

December 2025

THE SITUATION OF WOMEN ENVIRONMENTAL & HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ACROSS AFRICA

1. INTRODUCTION
2. METHODOLOGY
3. KENYA: I FEAR FOR MY LIFE. THEY CAN DO ANYTHING AT ANY TIME
4. A GLOBAL ANALYSIS ON LETHAL AND NON-LETHAL ATTACKS OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ACROSS AFRICA
5. THE UNDERREPORTING AND UNDERREPRESENTATION OF ATTACKS AGAINST WHRDS IN THE DATA
6. SPOTLIGHT ON KENYA
7. SPOTLIGHT ON UGANDA
8. SPOTLIGHT ON TANZANIA
9. SPOTLIGHT ON SOUTH AFRICA
10. SPOTLIGHT ON DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO
11. GENDERED FORMS OF VIOLENCE AND THEIR IMPACTS
12. NIGERIA: I HAVE SUFFERED, BUT DEFENDING THE TRUTH IS IMPORTANT
13. TANZANIA: WOMEN SHOULDN'T JUST BE PROTECTED, THEY SHOULD LEAD
14. SECONDARY VICTIMISATION: ACCESS TO INFORMATION; JUSTICE AND RECOURSE
15. DRC: DEATH THREATS AGAINST EHRDs
16. HOW GENDER INFORMS ACTIVISM
17. STRATEGIES AND RESOURCES
18. SUMMARY
19. RECOMMENDATIONS
20. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Women environmental and human rights defenders (WEHRDs) in Africa play a vital role in protecting communities, ecosystems, and the rights of marginalized populations. 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.

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

This report 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. It 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.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this research combined both quantitative and qualitative analysis. A quantitative data analysis was undertaken using the data collected and published on lethal and non-lethal attacks against EHRDs, disaggregating it by African country, industry driver, type of attack and gender where data was available. The datasets used were Global Witness' data since 2012 on killings of EHRDs; and ALLIED coalition data since 2022 on non-lethal attacks against EHRDs. The extent to which threats and attacks against women EHRDs may be underreported was in part assessed through a quantitative data analysis of applicants between 2020 and 2024 to both Natural Justice's emergency support fund for EHRDs, and Frontline Defenders emergency support fund for human rights defenders, disaggregated by applications from EHRDs in African countries only. This data was then cross-referenced against the published data and literature on threats and attacks against EHRDs in order to ascertain whether there may be countries or regions with a high number of applications for emergency support but little public data on EHRDs.

A broader literature review was undertaken and coupled with interviews with national and regional civil society groups working on defender issues in key countries of focus, and testimonies gathered from women EHRDs who have faced threats and attacks. This was to yield meaningful insights into the nature, scope, and gendered dimensions of attacks against women EHRDs; to make invisible struggles visible, provide evidence for accountability, and to honour the risk and resilience of their everyday lives.

KENYA: I FEAR FOR MY LIFE. THEY CAN DO ANYTHING AT ANY TIME

My name is Mary Mwangi¹. I advocate for land and environmental rights in a community along Kenya's coast. The issues we're facing are pollution mostly caused by industries along the Mombasa highway in Nairobi.

I've been facing numerous trumped-up charges since 2020 by the state on behalf of a private oil recycling company. The company is right in the middle of a residential area where around 2000 people live. Operations started in 2019 without the company following due process and against Kenya's Environmental Management and Coordination Act. The company's operations, which include delivery of used oil, pre-treatment of used oil, and refining the used oil into specific products have had serious negative environmental impacts on residents.

I was one of the residents that raised environmental concerns with company management but no action was taken. The plant was operating against the will of the people as they were not subject to public participation. Toxic gases were also produced which were endangering human as well as livestock health and life. The plants release sulphuric acid which is highly corrosive and has caused severe skin burns within the community.

When we saw that the issues were becoming more serious, I organised the community and set up a taskforce of 15 members to engage relevant authorities to come to a solution regarding our environmental concerns. We submitted petitions and memoranda to relevant government departments and non-state institutions including to the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) itself. We also worked with an NGO in Mombasa to launch public interest litigation against the company. We managed to obtain a court order restraining the company from continuing its operations. We also managed, through advocacy, to get NEMA to issue a cease order.

The company management conspired with the local police in a series of harassments and intimidation that resulted in arrests and trumped-up charges targeting a section of residents, and particularly the families championing the rights of the community. I was one of the first targeted because I managed to mobilise the community. There are currently four cases in court: they include me, my family - my husband and children – and a few community members who support in this struggle. Unfortunately, the company went back to full operations after the court order that was issued against them was later withdrawn for unknown reasons. We got another lawyer but the company – using a government official – confronted the NGO who had provided the lawyer. The case was withdrawn without us even knowing.

Currently the company is back in full operation and systemic arrests and threats are expected to continue. I'm being threatened through phone messages by specific people. I cannot move freely because my movements are being monitored by the company management.

I have fallen victim to false accusations and unfair trials. Anything can happen to me at any time – I'm still continuing with the struggle. We are trying our best as they are not the only company around – more companies are coming up and we know the same thing will happen within the community. 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. So that's my greatest fear. I've

¹ Pseudonym to protect her identity.

even become a target for the police – I never know when I’ll be arrested. At any time anything can happen to me or my family. I’ve been arrested over eight times between 2020 and 2025. One time they came to my home itself before arresting me and taking me to the police station. In most cases they summon me to the police station and they lock me in a cell. Then I’m taken to court and released on bail, so the case continues.

There have been times when I’ve been sent messages telling me that they’re monitoring my moves. There was a message sent to one of my sons on his phone from a very influential person in the government warning him that he should talk to me and I should stop what I’m doing because they’re monitoring my every step. There was even an incident where there were people following me. People came looking for me. Luckily, the community members they spoke to were people that knew me and they did not reveal who I was and where I was. I reported the incident to the Directorate of Criminal Investigations (DCI) in Mombasa. They just took my statement and did nothing. There was no investigation, nothing. They just went to the company, questioned them. They didn’t even get back to me to tell me what they’d found or what had transpired from whatever they were doing.

I have been excluded from key decision-making spaces by the government and been side-lined in forums where men dominate discussions. This has limited opportunities to influence policy and reduced access to critical support. They’ve also tried to turn my own community against me. A few now treat me differently as a result because most of them are being compromised. Remember this is a community that is very poor – they bribe them using money just to get them on their side. The emotional burden is heavy, balancing activities with expectations of care-giving and family roles. It often causes stress and fatigue. The impact is not only personal but systematic – it impacts me as a woman in my role as an environmental defender.

I will continue the work and try new strategies. We’ve thought of organising and implementing projects around environmental rights as a tool for environmental justice. The projects will promote inclusivity for women, youth and people living around the industrial areas through enhancing their capacity to protect their rights to a clean and healthy environment, and increase their knowledge of Free Prior and Informed Consent, and fundamental issues such as access to information, and access to justice. If these communities are well sensitized, they come to know their rights, maybe they’ll support the ongoing struggle. And it will help reduce the risk to me and my family.

A global analysis on lethal and non-lethal attacks of environmental and human rights defenders across Africa

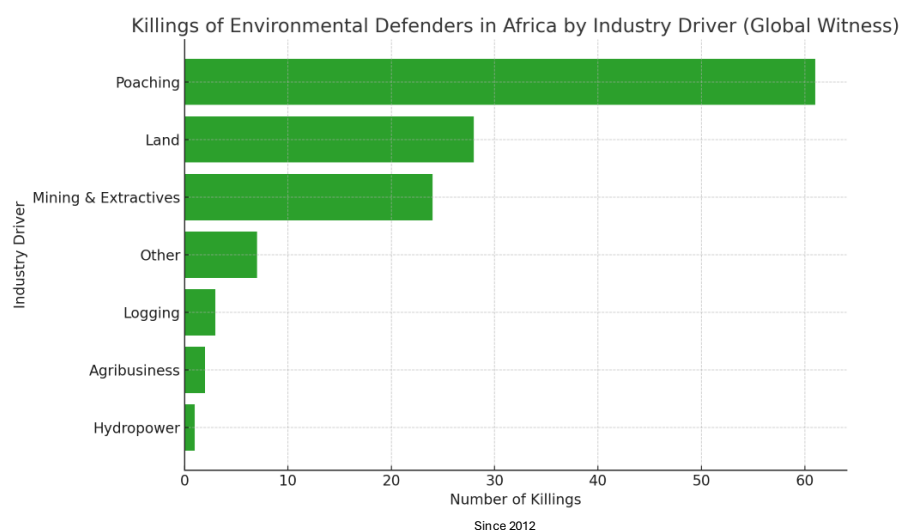
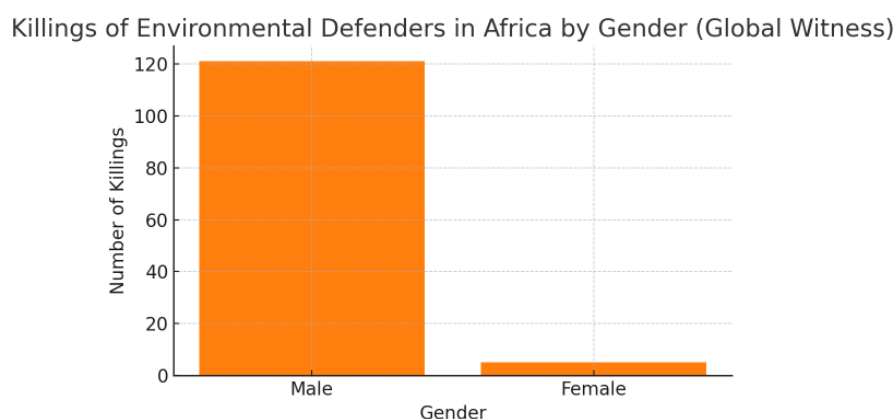
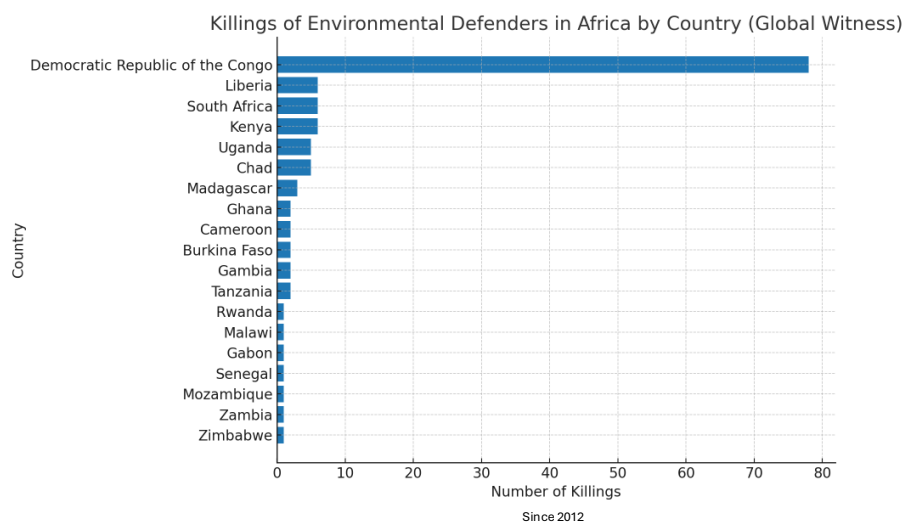
Global Witness started reporting on the killings of land and environmental defenders in 2012. Since then, a total of **2,157** defenders globally have been killed, **126** of whom were from an African country.²

The **Democratic Republic of Congo** is the deadliest place to be an environmental defender with a total of **78 killings**. **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**.

² Global Witness data on killings of land and environmental defenders
<https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/in-numbers-lethal-attacks-against-defenders-since-2012/>

Out of the 126 defenders reported killed³, **just five of them were women.**

Where a sector could be identified, around **half of the killings were linked to poaching (61)** with land and mining **representing approximately a fifth of killings each (28 and 24 respectively).**



³ The majority of killings recorded in Africa since 2012 have been male Virunga park rangers in DRC.

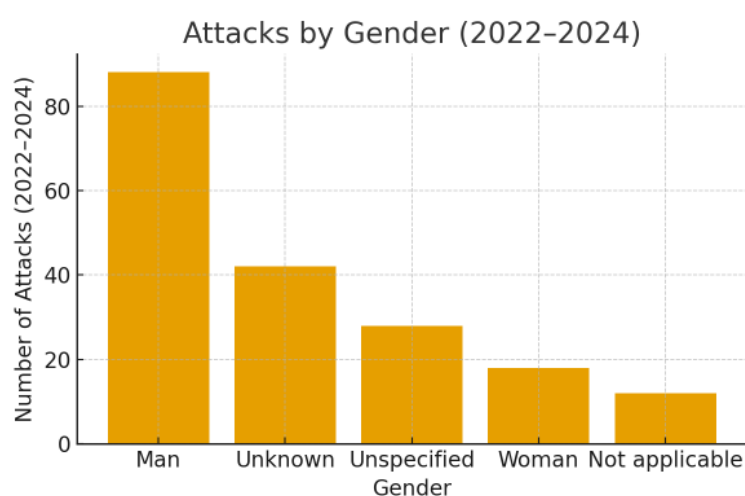
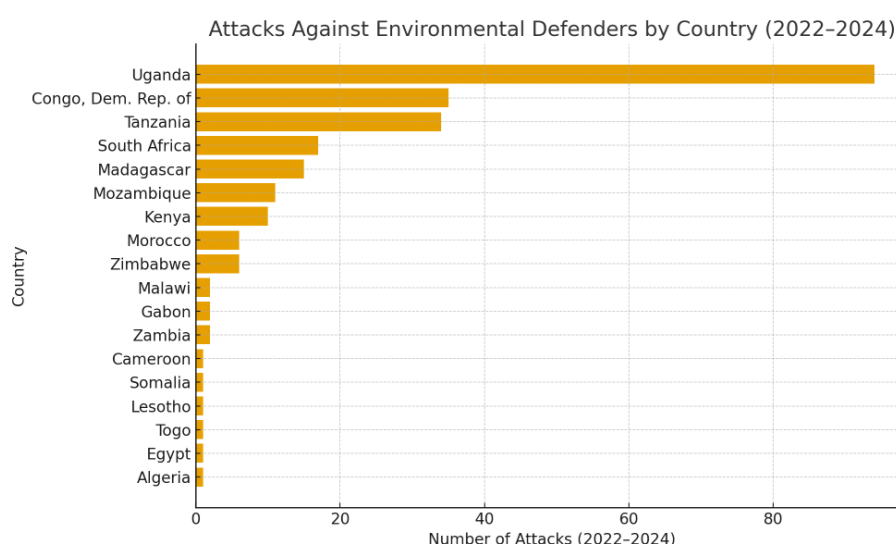
The Alliance for Land, Indigenous, and Environmental Defenders (ALLIED) is a global coalition that supports and protects land, Indigenous, and environmental defenders who face violence and threats. The coalition has been collecting and reporting on the data of attacks against land and environmental defenders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

According to its data, there have been a total of **261** attacks across all countries since 2022.

