



**Defend defenders!**



**NATURAL  
JUSTICE**

**THE SITUATION OF WOMEN  
ENVIRONMENTAL & HUMAN RIGHTS  
DEFENDERS ACROSS AFRICA**

# Executive Summary

**Women environmental and human rights defenders (WEHRDs) in Africa** play a vital role in protecting the climate, ecosystems, and the rights of their communities. Yet their work comes at a steep cost. From rural villages to conflict-affected regions, women face disproportionate risks, including gender-based violence, criminalization, intimidation, and exclusion from decision-making processes.

From **Kenya to the DRC, Uganda to South Africa**, and **Nigeria to Tanzania** women activists are confronting not only corporate and state repression but also deeply rooted patriarchal norms. They endure smear campaigns, sexual violence, online abuse, and repression for daring to challenge power. Many are targeted precisely because they are women: their **gender is weaponized to silence their voices, punish their resistance and discredit their leadership**.

They confront intersecting challenges shaped by gender, race, class, disability and location, whilst navigating complex social, cultural, and political landscapes. Despite their crucial contributions, the experiences of WEHRDs are often overlooked, their solutions sidelined and their struggles underreported.

The limited data that is available in Africa and on women defenders, paints a grim picture. Our research stresses that the numbers also mask the real scale of the crisis - silenced by fear, stigma, and chronic underreporting.

***"We cannot tire or give up. We owe it to the present and future generations of all species to rise up and walk!"***

-Wangari Maathai, Kenyan environmental activist and founder of the Greenbelt Movement

**Behind the statistics are stories of defiance.** WEHRDs are mobilizing rural communities, exposing environmental crimes, and demanding accountability from governments and extractive industries. They are creating safe networks, sharing digital security skills, and reshaping advocacy spaces that have long excluded them.

Our report spotlighting **six African countries**, sheds light on the realities faced by WEHRDs across the continent, exploring the threats they encounter, the gaps in protection, and the collective strategies and resources they rely on to safeguard their communities, their environment, and themselves. Our analysis underscores not only the urgent need for targeted support but also the resilience, leadership, and transformative potential of women defenders in shaping Africa's environmental and human rights landscape.

Our key recommendations call for **gender-responsive funding and protection frameworks for WEHRDs**: stronger data collection- disaggregated by gender; psychosocial and legal support; and recognition of women defenders as agents of change - not passive victims.

Housewives, students, and customary women leaders are forming alliances to educate communities about environmental degradation and promote sustainable livelihoods, though these networks remain critically underfunded. Strengthening them through **long-term, flexible funding and support is one of the most effective forms of protection**, recognizing women-led organizations as both conservation leaders and frontline defenders.

WEHRDs' struggles are not isolated acts of resistance but a vital front in Africa's broader battle for women's rights, human rights, climate justice, and environmental democracy- **all impossible without protecting those who defend them**.

# Key Findings

## The numbers & hotspot countries

Global Witness started reporting on the killings of land and environmental defenders in 2012. Since then, a total of **2,157** defenders across the world have been killed, **126** of whom were from an African country.<sup>1</sup>

The **Democratic Republic of Congo** is the deadliest place to be an environmental defender with a total of **78 killings since 2012**. **Six** defenders were killed over the same time period in **Liberia, South Africa** and **Kenya** respectively. **Five** defenders have been killed in both **Uganda** and **Chad** respectively.

Out of the total number of African defenders reported killed, **just five of them were women**.

The Alliance for Land, Indigenous, and Environmental Defenders (ALLIED) is a global coalition that supports and protects land, Indigenous, and environmental defenders who face violence and threats. The coalition has been collecting and reporting on the data of non-lethal attacks against land and environmental defenders across Africa since 2022.

According to its data, there have been a total of **261** attacks across all countries since 2022. **Uganda** represents almost **one third** of these attacks with a total of 94. The Democratic Republic of Congo and Tanzania both represent around 15% of attacks with 35 and 34 reported attacks respectively. Out of the total number of attacks, **just 18 were reported to be against women**, compared to 88 against men, with 70 attacks either unknown or unspecified.<sup>2</sup>

Looking at applications to emergency support funds for environmental and human rights defenders provides some insight into the extent of underreporting in Africa and by WEHRDs.

