

HOPE AND RESISTANCE GO TOGETHER  
**THE STATE OF WOMEN HUMAN  
RIGHTS DEFENDERS 2023**



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COVER PHOTO: Women from the Horkestar—Alternative Choir and Orchestra on March 8 Demonstration in Serbia. Photo: Lara Končar

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, November 2023

This report is completely or partly financed by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). Sida does not necessarily agree with the opinions expressed. Kvinna till Kvinna is responsible for the content.

The part on Sweden is financed by Kvinna till Kvinna's own funds.

Every other year, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation asks women's rights and queer rights activists around the world to fill in a survey with questions about their safety and security and the freedom they feel they have to conduct their work. This then allows us to publish a biannual 'state of the world' for feminist activists. We have been doing so for more than a decade; and it is with a heavy heart that we notice how it is becoming increasingly harder to fight for women's and LGBTQI+ rights globally. Harassment is getting worse, administrative and legal obstacles are becoming more numerous, and funding is decreasing, from a bare minimum to next to nothing.

In this year's survey and in the many interviews we conducted with women's and queer rights activists, we see that things are moving fast. Many respondents mention drastic changes in a short time—a new reality that is both difficult and dangerous to navigate. Being a women's rights activist, a feminist, you are questioned all the time, even by family and friends.

Twenty-five years ago, the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders was adopted. That was a different time. Today, anti-gender movements have become a force to reckon with in the pushback against women's and queer persons' rights. An amalgam of disparate forces such as governments, traditional leaders, religious figures, right-wing and nationalist groups, they strategically collaborate across borders and have plenty of resources. At the same time, women's movements, while equally strategic, remain drastically underfunded.

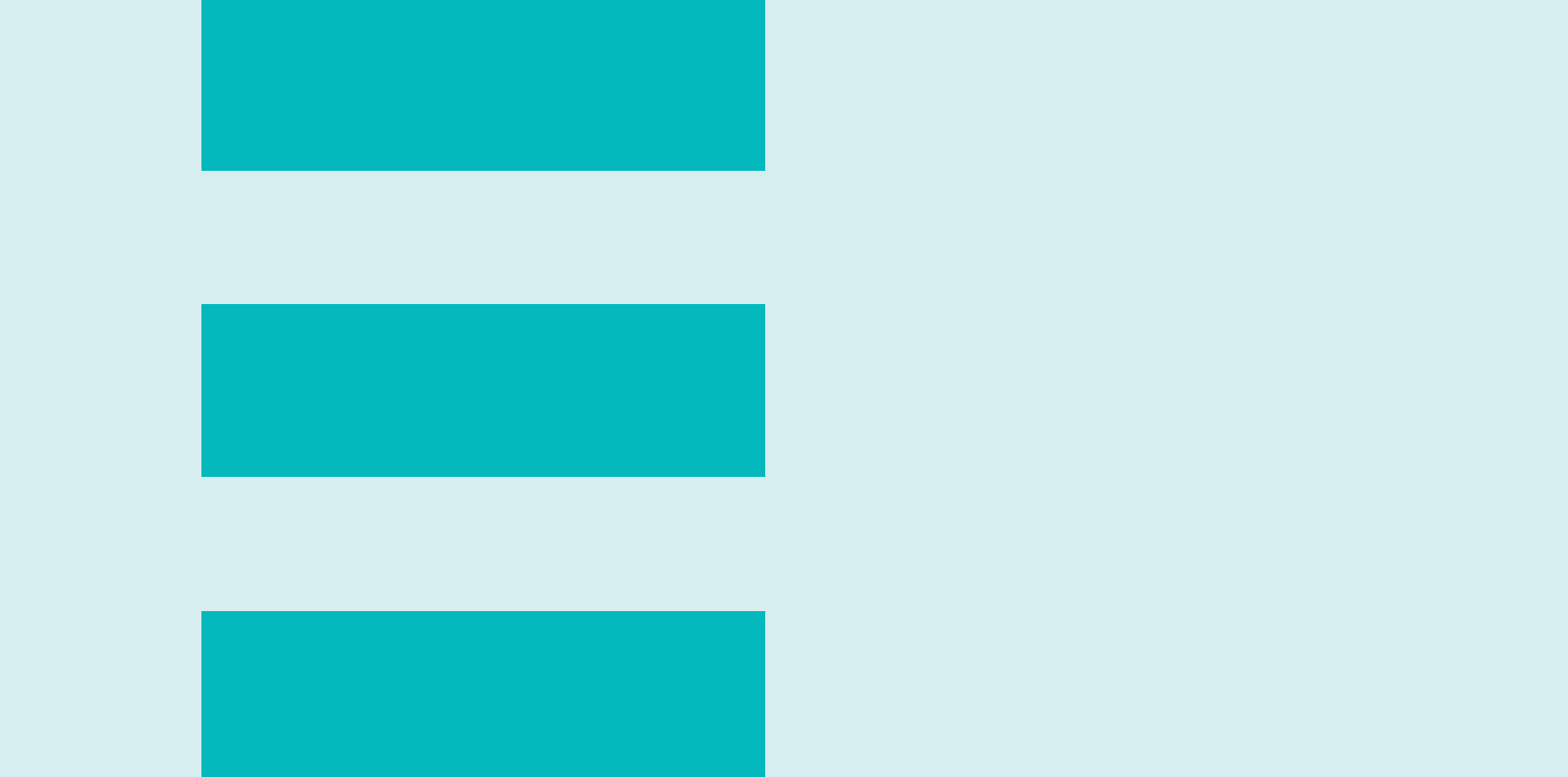
What we also see, however, is that feminists—as always—are offering resistance. As one activist from Nicaragua says, "hope and resistance go together". Women's and queer rights activists are not giving up any time soon. It is crucial that the international community step up its ambitions to support them. Kvinna till Kvinna has been backing the feminist movement for more than three decades as it advances or, sometimes, holds the line for women's rights and gender equality. We are determined to continue doing so: to keep funding, supporting, opening doors, strategising, and resisting. In solidarity with the bravest women of them all.

Photo: Liza Simonsson



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Petra Tötterman Andorff'.

**Petra Tötterman Andorff**  
*Secretary-General, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation*



# Introduction

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation monitors the situation for women's and queer rights activists. We have kept an eye on the shrinking space for civil society, especially for women's rights and LGBTQI+ organisations for decades. Every other year, we publish a report on these developments, to present a global overview of the hatred and threats that activists face and the space they operate in.

This year's report is based on the survey responses of 458 women's and queer rights activists, and 25 interviews with activists. We reached activists from 67 countries affected by violence, conflict or fragility.

Comparing this year's results to the results of previous studies, we note that matters are deteriorating for women's rights activists and democracy in general. The University of Gothenburg's V-Dem Institute estimates that global democracy has slid back to the level it was at in 1986.<sup>1</sup>

Three in four survey respondents say that they and/or their organisation have been threatened or harassed these past years as a result of their activism. That is a 15 percentage-point increase from our survey two years ago. We also note a substantial increase in the number of women's and queer rights activists whose family members have been attacked for being the sibling, parent, or child of an activist. In addition, almost 25 percent of activists have received death threats.

In spite of these developments, few activists appear to have quit their work. They do, of course, have to take measures to monitor threats and secure their offices and homes, which takes time and resources. But women's rights activists have become used to working under threat: hatred has become increasingly normalised and almost invisible to activists. This comes at a high price: burnout is common among activists. Still, the survey responses and interviews reveal that there has been a slight positive shift: a greater awareness of the importance of



Survey respondent

## Facts don't seem to really count anymore. How can we reclaim the narrative?

self-care, not just 'hard security'. Many say that they try to take time off when things become too much. This is only possible, however, when activists have the means and opportunity to do so.

The most significant shift in the results of this year's survey and interviews has to do with the actors behind the harassment and threats. 58 percent of survey respondents state that governments and authorities are the main actors behind the threats they face. In some regions, the figure is 80 percent. This means that more than half of women's and queer rights activists who participated in our study live in countries where their own government actively tries to make life harder for them, by limiting their civic space, harming them, and either halting or reversing progress in terms of women's and LGBTQI+ rights.

Other actors that are viewed as threats include traditional and community leaders, religious actors, anti-gender movements, and far-right actors. If we toy with the idea that they all operate along the same ideological lines and often collaborate, this group looks frighteningly powerful.<sup>2</sup> Its narrative of traditional values and anti-feminist sentiment has become more entrenched around the world. Activists can no longer just engage in proactive work: they also have to fight to maintain rights that were secured long ago.

This time, our report also includes a discussion of recent developments in Sweden. Sweden has an impressive track record as a global champion for

<sup>1</sup> V-Dem Institute, Gothenburg University: Democracy Report 2023. Defiance in the Face of Autocratization. 2023: p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> We wish to stress that not all community/traditional leaders and religious actors are anti-gender. When we refer to these actors in the context of the rise in power of anti-gender movements, we are solely referring to those leaders and religious actors who actively oppose gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights.

gender equality. Recently, however, there have been changes in the country's political landscape, with the far-right rapidly gaining influence.<sup>3</sup> This risks affecting women's and queer rights—and the same has and is happening in other parts of Europe.

Activists of all kinds encounter resistance around the world. We argue, however, that women's rights and queer rights activists stand out, for three reasons.

The first reason has to do with power. 46 percent of survey respondents feel that their space to act has shrunk in the past five years. This process hits women's and queer rights activists particularly hard. In many patriarchal contexts, simply speaking up as a woman or queer person is enough to become a target of hatred. Defending women's and LGBTQI+ rights only reinforces the resistance of governments, religious or traditional leaders, and far-right groups, who are united in their desire to maintain the power status quo and protect traditional values. Hatred against women's and queer rights activists is often used as a tool to grab or keep power.

Second, the threats and harassment that are used to silence women's and queer rights activists are gendered. Activists are sexually harassed in the streets, assaulted in police custody, slandered as 'bad mothers' and 'sluts', and told that their daughters will be raped.

The third reason that women's and queer rights activists often face fiercer backlash than other activists has to do with their lack of official decision-making power. Women and members of the LGBTQI+ community tend to be grossly underrepresented at all levels of formal decision-making. Their



**Sonja Hadji Nikolov**  
Akcija Zdruzenska,  
North Macedonia

**Even when we're just posting facts and figures on women's participation, we receive hateful comments. When men's power is in danger, they will find a way to threaten you. You can never sleep feeling safe.**



UN Secretary-General

**Women are much more likely than men to be targeted with sexual and gender-based violence and to be subjected to verbal abuse, surveillance, and online violence. While all activists are targeted with defamation, smear campaigns and online and offline hate speech, the attacks against women human rights defenders typically target their personal behaviour, their moral conduct or their sex lives.<sup>4</sup>**

only space to call for change, whether as an individual, organisation or network, is civil society. When civic space closes, women's rights and queer rights activists lose the one platform that enabled them to have a say in and influence their societies.

All of this is why the international community must act to safeguard civic space. It must put pressure on governments and institutions to create a more open environment for women's and queer rights activists to work in. Funding is an essential aspect of that. If we want to prioritise gender equality, we must support women's and LGBTQI+ rights movements. Research shows that women's rights organisations are key to advancing gender equality.<sup>5</sup> When we follow the money, however, it becomes painfully clear that they are rarely prioritised: only 0.3 percent of bilateral aid in conflict-affected and fragile states goes to women's rights organisations and movements.<sup>6</sup> The current trend is one of less funding, more bureaucracy, and more obstacles. This must change.

<sup>3</sup> V-Dem Institute, Gothenburg University: Democracy Report 2023. Defiance in the Face of Autocratization. 2023: p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations: Women and peace and security. Report of the Secretary-General. Paragraph 11.

<sup>5</sup> Weldon, L. and Htun, M.: 'Feminist Mobilisation and Progressive Policy Change: Why Governments Take Action to Combat Violence Against Women' in: Gender and Development, Vol. 21:2. 2013: p. 231-247.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations: Women and peace and security. Report of the Secretary-General.

# Methodology

When conducting this study, we used a mixed-method approach with both quantitative and qualitative elements.

First, we sent out an anonymous online survey translated into eleven languages during the spring of 2023, asking women’s rights and LGBTQI+ organisations, networks, and independent activists around the world fifteen questions. Our selection of respondents was semi-random. Thanks to the help of fellow civil society organisations, networks, and academics, we managed to reach 458 respondents in 67 countries affected by conflict, fragility and violence in Asia, the Americas, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>7</sup> Respondents could add comments to most of the survey’s questions, which resulted in additional valuable data and quotes.