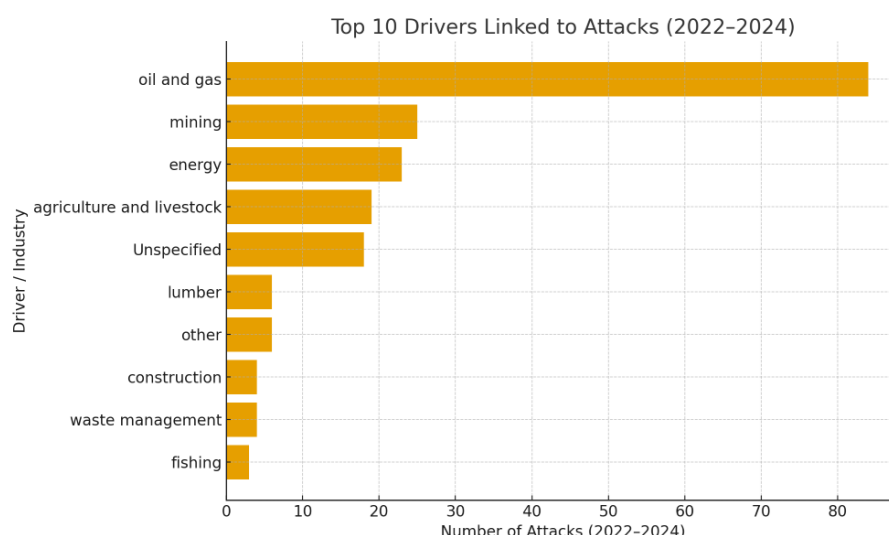
Uganda represents almost **one third** of these attacks with a total of **94**. The Democratic Republic of Congo and Tanzania both represent around 15% of attacks with 35 and 34 reported attacks respectively.

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.

Where a sector could be identified, just under a third were linked to the fossil fuel industry (oil and gas), with mining and energy linked to 25 and 23 attacks respectively.⁴



⁴ According to raw data provided by ALLIED



The underreporting and underrepresentation of attacks against WEHRDs in the data

Data on the killings of and attacks against WEHRDs has identified both few cases from African countries compared to other regions globally, and relatively few cases within African countries compared to cases involving male EHRDs.

Whilst Africa remains understudied across all academic disciplines and databases, the relatively small figure is striking, especially given that many African countries suffer from high levels of violence, and conflict and corruption often are linked to land and natural resources.⁵ It is also surprising given the very real threats WEHRDs face including intimidation, physical attacks and increasing cases of criminalization of activists.⁶

It is difficult to assess the extent to which killings of and attacks against WEHRDs is underreported simply by looking at the quantitative data alone. Methodological limitations skew all of the data sets available. 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.

Given that defenders of all genders are killed, the lower number of murdered women defenders is likely due to underreporting, not because women are less targeted.⁷ In fact, other types of

⁵ Tran, D. & Hanaček, K. (2023) *A global analysis of violence against women defenders in environmental conflicts*. *Nature Sustainability*, 6, pp. 1045–1053. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-023-01126-4>

⁶ 'On Dangerous Ground. 2015'S DEADLY ENVIRONMENT: THE KILLING AND CRIMINALIZATION OF LAND AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS WORLDWIDE', Global Witness, 20 June 2016 <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/dangerous-ground/> p.20

⁷ Tran, D. & Hanaček, K. (2023) *A global analysis of violence against women defenders in environmental conflicts*. *Nature Sustainability*, 6, pp. 1045–1053. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-023-01126-4>

violence against WEHRDs are much more common. This suggests that gender affects the types of attacks they face and the situations that put them at risk. A global study from 2023 showed that even in countries with stronger laws and better gender equality, WEHRDs still faced high levels of violence⁸

Looking at applications to emergency support funds for environmental and human rights defenders may provide some insight into the extent of underreporting. Whilst it was not possible to access the data for all of the emergency support funds available, it was possible to analyse the data on applications from environmental defenders in African countries from both Frontline Defenders and Natural Justice.⁹

Between 2020 and 2025, a total of **181 emergency support applications** were submitted by environmental defenders across Africa and neighbouring regions. 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 the majority of 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.

The most frequent category of types of threats or attacks was **“Threats or other harassment” (33 cases or 18%)**, indicating ongoing intimidation and pressure on defenders short of overt violence. **Arbitrary arrest or detention (16 or 9%)**, **physical attacks (15 or 8%)**, and **death threats (13 or 7%)** show that criminalization and direct violence remain pervasive. A smaller number of entries (**9 or 5%**) involved **non-violation-related support** such as solidarity or medical aid, suggesting some preventive or recovery-oriented grants.

Killings of and attacks against EHRDS in general have proven to be difficult to identify and the reasons why are well reported. However, there are both nuances within these and additional gender-based reasons that point towards killings of and attacks against WEHRDs being undocumented and under-reported:

Identification of motives There are challenges in linking deaths directly with a motive or root causes. Often killings relate to political violence or conflicts driven by intercommunity tensions where the defence of land and environmental rights may play a role but detailed information is

⁸ Tran, D. & Hanaček, K. (2023) *A global analysis of violence against women defenders in environmental conflicts*. *Nature Sustainability*, 6, pp. 1045–1053. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-023-01126-4>

⁹ Raw data on applications to Frontline Defender’s and Natural Justice’s respective emergency support funds for environmental and human rights defenders

lacking.¹⁰ Deeply rooted patriarchal norms may lead to women's activism being perceived as a violation of traditional domestic roles, potentially leading to violence from family and community members, and causing women to fear the potential repercussions. Even when they are active, they may not identify as an EHRD presenting challenges for information-gathering and data collection.

Violence against WEHRDs is highly gendered and often intersects with other forms of discrimination There is little concrete data on how often gender-based violence¹¹ is used against WEHRDs, 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.

Women and girl environmental and human rights defenders working in patriarchal¹² societies often face the same dangers as men when they challenge powerful interests like multinational corporations or government authorities. However, their activism also puts them at risk in other ways because of *who* they are, not just what they are doing. By defying traditional gender norms and expectations, they can become targets of violence and backlash from within their own families and communities. This pattern mirrors what has been observed in other forms of activism, such as movements for political rights, and women's rights, where women who speak out often face gender-specific threats and intimidation.

Some women defenders 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.¹³

Sexual orientation and gender identity often heighten risks for defenders. In his 2022 report to the UN General Assembly, the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity observed that women, LGBTI, and gender-diverse activists are targeted both for who they are and for their roles as social leaders. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, an LGBTI organization supporting survivors of sexual violence reports increased threats from armed groups seeking to silence them. Due to widespread discrimination, many LGBTI defenders avoid reporting when attacked. One

¹⁰ 'On Dangerous Ground. 2015'S DEADLY ENVIRONMENT: THE KILLING AND CRIMINALIZATION OF LAND AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS WORLDWIDE', Global Witness, 20 June 2016 <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/dangerous-ground/> p.20

¹¹ [The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\)](#) defines gender-based violence as violence directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately. It includes acts that inflict physical, sexual, or psychological harm, such as threats, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, and occurs in both public and private life. This type of violence is considered a form of discrimination and a violation of women's human rights.

¹² [UN Women](#) defines patriarchal societies as social systems where men hold disproportionate power and privilege, leading to gender inequality, discrimination and violence.

¹³ United Nations Human Rights Council (2021) *Final warning: death threats and killings of human rights defenders. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor*. Forty-sixth session, 22 February–19 March 2021. Agenda item 3: Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development. Geneva: United Nations, p.13. Available at: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3898237/files/A_HRC_46_35-EN.pdf

member explained, “Being gay exposes me to extra danger - armed groups see me as less than human because of my sexual orientation.”¹⁴

Resources and capacity to monitor and document attacks Compared with Latin America and Southeast Asia, there are fewer civil society organisations and journalists documenting attacks against EHRDs specifically in Africa, although this is slowly changing. They may also feel less free to speak out without fear of reprisals due to varying political tolerance towards media and civil society documenting attacks.

ALLIED has also expressed concerns around the lack of government efforts to document attacks on EHRDs.¹⁵ 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 from other human rights defenders, even though they likely account for about half of all cases.¹⁶

Rural geographies A lack of information and reporting from isolated rural areas exists where many cases of killings and attacks take place. The capacity to collect and safeguard evidence is very limited and the risks of doing so are high. This is exacerbated by a lack of or weak internet accessibility, language barriers and low levels of education leading to fewer information exchanges between any existing groups. Weak or non-existent human rights monitoring groups and limited press freedoms of civil society on top of this have led to a lack of regional data.¹⁷

Many rural and remote defenders are cut off from the networks and support offered by national civil society and social movements. Some tell of being simply ignored by the authorities and the issues they raise. 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.¹⁸

Conflict and post-conflict EHRDs working in areas of conflict, post-conflict or crisis situations face specific challenges arising from the nature of their work. The UN Special Rapporteur

¹⁴ United Nations General Assembly (2023) *Pathways to peace: women human rights defenders in conflict, post-conflict and crisis-affected settings. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders*. Seventy-eighth session, Item 73 of the provisional agenda: Promotion and protection of human rights. 7 July 2023. New York: United Nations, p.15, 16. Available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/78/160>

¹⁵ Since 2015, only three of 162 countries (under 2%) mentioned HRD killings or attacks in their VNRs; seven reported none, and 94% omitted the issue entirely.

¹⁶ ‘A Crucial Gap: The Limits to Official Data on Attacks Against Defenders and Why It's Concerning’, International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 21 October 2021 <https://iwgia.org/en/news/4533-crucial-gap-report.html>

¹⁷ Tran, D. & Hanaček, K. (2023) *A global analysis of violence against women defenders in environmental conflicts*. *Nature Sustainability*, 6, pp. 1045–1053. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-023-01126-4>; ‘Deadly Environment: The dramatic rise in killings of land and environmental defenders’, Global Witness, 15 April 2014, <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/deadly-environment/> p.17

¹⁸ United Nations Human Rights Council (2025) *Out of sight: human rights defenders working in isolated, remote and rural contexts. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor*. Fifty-eighth session, 24 February–4 April 2025. Agenda item 3: Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development. Geneva: United Nations. Available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/58/49> p.4

observed that in conflict and post-conflict contexts, many individuals became human rights defenders out of necessity or circumstance. However, because they were not formally linked to any organization or profession and often worked in remote or unstable areas, their efforts frequently went unnoticed and remained disconnected from support networks.¹⁹

In the Central African Republic, ongoing conflict and the frequent targeting of civilians have made it extremely difficult for human rights defenders to operate. Widespread abuses include the destruction of villages, mass rapes of women and girls, extrajudicial killings, torture and deaths in detention, religious and ethnic violence, child recruitment by armed groups, and attacks on aid workers and peacekeepers. In this environment, defenders face ‘exceptional levels of risk’.²⁰

Self-censorship amongst HRDs, especially among journalists, is common, and limited internet access leaves radio and mobile networks as the main tools for sharing information. Civil society groups focus largely on peacebuilding, where women defenders play a vital role. EHRDs are also active, working to protect the country’s natural habitats from conflict-related damage, poaching, and resource exploitation.²¹

In certain regions of Mali, violent extremist groups have significant power and influence. Defenders working on women’s rights and sexual orientation and gender identity rights are at greater risk, including an increased risk of sexual violence, as are journalists and media workers who experience significant repression.²²

The conflict in Sudan remains chronically underreported and human rights defenders working in the country are subjected to appalling violations without any recourse to justice. Women HRDs experience high risk in their work and a heightened risk of sexual violence carried out by security forces. In its 2024 report to the UN Security Council, the UN Panel of Experts on Sudan reported that disrupted communication networks had made it extremely difficult to monitor the situation in Darfur, particularly aerial bombings by the Rapid Support Forces. Lawyer Yousef Mahmoud described the months-long blackout as having plunged Nyala, South Darfur’s capital, into a “medieval communications abyss.”²³

¹⁹ United Nations Human Rights Council (2025) *Out of sight: human rights defenders working in isolated, remote and rural contexts. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor*. Fifty-eighth session, 24 February–4 April 2025. Agenda item 3: Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development. Geneva: United Nations. Available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/58/49>

²⁰ United Nations (2018) *World report on the situation of human rights defenders. Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mr Michel Forst*. Geneva: United Nations Human Rights Council. Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/37/51/Add.2> p.19/20

²¹ United Nations (2018) *World report on the situation of human rights defenders. Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mr Michel Forst*. Geneva: United Nations Human Rights Council. Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/37/51/Add.2> p.19/20

²² United Nations (2018) *World report on the situation of human rights defenders. Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mr Michel Forst*. Geneva: United Nations Human Rights Council. Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/37/51/Add.2>

²³ United Nations Human Rights Council (2025) *Out of sight: human rights defenders working in isolated, remote and rural contexts. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor*. Fifty-eighth session, 24 February–4 April 2025. Agenda item 3: Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development. Geneva: United Nations. Available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/58/49>; United Nations (2018) *World*

In the DRC, EHRDs interviewed for this research spoke of the lack of whistleblowing due to lack of protection, stigmatisation, and the risk of reprisals. Obstacles for women defenders include a lack of data privacy, making women susceptible to victimization; inadequate capacity building; and logistics: certain areas of the country are dilapidated with no communications network or internet connection to make it secure for them to communicate.

Mistrust in institutions and institutional bias 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, in addition to well justified concerns around how their case may be handled. Institutions such as the police and judiciary are rarely equipped to handle cases of gendered violence and court systems are not set up to meet victims' needs. 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.

