu allocated **450 protection grants** for human rights defenders and organisations facing urgent threats and risks. The grant-making under this programme has continued to operate in a flexible and responsive way, in order to provide comprehensive support to the different needs of HRDs at risk. Furthermore, this programme absorbed the demand for extreme and urgent material support from the community of defenders. In the context of the pandemic and the aggravated situation for HRDs in many countries, ProtectDefenders.eu has continued to concentrate resources around financial and emergency support programmes.

Emergency grants have been allocated in **66 different countries, across all regions**. The countries of origin of the highest number of defenders supported were Belarus, Myanmar, Uganda, Afghanistan, Tanzania, the Russian Federation, and Syria. The emergence of Belarus and Myanmar at the top of the grant-making list is a reflection of the dire crisis faced by HRDs from these countries during 2021. Focusing on the ProtectDefenders.eu mandate towards those who are most at risk, the supported defenders and groups developed their work in a wide array of fields related to the promotion and protection of human rights; however, the highest number of grants were mobilised to organisations working on freedom of expression, democracy and elections,

021



**450**  
protection grants



**714**

human rights defenders, including:



**341**

WHRDs and other gender and sex minoritised groups



**49**

grassroots groups accessing urgent protection

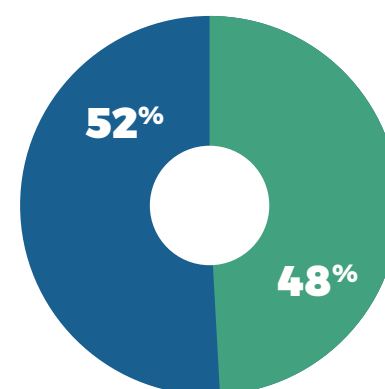


**354**

families receiving urgent protection support

women's rights, and LGBTI rights. The provision of emergency grants has allowed defenders to take immediate action to increase their safety on the ground, enabling them to continue their work while feeling safer. In several cases and in view of the threats faced, if no emergency support had been provided, the defenders would have had to leave the area to save their lives and the lives of their families.

In 2021, the **multidimensional approach of the support** granted has been reinforced, since a significant part of the grants has been used to implement more than one protection measure. As in previous years, emergency relocation has been the preferred protection measure, as it allows defenders to quickly leave an area when their security and integrity are most at risk. Therefore, **relocation** ranks as the most frequently requested type of support when it comes to emergency measures provided this year. This measure is carried out only when there are no viable options to mitigate imminent threats at home.



● Emergency support  
● General protection

**40%**  
Emergency relocation

**10%**  
Medical support

**8%**  
ICT equipment / Digital security

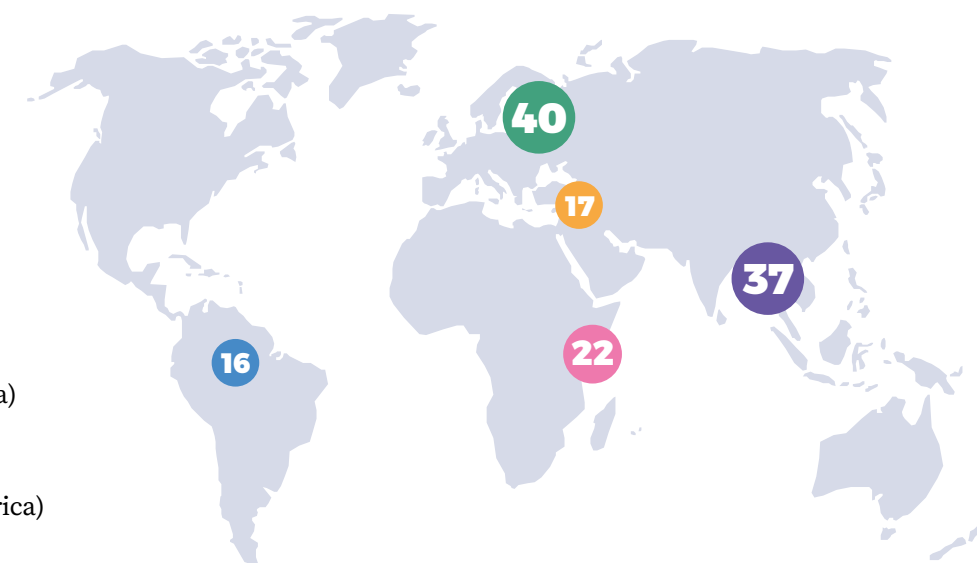
**7%**  
Legal support

**6%**  
Family support

**5%**  
Psychosocial support

Top countries per region:

- Belarus (Europe and Central Asia)
- Myanmar (Asia)
- Uganda (Africa)
- Syria (Middle East and North Africa)
- Colombia & Brazil (Americas)



Moreover, ProtectDefenders.eu has continued providing emergency grants to human rights defenders and organisations facing lengthy judicial procedures to **cover legal fees** or pay for appropriate support from a lawyer. Furthermore, ensuring access to **medical care** and rehabilitation, including psychological rehabilitation, has remained a priority, as human rights defenders face physical attacks, torture, assaults, and situations that can be detrimental to their physical and mental health. Within medical support, ProtectDefenders.eu also gives high priority to **psychological support** and rehabilitation from torture.

When delivering emergency support, there has been a **growing disparity** between the number of eligible requests and the available resources, as well as an **exponential increase in contacts through the ProtectDefenders.eu** single-entry points. Furthermore, this year ProtectDefenders.eu concentrated an unprecedented level of resources **around country emergencies and considerably reinforced internal and external coordination efforts** to enable more efficient responses.

## Medical assistance and support to the regional relocation of a Cameroonian HRD who was subjected to acts of torture

Since November 2020, the OMCT in the framework of ProtectDefenders.eu has been accompanying the Cameroonian human rights defender Japheth Mbankuh in his rehabilitation process after being the victim of the most horrendous abuses.

In September 2020, Japheth Mbankuh, a human rights defender engaged in the investigation and documentation of abuses perpetrated by the military forces and the separatists in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, was captured by the military and transported to their offices, where he was subjected to acts of torture. Two days later, he was given to the BIR military unit (bataillon d'intervention rapide), along with others who were captured, to be killed. While being transported to an unknown area, they were attacked by separatist fighters. Several BIR officers and other passengers were killed. Japheth Mbankuh and other surviving passengers were transported to the separatist camp where a captured military officer exposed his work. He was again severely beaten and threatened to death. Japheth Mbankuh was ultimately released on September 24, 2020. He subsequently left Cameroon to seek refuge in Ghana. He was suffering from fractures in his knee and multiple other injuries resulting from the acts of torture he was subjected to during his detention. Thanks to ProtectDefenders.eu's emergency grants programme, he was able to receive urgent medical attention and to remain safely in Ghana. At the time, his wife was pregnant and could not join him in Accra. Thanks to the OMCT's grant, she was able to relocate to Douala with their two children to be less at risk of reprisals for her husband's human rights activities. Nevertheless, she continued receiving several threatening messages and calls. The OMCT, therefore, renewed its support to Japheth Mbankuh for him to continue receiving medical support

after his knee surgery as well as to allow for his family reunification in Ghana.

In May 2021, after the birth of their third child, the family was able to reunite in Accra. Moreover, the grant covered the costs related to the HRD's knee surgery and subsequent treatments he had to undergo.

The OMCT remained in close contact with the defender and could therefore follow the progress in the situation of the defender who showed incredible resilience and was even able to partially continue his work from abroad.

It is very difficult for a human rights defender, who must urgently leave his country due to serious threats, to relocate without their family, it tends to aggravate their psychological distress. Therefore, the OMCT has increased its efforts in recent years to include as often as possible a component dedicated to family support in its individual grant-giving programme.



## A Woman Human Rights Defender and her three children resettled in Turkey can focus on strengthening feminist networks inside and outside Syria

A 35-year-old Syrian WHRD facing security threats for denouncing the detention of her family member and gender-based violence by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in the northern Idlib governorate in Syria received support to cover her family's temporary relocation, education, legal and basic needs in southern Turkey allowing her to pursue her women's rights activities.