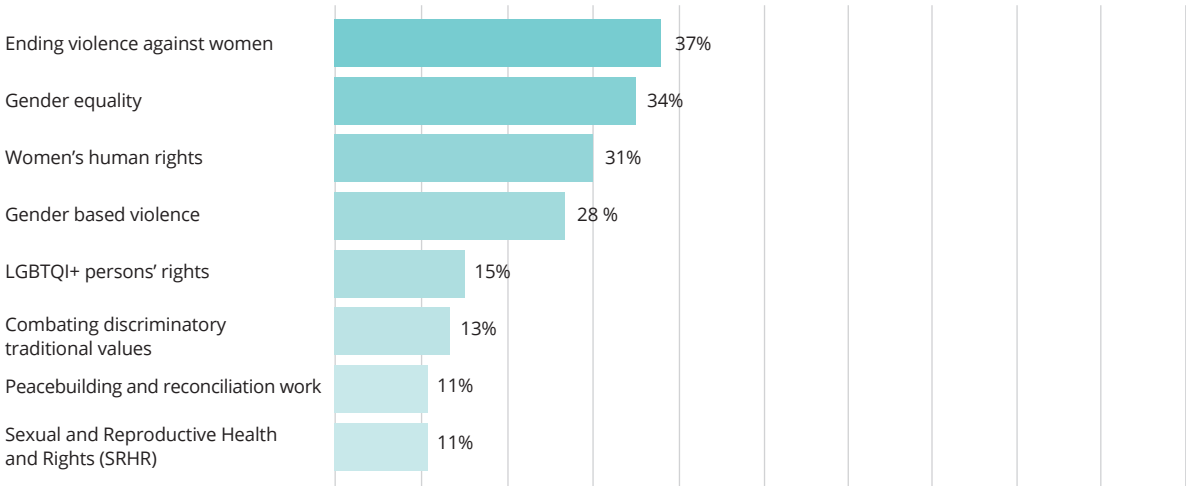
Between May and September 2023, we held in-depth interviews with 25 women’s rights activists.<sup>8</sup> Finally, we conducted a desk review of relevant literature

and drew on our own knowledge and experience of working with women’s rights for three decades. Whenever we quote an activist without naming them, it is because they prefer to be anonymous.

88 percent of those who filled in our survey identify as women. Throughout the report, we refer to them as ‘women’s rights activists’, ‘women human rights defenders’ and ‘queer rights activists’. We use the term queer activist as that is the term our interviewees preferred. We use LGBTQI+ when we talk about rights and issues.

The majority have significant experience as an activist: nearly half have been activists for eleven years or more. Only 8 percent have been an activist for less than three years. This is a shortcoming of our research: we would have liked to reach out more broadly to the next generation of activists. Most survey respondents tell us they are part of a large or small civil society organisation. Many are also part of various networks.

### Which are the focus areas of your work/activism (multiple choice, max 3)



<sup>7</sup> South Asia - Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Pakistan, Uzbekistan; South-East Asia - Bangladesh, China, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam; the Americas - Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Puerto Rico; Europe - Abkhazia, Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, Nagorno-Karabakh, North Macedonia, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Ukraine; the MENA region - Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine (incl. the West Bank and the Gaza Strip), Syria, Tunisia, Yemen, Sub-Saharan Africa - Angola, Benin, Burundi, Cameroon, the DRC, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Mali, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

<sup>8</sup> The activists we interviewed work in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the DRC, Georgia, Indonesia, Iraq, Jordania, Kenya, Nicaragua, North Macedonia, Palestine, the Philippines, Sweden, Thailand, Tunisia, and Ukraine.

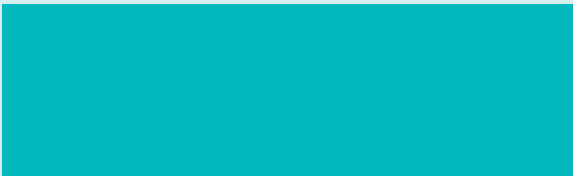


Photo: Maja Janeska Ilieva

Skopje Pride 2023 in North Macedonia. Working for LGBTQI+ rights is the issue that puts activists most at risk, according to our survey.



# The state of women's and queer rights activists

This chapter mainly analyses the responses of the 458 women's rights and queer rights activists around the world who filled in our survey.

## HARASSMENT, SLANDER, AND DEATH THREATS

75 percent of survey respondents state that they and/or their organisation have been harassed or threatened (online and/or offline) the past couple of years because of their work. That is a 15 percentage-point increase from our most recent survey in 2021.

When asked what kind of abuse they have to deal with, half of respondents mention 'general' harassment, i.e. various types of offenses intended to intimidate and humiliate. One in three have been the subject of smear campaigns and false accusations, especially in Eastern Europe (42 percent), the MENA region (38 percent). The third most common type of abuse is restrictive regulations and legislation. In South-East Asia in particular, criminalisation of activism is common. Almost one in four respondents have received death threats; thirty-seven activists have survived actual attempts

to murder them. In South Asia, murder attempts appear even more common (30 percent).

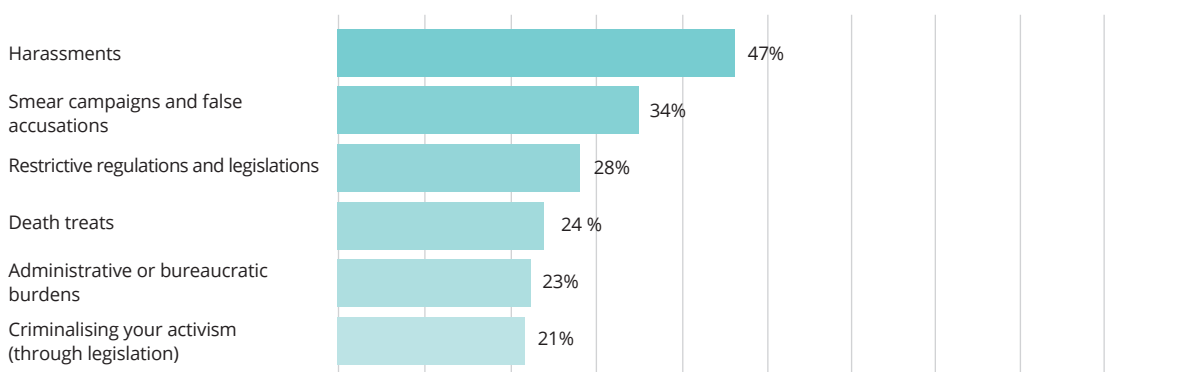
**Survey respondent**

**They threaten us, saying we will be gone soon, that we will not exist, will be banned. They call us traitors, anti-patriots...**

**María Teresa Blandón**  
La Corriente, Nicaragua

**Women activists were sexually abused during interrogation. Others were called whores. The usual. The female body has always been used for humiliation.**

**In what way have you/your organisation experienced harassments and/or threats (online and offline) during the last couple of years? (multiple choice)**



Sexual harassment is a prime strategy used to silence not just women's rights activists, but all outspoken women. Kvinna till Kvinna staff in Monrovia has witnessed how, in Liberia, women politicians are sexually harassed ahead of elections. When one female politician declared her candidacy, she became the target of a defamation campaign based on a fabricated sex scandal. Even just monitoring elections or supporting female candidates can put women activists at risk. They are bullied on social media and in their communities, sometimes to the extent that their lives are at risk.<sup>9</sup>

In Ukraine, the organisation Zmina documents human rights violations, including cases of women being detained or abducted by the Russian army because of their activism. Onysia Syniuk, who works for Zmina, says that women were told "you're such a good wife, we'll bring you back home [to Russia]" or "we'll rape your daughter and take her with us" when they were abducted.<sup>10 11</sup>

In comparison to last survey, many more respondents (one in three) state that their families have been threatened or harassed as a result of their activism. One region in particular stands out: more than half of South-East Asian respondents say their families have been threatened. Across all continents, respondents comment on how hard it is to deal with hatred that affects their children.



**Wendy Flores**  
Nicaragua Nunca Más, Nicaragua

**To be a human rights defender is to confront power, but it also has an effect on yourself and your family. I never thought my work would affect my family the way it did. That I would have to leave my family. I left Nicaragua alone, leaving behind a seven-months-old infant and a seven-year-old.**



**Activist**  
Bosnia and Herzegovina

**Even though I am doing the right thing, I do think about how it will influence my son's life here, now and in the future.**

### **Drowning in rules and restrictions**

This year, substantially more respondents indicate that restrictive regulations and legislation are used to hinder their work. This reflects the finding we discuss below that governments and authorities are the most common actors behind the pushback against civil society. Authoritarianism is on the rise around the world,<sup>12</sup> with governments working to restrict and regulate civil society, not least women's rights activists. Increasing the administrative/bureaucratic burden on organisations and criminalising activism are just some of the methods that many respondents (23 percent and 21 percent, respectively) say authorities employ to hinder their work.

This perceived increase in attempts to criminalise activism is mirrored in Front Line Defenders' report 'Global Analysis 2022': "Criminalisation in all its forms was one of the most pervasive and complex threats facing [human rights defenders] and their organisations globally".<sup>13</sup> According to Front Line Defenders, criminalisation stood for 34 percent of all violations recorded against human rights defenders in 2022. Criminalising activism not only prevents activists from carrying out their work, it also legitimises and paves the way for other actors to turn against them, resulting in a more hostile environment.<sup>14</sup>

International donors too can be guilty of complicating bureaucracy. Activists we interviewed together with the Centre for Women's Studies in Serbia said they are forced to spend an inordinate amount of time on applications, monitoring, and reporting, which leaves them with less time to carry out their actual work.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Information given by Kvinna till Kvinna's staff in Monrovia.

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Center ZMINA: Enforced Disappearances and Arbitrary Detentions of Active Citizens During the Full-Scale Armed Aggression by Russia Against Ukraine. 2023.

<sup>11</sup> For more information, see <https://zmina.ua/en/publication-en/womens-cells-of-kherson-torture-chamber-analytical-report-based-on-the-testimonies-of-detainees/>

<sup>12</sup> Freedom House: The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule. 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Front Line Defenders: Global Analysis 2022. 2022: p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Unpublished research by the Centre of Women's Studies and Kvinna till Kvinna. 2023



Photo: Wadiah Sili

Liberian women's rights organisation WORIWA organise safe spaces for women to meet and combat sexual and gender-based violence.

## Draft laws stifling civil society

Not all draft laws that seek to make life harder for activists are actually adopted. But even if a draft law is eventually shelved, the debate around it can do significant damage to activists.

In the spring of 2023, Georgian authorities proposed a so-called 'Foreign Agent Law', inspired by a similar law adopted in Russia in 2012. Following fierce demonstrations by Georgian civil society, the draft law was dismissed in parliament in March that year. Still, many activists fear that the process will eventually be resumed.

Government propaganda against the protesters also resulted in an immediate backlash. Young activists were dubbed 'satanists' and urged by the government to re-embrace 'traditional values', and civil society organisations were branded 'evil enemies of the nation'. So while the draft law was stopped (for now), it did affect organisations' ability to carry out their

work, with ordinary citizens now more reluctant to participate and engage with them.<sup>16 17</sup>

Similarly, in Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina), a new draft law labels all NGOs that receive funding from abroad as 'foreign agents' and calls for the government to control their actions. Worried local activists are doing everything they can to stop the legislation. "[The draft law] says that while working for animal rights or with children is okay, political action would not be allowed. Accountability would suffer if no one was allowed to speak up against the government any longer."

Minister of Justice Milos Bukejlovic has defended the proposed law, saying it would prevent organisations from using funds "for social destruction, destabilisation, and eventual financing of terrorist organisations".<sup>18</sup> Statements like this discredit civil society: even if the draft law is never adopted, the damage is already done.

<sup>16</sup> Conversation with Kvinna till Kvinna's South Caucasus office. 7 September 2023.

<sup>17</sup> UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders: What I'm hearing from human rights defenders in Georgia. 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty: Bosnian Serb Entity Says Controversial Draft Law Will Monitor NGOs Financial Flows. 28 March 2023.

## A gendered difference

Working to defend human rights is risky in many parts of the world. Being an environmental activist, for example, or defending land rights or the rights of indigenous peoples can be extremely dangerous.<sup>19</sup> Women's rights and queer rights activists, however, tend to be attacked also for who they are, not just for what they do or say.<sup>20</sup>

Being an outspoken woman or queer person is often seen as an offense in and of itself, especially in places where women are not expected or allowed to speak up.<sup>21</sup> "Being a political poet and a woman is enough to put you at risk," one Palestinian women's rights activist tells us. Vanja Stokić, a journalist and activist from Bosnia and Herzegovina, describes how insults are gendered: "I reported on migration for several years—both me and my boyfriend did. But while I was often called 'a migrant slut', he never got that type of insult."



In places where women need to be married to be respected by society, being an activist can make life hard. Rajaa Fadhil, Al Raja Foundation, from Iraq has seen this play out: "Some women have been divorced or left [by their husbands/boyfriends] because of their activism. It seems like women human rights defenders are not considered 'marriageable'."

Threats and harassment against women's and queer rights activists are also often hidden behind what is considered 'normal' violence against women, or 'normal' hate crimes against the LGBTQI+ community. This conceals the fact that such violence is a political act, designed to silence activists because their work threatens existing structures and power relations.

## WHO TO FEAR? ANTI-GENDER FORCES CLOSING IN

Respondents indicate that the main actors behind the threats they receive are governments and authorities (58 percent) and traditional or community leaders (42 percent). Almost four out of ten also point a finger at religious actors, anti-gender movements, and far-right actors.<sup>22</sup> Anti-gender movements can be transnational, or they can be regional or national organisations. Anti-gender rhetoric, however, is used by and unites all of these groups, which often collaborate. The result is a powerful movement that opposes women's and LGBTQI+ rights.

Photo: Liora Končar



Serbia March 8, 2023. "I don't want a flower. I want a revolution."