Front Line Defenders reported on the case of Ugandan EHRD, Florence Orishaba, who was abducted and sexually assaulted by men believed to be flagged plain-clothed police officers. This is just one of multiple incidents involving abuse by police towards a WEHRD that erodes trust and discourages formal reporting.²⁴

The Women Human Rights Defenders Network–Uganda (WHRDN-U) documented 260 attacks on WHRDs (2020–2024) and highlighted widespread fear, self-censorship and the need for alternative reporting and protection channels. The same country-level work and multiple case alerts from local groups show defenders often rely on networks like WHRDN-U rather than state authorities.²⁵

Misogyny and media reporting The media, which is often state-owned, is strongly suppressed in some African countries.²⁶ In addition, the lack of documentation and reporting of male violence against women especially is also prevalent owing to 'discursive discrimination' against women.²⁷ Women's activism is often overlooked, and violence against them rarely makes the news. In conflict reporting, women are frequently portrayed as mothers, caretakers, or bystanders rather than as activists and leaders. Because the loss of women's lives is sometimes seen as ordinary or even justified, gender-based violence becomes normalized and underreported – attacks and killings in the context of environmental conflicts are no exception.

report on the situation of human rights defenders. Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mr Michel Forst. Geneva: United Nations Human Rights Council. Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/37/51/Add.2> p.100

²⁴ 'Defamation charges against woman human rights defender Florence Orishaba dropped', Frontline Defenders <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/ru/node/6823>

²⁵ 'Assessment report on violence against women human rights defenders in Uganda 2020-2024', Women Human Rights Defenders Network- Uganda, 24 November 2024 <https://www.whrduuganda.org/assessment-report-on-violence-against-women-human-rights-defenders-in-uganda/>

²⁶ 'On Dangerous Ground. 2015'S DEADLY ENVIRONMENT: THE KILLING AND CRIMINALIZATION OF LAND AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS WORLDWIDE', Global Witness, 20 June 2016 <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/dangerous-ground/> p.20

²⁷ Tran, D. & Hanaček, K. (2023) *A global analysis of violence against women defenders in environmental conflicts. Nature Sustainability*, 6, pp. 1045–1053. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-023-01126-4>

When attacks or killings are covered, media reports often sensationalize the violence without acknowledging the women's identities or causes. Names are omitted, stories are reduced to shock value, and the broader patterns of extractive violence against women remain largely invisible.²⁸

SPOTLIGHT ON KENYA

Over the years, Kenya has consistently proven to be one of the most dangerous countries in Africa to be an environmental defender.²⁹

Kenya's civic space has significantly deteriorated over the last three years in particular, with a marked rise in repression targeting mostly environmental defenders and women human rights defenders, as well as digital activists, and protest organizers.³⁰ There has been an escalating crackdown on protest and assembly across the country: June 2024 saw a violent crackdown on nationwide protests with approximately 60 peaceful protesters killed, more than 1,200 arrests, and more than 130 individuals still missing months later. According to Human Rights Watch, *'Bodies of people showing signs of torture continued to turn up in rivers, forests, abandoned quarries, and mortuaries. The authorities have yet to investigate or prosecute anyone for these crimes.'*³¹ As a result of this, the international civil rights alliance, Civicus, downgraded Kenya's civic space status from 'Obstructed' to 'Repressed'.³²

The weaponisation of sexual violence with impunity against women protesters is widespread during such times of unrest. An anti-femicide protest in December 2024 saw demonstrators violently dispersed, with reports of sexual harassment by police.³³ At least 14 rapes were reported by women, including gang rapes by male police officers or criminal actors, during the protests in June 2025.³⁴

²⁸ Tran, D. & Hanaček, K. (2023) *A global analysis of violence against women defenders in environmental conflicts*. *Nature Sustainability*, 6, pp. 1045–1053. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-023-01126-4>

²⁹ See Global Witness annual reports on land and environmental defenders <https://globalwitness.org/en/topics/land-and-environmental-defenders-report-archive/>

³⁰ 'Kenya's civic space and governance are under siege', Civic Freedoms Forum, Kenyan Human Rights Commission, 19 September 2024 <https://khrc.or.ke/press-release/kenyas-civic-space-and-governance-are-under-siege/> ;

³¹ Human Rights Watch – Country Chapters – Kenya <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/kenya>

³² 'The CIVICUS Monitor downgrades Kenya's civic space to "Repressed" amid a crackdown on nationwide protests', Civicus, 04 December 2024 https://monitor.civicus.org/press_release/2024/kenya/

³³ 'Statement Presented during the 83rd Ordinary Session of the ACHPR on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders in Kenya', Defenders Coalition, 5 May 2025 <https://defenderscoalition.org/african-mechanisms/statement-presented-during-the-83rd-ordinary-session-of-the-achpr-on-the-situation-of-human-rights-defenders-in-kenya/>

³⁴ '14 women raped during June 25 anniversary protests, rights groups say', Daily Nation, 29 June 2025 <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/gender/14-women-raped-during-june-25-anniversary-protests-rights-groups-say--5099304> ; 'PRESS STATEMENT: FIDA-Kenya Call for Accountability and Justice Following Recent Protest Killings and Sexual Violence in Kenya', FIDA-Kenya, 17 July 2025 <https://fidakenya.org/2025/07/09/press-statement-fida-kenya-call-for-accountability-and-justice-following-recent-protest-killings-and-sexual-violence-in-kenya/>

The Assembly and Demonstrations Bill has recently been tabled by the Kenyan government. If passed, it would require state approval for protests, disclose organizer identities, and hand down a one-year prison term for organizers of “unlawful” protests. The draft Bill does not define what constitutes an unlawful assembly. It threatens rights to peaceful assembly and expression which are otherwise guaranteed under the country’s constitution.³⁵

“This new bill allows police to impose harsh conditions on protesters in the name of public order”

Catherine Mbui, Article 19, Kenya ³⁶

In July 2025, during Kenya’s historic day of resistance, a group of mothers, widows, women human rights defenders, and young women convened a press conference at the Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC) offices in Lavington, Nairobi, to demand justice for those killed, disappeared, or injured during the June 2024 protests. The event was violently disrupted when unidentified armed individuals stormed the KHRC compound, assaulting several women human rights defenders, seizing journalists’ equipment, and issuing threats. The attackers accused the women of organising protests, constituting a direct assault on human rights defenders and an alarming infringement on civic space.³⁷

Kenyan environmental and human rights defenders also face evictions, gendered smear campaigns, and legal harassment. In Lamu County, at least 35 environmental activists campaigning against the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia-Transport Corridor (LAPSSET) major infrastructure corridor have faced arrests, intimidation, beatings, and allegations of terrorism. It is not uncommon for women environmental activists, particularly those opposing large infrastructure projects like in Lamu County, to be falsely branded as extremists or terrorists to justify arrests, evictions, and legal harassment.³⁸

Kenya has experienced a ‘surge in state surveillance attempts’, with over 80 online activists abducted in 2025 for their social media activity. Some were reportedly tortured in detention. Phone tapping, email hacking, and real-time monitoring by state and telecom actors have become widespread.

A 2024 investigation revealed that security agencies have long enjoyed near-unrestricted access to mobile users’ call and location data. While this access is intended for criminal investigations, it also constitutes serious violations of privacy and potential misuse of personal information.

These findings raise concerns that mobile data may be used to facilitate abductions and extrajudicial killings carried out by state security agents. In addition, inconsistencies in call

³⁵ ‘Kenya 2024, Amnesty International <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/east-africa-the-horn-and-great-lakes/kenya/report-kenya/>

³⁶ Civicus Lens, 12 September 2024 <https://lens.civicus.org/interview/this-new-bill-allows-police-to-impose-harsh-conditions-on-protesters-in-the-name-of-public-order/>

³⁷ ‘Kenya: Arbitrary detention of human rights defenders and violent attack on women human rights defenders amid severe repression of civil society’, Frontline Defenders, 15 July 2025 <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/statement-report/kenya-arbitrary-detention-human-rights-defenders-and-violent-attack-women-human>

³⁸ ‘Kenya: Harassment of Environmental Activists’, Human Rights Watch, 17 December 2018 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/17/kenya-harassment-environmental-activists>

data records submitted to courts by telecom companies in cases involving missing persons suggest possible interference in investigations and obstruction of justice.³⁹

Voices from Kenya

EHRDs interviewed for this research spoke of conservation and carbon credits as industries linked to land violations and environmental degradation, and in turn, threats against EHRDs. This was the case particularly in the north of Kenya where violations are rife but for the most part undocumented. According to the interviewees, the majority of the defenders who have been targeted are women or sexual minorities, as well as Indigenous Peoples.

EHRDs suspect the involvement of the state given the levels of impunity, as well as collusion between the police and powerful business interests when threats and attacks are reported. Multinational companies or locals who have business interest in natural resource deals are seen as the main perpetrators, backed by ‘government machinery’, including the police when overseeing certain violations and failing to investigate.

EHRDs spoke of their increased awareness and empowerment on defending their rights, including those of Indigenous Peoples, but felt that attempts to silence them are now more explicit, with a notable trend of escalating and more violent threats against those that speak up. Young community militia have also been recruited in order to intimidate and destabilize EHRDs in their work, and legal mechanisms are increasingly being used against Indigenous land defenders.

Whilst not yet linked to EHRDs, there has also been a spate of extrajudicial killings through strangulation of online bloggers speaking out against the government which EHRDs have been alerted to.

Digital threats and attacks are also rife but difficult to track as EHRDs do not have the relevant resources or manpower to fully investigate surveillance and other digital threats.

SPOTLIGHT ON UGANDA

Human rights defenders have consistently reported being subjected to a steady barrage of harassment, arrests, and threats in Uganda. The Ugandan government has imposed severe restrictions on freedoms of assembly, association, and expression, and has facilitated an increasing crackdown on peaceful demonstrations, including a sharp rise in arrests and detentions of protestors.⁴⁰ Civil society groups have also been subjugated through legal and structural constraints: a total of 54 NGOs - primarily those focused on environmental, and women’s rights issues - have been suspended since 2021 under the government’s 2016 NGO

³⁹ ‘Exclusive: How Kenyan police use mobile phones to track, capture suspects’, Shabibi, N., Lauterbach, C., Daily Nation, 12 November 2024 <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/exclusive-how-kenyan-police-use-mobile-phones-to-track-capture-suspects-4804416>

⁴⁰ “‘Working on Oil is Forbidden”. Crackdown against Environmental Defenders in Uganda’, Human Rights Watch, 2 November 2023 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/11/02/working-oil-forbidden/crackdown-against-environmental-defenders-uganda>

Law, whilst others have had their registration blocked altogether.⁴¹ Meanwhile staff have been subjected to harassment, office raids by the police, and interrogations.⁴²

Environmental activists have been particularly targeted by the Ugandan government, the most high-profile being those protesting the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) pipeline. Eleven Ugandan activists, commonly known as the #KCB11, were arrested and arbitrarily detained in April 2025 whilst peacefully protesting the financing of the EACOP project at the KCB Bank Uganda branch in Kampala. They were charged with criminal trespassing and their arrest has drawn criticism from human rights organizations who have called for their immediate release. Their case is not unique: peaceful protests, particularly around oil projects, have regularly been labelled as ‘criminal unlawful assembly’ by the state leading to multiple arrests and detentions. Over a nine month period, 96 arrests and detentions were reported of people opposing the EACOP oil pipeline - nearly double proceedings from earlier years.⁴³ Between June 2024 and September 2025, Natural Justice documented 175 arrests related to the StopEACOP campaign, suggesting a higher incidence of police repression.⁴⁴

Cases of physical attacks and threats against EHRDs have escalated with no indication that they will reduce. In the oil-rich Albertine region, EHRDs have faced a multitude of challenges in their day-to-day life including the militarization of operational sites, making it difficult for EHRDs to access. Reprisals also take the form of intimidation, arrests, and physical violence. These acts are perpetrated by both government officials and representatives of the oil companies.⁴⁵

WEHRDs are especially vulnerable in the Albertine Rift of Uganda. They have experienced a rise in threats, intimidation, and even killings in recent years. Their advocacy often makes them targets of gender-based violence - including reported sexual harassment by security personnel - and threats to their families. Civil society groups have reported that defenders receive suspicious calls and messages from individuals believed to be security agents, often warning them to stop their work.⁴⁶

⁴¹ ‘Climate of fear. TotalEnergies implicated in repression of land and environmental defenders in East Africa’, Global Witness, 4 December 2024 <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/eacop/>

⁴² “‘Working on Oil is Forbidden’”. Crackdown against Environmental Defenders in Uganda’, Human Rights Watch, 2 November 2023 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/11/02/working-oil-forbidden/crackdown-against-environmental-defenders-uganda>

⁴³ ‘Uganda: the authorities continue to crack down on human rights defenders opposing oil development projects’, FIDH, 5 September 2024 <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/business-human-rights-environment/business-and-human-rights/eacop-kingfisher-tilenga-uganda-72-arrests-august-2024?utm> ; ‘Global Witness condemns escalating arrests of climate campaigners in Uganda’, Global Witness, 20 August 2024 <https://globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/global-witness-condemns-escalating-arrests-of-climate-campaigners-in-uganda/>

⁴⁴ Natural Justice raw data gathered via its emergency fund, the African Environmental Defenders Initiative

⁴⁵ ‘Targeted Threats and intimidation of Environmental Human Rights Defenders in the Albertine region’, Albertine Watchdog, 6 April 2022 <https://www.albertinewatchdog.org/2022/04/06/targeted-threats-and-intimidation-of-environmental-human-rights-defenders-in-the-albertine-region/>

⁴⁶ ‘Targeted Threats and intimidation of Environmental Human Rights Defenders in the Albertine region’, Albertine Watchdog, 6 April 2022 <https://www.albertinewatchdog.org/2022/04/06/targeted-threats-and-intimidation-of-environmental-human-rights-defenders-in-the-albertine-region/> ; ‘The Environmental Defenders provide support to women human rights defenders at the local and regional levels in the Albertine region’, Albertine Watchdog, 8 March 2024

WEHRDs challenging patriarchal norms endure hostility in both public and private spaces. Many face torture, harassment, and intimidation for speaking out on justice, accountability, and gender-based violence. Their work is frequently dismissed or undervalued, reinforcing systemic inequality.⁴⁷

Additionally, digital threats against WHRDs are growing. These include online surveillance, hacking, trolling, and theft of digital equipment. The Ugandan government and private actors have intensified technological surveillance of activists, journalists, and political opponents, often framing it as necessary for national security. Recent 2024 amendments to the Computer Misuse Act and NGO regulations further restrict digital freedoms and organizational operations. These laws disproportionately affect women activists reliant on digital tools for mobilization who are already targets of digital attacks such as hacking and doxxing, alongside LGBT defenders.⁴⁸

Gendered intimidation is common: smear campaigns against LGBT and/or women defenders include threats of rape or outing of their sexual identity. Prominent climate activist, Nyombi Morris, for example, faced rape threats and family reprisals through homophobic rhetoric, whilst women defenders are often targeted with sexual violence, abductions, and gender-based threats.⁴⁹ In 2023, a fact-finding mission by the Women Human Rights Defender Network–Uganda recorded 260 attacks against women human rights defenders. Most of these targeted individuals rather than organizations, taking the form of physical and emotional abuse, professional smears, and persistent harassment. Such attacks have left many defenders living in fear and practicing self-censorship. Strikingly, the investigation found that the main perpetrators were often members of the very communities the defenders sought to protect – challenging the belief that these spaces would offer them safety.⁵⁰