In late 2018, the WHRD denounced her brother's arrest by the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group. She was intimidated to stop posting about it on her social media accounts. After her brother was released three months later, he told her that she was threatened by the HTS group because of her activities promoting and defending women's rights. Fearing for her family's safety, she relocated with her family to the northern countryside of Aleppo governorate, in February 2019, with initial support from the EMHRF, where she continued her women's rights work in cooperation with local civil society initiatives. However, due to the deteriorating security situation in Afrin, she moved again with her family to the city of Selqin in the Idlib governorate in June. From Selqin, she continued her human rights activism but had to leave for Turkey due to the violent context and recurrent threats in northern Syria.

The support from the EMHRF was crucial to allow her to stabilise her family circumstances in Turkey. It enabled her to pursue her children's education and to cover the healthcare needs of her eldest son who suffered from hyperthyroidism. She also secured a temporary protection document for her family. Feeling relieved, she could then focus on pursuing her human rights activism, taking part in campaigns promoting women's rights and peacebuilding and supporting

the formation of a network of feminists and rights defenders in northern Syria. She joined the Syrian Women's Political Movement and was later appointed as a leading member of a newly founded and the first woman-led Syrian opposition party, the Syrian Liberal Party (Ahrar Party).

The WHRD was cast in a documentary film "Her Stories" documenting the stories of three great Syrian women who during the Syrian revolution rose against the challenges and hardships to create a lasting change, supported by Heinrich Böll Stiftung Middle East in collaboration with a Syrian filmmaker. The documentary film was screened at the OFFA festival in Canada in June 2021. However, her financial situation remains unstable, and she fears for her family's safety in Turkey in the long term due to increasing hostile speech and discrimination against Syrian refugees.



## 24/7 assistance to HRDs at high risk

ProtectDefenders.eu has continued to provide **24/7 support to human rights defenders facing immediate risk** through, among other channels, an emergency helpline (+353 (0) 1 21 00 489 and Skype) run by Front Line Defenders. This hotline provides an emergency communication system through which HRDs can request immediate assistance and mobilise rapid international support and action. Moreover, the functioning of this hotline is complemented and enriched by the operability and constant availability of Front Line Defenders **protection coordinators**, including those based outside the headquarters in each world region. The **Secretariat of ProtectDefenders.eu also plays a key role in ensuring a quick response** to the needs and requests of people who contact ProtectDefenders.eu through any of its centralised methods (**telephone, e-mail, single-entry points, general contact, and social media**).

Due to the **ever-increasing visibility of ProtectDefenders.eu**, the requests received come from a wide array of countries and contexts, although they can be seen as a reflection of the evolution of trends in the field. The top countries of origin of requests from defenders have been Afghanistan, Colombia and the DRC, although the emergency of the Afghanistan crisis is expected to lead to a record number of requests for support, which had already dramatically increased by the end of 2021.

The Secretariat and Front Line Defenders have maintained this help-desk, accessible in five languages, providing direct security advice and guidance to **more than 3,600 individuals from across the world**.





# Funding to local organisations and communities

Financial support, including core-funding to at-risk organisations, groups and communities

With this grant-making programme, ProtectDefenders.eu provides financial support to grassroots organisations and local groups facing severe restrictions in the most difficult contexts in the world. In 2021, ProtectDefenders.eu supported **104 grassroots civil society organisations** – a record number for this programme – through a multidimensional approach and multi-purpose grant-making.

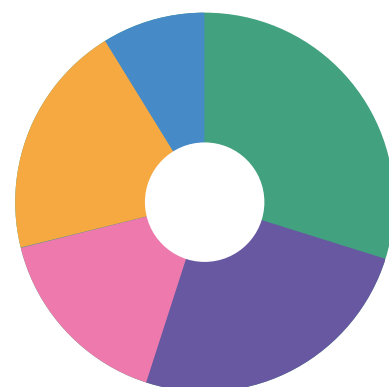
This increased funding has become necessary due to the **exacerbated risk generated by COVID-19 and country crises**, demanding greater commitment and support to organisations and communities. This support has provided a lifeline to many who face risks due to the shrinking space for civil society. Through direct material support and financial support, this programme has also enabled organisations to carry out advocacy actions, monitoring and fact-finding initiatives, and to reinforce their security and capacities.



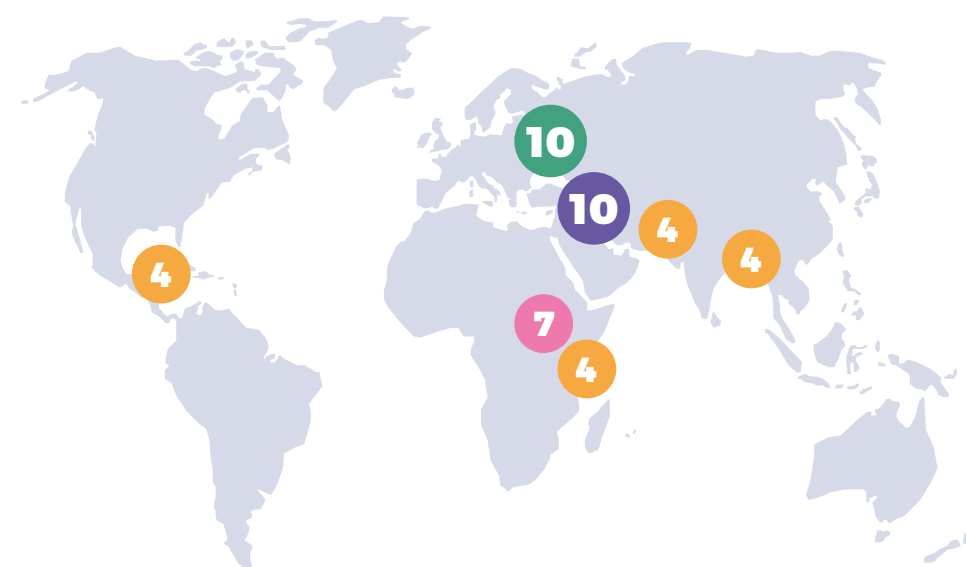
grants to local organisations allocated, supporting at least 2,150 human rights defenders



MENA **30%**  
 Africa **25%**  
 Asia and the Pacific Region **16%**  
 Americas **20%**  
 Europe and Central Asia **9%**



## Funding to local organisations and communities



Countries with highest number of granted organisations:

- Israel and the OPT
- Syria
- Uganda
- Afghanistan, Uganda, Tanzania, Myanmar, and Honduras

## Type of grant (core-funding, seed funding, specific project, training...):

Advocacy & campaign and networking capacities: main or secondary purpose of

**60%**

of the total number of grants

Lifeline support: main or secondary purpose of

**33%**

of the total number of grants

Monitoring, reporting & fact-finding activities: main or secondary purpose of

**26%**

of the total number of grants

Reinforcement of the security set-up of the organisation: main or secondary purpose of

**35%**

of the total number of grants

# Success story

## Strengthening the investment and leadership capacity of young Libyan activists and journalists

A Libyan HRD organisation has consolidated its structure to build the capacity and learning of Libyan youth to research and communicate on local human rights issues, and to be a force for democratic and human rights change in Libya.

The objectives of the HRD organisation are to promote respect for freedom of expression and human rights, to transmit the voices of marginalised populations and to empower journalists as key actors for democratic change in Libya. It was able to operate in Libya from July 2011 and register in Tripoli in 2012. However, the kidnapping of the association's president, and the subsequent relocation of most of the association's members, led to the cessation of its activities in Libya. While undertaking serious efforts to reshape its strategic priorities in light of its experience and the needs of local beneficiaries and the context in Libya in 2019, it faced significant security and banking obstacles, in addition to the withdrawal of donors from Libya, to consolidate and restart its activities in Libya. The EMHRF thus allocated an operational grant aimed at allowing the HRD organisation to restart its human rights activities while registering abroad for sustainability purposes.

