

# Human Rights Advocates Program

## Alumni Survey

June 2017

Within patriarchal systems, women are often regarded as property. They must fit certain gender stereotypes. Women who transgress these boundaries and challenge these norms are seen as dangerous.

–HRAP Advocate from Cameroon

As the Human Rights Advocates Program approaches its 30th class in 2018, the Institute for the Study of Human Rights is launching a series of initiatives to commemorate the milestone. Over the course of the next 12-18 months, ISHR will survey HRAP alumni—totaling 308 advocates in 88 countries around the globe—on the issues they face. The first in this series focuses on women human rights defenders. The 130 HRAP alumnae were asked to fill out a survey about the challenges facing WHRDs in their countries. A total of 16 advocates responded. The majority of respondents are from Africa (Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, South Africa and Uganda). The three Asian countries represented are India, Nepal and Myanmar. Armenia and Moldova represented Europe. Colombia and Syria were the representatives of Latin America and the Middle East, respectively. To protect their privacy, their names have not been used in this report.

One-third of respondents were aware of national mechanisms for consultation and dialogue with their

governments. A respondent from India reported: “One of the most important mechanisms for the protection of women’s rights and also for defenders are the women’s commissions set up by various state governments [as well as] the National Commission for Women in the capital of New Delhi. While some commissions have been criticized for not being more proactive, these are important fora to promote dialogue and to involve civil society.” A respondent from Colombia wrote: “The mechanisms for the participation of WHRDs has been strengthened in recent years...because of demands by a movement of women and feminists that is stronger in the past few years and that in order to support the peace negotiations has strengthened, generating alliances that can act as a ‘block and demand’ to be taken into account in the different scenarios in which decisions are made.” Echoing the impact of WHRDs in creating opportunities for dialogue and consultation with their government, a respondent from Uganda said: “Through their [WHRDs] constant engagement with the government, an enabling environment for WHRDs is being created slowly.”

Respondents who reported that they were not aware of any mechanisms to engage with their governments explained the situation. The respondent from South Africa said: “There is no consultation whatsoever taking place and no dialogue at all. I think again our government is pretty scared on what they would be told as the writing is on the wall.” A respondent from Kenya noted: “The government of the day has not done much but the local NGOs are giving WHRDs a priority in terms of protection mechanisms. The Urgent Action Fund targets WHRDs. There are also other mechanisms like the National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders and the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders.” Referring to the current political situation in India as an obstacle to progress, one respondent reported: “The words ‘human rights’ and ‘activists’ are now seen as anti-national.” From Nepal, a respondent reported: “WHRDs are coming up and taking action through their own initiatives.”

Similar threats to WHRDs exist around the globe. A respondent from Uganda reported: “WHRDs in Uganda are vulnerable and face a lot of challenges in the process of

demanding for and defending human rights concerns. They face threats and risks in terms of sexual harassment, domestic violence, conviction of moral crimes and threats against their children and reputation. WHRDs...face resistance and hostility from their partners, family members, community leaders and states actors including the courts, the military and the police. They also face pressure to stop their work. They experience domestic violence and family expulsions, for example. Most have had their spouses defamed.” A respondent from Colombia replied, “The stigmatization is constant as are the attacks, threats, assassinations and sexual violence.” Also from Uganda came reports of “financial harassment [in the form of] unexplained terminations of duty.” A respondent from Myanmar said that “frequent harassment and death threats [are made] by phone, sms and social media—in particular Facebook.” From Armenia, a respondent wrote: “The most common threats that WHRDs face are blackmail and verbal threats. There is also a chain of ultra-nationalistic groups who present WHRDs and feminists as ‘traitors of the family,’ ‘enemies of the state,’ and ‘in the



Stella Nyanzi in the dock at Buganda Road court in Kampala, the Ugandan capital. Photograph: James Akena/Reuters

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–HRAP Advocate from Colombia

service of the interests of western countries and western propaganda.” A respondent from Kenya stated, “As HRDs, all sexes/genders face the same threats, but WHRDs are more vulnerable as they are threatened with rape and sexual harassment.”