Voices from Uganda

<https://www.albertinewatchdog.org/2024/03/08/the-environmental-defenders-provide-support-to-women-human-rights-defenders-at-the-local-and-regional-levels-in-the-albertine-region/>

⁴⁷ ‘Targeted Threats and intimidation of Environmental Human Rights Defenders in the Albertine region’, Albertine Watchdog, 6 April 2022 <https://www.albertinewatchdog.org/2022/04/06/targeted-threats-and-intimidation-of-environmental-human-rights-defenders-in-the-albertine-region/>; ‘The Environmental Defenders provide support to women human rights defenders at the local and regional levels in the Albertine region’, Albertine Watchdog, 8 March 2024

<https://www.albertinewatchdog.org/2024/03/08/the-environmental-defenders-provide-support-to-women-human-rights-defenders-at-the-local-and-regional-levels-in-the-albertine-region/>

⁴⁸ ‘Targeted Threats and intimidation of Environmental Human Rights Defenders in the Albertine region’, Albertine Watchdog, 6 April 2022 <https://www.albertinewatchdog.org/2022/04/06/targeted-threats-and-intimidation-of-environmental-human-rights-defenders-in-the-albertine-region/>; ‘The Environmental Defenders provide support to women human rights defenders at the local and regional levels in the Albertine region’, Albertine Watchdog, 8 March 2024

<https://www.albertinewatchdog.org/2024/03/08/the-environmental-defenders-provide-support-to-women-human-rights-defenders-at-the-local-and-regional-levels-in-the-albertine-region/>

⁴⁹ ‘I can’t stop now’: Uganda’s anti-LGBTQ+ law forces climate activist into exile’, Kimeu, C., The Guardian, 30 October 2024 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/oct/30/uganda-extreme-anti-lgbtq-law-threats-forces-climate-activist-nyombi-morris-exile>

⁵⁰ ‘Women Human Rights Defenders in Busoga: Courageously Championing Change in difficult working conditions’, Women Human Rights Defender Network-Uganda, 2 August 2023 <https://www.whrdnuganda.org/category/updates/?utm#>

WEHRDs spoke of the cultural resistance they face in their work where in order to be taken seriously, they must convince others that they have a right to speak on a subject. Women are expected to choose ‘softer’ areas of practice that don’t involve activism and the accompanying media attention. Activism from a woman in Uganda is seen as going against societal norms and not fitting the mould of what is required of a woman.

Whilst the WEHRDs interviewed for this research cited corporations as the main perpetrators of threats and attacks against WEHRDs due to their ability to influence the government – and in turn the police and media framing - the discussions mainly focused on the behaviour of the state and the police.

WEHRDs spoke of gender-based violence and ‘man-handling’ of WEHRDs at protests where excessive force is used on women due to them being viewed as misplaced in that space. Sometimes men take advantage and ‘cross lines’, grabbing their genitalia to cause embarrassment. There have been incidents where some women have been stripped naked during protests. When arrests of WEHRDs are made – which is common – women are often detained and held in the same cell as a man, not only experiencing or risking further sexual harassment or assault, but also facing stigmatisation when released back into their communities.

SPOTLIGHT ON TANZANIA

Despite being under new presidential rule, Tanzania’s civic space is still incredibly repressed, and land, environmental, and Indigenous rights defenders in particular operate under constant threat. Activism perceived as critical of the government or large projects, including the high-profile EACOP pipeline, is effectively forbidden, creating a near-total shutdown of protest spaces.⁵¹ Police have wide discretionary powers to ban or disperse public gatherings, including peaceful protests.⁵² Human rights groups have warned about a trend toward legislative authoritarianism, where new laws are passed or old ones amended in order to tighten state control and criminalize dissent. Under Tanzania’s NGO Act, the government has broad powers to monitor, deregister or suspend NGOs, especially those critical of state projects or working on human/environmental rights.⁵³

Ahead of the last Tanzanian elections in late 2020, the country’s only formal HRD network, the Tanzania Human Rights Defenders Coalition (THRDC), was forced to suspend its operations following incessant intimidation and interference in its activities by the authorities, including the freezing of its bank accounts for allegedly not declaring funds. The THRDC had been previously disqualified by the electoral commission from providing voter education and

⁵¹ ‘Tanzania: Authorities instil climate of fear and step up repression ahead of general elections’, Amnesty International, 20 October 2024 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/10/tanzania-authorities-instil-climate-of-fear-and-step-up-repression-ahead-of-general-elections/>; ‘Climate of fear TotalEnergies implicated in repression of land and environmental defenders in East Africa’, Global Witness, 04 December 2023 <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/eacop/#tanzania-stamping-out-civic-space>

⁵² CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation and East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (2021) *Tanzania: Joint submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review, 39th session of the UPR Working Group*. Submitted March 2021. Geneva: United Nations Human Rights Council.

⁵³ “‘As Long as I am Quiet, I am Safe’ Threats to Independent Media and Civil Society in Tanzania”, Human Rights Watch, 28 October 2019 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/10/28/long-i-am-quiet-i-am-safe/threats-independent-media-and-civil-society-tanzania>

monitoring the elections. President John Magufuli won re-election with a reported 84% of the vote.⁵⁴

As well as repressive laws, state surveillance and corporate influence are increasingly used to silence dissent and restrict activism. HRDs opposing state or corporate-backed projects face police summons and interrogations; phone confiscations and surveillance; and harassment and smear campaigns.⁵⁵ Peaceful protests are heavily restricted, and environmental activists and indigenous communities have been prevented from organizing protests, with police violently dispersing assemblies.⁵⁶ This includes in both Loliondo and Ngorongoro where members of the Indigenous Maasai community are fighting against violent government-led evictions and human rights violations to protect their ancestral land from being cleared for tourism and conservation purposes.⁵⁷ Women land defenders are particularly at risk in regions such as Loliondo and Ngorongoro. Since June 2022, authorities have used unlawful and abusive methods, including beatings, shootings, and arbitrary arrests to forcibly remove residents from their land with victims and witnesses telling of multiples instances of rape and other sexual violence by security forces.⁵⁸

Human rights groups have also reported on the extensive use of sexual and gender-based violence such as female genital mutilation in Tanzania. Whilst the use of SGBV as a targeted tactic against EHRDs has not been extensively documented, in other contexts, human rights groups have acknowledged that women defenders are particularly vulnerable to gendered attacks, harassment, and threats, and it is reasonable to infer that Tanzanian WEHRDs face similar risks.⁵⁹

Whilst Tanzania doesn't have legally explicit Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation (SLAPP) laws, documentation suggests patterns consistent with strategic legal harassment, including baseless or politically motivated lawsuits; prolonged legal proceedings; and arbitrary arrests and detentions without charges. Corporations, especially in mining, agribusiness, and

⁵⁴ Frontline Defenders Global Analysis 2020

https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/fl_d_global_analysis_2020.pdf&sa=D&source=editors&ust=1760967550343274&usg=AOvVaw1IOoIR-K6q-YTe_kWXjbeC

⁵⁵ 'Concern grows for Tanzanian communities opposing TotalEnergies' oil pipeline', Global Witness, 18 April 2024 <https://globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/concern-grows-for-tanzanian-communities-opposing-totalenergies-oil-pipeline/>

⁵⁶ "As Long as I am Quiet, I am Safe" Threats to Independent Media and Civil Society in Tanzania', Human Rights Watch, 28 October 2019 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/10/28/long-i-am-quiet-i-am-safe/threats-independent-media-and-civil-society-tanzania> ; Amnesty International. Tanzania 2024 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/east-africa-the-horn-and-great-lakes/tanzania/report-tanzania/>

⁵⁷ Tanzania: Stop Violent Forced Eviction Of The Maasai, 13 July 2022 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr56/5742/2022/en/>

⁵⁸ 'Tanzania: Maasai Forcibly Displaced for Game Reserve', Human Rights Watch , 27 April 2023 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/04/27/tanzania-maasai-forcibly-displaced-game-reserve>

⁵⁹ 'No Way Out: Child Marriage and Human Rights Abuses in Tanzania', Human Rights Watch, 29 October 2024 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/10/29/no-way-out/child-marriage-and-human-rights-abuses-tanzania> ; "As Long as I am Quiet, I am Safe" Threats to Independent Media and Civil Society in Tanzania', Human Rights Watch, 28 October 2019 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/10/28/long-i-am-quiet-i-am-safe/threats-independent-media-and-civil-society-tanzania>

energy, have sued activists and lawyers defending Indigenous communities for defamation, seeking large damages and seeking to silence them and deter their work.⁶⁰

Human rights organisations have documented a significant decline in media freedom in Tanzania, driven by increasing government restrictions and a shrinking civic space. Reports cite the arrest and detention of journalists, censorship of media outlets, and the use of cybercrime legislation to suppress online expression. Restrictions on political gatherings and harassment of opposition parties have further created a climate of fear, fostering widespread self-censorship among journalists and civil society actors.⁶¹

Interviews conducted with women NGO leaders and journalists reveal that many experienced surveillance, threats, and direct pressure from authorities to remain silent. While repression affects both men and women, human rights groups found that women in leadership roles face heightened risks because of their activism and gender.⁶²

The situation in Tanzania has also triggered concerns from the international community. The World Bank suspended a \$150M grant to Tanzania's Southern Agricultural Growth Corridor project in 2024 due to the mass displacement of Indigenous groups and small-scale farmers from their land to make way for large commercial farms.⁶³ The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression, along with other UN experts, has expressed serious concerns about the situation in Tanzania. They flagged the government's restrictions on freedom of expression and the media, highlighting the increasing crackdown on dissent, including the arrest and detention of journalists and opposition figures. Despite this, the Tanzanian government has failed to implement protective frameworks for HRDs and violence against them continues with little or no accountability.⁶⁴

Voices from Tanzania

The WEHRDs interviewed for this research very much placed the Tanzanian government at the centre of threats and attacks against defenders, stating that “once the government notices you as an environmental defender, you will be under scrutiny”. EHRDs recognise that the state mechanism is not protecting them, describing the constant fear and threats that they live under

⁶⁰ ‘Business and Human Rights Centre, SLAPPs Database: <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/from-us/slapps-database/>

⁶¹ ‘Tanzania: Climate of Fear, Censorship as Repression Mounts’, Human Rights Watch, 28 October 2019 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/28/tanzania-climate-fear-censorship-repression-mounts> ; Tanzania. Events of 2024, Human Rights Watch <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/tanzania> ; Tanzania. Events of 2018, Human Rights Watch <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/tanzania>

⁶² “‘As Long as I am Quiet, I am Safe’ Threats to Independent Media and Civil Society in Tanzania’, Human Rights Watch, 28 October 2019 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/10/28/long-i-am-quiet-i-am-safe/threats-independent-media-and-civil-society-tanzania>

⁶³ ‘Tanzania wants to evict Maasai for wildlife – but they’re fighting back’, Lawal, S., Al Jazeera, 5 August 2024 <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/8/5/tanzania-wants-to-evict-maasai-for-wildlife-but-theyre-fighting-back>

⁶⁴ ‘Tanzania: UN Experts alarmed by pattern of enforced disappearance and torture to silence opposition and critics’, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of freedom of opinion and expression, 13 June 2025 <https://www.srfreedex.org/tanzania-un-experts-alarmed-by-pattern-of-enforced-disappearance-and-torture-to-silence-opposition-and-critics/>

as having ‘nowhere to run’. Sectors driving harms against EHRDs are predominantly industrial agriculture and mining for transition minerals, with Chinese companies dominating the latter.

NGOs must be registered and accredited but the government plays a heavy hand when it comes to gatekeeping, with some organisations having received threats that they will be shut down.

EHRDs feel the repression of the current culture in Tanzania, stating that ‘people are not vocal’ and that the climate that has been created has removed the ability for them to speak openly and freely compared to 10 years back. Those that do speak out aren’t able to stay in their homes.

Most WEHRDs have been put in remand for prolonged periods of time. Many are sexually harassed but feel unable to report or tell their stories due to the stigma and shame. They also spoke of people disappearing as well as brutal tortures.

SPOTLIGHT ON SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa’s civic space has deteriorated due to growing repression against environmental, land, housing, and Indigenous rights defenders. Despite constitutional protection, EHRDs are violently targeted, facing intimidation, systemic harassment, arbitrary arrests, and physical attacks, sometimes fatal, often at the hands of private individuals or security forces. This is particularly the case when EHRDs raise concerns around land loss or environmental degradation driven by mining companies.⁶⁵

Peaceful protests are met with heavy police resistance, with tear gas and rubber bullets fired at protesters to disperse them.⁶⁶ The government and corporations misuse counter-terrorism laws and other legal frameworks to delegitimize protest and advocacy, often labelling defenders as criminals. Criminalisation and smear campaigns are also regularly deployed as tactics to silence defenders. Many climate and environmental justice non-for-profits, are portrayed as divisive or anti-development by extractive-industry-aligned actors.⁶⁷

Many EHRDs operate under constant threat such as environmental activist Lorraine Kakaza, who, despite existing sectoral regulations on environmental standards, has been repeatedly threatened and harassed for mobilizing against coal mining in Mpumalanga.⁶⁸ The 2020 killing of Fikile Ntshangase, a leader opposing a coal mine expansion, remains emblematic of the dangers faced by environmental activists in South Africa.⁶⁹ Nine years ago, Sikhosiphi Rhadebe was gunned down at his home in Xolobeni on South Africa’s Wild Coast, in what fellow activists claimed was an escalation of violence and intimidation against local opponents of a mine owned by Perth-based Mineral Commodities Limited (MRC). To this day, no one has been

⁶⁵ Frontline Defenders – South Africa <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/location/south-africa>

⁶⁶ ‘HRD killed, CSOs villified, protests documented’, Civicus <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/hrd-killed-csos-villified-protests-documented/>; ‘Southern Africa: Growing Authoritarianism Threatens Rights’, Human Rights Watch, 16 January 2025 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/01/16/southern-africa-growing-authoritarianism-threatens-rights>

⁶⁷ ‘South Africa: pattern of retaliation and attacks against human rights defenders (joint communication), UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, 23 January 2024 <https://srdefenders.org/south-africa-pattern-of-retaliation-and-attacks-against-human-rights-defenders-joint-communication/>

⁶⁸ ‘Bringing Change, Bringing Hope’, Frontline Defenders, 6 March 2017 <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/resource-publication/bringing-change-bringing-hope>