Frontline Defenders'<sup>3</sup> data on applications from environmental defenders in African countries<sup>4</sup> shows that between 2020 and 2025, a total of **181 emergency support applications** were submitted by environmental defenders across Africa. Applications were highly concentrated in **East and Central Africa**. **Uganda** accounted for the largest share (47 applications, roughly one in four), followed by the **Democratic Republic of Congo (25)**, **Tanzania (15)**, **South Africa (13)**, and **Kenya (13)**. This pattern suggests that defenders in these countries face persistent threats but also have stronger access to emergency response channels. By contrast, fewer applications from West and North Africa may reflect lower awareness of support mechanisms or limited reporting rather than reduced risk.

Men submitted most applications (**81 cases, 45%**), followed by **organisations (68 cases, 38%)** and **women (32 cases, 18%)**. The comparatively lower number of applications from women defenders aligns with wider documentation gaps observed in other datasets, such as **ALLIED** and **Global Witness**. It may also point to gendered barriers in accessing emergency funds, including digital access, safety concerns, or lack of trust in external reporting mechanisms.





## Nature of attacks and violence against women

Frontline Defenders' emergency fund applications from 2020-2025 show that the most frequent types of threats or attacks were **"Threats or other harassment" (18% of cases)**, indicating ongoing intimidation and pressure on defenders short of overt violence. **"Arbitrary arrest or detention" (9%)**, **"Physical attacks" (8%)**, and **"death threats" (7%)** show that criminalization and direct violence remain pervasive. A smaller number of emergency applications **(5%)** involved **non-violation-related support** such as solidarity or medical aid, suggesting some preventive or recovery-oriented grants.<sup>5</sup>

***"The biggest threat I face now is fear for my life and that of my family. These are very powerful individuals in government who have shown openly that they will not stop at anything. And it's not only the government but the private sector and even the investors. We know that we are dealing with people who have money – they can do anything, that's my greatest fear. At any time, anything can happen to me or my family."***

-A WEHRD from a county in coastal Kenya

There is little concrete data on how often gender-based violence is used against women EHRDs, but interviews and testimonies from the African continent show it is a serious problem. Reports suggest that violence against women and girls involved in climate and environmental activism is likely to be far higher than official figures indicate, largely because many incidents go unreported.<sup>6</sup> Anecdotal evidence shows **gender-based violence is likely to be the most common nature of attacks against WEHRDs, primarily with sexual violence being weaponised with impunity to punish and deter their activism.**

Misogynistic insults such as being called "whores," "bad mothers," or "immoral women", are not just casual slurs but deliberate tools used to silence and discredit them. **Gender discrimination becomes a weapon**, exploited to divide communities and deepen family rifts, especially when women challenge powerful interests or question traditional norms.<sup>7</sup>

Women who defend their rights to land, natural resources, and a healthy environment face unique risks beyond those encountered by men. Smear campaigns often target their private lives, filled with **sexist and sexualized attacks** that seek to undermine their credibility and dignity.<sup>8</sup>

***"Once the government notices you as an environmental defender, you will be under scrutiny."***

-A WEHRD from Tanzania

**Digital threats against WEHRDs are growing.** These include online surveillance, hacking, trolling, and theft of digital equipment. Women and LGBTIQ activists face smear campaigns, threats of rape or outing of their sexual identity. Regulations further restrict digital freedoms and organizational operations, disproportionately affect women and LGBTIQ activists reliant on digital tools for mobilization who are already targets of digital attacks such as hacking and doxxing.<sup>9</sup> Several women defenders have also faced particularly degrading attacks, including the spread of fake pornographic images intended to humiliate and silence them.<sup>10</sup>

Evidence suggests that **women activists face heightened risks of intimate partner and family violence when their work challenges gender expectations.** According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), women defenders are often threatened with divorce or separation from their children as a means of control. Such patterns mirror broader trends in gender-based violence, where activism that disrupts traditional roles can provoke backlash and abuse from within the home.<sup>11</sup>

**Many women defenders highlight that existing protection mechanisms often overlook gender-specific needs**, such as resettlement programmes which often exclude families. They stress the importance of being involved in the decision-making process from the start to move beyond paternalistic approaches that underestimate the risks they face.<sup>12</sup>

## Women's disproportionate burdens

Extractive industries – one of the primary sectors linked to killings and attacks of EHRDS – often fail to deliver the development they promise, instead deepening poverty and reinforcing economic, social, and gender inequalities.<sup>13</sup> **Women bear a disproportionate level of eco-violence**: they are often the first to notice and experience polluted water, contaminated land, and the impacts of environmental damage on their own health and that of their families. In communities where **women are primary caregivers, climate change, biodiversity loss and ecological destruction increases their workload**, affecting their ability to provide food and clean water.<sup>14</sup>