With the operational support of the EMHRF, the organisation continued its work to disseminate the culture of democracy and human rights among young Libyan activists and journalists, while registering a structure in Europe to ensure its sustainability. The organisation organised a digital storytelling workshop in Yefren, from 24 to 28 February 2021, for the benefit of 10 young local activists, including 3 women, to raise their awareness of the relevance of producing a compelling story for digital use, based on real and verified human rights concerns, to influence their communities to act accordingly.

The association also organised a training workshop in Tripoli and Benghazi from 7 to 11 March 2021 to equip young journalists with investigative skills on human rights issues, benefiting 17 beneficiaries, including 11 women.

It is difficult to measure the impact of the grant at this stage due to the unstable context and the recent resumption of its activities in Libya. That said, given the considerable obstacles faced by local human rights actors in Libya, maintaining autonomous spaces of expression and capacity development to engage and report on human rights issues facing the population remains fundamental to opening prospects for democracy and human rights change, particularly in light of some stabilisation and the elections scheduled for December 2021. The themes chosen by the participants, including women's rights to participate in social and political life, illustrate the importance of maintaining these spaces for the engagement of young actors of change in Libya. Thanks to the quality of the work carried out, the follow-up and the constant follow-up by the EMHRF, the organisation has received assurances of future collaboration from the International Center for Transitional Justice.

The EMHRF Board and staff members have closely followed up on the organisation before and during the partnership to assist it in reshaping its strategic priorities taking into account its experience and the needs of local beneficiaries, and structuring its operations in a more efficient and sustainable manner.



# Success story

## Physicians for Human Rights Israel (PHRI) advocates at the Supreme Court of Israel to revise policies that lead to separating of Palestinian children from mothers when they leave Gaza

UAF supported an advocacy initiative of an Israeli physicians' group to request the Supreme Court of Israel to revise policies that separate Palestinian children from mothers when they leave the Gaza Strip for medical treatment. There was a momentum to push for such a change due to the upcoming review of the status of children in Israel by the UN Committee on the Right of the Child (CRC).

Through PHRI's casework, they sought to identify specific stories of child separation on which to base principled appeals to both Israeli courts and duty bearers. PHRI wanted to increase its outreach to local partners. This outreach aimed to shift the IPA's government-aligned stance and influence Israeli government policy. Potential partners included child rights organizations, such as UNICEF Israel and Israel National Council for the Child, other medical associations whose focus reflects the medical needs of children exiting Gaza for treatment. This includes e.g., the Israeli Cardiology Association, the Israeli Association for Gynaecologists and Obstetricians and the Israel Cancer Association. Likewise, PHRI sought to engage local feminist groups, such as Isha le Isha, to harness their support. The results of this outreach would feed into and magnify PHRI's submission of an alternative report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Palestinian hospitals in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, where minors from Gaza normally travel for treatment, reported to PHRI in late April that they are seeing a considerable positive shift in the numbers of children who are accompanied by their parents. In East Jerusalem's al Makassed hospital, only 3 out of 28 children were accompanied by family members who were not their parents. Other hospitals, such as al Najah hospital in the West Bank, reported no new cases in April. We believe that this change was a direct result of the appeals to local and international medical associations, and

their appeals to the Israeli Pediatrics Association and Ministry of Health, who felt pressure because of international attention. As such, although the Israeli Pediatric Association did not officially change its public stance, the impact of lobbying still served to mitigate this human rights violation.

It is unclear whether this trend will continue beyond the snapshot reported to PHRI in April, though a conversation with the Augusta Victoria hospital in East Jerusalem in early July, confirmed that there were no cases of child separation at present. To monitor this issue, PHRI has submitted a Freedom of Information request to the Ministry of Defence to analyse the development in the ongoing numbers.

The organisation has asked for further advocacy to reach out to the Israeli Ministry of Health and the Israeli Paediatric Association to ask them to ensure that all children exit Gaza accompanied by their parents, including urging the Israeli paediatric Association to take a public stance on this matter.



# Temporary relocation grants

Human rights defenders in the most difficult contexts and facing immediate risks, and their families when needed, have accessed comprehensive and enhanced shelter and temporary relocation programmes

In 2021, ProtectDefenders.eu allocated **66 grants** under the Temporary Relocation Programme to **69 human rights defenders** at risk, in close partnership with host institutions worldwide. Grants continued to provide support to the family members who remained in the country of residence, or facilitated their relocation together with the defender for **82 family members** in total. The average duration of the temporary relocations funded by ProtectDefenders.eu was **7 months** and the **majority of the relocations continued to take place in EU countries**. Nonetheless, **visa processing has taken even longer than before, including for EU countries**, and the pandemic has been repeatedly used as a pretext to refuse visas for HRDs. Human rights defenders applying to temporary relocation programmes have faced **additional challenges** in their local environment, linked to various measures against COVID-19 maintained by their respective governments – on top of the backlash HRDs have faced in several countries. Despite various operational challenges at the level of the secretariat as well as the whole consortium, the programme has remained fully operational and has fully allocated its yearly budget. ProtectDefenders.eu has continued to pay special attention in applying a **gender lens during the**

02.3



69

69 HRDs receiving support to temporarily relocate



151

individuals receiving support as part of temporary relocation programmes (including family members)

73%

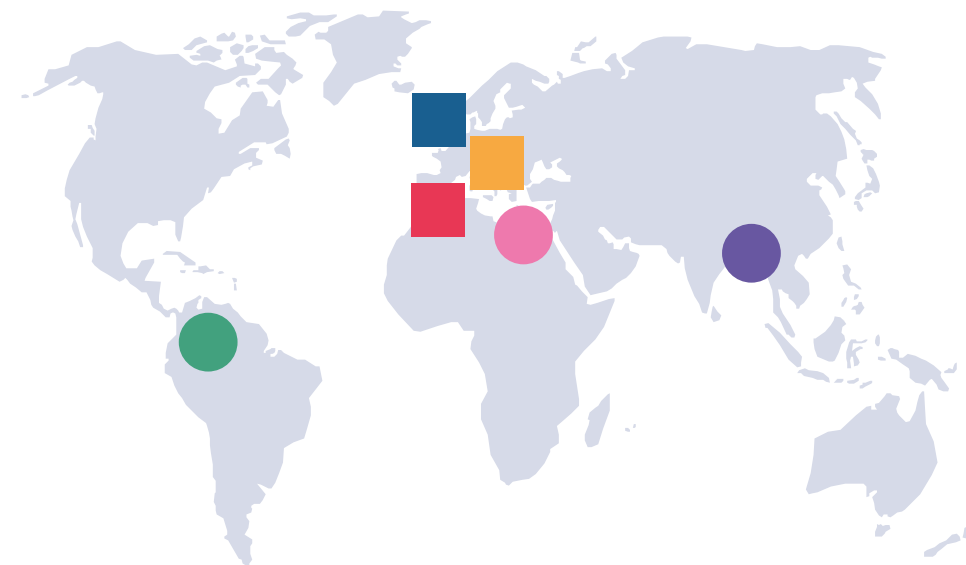
international relocations

27%

at the regional level

**whole cycle** of the grant management process: for instance, using gender-sensitive language or proactively asking questions about different needs (such as support of children, or psychological support for gender-based violence survivors or HRDs who have experienced trauma due to their sexual orientation and gender identity) so that the relocation programme can address these specific needs. Furthermore, the **psychological and medical needs** of the defenders remain an integral part of the support, and psychosocial support is considered an important tool, especially when accompanied by capacity-building training to help defenders regain confidence in their work, and overcome tense and stressful periods. This support also includes offering counselling services to help defenders plan their future work or return to their country of origin more strategically, taking into account the risks they face.

Moreover, ProtectDefenders.eu remained in **close and flexible contact with the HRDs** benefiting from the Temporary Relocation Programme and the host organisations assisting the relocated defenders. While study visits and face-to-face meetings were not organised due to the ongoing pandemic, pilot online beneficiaries' meetings with TR grantees took place in 2021. On one occasion, ProtectDefenders.eu convened relocated **defenders from Colombia** (the country of origin of the highest number of TR grantees year after year) to share and discuss their relocation experience during a two-hour call. During another meeting, **women rights defenders** discussed the **gendered aspects of the protection and their temporary relocation programmes**. **These spaces generated interesting synergies, provided an opportunity for mutual sharing, networking, and the development of solidarity**, and gave ProtectDefenders.eu valuable first-hand **insights into the TR programme**.