The majority of respondents reported that WHRDs in need of immediate protection turn to civil society and friends. A respondent from India said, “The informal resources lie largely in the realm of NGOs who run helplines and provide counseling and other help.” Respondents from Kenya and Colombia reported that WHRDs can access rapid-response funds. While government-sponsored institutions were mentioned by respondents from Uganda, India and

school-age girls so that they can attend school. Her children face threats from unknown people who keep surrounding their home while their mother is in prison.”

When asked if any campaigns to raise awareness about the prejudices against the work and activities of WHRDs had taken place in their countries, the majority of respondents described efforts as “small scale.” They pointed to press conferences, radio and TV talk shows as well as events to mark International Women’s Day (Nepal). In Cameroon, the NGO More Women in Politics organized a walk against Boko Haram, noted one respondent. “In the present context [in India]...working to protect HRDs [would be] a luxury,” said a respondent from India. Respondents from Syria and Colombia pointed to campaigns in their respective countries that had been organized by prominent international organizations including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Catholic Agency For Overseas

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–HRAP Advocate from India

Colombia, the respondent from India added, “These are all government-sponsored so they have their limitations.”

More than half of the respondents reported that male HRDs working on women’s rights were at risk. The case of Nicholas Opiyo, the founder of Chapter Four Uganda, was cited by a respondent from Uganda. She wrote that Opiyo “has several threats which he shared in social media.” A respondent from Cameroon reported men working on women’s rights are “not in any danger but most often are considered as confused or lost people for defending and protecting the rights of women.”

More than half of the respondents reported that the families, spouses and partners of WHRDs faced danger. A Ugandan respondent reported: “They are threatened. For example, [Ugandan activist] Stella Nyanzi has now [as of late April 2017] spent three weeks in prison for demanding that the government provide sanitary napkins in school for the



Cameroonian NGO More Women in Politics



Colombian Activist Angélica Bello

Development and Protection International. The respondent from Colombia cautioned, “The truth is that the attacks and assassinations of human rights defenders continue, and a specific campaign has not been organized that could protect these defenders by way of information.”

Respondents from Uganda, Colombia and India reported that WHRDs working on Indigenous and environmental issues are most at risk. “The line between environmental issues and Indigenous issues is rather thin,” said a respondent from India. The case of Beatrice Atim Anywar, a Kitgum District Member of Parliament, who “strongly defended the sale of the largest forest in Uganda by the Government to investors and... was arrested [and] inhumanely handled by police,” was cited by a respondent from Uganda. Kenya added that WHRDs working on sexual orientation and gender identity and sexual and reproductive health and rights are also at risk. The respondent from Haiti replied: “For subjects related to corruption and the rape of minors, it is the threat of death. Threats against LGBTI include social exclusion, the

prohibition to associate and to carry out public activities. They are also threatened with legislative measures.”

Two of the respondents reporting personally knowing WHRDs who were killed for their activism. They include the Colombian human rights activist Angélica Bello who died under controversial circumstances in 2013. “I know many WHRDs who have paid a very high price but are still alive,” wrote a respondent from Uganda. “I have been a witness to and victim of severe violence directed at WHRDs,” reported a respondent from Kenya. The respondent from Haiti wrote: “I do not know any WHRDs who were killed. We know journalists, whom we also consider to some extent HRDs, who were killed, shot, or attacked for their work.”

While the WHRDs who responded work in countries across the globe, they articulated a set of shared concerns. WHRDs, according to this survey, face the common threats of violence and abuse, threats to their families, and defamation. Furthermore, while some respondents cited existing government mechanisms and civil society movements seeking to protect WHRDs, where these do exist they are neither robust enough nor well known enough to be as effective as they need to be.

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–HRAP Advocate from South Africa



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