



Security Council

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Letter dated 12 October 2022 from the Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

Ahead of the Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security, to be held on Thursday, 20 October 2022, I have the honour to enclose herewith the summary report entitled “Protecting women human rights defenders in conflict” (see annex) resulting from the civil society consultations on the issue of reprisals against women human rights defenders in conflict-affected countries, including as a result of cooperation with the United Nations.

The consultations gathered more than 40 civil society representatives ahead of a Security Council open debate on the theme “Protecting participation: addressing violence targeting women in peace and security processes”, convened by Norway on 18 January. The consultations were organized and facilitated by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, and served as expert input for the 2022 report of the Secretary-General on women and peace and security.

I kindly ask for the present letter and its annex to be circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Mona Juul
Permanent Representative



Annex to the letter dated 12 October 2022 from the Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

Protecting women human rights defenders in conflict

A consultation with civil society, held from 10 to 12 January 2022

Summary report

Introduction

Just as the call for women's full, equal and meaningful participation has grown louder, and recognition of their role has become more visible, so has the violence that threatens and limits their participation. This violence is targeted precisely at silencing their advocacy and inhibiting women in general from participating in public life. The ascendancy of extremist political actors and the resurgence of military coups and seizures of power by force have made this problem worse. Despite increasing attention to this issue, when civil society actors need long-term support so that they can strengthen their own safety measures, or emergency help for protection or relocation when most at risk, the response from their own Governments and international partners, including those that champion and encourage their work and their advocacy, is often found wanting.

In preparation for the Security Council open debate on the theme "Protecting participation: addressing violence targeting women in peace and security processes", convened by Norway on 18 January, more than 40 representatives from civil society participated in a three-day virtual consultation¹ and brainstorming exercise on the issue of reprisals against women human rights defenders in conflict-affected countries, including as a result of cooperation with the United Nations. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security organized and facilitated the sessions. Norway supported the meeting.

Participants included civil society activists from Afghanistan, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Libya, Myanmar, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria and Yemen, as well as representatives of global organizations working on issues related to women, peace and security and of human rights organizations that specialize in the protection of human rights defenders, and independent experts. This consultation served also as expert input for this year's report of the Secretary-General on women and peace and security, which will place special emphasis on one of his five goals for the next decade: to turn the unconditional defence of women's rights – and those who protect them – into one of the most visible and identifiable markers of the work of the United Nations on peace and security.

Recent United Nations initiatives and developments in the Security Council

- In part because of the increasingly alarming frequency and severity of these reprisals, the past few years have seen greater attention to this issue in the periodic reports of peacekeeping and special political missions. In 2021, 14 peace operations reported to the Security Council on violence targeting human rights defenders, although the quality of the information varies from report to report.

¹ The present summary report reflects the views expressed by the civil society experts at the three-day consultation.

There is also new guidance from OHCHR to mitigate reprisals associated with United Nations cooperation, and several countries have included in their national action plans on women, peace and security specific goals related to the protection of women human rights defenders. The Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund is opening a special window to provide emergency support to individuals at risk and flexible funding to women human rights defenders working in conflict, crisis and post-conflict settings, to be launched on 18 January.

- In the Security Council, some members raise these issues, including individual cases, in their statements, and an Arria-formula meeting was held in February 2020 to address reprisals against women human rights defenders and peacebuilders. The meeting of the Council held on 18 January was the first formal meeting of the Security Council dedicated to the issue of targeted violence against women human rights defenders and women in public life in conflict settings.
- The Security Council referred to this in its resolution [2467 \(2019\)](#) on women, peace and security, both in the preamble (“remaining deeply concerned about threats, attacks and restrictions on the work of civil society organizations that inhibit their ability to contribute to international peace and security”) and in operative paragraph 21 (“Welcomes the regular briefings by women from civil society, particularly in country-specific meetings (...) and calls upon States to condemn acts of discrimination, harassment and violence against civil society (...) and develop and put in place measures to protect them and enable them to do their work”).
- The Security Council, in its resolution [2493 \(2019\)](#) on women, peace and security, adopted unanimously in 2019, dedicated operational paragraph 6 to this issue: “Strongly encourages Member States to create safe and enabling environments for civil society, including formal and informal community women leaders, women peacebuilders, political actors, and those who protect and promote human rights, to carry out their work independently and without undue interference, including in situations of armed conflict, and to address threats, harassment, violence, and hate speech against them”.
- In some cases, a country-specific resolution has recognized the need to protect women's rights organizations and women peacebuilders from threats and reprisals. The Security Council, in its resolution [2542 \(2020\)](#) extending the mandate of United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), included this in its preamble: “Urging the parties to ensure the full, equal, effective and meaningful participation of women in all activities and decision-making relating to democratic transition, conflict resolution and peacebuilding, recognizing the need to protect women's rights organizations, and women peacebuilders from threats and reprisals and supporting the efforts of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General and UNSMIL to facilitate wider engagement and participation of women from across the spectrum of Libyan society in the political process and public institutions, recognising that the political process should be inclusive of all Libyans”. In its resolution [2567 \(2021\)](#) extending the mandate of United Nations Mission in South Sudan, the Council raised this in operational paragraph 12: “Further calls on parties to recognize the need to protect women-led organizations and women peacebuilders from threats and reprisals, and fulfil these commitments set out on inclusivity, including in respect of national diversity, gender, youth, and regional representation in the Revitalized Agreement, including the 35 per cent minimum for women's representation”.

