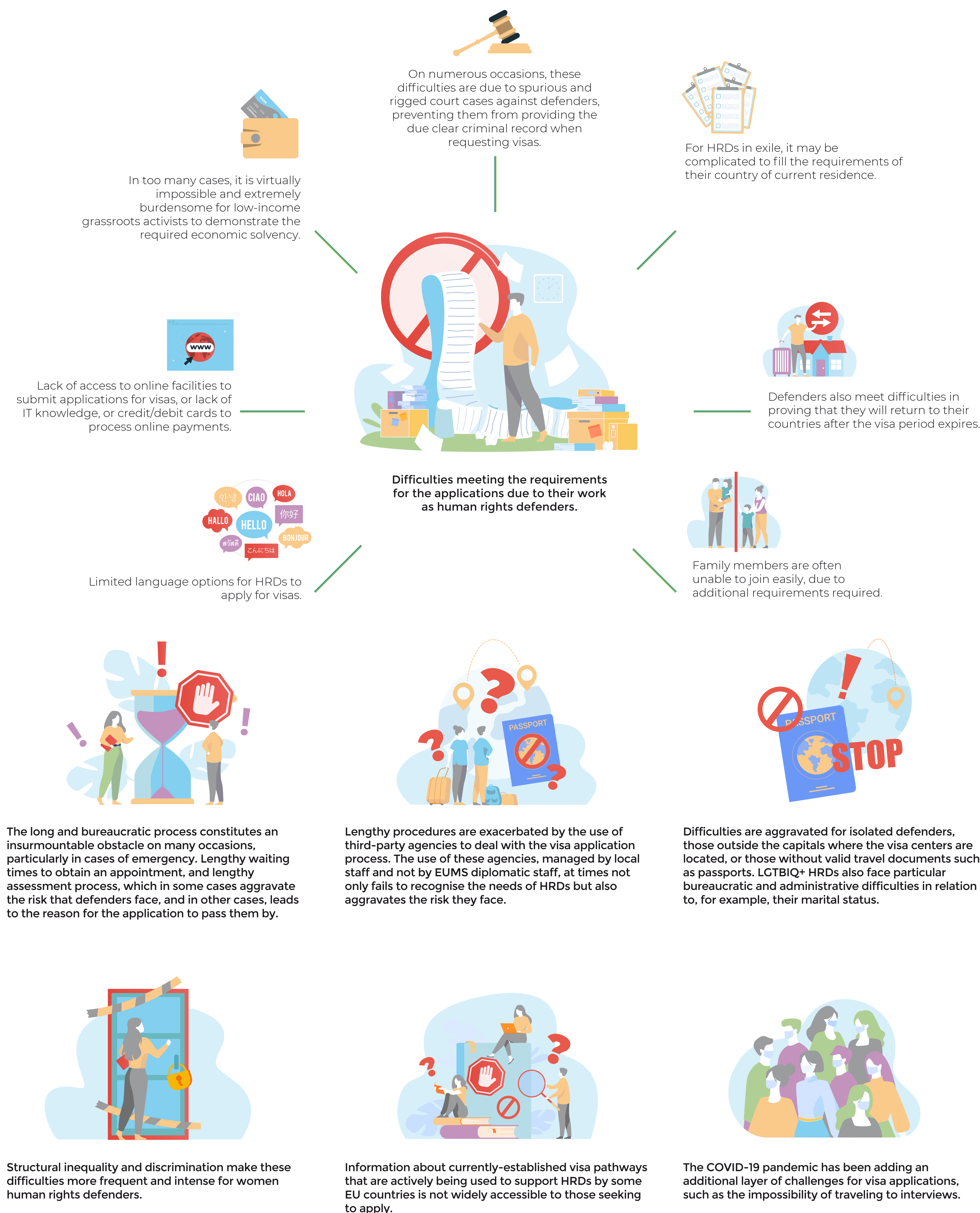


**EVERY DAY, AT-RISK HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ARE CONFRONTED WITH CHALLENGES, BARRIERS, AND OBSTACLES WHEN APPLYING FOR A VISA TO THE EU. A NON-EXHAUSTIVE LIST OF THESE OBSTACLES INCLUDES:**



Human rights defenders report an increase in cases of **Schengen visa decline**, as well as orders to automatically decline any applications coming from specific countries, as any applicant is considered a potential asylum seeker. It increasingly appears that only HRDs with access to personal connections within European embassies or influential political figures can get visas.