Top countries of origin:

- Colombia
- Myanmar
- Egypt

Top countries of relocation:

- Germany
- The Netherlands
- Spain

“The temporary relocation changed the nature of my human rights defender work from direct work in the field with people to doing research and writing articles and conducting virtual events. Covid-19 pandemic gave the opportunity to learn more about online activism and improve my online research skills.”

“When returning to my community, government officials realised that human rights defenders had supporters such as the European Union and other organisations, and that they should not directly threaten or harass human rights activists.”

“My colleagues and I gained knowledge and skills within the host organisation and wider feminist activists' network in the country of relocation, incorporated it into event curricula to make it accessible and useful for more women's rights defenders.”

“It is great to have possibility not only to rest and relax but also to meet people to learn new skills and knowledge that is important to improve personal and work capacity and effectiveness back home, and to change my approaches to importance of self-care and well-being for work and activism.”

“Thanks for the temporary relocation, I have become more willing to re-engage advocacy and lend my skill-set to the organisation. I was fearful before the programme, but have since committed to supporting the team, though not on the front line.”

“With this relocation, I extended my activism online by reaching out to the fellow countrymen and women who were being subjected to harsh situations by the regime.”

## Success story

### Support to a Woman Human Rights Defender in Afghanistan still facing threats after her relocation

Fatema Jafari, a woman human rights defender in Afghanistan, was relocated to The Netherlands after her visa in Italy expired. Due to the numerous threats she was still facing in her country, she could not return to Afghanistan and had to apply for asylum in The Netherlands.



Since 2011, Fatema Jafari, a woman human rights defender from Afghanistan, has constantly fought against corruption and women's rights. Her activism in Afghanistan has led her to have international recognition. In April 2012, she was invited to the U.S. for the International Visitors Leadership Program. She later participated in two prestigious fellowships in the United States, the Reagan Fascell Fellowship at National Endowment for Democracy, and the Maurice R. Greenberg World Fellowship at Yale University in 2016. Following these experiences, she wrote a book entitled: "Women political participation in Afghanistan".

Given her human rights work, she suffered multiple attacks and threats by violent groups related to the Taliban. Due to this situation, in August 2019, ProtectDefenders.eu allocated her a grant under the Temporary Relocation Programme. The WHRD was relocated to Florence, Italy with the European University Institute (EUI), where she started a fellowship for Policy Leaders, allowing her to participate in executive training seminars organised by the School of Transnational Governance and in English courses. These activities increased her capacity, strengthened her work against corruption in Afghanistan and spread her work among civil society organisations, universities, and other stakeholders.

As a result of the political instability, the terror, and insecurity in Afghanistan, her return would have made her face considerable risks. It became necessary to find other relocation alternatives. After several attempts to get a visa in different countries (including a rejection in Ireland), she finally obtained one in The Netherlands, where she applied for asylum. She has studied gender and policies at Radboud University. The grant included support for her husband and children to adapt to a new environment and tackle the experienced traumas suffered in the past.

The WHRD did not report any security incidents since she established herself in Europe. She has continued writing articles in local newspapers, holding webinars and other commitments related to her human rights work. The support she received allowed Fatema and her family to alleviate their stress. The WHRD can continue working for women's rights in Afghanistan without the pressure of threats and possible attacks.



## Coordination with the EU Temporary Relocation Platform

In 2021, the EUTRP enhanced their internal structure to strengthen trust and knowledge-sharing among its members. New governance by-laws of the platform have been implemented and the membership procedure has been renewed; and, although the acceptance of new members is on hold, there are **at least 20 entities expected to become new members** of the platform. Additionally, the new EUTRP website will be **ready to be launched in early 2022**.

During 2021, efforts were made to facilitate specific activities to **strengthen member capacities and encourage networking**. Some of these activities were addressed to all members, such as the **"Digital Security Month"**, whereas others were designed to fit the needs of specific categories of members within the platform, such as the **"Social Sessions"** and **"Budget & Donors: An honest conversation"**.

## Shelter Initiatives programme

Financial and technical support and accompaniment to organisations for the development and implementation of regional and local temporary relocation programmes

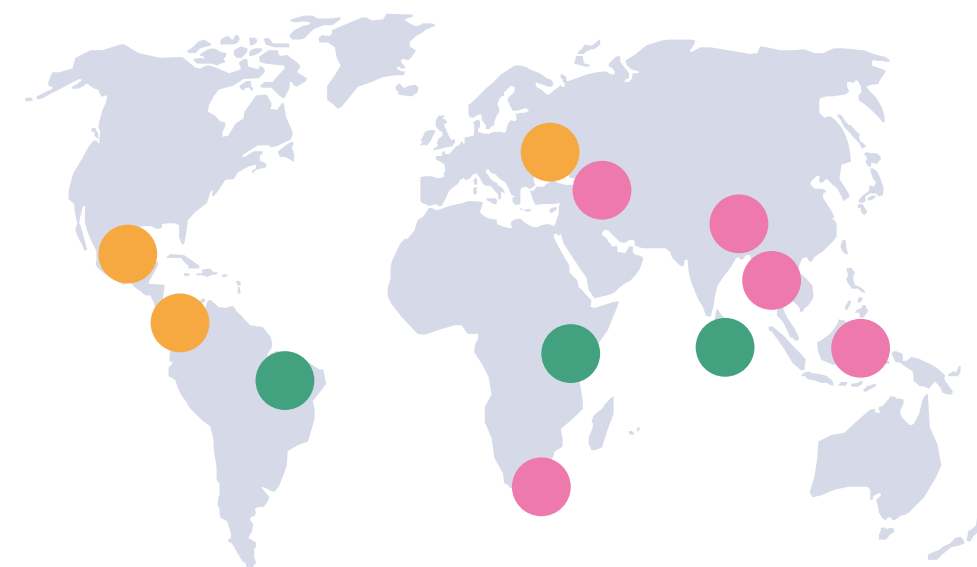
The implementation of the Shelter Initiatives pilot programme was initiated in 2021, and ProtectDefenders.eu has so far supported 12 organisations, grouped around three categories:

**Feasibility research:** Three organisations (from Brazil, Sri Lanka and Tanzania) received funding and started engaging in a technical accompaniment process to support feasibility research to assess if there is a need for HRDs from the country/region to be temporarily relocated, as well as to map other actors working in protection of HRDs, carry out security assessments on the proposed location of a potential shelter, and to start to outline the characteristics of the programme.

**Set-up of new initiatives:** Five organisations from Indonesia, Iraq, Nepal, South Africa, and Thailand have already performed feasibility research and are starting a new temporary relocation programme. During the implementation period, these entities are developing their internal protocols, setting up their staff, receiving the first participants under a pilot modality, assessing how the hosting of the first participants is working and implementing the necessary adjustments on a rolling basis.

**Support to existing initiatives:** Four already-established entities providing temporary relocation from Costa Rica, Georgia, and Mexico are working on strengthening their current projects by improving their infrastructure, offering capacity-building to their teams, or developing new protocols, among other measures.

- Feasibility research: Brazil, Sri Lanka and Tanzania
- New Initiatives: Indonesia, Iraq, Nepal, South Africa, and Thailand
- Support to existing initiatives: Costa Rica, Georgia, and Mexico





## Strengthening the resilience of HRDs through capacity development

Tailored training enabling HRDs and communities to work safely and covering physical security; digital security; well-being; mutual learning and experience sharing; and the use of advocacy and communications as protection strategies.



