

# REVIEW OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROTECTION OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS: KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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## Introduction

**Human rights defenders** worldwide face significant challenges, including social, political, and economic restrictions, harassment, violence, and structural repressive monitoring. **Women human rights defenders (WHRDs)**, however, encounter additional gender-specific obstacles that intersect with these broader challenges. As a result, they require protection and support that is not only gender-responsive, but also intersectional. This means being aware that they may require different or additional forms of support depending on factors such as their age, marital status, rural or urban living, ethnicity and sexuality. The 2021 [Recommendations for the Protection of Women Human Rights Defenders](#) by [Peace Brigades International \(PBI\) – The Netherlands](#), [WO=MEN Dutch Gender Platform](#) and [Cordaid](#) aim to provide practical strategies and recommendations for diplomatic missions for safeguarding and supporting WHRDs. Importantly, these recommendations were co-created by Netherlands Embassy staff and WHRDs, who provided input based on their lived experiences. Given the increased violence, harassment, and gender-specific threats WHRDs face, the Recommendations have recently been reviewed for their effectiveness in addressing these challenges. This document summarises the review's key takeaways and recommendations for key stakeholders.

# Key findings

**Embassies** primarily support WHRDs through two main activities:

1. **Referrals** to local, regional or international organisations (mostly CSOs) that can offer direct, preventive or protection assistance from harm or threats
2. Provision of **safe spaces** for WHRDs to network, conduct their work and seek assistance

**WHRDs** experience barriers and challenges in accessing support from diplomatic missions, primarily related to the following issues:

- The worldwide trend towards **shrinking civic spaces** has led to an increase in criminalisation of human rights defenders
- Accountability and the **political positioning** of diplomatic missions present major obstacles for them to publicly speak about on issues that WHRDs are facing, particularly in situations where domestic actors are directly involved in or linked to the human rights violations that WHRDs are speaking out against
- Some diplomatic missions lack sufficient **capacity** and resources to take concrete actions on the topic

**On the content of the Recommendations**, overall respondents perceive them as a **useful tool**, both in terms of content and presentation, and a **valuable starting point** for engagement on the topic. However, they indicated that the **content, use and reach** of the Recommendations was limited. They identified concrete improvements, which are summarised below:

- The Recommendations were perceived as being quite broad and generic. A need for **localisation** and **contextualisation** was identified, to enhance applicability. It was suggested to develop versions that are tailored to local contexts, including translation into other languages
- The Recommendations could benefit from a clearer **intersectional lens**, highlighting issues that WHRDs face next to security risks. Examples are mental health issues and burnout, or the fact that WHRDs often have family caring duties that need to be taken into account when providing support

- There are **emerging topics** that require attention, such as digital security threats linked to the rise in use of artificial intelligence. It is therefore important to keep the Recommendations up to date

**On the usage and reach by the embassies**, the frequent rotation of staff poses challenges in **maintaining continuity** of support and ensure institutionalisation of knowledge, established contacts with WHRDs or relevant partners, and familiarity with the Recommendations. This could be overcome by creating welcome packages for new embassy staff, facilitating exchanges between embassies, or integrating the recommendations into already existing official (training) processes and documents.

Additionally, embassies suggested that information shared with them would be more impactful if it would be regularly highlighted through official channels and external communication.



Moderator Kiza Magendane with speakers Tsano (WHRD from Zimbabwe), Sabina Atzei (Cordaïd), Mairit Majj (MEP) and Yeno Suzan Lemi (advocate from South Sudan, not pictured) at the panel discussion on WHRDs at Afrikadag 2024.

Sharing **best practices** was also seen as valuable, and various examples were brought up of successful implementation of similar tools by other embassies.

Finally, **responsibilities** should be defined for raising awareness about the Recommendations. To stay relevant, they require continuous and repeated attention.

## Our next steps

In order to improve the use of the Recommendations and maximise their reach, PBI, Cordaid and WO=MEN will undertake the following steps:

- **Review and update the content** of the Recommendations and improve it based on the review
- Produce localised versions of the Recommendations in partnership with diplomatic staff, WHRDs and women's rights organisations. This is currently being piloted by Cordaid in South Sudan (supported by [Just Future](#)) with the goal of expanding it to other countries
- **Translate** the Recommendations to French and Spanish (and other languages may follow)
- Continue to **promote** the Recommendations through various communication channels
- Continue **advocacy** and **engagement** with policy- and decision-makers and embassies



Ukrainian WHRDs Natalia Karbowska, Oksana Grygorieva and Olena Volobueiva, and Anika Snel (WO=MEN) meeting with Ruben Brekelmans (then VVD parliamentarian) during a visit to the Netherlands in May 2024

## Recommendations for stakeholders

The Recommendations review indicated its potential to become an integrated component of missions' strategies to support and protect WHRDs. The following steps would further this:

### FOR POLICYMAKERS

- **Ensure women human rights are prioritised** in the governmental agenda and **highlight the specific challenges and needs** of WHRDs

### FOR THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND EMBASSIES

- **Increase engagement** with WHRDs through supporting their activities. Their voices are essential to stay informed on human rights developments in their countries.
- **Ensure the Recommendations are mainstreamed** throughout embassy documentation, instruments and processes, such as onboarding of new staff
- Look for ways to **exchange best practices and mutual learning** between embassies, to strengthen their capacity regarding this topic

### FOR POLITICIANS

- Advocate for and support **policies and practices** that prioritise, protect and support WHRDs
- **Engage directly with WHRDs** to learn from their knowledge and experience
- Continue to **raise awareness** about WHRD's work, their challenges and their need for protection

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