Women's vulnerability is also shaped by biology. Studies show that higher oestrogen levels and increased body fat can cause toxins to accumulate more in women, creating cycles of exposure and retention. Pollutants like mercury and dioxins not only threaten women's health but can also affect fetuses and pass to infants through breastfeeding. Caring for sick family members further burdens women, especially where there's a lack of public health, sanitation, and social services.<sup>15</sup>

*"I was beaten like a football mercilessly. I was rushed to the hospital where I stayed for two months. I have suffered, but defending the truth is important, that's what keeps me going."*

-A WEHRD from Nigeria

## Intersectionality

**WEHRDs do not experience violence in the same way**. Race, class, caste, age, and sexuality shape who is most at risk, while **women's experiences of environmental harm are often made worse by racism, discrimination and poverty**. Understanding these layered identities is key to grasping how oppression and resistance intersect in women's activism. In global power hierarchies, **Black and Indigenous women defenders remain the most invisible**, highlighting the intersecting inequalities that define whose pain is acknowledged and whose resistance is remembered.<sup>16</sup>

**WEHRDs with disabilities often face unique challenges tied to their disabilities**. In conflict areas for instance, those advocating for disability justice encounter strong resistance from patriarchal authorities and face heightened risks of gender-based and sexual violence due to the absence of dedicated protection systems. Many **disability rights defenders are also isolated from broader human rights and feminist movements**, leaving them with limited access to the protection networks that support other women defenders.<sup>17</sup>

## Perpetrators: sectors and industries

Where a sector could be identified, around **half of the killings in Africa since 2012 were linked to poaching (61)** with land and mining **representing approximately a fifth of killings** each (28 and 24 respectively).<sup>18</sup>

Where a sector could be identified, **just under a third of non-lethal attacks were linked to the fossil fuel industry (oil and gas), with mining and energy sectors** linked to 25 and 23 attacks respectively.<sup>19</sup>

Whilst the WEHRDs interviewed for this research cited **corporations as the main perpetrators** of threats and attacks against them, due to their ability to influence the government – and in turn the

***“What structures violence against human rights defenders is a State anchored in racism and sexism and in an economic system whereby profit and wealth for a few are worth more than the lives of certain persons. The more a person or a group falls outside the characteristics of being white, male, sexually normative and rich, the more they will suffer from inequalities.”***

-Brazilian Committee of Human Rights Defenders<sup>27</sup>

police and media framing - the discussions mainly focused on the role of the **state and the police**. Repressed civic space and laws restricting peaceful protest in countries like Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, are major contributions to impunity and WEHRDs' rights being violated.

According to interviews, criminalisation of land and environmental defenders in Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya is rising. Both state and private sector actors are using the justice system to silence dissent, particularly around land conflicts linked to infrastructure and conservation projects.

**Minority and Indigenous communities are most affected, with weak judiciaries leaving their protection largely in the hands of civil society organisations.**

**In Kenya, WEHRDs interviewed for this research spoke of conservation and carbon credits as industries linked to land violations and environmental degradation**, and in turn, threats against them. This was the case particularly in the north of Kenya where violations are rife but for the most part undocumented.

Submissions to the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, reveal the multitude of ways in which women face secondary victimisation after being targeted for their work as an EHRD, facing economic and personal consequences for their activism, and an inability to pursue justice. Women without money at the time of arrest are often coerced into sex by police officers in exchange for their release.<sup>20</sup>

## Data limitations: under-reporting, zero data collection and skewed data

**WEHRDs often choose not to report threats**, including death threats, for fear of having their personal lives attacked, targeting their marital status, lifestyle, or religious beliefs in deeply defamatory ways.<sup>21</sup> **Many do not even know the term “human rights defender” or see themselves as one**, which limits their access to resources and support that could otherwise help them.<sup>22</sup>

**A lack of trust in legal and political systems to provide adequate protection or support is a key reason why women don't report threats and attacks.** Distrust in the police stems from a fear of not being believed or being mistreated by the police and other institutions. Women may also feel a sense of shame and stigma when reporting, as well as fear of the consequences if she does report – unsurprising given the possibility of collusion between the state, corporate elites and the police force as frequently reported by EHRDs.

