

Council must denounce rape and other forms of sexual violence against women defenders

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Women defenders are attacked for both who they are and what they do. Sexual violence against women defenders aims at intimidating and overpowering them as women. It also aims at crushing what they represent – the dismissal of traditional, subordinate roles for women, and the assertion of rights in the public and political space. Acts of sexual violence against women defenders are not isolated incidents but are facilitated by a broader social order that seeks to keep women on the margins.

Frequently the experience of women defenders foreshadows what other women may experience. Their visibility can make them vulnerable. Impunity in cases of rape against women defenders encourages sexual violence as a repressive tactic against the population more broadly. Impunity is further embedded as women defenders frequently don't report cases of sexual assault for fear they won't be taken seriously or because the authorities themselves were involved in the attack. Furthermore, taboos around sexual violence, create a dual stigmatisation which adversely affects women defenders' ability to seek justice and protection.

Sexual violence, including rape, is used against women defenders in many different contexts. During demonstrations in Tahrir Square, Cairo, commemorating the second anniversary of the January 25th revolution, women defenders were sexually assaulted and raped, including with the use of metal rods. Parliamentarians were later to imply that women that attended such a demonstration were not 'decent' women.

The [Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition](#) has documented several cases of sexual violence, including a case in Iran where a woman defender was raped by a State official, whilst being held in solitary confinement. The condition placed on her being moved from solitary confinement to the public prison was that she agree not to report the rape to the prison doctor.

Sexual attacks, and the threat of such violence, is a tactic commonly used against lesbian and bisexual defenders. Rape is supposedly designed to 'cure' the woman of her homosexuality. It is used to compel her back in line with both heteronormative and patriarchal norms. It is an attempt to silence her activism. The Coalition documented a case in Uganda where, following a series of threats of sexual assault, a woman defender was forced to move house for her own safety.

In militarised contexts, sexual violence can be used against women as a means to assert or reassert particular social and political orders, with women defenders as visible targets. In conflict situations, rape is a common tactic against those who raise awareness about state and non-state perpetrators of sexual violence.

Important steps are being taken by international and regional human rights bodies to confirm women's right to defend rights without fear or attack. For example, the African Commission on Human and People's Rights recently handed down its first decision confirming the duty of States to protect women from violence. The risk of experiencing sexual violence faced by women defenders has also been acknowledged by mechanisms of the Human Rights Council and by other UN bodies, including recently by the Commission on the Status of Women.

The Human Rights Council must continue to focus attention on the issue. With a resolution on violence against women led by Canada due to be considered at the current 23rd session, the Council must denounce the use of rape and all forms of sexual violence against women, including women human rights defenders, perpetrated by State and non-state actors. States must redouble efforts to prevent such violence; and to ensure appropriate

redress and the provision of gender-specific medical and counseling services to victims of sexual violence.

All women have the right to claim and defend rights without fear of sexual violence. States must effectively challenge the structural discrimination and violence that facilitate these most egregious attacks against women including in their legitimate and crucial work to advance human rights in our communities.

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