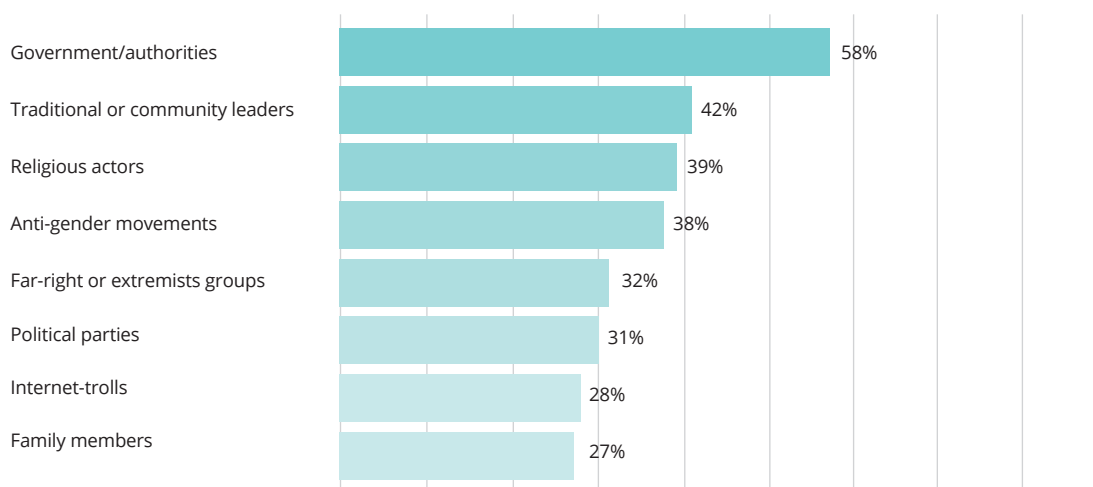
<sup>19</sup> Front Line Defenders: Global Analysis 2022. 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Global Witness's report from 2023, 'Standing Firm: The Land and Environmental Defenders on the frontlines of the climate crisis', states: "Female defenders were subjected to 11% of the total number of lethal attacks. A relatively small percentage at first sight, this figure hides a much more complex reality. Many forms of gender-specific violence – ranging from sexual violence to rejection by their families and communities – are inflicted on women. Women defenders therefore face attacks on two fronts – as well as being targeted for their activism, they also face gender-specific rights violations."

<sup>21</sup> The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders recently touched on this, on page 3 of her 2023 report 'Success through Perseverance and Solidarity: 25 Years of Achievements by Human Rights Defenders'.

<sup>22</sup> Anti-gender movements can include religious actors, traditional leaders, far-right, conservative and 'pro-life' actors, and even governments, but the term can also refer to individuals and organisations that specifically oppose these issues, such as CitizenGo and World Congress of Families.

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



### Governments and leaders a growing threat

The top five actors behind the threats differs from previous surveys. In our 2021 survey, only 32 percent indicated that government and authorities were the ones behind the threats.

The trend is global: government and authorities are one of the top three main sources of threats in every region. Clearly, they are pushing back against civil society. This is perhaps unsurprising, as there are more closed autocracies than liberal democracies in the world today (a situation not seen since before the fall of the Berlin Wall).<sup>23</sup> Another contributing factor are restrictions on freedom of assembly that were put in place during the covid pandemic and that have not been rolled back since.<sup>24</sup> In the South Caucasus and South-East Asia, the problem appears gravest: over 80 percent of respondents in these regions point at governments and authorities. Reasons behind this disparity might include Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, ongoing and unresolved conflicts in the South Caucasus, and political unrest in South-East Asia.

In conflict-affected areas, the military and/or militias are another key source of threats. Aziza Bagwene, an activist from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, says 'regular' threats and violence can be dealt with, while military violence can be a matter of life and death. "We are most afraid of the war lords, as they can just kill us. Right now, it is the army that



Light ceremony in the Philippines.

is threatening, because they don't want us to be out in public." In South Asia, the Taliban plays a similar role. One activist from the region recounts how they imprisoned her for 41 days because of her work for human and women's rights.<sup>25</sup>

### Anti-gender and far-right actors on the march

This year, a significantly higher number of respondents point to anti-gender movements and far-right extremists as being behind the threats and harassment they face. There is a similar rise in all regions, although Europe stands out. In the Western Balkans, 53 percent indicate that anti-gender forces are behind the harassment; in the South Caucasus, the figure is 65 percent.

<sup>23</sup> V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg: Democracy Report 2023. Defiance in the Face of Autocratization. 2023: p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Our World in Data: COVID-19: Cancellation of Public Events and Gatherings. 2022.

<sup>25</sup> The development in Afghanistan is difficult and dangerous to follow, but some organisations are trying to monitor civic space. The Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization (<https://srmo.org/>) publishes quarterly reports on the situation.



Iraqi Women's League demonstration in Baghdad, Iraq.

In both regions, anti-gender forces are an innate part of power structures: political leaders and anti-gender actors cooperate and are sometimes even one and the same. This is obvious in North Macedonia. Sonja Hadji Nikolov from the organisation Akcia Zdruzenska mentions the country's Secretariat for Gender Equality as an example. These days, she says, it seems to be 'an executor of traditional values', while its job should be coordinating gender equality and gender mainstreaming in governmental policies. "Everything changed dramatically in a very short term. Before, we found open institutions to talk to and new target groups that wanted to work with us. Now, there is a new reality."

Kenyan queer activist Yvonne (Yvee) Oduor from the organisation galck+ feels the anti-gender movement has become stronger in her country since the covid pandemic. "The anti-gender movement has so much power, they control everything, including our politicians. They fuel hate, and the government—which consists of conservative evangelicals—won't

condemn the violence. And because the anti-gender movement is better funded these days, they're more of a threat."

### Fearing your own family

Globally, one in four respondents say that their family members harass and threaten them. This appears to be more of a problem in some regions than others. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the number rises to 51 percent.

One Egyptian women's rights activist tells us her mother demands a monthly bribe from her in return for keeping her activism a secret from the rest of the family. If her brother would find out, her work, and possibly even her life, would be in danger. Rajaa Fadhil from the Al Raja Foundation in Iraq explains that husbands, fathers and brothers can prevent women from carrying out their work. "Sometimes, [male relatives] don't allow us to travel and do certain things. Friends and relatives question our work a lot."



Activist  
DRC

**...the constant fear that our children might be kidnapped by their father's extended family makes our work very fragile...**

### **Anonymous hatred spouted behind screens**

Threats and hatred often occur in digital channels. Online threats can remain confined to online spaces, but can also lead to actual violence in real life. Mary Lawlor, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, writes in her latest report about how women's rights and queer rights activists, bloggers and researchers in Ukraine have had their identities exposed by far-right Telegram channels, often followed by hate and discriminatory comments. They have also had their home addresses published along with those of their parents. Such threats are often not taken seriously by the police.<sup>26</sup> A similar situation happened in Liberia, when people in the LGBTQI+ community were outed on TikTok, which led to harassments against them.

Avoiding online harassment is hard: many activists restrict what they share on social media, but social media are often a necessary tool in their activism.

Yvonne Oduor from Kenya has stopped using some social media: "I had more than 5,000 followers on Facebook, which I used to raise awareness of LGBTQI issues. But there were a lot of haters and it became more and more vile, so I couldn't do it anymore. I left Facebook because of the hate. It's easier to handle Instagram and Twitter, to just block, mute, delete."



Activist  
Sub-Saharan Africa

**You need to be present on social media. But as soon as you're active, you get digital hatred and threats, and messages on your phone from hidden numbers. Can you imagine how that feels?**



A peace and women's rights advocate from Quezon City in the Philippines altered her behaviour after activists, journalists, leftist leaders, and lawyers in her country were targeted on Facebook and X/Twitter for speaking out against former president Duterte's war on drugs. "You'd receive messages saying 'we will rape your daughter', and trolls would follow you until you stopped posting messages that were critical of the government. So you stop posting or make your posts private, because you're scared for yourself and your family."

Many respondents say 'internet trolls' are a source of harassment. Sometimes it is obvious who these voices are, sometimes it isn't. "We really don't know," one activist from sub-Saharan Africa says. "Maybe it's people who want to stop us because they believe we're recruiting people to be homosexual. We try to assess [these posts], but we can't really see who's behind them."

Ruby Kholifah from the Asia Muslim Action Network in Indonesia has a progressive, woman-friendly view of Islam. When she writes about this on X/Twitter, the backlash is fierce. "I know it comes from radical groups, from extremists; it's their narrative. But I'm not concerned with who it is. I have my own way of dealing with it. We produce [alternative] narratives online, so people also get to hear that side. If we don't speak up, then the conservative side is the only one heard."

<sup>26</sup> United Nations: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders. Pathways to peace: women human rights defenders in conflict, post-conflict and crisis-affected settings. 2023: p.15.

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# ATTACKED BY A SWARM OF BOTS

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Bots (short for robots that simulate human activity online)<sup>27</sup> tend to be cleverly programmed, but a staff member from Kvinna till Kvinna's Serbia office says they are easy to spot. "A social media post usually gets a standard number of comments in relation to the page's number of followers. A post about a new report might get a handful of reactions, for example. When an activist or organisation is attacked by bots, however, there are suddenly thousands of comments, all along the lines of 'you're sick and should be murdered'. Russian-organised bots are among the strongest in the world. They're produced at an unstoppable rate and flood social media accounts and online media portals."<sup>28</sup>

Bots are easily mobilised, almost like an army. They use social media algorithms to identify interesting posts, then destroy them in less than a day. Usually, bots are too numerous to block, and reporting each offensive comment would take days, with no guarantee that the comments would actually be removed. "It happens so fast—they choose you, hack you, and upload hundreds of photos of, say, children's pornography, which automatically gets you banned for good. You lose all access to your account, including your contacts," Kvinna till Kvinna staff member explains.

On the other side of the globe, a peace and women's rights advocate from Quezon City in the Philippines has had a similar experience. "We tried to create a 'fairy farm' to counteract the troll farm, being supportive and saying something about all the fake news. But we did so for a short time only, because it was so draining: there are thousands of trolls. We received thousands of hate messages straight away."

## Opposition from within the movement

In our last survey, we were surprised by how many respondents indicated that opposition came from other civil society actors, even feminist organisations. This might have been a result of the covid-19 pandemic: lockdowns prevented activists from meeting and discussing things with each other, which sometimes led to tension.

In this year's survey, few respondents state that civil society is a source of threat. Still, disputes among activists are not uncommon. Different generations can clash with each other, urban and rural activists have different priorities, activists compete for the same scarce resources, etcetera.

Whether or not LGBTQI+ rights should be part of the struggle for women's rights is often a controversial issue. One queer rights activist from sub-Saharan Africa doesn't feel accepted by women's rights activists. "We are not really welcomed in the feminist

movement. They use different explanations for our exclusion. They forget that we too want to be—and are—part of the same fight."

In conflict settings, there can be a split between those who leave the country and those who remain behind. This can make it hard for the two groups to understand each other's situation and roles. One respondent says Russia's invasion has created a divide in the Ukrainian women's movement. "Some left Ukraine, some are still there. We need to find internal resources to talk to each other."

Working in exile can also pose new kinds of threats to activists. Olga Karach from the Belarusian human rights organisation Our House is still threatened by the Belarusian government, even though she now works from Lithuania. Her photo has been shown on TV in Belarus, with the caption 'devil', and the Belarusian state security committee calls her an 'extremist' and 'terrorist'.

<sup>27</sup> 'Bot' is short for robot and refers to computer programmes that simulate human activity and operate independently, without instructions from human beings. Bots are an increasingly common and difficult opponent for activists to deal with.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, University of Oxford <https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2019/09/CyberTroop-Report19.pdf> and The Washington Post's <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/04/16/russia-disinformation-discord-leaked-documents/>





Meeting organised by Rwanda Women's Network.

Sometimes, those who go into exile feel guilty or worry that they should work harder, because they were lucky enough to be able to escape. María Teresa Blandón from Nicaragua feels it comes with a certain responsibility. "Being outside of the country, putting a name to the resistance is my duty."

### LGBTQI+ RIGHTS MOST DANGEROUS

According to our respondents, the issues that put activists most at risk are LGBTQI+ rights (35 percent), combating discriminatory traditional values and anti-gender rhetoric (33 percent), and countering corruption (25 percent).

Working for LGBTQI+ rights appears to have become more dangerous in many regions. In its most recent global analysis, Front Line Defenders writes that "a combination of brutal violence, impunity, criminality, discrimination and transphobia against diverse sexual and gender identities continued to impede the human rights work of LGBTQI+ defenders [in 2022]."<sup>29</sup>

Compared to our last survey, there has been a significant shift in sub-Saharan Africa, where 38 percent of respondents now say working on LGBTQI+ rights is risky. Even though there has

been a positive development in some countries (such as Gabon, Botswana, South Africa, and Namibia) these past few years,<sup>30</sup> the issue remains controversial in the region. Yvonne Oduor, a queer activist from Kenya, has become more careful about the places she frequents. "Physically, I feel more insecure. When I'm invited somewhere, I always need to think about whether it's worth it."



<sup>29</sup> Front Line Defenders: Global Analysis 2022. 2022: p. 17.

<sup>30</sup> D+C: LGBTQ rights in Africa – between progress and backlash. 2023.



Amporn Marddent, Thai scholar and activist.



Tamta Mikeladze from Social Justice Center in Georgia.