HRDs working with ProtectDefenders.eu report that the Schengen visa has become a **matter of privilege** that only some defenders have access to, and even the visa declines appear to be pervasive and systematic for HRDs from some countries, such as Syria, Iraq, Palestine, and Yemen.

**NONETHELESS**

some **States and institutions worldwide are currently exercising a wide range of prerogatives to facilitate access to visas** for human rights defenders. Some of these best practices are:



- SPAIN** has a special one-year residential visa for HRDs (Residencia Temporal no Lucrativa), through the Spanish Program for Support and Protection of HRDs at risk aiming to provide HRDs with temporary shelter.
- SWITZERLAND** waives the visa fees for HRDs attending Human Rights Council events to mitigate the financial burden of visa applications for HRDs.
- In the **NETHERLANDS**, there is an accelerated assessment of the visa application for at-risk HRDs accepted by Justice and Peace Netherlands for the Shelter City programme, who can have their visa issued in two or three days, even within 24 hours. This can administratively be done by close cooperation between Justice and Peace and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- Thanks to the work of **ICORN**, there are distinct national entry regulations and long-stay visas for writers at risk in **NORWAY** (through the refugee resettlement scheme, in partnership with Norwegian PEN), **SWEDEN** (temporary residence permit), and **DENMARK** (two-year residency permit for writers invited to cities members of an international organisation).
- A "Facilitated Visa Procedure for HRDs" programme - established with the government of **IRELAND**, allows Front Line Defenders to obtain at short notice temporary visas for human rights defenders facing imminent dangers or in need of respite as a consequence of constant persecution.
- In **COSTA RICA** there is a special immigration procedure for HRDs hosted by Shelter City Costa Rica, granting them the status of "Temporary Protection Mechanism" for a period of six months with the possibility of extending it up to one year. This special status as its extension can be requested only by Fundación Acceso, the NGO implementing "Shelter City Costa Rica", and is based in an official resolution issued by the General Direction of Migration.
- The **CITY OF BERLIN** has a specific residence and work permit given to artists and journalists, which has been granted in some cases to HRDs with this profile.
- CANADA's** dedicated refugee stream for human rights defenders allows ProtectDefenders.eu and Front Line Defenders, alongside other Canadian and international partners, including UNHCR, to contribute to identifying HRDs who are at risk and in need of permanent resettlement.
- The visa process for **SOUTH AFRICA** accommodates the peculiar challenges of HRDs. For example, HRDs in exile can submit and have visas granted even without long-term residency in the country.
- Furthermore, there are some good practices non-specific, but beneficial to HRDs. For instance, some local missions have an eased visa process - there are local visa handling partners who receive the applications and payments and render guidance in completing the forms. The visa offices are based in the country missions, and they handle the applications in a fast and efficient way.



**THE PROMOTION OF AN ENABLING VISA FRAMEWORK FOR HRDS IN THE EU MUST BE ADDRESSED IN A COMPREHENSIVE AND UNIFORM MANNER, ONE THAT IS CONSISTENT AND SENSITIVE TO THE SITUATION AND NEEDS OF AT-RISK DEFENDERS.**

**FOR THIS, PROTECTDEFENDERS.EU RECOMMENDS THE CREATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF A SPECIAL ACCELERATED VISA PROCESS FOR HRDS.**

- This special visa should be a multiple-entry, long-term visa that enables HRDs to better manage their protection needs - including sometimes not using the visa but keeping it in reserve, in a way that constitutes a security resource that enables the HRD to continue in their work.
- This visa process should make the application procedures easier, user-friendly, and available in the local languages. Besides:
  - The financial requirements should be alleviated.
  - The visa application processing fees should be waived for at-risk HRDs.
  - The visa processing time should be shorter, especially for HRDs at risk, and allow for urgent procedures.
- The embassies of EU countries should be the main stakeholder to receive and process visa applications. A special email/specific contact for HRD visa processes should be created so as not to rely on a third-party agency for HRD visas. This contact person should be gender-sensitive, aware of confidentiality needs, and know about HRDs needs and risks.
- Local and international NGOs identified as partners should be able to refer cases to the embassies and confirm their status as a defender - even if only through voluntary work, as well as the risk faced because of their activities, helping to speed up the visa processing
- In the Member States, national human rights institutions and civil society should be consulted and involved in the implementation of the new visa application process for Human Rights Defenders