⁶⁹ ‘Environmentalists Under Threat in South Africa’, Human Rights Watch, 4 November 2020 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/04/environmentalists-under-threat-south-africa>

charged for his murder. Investigations into killings of and attacks against EHRDs are still falling short and accountability is rare, reinforcing a culture of impunity.⁷⁰

The Regulation of Interception of Communications Act (RICA) gives authorities broad surveillance tools, including SIM registration and potential decryption of communications under court orders. This framework enables state actors to monitor or track activists and has been widely criticised by human and civic rights groups.⁷¹ In February 2021, the Constitutional Court of South Africa confirmed that RICA was unconstitutional and Parliament was given a three-year period to pass updated legislation.⁷² Whilst a proposed amendment bill was introduced, the President returned the bill to Parliament in November 2024 on the grounds that it still raised constitutional concerns and may be vulnerable to challenge.⁷³

Activists challenging powerful industries have routinely been targeted through SLAPPs, designed to suppress critique, intimidate and drain resources. A key ruling in South Africa's Constitutional Court in 2021, however, rejected such abusive tactics, affirming 'acceptance of environmental activism as a form of the right to freedom of expression.'⁷⁴

Indigenous communities have also achieved landmark court success. Following one of the largest protests in post-apartheid South Africa in December 2021, Indigenous communities from the Wild Coast of South Africa's Eastern Cape attained a landmark legal victory against energy and petroleum giant Shell. The communities won the case at the South African High Court on the basis of violation of their constitutional right to be consulted and give consent to the project.⁷⁵

Yet sustained threats and repression persist despite these legal wins. The Minister of Mineral Resources and Energy, Gwede Mantashe, has repeatedly used public platforms to criticise civil

⁷⁰ 'Environmentalists Under Threat in South Africa', Human Rights Watch, 4 November 2020

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/04/environmentalists-under-threat-south-africa>

⁷¹ 'State of Privacy South Africa. A study of privacy and surveillance issues in South Africa', Privacy International, 26 January 2019 <https://www.privacyinternational.org/state-privacy/1010/state-privacy-south-africa>

⁷² 'Constitutional Court Upholds Declaration Of Invalidity Of Rica', Mondaq, 8 February 2021 <https://www.mondaq.com/southafrica/constitutional-administrative-law/1034108/constitutional-court-upholds-declaration-of-invalidity-of-rica>; REGULATION OF INTERCEPTION OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PROVISION OF COMMUNICATION-RELATED INFORMATION AMENDMENT BILL. (As introduced in the National Assembly (proposed section 75); explanatory summary of Bill and prior notice of its introduction published in Government Gazette No. 49189 of 25 August 2023)

⁷³ 'Ramaphosa rejects bill intended to protect journalists, lawyers from undue surveillance', Dentlinger, L., Eyewitness News, 21 November 2024 <https://www.ewn.co.za/2024/11/21/ramaphosa-rejects-bill-intended-to-protect-journalists-lawyers-from-undue-surveillance>

⁷⁴ 'South African Constitutional Court provides new protection for activists against SLAPP suits', Centre for Environmental Rights, 15 November 2022; 'Blog: SLAPP suits as a 'weapon' against environmental activism in South Africa', Vinti, C., The Global Network for Human Rights and the Environment <https://gnhre.org/?p=12961#:~:text=This%20is%20because%20it%20is,is%20hidden%20from%20the%20public.>

⁷⁵ 'Indigenous communities in South Africa sue, protest off-shore oil and gas exploration', 10 December 2021, Mongabay, <https://news.mongabay.com/2021/12/indigenous-communities-in-south-africa-sue-protest-offshore-oil-and-gas-exploration/>; 'In their Legal Victory over Shell, South Africa's Indigenous Communities Continue to Assert their Power', 7 February 2022, Hakai magazine <https://hakaimagazine.com/news/in-their-legalvictory-over-shell-south-africas-indigenouscommunities-continue-to-asserttheir-power/>

society organisations (CSOs) and the philanthropies that support them, accusing these groups of acting as agents of foreign interests and obstructing South Africa’s development.

At the Southern Africa Oil and Gas Conference in Cape Town in September 2023, Minister Mantashe stated that *“when a non-governmental organisation is funded by the Ford Foundation or other entities in the United States, you can’t rule out the fact that some of it comes from the CIA and is part of a deliberate programme to block development in a poor country like South Africa.”*

His comments were made in reference to those same legal challenges which led the High Court to overturn Shell’s seismic survey permits for the Wild Coast.⁷⁶

Voices from South Africa

The WEHRDs that were interviewed for this research grew up in the rural provinces in the southern part of Cape Town. It’s an area surrounded by two oceans. Mining companies have come into their area with devastating impact, pushing them to become activists, working with other fisherfolk women after they realized that their livelihoods and the future of their children were in jeopardy. Some people in the community have got jobs when the companies have come in and set up mines, but when they leave, they leave a trail of unemployment and destruction. When people in the community have tried to mine themselves, they have been criminalised.

They spoke of their love for their oceans and why they became involved in this struggle to make sure they were protected. Women have taken leadership in the communities: due to the loss of fish stocks from polluted water sources, the women have had to look at alternative economic options, setting up a food kitchen and providing arts and crafts for tourists.

The mining companies are coming every month or two. When the community refuses their operations, they simply set up a new company under a new name and apply again. This is by design - forcing the community to go to multiple consultation meetings, taking up their time and wearing them down. The communities have been outspoken about why they don’t want mining companies there, making profit from communities in poverty and colluding with the government officials that grant the licenses. They’ve even had to endure SLAPP suits, living with the very real fear that they could lose the case when they can’t even afford to pay their children’s school fees. The companies do not come to the community and ask what their vision is – they come with a readymade proposal to extract.

SPOTLIGHT ON DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Legal Framework for Environmental Defenders

The Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) guarantees fundamental freedoms critical to environmental advocacy, including freedom of expression (Article 23), the right to peaceful assembly (Article 25), and the right to demonstrate with prior notification to

⁷⁶ ‘HRD killed, CSOs vilified, protests documented’, Civicus <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/hrd-killed-csos-villified-protests-documented/>

authorities (Article 26).⁷⁷ Law No. 23/027, adopted in 2023, explicitly protects human rights defenders, including environmental advocates, by granting them the right to work freely, shielding them from harassment and retaliation, and ensuring access to legal remedies.⁷⁸

Despite these protections, defenders face serious risks, including harassment, legal intimidation, physical assaults, and killings, particularly when opposing illegal logging, mining, or other extractive activities, with perpetrators rarely held accountable. Limited legal aid and low awareness of rights further undermine protection.

Overall, the legal framework is an important step, but enforcement remains weak and practical protections insufficient.

Enabling Context for Attacks

Environmental and human rights defenders (EHRDs) in the DRC, particularly WEHRDs, operate in one of the most dangerous contexts in the world.⁷⁹ In conflict-affected provinces such as North and South Kivu, Ituri, and Maniema, threats are linked to work on land rights, mining transparency, environmental protection, and peacebuilding. Armed conflict, corruption, and patriarchal norms combine to make defending the environment increasingly risky.⁸⁰ Key enabling factors include:

- **Violence and impunity:** Extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests, and harassment are widespread. Armed groups and state security forces often target defenders exposing illegal mining, logging, or land grabbing, sometimes in collusion with extractive companies or political elites.⁸¹ Urgent accountability measures are needed, including specialized judicial units, independent monitoring of eastern provinces, and mandatory protection clauses in environmental and extractive programs.

⁷⁷ The Constitution of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2006, Available at: https://www.icla.up.ac.za/images/constitutions/drc_constitution.pdf.

⁷⁸ Journal Officiel de la Republique Democratique du Congo, Loi n 23/027, 15 juin 2023, available at: <https://ishr.ch/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Loi-N%C2%B0-23-027-du-15-juin-2023-DDH-RDC.pdf>; Democratic Republic of the Congo, International Service for Human Rights, available at: <https://ishr.ch/defenders-toolbox/national-protection/democratic-republic-of-the-congo>.

⁷⁹ ‘UN expert expresses extreme concern for safety of human rights defenders in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo’, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 5 March 2025, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/03/un-expert-expresses-extreme-concern-safety-human-rights-defenders-eastern>; ‘Democratic Republic of Congo: Urgent call for the protection of human rights defenders amid escalating violence in Eastern DRC’, Front Line Defenders, 14 February 2025, available at: <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/statement-report/democratic-republic-congo-urgent-call-protection-human-rights-defenders-amid>; ‘#HumanRightsByWomen: Amplifying the voice of women human rights defenders in the DRC’, Protection International, 29 November 2024, available at: <https://www.protectioninternational.org/news/humanrightsbywomen-drc>;

⁸⁰ Consultant’s interviews with civil society groups in DRC

⁸¹ ‘Roots of resistance: Documenting the global struggles of defenders protecting land and environmental rights’, Global Witness, 17 September 2025, available at: <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/roots-of-resistance>; ‘Democratic Republic of the Congo 2023, Human Rights Report’, U.S. State Department, available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/democratic-republic-of-the-congo/>.

- **Criminalization and weaponization of law:** Authorities use vague defamation laws, “anti-subversion” provisions, strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), and intrusive NGO registration rules to suppress dissent.⁸² Legal reforms should prioritize protection over regulation by amending restrictive laws, establishing an independent HRD Protection Commission with civil society and women’s representation, and leveraging international support to strengthen civic freedoms and legal defense.
- **Conflict, corruption, and resource exploitation:** Violence against EHRDs is driven by armed conflict, corruption, and natural resource exploitation. Illegal mining, logging, and wildlife trafficking are controlled by networks involving armed groups, rogue military actors, and complicit business interests. Threats have escalated since 2024–2025 with renewed M23 rebel activity and competition over resource zones.⁸³ In Maniema, for example, 70 defenders were arrested in 2024 for opposing illegal logging, and women leaders remain under threat despite pursuing legal redress.⁸⁴ Addressing these challenges requires anti-corruption enforcement, transparent licensing, community consultation, and embedding defender protection standards in all international environmental finance projects.

Gendered Dimensions of Threats

Women defenders face gender-specific threats, including sexual violence, harassment, online abuse, and reprisals against their families. Sexual assault is often used to intimidate and goes

⁸² ‘A human rights agenda for the Democratic Republic of Congo’, Human Rights Watch, 6 March 2024, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/03/06/human-rights-agenda-democratic-republic-congo>; ‘Reprisals against PPLAFFF and Global Witness intensify with new SLAPP procedures,’ OMCT, 30 November 2020, available at: <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/urgent-interventions/reprisals-against-pplaaf-and-global-witness-intensify-with-new-slapp-procedures>; ‘Corporate connections and Twitter tricks: tracking a social media smear campaign in the DRC’, Global Witness, 20 May 2021, available at: <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/digital-threats/corporate-connections-and-twitter-tricks-tracking-a-social-media-smear-campaign-in-drc/>; Consultant’s interviews with civil society groups in DRC.

⁸³ ‘The nexus of conflict, mining, and violence in Eastern DRC’, New Lines Institute, 30 September 2025, available at: <https://newlinesinstitute.org/political-systems/nexus-of-conflict-mining-and-violence-in-the-ituri-and-kivu-provinces-of-the-drc>; ‘Sanctioning critical minerals traffickers stoking armed conflict in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo’, U.S. State Department, 12 August, 2025, available at: <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/08/sanctioning-critical-minerals-traffickers-stoking-armed-conflict-in-the-eastern-democratic-republic-of-the-congo>; ‘UN experts say Rwanda supported rebels in Congo and smuggled minerals at ‘unprecedented levels’’, AP, 4 July 2025, available at: <https://apnews.com/article/rwanda-congo-coltan-rubaya-smuggling-m23-trump-minerals-12d3bc8c8c8144c38c7e497c9928b0bc>; ‘Children executed and women raped in front of their families as M23 militia unleashes fresh terror on DRC’, The Guardian, 21 December 2024, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/dec/21/children-executed-and-women-raped-in-front-of-their-families-as-m23-militia-unleashes-fresh-terror-on-drc>; ‘Illegal logging in rebel-held Congo threatened gorillas, alarms environmentalists’, Reuters, 22 May 2025, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/illegal-logging-rebel-held-congo-threatens-gorillas-alarms-environmentalists-2025-05-22>; Consultant’s interviews with civil society groups in DRC.

⁸⁴ Consultant’s interview with civil society group in DRC

unreported due to stigma and inadequate gender-sensitive reporting. Social norms further isolate women, portraying outspoken defenders as “rebellious” or “shameless.”⁸⁵

“Cultural and social norms heavily restrict women who are expected to remain silent, submissive, and confined to household roles.”⁸⁶

The experience of Grace Ngoma⁸⁷, a WEHRD in Kivu, illustrates these risks: between 2021 and 2022, she survived multiple assaults by men in military uniform, and in May 2022, security forces raided her organization’s office, seizing equipment and detaining her family, ultimately forcing her into exile.

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.

“There appears to be no formal guidelines for protection mechanisms for women, while any information rarely reaches women on the ground.”⁸⁸

“Women have less access to information, legal recourse, and financial means. Customary laws often disadvantage women, reinforcing secondary victimization.”⁸⁹

Resource Gaps and Protection Infrastructure

Most defenders, especially women, lack basic resources for safety, with minimal financial aid, legal support, or emergency response mechanisms. Organizations like Global Witness and Frontline Defenders provide advocacy and training but rarely direct protection or funding. 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.

Psychological and Social Toll

Constant threats, violence, and impunity take a severe psychological toll, causing anxiety, trauma, and burnout, with some forced into hiding or exile. Women face added isolation from social stigma and caregiving responsibilities. Lack of psychosocial services worsens long-term harm, weakening movements and silencing voices.⁹⁰ Institutionalized psychosocial support is essential, with national and international partners collaborating with local health centres and

⁸⁵ Consultant’s interviews with civil society groups in DRC; “Massive influx of cases”: Health workers perspectives on conflict-related sexual violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo’, Physicians for Human Rights, 22 October 2024, available at: <https://phr.org/our-work/resources/massive-influx-of-cases-sexual-violence-drc>; ‘Standing up against gender-based violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kvinna, 13 December 2023, available at: <https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/2023/12/13/standing-up-against-gender-based-violence-in-the-democratic-republic-of-the-congo>; ‘Women human rights defenders in DR Congo create a protection network, Protection International, 24 March 2021, available at: <https://www.protectioninternational.org/news/dr-congo-women-human-rights-defenders-create-a-protection-network-2>.

