

World's peak human rights body should act to protect women human rights defenders

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(Geneva – 8 March 2013) The world's peak human rights body should take action to protect women human rights defenders and those working on women's rights or gender issues, the International Service for Human Rights said on International Women's Day.

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'Women human rights defenders are particularly vulnerable to such violations, with a recent UN report finding that people working on women's rights and gender issues are often subject to harassment, stigmatisation, and sexual violence or abuse.'

'Women defenders challenge societal notions about the status of women. It is because of their work to challenge these very attitudes that women human rights defenders can find themselves the target of human rights violations,' Ms Openshaw said.

According to Ms Openshaw, attacks against women defenders are often state-sanctioned or involve the state taking inadequate or no action to protect those working on women's rights or gender issues. Moreover, such attacks persist in all corners of the world.

'Legislation to criminalise "homosexual propaganda" in Russia or the Ukraine or to restrict the provision of abortion services in Mississippi are two sides of the same coin,' said Ms Openshaw. 'Both laws discriminate on the grounds of gender or sexuality and both laws target those who stand up for women's rights or gender or sexuality issues.'

The UN Human Rights Council - the world's peak multilateral human rights body - is currently considering a draft resolution on legislation affecting human rights defenders. ISHR is calling on the Council and all member states to ensure that the text recognises the systemic and structural discrimination and violence faced by women human rights defenders. ISHR is also calling on the Council to reaffirm the legal obligation of all states to protect women from violence and discrimination and to ensure that women human rights defenders and those working on women's rights and gender issues are not subject to attacks, intimidation or reprisals.

A number of states from different regions, including Norway, Argentina, the Netherlands, Mexico, Slovenia and Australia, have pledged their support for the resolution and publicly outlined their commitment to protect those working to promote human rights and end discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity.

'International Women's Day is a day to celebrate the leadership role that women human rights defenders have played in advancing human rights and social justice globally,' said Ms Openshaw.

'But it is also a day to act to ensure that those working to challenge inequality are free from violence and discrimination. We call on all states to ensure that, at the international level, the Human Rights Council adopts a strong resolution and, at the national level, governments enact effective laws and policies to protect women's rights and women human rights defenders.'

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