In 2021, ProtectDefenders.eu continued to implement a capacity development programme of activities, which aims at **reinforcing the protection skills of HRDs and human rights communities.**

As a result of the training, defenders can draft security plans, and implement new security measures (physical, digital) and approaches (on campaigning, advocacy or psychosocial accompaniment) in their organisations. Some of the initiatives included follow-up sessions to reinforce the implementation of the knowledge gained during the training. Human rights defenders, including groups and communities, reported unanimously that support received via training and capacity-building has increased their skills and tools, enabling them to better manage their security situation and develop their work. Defenders and groups have been able to develop and strengthen protection, support and advocacy networks, as well as engage in strategic activities enabling them to address the restrictive contexts in which they carry out their activities. Training contributed to the improvement of the well-being of HRDs and produced strategies to fight against shrinking space and other challenges faced when conducting human rights work, including work by WHRDs and activists from marginalised communities.



training and capacity development programmes delivered to human rights defenders, communities, groups or organisations



human rights defenders worldwide, with 98% of beneficiaries being considered most-at-risk HRDs, and 72% of them women human rights defenders



countries, with the highest number from the Americas region (37% of activities)



of the activities were mostly focused on the creation of protection mechanisms and risk assessment plans

02.5

## Success story

### Addressing HRDs' psychological well-being to contribute to a more resilient and sustainable human rights movement

During an online workshop, the OMCT engaged with 17 HRDs and experts on psychological support to contribute to a more resilient and sustainable human rights movement.

The first session provided an opportunity for participants to exchange and better understand the short and long-term psychological impacts of the systematic harassment faced by HRDs working in protracted situations of threats and pressures. The discussion focused on the forms of harassment used against HRDs and their organisations, on the psychosocial impacts of witnessing human rights violations and accompanying those who suffer them, as well as on the implications of the mental health issues of HRDs on the sustainability of the human rights movement.

On the second day, participants built upon the needs and challenges identified during the previous session, to collectively identify best practices and strategies in supporting the greater resilience of local civil society activists and empowering them to continue operating in threatening environments. Participants shared their self-care strategies to ensure the well-being of defenders in their respective organisations. They also mentioned the importance of changing the narratives within the human rights community to acknowledge HRDs as people who suffer and have weaknesses, but this does not make them less professional or less skilled.

The specific needs and challenges of WHRDs were further acknowledged.

The two sessions are proof there is a major interest within the human rights community to expand the work reinforcing the resilience of HRDs and their organisations in the face of opposition to continue and sustain their human rights work. All participants were very grateful for having been provided with a safe space to discuss these issues and highly valued the opportunity to exchange experiences and practices from different countries and contexts.

Participants expressed strong interest in continuing and fostering such exchanges regularly. They stressed the importance of remaining engaged in the development of good practices to build the resilience of defenders, of initiatives promoting access to better personal care, psychosocial support and rehabilitation of HRDs, so they can sustain their work amidst such adverse and dangerous environments. Participants also asked the OMCT to work on a compilation of these experiences and good practices in the form of a guide to share with their partners, to be published in 2022.

“It is very important for the team to be able to talk about their personal experience, a very important part to learn how to not deny that we are hurt. Very often people ignore symptoms, deny their fears, and do not recognize themselves as vulnerable. Sometimes that leads to a structural conflict and it is just the tip of the iceberg.”

Yesica Sanchez Maya,  
Consortio Oaxaca (Mexico)



# Success story

## Capacity building of Sikuani indigenous communities on protection issues in the context of the pandemic.



The indigenous communities of Vichada implemented a strengthening strategy (in-person and virtual), which allowed them to increase their knowledge and skills in human rights issues, protection, and advocacy with the accompaniment of PI. Given the mobility restrictions due to COVID-19 and the lack of connectivity experienced by the indigenous communities of La Primavera, PI and the leaders were able to successfully develop the accompaniment of the communities, adapting to the virtual environment for the development of training and advocacy processes for protection.

Thanks to the joint work between the indigenous communities and PI, the women of La Pascua formed their organisation, identified new leadership, and acquired knowledge to strengthen

the defence of their ancestral territories hand in hand with the men. The people of La Llanura reviewed and adjusted their life plan, a key document for cultural and territorial protection, which is the navigation chart for the country's indigenous communities. The Guardia Indígena del Trompillo rebuilt its meeting hut, a safe place within the community, where people can dialogue and meet without fear of being listened to or intimidated by people outside their territory.

PI achieved progress in strengthening the indigenous communities, with new tools that allow them to continue in better conditions of security and protection in their processes of territorial defence against the threats they face due to the interest of external actors in the exploitation of their ancestral territories.

“(...) We have felt accompanied in the midst of the pandemic and we are proud of the training we have been given and we want it to continue, but now also for women and young people, who are the fruit of our people. We are always ready to fight in the face of the incidents that have occurred.”  
El Trompillo indigenous authority, in-person risk analysis workshop, June 4, 2021.



## Fieldwork and accompaniment

Monitoring programmes responding to specific cases of HRDs at risk through fact-finding and field missions; trial monitoring, advocacy missions, prison visits and accompaniment of HRDs



Although the COVID-19 pandemic impacted activities in 2021, imposing limitations on in-person activities, ProtectDefenders.eu continued to **monitor the situation of human rights defenders in the field** and advocated for an enabling protection for human rights defenders at local, regional and international levels. With **24 monitoring, fact-finding, and accompaniment actions in the field**, ProtectDefenders.eu covered a wide range of countries, areas and topics, both thematically and geographically, conducted urgent advocacy, documented human rights violations faced by the defenders, and monitored trials.

With these **missions**, ProtectDefenders.eu documented the detected trends, attracted national, regional and international attention, and started a dialogue with concerned authorities. They also helped to identify defenders at risk, breaking the isolation some were in and connecting them to other support available through ProtectDefenders.eu. Thanks to **judicial observation** during trials, pressure on authorities and mobilisation around cases, ProtectDefenders.eu has seen a positive impact on the situation of HRDs, including the improvement of detention conditions, charges being dropped, and the release on bail of several defenders.

**Finally, field accompaniment activities have reportedly dissuaded potential perpetrators and gave the defenders a feeling of recognition and moral support, helping to maintain the necessary space for them to continue their work in very sensitive conditions.**

# 24

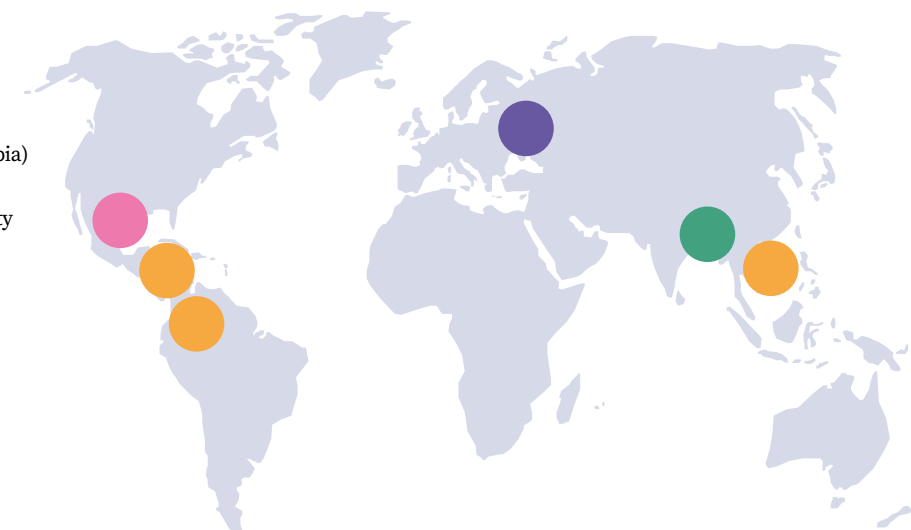
monitoring, fact-finding, and accompaniment actions in the field

Direct support of at least

# 1,099

human rights defenders

- One advocacy mission (to South-East Asia)
- One fact-finding mission (to Mexico)
- 15 field monitoring missions, including accompaniment and judicial observations (in countries such as Honduras, Vietnam and Colombia)
- 7 multi-dimensional field activities, including a meeting with members of Belarusian civil society



# 02.5



## Success story

### Honduras: Conviction in Berta Cáceres' case: a landmark ruling

Through trial observations and statements, FIDH conducted advocacy to ensure an efficient and fair trial in the case of the murder of land and environmental rights defender Berta Cáceres.