⁸⁶ Consultant’s interview with civil society group in DRC

⁸⁷ Pseudonym to protect her identity

⁸⁸ Consultant’s interview with civil society group in DRC

⁸⁹ Consultant’s interviews with civil society groups in DRC

⁹⁰ Consultant’s interviews with civil society groups in DRC

women's organizations to provide confidential trauma counselling and resilience training for defenders and their families.

Emerging Leadership and Resilience

Despite these dangers, defenders, especially women, demonstrate remarkable resilience. Across Kivu, Ituri, and Maniema, grassroots initiatives are emerging to protect forests, monitor extractive activities, and advocate for community rights. 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.⁹¹ Strengthening them through long-term, flexible support is one of the most effective forms of protection, recognizing women-led organizations as both conservation leaders and frontline human rights defenders.

Defending the environment in the DRC is an act of defiance: as extractive pressures and conflict intensify, WEHRDs not only safeguard ecosystems but also challenge entrenched corruption and patriarchy, underscoring that sustainable peace and environmental justice are impossible without protecting those who defend them.

Underreported: Nigeria

Given the prevalence of the oil industry in Nigeria there is relatively little reporting on the threats and risks that EHRDs face within the country.

Northern Nigeria has faced prolonged conflict and terrorism, largely driven by the extremist group Boko Haram and its splinter faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). Since the early 2000s, these groups have waged violent campaigns involving bombings, kidnappings, and attacks on civilians, particularly targeting schools, women, and rural communities. The violence has displaced millions, destroyed livelihoods, and deepened poverty in the region. Ongoing clashes between armed groups, community militias, and security forces have further destabilized northern states, while weak governance and limited economic opportunities continue to fuel insecurity and recruitment into extremist movements.⁹² This has meant that support for EHRDs is extremely limited given the lack of access to the region. This includes a lack of funding from the National Human Rights Commission, according to EHRDs interviewed for this research.

International support is available but intervention is typically reserved for special cases with support being granted to those partnered with or recommended by international organisations. Many attacks happen in villages where there is no communication or media

⁹¹ Consultant's interviews with civil society groups in DRC

⁹² 'Case study. Nigeria – Boko Haram and the fight against terrorism. A case study from the 2014 Human Rights and Democracy Report.', UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 12 March 2015 <https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/nigeria-boko-haram-and-the-fight-against-terrorism> ; 'Rivalry among Boko Haram factions compounds violence in northern Nigeria', Iyora, F., Al Jazeera, 8 September 2023 <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/9/8/rivalry-among-boko-haram-factions-compounds-violence-in-northern-nigeria>

networks and the support system for WEHRDs is incredibly slow.

In Ogoniland in the Niger Delta region of Southern Nigeria, more WEHRDs are able to carry out their work, standing up against the oil sector and carrying out reforestation projects. However, attacks remain prolific: the oil industry is backed by military presence and police who carry out attacks with brute force.

According to interviewees, attacks on WEHRDs include sexual violence, gender-based intimidation, physical abuse, incarceration where rape is commonplace, and torture by state actors such as the police and military.

NGO representatives in Nigeria also stated that women in Nigeria continue to be vastly underrepresented in political life with conservative cultural norms favouring male leadership. Whilst women are able to take on cultural and community leadership roles, levels of discrimination remain high. WEHRDs in roles of influence typically face stigmatisation, threats, and systemic repression.

Gendered forms of violence and their impacts

WEHRDs are at the forefront of many struggles for land and environment around the world but the critical leadership role they play comes at a high price that is often invisible.⁹³ Data show that violence against women defenders is most prevalent in mining, agribusiness, and industrial conflicts across the Global South. Repression, criminalization, and targeted attacks are closely connected, often escalating into displacement or killings when conflicts intensify. They suffer distinct, and sometimes heightened, risks. Notably, women defenders face high levels of violence regardless of a country's governance standards or gender equality progress.⁹⁴

“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.”⁹⁵

Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders, Aarhus Convention, Michel Forst

Threats of violence and death WEHRDs face distinctly gendered threats of violence and death, intended to silence them and force them to abandon their work. A global study on gender-based violence in environmental conflicts found that many endure persistent death threats - sometimes lasting weeks or even years - for opposing powerful corporate interests.⁹⁶

⁹³ ‘At what cost? Irresponsible business and the murder of land and environmental defenders in 2017’, Global Witness, 24 July 2018 <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/at-what-cost/#africa>

⁹⁴ Tran, D. & Hanaček, K. (2023) *A global analysis of violence against women defenders in environmental conflicts*. *Nature Sustainability*, 6, pp. 1045–1053. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-023-01126-4>

⁹⁵ Dey, A. & Pelling, M. (2021) *A comparative study of women environmental defenders’ antiviolent success strategies*. *Geoforum*, 126, pp. 126–138. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2021.07.012>

⁹⁶ Tran, D. & Hanaček, K. (2023) *A global analysis of violence against women defenders in environmental conflicts*. *Nature Sustainability*, 6, pp. 1045–1053. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-023-01126-4>

“There was one time when powerful local authority and armed police representatives turned up at a training session with no prior notice. We were taken and held in a cell with no toilet and no windows, just a metallic door, and had our phones and shoes taken from us. We were threatened and told never to come back to the area again. Since the advent of M23 in February 2025, we have been prevented from speaking up about any governance issues”.⁹⁷

- Civil society representative from DRC

Women staff members from a local CSO, report being followed and surveilled by men in cars. They have also received multiple phone calls threatening rape and sextortion. These are attempts to deter their work to try and prevent illegal deforestation in the area. Valuable rosewood trees are being felled by merchant loggers from Rwanda and Burundi working in cahoots with Chinese companies who access the trees by bribing community leaders in forests managed by local communities and Indigenous Peoples.

One local chief who has already been bribed is currently issuing threats to one of the WEHRDs, threatening her with arrest. Seventy EHRDs have already been arrested for resisting the illegal logging of rosewood in the Maniema province. She fears that others may be kidnapped and taken to the forest for mistreatment including sexual abuse. Whilst defenders are working with the government they are also under the threat of rebel occupation, presenting severe challenges to their work and leaving them with psychological trauma from the constant threats they are facing.⁹⁸

Online harassment and abuse Digital technology is a vital tool for HRDs for information sharing, and organizing, yet is increasingly being used by states to restrict and monitor the work of defenders. Governments now exploit the Internet and other technologies to surveil activists and limit their activities - a growing concern given how essential these tools are for human rights work. Across Africa, defenders report harassment and smear campaigns on social media and blogs, intercepted emails, and recorded phone calls. Several women defenders have also faced particularly degrading attacks, including the spread of fake pornographic images intended to humiliate and silence them.⁹⁹

Defenders in Kenya spoke of consistent digital and cyber-attacks over the past three to four years. Perpetrators start with online attacks, compromising social media accounts, but such events are likely the first warning. The threats escalate - close family members are called and warned, then families are visited in person. Another warning sign may be the perpetrator directing the police to warn the defender, or summon them to do an ‘investigation’ about a social media post. Understanding these patterns and monitoring them is crucial to EHRDs work. For this reason, defender coalitions focus on physical and digital security management.

Disinformation and smear campaigns Disinformation and smear campaigns are repression tactics commonly reported by WEHRDs. Misogynistic insults such as being called “whores,” “bad mothers,” or “immoral women”, are not just casual slurs but deliberate tools used to

⁹⁷ Consultant’s interview with civil society groups in DRC

⁹⁸ Consultant’s interviews with civil society groups in DRC

⁹⁹ United Nations Human Rights Council (2015) *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders*, Michel Forst. Geneva: United Nations. Available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/28/63>

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.¹⁰⁰

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.¹⁰¹ In societies where women are still expected to remain in the private sphere, stepping into public activism can provoke hostility. Women defenders are subjected to relentless online harassment, defamation, and stigmatization campaigns that question their respectability as women, mothers, and citizens.¹⁰²

Many women defenders explain that these violations cannot be separated from the broader social, cultural, and political contexts in which they occur, where patriarchal norms and deep-rooted stereotypes still prevail. Their very act of speaking out is seen as defiance against a culture that confines them. During consultations with UN representatives, numerous women recounted being branded as prostitutes or sinners, accused of betraying tradition or faith. Those working to promote sexual and reproductive rights are often singled out by religious groups, who portray them as threats to moral order.¹⁰³

Criminalisation While perpetrators often enjoy impunity, the criminalisation of activists is increasing, especially across Africa. Governments and powerful business interests are using trumped-up charges and lawsuits to intimidate defenders, damage their reputations, and drain their resources through long legal battles. Once accused, defenders are publicly branded as criminals, despite the vast imbalance of power between them and their well-funded opponents.¹⁰⁴

Criminalisation often arises when state and corporate interests align to prioritise profit over people and the planet. Across the region, defenders face arbitrary arrests, police raids, and prosecution under counter-terrorism, national security, or defamation laws. Those who speak out against destructive projects or seek foreign support are accused of being “anti-development” or serving foreign agendas.

This tactic has particularly harsh consequences for women. When jailed, they face isolation from their families and communities, reinforcing the notion that women should not take on leadership roles or speak out. In East Africa, such abuses are common: defenders are charged

¹⁰⁰ ‘At What Cost? Irresponsible business and the murder of land and environmental defenders in 2017’, Global Witness, 24 July 2018 <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/at-what-cost/#africa>

¹⁰¹ ‘Defending tomorrow: The climate crisis and threats against land and environmental defenders’, Global Witness, 29 July 2020 <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/defending-tomorrow/> p.13

¹⁰² United Nations Human Rights Council (2015) *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders*, Michel Forst. Geneva: United Nations. Available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/28/63> p.12

¹⁰³ United Nations Human Rights Council (2015) *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders*, Michel Forst. Geneva: United Nations. Available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/28/63>

¹⁰⁴ ‘On Dangerous Ground. 2015’S Deadly environment: The killing and criminalisation of land and environmental defenders worldwide’, Global Witness, 20 June 2016 <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/dangerous-ground/>

without evidence, subjected to drawn-out legal processes, and targeted through the manipulation of police, courts, and prisons.¹⁰⁵

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 the Northern part of Kenya, EHRDs spoke of multinational companies approaching men and elders in small communities about conservation projects, enticing them with payments for what is communal land. Women that speak up are criminalized, facing serious trumped up charges. One woman was falsely accused of fighting four armed police officers and stealing 250 bags of cement. She was arrested and detained, only released on bail for a payment of around \$20,000USD due to her work against a powerful conservancy company.¹⁰⁶

Criminalisation of EHRDs takes multiple forms, namely:¹⁰⁷

- Being accused of serious crimes without foundation or evidence;
- Being subjected to distorted and lengthy criminal proceedings and illegal arrests;
- Misuse of counter-terrorism, national security, and defamation laws;
- Criminalising the rights to free speech and peaceful protest;
- Labelling the defenders who receive foreign funding or support as anti-development or working for sinister imperial interests

Physical violence Although data is scant, testimonies reveal that many WEHRDs have been subjected to sexual violence by armed groups and security forces while carrying out their activism. These attacks stem not only from their sexualized nature but also from broader social norms that normalize violence against women or fail to recognize it as violence at all.

In one example, soldiers raped, beat, and killed members of the Environmental Women’s Committee (EWC) in Nigeria to suppress their occupation of Chevron’s oil terminals. Such brutality reflects a global pattern in which violence against women activists is legitimized as a way to punish and discipline those who dissent, especially when their bodies are perceived as vulnerable or “deserving” of control. The violence often extends beyond the defenders themselves to their wider family and community. This demonstrates that the repression of women defenders is not limited to individual harm but forms part of a broader pattern of collective punishment and intimidation, designed to silence both them and their communities.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ ‘At What Cost? Irresponsible business and the murder of land and environmental defenders in 2017’, Global Witness, 24 July 2018 <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/at-what-cost/#africa>

¹⁰⁶ Consultant’s interview with civil society groups in Kenya

¹⁰⁷ Webinar: A discussion on criminalisation of LEDs in East Africa

¹⁰⁸ Dey, A. & Pelling, M. (2021) *A comparative study of women environmental defenders’ antiviolent success strategies*. *Geoforum*, 126, pp. 126–138. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2021.07.012>

Women who defy traditional gender norms also often face hostility from their own communities. In patriarchal settings, activists are subjected to harassment, abuse, and social exclusion for taking on public leadership roles.

Similarly, 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.¹⁰⁹

Intersectionality: an amplifier of risk

WEHRDs do not experience violence in the same way. Race, class, age, and sexuality shape who is most at risk. Despite these intersecting barriers, many continue to resist, drawing strength from their lived experiences to reclaim power and challenge how society defines them.

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.¹¹⁰

Women's experiences of environmental harm are often made worse by racism and poverty. In South Africa, activists Makoma Lekalakala and Liz McDaid fought against a government-backed nuclear power plan that promised cheap energy but mainly benefited the wealthy. Many Black women in poor neighbourhoods couldn't afford electricity and had to burn paraffin, trash, or wood for cooking and heating, exposing themselves to toxic smoke and danger. Because women often manage households, they bear the heaviest burden of these crises.¹¹¹

“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
Defenders¹¹²***

¹⁰⁹ 'GBV against climate change activists', Clugston, N., Social Development Direct, March 2024
<https://sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-04/VAWC%20Helpdesk%20Q100%20GBV%20against%20climate%20change%20activists.pdf>

¹¹⁰ Dey, A. & Pelling, M. (2021) *A comparative study of women environmental defenders' antiviolent success strategies*. *Geoforum*, 126, pp. 126–138. Available at:
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2021.07.012>

¹¹¹ Dey, A. & Pelling, M. (2021) *A comparative study of women environmental defenders' antiviolent success strategies*. *Geoforum*, 126, pp. 126–138. Available at:
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2021.07.012>

¹¹² United Nations General Assembly (2023) *Pathways to peace: women human rights defenders in conflict, post-conflict and crisis-affected settings*. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders. Seventy-eighth session, Item 73 of the provisional agenda: Promotion and

Women human rights defenders with disabilities often face unique challenges tied to their disabilities. In conflict areas of Burkina Faso and Cameroon, for instance, members of a Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition organization report that 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. According to Women Enabled International, 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.¹¹³

Ecoviolence

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. Women bear a disproportionate share of the harm: 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, ecological destruction increases their workload, affecting their ability to provide food and clean water.¹¹⁴

Women's vulnerability is also shaped by biology. Studies show that higher estrogen 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.¹¹⁵

NIGERIA: I HAVE SUFFERED, BUT DEFENDING THE TRUTH IS IMPORTANT

My name is Gladys Eze.¹¹⁶ Environmental activism has led me to being stigmatized, and I've experienced violence and threats over the course of the related advocacy. Upon going to a company to stop pollution - the company sent men to share our demands, but upon asking they started pouring teargas in our eyes and some of them started shooting. I was the only

protection of human rights. 7 July 2023. New York: United Nations. Available at:

<https://undocs.org/en/A/78/160> p.15

¹¹³United Nations General Assembly (2023) *Pathways to peace: women human rights defenders in conflict, post-conflict and crisis-affected settings. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders*. Seventy-eighth session, Item 73 of the provisional agenda: Promotion and protection of human rights. 7 July 2023. New York: United Nations. Available at:

<https://undocs.org/en/A/78/160> p17

¹¹⁴ Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) & Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition (2017) *Women human rights defenders confronting extractive industries: An overview of critical risks and human rights obligations*. Toronto: AWID. Available at: <https://www.awid.org/publications/women-human-rights-defenders-confronting-extractive-industries> p.10/11

¹¹⁵ Dey, A. & Pelling, M. (2021) *A comparative study of women environmental defenders' antiviolent success strategies*. *Geoforum*, 126, pp. 126–138. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2021.07.012> p 126-138

¹¹⁶ Pseudonym to protect her identity.

woman there amongst a group of men and I was seriously beaten – I was beaten like a football mercilessly. When one of the men wanted to shoot me I said no problem. I was hit and also suffocated because of the tear gas. It was difficult to breathe because the man used the back of his gun to hit me and kick my legs.

