

PROTECTING WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ON THE FRONTLINES

Enhancing the Safety & Impact of WHRDs through Innovative Financing

May 2025

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WPHF supported WHRD from Afghanistan

Background

Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) play critical roles during and after conflict, working across the human rights-peace and security-development nexus, at community, national, and international levels. Too often, however, their work goes uncredited and unacknowledged.¹ Their activism and voices most often reflect the unfiltered reality faced within their communities by all. This often makes WHRDs the most direct, outspoken and brave in the human rights ecosystem, particularly in conflict and crisis settings. More alarming is that WHRDs working in these contexts face significant risks in carrying out their work and activism. They are often targeted and threatened physically or verbally, are consistently attacked, stigmatized, detained or arrested without cause, and even assassinated for their essential human rights work.

Established in 2022, the WPHF Funding Window for WHRDs provides protection grants directly to WHRDs in fragile settings to facilitate their security, reduce their risks and contribute to their survival to ensure their activism can continue and their voices are heard. WPHF has led this innovation within the UN, by using key partnerships with civil society to deliver this kind of direct protection, making WPHF the only UN entity carrying out this kind of impactful work. Not only is this critical because of the lack of global financing for WHRDs worldwide, but WPHF is in a unique position to strategically advocate and push for increased accessibility and immediate funding through its convening power. We must continue to support the survival, enable the work and platform the voices of WHRDs on the front lines.

While safeguarding WHRDs is crucial for their immediate well-being and continued activism, their active participation in decision-making and international fora is equally vital for driving systemic change and advancing human rights. Ensuring that WHRDs can contribute their perspectives and

expertise to key discussions and policy-making processes is essential for crafting inclusive and effective solutions to global challenges. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 underscores the importance of women's participation as a fundamental pillar in peace and security efforts.² By facilitating the involvement of WHRDs in events and decision-making, policies and actions become more inclusive and effectively address specific needs, driving advancement toward greater equality, justice, and peace.

Twenty-six years after adopting the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, and twenty-four years after the first UN Security Council Resolution on Women, Peace, and Security (1325), WHRDs in conflict and crisis-affected countries still lack sufficient funding. In his 2023 report on WPS, the UN Secretary General urged the international community to pay consistent attention to the threats and violence faced by women human rights defenders, which remain on the rise.

Despite gains made in the implementation of the WPS agenda, we have yet to attain the full, equal, meaningful and safe participation of women in building and sustaining peace. The SG urges the international community in his 2023 report on WPS to strive for this as “the norm, and not an afterthought.” Specific recommendations from the 2023 SG report on WPS include the need for additional measures to support WHRDs to undertake their work in a safe and sustainable manner, to facilitate the evacuation and relocation of WHRDs at immediate risk, and to implement strategies for long term support for WHRDs in exile.

About the WPHF Window for WHRDs

To address the specific needs of WHRDs in conflict and crisis-affected countries, the United Nations Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) launched a [Funding Window for](#)

[WHRDs](#) in 2022. Applications are received on a rolling basis through two streams:

- ▶ Safety Net Grants: in partnership with INGO partners, this stream provides safety net grants up to USD 10,000 for WHRDs at risk due to their activism, and to support their protection and that of their dependents. The average grant size provided to WHRDs is \$3,989.
- ▶ Advocacy Support: to cover logistical expenses for participation in national, regional or international level meetings, events or decision-making processes, which contribute to advancing human rights and peace.

As of December 2024, the WPHF Window for WHRDs has supported 800 requests from WHRDs from 26 countries.

WHRD Impact Survey

Methodology

In January 2025, the WPHF Window for WHRDs, in collaboration with its INGO partners (Front Line Defenders, Agir ensemble pour les droits humains, Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to Human Rights Defenders (EMHRF), Defend Defenders, MADRE, Forum Asia, Gender Equality Network (GEN), and Mina's List), launched its second online global impact survey with WHRDs who received emergency protection grants under the safety net stream in 2024.

The objective of the survey was to measure to what extent safety nets for WHRDs facilitates the protection of WHRDs working in/from conflict and crisis countries, and their dependents, as well as inform advocacy initiatives for increased financing from the international community for protection of WHRDs.

The anonymous and confidential survey specifically explored questions related to risks and their frequency, the changes in threats as a result of safety nets, if any, and protective measures and strategies used. WHRD respondents were also asked about their ability to continue their activism in the face of the risks and threats they face, as well as on suggestions on how WPHF and its NGO partners can better support WHRDs globally.