On 5 July 2021, military intelligence officer and former executive of hydroelectric company Desarrollos Energéticos (DESA), David Castillo, was sentenced for the 2 March 2016 murder of Lenca leader and indigenous, land and environmental rights defender Berta Cáceres. In its ruling, the court convicted David Castillo as co-perpetrator of the crime and considered that the motive for the murder was to stamp out opposition to the Agua Zarca hydroelectric project by the indigenous communities of Río Blanco, led by Berta Cáceres, as coordinator of the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organisations of Honduras (COPINH).

FIDH had denounced the harassment against Berta Cáceres before she was murdered and never stopped mobilising, demonstrating the strength of the unity and constancy of the different organisations that participated and accompanied the search for justice and truth in this case. FIDH participated, together with other international and Latin American human rights organisations — including FIDH's member organisations such as CAJAR, CALDH and CIPRODEH — in the Qualified Observation Mission in the Case of

Berta Cáceres. This body observed the hearings in the case, published analyses of the hearings and reports on the progress of the process, and issued numerous open letters to the Honduran authorities calling for due process to be respected during the first trial in 2018 against the material authors of Berta's murder, for which seven people were convicted in January 2019.

FIDH carried out a series of trial observations ahead of David Castillo's sentencing (April-June 2021) and issued several urgent appeals, press releases and a series of articles analysing the hearings.

This conviction is a historic ruling in the fight against impunity for the murder of land and environmental defenders in Honduras and highlights the value of defending nature and the rights of indigenous peoples and peasants. It is a precedent that will have to be considered when rendering justice in other cases.

Throughout the more than five years since Berta's murder, FIDH accompanied her family and COPINH in demanding justice for Berta.



## Success story

### Permanent accompaniment to the Association for Research and Social Action - NOMADESC



The Association for Research and Social Action NOMADESC is a Colombian organisation that has been advising an accompanying social, trade union, women's, indigenous, Afro-descendant and peasant organisations for the defence of human rights for 22 years. The context of the Covid-19 pandemic has aggravated the situation in the country for defenders. Due to multiple threats and risk situations faced by the leaders linked to NOMADESC, PBI carries out permanent accompaniment of this organisation, supporting them in the full use of their rights for the defence of rights.

Through this accompaniment, NOMADESC has managed to continue its work, despite multiple death threats to its leaders, who are mainly women. Defending life in times of pandemic has been very difficult, from the lack of security and confidentiality in

virtual platforms to the lack of connectivity of defenders due to the characteristics of the places where they live. The national strikes and the violence deployed by the military and police, persecution, and criminalisation of the defence of human rights, as well as volatility in the environment generated by paramilitary actors, are just some of the challenges faced by the organisation.

The hostile and highly volatile context in Colombia makes NOMADESC's ability to carry out its work to be almost completely dependent on the presence of PBI in the field. The presence of international observers has a very evident impact not only in the attitude of authorities at the precise moment of the accompaniment but in general with the organisations. The impact of this project is very positive and, it is expected that PBI will continue working with the organisation.



## Advocacy work

Contributing to address the root causes of HRDs' vulnerability and to open spaces for human rights work through actions focused on urgent appeals, letters and statements, UN submissions, public statements, HRD advocacy tours, news articles, reports and advocacy countering negative narratives

In 2021, ProtectDefenders.eu continued to carry out actions to mobilise relevant authorities, build public awareness and enhance visibility regarding the situation of human rights defenders at every level. ProtectDefenders.eu has regularly dispatched **urgent alerts and appeals and sent petitions and letters to relevant stakeholders to generate adequate warnings and contribute to improving the HRD situation at the local level.**

According to HRDs, urgent appeals and private interventions have allowed them to continue their work, monitoring and fieldwork on the human rights situation in their specific context. These monitoring and advocacy support activities contributed to deterring more vicious forms of attacks and helped to build the credibility of human rights defenders in given contexts.

Urgent interventions are issued to the authorities of the countries concerned, relevant human rights protection mechanisms and stakeholders to **prevent further violations and call for immediate investigations into those already carried out.** Thanks to appeals and actions, ProtectDefenders.eu has reportedly contributed to enhancing the protection of HRDs in general and to stopping or alleviating the degree of repression faced by HRDs, thanks to action taken by the concerned authorities or pressure from influential third parties. These actions have led to the release of detained HRDs, improvement of their detention conditions, access to health care, the fight against impunity, and so on.

**The broad dissemination of ProtectDefenders.eu's Monthly Bulletin – to recipients including HRD protection mechanisms – increases the visibility of cases of harassment, and publicity often creates or strengthens a protective effect.**

ProtectDefenders.eu's work has led to the situation of human rights defenders at risk being more visible in the press and on social networks, authorities being called out, and patterns of harassment being more precisely documented.

02.7

↓  
**1255**  
advocacy  
materials produced

Appeals  
**621**

Other ad hoc materials, including  
petitions, urgent submissions,  
and private demarches

>**35**

Public statements  
>**35**

Press releases  
>**40**

Reports  
**7**

Letters and open letters  
>**19**

## Success story

### Advocacy and Communication campaign in support of Khaled Drareni

Khaled Drareni, the Algeria correspondent of Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and TV5 Monde and editor of the independent online media outlet Casbah Tribune website, was arrested on March 29, 2020. In August of the same year, he was sentenced to three years in prison and a fine of 50,000 dinars (330 euros) on a charge of "inciting an unarmed gathering and endangering national unity" because of his coverage of Algeria's "Hirak" protest movement.

During the trial, the prosecution also accused him of criticizing the Algerian political system on Facebook and of reporting a call by a coalition of political parties for a general strike. Drareni had always denied the charges, insisting that he was just doing his job as an independent journalist. On September 15, the Algiers appeal court decided to keep Algerian journalist Khaled Drareni in detention, albeit reducing his sentence from three to two years in prison.



In such a difficult situation for the journalist, who became a symbol of press freedom in Algeria, RSF decided to communicate on the case, and advocate for his immediate release.

✓ RSF closely monitored all phases of the proceedings and raised awareness of both the general public and international authorities through open tribunes, Facebook lives, and more than 40 press releases published on the website in both English and French. All publications, which were also shared in the social networks accompanied by the hashtag "#FreeKhaled", benefited from a wide coverage at international and local levels.

✓ Several demonstrations were organised in support of Khaled both in Tunis and Paris. For instance, on October 15, one month after an Algiers appeal court sentenced Drareni to two years in jail RSF installed a gigantic portrait (measuring 18 metres by 18 metres) of its correspondent overlooking Paris's ring road.

RSF's mobilization paid off as **Khaled was finally released provisionally under a presidential pardon on 19 February 2021.** Two days later, he took part in RSF weekly virtual meeting where he acknowledged RSF massive and sincere support. However, one month later, the country's supreme court accepted his

lawyer's appeal without overturning his conviction, in effect ordering a retrial.

RSF's advocacy mobilisation, involving international CSO and EU institutions who took a stand in defence of Khaled and press freedom in Algeria, was a key factor of success that contributed to the release of RSF correspondent. This case further showed that continuous monitoring of the press freedom situation in Algeria and joint advocacy towards authorities are needed to defend journalists facing unfair allegations in the country, including Khaled himself.





# Success story

## Protection for Human Rights Defenders (HRDs in Asia): At the frontlines of movements for human rights and democracy

In the data FORUM-ASIA collected for 2020, 656 cases of violations against HRDs across 20 different countries in Asia have been recorded. The most common form of violations includes judicial harassment (342 cases); arbitrary detention (279 cases); intimidation and threats (175 cases); and physical violence (149 cases) that at times results in the killing of the HRD (37 cases). FORUM-ASIA noted that more than one violation could be involved in one case – judicial harassment usually falls in with arbitrary arrest and detention. The outbreak of the COVID-19 virus has worsened the situation of the HRDs as the pandemic and its related restrictions were weaponised to silence, harass, monitor, and criminalise HRDs and prevent them from conducting their work. Notwithstanding the unsafe and insecure environment for HRDs, their indefatigable stance to ensure human rights are realised steered movement formations as witnessed across the region. While these movements bring hope to the region, they also raise important questions for the international community at large about what actions can and should be taken to better ensure violations against HRDs are prevented and addressed. To this end, FORUM-ASIA organised a side-event to collectively reflect on the situation of Asian HRDs on the ground and provide concrete recommendations to relevant stakeholders on how to address the violations HRDs face and better protect their rights.

