

Brief to United Nations Special Procedures
Global Trends for Women Human Rights Defenders in the Context of COVID-19
Prepared by Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, May 2020

Context

Viruses don't discriminate, but systems and policies do. Neoliberalism and unchecked corporate power have led to extreme wealth inequality. Rising authoritarianism, nationalism, militarization, and extremism have intensified attacks on human rights, democracy, and information. White supremacy, racism, xenophobia, occupation, colonialism, and settler violence, intersect with patriarchy, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, ageism, and other discriminatory systems, threatening the lives and security of marginalized groups. Across every region, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these inequities. Corporations and elites are consolidating their power and states are using the pandemic as an excuse to increase repression and surveillance, erode human rights, and persecute human rights defenders. Women, trans, and gender non-conforming human rights defenders – especially those who face intersecting forms of discrimination and violence – are particularly at risk, both because they are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and because they are disproportionately targeted for attacks and excluded from decision-making. The following is a summary of global trends the Urgent Action Funds (UAFs)¹ are currently witnessing as part of the COVID-19 epidemic.

Trends

Intensified Marginalization

Women, trans, gender diverse, and other historically oppressed groups of defenders and their communities face intensified marginalization in this crisis, in particular the groups below.

- **Racial, ethnic, religious, and other minorities** are disproportionately falling ill and dying due to structural racism. In France, we are supporting an organization of Black and other racialized activists to provide online advice to their communities during the pandemic.
- **Indigenous, environmental, and land rights defenders** are especially at risk, both due to their unequal access to resources and due to state and non-state actors using the crisis as an opportunity to dispossess and criminalize them. In the United States, we are supporting Two-Spirit indigenous land defenders on reservations to respond to the emergency needs of their communities. In Lebanon, we are funding women land rights defenders and farmers who are organizing to encourage sustainable farming practices and reclaim their land to ensure self-sufficiency.
- **Disability rights defenders** report structural barriers to access and discrimination, including when it comes to triage and other healthcare practices. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan we are funding activists to provide medicine, groceries, and hygiene kits to women with disabilities, as well as accurate information on the pandemic.
- **Lesbian, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and other gender diverse defenders** experience increased violence resulting from states using the pandemic as an excuse to adopt militarized policing practices and transphobic laws. In Brazil, we are resourcing the creation of an online support network for lesbian women facing militarized state violence. In Hungary, we are funding a trans group that is raising awareness about a law that would assign gender at birth without the possibility of changing it.
- **Sex worker and informal, domestic, and low-wage worker rights defenders** are experiencing threats to their livelihoods. Women are overrepresented among frontline workers, from nurses to cleaners and grocery store workers. Their care work has increased with school closures and sick family members. Sex workers face a loss of income as well as more repression and attacks. In Cambodia, with factories closed down and owners withholding pay, we are supporting workers to organize and to access basic needs.

¹ The Consortium of Urgent Action Funds includes Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, Urgent Action Fund Africa, Urgent Action Fund Latin America, and Urgent Action Fund Asia and Pacific.

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- **Migrant, displaced, refugee, or stateless defenders and those affected by conflict and occupation** face severe safety and security threats. Their immigration status makes them even more vulnerable in this crisis, since they often lack access to social protections and can be trapped in unsafe situations due to closed borders and other travel restrictions – in particular those in detention centers and those living under occupation or blockade. In Israel, we are supporting an advocacy campaign to include undocumented women in the emergency pandemic response. In the Palestinian Territories, we are supporting a gender-based violence hotline for respond to women and girls.
- **Defenders deprived of their liberty** also face severe health risks. The detention of defenders is increasing as states repress human rights under the guise of combating the virus. In the United States, we are supporting formerly and currently incarcerated women, trans, and gender non-conforming defenders campaigning to release the elderly and those with serious medical needs. In Colombia, we are funding an organization to supply personal protective equipment to women political prisoners and provide livelihood support to a recently freed political prisoner and her infant.

Gender-Based Violence

Across every region we have seen an increase in gender-based violence, within the home as a result of quarantine conditions, and in society at large, due to the rise in authoritarianism and militarism provoked by the pandemic. Social isolation is exacerbating domestic violence stress triggers such as financial and health-related concerns. Additionally, women living under authoritarian governments are facing increased gender-based violence due a rise of militarized responses to the health crisis. In Pakistan, we relocated activists who were experiencing violence and were unable to stay with their family. In Lebanon, we resourced the creation of a short-term informal shelter for vulnerable migrant workers and their families.