Made available in English, French, Arabic, Spanish, Dari, Pashto, and Burmese, 156 WHRDs from 14 countries participated in the survey, including from Africa (23.1%), Arab States (5.8%), Asia and the Pacific (67.9%), and Latin America and Caribbean (3.2%). Overall, 51.6% of WHRDs that participated are 30 years and above, while 31.2% between 18 and 29 years old (and 1.1% preferred not to provide their age). Respondents were also diverse in their identities with 54.9% of WHRDs identifying as a woman who is forcibly displaced (refugee, internally displaced, or asylum seeker), 11.5% as an indigenous or ethnic minority, 10.4% as a religious minority, 10.4% as a single mother, 7.7% as a

widow, 2.7% as LGBTQI+, 1.6% as a female sex worker, and 0.5% as a person living with a disability.

In addition, 37 post-advocacy support surveys were administered to WHRDs who had received direct logistical support to participate in advocacy events, meetings and workshops.

Limitations

Results of the survey should be read considering the following limitations: i) the contexts in which the survey is conducted is ever-changing considering that new conflicts, tensions, and threats have arisen since its launch, ii) impact of safety grants are short-term and do not cover long-term solutions. As such, positive impact can equally change given the fluid nature of conflict and crisis; and iii) as advocacy support is provided on a short-term basis, the real impact of WHRD participation is not always immediately seen. The findings from these WHRDs refer to a period of six-months after support only. Despite these limitations, the findings demonstrate that there have been positive impacts felt by WHRDs, while also highlighting the continued need and urgency to support WHRDs working in conflict and crisis settings and the importance of ensuring that the experiences and priorities for their protection are prioritized.

Key Findings

Threats as a result of WHRD activism

The survey findings reveal that 77.5% of WHRDs face frequent threats as a result of their activism and work and another 17.9% reported facing occasional threats and risks. These rates are even more alarming for WHRDs in Afghanistan and Colombia where 86.5% and 80.0% of WHRDs report this respectively. Overall, there has been an increase of frequent threats against WHRDs by 8.8% since 2023 where WHRDs were asked the same question. Based on information during the application process of supported WHRDs in 2024, risks and threats faced by WHRDs vary, although all of them alarming. 22.7% of WHRDs faced threats of arbitrary arrest and detention, while 18.4% faced intimidation and harassment, including sexual harassment and conflict related sexual violence. Another 12.5% were under surveillance and threatened with death or included on assassination or hit lists, 10.9% were threatened if they did not stop their activism, 9.5% were threatened with intimidation and attacks against their family and community, while 8.9% of WHRDs experienced raids of their homes or offices, or had material confiscated.

Reducing the risks and threats of WHRDs

Despite the risks and threats highlighted by WHRDs, the safety net grants have shown to be useful in offering immediate and short-term protection. Just over half (57.6%) of WHRDs indicate that the grant received has helped reduce the risks and threats they face, and 35.9% have been able to

continue their activism to a large extent. Support related to relocation within their country or elsewhere, livelihood support such as food and secure accommodation, the purchase of security cameras and new phones, and addressing trauma through psychosocial support and accessing medical care are among the few areas WHRDs highlight as helpful.

“When I was released from prison, I was not in a good financial situation. I was in debt [for] rent, electricity, water, etc. This helped me to pay off some of those debts and [buy] a mobile phone. I also went to the doctor when I was sick, and it solved some of my problems. I was [also] able to relocate, rent a new house, and live my life in Afghanistan.” (WHRD from Afghanistan)

“I managed to relocate to another place, I managed to install security cameras, we managed to pay for my son's university semester, we were also able to buy food in those moments when we had to go out and take refuge in another place.” (WHRD from Colombia)

“The grant was useful in meeting my protection needs as I was able to get out of my city, where I had been arrested twice and harassed by phone...my exit [helped] me in terms of personal safety.” (WHRD from Sudan)

Protection Measures and Strategies

WHRDs highlight several protection measures and strategies which they have been able to adopt to keep them and their families safe. The majority highlight that relocation (44.8%), including finding a safe house is the first strategy, followed by supporting their current livelihoods (18.8%) and minimizing their movements/travel, avoiding public spaces and keeping a low profile (9.4%). WHRDs have also used the small grant to address medical and mental health issues. In a few cases (4.2%), WHRDs have conversely increased their activism and advocacy work.