The webinar, organised as a side-event during the 46th session of the UN Human Rights Council, invited in the panel HRDs from India, Indonesia, and Myanmar to highlight cases of attacks against HRDs, and provide concrete recommendations to relevant stakeholders on how to prevent attacks against HRDs and ensure better protection of their rights. The Special Rapporteur on the situation human rights defenders (SR on HRDs), Mary Lawlor, joined in the panel to discuss her plans, ways to collaborate, and how the mandate can push the states to play more role in ensuring democracy and protection of defenders on the ground. The webinar

was live-streamed on Facebook and other social media platforms is accessible here: [Webinar] HRC46 Side Event: Protection for HRDs in Asia: At the frontlines for human rights and democracy.

FORUM-ASIA also delivered an [oral statement](#) under Item 3: General Debate to highlight and echo concerns about the violence and widespread killings of human rights defenders as presented by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders during the 46th session of the UN Human Rights Council.

The relationship built between the SR on HRDs, FORUM-ASIA and its members was strengthened during the side-event as the commitment to actively collaborate with the mandate holders was emphasised. Civil society recommendations shared with the SR on HRDs was an assurance that the mandate can work better with HRDs on the ground.



# Success story

## Collective solidarity for fellow members receiving threats in Colombia



On 11 August 2021, ESCR-Net sent a collective letter in solidarity with several Colombian activists and political leaders that had received death threats from a paramilitary group called Águilas Negras.

On July 20, 2021, several social and political leaders, including ESCR-Net members Comité Ambiental en Defensa de la Vida, received a threatening WhatsApp message allegedly from the paramilitary group Águilas Negras. The message declared several political, social, environmental, indigenous leaders and human rights defenders as military targets, describing them as “scum” who seek to “destabilise” the country.

In a previous letter sent in May 2019, ESCR-Net denounced the paramilitary group for allegedly sending a threatening email to several members of environmental organisations in Cajamarca, accusing them of profiting from their human rights work and of being connected to guerrillas. The threat appeared to be connected to the organisations’ resistance to mining projects in the region.

ESCR-Net reiterated its concern and alerted that Águilas Negras was included in the list of “new paramilitary groups” in a 2010 report by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions.

Among other urgent actions, the letter calls upon the Colombian authorities to investigate the threats to find and sanction those responsible, as well as to ensure the safety of members of Comité Ambiental en Defensa de la Vida and the other organisations and human rights defenders and political leaders; to undertake the necessary and appropriate measures to dismantle paramilitary groups in Tolima and the country; and to ratify the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (Escazú Agreement.)

The Colombian authorities committed to providing protection, including from police and the National Protection Unit (Unidad Nacional de Protección – UNP) for the political leaders and activists that had received threats. The collective letter to the Colombian government, in coordination with local solidarity, did seem to lessen the immediate threats to Comité Ambiental, based on their assessment.

However, the trust in national protection mechanisms is low and some of the activists involved have since received new threats. For that reason, ESCR-Net is now exploring possibilities for providing further protection measures in collaboration with fellow Consortium partners, Front Line Defenders.

In contexts of low confidence in official protection mechanisms and the State more general, it is often useful to look at other ways to provide “hard” protection measures to complement advocacy efforts.

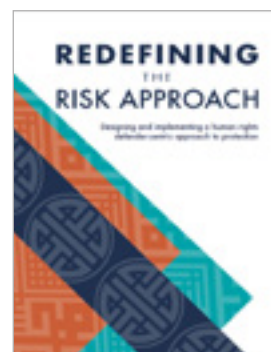


# Collectively raising awareness of the situation of at-risk HRDs worldwide



The **ProtectDefenders.eu Index of Attacks and Threats Against HRDs**, launched on ProtectDefenders.eu's website in May 2017, compiles public alerts on the situation of HRDs issued by Front Line Defenders, RSF, and the Observatory. The index has reinforced awareness and visibility regarding the individual situations of defenders facing attacks and threats. In 2021, **534 new alerts were added to the index**, which already lists more than 4,250 attacks.

In 2021, ProtectDefenders.eu launched several reports, advocacy materials, and manuals on the situation of human rights defenders:



Protection International publication **“Redefining the Risk Approach”**, about the Risk Analysis and Protection Plan Principles, otherwise known as the “Risk Approach Recommendations”. The Risk Analysis and Protection Plan Principles are 21 concrete statements, which outline the most essential and foundational concepts behind implementing the risk approach for protection – from conducting a situated risk approach to building an effective protection plan.



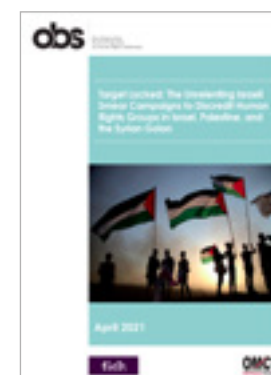
**“Turkey's Civil Society on the Line: A Shrinking Space for Freedom of Association”:** Ongoing Crackdown Poses Existential Threat to Independent Civil Society. In the second of two reports on the crackdown against human rights defenders, civil society actors, and independent voices in Turkey, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (FIDH-OMCT) and one of FIDH's member organisations in Turkey, the Human Rights Association (IHD), condemn repressive measures that inhibit freedom of association and create an increasingly narrow space for civil society in the country.



**“Guatemala, una deuda sin saldar”.** The defence of human rights continues to be a high-risk activity in Guatemala, with more than 1000 attacks on defenders in 2020 and a total lack of a public agenda that would guarantee the right to defend human rights.



Protection International Reflection Paper: **“Understanding Death Threats Against Human Rights Defenders”**. This short paper reflects on the connection between death threats and the actual level of risk they pose. It also provides a number of key considerations for conducting a comprehensive assessment on the likelihood that a threat may be executed and outlines some recommendations for preventive decision-making whenever a human rights defender receives a death threat.



**“Target Locked: The Unrelenting Israeli Smear Campaigns to Discredit Human Rights Groups in Israel, Palestine, and the Syrian Golem”.** From slander and campaigns to deter donors, to restrictive legislation and judicial obstruction, the Israeli Government's smear and harassment tactics against Israeli, Golan and Palestinian human rights NGOs and defenders have been flourishing for 20 years.



**“Undermining Rights: The Defence of Human Rights Hampered by Economic Interests”.** In Peru, the defence of human rights is a high-risk activity. Since 2011, 220 human rights defenders have been murdered and 960 criminalised.



**“Standing Tall: Women Human Rights Defenders at the Forefront of Thailand's Pro-Democracy Protests”.** Women who played a key role in organising and leading peaceful pro-democracy protests in Thailand in 2020 faced frequent human rights violations aimed at delegitimising their work and credibility and discouraging them from participating in the demonstration.



Brazil: Covid-19 kills human rights defenders due to dismantling of social policies and government. The pandemic is massively affecting human rights defenders in Brazil, where organisations denounce the impact of the dismantling of social policies and hold the Brazilian state responsible for the grim and rising death toll.





# coordination

PROTECT **DEFENDERS.EU**

03





# Coordination



In 2021, ProtectDefenders.eu continued its **intense, coordinated work, deepening the relationships and links between programmes, partners, and key stakeholders**. The unprecedented situation created by the extreme demand for resources from defenders and organisations in danger has accelerated the deepening of this coordinated work. In effect, **coordination permeates all of the operational and strategic practices and activities of the consortium** and has been crucial in ensuring that support for HRDs remains reliable and consistent. The ProtectDefenders.eu Consortium has continued to provide a **swift, relevant and coordinated response to the needs of human rights defenders at risk**, and although it is **resource-intensive, it has at the same time increased experience-sharing**. **Coordination has been robust and sophisticated in the allocation of grants, or in addressing the most serious country crises**, such the specific cases of **Belarus, Myanmar, and Afghanistan**, favouring increased reactivity and solidarity. Notably, allied organisations with protection mandates and outside the consortium have been invited to these spaces, which has contributed to reinforcing the global reach of support when it has been most necessary.