Few respondents from the MENA region mention that LGBTQI+ rights are dangerous to work with. This does not mean that working with the issue is unproblematic in the region. In many MENA countries, surveillance and oppression of LGBTQI+ activists is so severe that they either cannot conduct their work or have to do so in secret. Instead of LGBTQI+ rights, MENA respondents say that combatting traditional values and anti-gender rhetoric is the number one issue that puts them at risk.

In South-East Asia, anti-militarism seems more dangerous to engage in than in other regions. This probably has to do with the conflicts in the region, for example the military junta in Myanmar, where many respondents are based. Amporn Marddent, a Thai scholar and activist, says that those at greatest risk in her country are human rights activists who work on specific cases, such as murders or violations of women in conflict areas.

## Government approval legitimising harassments

When governments 'sanction' hatred against activists through legislation, policies, and statements, this often worsens harassment and leads to impunity.

Sama Awiedah from the Women's Studies Center in Palestine receives comments on Facebook saying that she and other activists should be killed. "Some people say it's empty threats, because they never do anything. But even so, the things they write can make someone else do something."

Tamta Mikeladze from Social Justice Center in Georgia says attacks against women's rights organisations, and LGBTQI+ organisations in particular, have increased with the blessing of the current government. "There have been quite a few interviews with the prime minister about how bad NGOs are. He claims we're fuelling hatred in society, as we work for minority rights." Large posters were put up in the Tbilisi metro, with portraits of activists—including Tamta. "I use public transport a lot, and suddenly that wasn't safe as there were posters of me that said I was a traitor and an enemy of the church. The language was very aggressive. Officially, it's not the government that's behind the posters, but no one can [put up ads] in the metro without the permission of the authorities. And the government uses the same phrases as on the posters."

In Tunisia too, matters are rapidly getting worse for women's rights organisations. President Kaïs Saïed has been copying the authoritarianism of neighbouring countries like Egypt. Add to this dangerous populism, and you can see why Tunisian women's and queer rights activists have plenty to fear. "The populist regime has created a hostile environment in which people are made to doubt human rights activists," says a women's rights activist in Tunisia. "Feminist organisations are seen as untrustworthy and as pushing a Western agenda that doesn't benefit Tunisian people. This is part of a strategy: we don't have bread, there's no sugar, so [the president] needs someone to blame."

In February 2022, a draft law that would forbid organisations from working with controversial issues was leaked in Tunisia. The leak resulted in a wave of protest. "I'm sure it was leaked intentionally, to test if it would fly. I have no doubt that [the authorities] will pass a very restrictive law when the time is right. They're doing what neighbouring governments have done, they're waiting to consolidate their power before they act."



Activist  
Tunisia

**The only positive thing I can see is that civil society keeps fighting. They're out on the streets, vocally demanding change. But they can only react: they don't have the luxury of working on their own agenda, it's all about holding the line.**

Photo: Maja Janewska Ilijeva



From 8th of March protests 2023 in North Macedonia.

## **A NARROW PLACE IN A SHRINKING SPACE**

After the covid pandemic, there was much talk around the world of 'building back better'. Today, this is a distant memory: the opposite seems to be happening instead. Developmental gaps between and within countries have widened, poverty has increased, and the climate crisis has accelerated. At the same time, authoritarianism is on the rise and democracy is backsliding—a toxic blend for women's and LGBTQI+ rights.<sup>31</sup>

In 2023, Freedom House published its Freedom of the World index for the fiftieth time. It sounded

the alarm over the "widespread assault on the civil liberties that can be used to hold governments to account—most notably, freedom of expression" that has been occurring these past five decades.<sup>32</sup> For seventeen years in a row, the report noted, countries that are becoming less liberal have outnumbered countries becoming freer. Similarly, Civicus' State of Civil Society Report this year found that the right to protest is under attack all over the world, "whether people are mobilising to seek economic justice, democracy, human rights and environmental action or articulate other demands".<sup>33</sup>

In our survey, we asked women's and queer rights activists about the freedom they have as activists. 46 percent of the respondents feel that civic space has shrunk in the past five years—an increase of around 6 percentage points from 2021. Just 22 percent say that their space has increased.

In South Asia, the problem appears particularly dire: 21 percent report that their space to work as an activist has been entirely closed for the last five years, compared to the global average of 5 percent. South Asian respondents say that their freedom as activists depends on where they work and who is in power. "Duterte's term had a chilling effect on us all," one peace and women's rights activist from the Philippines says. "It affected our courage and bravery. We continue our work, but we're more subtle. We haven't stopped, we've just slowed down."

## **Wasting time seeking funding**

Shrinking civic space manifests itself in different ways, but there is a similar pattern between regions and over time. 45 percent of respondents say it is getting harder to find funding for their work: funding opportunities are both becoming rarer and more difficult to access.



Sonja Hadji Nikolov  
North Macedonia

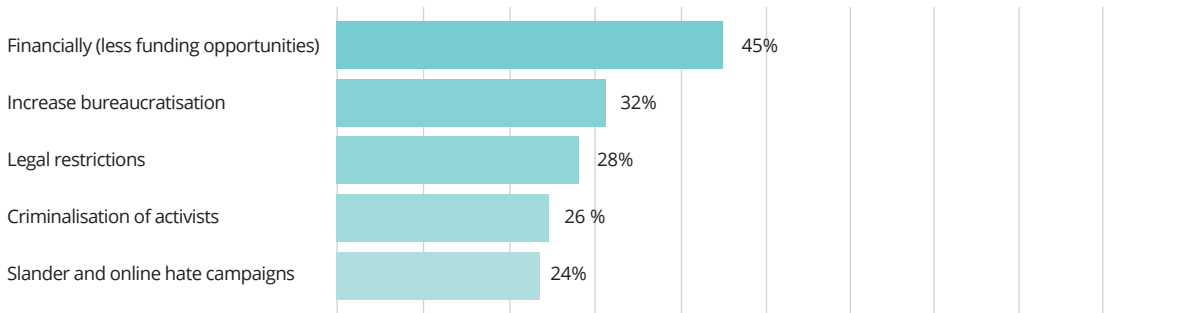
**We waste so much time writing proposals to survive financially. There's no time to lift our heads, see what is happening and strategise against the anti-gender movement. We are exhausted.**

<sup>31</sup> The World Bank: Covid-19 leaves a legacy of rising poverty and widening inequality. 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Freedom House: Freedom in the World 2023. 2023: p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Civicus: State of Civil Society Report 2023. 2023: p. 7.

**How does the shrinking space for civil society manifest itself? What do you see as the main obstacles? (multiple choice, max 3)**



When activists from 87 women-led organisations from around the world met in Berlin in May 2023, at a meeting organised by the Women Peace and Humanitarian Fund, they drafted a manifesto. Funding was one of the document's main points: "The scarcity of funding makes it more difficult for us to operate and pushes us to compete rather than build coalitions and synergies. Funding opportunities are often project-based, short-term, and inflexible. As a result, we struggle to pay our staff and sustain our work."<sup>34</sup>

**Bureaucratic hurdles**

Shrinking civic space also manifests itself as bureaucratisation: time-consuming registration and renewal processes, difficulties opening a bank account, stringent and often random reporting requirements, etcetera. More than one in four say legal restrictions hinder their work, a slight increase from last survey. This reflects the fact that many respondents feel governments are becoming more authoritarian.

Several respondents lament the fact that the international community, including the UN, has done little to help activists in closed spaces and that it keeps silent even when things are rapidly getting worse for civil society. Holding international conferences (like COP in Egypt and the World Bank/IMF annual meeting in Morocco) in countries where civil society is harshly restricted is one example. When conferences are held in these places, the state benefits from the increase in tourism and the positive attention, while activists



**We applied for our certificate of compliance in June 2021, submitting all the necessary documents. Later that month, they asked us to change our organisation's name, which we did. Since then, we haven't heard anything. We've followed up multiple times, but there has been no response. We don't know why. Maybe they know that we support the queer community? Maybe it's the competition from other 'big fish' organisations?**

are prevented from participating in the conference and having their voices heard.<sup>35</sup>

**Factors behind the shrinking space**

We asked survey respondents what they believe the reasons behind the shrinking civic space are. The most common response by far is that governments fear political change and the power of civil society (58 percent). The second most popular

<sup>34</sup> Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund: Berlin Declaration 2023. Women Peacebuilders, Humanitarian Responders and Human Rights Defenders Call on the World to Invest in their Work on the Frontlines. 2023.

<sup>35</sup> Amnesty International: Egypt: Arrests over calls for protests during COP27 expose reality of human rights crisis. 6 November 2022. The Guardian: Civil society groups report surveillance and intimidation at COP27. 10 November 2022.

During the women's rights conference Women Deliver in Rwanda, many delegates were shocked by the fact that the opening speech was delivered by Hungarian president Katalin Novák, an anti-abortionist who has been criticised for her anti-equality views. See [www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/jul/19/gut-churning-anger-as-hungarian-president-addresses-major-womens-rights-conference](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/jul/19/gut-churning-anger-as-hungarian-president-addresses-major-womens-rights-conference).



Women’s Peace Caucus in the Democratic Republic of the Congo organised a roundtable discussion between political party leaders and potential women candidates in the run-up to the 2023 elections.

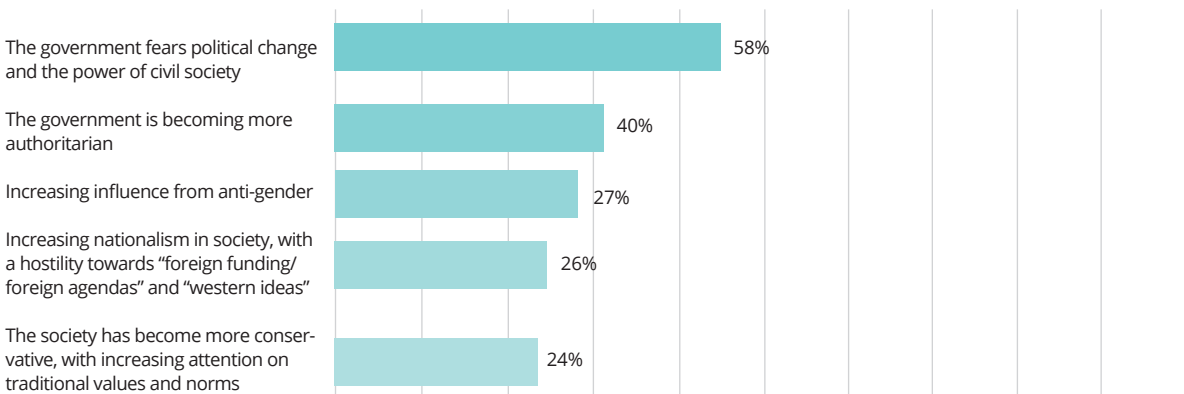
answer is authoritarian governments (40 percent). These two results are the same as in previous surveys, which indicates that the repression of civil society is ongoing. The third most common reason respondents cite is the increasing influence of anti-gender movements (27 percent).

In many contexts of shrinking/closed civic space, governments suppress civil society in covert ways, to avoid international criticism. Some only work with so-called ‘GONGOS’—government-operated non-governmental organisations. These organisations look like civil society organisations but are actually closely linked to or created by the authorities.



**The government is wise enough to select a group of civil society organisations to work with, [as a] show to the international community [...] These organisations are ‘real’ in the sense that they exist, but the freedom is not there, their right to speak freely is limited.**

**If you work in a context of shrinking or closed civic space, what do you think is the reason(s) behind it? (multiple choice, max 3)**





This is the last photo taken at the La Corriente office, when it was shut down by the Nicaraguan government. "We painted a big feminist mural on the wall. After this, I closed the door and did not return", says María Teresa Blandón.

## "I WAS LUCKY, SOME OF MY COLLEAGUES WERE NOT"

In Nicaragua, the slide from relative freedom to zero space for civil society happened quickly.

Human rights activist Wendy Flores had been working against gender-based violence in Nicaragua for years. There had been a backlash against democracy and human rights for a while, she says, but it was when people in cities, especially young people, took to the streets in protest in April 2018 that the government responded with brutal force. Many people disappeared, had their assets taken, and were arrested, tortured, and even killed by the military or the police. After the protests had been violently quashed, the government began to shut down civil society organisations.

"In December that year, my organisation was one of the first to be silenced. We didn't feel safe and had no security plans. We couldn't go home, our houses were being monitored. We desperately tried to flee. I took nothing but my computer and

left. I was lucky, some of my colleagues were not. They were arrested by the military when they tried to escape."

María Teresa Blandón, head of the Nicaraguan women's rights organisation La Corriente, remembers the horror. Feminist organisations were prime targets of the government's purge. "Most of the feminist organisations that existed have been closed, their assets confiscated. We ourselves were shut down in April 2022." Around 3,000 organisations, many of them women's rights organisations and rural women's communal houses, suffered a similar fate, María Teresa says.

She herself is currently in Costa Rica. More than 300 Nicaraguans have had their citizenship revoked. "[The authorities] simply deleted them from the registers, they do not exist, they're no longer citizens. Only one dictator ever did something similar, and that was Pinochet."