Forms of reprisals and targeted violence

- Women human rights defenders are subjected to reprisals in reaction to the nature of their work or a specific interaction (e.g. with the United Nations) or public intervention, as well as intimidation to discourage individuals and organizations from any future participation or engagement and inhibit these before they happen. Participants raised examples that ranged from killings and sexual assault to disappearances, torture, detention, threats, intimidation, surveillance and smear campaigns. Women protesting in Afghanistan in recent weeks have been harassed and, in some cases, detained and tortured. Women in Yemen have been detained and assaulted in Houthi-controlled territory as punishment for their activism. In Myanmar, the military junta has detained thousands of activists and protesters (more than 8,500, according to one participant, including 1,500 women human rights defenders and women doctors, students and journalists), and 103 women human rights defenders have been killed. Many LGBTQI rights activists and young women protesters have been detained and tortured too, and, in many cases, their families do not know where they are.
- Since 2018, about one third of civil society representatives supported by the NGO Working Group to brief the Security Council have faced some sort of reprisal or intimidation, and two thirds of reprisals were perpetrated by State actors. This number increases to 57 per cent if we only count the thematic debates on women and peace and security. This includes civil society representatives being subjected to intimidation, right before sitting down in the Council chamber, by a representative of the Member State they were briefing about; receiving direct instructions to brief only on certain topics and not on others; being told that their advocacy on issues such as gender-based violence or reproductive rights was “controversial” and incompatible with the religions and moral values of the country in question; having laptops confiscated; and being arbitrarily arrested or interrogated by security forces. Several of them had to relocate temporarily, and some have not been able to return to their country.
- An organization collecting and analysing data on global trends reported that 2020 saw the most killings (331) of human rights defenders recorded in more than a decade of tracking, but this alarming number was muted by the global pandemic and less covered by the media. Many protests were met with repression and violence, and Internet shutdowns continued to be used to hinder communication and mobilization. While it is commonly perceived that men are at greater risk of physical attacks, women human rights defenders are at least as likely to experience such attacks as their male counterparts, but this is extremely under-reported (or anonymized) in official United Nations statistics. In general, women are much likelier to be targeted with sexual violence and to be subjected to verbal abuse, surveillance and online smear campaigns.
- Sexual violence is often used not only to target women human rights defenders and LGBTQI rights defenders, but close family members. The use of sexualized threats and sexual assault is extremely under-reported in public reports and statistics, in part because of stigma and risk of further reprisal and in part because the victims are in detention and unable to report. Seven per cent of grant applications from women submitted over the past two years to a protection organization included reports of sexual violence or sexual harassment.
- While both men and women are targeted by defamation, smear campaigns and hate speech, the focus of the attacks against men human rights defenders is usually the work they carry out, whereas the focus of the attacks against women human rights defenders is much more personal, and typically relates to their personal behaviour, moral conduct or sex lives. A Yemeni woman human rights

defender reported that this is very effective in silencing women, because it amounts to “social suicide”. A participant from Syria reported that some colleagues had considered actual suicide after sexual or erotic fake pictures of them had been sent to their families. Briefers to the Security Council from countries like South Sudan or Libya reported that they had been subjected to “character assassination” and a serious defamation campaign, even on television. Participants noted that some of these smear campaigns may appear ridiculous – and perhaps even harmless – to outside observers, but that such campaigns are a serious threat and directly linked to the violence they suffer in their countries. Moreover, the providers of communications platforms do little to prevent such attacks and hate speech.