On **external coordination**, the synergies of the twelve organisations as well as the pursuit of the greatest impact have promoted collaboration with entities, actors and organisations outside the consortium, and joint efforts have resulted in innumerable results over recent months. For instance, the role of ProtectDefenders.eu as coordinator of the **EUTRP** has continued to foster a privileged and fluid collaboration with all member entities and connected stakeholders, including regional and national governments, cities, NGOs and other actors. One of the most evident and tangible outputs of this cooperation when designing and implementing activities continues to be the successful implementation of the “**Comprehensive Support to Human Rights Defenders in Turkey**” project, developed during the first period of ProtectDefenders.eu by FIDH, FLD, RSF, OMCT Europe, ILGA-Europe, and the Secretariat of ProtectDefenders.eu.

Regular and very frequent **communication takes place with the EEAS**, the European Commission focal points, and the European Parliament actors supportive of HRDs. However, the most powerful example of added value and unique coordination has been the **successful partnership with the government of Canada for the implementation of a dedicated refuge and resettlement stream for human rights defenders at risk in Canada**. The structure of ProtectDefenders.eu as an international civil society network has proven to be the determinant factor to the Government of Canada in identifying the consortium as the preferred partner for this stream.

The **credibility and diversity of partners** has brought together a wealth of experience in ProtectDefenders.eu that has strengthened learning and synergies. This has included strengthened joint action on protection outside the scope of the EU HRD mechanism. It has also helped to ensure better understanding and awareness of the importance of the protection of HRDs, in a context in which repression against HRDs is increasing and more sophisticated attacks are developing. Moreover, there are more opportunities to discuss shared lessons, recommendations and areas for improvement, and an increased capacity to respond to emergencies or sudden worrying developments in the field.

Ultimately, ProtectDefenders.eu ensures **more comprehensive and effective protection of HRDs at the greatest risk**, enabling joint work that ensures the limited resources available are put to the best use. Finally, ProtectDefenders.eu enables **significant enhanced coordination of strategy and planning**. This includes a broader network of influence, fewer missed opportunities, stronger messaging impact, and increased access to key stakeholders; it also entails engaging the EU to take a stronger protective role in the cases in which the 12 organisations intervene, thereby bolstering crucial political support.



# Success story

## ProtectDefenders.eu and the Canadian Government plan for protecting HRDs through resettlement options



Refugee HRDs face unique protection challenges concerning their security. They often continue to be subjected to threats, harassment and surveillance by their governments, sometimes in collusion with the host government, while their ability to protect themselves is significantly reduced. Lack of access to humanitarian assistance and other services, restrictions on movement and being cut off from their networks negatively impacts their life and their ability to continue their human rights work. Refugees from marginalised groups, such as LGBTQI defenders and WHRDs, are at heightened risk from the host population, other refugees, particularly in camp settings and authorities. Often HRD refugees are forced to maintain a low profile in the host country, isolating themselves from local refugee support networks, and can be reluctant to approach local authorities to register due to the fear of being criminalised or deported. In some contexts, refugee HRDs are also forcibly returned to their country, in violation of host states' international obligations.

In December 2019, the Government of Canada announced a commitment to introduce a dedicated refugee stream to protect HRDs. Since then the Canadian Government has been in discussion

with a number of parties about how this might be implemented in practice. These consultations have included ProtectDefenders.eu as well as several partner organisations in the Consortium. After 16 months of conversations between the IRCC and the Secretariat of ProtectDefenders.eu, the Canadian Government and ProtectDefenders.eu signed in July 2021 an MoU as the basis for establishing such a programme in partnership with ProtectDefenders.eu as well as directly with Front Line Defenders. The proposed programme will be implemented in coordination with UNHCR. The objective of this stream is to facilitate access to a long-term protection solution for at-risk defenders and their families who are in host countries and without reasonable prospects of local integration and for whom it is unsafe to return to their country of origin. The specific goal of this programme is to operationalise a stream of 250 places a year for defenders (including family members) for permanent resettlement in Canada through a practical HRD refugee mechanism built on expertise in the risks faced by HRDs and a broad network of engagement in the most difficult contexts. The programme is expected to be fully operational early in 2022.

**“Through this new refugee stream, the Government of Canada stands with human rights defenders by offering them protection and a safe home in the face of real dangers, because offering refuge to the world’s most vulnerable speaks to who we are as Canadians.”** - The Honourable Marco E. L. Mendicino, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada

In response to the unprecedented crisis in Afghanistan, the Government of Canada decided to open a differentiated and temporary stream for up to 900 HRDs in distress from the country. ProtectDefenders.eu and Front Line Defenders will also be the main implementing partners for this special stream for Afghan HRDs.



# Success story

## 2021 ProtectDefenders.eu Virtual Meetings with HRDs: Addressing challenges for HRDs in times of COVID-19



The global situation generated by the COVID-19 pandemic revealed aggravated challenges for defenders supported by the EU HRD Mechanism, already facing high risk and operating in difficult and highly repressive contexts. In a series of restricted meetings with human rights defenders held in February 2021, the ProtectDefenders.eu Consortium promoted spaces for exchange to share experiences and thoughts, and jointly define strategies to address three of the main common issues facing the community of defenders and civil society in the current situation. To conclude this round of conversations, ProtectDefenders.eu promoted a space for exchange and dialogue on these topics between defenders and partners with key EU and international stakeholders.

More specifically, the first stage of the Virtual Meetings consisted of a series of restricted dialogues of HRDs beneficiaries of ProtectDefenders.eu support, in a small format, articulated around the main topic. The focus of the different events was on specific challenges on HRDs aggravated by the impact of COVID19 and on lessons that can be extracted for ProtectDefenders.eu to adjust its implementation in practice, and for the international community to reflect the needs and demands from the HRD community. The challenges addressed were the digital risks faced by HRDs; the increased violence against women human rights defenders; and the challenge of maintaining HRDs' spaces for advocacy and public mobilisation.

To wrap up this consultation process, an online public dialogue of human rights defenders with international and EU stakeholders was organised. This space was led by HRDs and facilitated visibility, raising awareness spaces, and international solidarity on the topics discussed. The online seminar was moderated by Hassan Shire, Executive Director of DefendDefenders as representative of the Consortium, and counted with the participation as panellists of Mary Lawlor, the UNSR on HRDs; Eamon Gilmore, the EUSR on Human Rights, and WHRDs Erika Aifan (Guatemalan judge, as the rapporteur of the group on Digital Risks), Janette Akhilgova (Russian HRD, as the rapporteur on Increased violence against WHRDs), and Didar Erdem (Turkish lawyer, as the rapporteur of the

group on Advocacy). This online seminar was received with great interest by the HRD community and was followed by more than 650 participants. “International community should push big tech companies and social media platforms to ensure technical solutions for physical and mental integrity of defenders, including channels in local languages and special measures for defenders, particularly who advocate for Women and LGTBI+ communities.” - Extracted from the recommendations of the session on digital risks.

“It is essential to make funding available for the creation and coordination of women’s human rights defenders platforms at a regional level to develop advocacy activities, community engagements, civic education, capacity building and networking.” - Extracted from the recommendations of the session on increased violence against WHRDs.

“(The EU) should increase their political support to W/HRDs through more vigorous statements in support to W/HRDs and Freedom of Expression, and continue engaging with the governments.” - Extracted from the recommendations of the session on maintaining spaces for advocacy and mobilisation.



# Are you at risk or under threat?

**Call our hotline now: +353 (0) 1 21 00 489**

Our multilingual protection officers are available 24/7.

If you need emergency support we can communicate securely and flexibly.

## Learn more

about our funding programmes for defenders, grassroots organisations and communities on our website

**[www.protectdefenders.eu](http://www.protectdefenders.eu)**

## Join our community in social media

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**[twitter.com/ProtectHRD\\_EU](https://twitter.com/ProtectHRD_EU)**

## Contact us

**[contact@protectdefenders.eu](mailto:contact@protectdefenders.eu)**

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