## Suddenly, anyone can be called a terrorist

The steady shrinking of civic space can also partly be explained by the anti-terrorism measures that were adopted after the 9/11 terror attacks in the USA. Registration processes became more resource- and time-intensive, for example.<sup>36</sup> Banks became more cautious when working with NGOs. Some organisations are now unable to open a bank account or have had their existing account

suspended, and international donors (like Kvinna till Kvinna) are prevented from sending funds to civil society organisations.<sup>37</sup>

Following 9/11, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF, a global money laundering and terrorist financing watchdog<sup>38</sup>) adopted Recommendation 8. This recommendation warned that non-profit organisations are particularly vulnerable to being used by terrorists for money laundering—even

Photo: Regina Jegerova-Asterova/Kvinna till Kvinna



Feminist demonstrations in Tbilisi, Georgia.

<sup>36</sup> UN OHCHR: Global study on the impact of counter-terrorism measures on civil society and civic space. 2023.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Financial Action Task Force: Recommendations are the global standards against money laundering and terrorist financing. 2021-2023.

though there is a lack of evidence for this. Once the FATF's recommendation was published, many countries incorporated it into their legislation.<sup>39</sup> Although FATF has since revised the recommendation, states still use it to repress civil society and detain activists, all under the pretext of protecting national security.<sup>40</sup>

Another issue is the fact that there is no universally recognised definition of 'terrorism': technically, anyone can be labelled a terrorist. In 2023, the UN published a study on the global impact of counter-terrorism measures on civil society. It found that blurry definitions allow states to label women's rights activists as 'terrorists', 'threats to national security' and 'foreign agents', which in turn legitimises hatred and harassment towards them.<sup>41</sup> In 2020 (referring to an anti-terrorist crackdown on Filipino civil society), the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights noted that 'red-tagging'—labelling individuals and groups as communists or terrorists—has been a persistent and powerful threat to civil society and freedom of expression for decades.<sup>42</sup>

## THREATS AND HARASSMENT —PART OF THE JOB?

Unfortunately, attempts to silence women's rights activists have become normalised. Organisations and activists have become accustomed to facing harassment, threats, and violence. In our 2021 report *Solidarity is Our Only Weapon*, one activist called it "part of everyday work".<sup>43</sup>

When we asked activists how their work had been affected, many mention that they have become more conscious of what they say, to whom, and how. One in ten report censoring themselves. Many have stopped talking to the press and have either left social media or restricted their use of it. Some have moved to a different neighbourhood to become more anonymous, or even left the country. All of these measures take time and energy.

Still, just over a third of respondents proclaim that they do not let threats and harassment affect their work. Sama Awiedah from the Women's Studies Center in Palestine is targeted by both political parties and religious leaders, but does not let it get her down. When we interviewed her in June 2023,

she said: "I close the windows when I'm home, but other than that I don't do anything. I try to go out with friends. You might not believe this, but I used to be afraid, but now I am not."

One in five say that threats actually motivate them. Aziza Bagwene, founder of AFEM in the DRC, says that being an activist is a calling. "[Once] you start, you cannot stop. I began 30 years ago; at times I thought of going into exile, but I am still here. [Working for women's rights] demands sacrifice." In that sense, the survey reflects the resilience of women's rights activists. Several respondents mention that they refuse to stop because they want to change the world for future generations.

Still, several interviewees and survey respondents lament the fact that there is little to no protection for them in society. On the contrary: it is usually up to activists themselves to decide which security measures to take, and to then implement those measures (often on a meagre budget).

 **Activist**  
Iraq

**We are very careful in our organisation. We start early in the morning and try to leave the office by 2pm, when the streets are empty.**

 **Survey respondent**

**I quit my job, changed my place of residence, and [stopped doing] fieldwork.**

<sup>39</sup> Front Line Defenders: *Global Analysis 2022*. 2022: p. 12.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*: p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> UN OHCHR: *Global study on the impact of counter-terrorism measures on civil society and civic space*. 2023: p. 29.

<sup>42</sup> UN OHCHR: *Situation of human rights in the Philippines*. Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. 2020.

<sup>43</sup> *Kvinna till Kvinna: Solidarity is Our Only Weapon*. 2021.





**Activist**  
Bosnia and Herzegovina

**It's a dark, dark atmosphere. [...] We don't have any protection, not from the police, not from the system, and not from fellow citizens.**



**Survey respondent**

**It has affected my mental health, I've started having anxiety.**



**Survey respondent**

**I love reality television, to escape for a while.**



**Activist**  
Western Balkans

**That strong glow we used to have—we need to get back to it. Now, we're dealing with survival and burnout. We ask ourselves whether it's worth it. We love what we're doing, but what do you do when you're attacked from every side?**



**Survey respondent**

**I often have a sense of regret that I took this path, a sense of uncertainty.**

Rajaa Fadhil from Iraq stopped writing reports on human rights abuses. Today, she does fieldwork instead. "A couple of years ago, I got threats at home for reporting on sexual abuse. 'We'll kill you if you report on any more cases like this.' I went away for a month. Now, things are calmer and I don't get as many threats—but I'm not reporting. I just do rather than report. If I had continued to report, maybe I would have been killed, so this is my strategy for now."

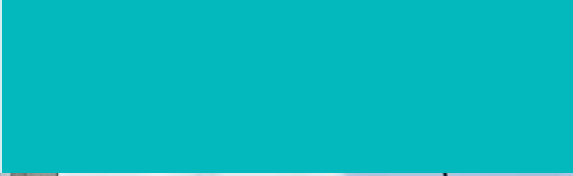
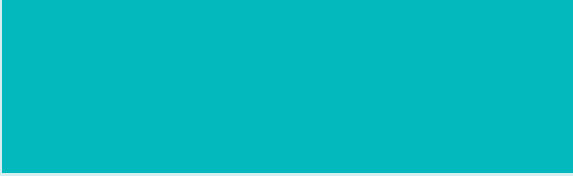
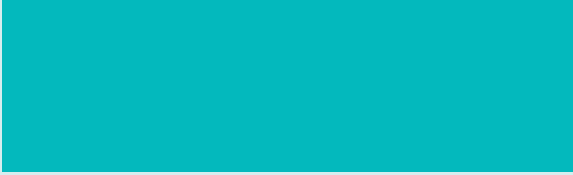
### **The psychological effect of constant fear**

Physical insecurity has practical solutions, like security cameras or offices at secret locations. But constant threats and harassment take a psychological toll on activists. These less tangible mental effects are frequently mentioned by interviewees and survey respondents.

Often, activists find psychological insecurity harder to deal with than physical insecurity. Peace of mind feels like a luxury. Luckily, this is changing: more and more activists are realising how important boundaries and self-care are. When we asked respondents how they take care of themselves, one of their top tips was watching films and TV. But still, in interviews and survey responses, we identify a sense of weariness, even resignation.

The international community should take this weariness seriously and understand that it is a warning sign. Research and experience have taught us that gender equality does not advance without a feminist movement advocating for it.<sup>44</sup> When women's rights organisations are forced to close their social media accounts, stop giving interviews, limit their mobility, spend more time on security and on applying for funding, the feminist voice is silenced. This is a grave problem that affects everyone.

<sup>44</sup> Weldon, L. and Htun, M.: 'Feminist Mobilisation and Progressive Policy Change: Why Governments Take Action to Combat Violence Against Women' in: Gender and Development, Vol. 21:2. 2013: p. 231-247.



Sarajevo Pride festival, Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Photo: Amer Koperanovic

# Anti-gender movements and their allies

Our survey results and interviews with activists paint a clear picture: a loose-knit web of anti-gender and anti-rights groups has been attacking women's and LGBTQI+ rights around the world, hand in hand with climate deniers, far-right sympathisers, nationalists, and authoritarian movements.<sup>45</sup> Together, they pose a serious threat to democracy and human rights. In this section, we will take a closer look at anti-gender movements and their allies, and the consequences their increasing power has on women's and queer rights activists.

## WHAT DOES 'ANTI-GENDER' MEAN?

The term 'anti-gender' was coined and popularised by the Vatican in the late twentieth century, in reaction to progress made by the women's rights and LGBTQI+ movements and the introduction of gender studies at universities.<sup>46</sup> During the high-level UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (1994) and the World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), advances were made in the way the world spoke about gender. In Cairo, the notion of sexual and reproductive rights for women was introduced; in Beijing, the word 'gender' replaced 'sex' in a UN context. The Vatican and likeminded states and organisations viewed this as a major ideological defeat: they consider biological sex a representation of a 'natural' order, and gender as sheer invention and ideology.<sup>47</sup>

The anti-gender narrative has been adopted by conservative and religious groups, parliaments, and political fringe actors to attack human rights, deny climate change, undermine research, and promote authoritarianism.<sup>48</sup> This has resulted in unlikely alliances between Orthodox communities, Catholics, Islamists, right-wing secularists, nationalists, populists, and conservatives.<sup>49</sup> In many contexts, these actors seem to use the anti-gender narrative as a tool to gain or maintain power.

When we speak about 'anti-gender movements', we are referring not to a single movement, but rather to a range of anti-rights groups. While they operate in different ways, they all actively wish to



<sup>45</sup> Kvinna till Kvinna: Patriotism and Patriarchy. 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Korolczuk, E.: 'The Vatican and the Birth of Anti-Gender Studies', in: Religion & Gender, Vol. 6:2. 2016: p. 294.

<sup>47</sup> Kvinna till Kvinna and EuroMed Rights: The Fierce and Furious. 2019: p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Global Philanthropy Project: Meet the Moment: A Call for Progressive Philanthropic Response to the Anti-Gender Movement. 2020: p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Kvinna till Kvinna and EuroMed Rights: The Fierce and Furious. 2019: p. 5.



**Activist**  
North Macedonia

**Our funds are all earmarked for specific projects and activities. Fighting the anti-gender movement is extra work we do on the side—which means we need extra resources.**

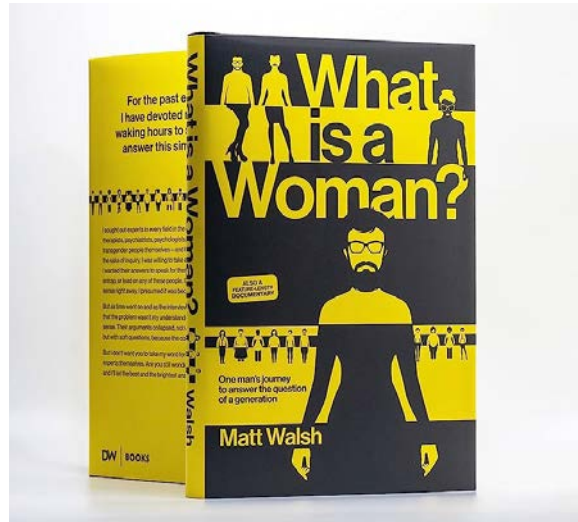
undo advances to women’s and LGBTQI+ rights. Anti-gender movements around the world share a surprisingly similar narrative. To them, the world is binary: it consists of ‘we’ (traditionalists and nationalists who claim to protect children, family values, order, and, in some cases, religion) and ‘they’ (progressives, liberals, and feminists, who are destroying traditional values, encouraging depravity, and harming children). The term ‘gender ideology’ has become a symbol for the fight against this evil ‘them’.<sup>50</sup> Anti-gender movements view what is happening as a cultural war of ideas and ideologies.

### **Ironic funding**

Anti-gender movements are often well funded, while women’s rights movements rarely are. The ongoing surge in anti-gender sentiment creates an extra burden on cash-strapped civil society organisations.

While anti-gender movements like to clamour that ‘gender ideology’ is a Western import and that women’s rights organisations are spies financed by foreign countries (the ‘evil West’), much of their own funding actually comes from the USA and countries in Europe. Russia is another main source of funding.

Tracing anti-gender funding is not easy, but AWID has made attempts to do so. In 2021, the organisation found that anti-rights actors continued growing in their financial and political power. For example, the budget of the anti-gender group Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) went from 14 million USD in 2002 to 60 million USD in 2019. The Spanish based anti-gender organisation CitizenGo has senior executives of companies like IBM and Nestlé among its donors. “These enormous resources are put to use in the service of anti-rights agendas around the world, from eroding comprehensive sexuality education in Kenya to vilifying Black Lives Matter activists in the United States.”<sup>51</sup>



## **“WE JUST WANT TO RE-EDUCATE YOU”**

In many countries, questioning traditional values can be a dangerous thing to do. In North Macedonia, the anti-feminist and anti-trans film ‘What is a Woman?’<sup>52</sup> was screened in a small town. A local activist commented on a Facebook post that promoted the screening, simply asking: “Do you have all the information, do you know what you’re supporting and promoting?”



**Activist**  
North Macedonia

It was a polite question, but it still resulted in attacks. When I went to pick up my child from daycare that day, another mother was waiting for me to discuss my ‘bad way of thinking’. The next day, there were two mothers; the day after even more. They said they wanted to re-educate me, so I wouldn’t end up harming the children. I decided to stop picking up my child and send a family member instead.

<sup>50</sup> Kováts, E. and Põim, M. Gender as symbolic glue, the position and role of conservative and far right parties in the anti-gender mobilizations in Europe. 2015.

<sup>51</sup> AWID: Rights at risk, time for action. 2021: p. 7-8. ADF is based in the USA, CitizenGo is headquartered in Madrid. Both have a global outreach.

<sup>52</sup> An American film about gender and transgender issues, presented by conservative political commentator Matt Walsh.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF WORDS

One common anti-gender tactic is to twist the meaning of words to give them a negative connotation and alter people's perception of them. 'Homosexuality' becomes 'paedophilia', gender 'confuses children and makes them gay', feminism means 'hating all men', 'women's rights' are actually about 'the right of the unborn child', etcetera. Words like 'feminist activism' and 'gender-based violence' end up triggering debate.