- Women human rights defenders are increasingly targeted with digital attacks. In Myanmar, online security is becoming one of the most prevalent issues. In Libya, online abuse against women politicians is extremely common, not only while campaigning, but also when they are exercising a political office. An organization that conducted a survey in Libya found that 96 per cent of women had experienced online abuse. Participants warned that online violence frequently leads to offline violence. A woman human rights defender from Yemen recounted a sophisticated digital attack that occurred after she had briefed the Security Council, involving the hacking of her phone and bank account in addition to a coordinated smear campaign online.
- Participants also shared that Governments have used surveillance tools against women human rights defenders, and telecommunications companies often cooperate with them to tap phone or Internet lines and even share the location of women in shelters and safe houses.
- Women human rights defenders are also affected by the general insecurity affecting women in conflict-affected countries, owing to the proliferation of small weapons and armed actors and to the increase in domestic violence, but they are also often targeted by their own families owing to the nature of their work.
- There is an alarming trend of reprisals and intimidation in relation to cooperation with the United Nations, and this is effectively suppressing such cooperation, as highlighted by the United Nations in its latest report on this issue. Since 2010, the Secretary-General has submitted annually a system-wide report to the Human Rights Council containing a compilation and analysis of cases and trends of reprisals against human rights defenders, which feeds into a biannual Council mandate on reprisals (endorsed for the first time this year by the General Assembly). The Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights has been the designated system lead on this since 2016. According to the 2021 report on reprisals, there was a rise in allegations of monitoring and surveillance, both online and offline, and in the use of restrictive legislation, both in the context of counterterrorism and in the context of the pandemic. Out of a total of 240 individuals referred to in the report, more than 100 are not mentioned by name, and a large number of them concern women, as a growing number of persons report anonymously out of fear of further reprisals.

Repressive legislation

- In addition to violence targeting individuals, repressive and discriminatory laws and policies are limiting women’s rights organizations in their work or are used as justification to target them. These range from laws and policies used against terrorism and rules governing civil society organizations, to laws that restrict freedom of expression or assembly or discriminate against women directly.

- Many of the cases referred to by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism involve women human rights defenders that are experiencing rights violations under the guise of fighting terrorism. More than two thirds of the communications sent by the mandate relate to the use of a counterterrorism measure against a civil society actor.
- A participant noted that a decree in Libya establishing a civil society commission comprising State-affiliated militias and other members of the security apparatus is impacting the work of Libyan women’s organizations, because it forces them to obtain prior approval before engaging with any international organization or embassies. Women’s rights organizations have seen laws against terrorism and sabotage used against them. An organization providing shelters for battered women in Iraq was accused of kidnapping them, rather than saving them, and their advocacy against so-called “honour killings” or child marriage had to be limited to avoid prosecution.
- A participant from Yemen described how guardianship rules for women limit their mobility, their right to work, their access to health care and their ability to make important life decisions, from opening a bank account to leaving the country. Women human rights defenders with disabilities are particularly at risk of being classified as suffering from mental health issues and being forcibly institutionalized in psychiatric facilities with the purpose of silencing them.

Other challenges

- **The pandemic.** Both men and women were affected by a shift in global media attention and national political focus away from significant cases of attacks against human rights defenders, but women were often forced to combine their human rights work with an increased amount of work in the domestic sphere owing to lockdowns, school closures and unequal distribution of the burden of care. As the closure of public spaces forced human rights defenders to move their activism online, women in conflict-affected countries were impacted by the gender digital divide and had a harder time accessing stable Internet connections. In some countries, religious and public figures with large followings spread theories that marriage equality or homosexuality were the cause of the new disease, which put defenders at risk of attack. Inequality in vaccine access also means that women human rights defenders cannot get visas to travel to most other countries, with far-reaching consequences for their participation. A Yemeni participant noted that prohibitions from accessing vaccines in Houthi-controlled territories had been a barrier for women to participate in track two mediation activities.
- **Relocation.** Participants noted that relocation programmes and strategies for women human rights defenders at risk do not always meet the specific needs of women, who are often the primary caregivers and need to be relocated alongside their family members (or will refuse relocation because of their family duties). The needs of women with disabilities and the related additional costs, including for accessible housing, personal assistance and sign language interpretation, are not always taken into account. Women awaiting resettlement in host countries are often at risk of attacks and may face hurdles to open a bank account or have an income. A woman human rights defender from Afghanistan, who had relocated after the takeover by the Taliban, emphasized that she and many others like her did not want to leave their country but did not have a choice.
- **Donors.** Several participants reported that they fear that donors will withdraw funding if they engage in certain types of human rights work. A participant from

Myanmar explained that her organization was warned by international donors to not talk about the gang rape and murder of two teachers during International Women's Day.