ALLIED has expressed **concerns around the lack of government efforts to document attacks on EHRDs.**<sup>23</sup> **Weak or non-existent human rights monitoring groups coupled with limited press**

***“Cultural and social norms heavily restrict women who are expected to remain silent, submissive, and confined to household roles. Women have less access to information, legal recourse, and financial means. Customary laws often disadvantage women, reinforcing secondary victimization.”***<sup>26</sup>

-Women defender expert from the DRC

**freedoms of civil society have led to a lack of regional data.**<sup>24</sup> The UN provides only regional data on HRD killings and disappearances, with no country-level details or source information. Under reporting on Sustainable Development Goal 16.10.1, which records killings and attacks on HRDs, most cases come from civil society organizations rather than reported by states. In addition, the data does not distinguish land, environmental, or Indigenous defenders, even though they likely account for about half of all cases.<sup>25</sup>

The **Global Witness** data on killing of EHRDs is the only data that is consistently disaggregated by gender, whilst the **ALLIED** data only has partial gender disaggregation and is a fairly nascent initiative. Neither of the datasets integrate metrics for gender-based violence such as sexual assault, harassment, threats of sexual violence, and/or violence against family members.

***“Physical brutality and legal harassment may be perpetuated against individuals or members of specific groups, but the implications have far-reaching consequences to entire communities, nations, and humanity at large as culturally sanctioned violent repression polices women’s mobility, agency, and even conceptions of femininity.”**<sup>28</sup>*

-Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, Aarhus Convention, Michel Forst.

## Key recommendations

### African states should:

- Recognize and protect WEHRDs in law and policy;
- Tackle the drivers of harms against WEHRDs defenders by protecting land and environmental rights;
- Prevent and address gender-based threats and violence against WEHRDs and guarantee their recognition and protection and their communities;
- Systematically identify, document and analyse attacks on land and environmental defenders;
- End criminalisation and harassment of WEHRDs;
- Protect WEHRDs online, promote digital security and counter-disinformation;
- Ensure and civic space and an enabling gender responsive funding environment;
- Ensure transparent and prompt justice for WEHRDs who have been attacked;
- Establish strong and binding legal frameworks on business and human rights; and
- Adopt international and regional declarations, frameworks and mechanisms that protect defenders on the African continent.

### International donors and state aid agencies should:

- Provide direct, flexible, sustainable, long-term funding to WEHRDs, taking into account the limitations they may face in official registration or when living in territories where banks are sanctioned. Ensure information relating to emergency assistance and protection support is in an accessible format and translated into local languages.
- Francophone activists face additional barriers due to language. Donors and NGOs should establish Francophone-compatible protection funds with simplified, low-connectivity access, supported by decentralized, women-led networks offering monitoring, shelters, and emergency legal aid.

- Integrating gender-sensitive protection and support is urgent, including emergency relocation, trauma counselling, protection grants, and women-led early warning networks to strengthen rapid response and solidarity.
- Integrate psychosocial support and safe spaces for women defenders (WEHRDs) by providing sustained funding, technical assistance, and visibility for initiatives that promote their mental wellbeing and safety.
- Establish and strengthen networks of WEHRDs at local, regional, and national levels, creating platforms for solidarity, peer support, and experience sharing to address burnout, trauma, and security challenges associated with their work.
- Provide funding, technical support and visibility for the development of networks of WEHRDs at the local, regional and national levels including the facilitation of networking and experience sharing opportunities. Develop networks that bring together the overlapping constituencies involved in environmental justice, including environmentalists, conservationists, Indigenous communities and the human rights movement.
- Provide funding to WEHRDs to participate in high-level events at the national, regional and international levels, recognizing the historic and systemic obstacles to their equal representation at such events.
- Support legal aid initiatives that support WEHRDs by connecting local communities with international law firms and overseas lawyers to provide legal advice, as well as sustained material and psychological support in order that they are able to pursue litigation claims as a way to ensure accountability and obtain redress. Invest in specialised legal aid defenders' clinics and train frontline grassroots defenders as paralegals.

***"I have done reports on the killings of human rights defenders. For example, the murder of a 65-year-old grandmother who was against the extension of an open mine at the end of a National Park in South Africa. She was shot in front of her grandson."***

-Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders referring to the murder of South African WEHRD, Fikile Ntshangase.



## Endnotes

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