



KVINNA TILL KVINNA

Insiste, Persiste, Resiste, Existe – A report on women's rights activists

"Men [human rights defenders] are 'just' killed. The killing of women is much crueller. Things are done to women's bodies before and after the killing.

Many OFP members were raped before being killed. Their stomachs were cut, poles inserted in their vaginas and they were beaten to death. When we find bodies of these women, they had signs attached to them that said 'I am a prostitute'. Or their bodies showed other forms of sexual torture. It seems there is some form of perverse pleasure in mutilating women's bodies."

– Anonymous WHRD, Organización Femenina Popular (OFP), Colombia

"In Tunisia, police have beaten women activists in public, saying they are prostitutes."

Anonymous WHRD, Tunisia

"When we do sensitization of women in the region about women's rights, the men say you women encourage our women to strike against us."

Esther Tshinama, UFEDEPA, DRC

The Report *Inisiste, Persiste, Resiste, Existe*, is based on more than a hundred interviews with people who defend women's human rights. The interviewees come from Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burma, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iran, Montenegro, Nepal, Serbia and Tunisia.

The purpose of the report is to make the threats encountered by women's rights activists in their work visible as well as the strategies these women use to combat and handle the threats. The report is to be distributed to women's rights activists in order to initiate an in-depth debate among them and other actors as to how the security situation can be improved.

The report is the result of collaboration between the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, the Frontline Protection of Human Rights Defenders (Ireland) and the Urgent Action Fund (USA) who all possess broad knowledge of working with human rights defenders.

The interviews show that those who fight for women's human rights face serious threats due to their work. Every day women rights activists defy norms and traditions on women's subordination. By demanding their rights they challenge the powers structure. Activists challenge traditional women's roles and are thus threatened, not only by repressive regimes and religious leaders but also by their close families.

With scanty resources and great courage they continue their work for women's human rights to be fully respected. The interviewees show that change can happen, and that the work they do contribute to changes of societies.

Conclusions:

- The greatest threat against women's rights activists is the lack of acknowledgement. Work for women's human rights is generally not seen as a part of the "real" work to protect, respect and promote human rights. Many of the women activists do not see themselves as human rights defenders either.
- Violence against women's rights activists is not seen for what it is: a component of deliberate, calculated strategies to silence them and to stop them from conducting their daily work to change society, save lives and claim justice. Instead the real reasons behind the assaults are hidden behind the usual "accepted" violence against women. It is easier to get away with humiliating, raping, kidnapping or murdering a woman who is "just a woman" than attacking a human rights defender.
- Regardless of where in the world women act, one can find similar kinds of threats:
 - Sexualised violence: Threats of rape and actual rape along with other forms of sexualised violence is something that many women's rights activists live with. The rape of the women themselves and of people close to them, like daughters and sisters, is used as a punishment and a weapon to stop their work.
 - Isolation: Local and international networks give women's rights activists' strength, impact and protection. Therefore, it is common to try to cut these ties by limiting their freedom of movement and their communication and financing channels. Their work is diminished and ignored.
 - Rumour spreading and defamation: Many women are accused in the media and other public arenas of being prostitutes, lesbian, mad, witches, traitors and abnormal.
 - Silence: Governments and authorities do not often condemn threats and harassment, or offer protection, and fail to bring the perpetrators to justice. The passivity of politicians and authorities supports the assaults and gives the green light to the perpetrators to continue.
- Threats can come from all parts of society. From authorities, politicians, militia groups, religious leaders and from organisations. Sometimes women's rights activists are questioned, counteracted and threatened by their family members. Many are accused of not managing their duties in the home, of being poor mothers and of undermining the family.

- Women's rights activists use a number of strategies to tackle the threats. The pros and cons are determined in order to find the best strategy for the situation in question:
 - To show no fear and claim public space – or see the threats as real and plan ways of tackling them.
 - Working anonymously and with no known address – or to be visible in everything you do and obtain international contacts and exposure.
 - To report the threats and harassment to the police (where possible) because the state is obliged to protect its citizens – or to choose never to contact the police and perhaps rather hire a private guard instead.
 - Stubbornly stand for what you believe in to show your endurance and/or know which fights are worth fighting and be flexible in order to achieve sub-goals on the way.
 - Create networks, both nationally and internationally: to become visible and thus less vulnerable.
 - Create secure places – for offices and meetings. It could be about security equipment or just knowing that there is rent money available for a considerable amount of time.
 - Get support to obtain a driver's licence or arrange modes of transport so that you are free to flee when need be, that you can choose yourself the best time to leave.
 - Seek support and protection from your family: create an understanding for your work so as to guarantee support.

"Being widely accompanied, not being isolated, being part of a national international network. That all gives me a sense of security, of a growing movement involving more and more people."

Anonymous WHRD, Colombia

To learn more about the organisations behind the report:

www.kvinnatillkvinna.se

www.frontlinedefenders.org

www.urgentactionfund.org