I screamed at him to listen to me. Whilst he was beating me, another man said shoot her and another said beat her. The next thing I know I was in the emergency ambulance. I was rushed to the hospital where I stayed for two months. The youths of the community who were advocating for the same thing, rushed me to the hospital and asked the company to pay the bills for the treatment, which they did after apologising. I couldn't stand up for a month and I couldn't walk. The impact from when I fell impacted my waist, I have knee issues and I still struggle to sit due to the pain.

But the community now sees me as a threat – 'why were you advocating on environmental pollution and climate?' I was victimised and stigmatized. As a young girl you want to get married but the community would say, 'you know that the men from the company dealt with her mercilessly, they hit her womb, maybe her womb has fallen out' – all those beliefs. But today I'm married, I've given birth to a child – and that is to prove them wrong.

I also want to speak about the response from the lawmakers, law enforcement and agencies – it was very poor, they didn't come to my aid at all. To me, it was gender-based violence because I was the only woman. I have received calls of threats – last year after one of the advocacy meetings, I received a call saying I like making noise, because I went on social media advocating for peace ...and I received a call saying I should stop it.

What keeps me going is that I just want the right thing to be done. I'm so passionate about what I'm doing – I like defending the truth.

The gendered challenges of being a WEHRD and their impacts

Women often begin their environmental and land activism at a distinct disadvantage. Many are excluded from land ownership and from community decisions about natural resources, and when they dedicate time to advocacy, they may face criticism for neglecting domestic responsibilities or childcare. Balancing activism with family and community care can create significant physical and emotional strain.¹¹⁷

In addition to these burdens, women defenders frequently fight on two fronts: publicly, to protect land and resources, and privately, to defend their right to speak out within their families and organizations. Patriarchal norms often limit the recognition and support they receive, and in many cases, communities, institutions, and even families conceal or ignore the violence women face. Despite these obstacles, women continue to lead and advocate, often at great personal cost.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ 'At What Cost? Irresponsible business and the murder of land and environmental defenders in 2017', Global Witness, 24 July 2018 <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/at-what-cost/#africa>

¹¹⁸ 'At What Cost? Irresponsible business and the murder of land and environmental defenders in 2017', Global Witness, 24 July 2018 <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/at-what-cost/#africa>

A recurring pattern in the experiences of WEHRDs is the dismissal of their knowledge and expertise as unworthy or irrelevant. Women are often shut out of male-dominated spaces where ‘scientific’ or ‘economic’ decisions are made, and many lack access to legal or technical resources. Even those with recognized expertise struggle to be taken seriously. Their work is frequently misrepresented as detrimental to progress, especially when they challenge powerful economic interests. For example, in Nigeria, the Escravos Women’s Coalition, who protested Chevron’s oil operations, were mocked as “backward” and “anti-development.” The women’s deep understanding of the social and environmental harm caused by extraction was ignored, both through cultural ridicule and structural exclusion from key negotiations that allowed Chevron’s expansion in the first place.¹¹⁹

In the DRC, WEHRDs who have been working in the mining sector for over a decade spoke of the difficulty at the local level in participating in discussions, with no women represented in leadership roles at the corporate or local authority level. In order to access the mining site itself, they have to pay money to a local chief. If they are unwilling or unable to pay, women are ‘obliged to have sex to with the person in power’ – essentially rape, an issue still trivialised by both men and women.¹²⁰ Such systems reinforce the gendered and often misogynistic space of the extractive industry.

Other defender groups in the DRC spoke of ways in which gender has an impact on each of the following. Firstly, is resources: many of the outdated customary traditions mean that women are not considered in issues such as inheritance. Women are seen as being ‘married off’ to other families, and not considered main heirs to anyone’s estate, including land and natural resources. With regards to marriage, despite there being provisions on joint ownership, it is men that lead on any decision-making, meaning that he can sell things without the consent of his wife. This was seen as a means of violence against women and something that should be changed.

Literacy levels of women within the DRC are low which impacts their access to important information, and therefore their ability to report or seek redress. Women that have been attacked or stigmatised may ultimately be forced to leave their community.

Finally, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders has reported that women defenders have stated that they often feel seen first as victims rather than as leaders driving change. Their work and expertise are frequently overlooked, both within their families and communities and in the organisations they belong to. Many described being excluded from consultations on development projects and sidelined in decision-making, particularly in male-dominated NGOs. Some even reported being personally invited to participate in regional consultations only to be replaced by male colleagues, highlighting persistent gender biases that undermine women’s contributions and leadership.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Dey, A. & Pelling, M. (2021) *A comparative study of women environmental defenders’ antiviolent success strategies*. *Geoforum*, 126, pp. 126–138. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2021.07.012>

¹²⁰ Consultant’s interview with civil society group in the DRC

¹²¹ United Nations Human Rights Council (2015) *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders*, Michel Forst. Geneva: United Nations. Available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/28/63> p.13

Climate inequality

The effects of climate change will not be felt equally. Those least responsible for causing the crisis - often the poorest communities - will bear its greatest costs. Many live in areas most exposed to storms, floods, and drought, where even small shifts in the climate can devastate livelihoods.¹²²

Women and girls are especially vulnerable. They are more likely than men to die in natural disasters and face greater hardship from long-term environmental changes such as drought and flooding. In many regions, women are responsible for collecting water, a task made harder as droughts become more frequent and severe.

Although women produce nearly half of smallholder food in developing countries, only 10–20% own land, according to the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO). This lack of ownership leaves them more exposed to climate shocks and often excluded from decisions about land use, resource extraction, and climate adaptation efforts that directly affect their lives.¹²³

TANZANIA: WOMEN SHOULDN'T JUST BE PROTECTED, THEY SHOULD LEAD

Imani Mwenda, Nala Mushi and Chiku Juma¹²⁴ are three women human rights defenders working in rural communities across eastern Tanzania. Their work centres on land rights, gender-based violence, legal empowerment, and community education issues that have become increasingly urgent parts of the country emerge as a key site for graphite extraction, a critical mineral in the global transition to green technologies.

As Tanzania positions itself within the global supply chain for critical minerals, the experiences of these defenders reveal both inspiring progress and persistent structural challenges. Their testimonies highlight how extractive activities intersect with gender inequality, land governance, and community participation. In this context, their advocacy is not only local, it is globally significant. Ensuring that communities like theirs are protected, informed, and empowered is essential to achieving a just transition one that is environmentally sustainable, socially equitable, and inclusive of grassroots voices.

Their stories should help to inform policy, strengthen protection mechanisms, and elevate the role of women defenders in shaping the future of mineral governance in Tanzania.

Imani Mwenda - Having a say in Tanzania's energy future

In the heart of her graphite-rich village, Imani stands as a fierce defender of land rights and community dignity. Her journey began with a simple but powerful mission: to help her community understand their rights in the face of powerful mining interests tied to the global demand for critical minerals.

¹²² 'Defending tomorrow: The climate crisis and threats against land and environmental defenders', Global Witness, 29 July 2020 <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/defending-tomorrow/> p.12

¹²³ 'Defending tomorrow: The climate crisis and threats against land and environmental defenders', Global Witness, 29 July 2020 <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/defending-tomorrow/> p.13

¹²⁴ Pseudonyms to protect their identities

When land valuation processes began in preparation for graphite extraction, Imani stepped forward not just to educate women about their rightful compensation, but to challenge the silence imposed by local authorities and corporate actors. Her insistence on transparency and community representation led to her arrest in 2016 under false accusations of sabotage and disruption. She was targeted for daring to question the legitimacy of government meetings held without village leadership - a clear violation of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC).

Despite threats from police and mining company officials, Imani persisted. She became a role model, inspiring youth to speak up and demand accountability. Her advocacy reflects the core principles of a just transition namely community empowerment, gender equity, and legal safeguards in mineral governance.

Today, Imani continues to work with paralegals and uses her phone as a lifeline to report injustices. Though she prefers to remain anonymous for safety, her impact is unmistakable. She dreams of a future where her village negotiates directly with companies, where land rights are respected, and where every citizen, especially women, knows their worth and can have their say in Tanzania's energy future.

Nala Mushi - Legal awareness is a shield

In her small village, Nala has become a quiet but powerful force for women's legal empowerment. Her advocacy began with a simple realization: many women in her community had no understanding of their basic rights especially when it came to land, property, and village governance. As graphite exploration expanded across the region she saw how women were being left out of compensation processes and decision-making forums.

Imani stepped in to change that. She began holding informal education sessions, helping women understand how village councils operate and how land ownership affects their future. Her work is especially critical in a region where mineral extraction can reshape land use and community dynamics overnight.

Though she has not faced direct threats, Imani navigates a landscape of systemic resistance. Social norms discourage women from speaking out, and institutional support is often lacking. Yet her persistence reflects the heart of a just transition: ensuring that those most vulnerable, especially rural women, are informed, included, and empowered.

Imani's story reminds us that legal awareness is not just a tool, it's a shield. In the context of critical minerals, her work ensures that women are not sidelined, but instead become active participants in shaping the future of their communities.

Chiku Juma – Challenging patriarchal norms

Chiku Juma's journey into human rights advocacy was born from personal injustice. After witnessing the denial of inheritance rights to women in her village¹²⁵ she committed herself to fighting for gender equity especially in land and property matters. In her community, where graphite extraction has brought new waves of land valuation and compensation, her work has become even more urgent.

¹²⁵ [Challenges Surrounding the Adjudication of Women's Rights in Relation to Customary Law and Practices in Tanzania](#), NH Msuya, 2019.

Chiku's most notable success came when she supported a widow in claiming her rightful inheritance despite resistance from male relatives and village leaders. Her advocacy challenges deep-rooted patriarchal norms that often exclude women from the economic benefits of mineral development.

She regularly speaks at village meetings, using her voice to educate others and push for change. Unlike many defenders, Chiku believes that visibility is a tool for transformation. Her courage embodies the principles of a just transition: transparency, inclusion, and justice.

Chiku's work ensures that women are not just protected, they are positioned to lead. In a region shaped by graphite extraction, her advocacy helps build a future where mineral wealth does not deepen inequality but becomes a catalyst for empowerment.

Secondary victimisation; access to information; justice and recourse

Submissions to the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, reveal the multitude of ways in which women are further victimised after being targeted for their work as an EHRD, facing economic and personal consequences for their activism, and an inability to pursue justice.

Civil society groups in DRC spoke of the lack of technologies such as radios to be able to access basic information including their own rights under the law. Women are heavily discriminated against and not permitted to be involved in any decision-making processes. Should a community receive reparations for damage caused by a project, women spoke of how the men typically take the money, often taking their new wife and leaving their old wife and children in communities where polygamy is practiced.¹²⁶

When imprisoned, women frequently lose their livelihoods, leaving them unable to support their families or repay debts. In 2022, AdvocAid brought a case before the Economic Community of West African States Community Court of Justice, arguing that existing laws unfairly target poor and vulnerable women, punishing them for potential rather than actual harm. The case also states that women without money at the time of arrest are often coerced into sex by police officers in exchange for their release. In some instances, officers are reported to have raped women, frequently without protection. Those who refuse sex are typically charged in court, while those who comply are released without charge. The case remains ongoing.¹²⁷

Gender-based violence against women defenders in rural areas remains widespread. Support services are scarce, and accountability is often out of reach due to the lack of gender-specialized prosecutors. As Kenyan Indigenous activist, Jane Meriwas noted during a 2024 consultation in Accra, whether police take reports of gender-based violence seriously enough

¹²⁶ Consultant's interview with civil society groups in DRC

¹²⁷ United Nations General Assembly (2024) *The contributions of human rights defenders towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders*. Seventy-ninth session, Item 71 of the preliminary list: Promotion and protection of human rights. 9 July 2024. New York: United Nations. Available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/79/184> p.4/5 ; 'Press Release – Court case filed against Sierra Leone to overturn discriminatory loitering laws', AdvocAid, 4 May 2022 <https://advocaidsl.org/press-release-court-case-filed-against-sierra-leone-to-overturn-discriminatory-loitering-laws/>

to take a statement depends on the individual officer, with many dismissing such cases as mere “family issues.”¹²⁸

In Sierra Leone, women defenders report high rates of gender-based abuse, including forced marriage, rape, and economic exploitation. The group Women on Mining and Extractives works with women rape survivors in areas such as Tongo Fields and Kenema District, empowering them to help others seek justice. However, the Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone Police, the main authority mandated to handle such cases, lacks adequate resources and often demands payment to conduct investigations. In one case, a rape survivor in Tongo Fields dropped her complaint because she could not afford the fee.¹²⁹

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.¹³⁰

Defenders in the DRC highlighted that many women do not have the capacity to read or understand English, creating a barrier to accessing support information, unlike many of the men who are able to access and learn language skills online. They spoke of few defender training opportunities because of this language barrier, and the limited options of those in the francophone world. They were not aware of any mechanisms that had been set up specifically to help WEHRDs given the customary norms in the DRC and how women are not used to working in this space (and perhaps do not see themselves as defenders).¹³¹

DRC: DEATH THREATS AGAINST EHRDs

In eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, WEHRDs are living in hiding, fearing for their safety due to the intensification of death threats against them since the occupation by the armed group AFC-M23.

In March 2025, following the occupation of cities in the DRC by the AFC-M23 rebellion, pressure on environmental and human rights defenders increased. Jean Sema¹³², the head of a conservation organisation, began receiving death threats from unknown individuals.