- **Self-censorship.** Because of the risk of reprisals, many participants reported that colleagues had stayed away from their advocacy because of ongoing danger to themselves or, even after relocation, to their families, and had either withdrawn from public life because of the shrinking civic space and fear of attacks, become more selective about their engagements or shifted their focus away from human rights and onto development or humanitarian action.
- **Reporting issues.** There is extreme under-reporting in United Nations statistics on this issue, especially when it comes to women human rights defenders. Out of a total of 240 individuals referred to in the 2021 United Nations report on reprisals, more than 100 are not mentioned by name, and a large number of them concern women, as a growing number of persons report anonymously out of fear of further reprisals. Out of 706 cases reported from 2010 to 2020, 43 per cent of them do not specify what the human rights defender is working on, which limits the capacity for trend analysis. Participants criticized the process for reporting reprisals to the United Nations as burdensome for the victim, who has the responsibility to share follow-up information. Language is an additional reporting barrier for many women human rights defenders. Questioning the annual reporting cycle, a participant argued that a report published 15 months after an incident does not deliver any kind of protection. Participants noted the dismantling of the Human Rights Council-mandated Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen, which had documented repression against politically active women.
- **Additional vulnerabilities.** Defenders of LGBTQI rights faced additional challenges because their activities were often not seen as human rights work or as social work, but as monstrous or perverted. A participant noted that in Colombia, armed actors had particularly targeted LGBTQI rights activists to garner support from communities. Others shared additional challenges faced on account of disabilities or age. Young women, for example, may have a harder time being taken seriously, even when at imminent risk.

Key messages and recommendations

- In September 2021, the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security circulated an open letter supported by 381 civil society organizations across 88 countries to Security Council members. The letter urges Member States to 1) immediately stop intimidation, attacks or reprisals and ensure accountability; 2) prevent threats and violence against women human rights defenders and elevate their role in promoting peace and human rights; 3) call upon the United Nations to ensure that all staff understand and champion the important work of women human rights defenders and provide all the necessary protection and support (risk assessments, protocols, rapid and flexible funding); 4) urge OHCHR to issue regular public statements and brief the Council and the Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security periodically on this issue and specific cases; 5) ensure that peace operations are fully resourced to monitor, report, and provide gender-responsive support; and 6) ensure that women civil society representatives continue to brief the Council regularly, that they are selected and supported by their peers in non-Governmental organizations, and that their recommendations are acted upon by the Council members.
- For many participants, what is most needed, above practical concerns, is consistent, visible and explicit political support for women human rights

defenders and their work, and recognition of their legitimate right to participate in decision-making and peace and security processes. Smear campaigns and misinformation challenging the legitimacy of the work of feminist organizations or LGBTQI rights activists are one of the key root causes behind the targeted violence. Rather than letting civil society carry the burden, the United Nations should take a greater role in holding Governments accountable.