### Just saying that you're a feminist activist can make it impossible to get married, so many young girls are afraid of the word 'feminist'.

Nicaraguan activist María Teresa Blandón recalls a campaign in her country in 2008 to redefine the term 'feminism'. "Vice-president Rosario Murillo created an infamous campaign. She said she represented 'real feminism', while other feminists, like us, 'benefit from the suffering of women'. She claimed we have an abnormal sexuality, that we are against traditional values and mothers, kill infants, and belong to a culture of death. This discourse is still referred to." Fellow Nicaraguan activist Wendy Flores agrees: "The anti-gender movement hasn't been that strong in our country—mostly, I think, because there hasn't been any need. The state has retaliated against women so much already, there

has been a complete war against the women's movement. There's no need for another movement."

Civil society organisations, especially those that promote women's and LGBTQI+ rights, are discredited, slandered, and portrayed as evil. Civicus found that civil society organisations are often the target of disinformation and hate speech, not least when they fight for the rights of excluded groups. "Disinformation is pervasive in the pushback against women's and LGBTQI+ people's rights: it's deployed in culture wars waged by well-resourced and influential global networks of ultraconservative, nationalist and white supremacist groups—including those that attack women's rights in the name of what they characterise as the rights of the unborn while attacking trans people's rights in the name of women's rights."<sup>53</sup>

Focusing on the meaning of words can be a strategy to prevent debate about topics that truly matter—especially at crucial times, such as in the runup to elections. In North Macedonia, for example, a new gender equality law is currently being discussed. Women's rights organisations have been advocating the changes that the draft law contains for years. Due to a major disinformation campaign, however, public debate does not address the situation for women, violence against women and the women dying in childbirth. Instead, it centres on how civil society wants everyone "to become homosexual or trans, which is of course not true," says activist Sonja Hadji Nikolov. "It's hard to see how we could alter this rhetoric."

Photo: Julia Öregrén



Stockholm Pride 2019. The sign reads "The patriarchy will fall within your lifetime. Just come along."

<sup>53</sup> Civicus: State of Civil Society Report 2023. 2023: p. 9.

## Dictating which words to use

In August 2023, Iraq's official media regulator forbade all media and social media companies operating in the country from using the word 'homosexuality', telling them to say 'sexual deviance' instead. The country's Communications and Media Commission followed suit by banning the term 'gender', which is now to be replaced with 'men and women'. It prohibited all phone and internet companies from mentioning either of the banned terms in their apps.<sup>54</sup>

Following these events, 133 Iraqi women's rights activists signed a statement clarifying the meaning of the word 'gender' and calling on the state to stop demonising the term. Unfortunately, many have since received threats and been urged to withdraw their signature. "It's like things can just disappear into a black hole," one activist sighs.

Some suspect the timing of the authorities' bans is not accidental: elections are coming up in Iraq, so the move may have been done to distract and discredit the women's movement, and stop them from monitoring the elections, supporting female candidates, and promoting issues related to gender equality.



**They [...] create problems to prevent people from thinking about the real problem. Now everyone is busy with the gender thing.**

A municipality in North Macedonia recently wanted to make similar changes to its programme for equal opportunities: it wanted to erase the term 'gender equality' from the programme and define what it means to be a man or a woman. Both the mayor and members of the municipal council supported the change. Thanks to lobbying by women's rights activists, however, it did not go through.

After the whole affair, a women's rights activist from the municipality posted an innocent message about it on Facebook. She then faced a barrage of insults, with people calling her a satanist and traitor. "The municipality no longer cooperates with our organisation, because we support gender equality. Another nearby municipality also refuses to work with us, because the name of one of our projects mentions 'advancing gender equality'."

## Language that legitimises violence

In March 2023, queer activists in Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina, were violently attacked. They had planned a film screening with a panel debate; the event was cancelled last minute by the police, for security reasons. The police told the activists that they should leave town as their safety could not be guaranteed. A few dozen men then chased the activists through the streets, shouting slurs at them and throwing punches. Several activists were physically hurt.



Photo: Mirjana Ribić



The attack happened on the street where I live. Some of my neighbours participated in a way, in their own garden. They weren't part of the group that beat us, but when I tried to go to them, they stopped me and said 'You're not one of us'. That sentence was the worst for me that night. After the attack, we went to the police and reported it. They told us to leave, so we did. I was gone for a month.

<sup>54</sup> Reuters: Iraq bans media from using term 'homosexuality', says they must use 'sexual deviance'. 9 August 2013.

Afterwards, activists accused political leaders of the attack, arguing it was fuelled by the way they speak about the LGBTQI+ community. Days before the attack, Milorad Dodik, the president of Republika Srpska, had reportedly said that LGBTQI+ people were ‘harassers’ and that he hoped “official bodies [would] prevent them from gathering both in closed venues and in the open”.<sup>55</sup> Right after the attack, the town’s mayor tweeted “Banja Luka will remain a bastion of traditionally patriarchal family values and I am proud of that [...]”.<sup>56</sup> According to activist Vanja Stokic, president Dodik likes to claim that there are no gay people in Banja Luka, and that if there would be, they should leave for Sarajevo—the centre of all evil in Bosnia and Herzegovina, according to Dodik. “The government is very focused on traditional values. Many have started seeing us activists as enemies of tradition, as something imported by the evil West. A week ago, my own brother said I should leave Bosnia and go abroad, where I would be more accepted.”

Kenyan politicians too have condoned violence against civil society, according to queer activist Yvonne Oduor. She mentions a parliamentary discussion on queer people’s rights, during which

politicians were openly homophobic and queer-phobic. “They were literally calling for harm and violence towards the community.” Yvonne believes the pandemic paved the way for an increase in anti-gender sentiment. “It started with covid-deniers and anti-vaxxers. Somehow, it became okay to say and do things that weren’t socially acceptable just four years ago. People who used to hide their bigotry on social media are now doing [these things] under their own name. It’s scary.”

### USING ANTI-GENDER TO DISTRACT

Many survey respondents and interviewees tell us that anti-gender actors strategically focus on language and specific words to prevent people from discussing problems that actually matter. The goal is to create a nonsensical narrative that distracts people from seeing the real issues—which helps whoever is behind the distraction gain popularity, win elections, and grab (or stay in) power.

The Berlin-based Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy has analysed anti-gender movements. It notes that conservative actors often do not attack women’s and LGBTQI+ rights for the sake of doing so, but

Photo: Maja Jarevska (Iljvo (NM)) and Lara Koncar (SRB)



8th of March Protests 2023 in the Western Balkans. The sign reads “Let’s go, women”.

<sup>55</sup> AP News: Bosnia: Rights activists assaulted following LGBT event ban. 19 March 2023.

<sup>56</sup> Twitter, Draško Stanivuković (Banja Luka’s mayor). [https://twitter.com/Stanivukovic\\_D/status/1637381511262478338%2019%20March%202023](https://twitter.com/Stanivukovic_D/status/1637381511262478338%2019%20March%202023), translated into English.

rather to strengthen their positions of power and to support social and political hierarchies they fear are threatened and in decline.<sup>57</sup>

Palestinian activist Sama Awidah has observed the same trend. She does not necessarily believe that anti-gender hatred comes from a place of misogyny. Instead, she believes women are targeted because they are considered more vulnerable. “We are seen as the weakest in society, they can

easily ask society to be against us. They see women as followers, not leaders.”

This is also highlighted by the team behind the UK-based research project Countering Backlash: “The current tide of patriarchal backlash is no mere reaction to progress for women’s rights, but rather a complex array of proactive political forces responding to threats and opportunities wrought by multiple global crises.”<sup>58</sup>

## THREATS ARE INCREASING

Photo: Kinana til Kinana/Rana Khoury



**Sama Awidah**

Women’s Studies Centre, Ramallah, Palestine  
Interviewed 21 June 2023

The threats are increasing. These last six months have been very bad. A Facebook page has been writing about our organisation, mentioning me by name. They say that I want to destroy Palestinian society and make everyone LGBTQ. Because I oppose early marriage, they say I want girls to have sex before marriage. They claim that the CEDAW convention encourages people to be LGBTQI+ and call me ‘CEDAWit Sama’.



I feel like I’m used in a political game. Like there’s no protection for me—including by Facebook, which refuses to shut down the page. What they’re doing against me has nothing to do with Islam, it’s all politics. They want to show that they should be in power, because they stand for the right values.

<sup>57</sup> Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy: Power Over Rights - Understanding and Countering the Transnational Anti-Gender Movement, Vol. 1, 2021: p. 12.

<sup>58</sup> Institute of Development Studies: Grasping Patriarchal Backlash: A Brief for Smarter Countermoves. 2023.





Photo: Mariam Mikradze

Feminist march against violence in Tbilisi, Georgia, 2022.

In Georgia, the government has recently sought to distract citizens as a way to maintain power in the 2024 elections. It portrays Georgia as Russia's likely next target, after Ukraine. The underlying message of the ruling party, Georgian Dream, is that it is the only actor that can prevent an attack from happening, by implementing a 'pragmatic approach' and carefully positioning itself between the EU, neighbouring Russia, and Georgia's new strategic partner, China.

Georgians have been sceptical towards the ruling party's ability to stop Russia, given Russia's war against the country in 2008 and the fact that Russia continues to fuel the unresolved conflicts over the disputed breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In response, Georgian Dream has been trying to shift people's attention to the 'danger' that is LGBTQI+ rights, which it depicts as a Western import.



Activist  
Georgia

**We are the only party that can save you from Putin and the homosexuals, they say.**

Staff at Kvinna till Kvinna's South Caucasus office say people are used to witnessing homophobia ahead of elections: "This time, however, things are different: it seems hopeless, the situation is only deteriorating." Independent anti-gender movements (financed by Russia, the Orthodox church, and to some extent nationalist groups) work together. "They can quickly mobilise large mobs to undermine events like Pride, organising transportation from rural villages and even paying people to take part [and protest]."



Tamta Mikeladze  
Georgia

**There's a culture of mistrust for civil society, which the government feeds. We are the enemy.**

### **Hatred enabled by those in power**

The increase in online hatred and threats is often enabled, even spurred on, by those in power. A peace and women's rights advocate from the Philippines tells us that the country's previous president was openly misogynous. "When an Australian nun was raped and killed, he said 'I should have

raped her first, because she was so beautiful.' There were instances when he kissed women on the lips when they came to greet him. Sexism became normalised. Harsh language became normalised."

Religious actors too are fuelling hatred. Amporn Marddent, an anthropologist working at Thammasat University in Thailand, analysed the situation of women in Afghanistan. When the press interviewed her about her findings, she suffered a backlash. "It was widespread. I was bullied in social media by followers of religious influencers. No one talked to me directly, however, only to my family members, who passed on the warnings to me."

A women's rights activist from sub-Saharan Africa has observed how the level of religiousness in her society affects the level of threats women's rights activists face. "Often, they claim that an outspoken woman brings shame to her family."

In Albania, an evangelical pastor known for his anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric heads the Coalition for Family and Life. In February 2023, the Coalition organised its second 'God, Family, Nation' convention in Tirana. Participants included politicians from Austria, the USA, and England, as well as representatives of both the Albanian government and the opposition.<sup>59</sup> Prominent politicians used the gathering as an opportunity to oppose changes to the Albanian Family Code, which would allow for same-sex partnerships.<sup>60</sup>

In Serbia, the main anti-gender actors are state institutions, right-wing organisations, and the Church. They agree on the importance of 'family values', want to ban Pride and sex education, and scale back women's reproductive rights. "The Church has too much influence, not only on state structures but also on ordinary people," one activist from Serbia says.<sup>61</sup>

## SILENTLY SWIMMING IN MUDDY WATER

Our survey respondents and interviewees repeatedly highlight the importance of forging solidarity and building a stronger, intersectional women's rights movement. Stress, competition over scarce funding, security concerns, and constantly being under attack can all lead to exhaustion, self-censorship and polarisation. Anti-gender

movements like to fan the flames of polarisation: division in the women's movement plays right into their hands.<sup>62</sup> In North Macedonia, anti-gender groups co-opted International Women's Day as an occasion to 'protect real women', which they define as mothers, wives, and housewives who stand for traditional values.<sup>63</sup>

Globally, there has been a wave of transphobia. Anti-gender actors have cleverly and strategically capitalised on this, dividing women's organisations and making them turn against each other to prevent them from working for change. One women's rights activist from sub-Saharan Africa mentions how an anti-gender actor bribed trans and queer individuals into publicly stating that being trans or queer is something one is taught, and that conversion therapy works. The bribes were never paid out, but the statements strengthened the narrative on conversion therapy and learnt behaviour.



**Yvonne Oduor**  
Kenya

**It's so irrational. I always try to understand where hate is coming from, but this transphobia, I can't understand it. We see it in the US and other places too. It's such an inexplicable hatred, almost like mass hysteria.**

The more divided the women's movement is, the scarcer safe spaces become. Activists begin to censor themselves. Sonja Hadji Nikolov from North Macedonia describes it as being 'in muddy water'. "We censor ourselves because of the church and the anti-gender movement, but also because of the split within the women's movement. It has made everyone afraid to talk, even in previously safe spaces. Our safe spaces are disappearing." "We should feel safe enough to disagree, but I feel the fear in the room," another activist from the Western Balkans echoes. "We're always very careful, asking ourselves whether we're in the right space to talk," says a sub-Saharan African activist.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, <https://www.syri.net/politike/571478/konventa-e-2-te-pro-familjes-dhe-jetes-akil-pano-familja-shqiptare-e-kercenuar>.