Collective Care

Activists are feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of balancing the crisis, work, and their survival. Already living with high levels of anxiety and stress in conducting their work, they now face uncertain economic, social, and health concerns. The sudden closure of schools and other institutions have increased their caregiving roles, financial responsibility, and workload. In the United States, we are supporting a Black sex worker collective to host a wellness space to help people cope the emotional effects of COVID-19.

Basic Needs

In a majority of regions where the UAFs operate, 80% to 90% of women, LGBTIQ+ and gender non-conforming individuals work in the informal sector. They are unlikely to benefit from government aid packages. It is an imperative political act to broaden the definition of security to include basic needs required for the survival of activists and movements. In Tanzania, we supported an organization to install hand-washing facilities in high-risk environments such as markets and public transport terminals and to advocate for women's rights through local radio and TV programs. In Thailand, we funded an LGBTI rights group to provide food and other essentials to its members and their families. In Fiji, we supported an organization to supply food and other basic needs for rural women with no government assistance.

Access to Information

Human rights defenders, journalists, bloggers, and those covering the COVID-19 response have been targeted. Additionally, the language and channels used by governments and the WHO on prevention measures often fail to reach marginalized groups, such as those with limited literacy and access to the Internet or television. There is also a need to debunk false information that could escalate the spread of the virus. This includes racist disinformation that scapegoats certain communities. In Madagascar, we funded a project to educate girls and young women on COVID-19 through radio programs.

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State Accountability

Defenders are monitoring their governments and holding them accountable as they take advantage of this global emergency to erode human rights and adopt repressive measures, from limiting abortion access to contracting with private companies to increase surveillance and shrinking civic space and freedom of speech. The Philippines passed a law authorizing arrests for spread of misinformation on social media, which led to a mass arrest of human rights lawyers. In Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala the militarization of emergency plans is suspending fundamental rights, enforcing curfews, and strengthening authoritarianism. In Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Colombia, governments are using public resources to promote religious right-wing discourses and practices as solutions to the pandemic. WHRDs across regions report an increase in digital surveillance. It is critical to monitor measures taken during this emergency and their implications in the long term. In the United States, we funded activists developing a litigation strategy and raising awareness about threats to abortion access.

Digital Security

As the pandemic requires a pause in physical movement, WHRDs report a need for information on available resources, access to virtual spaces, and secure digital platforms to continue their activism. Along with a need to become aware of and gain access to online spaces, video-conferencing subscriptions, upgrades to virtual storage and content management products, procuring VPNs, and buying laptops with cameras, WHRDs need support with digital security trainings to allow them to conduct their activism safely. In Ecuador, we are supporting a group providing counseling to women facing digital harassment and threats and conducting webinars about holistic security and protection.

Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic and the systemic marginalization it has exacerbated pose an existential threat to women and other marginalized human rights and social justice activists and movements. These defenders are on the frontlines, providing support to their communities while overburdened with extreme care work responsibilities and facing intensified attacks. Now more than ever, it is crucial to support them and ensure that these activists, organizations, and movements can continue their work during and after this pandemic. This requires:

- **Collective care and holistic psychosocial support:** Care work needs to be valued as essential work that is disproportionately undertaken by women, trans, and gender diverse people. These defenders, especially those who face intersecting forms of discrimination and violence, need collective and holistic care as well as robust integrated protection measures.
- **Flexible and sustainable funding:** Women, trans, and gender non-conforming human rights defenders continue to be critically underfunded, and this pandemic is aggravating their economic challenges. States and philanthropic actors must provide flexible, core, and rapid response funding to ensure the sustainability of frontline activists and movements, especially small, informal, community feminist groups and organizations, so they can survive this crisis and continue their invaluable work.
- **Feminist leadership and solidarity:** Despite the compound obstacles they face, women, trans, and gender diverse defenders build vital solutions to global and local crises. COVID-19 has highlighted even more starkly the urgency of the systemic changes feminist movements are working to create, from robust environmental justice measures to inclusive social protections and labor rights, and a reevaluation of care work. It is imperative to center intersectional feminist leadership and solidarity and ensure that activists are meaningfully involved in decision-making during and after the pandemic.