- Women human rights defenders themselves must be considered experts on their own security and they must be empowered to make decisions about their own safety and make choices over protection measures. Responses must be context-specific and tailored to the needs and preferences of the concerned individual.
- Several participants maintained that compromising on their participation or visibility would not make them safer, but the contrary, and that if peacebuilders were denied space, access or funding because of safety concerns, this would embolden perpetrators of intimidation and reprisals and confirm that their tactics work.
- Much more important than a better response to individual cases is fostering an enabling environment for all. This includes: political support that provides legitimacy to the work of women human rights defenders; long-term resources for their organizations; the revocation of laws and policies that restrict women human rights defenders and their work; conversely, the adoption of context-specific laws that support and protect women human rights defenders; and a culture of accountability, in which attacks against women human rights defenders are publicly denounced, swiftly investigated and punished.
- The Security Council should adopt language similar to operative paragraph 6 of resolution [2493 \(2019\)](#) and operative paragraph 21 of resolution [2467 \(2019\)](#) in its country-specific resolutions, including systematically in its mandates for peace operations or sanctions committees. For example, the Council could (a) call on the Government to take measures to ensure the effective promotion and protection of civic space, both online and offline, as well as the protection of women human rights defenders against threats and reprisals, and (b) request the relevant mission to assist the Government in these efforts and report to the Council on this issue. For example, following the adoption of resolution [2542 \(2020\)](#) on Libya, which raised the issue of reprisals against women's rights organizations and peacebuilders, the reports of the Secretary-General on Libya added a separate section on human rights defenders and included more information and analysis on their situation.
- Security Council members should publicly condemn each instance of reprisal against Council briefers and closely follow up on the situation. The Council should continue inviting women human rights defenders, in all their diversity, regularly, as routine practice, including LGBTQI defenders. This involves investing appropriate time and resources to assess their risks in advance, develop tailored protection plans and follow up on the briefers' well-being post facto, and being prepared to mobilize emergency assistance if a reprisal situation occurs.
- Security Council members and donors should take into account the stark increase in the demand for women civil society briefers and support peer civil society organizations that can facilitate this role, such as the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security in facilitating these. OHCHR, with extrabudgetary support from donors, has been providing risk assessments for these briefings over the past few months, and this support should be extended and translated into sustainable capacity.

- Political support for women human rights defenders, recognizing their right to participate and their invaluable contribution to peace and security, should come not just from the Security Council, but from United Nations country teams, peace operations and diplomatic embassies in conflict-affected countries, and be expressed in a way that effectively reaches many audiences in those respective countries (e.g. not just in human-rights-related conversations or spaces, but also in conversations about counterterrorism or national security) and at the community level. Participants noted that multilevel, concerted political support by many different actors echoing one another was one of the most effective measures for their protection.
- Consistent follow-up on individual cases is crucial, and not just to provide adequate support to the concerned individuals, but to enhance accountability. Otherwise, Governments or non-State actors may make the calculation that at most they will be mentioned once or twice in a United Nations report alongside several other countries, and this may not be enough international pressure to influence their actions.
- United Nations country teams and peace operations should invest more in prevention and root cause analysis and be ready to provide risk assessments prior to and following cases of reprisals. Proactive engagement with women human rights defenders should be the first step in any of these assessments. The United Nations should use its channels with national Governments to inquire into the whereabouts of women human rights defenders in cases of detention or disappearance and escalate as appropriate to prevent harm to the concerned individual. Participants raised a positive example of proactive engagement with women human rights defenders by the United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia, and recommended that other missions follow its model.
- The Secretary-General could consider issuing a directive to United Nations peace operations and country teams, reminding them of his new call to action for human rights, which includes this as one of its actions: ensure that resident coordinators, United Nations country teams and heads of United Nations peace operations develop partnerships with civil society organizations to contribute to an enabling environment for civic space, including for women's organizations and women's rights defenders. This directive could also recall the relevant instructions in the United Nations policy and handbook on the protection of civilians in peace operations, which states that missions can provide a "security umbrella" for women's rights defenders and organizations working on women's rights or gender-based violence.
- Practical measures to support women human rights defenders must include expediting and facilitating the approval of applications for asylum, temporary relocation or protected status due to gender-based persecution, making rapid and flexible funding available for the protection of women peacebuilders and human rights defenders in emergency individual cases, and taking all necessary measures to enhance digital and physical security, in consultation with the affected individuals and civil society.
- The United Nations should adopt a more coordinated approach and systematic protocols for support of women human rights defenders at risk, that are easily accessible and understood by grass-roots activists, accompanied by local implementation strategies and practical guidance and training for United Nations staff, open and simplified reporting channels and shorter reporting intervals. Member States should fund these capacities adequately. Diplomatic embassies should develop similar initiatives for their staff.

- Rapid and flexible funding should be available for women's rights organizations, including through organizations that specialize in protecting human rights defenders (e.g. Front Line Defenders, Urgent Action Fund and Defend the Defenders) and United Nations funds, such as the new special window of the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund. Costs may range from transportation and relocation to legal fees, translation, health care, security equipment and staff. Due consideration must be given to the long-term legal and financial needs of women human rights defenders in exile. Protection programmes and funds must be open to the family dependants of women human rights defenders, including children and elderly parents, and address the specific needs of women human rights defenders with disabilities.
 - Member States and international organizations should shift spending priorities away from militarized responses and counterterrorism and invest in long-term support to civil society organizations.
-