<sup>60</sup> Danaj, E., Čolak, A., Dičić Kostić, N. & Vrbaški, S. Women's Rights in Western Balkans. The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. 2023.

<sup>61</sup> The Centre for Women's Studies and Kvinna till Kvinna: Internal analysis of research on the anti-gender movement's impact on WHRDs. 2023.

<sup>62</sup> Cvetkovic, I. and Velichkovska, M.: 'Overview of Key Findings' in: Who is Afraid of Gender? 2022.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

This self-censorship means many activists now think twice before speaking with the media.

Sonja Hadji Nikolov feels journalists focus on confronting activists rather than promoting serious discussion. “We are never given the space to talk about gender equality. Meanwhile, male representatives of the anti-gender movement are given plenty of airtime to promote their views, without anyone questioning them with arguments and facts.”

When women’s and queer rights activists withdraw from social media and say no to media interviews it means their voices are not heard—a strong indicator of the democratic backslide.

### ANTI-GENDER FORCES IN SWEDEN

Anti-gender movements are not only becoming more influential in conflict and fragile settings, but also in countries in the Global North, where they are subverting the conversation on women’s hu-

man rights and chipping away at gender equality. Sweden, which is known for being a global champion for gender equality, is one example of this.

Following parliamentary elections in the country in 2022, the success of a far-right political party helped a conservative government come into power.<sup>64</sup> While the situation in Sweden isn’t as dire as that in certain other countries, there are clear negative trends. These include heightened levels of hostility and threats against women’s rights advocates, instances of self-censorship, internal divisions in the women’s movement (primarily concerning transgender issues), a spike in anti-gender discourse, and the discrediting of feminist activists through the dissemination of false information. The Swedish NGO Civil Rights Defenders assesses how Swedish citizens view democracy in their country. In 2023, 59 percent of survey respondents worried that Sweden is moving in an anti-democratic direction, in comparison to 44 percent the year before.<sup>65</sup>



Survey respondent

**No one wants to take part in TV debates anymore, because you get too much hate speech, both during the programme and afterwards. It’s exhausting.**



Amporn Marddent  
Thailand

**They say I have no right to speak on behalf of Islam, since I’m a scholar working at a secular university. I keep silent and don’t react when I’m heavily criticised. I continue my work, but don’t speak out in public so much for a certain time. My family worries about me. They support me, but feel that I should stop giving interviews to the media for a while.**



Photo: Kvinna till Kvinna/Jule Granelin-Rizk

From the uprising in Lebanon in 2019 where women took a front position.

<sup>64</sup> Civicus: State of Civil Society Report 2023. 2023: p. 5. Freedom House: Freedom in the World 2023. 2023: p. 28.

<sup>65</sup> Civil Rights Defenders. Ett år efter Tidöavtalet: Synen på Sveriges demokrati. 2023. [https://crd.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Syner-pa-Sveriges-demokrati-ett-ar-efter-Tidoavtalet-CRD\\_Novus-231013.pdf](https://crd.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Syner-pa-Sveriges-demokrati-ett-ar-efter-Tidoavtalet-CRD_Novus-231013.pdf)



Nina Rung finds it particularly concerning how orchestrated the attacks on her are.

Maria Brock, a Malmö University researcher who studies anti-gender movements, concludes that anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric by high-ranking politicians has significant influence on public attitudes, regardless of whether the country's legislation actually reflects their rhetoric. Derogatory expressions by authority figures normalise such attitudes among the population.

Both in Sweden and other countries, anti-gender actors like to argue that "children need to be safeguarded from political indoctrination", Brock says. She notes that far-right political actors strategically mentions

children to rile up its supporters. In 2023, for example, a prominent politician likened storytelling sessions led by drag queens to 'grooming',<sup>66</sup> and associated Pride with paedophilia, asserting that children should not be involved in adults' sexual activities.<sup>67</sup>

In November 2022, Malmö City Library received death threats for allowing drag queens to read stories to children, even though the library had held such events for six years already.<sup>68</sup> In 2023, a trans summer camp for children under the age of 12 had to be cancelled with one day's notice, due to security concerns following threats.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>66</sup> X/Twitter - Björn Söder: <https://twitter.com/bjornsoder/status/1655609688044589059> and <https://twitter.com/bjornsoder/status/1655625383482470420>. 8 May 2023.

<sup>67</sup> Aftonbladet: Björn söder anklagar Pride: 'Kopplingar till pedofili'. 3 August 2023.

<sup>68</sup> Gunilla Fritze. Dödshot efter sagostund med dragqueens på biblioteket i Malmö. SVT Nyheter Skåne. 2022-11-16, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/skane/dodshot-efter-sagostund-pa-biblioteket-i-malmo>, 2023-09-11.

<sup>69</sup> Anders Dalsbro. Transkollo för barn ställdes in efter hot. Expo. 2023-06-05, <https://expo.se/2023/06/transkollo-for-barn-stalldes-efter-hot>.



### Outspoken voices targeted

Research by Lund University shows that women and men in Sweden encounter similar levels of online hatred, but that women are subject to more sexist and harsher comments. These findings highlight the challenges that women face when fulfilling their political responsibilities.<sup>70</sup>

Nina Rung is a lecturer and opinion-maker who focuses on sexual violence and men's violence against women. During her years as a public debater, the nature of the criticism towards her underwent a shift. Rung has received both death threats and threats of sexual assault. Some of these threats were directed at her children. What Rung finds particularly concerning is how orchestrated the attacks are: when one far-right platform criticises her, others follow suit. These past two years, opponents have mainly tried to erode her credibility by disseminating false information, including claims that she would lack academic qualifications.

Bilan Osman is a freelance journalist who specialises in far-right movements. Osman too faces notably more hostility today than she did a decade ago. As a female, black journalist who wears a hijab, she is criticised on multiple levels and subject to daily hateful comments.

### What is the breaking point?

Research shows that hatred, threats, derogatory remarks, and intimidation negatively affect a person's job performance and make them more vigilant.

Bilan Osman's dedication to her work would waver if someone would threaten her child. Her activism has come at a heavy price: because of the harassment and threats, she now lives with a protected identity. Nina Rung continues her work as a lecturer, but often refrains from discussing right-wing extremism and anti-gender issues on social media. Otherwise, she would have to face comments that say she is disgusting and should die, which would cause her significant distress and anxiety.

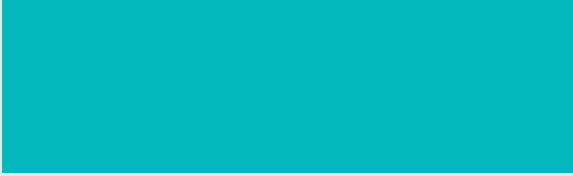
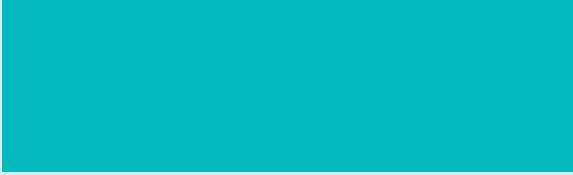
LGBTQI+ activist Elias Fjellander finds online hatred more distressing than threats of physical harm. Being accused of paedophilia on a daily basis, by multiple online accounts, is emotionally draining. As a result, Fjellander has adjusted the way he lives, both in his personal and work life. RFSL Ungdom, the organisation he chairs, sometimes refrains from expressing its stance on certain issues (like transgender rights) on social media, due to the overwhelming volume of comments it would otherwise receive.



Photo: RFSL

Elias Fjellander and RFSL Ungdom sometimes avoid expressing their stand on issues that generate a lot of hate.

<sup>70</sup> Sandra Håkansson. Betalar kvinnor ett högre pris för makten? Hot och våld mot svenska politiker. SNS. 2022. <https://snsse.cdn.triggerfish.cloud/uploads/2022/11/sns-analys-92-betalar-kvinnor-ett-hogre-pris-for-makten.pdf>



Intergenerational workshop bringing together young and senior activists in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.



Photo: Sandra Simbikwira

# Breaking down obstacles



**María Teresa Blandón**  
Nicaragua

**In this world that seems to become harder, it's important to remember that we cannot lose hope. Because otherwise, nothing would happen. Hope and resistance go together.**

Although women's and queer rights activists face seemingly endless obstacles and mounting resistance, their determination is unwavering. In her 2023 report, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders underlined how important it is to highlight victories, to "[counter] an agenda from anti-right movements and Governments who want to portray human rights defenders as being unpatriotic, antidevelopment, or even as traitors, criminals and terrorists".<sup>71</sup>

So, here is a reminder of some of the amazing work feminist activists have been doing in recent years.

## Networking and solidarity

Networking is essential for activists. Many women's rights and queer rights activists have successfully connected and forged alliances with each other.

- In **the Democratic Republic of the Congo**, the women's movement was struggling with an intergenerational divide. To deal with this, Kvinna till Kvinna established a mentor programme to facilitate learning between younger and older activists—in both directions! Participants listed their strengths and weaknesses and were then paired with a suitable mentor/mentee. The results were impressive: young activists now dare to speak up in public, while older activists have learned new ways of working online. "It's about building trust," a staff member from Kvinna till Kvinna's office in Bukavu says.

- When forced to live outside of one's country, connections become even more important. Activist María Teresa Blandón, **Nicaragua**, has teamed up with other exiled activists and received support from regional feminist movements. "Our common platform has helped us a lot. We share information and campaign together."
- Sama Awiedah from **Palestine** says support from other organisations helps her carry on her work, in spite of the attacks she is subjected to. "They write statements in my support and they accompany me to meetings."

## Playing it smart and safe

When obstacles seem insurmountable, activists often find clever ways around them.

- In **Indonesia**, Ruby Kholifah from the Asian Muslim Action Network, is careful in how to talk with the government and what approach will open the doors. Human rights issues are often sensitive, but gender-based violence can be used as an entrance to expand the discussion from the victims of violence to root causes of violence. "With a different approach, the door would have remained closed."
- In **Iraq**, it can be difficult to register an organisation if its proposed name mentions the protection of human rights. But there are ways around this: "Time after time, they rejected the name we wanted for our organisation. Friends suggested rephrasing the name or registering in my own name. Our organisation's name now might not be what we wanted, but it works," activist Rajaa Fadhil tells us.

## Legislation

Research and experience show that gender equality advances when a country has a strong feminist movement. Women's rights and LGBTQI+ organisations push for legislative advancements and monitor their implementation. They inform women

<sup>71</sup> UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders: Success through perseverance and solidarity: 25 years of achievements by human rights defenders. 2023: p. 3.

and girls of their rights, offer women free legal assistance, and accompany them in court.

- Managing to successfully change legislation grants activists visibility, but can also result in more threats. Yvonne Oduor from **Kenya** works for an organisation that has won several court cases. “We are organising at a level that has become a real threat to our opponents.”
- In **the Democratic Republic of the Congo**, parliament is finally considering a law on the protection of human rights defenders. “Today, activists are not protected; they face a lot of threats and struggle to claim their rights. Some activists are killed, some arrested for no reason,” a staff member from Kvinna till Kvinna’s DRC office explains. “This [legal] initiative has started to change that, demanding that activists be protected rather than mistreated by the police, the government and others.”

## Peer protection

Women’s and queer rights activists often face a lot of risk because of their work. The solidarity of fellow activists is a vital source of support.

- In **Central America**, IM-Defensoras offers support to women human rights defenders at risk, contributing to the protection of women’s rights activists through a feminist lens. It helps to create an environment of trust and confidence that allows for quicker responses to emergency situations.<sup>72</sup> They have been a great support to for example the Nicaraguan feminists in exile.
- For years, Kvinna till Kvinna has held Integrated Security workshops for at-risk women’s rights activists. Our workshops are a safe space to discuss threats and exhaustion.<sup>73</sup>
- galck+ in **Kenya** has developed an emergency response mechanism. The organisation not only supports activists, but also monitors the security situation for the queer community in terms of discrimination, harassment, and violence.

## Documenting offences

Documentation is important, especially as a way to reclaim the narrative in environments where facts no longer seem to count.

- Urgent Action Fund Africa (UAF-Africa) has developed the Feminist Republik concept. One of its components is documenting the threats and violations that women’s rights activists in **Africa** experience, and the support and protection they need. The goal is to create a region-wide registry of gendered data. Masa Amir, who works for UAF-Africa, says feminist networks seem to be the most effective type of support.<sup>74</sup>
- Many organisations don’t have the time or money to document security incidents. It is also important to document accomplishments, however. Tamta Mikeladze from **Georgia** works with knowledge-production and the collection of facts. “Conservative groups might discard factbased messaging, but we know that our material is built on knowledge and facts.”

## Finding allies

Another helpful tool for activists is finding allies in different contexts, outside the sphere of civil society.

- In **Kenya**, Yvonne Oduor’s organisation has trained police officers. “The ones we are in contact with will protect us and let us know if something is happening that we need to be aware of.”
- In **Indonesia**, Ruby Kholifah has identified individuals in the government and the police that she trusts. “They are open for us to call them, for example when I visit an area where there are extremists.”