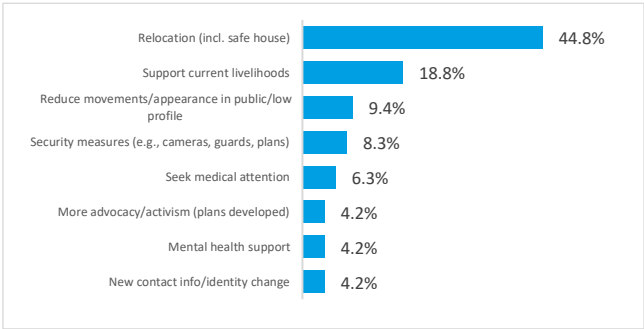


Figure 1: Protective Measures and Strategies of WHRDs, 2024

Despite the risks, WHRDs remain resolute in their activism and advocacy on human rights and have developed various strategies to mitigate against reprisals and efforts to repress them. Some of these strategies include implementing digital protection measures (8.3%) and changing their identity and contact information (4.2%). However, it is concerning that the cost of maintaining their safety often includes measures such as keeping a low profile and reducing public movements (9.4%), limiting their participation in public events and decision-making processes, and being forced to

temporarily relocate, either within their own countries or abroad (44.8%).

“This grant had a big impact on my mental health. I didn’t feel safe at all in Khartoum or White Nile states. I also couldn’t work. Since I arrived in Country X, I feel safer and generally better about my wellbeing. Regarding work, I can now go back to documenting human rights violations in my country.” (WHRD from Sudan)

Continued, New and Frequent threats of WHRDs

While the safety net grants have been critical for WHRDs to improve their protection, 59.2% of WHRDs continue to face new or recurring threats, including threats to cease their activism and work (32.6%), death threats and their names being included on hit lists (14.1%), arbitrary arrests detention (8.7%), digital and cyber-attacks (7.6%), torture (6.5%), among many others.

“I can’t work outside the house and in the community without fear. Most of the time when I go out, I leave my smartphone at home because I am afraid that they will check it at the checkpoints, and I will be arrested.” (WHRD from Afghanistan)

“The nature of the threats is related to hostility and social tensions. They come from my certain members of the neighborhood who violently reject my community work with women, LGBTQI+ girls in my country.” (WHRD from Cameroon)

“As a journalist, I am subject to withholding information from official sources and to interrogation...I now live in a state of war, and my family [is] exposed to death and direct targeting because of the publication of the violations of the occupation against unarmed civilians.” (WHRD from Palestine)

This demonstrates that while safety net support has increased WHRDs’ overall protection in the immediate and medium-term, in many cases various challenges remain for the long-term period, and WHRDs safety and protection is an on-going concern. Political action, advocacy and continued funding to WHRDs from/working in crisis and conflict-affected contexts remain critical.

Threats against WHRDs are rarely a sporadic or one-time event. Despite receiving safety net protection grants, survey respondents highlight that threats are persistent and pervasive with 77.5% of WHRDs noting that they continue to frequently face risks and threats because of their work. Another 17.9% report that they sometimes face these threats. Regionally, findings reveal that the majority of WHRDs in Asia and Pacific persistently face threats (86.5%), representing those notably from Afghanistan, Myanmar and the Philippines, followed by those in LAC (80%), Arab States (75%), and Africa (50%). However, it is important to note that the protection grants WHRDs receive are in fact short-term, and thus it cannot continuously address the threats against them.

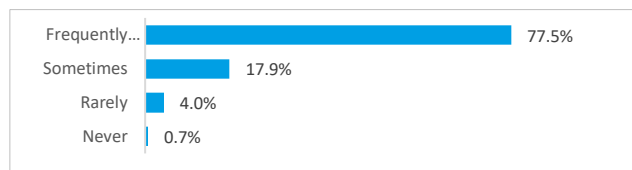


Figure 2: Frequency of risks faced by WHRDs, 2024

Given these troubling trends, short-term emergency support is only part of the solution. It must be accompanied by full recognition of WHRDs' legitimate work and their right to meaningful participation in issues that directly impact them and their communities, as well as by strengthening national, regional, and international protection and accountability mechanisms to prevent and respond to violations against them. Equally important is the demonstration of unabated and public political support to WHRDs at risk, including rapidly providing visas to allow survivors to retreat to safer locations.³

Most importantly, WHRDs should not be cast as victims when pushing for their protection, as this further marginalizes them from decision-making spaces. Indeed, WHRD's protection cannot be advanced at the expense of their fundamental right to participate in public and political life. When their voices are most threatened, there is a great need to create spaces where all barriers to their participation are lifted, and they are empowered to assert their demands. Protection of WHRDs cannot be limited to providing physical security; participation and protection are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing.

Impact of Advocacy Support

In 2024, post-advocacy surveys were also conducted with 37 WHRDs who had participated in national, regional or international advocacy events to highlight the issues faced by WHRDs and to advocate for global intervention. As a result of the advocacy support provided to WHRDs, approximately 68% reported that they felt enabled to achieve their advocacy objectives at the events they attended. Positively, 82% stated they could fully or partially influence policies, recommendations, decisions, or outcomes related to the event's theme. For example, WHRDs engaged with national governments at COP27 in Egypt, advocating for indigenous youth and climate change. They also played a key role in establishing a national security task force and a mixed advocacy framework, bringing civil society, legislators, and ministry representatives together.

