

Statement at the 20th session of the Human Rights Council

26 June 2012

Panel discussion on Women Human Rights Defenders

ISHR, as a member of the Women Human Rights Coalition, welcomes the recognition of the work of women human rights defenders provided during this session of the Human Rights Council, and the acknowledgment of the need to address their protection needs.

Women human rights defenders are at the forefront of social justice movements where their work for rights meets powerful opposition. In May this year 13 women HRDS were sentenced for up to two and a half years in prison for defending the land rights in Cambodia. In Zimbabwe members of Women and Men of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) are regularly detained and abused for challenging state measures that violate peoples basic rights.

Women human rights defenders are at risk both in the global North and South. Recent reports on firebomb attacks on abortion clinics in several American states indicate that even those working to uphold rights through providing services that are protected by law, are vulnerable to attack.

Women human rights defenders face specific risks and have specific protection needs. The risks are frequently informed by resistance on the justification of social, religious and cultural mores. Those working on sexual and reproductive rights and rights related to sexuality are frequently in the eye of the storm.

For example, last week the ongoing harassment and intimidation of LGBT human rights defenders in Uganda was escalated with a ministerial announcement to ban 38 NGOs accused of 'promoting homosexuality'. Such a step directly threatens those who challenge discrimination in their societies, closing the space for the legitimate exercise of their rights as defenders. Specific protection measures and programmes for human rights defenders will not be effective where basic rights are denied.

Furthermore, protection requires:

- Systematic documentation with support from all actors with responsibilities regarding protection.
- Placing women human rights defenders at the heart of the definition of protection measures.
- Maximising coordination between actors including the UN, States and national human rights institutions to create a coherent protective umbrella.
- An agile response from human rights bodies and mechanisms to identified risk and need. In this regard, we welcome the initiative taken by the Inter-American Commission to establish a Unit to focus attention on the experience of LGBTI people including defenders. This step is indicative of a recognition of the gravity of the threats experienced by individuals and groups historically subjected to discrimination.

However, as noted by the Special Rapporteur on HRDs in her 2010 report to the Council, ultimately the protection of women human rights defenders lies in a transformation of contexts where inequality, violence and patriarchal attitudes and practice inform women human rights defenders' experience.

This panel contributes to the public acknowledgement of the work of human rights defenders. We commend the HRC for this step. However, even as advances are made in increasing human rights guarantees in some areas, women HRDs that contribute to the promotion of these rights have faced and continue to fear reprisals. The Council must ensure that this remains a space where women defenders can operate without hindrance.