<sup>72</sup> UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders: Success through perseverance and solidarity: 25 years of achievements by human rights defenders. 2023: p. 17.

<sup>73</sup> The concept was created in cooperation with Urgent Action Fund. For more information, see <https://integratedsecuritymanual.org/>.

<sup>74</sup> For more information, see <https://www.uaf-africa.org/journey-towards-the-feminist-republik/>.





Photo: Maja Jansko-Iijeva

## SELF-CARE STRATEGIES FOR ACTIVISTS

Being an activist can be draining. We asked respondents how they take care of themselves and find the strength to carry on.

- I eat better and sleep more.
- Vacation! Weekends are spent not working. I used to work 16 hours a day, until I decided that this needed to stop.
- I've created a queer bubble in my life—all my close friends are queer. It's like a protection, because this way I don't have to interact with queerphobia in my day-to-day life.
- I often go to a psychotherapist. It's expensive, but good.
- I watch a lot of Netflix and reality TV. Something that takes my mind off everything.
- I dance a lot, alone or with friends.
- I have mentors to talk to.
- We go out and eat or do something fun, all of us in the office.
- My family is very supportive. My siblings are some of my best friends, we're always together.
- I have a strong support system. I'm not entirely consumed by activism.
- I regularly go on vacation, exercise after work, and pray.
- I feel safe when I'm in Western countries. I was in London for two weeks, and it wasn't until I got there that I recognised all the tension I had been holding.
- Explore safety tactics, take self-defence classes, carry pepper spray with you, hide your identity online, and be more cautious overall, online and offline.
- Our organisation is interested in wellness and mental health, so some of us are taking courses to learn how to conduct group therapy.



# Recommendations

## YOU NEED OUR KNOWLEDGE. WE NEED YOUR EARS

The activists we interviewed and surveyed tell us that the things they need most from the international community are inclusive funding, networks and solidarity, recognition, and protection. This is what they say:

### Inclusive funding

- We need more money to achieve sustainable results. Multi-year funding allows us to focus on working for change rather than doing administration.
- Donors should not only fund projects, but also core operations. This strengthens our autonomous agendas and helps us become independent.
- Support us based on our strategies, not your own. Donors should talk with us, listen to us, and ask us what we want and need.
- Do not just support big organisations, but also reach out to smaller and newer initiatives. Check whether your criteria prevent any actors from applying for funding. Are non-registered organisations allowed to apply, for example?<sup>75</sup>



### Networks and solidarity

- Encourage regional solidarity! Civic space is shrinking, authoritarian and anti-gender actors are copying each other's actions. Being part of a vibrant network can strengthen our resistance.
- Help us create spaces for activists to meet, network, exchange knowledge and get support, including from the international community.



**International organisations always offer women hairdressing courses. But we work differently; we need to think outside the box, we can't stay in our usual box.**



**Very few donors ask 'what do you need to feel safe—legally, financially, etcetera?' It feels like very few donors are interested in strengthening us as actors.**



**We need safe spaces to be brave spaces.**

<sup>75</sup> Mama Cash and Astraea investigated the funding given to lesbian, bisexual, and queer activists and organisations. They found that within LGBTQI funding—which itself represents less than 1% of all foundation and government funding—just 5% is specifically directed to lesbian, bisexual, and queer issues and communities. See [www.mamacash.org/en/report-vibrant-yet-under-resourced](http://www.mamacash.org/en/report-vibrant-yet-under-resourced).



Girls champions Ange, Yvette and Yvonne participating in training by Rwanda Women's Network.

## Recognition

- Acknowledge our insight. NGOs know what things are truly like on the ground for women, and whether legislation is actually being implemented.
- We want opportunities to come and talk at international conferences or UN/EU offices in our countries. We want to be heard!
- After attacks against activists, the international community sometimes sends letters of concern. That is not enough. You should also demand change in countries where we are being attacked.

## Protection

- At-risk women's rights and queer rights activists need protection and safe spaces where we can breathe.
- Help us achieve justice for activists who are falsely accused and arrested.
- Fight impunity from crimes against women's and queer rights activists, and help make sure perpetrators are arrested and convicted.
- Provide security training to help us be safer.
- Speak up against the silencing of women's rights and queer rights activists.

# KVINNA TILL KVINNA CALLS FOR...

## ACKNOWLEDGE AND CONSULT CIVIL SOCIETY

- International institutions (UN, EU, AU, IMF, World Bank, etc.) should meet with women's and queer rights activists (in a safe way) when visiting a country, developing programmes, and negotiating loans.
- International institutions should inform themselves about the organisations and individuals they meet and learn to identify GONGOs and anti-gender actors, and make sure the meetings are safe for women's rights and queer rights activists.
- Embassies and EU representations should make sure women's and queer rights activists get to speak about political issues with senior political staff.
- Donors and governments should facilitate women's and queer rights activists' participation in regional and international fora, to counter anti-gender forces' presence in these spaces.



## INVEST IN AN INDEPENDENT CIVIL SOCIETY

Donors should radically rethink their funding mechanisms and offer flexible and long-term funding. Human and financial resources allow women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights organisations to be actors of change that safeguard democracy.

Donors should provide funding for safety mechanisms, emergency protection and relocation, trauma/stress management, and psychological wellbeing.

Donors should invest in systems to document attacks against women's rights and queer rights activists. We need greater knowledge of gendered threats, methods to silence activists, ways to support activists, and ways to end impunity for offenders.

Donors and governments should work to bridge the digital divide so that women's and queer rights activists, including those living in rural areas and in poverty, can safely and affordably access the internet.

## SUPPORT WOMEN'S AND QUEER RIGHTS ACTIVISTS

The international community must speak up against authoritarian regimes. It should not keep quiet when activists are attacked or freedom of expression and assembly are under threat.

Donors should invest in countering disinformation, misinformation and propaganda on feminist, gender and political issues.

Donors should support regional solidarity, because networking is vital for activists.

Donors should keep supporting activists in places where civic space is closed or shrinking—even if doing so is hard and does not offer an immediate return on investment. They should avoid funding GONGOs, as this can contribute to the shrinking of civic space.

Governments should make it easier for activists to travel to international meetings or networking gatherings. Activists could be given special 'fast-track' visas, for example, and meetings could be held in countries that speedily process visa applications.

# Thank you!

First of all, a heartfelt thank you to all activists who took the time to answer our survey, to the interviewees who shared their experience and wisdom with us, and to our Kvinna till Kvinna colleagues who supported us with their knowledge, contacts, and analyses.

Thank you to the fellow civil society organisations that helped disseminate our survey among their contacts:

AWID // Concord Sweden's working group on civic space // Countering Backlash Project (IDS) // Civicus // Civil Rights Defenders // Diakonia // Eastern Partnership Network, Sweden // EuroMed Rights // Fos Feminista // Magda Cardenas // Our House // Swedish Institute // Swedish Embassy in Bogota, Colombia // Swedish Committee for Afghanistan // UAF Sister Funds // We Effect // Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund // Zmina

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



# Summary of previous reports

For years, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation has been monitoring the shrinking of civic space and the hatred, threats and violence that women human rights face around the world. Here is an overview of some of our previous reports on the issue.

## **Insist, Persist, Resist, Exist (2008)**

We co-developed this report with the Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights and Front Line Defenders. It draws on over 100 interviews with women's rights activists around the world to look at what types of threats and risks they encounter, why, how, and by whom. The report also discusses the pros and cons of the different strategies women's rights activists use to deal with threats. It concludes that the sustainability of activists' work depends on recognition, safe spaces, time to reflect, discuss, and assess, and solidarity in terms of support and funding.

<https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/insiste-persiste-resiste-existe/>

## **Patriotism and Patriarchy—The Impact of Nationalism on Gender Equality (2014)**

This report is a collaboration between Kvinna till Kvinna and the Swedish organisation EXPO. It focuses on nationalism in Europe and the way it affects women's rights and women's role in society. The first half of the report focuses on the Western Balkans, the second explores five successful nationalist parties in different European countries. The study finds that nationalist policies affect gender equality in many ways: political initiatives that encourage women to stay at home reinforce traditional gender roles, LGBTQI+ people are discriminated against when family policy is based on the idea of the nuclear family, abortion is partially or fully banned, and activists who challenge traditional gender roles face opposition, harassment, and slander.

<https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/patriotism-and-patriarchy/>

## **Femdefenders: The Hatred against Women Human Rights Defenders—Online and Offline (2014)**

This study provides an update of how women human rights defenders are persecuted, threatened, and harassed—physically and verbally, online and offline. It is based on the survey responses of 66 activists from Albania, Armenia, the DRC, Iraqi Kurdistan, and Sweden. The results reveal that more than 60 percent of women human rights defenders have been subjected to online or offline threats or violence because of their work. Respondents say it is most dangerous for them to combat violence against women, promote gender equality, and fight corruption.

<https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/femdefenders-the-hatred-against-women-human-rights-defenders/>

## **Femdefenders: Young Women Who Tear Down Barriers (2015)**

This report features the stories of young feminists from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia and Sweden who participated in Kvinna till Kvinna's Young Women's Peace Academy. It is based on a survey of 128 participants, who were asked about the power they feel they have to influence their societies, the opposition they encounter, and what gives them the energy and courage to continue their struggle. Respondents say that the main actors who oppose their work are religious and traditional leaders, political parties and their leaders, the state (the police, the legal system, the military, etc.), nationalist movements, and their own families.

<https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/femdefenders-2015/>

## **Building Resilience—Counteracting the Shrinking Space for Women's Rights (2017)**

This report is a precursor to 'Suffocating the Movement'. It discusses common strategies, like threats, harassment and violence, that are used to narrow civic space for women human rights defenders.

<https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/building-resilience/>



### **Suffocating the Movement— Shrinking Space for Women’s Rights (2018)**

This is one of the first reports globally on the gendered aspects of shrinking civic space. It reveals that gender equality and democracy are at risk in many parts of the world, not least because of nationalist, extremist, and conservative values that limit activists’ space to lobby for human rights. The report is based on a survey of 123 women’s rights activists from 32 countries in the MENA region, Africa, Europe, and the South Caucasus. Most of the respondents say that their governments are so afraid of losing power that they have become paranoid and now view civil society as the enemy. Respondents add that increasing nationalism and a focus on traditional gender roles prevent women from speaking out about political issues, and that civil society is being suffocated by restrictive laws, blocked funding, travel bans, and arrests. The price activists pay for challenging norms is shaming, sexual harassment, and attacks.

<https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/suffocating-the-movement/>

(For a Swedish summary, see ‘Så tystas en kvinno-rörelse’ on the same page.)

### **The Fierce and the Furious—Feminist Insight into the Anti-Gender Narratives and Movements (2019)**

This report, which we co-wrote with EuroMed Rights, focuses on anti-gender movements and narratives in the Euro-Mediterranean region. It looks into the reasons behind the anti-gender backlash and explores strategies to counteract it. The report is based on a desk study, a survey of 50 activists, and in-depth interviews with women’s rights activists. The study’s main finding is that, in spite of the fact that anti-gender movements in the region have different historical backgrounds, their arguments are very similar. Gender equality is seen as a ‘Western import’ for which there is little need, while gender studies are considered unscientific or an ideological construct. Opposing gender equality is the symbolic glue that holds anti-women and anti-LGBTQI+ actors together.

<https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/the-fierce-and-the-furious/>

### **Women’s Rights in the Western Balkans**

Each year since 2016, we have published a data-based analysis of the situation for women human rights defenders in the Western Balkans.

<https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/womens-rights-in-western-balkans-2022/>

### **The Space for WHRD and LGBTQI Activists in Liberia (2020)**

This report gives a brief overview of the situation for women human rights defenders and LGBTQI+ activists in Montserrado and Grand Bassa, two counties in Liberia. Living under constant threat (whether real or perceived) has a serious impact on activists’ physical, mental, and emotional health. The study also shows that Liberian women’s rights and LGBTQI+ activists have very limited civic space to operate in.

<https://kvinnatillkvinna.se/publications/the-space-for-women-human-rights-defenders-and-lgbtqi-activists-in-liberia/>

### **Impact of Shrinking Space on Women Organising in Jordan (2021)**

This study attempts to pinpoint key challenges that women’s rights activists face in relation to Jordan’s political, socioeconomic, and demographic challenges. One of its main findings is that over 90 percent of respondents feel civic space in Jordan is shrinking, with 95.5 percent blaming the government for this.

<https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/impact-of-shrinking-space-on-women-organising-in-jordan/>

### **Solidarity is Our Only weapon. The Situation for Women Human Rights Defenders (2021)**

This report is based on a literature review, a survey of 334 women’s rights activists and journalists in 74 countries, and five in-depth interviews with 15 women’s rights activists. It highlights how threats, hatred, and even physical harassment of activists appear to have become normalised, with many activists viewing these matters as ‘part of their job’. The study also shows that many activists these days are careful about what and how they communicate, as many forces try to silence them. Respondents suggest that the actors behind the threats they face are anti-gender movements, authoritarian governments, patriarchal religious structures, community leaders, nationalists, and alt-right movements. Corruption seems to be the riskiest issue for activists to work with.

<https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/solidarity-is-our-only-weapon/>

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**For all women's rights,  
in every corner of the world.**