The impact of WHRD's engagement in advocacy opportunities is also seen in other areas. Many WHRDs (43.8%) noted increased confidence in public speaking and received invitations to participate in further advocacy initiatives. Another 34.3% highlighted that the key result was their ability to provide recommendations to other policies and strategies, while 12.5% reported mobilizing new resources for their advocacy work and establishing new partnerships with donors, respectively.

Despite the success, 42% also reported experiencing reprisals or intimidations following their participation participating in their respective advocacy events.



Figure 3: Types of changes that occurred for WHRDs as a result of participating in advocacy events, 2024

Recommendations for Donors and Key Actors in the International Community

- ▶ **Invest in flexible and rapid funding for WHRDs from and working in conflict and crisis-affected contexts.** Defending human rights has a cost, and the international community must find ways to accelerate flexible and quality funding for WHRDs from and working in conflict and crisis-affected contexts to ensure they have the resources to protect themselves.
- ▶ **Facilitate spaces for meaningful participation and advocacy.** The international community has a responsibility to facilitate dismantling historic and systemic barriers to their equal representation and participation at all levels in national, regional, and international decision-making processes. Their voices are central and WHRDs must have space for impactful engagement.
- ▶ **Tailor approaches for the protection and participation of WHRDs from and working in conflict and crisis-affected countries.** The international community must understand that WHRDs have gendered needs shaped by diverse identities, different levels of influence, and knowledge of international and national procedures. Support must thus be tailored to these intersecting needs, acknowledging that a one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate.
- ▶ **Move beyond temporary fixes.** Understand that short-term protection alone is a stopgap measure and cannot address the complex and evolving needs of WHRDs, especially in protracted crises and for those in exile. The international community must improve and enhance existing support systems to emphasize sustainability and strengthen resilience, agency, and meaningful participation in decision-making processes. This includes providing long-term funding for the work of WHRDs and to prevent, primarily, and respond to violations against WHRDs, visas for displaced WHRDs, economic support, and capacity-building initiatives.
- ▶ **Commitment to technical and strategic assistance.** Funding alone does not ensure the meaningful

involvement of WHRDs from and working in conflict and crisis-affected countries in decision-making processes. Financial support must be complemented by technical and strategic assistance, networking opportunities, capacity strengthening initiatives, and efforts to enhance their visibility and sustained impact of their activism and advocacy efforts.

- ▶ **Creating safe decision making and advocacy spaces for WHRDs from and working in conflict and crisis-affected contexts.** WHRDs should not have to rely solely on bravery to exercise their right to participate. The international community needs to continue to create safe spaces for WHRD's involvement in decision-making at national, regional and international levels, and ensure through collaborative work on risk assessments and protection planning before, during, and after advocacy events which can place WHRDs at continued risk.
- ▶ **Bridging the evidence gap.** The international community should systematically collect, analyze, and share detailed intersectional data on WHRDs—covering demographics, risks, participation, and feedback—to better address their protection needs and strengthen their rights to meaningful involvement.

For more see: <https://wphfund.org/whrdimpact/>

References

- ¹ UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders (2023) *Success Through Perseverance and Solidarity: 25 Years of Achievement by Human Rights Defenders*, 52nd Session of the Human Rights Council, <https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2FHRC%2F52%2F29&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>
- ² UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, S/RES/1325 (2000), 31 October 2000.
- ³ Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders. *Pathways to Peace: Women Human Rights Defenders in Conflict, Post-Conflict, and Crisis-Affected Settings*. United Nations, 2021. Report A/HRC/46/35.

WPHF IN ACTION

OUR VISION TO ENHANCE SUPPORT FOR WOMEN ON THE FRONT LINES

The United Nations Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) is a multi-partner trust fund mobilizing urgently needed finance for local women's organizations and women human rights defenders (WHRDs) working on the frontlines to respond to crisis and build lasting peace. Since its launch in 2016, WPHF has funded over 1,550 local women's organizations across 44 countries, and supported over 870 WHRDs and women peacebuilders in 25 countries. Guided by a range of civil society, government, and UN actors, WPHF supports women and their local organizations in fragile settings around the work across six outcome areas through three key funding mechanisms.

1

Regular Funding Cycle

provides institutional and programmatic funding to local civil society organizations to support their work on women, peace and security and humanitarian action

2

Rapid Response Window for Women and Peace Processes

addresses short-term strategic interventions aiming at ensuring or strengthening women's meaningful participation in track 1 and track 2 peace processes and the implementation of peace agreements

3

Funding Window for Women Human Rights Defenders

supports the advocacy and the protection of women peacebuilders, humanitarian responders and human rights activists from crisis countries

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