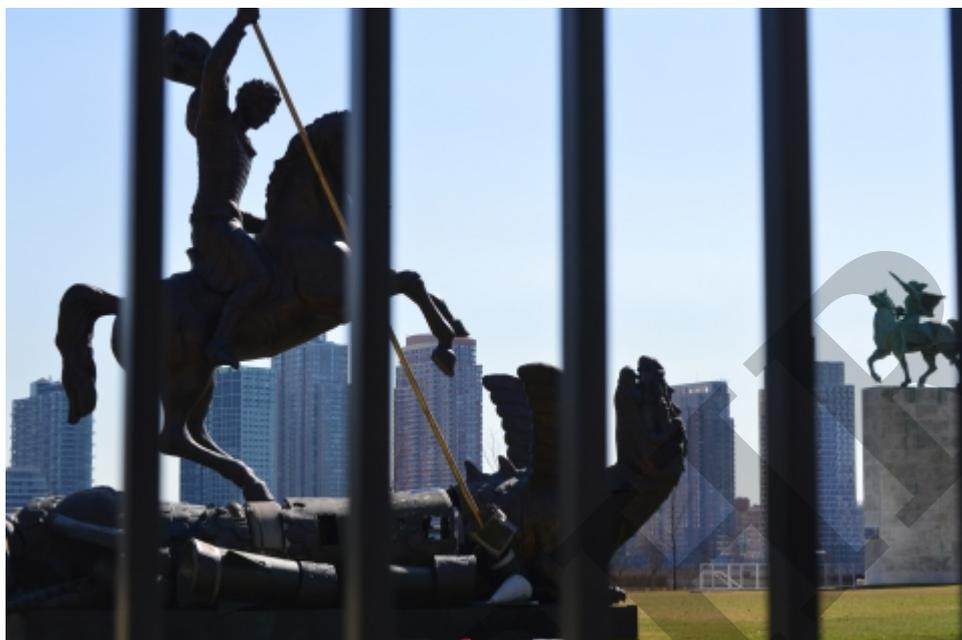


[CSW62 | As visa restrictions keep defenders away, ISHR launches report on barriers to participation](#)

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As civil society protests the denial of visas to women defenders seeking to participate in the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) meeting in New York - starting this week - ISHR launches a report on barriers to civil society engagement with the UN.



On 9 December 1998, the United Nations unanimously adopted the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, which confirms the right to ‘unhindered access to and communication with international bodies’. However, that right is not being guaranteed. ISHR’s new report, [‘The Backlash Against Civil Society Access and Participation at the United Nations’](#) documents a broad range of obstacles faced by human rights defenders, from opaque bureaucracies and secret rules to physical threats and attacks.

The report comes at a critical moment, as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) session kicks off and concern is raised about the denial of visas to women human rights defenders travelling to NY.

‘Many African young women and girls are facing challenges in getting US visas’, said Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda, the Chief Executive of Rozaria Memorial Trust quoted in the report. The Trust is aware of four girls from three different countries who have been denied visas despite having CSW accreditation and sponsorship letters.

‘This year CSW is focusing on the empowerment of rural women. Visa requirements are keeping these very women out of the conversation,’ said ISHR’s Tess McEvoy.

Visas are not the only problem. According to ISHR’s report, there are deep structural problems in the UN’s relationship with NGOs, starting with the Committee on NGOs, which reviews applications for ECOSOC accreditation.

States with poor human rights records dominate the Committee and habitually violate the spirit of their mandate, blocking applications based on their own political interests.

‘The NGO Committee has more than earned its reputation as the ‘anti-NGO Committee,’ said ISHR’s Eleanor Openshaw. ‘Many well-qualified NGOs are being prevented from sharing their expertise with the UN.’

ISHR’s report also details the arbitrary treatment of NGOs without consultative status trying to participate in UN processes. At high-level events NGOs with relevant expertise can be blocked through a “no-objection”

procedure. This procedure effectively allows any State to veto an NGO's participation without providing justification or even having to be named.

'The no-objection procedure is poorly defined, and we don't have access to formal criteria or rules for objections,' said ISHR's John Indergaard. 'It's carte blanche to exclude legitimate NGOs for illegitimate reasons.'

In a recent high-profile case, the procedure was used by Egypt on behalf of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to block 22 LGBT and addiction-related NGOs from participating in a 2016 high-level event on AIDS.

Formal accreditation is no guarantee of participation at the UN. On one occasion, civil society members from Taiwan had their passports considered invalid identification and were denied UN ground passes, despite being registered under an accredited NGO.

Even when they make it into an actual UN building, NGO representatives have been thrown out without explanation or asked to leave while events were ongoing. At some high-level events and committee meetings, NGO representatives have been barred from giving statements and bringing in specific documents.

Human rights defenders have also been subjected to intimidation and received physical threats based on participation at the UN. In 2013, Sri Lankan defenders speaking at the Human Rights Council were accosted by State delegates in the hallways while a Government minister back home threatened to break their legs.

'Civil society has a right to engage with the UN and the value of their input has been repeatedly acknowledged by States,' says Openshaw. 'It is simply appalling that defenders are being attacked, silenced and turned away. Twenty years after the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, the UN must ensure defenders' rights are guaranteed.'

ISHR hopes that the recommendations outlined in its report will assist efforts to enable the participation of human rights defenders in UN processes.

Download the report in [English](#), [Spanish](#), [French](#) and [Arabic](#).

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