

[African WHRDs call for strengthened legal recognition and protection](#)

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African States should strengthen legal and policy frameworks to support and protect women human rights defenders, ISHR and leading African WHRDs said today.

In a workshop organised by ISHR on 20 April in the Gambia, participants closely examined recommendations made to States Parties by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in a [report released during its 56th session](#) focusing on WHRDs in Africa. The report considers the particular situation and protection needs of women human rights defenders - including those working on issues of land and environmental rights, freedom of expression and association, sexual and reproductive health rights, issues of sexual orientation and gender identity, among others - and makes over 30 recommendations to States, national human rights institutions, donors and other stakeholders to ensure a safe and enabling environment for their work.

The African Commission Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, Commissioner Reine Alapini Gansou, highlighted that the motivation behind the report came from the needs constantly articulated by WHRDs in the continent. 'African WHRDs are really in dire straits. Many can't even travel to attend ACHPR sessions for fear of the threats they may face in their engagement,' said Ms Alapini Gansou.

Ms Alapini Gansou highlighted the interest the study received by States and the UN attending the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2015, when she had the opportunity to present preliminary findings at a high-level event.

'Let's work hard to ensure that we do not forget about this report by finding effective and practical steps for the implementation of its recommendations,' stressed Ms Alapini Gansou.

Participants reiterated the recommendation calling for all States to enact a law on the protection of HRDs, with specific reference to women defenders ensuring their explicit recognition and gender-specific protection. Furthermore, participants emphasised that such laws should be accompanied with a clear articulation by States regarding implementation plans and mechanisms.

'There are also laws that exist that discriminate against women in many African countries, such as inheritance laws. Meanwhile, there are laws that restrict the work of defenders through their arbitrary application, such as national security laws. These laws all need to be reviewed in line with international human rights

standards,' said Ms Maxmillienne Ngo Mbe of the Central African Human Rights Defenders Network.

Participants identified the need to strengthen protection mechanisms at the national level; for instance ensuring that States establish national human rights institutions that are compliant with the Paris Principles and that have HRD focal points who are able to respond to the specific needs of women defenders.

'While the State has the primary responsibility to ensure protection of all citizens in their country, the reality is that the State itself is also the perpetrator. As such, protection mechanisms for HRDs must be independent to be effective,' said Ms Djingarey Maiga, a woman defender from Mali. 'Greater solidarity amongst African WHRDs through the creation of protection networks would also go a long way in enabling greater recognition of their work as well as generating peer support,' she added.

The women defenders also committed to interacting with government bodies, local authorities, parliamentarians and other activists to popularize and disseminate the report of the ACHPR focusing on WHRDs.

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