¹²⁸ United Nations Human Rights Council (2025) *Out of sight: human rights defenders working in isolated, remote and rural contexts. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor*. Fifty-eighth session, 24 February–4 April 2025. Agenda item 3: Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development. Geneva: United Nations. Available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/58/49> p.6

¹²⁹ United Nations Human Rights Council (2025) *Out of sight: human rights defenders working in isolated, remote and rural contexts. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor*. Fifty-eighth session, 24 February–4 April 2025. Agenda item 3: Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development. Geneva: United Nations. Available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/58/49>

¹³⁰ United Nations Human Rights Council (2015) *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Michel Forst*. Geneva: United Nations. Available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/28/63>

¹³¹ Consultant’s interview with civil society groups in the DRC

¹³² Pseudonym to protect his identity.

Indeed, in March 2025, the organisation published a statement denouncing the illegal exploitation of resources, including timber and minerals, within a National Park. Field monitoring conducted by this NGO showed that environmental destroyers took advantage of the presence of the rebellion to destroy the park's forests and ecosystems. These actors were disturbed by the voice of the NGO, which denounced these destructive environmental practices. Following the intensification of these threats Jean fled the city and went into hiding in July 2025 to save his life.

Seeing Jean's prolonged absence, the perpetrators began threatening the women working for the same NGO: Jina Laurent, Jamila Mertens and Zola Leroy¹³³ - all defenders and activists for environmental rights.

On September 9, 2025, around 12:00 pm, a suspicious car with tinted windows, carrying unknown individuals, parked for several hours in front of their office. During a break, as the women were leaving the office, one of the individuals attempted to force them into the car, but they managed to escape, realizing it was an attempted kidnapping.

On September 13, 2025, Jina, Jamila and Zola went out to purchase office furniture. Along their journey they noticed a car following them. The three women decided to enter a shop for safety. Two men exited the suspicious car and again attempted to kidnap them, but they were saved thanks to the presence of several people inside the shop.

Three days later, two of the three women received phone calls threatening them with death. During these calls, the perpetrators demanded USD 2,000 to avoid being kidnapped, raped, and publicly shamed on social networks. The NGO retrieved the phone number used to make the threats and alerted the local security service of the rebellion, but the threats continued. Due to these ongoing threats, the three women are living in a state of generalized fear and in hiding, fearing for their lives.

Since the beginning of September 2025, Mona Malanda¹³⁴, an Indigenous woman leader resisting the exploitation of redwood, has been receiving death threats from unknown individuals. Mona is also threatened by a lawsuit filed by redwood traders accusing her of denouncing the illegal exploitation of mukula trees.

She fears her situation may mirror that of 17 human rights defenders who were sentenced by a High Court and continue to receive death threats via phone calls from unknown individuals.

Protection measures are critical to save their lives.

How gender informs activism

There are clear examples from Africa where being a WEHRD influences how their activism is done. It can shape what issues are prioritized, how tactics are chosen, and how the work is framed.

In Uganda, 75% of people live in rural areas, and women's roles as farmers and caregivers tie them closely to the land. Yet climate change threatens their livelihoods, driven by land grabs by

¹³³ Pseudonyms to protect their identities.

¹³⁴ Pseudonym to protect her identity.

extractive industries and industrial agriculture backed by foreign investors. Corporations clear forests and build infrastructure, destroying vital resources and leaving hundreds of women displaced in refugee camps, as land rights typically fall to men.

In response, environmental activist Sostine Namanya, founded Uganda's "eco-feminist" movement in 2016 – the National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE) – mobilising rural women across dozens of communities. It has since grown into a 7,000-member network of activists – akin to an 'early warning system' – who protest land rights violations in the oil-rich Albertine region, alert journalists to stories of environmental abuses, and lead reforestation efforts across the country.

This multifaceted fight against environmental injustice has achieved some progress. In 2019, NAPE and other Ugandan activists sued the French oil giant Total over plans to drill in a national park. The case is still underway in France. The group also rallied women to protest efforts to turn Uganda's biodiverse Bugoma Forest into a sugar plantation, sparking an ongoing legal battle. Linking resource justice, land rights, and gender shows that empowering women at the grassroots level can help build resilience against environmental destruction and climate breakdown. Being a woman shaped *what* she fought for (rights to water and land, food security), *how* she mobilised (women-focused networks), and *why* (because of the direct burden carried by women).¹³⁵

The Ugandan youth climate activist, Vanessa Nakate started her activism in 2019 and makes a point of emphasising intersectional justice, linking climate change with gender and racial inequality. As a young African woman, Vanessa faced gendered and racialised criticism that most male activists didn't receive, including remarks about her appearance, sexuality, and motives.

Vanessa frames her activism not only around climate policy, but also around how climate change disproportionately affects women and girls (for instance through food insecurity, water burdens, care-work). This gendered perspective shapes her choice of issues and tactics which include using digital organising, youth networks, and framing climate justice as also a women's-rights issue, not just a technical environmental one.¹³⁶

Whilst the WEHRDs interviewed for this research did not speak explicitly about how their gender influences their work when asked, the discussions highlighted patterns of key ways in which being a woman environmental defender shapes activism:

Issue Selection: Women often focus on intersections, taking on issues that reflect their daily gendered roles such as food and water security, land rights, and health rather than strictly environmental work.

Mobilisation Methods: WEHRDs use networks, and community-based organising, often combining livelihood projects with environmental work.

¹³⁵ 'Eco-feminists are tackling climate change head on', Bryce, E., Wired, 5 October 2021 <https://www.wired.com/story/eco-feminists-climate-change/>

¹³⁶ Barnes, Brendon R. 2021. "Reimagining African Women Youth Climate Activism: The Case of Vanessa Nakate" *Sustainability* 13, no. 23: 13214. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132313214>

Intersectional framing: WEHRDs typically frame activism in everyday terms such as their children’s well-being, and clean water, exposing how women are disproportionately impacted, which resonates locally.

Vulnerability & Strategy: Because WEHRDs face both environmental threats and gender-based threats (abuse, stigma, exclusion) their activism often includes safety strategies, awareness of gender violence, and intersectional advocacy.

Barriers Unique to Women: They may face social stigma for stepping into public roles, be seen as going against gender norms, or face heightened violence (including sexual violence) for their activism. This means their tactics may need to be more community-embedded, and more relational.

Strategies and resources

Environmental defenders are often grassroots groups - local associations, social movements, and community members - who mobilize in response to local environmental and social threats. While awards and media coverage often spotlight individual heroes, most environmental defence efforts are collective struggles driven by communities protecting their shared environment.¹³⁷

Resources and support for EHRDs

Category	Purpose & description	Notes
Emergency Protection and Security Support	To provide immediate safety and crisis intervention for defenders at risk.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergency support grants Small, flexible funds to cover evacuation, temporary relocation, safe housing, medical needs, and legal emergencies. • Relocation programs Temporary or long-term relocation to safer areas, though WEHRDs often face additional challenges due to family responsibilities. • Urgent alerts and documentation Rapid sharing of threat information with allies, media, and protection networks. • Local protection mechanisms Community-based safety plans such as safe houses, daily check-ins,

¹³⁷ Scheidel, A., Del Bene, D., Liu, J., Navas, G., Mingorría, S., Demaria, F., Avila, S., Roy, B., Ertör, I., Temper, L. & Martínez-Alier, J. (2020) *Environmental conflicts and defenders: A global overview*. *Global Environmental Change*, 63, 102104. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2020.102104>

		emergency contacts, and secure communication apps.
Legal and Judicial Support	To defend defenders in court and strengthen accountability systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pro bono legal aid and access to networks of lawyers supporting HRDs under threat. • Strategic litigation and use of courts e.g., <i>Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights</i> securing compensation for police brutality victims.¹³⁸ • Advocacy through regional courts e.g. <i>Economic Community of West African States Court</i> ruling to protect freedom of expression in Nigeria.¹³⁹ • Calls for stronger environmental legal networks to provide community legal advice and representation.
Capacity Building and Knowledge Sharing	To strengthen the ability of defenders and organizations to prevent risks and sustain their work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity-building grants Enabling defenders to continue human rights and environmental activities securely. • Training on advocacy, physical and digital security, and risk analysis. • Knowledge-sharing networks Linking defenders, CSOs, and communities to exchange tools, strategies, and successful protection measures. • Holistic approaches Initiatives such as those from <i>Not1More</i> combine safety,

¹³⁸ United Nations Human Rights Council (2023) *Success through perseverance and solidarity: 25 years of achievements by human rights defenders. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders*. Fifty-second session, 27 February–31 March 2023. Agenda item 3: Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development. Geneva: United Nations. Available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/52/29>, p.7

¹³⁹ ‘SERAP v. Federal Republic of Nigeria’, Global Freedom of Expression, Columbia University <https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/cases/serap-v-federal-republic-of-nigeria/>

		wellbeing, and mental health with peer learning.
Psychosocial and Wellbeing Support	To address trauma, stress, and mental health challenges resulting from activism and violence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychosocial support grants For counselling, trauma recovery, and community-based healing. • Holistic protection models Integrating wellbeing into safety planning to prevent burnout and isolation.
Networks, Allies, and Collective Action	To build solidarity and create stronger advocacy and protection systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allies: family, NGOs, local and foreign governments, embassies, international organizations, and artists/judges who amplify defenders' voices. • Civil society and defender networks: national and regional collaborations offering solidarity, shared documentation, and advocacy • International allies: <i>Global Witness, Protection International, Amnesty International</i>, and others offering exposure, training, and pressure on perpetrators. • Collective and community-led approaches Prioritizing defender-led, context-specific strategies that account for gender, race, and class differences
Gaps and Challenges	Ongoing barriers identified by defenders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of localized protection programs, especially in rural or conflict-affected regions (e.g., DRC). • Limited support for WEHRDs, including language barriers and difficulty accessing donors or embassies. • Insufficient legal aid and weak state protection mechanisms. • Persistent patriarchal norms that undermine women's

		leadership and recognition in civil society spaces.
--	--	---

SUMMARY

Across Africa, WEHRDs are standing at the frontlines of the fight for land, water, and climate justice, and they’re paying a steep price for their courage. This report exposes the intersecting threats they face and the resilience that keeps their movements alive.

From **Kenya to the DRC, Uganda to South Africa**, 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 criminalization for daring to challenge power. Many are targeted precisely because they are women: their gender is weaponized to silence their voices and discredit their leadership.

Data from **Global Witness** and **ALLIED** paint a grim picture. Between 2022 and 2024 alone, 261 attacks against defenders were recorded in Africa, yet fewer than 20 involved women. Out of 126 killings documented since 2012, only five victims were women. These numbers, the report stresses, mask the real scale of the crisis - silenced by fear, stigma, and chronic underreporting.

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

The report calls for **gender-responsive protection frameworks**, stronger data collection, psychosocial and legal support, and recognition of women defenders as agents of change - not passive victims. Their struggles are not isolated acts of resistance but a vital front in Africa’s broader battle for women’s rights, human rights and environmental justice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

African states should:

Recognize and protect WEHRDs in law and policy

- Adopt national policies or laws that explicitly recognise WEHRDs and the state’s duty to protect them through meaningful consultation with civil society and ensure alignment with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights. Ensure national human rights strategies (especially on business and human rights) and strategies to tackle gender-based violence which reference WEHRDs, and include protection measures considering both the individual and collective needs of at-risk WEHRDs, including both rural and marginalised women.

Tackle the drivers of harms against WEHRDs defenders by protecting land and environmental rights

- Guarantee the land rights of rural communities and Indigenous Peoples through comprehensive land reforms that redistribute land and promote fairer land ownership. Ensure all government and business projects secure the free, prior and informed consent of affected Indigenous and traditional communities through meaningful consultation. Centre women's rights within this process to ensure they have access to land and are recognised as rightful landowners.
- Ratify and implement existing international and regional agreements with provisions to protect WEHRD's traditional knowledge and practices and uphold their rights, including ILO Convention 169 which protects the rights of Indigenous and tribal peoples.

Prevent and address gender-based threats and violence against WHRDs and guarantee their recognition and protection and their communities

- Publicly affirm the legitimate role of WEHRDs, condemn attacks, and pledge to investigate reprisals.
- Establish confidential reporting pathways for WEHRDs, including online reporting, and specialised response teams that can coordinate emergency relocation, medical, psychosocial and legal support.
- Design protection programmes that explicitly include LGBTIQ+ WEHRDs, migrant WEHRDs, defenders with disabilities and WEHRDs from ethnic minorities, and consult those groups in their design and implementation.

Systematically identify, document and analyse attacks on land and environmental defenders

- Systematically document attacks, and their motivations, including the collection of disaggregated data on ethnicity, race, sexual orientation and gender identity, disability, geographical location and other relevant characteristics; which would enable them to improve existing laws and mechanisms to protect defenders. Ensure data gathering is transparent, responsible and participatory. Monitor and publicly report specifically on violations, abuses and reprisals committed against WEHRDs.

End criminalisation and harassment of WEHRDs

- Repeal or revise any existing laws that allow for the criminalisation of WEHRDs or organisations working to protect human, land or environmental rights. This includes repealing or revising laws related to terrorism, sedition, defamation or public order that are commonly misused against WEHRDs, and adopting clear safeguards against abusive prosecutions. Enforce existing laws that protect WEHRDs. Where such laws do not exist, new frameworks must be established. Anti-SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) measures should be introduced to allow courts to quickly identify and dismiss lawsuits intended to intimidate or silence WEHRDs for exercising their rights. Cease arbitrary investigations, surveillance and administrative penalties against WEHRDs.

- Increase or commence awareness-raising programmes on the rights and roles of WEHRDs; and ensure law enforcement, government officials and the judiciary receive appropriate training relating to the work and legitimacy of WEHRDs and the gendered impact of violations against them.
- Create or empower independent national bodies such as national human rights institutions or ombudspersons with a clear mandate to monitor cases of criminalisation, provide WEHRDs with legal assistance, and issue public recommendations to relevant authorities.

Protect WEHRDs online, promote digital security and counter-disinformation

- Develop national guidance and training for WEHRDs on digital security, and partner with civil society and tech firms to remove abusive content and protect data.
- Train state actors on non-interference with WEHRDs' digital expression and prohibit state-sponsored hacking and surveillance.

Ensure an enabling civic and funding environment

- Repeal or reform laws that restrict foreign funding, impose excessive registration requirements, freeze assets without due process, or criminalise peaceful assembly.
- Facilitate local philanthropic mechanisms and tax incentives that support women's rights organisations.
- Mainstream Gender-Responsive budgeting into their national annual budget to support WEHRDs' activism, and access to participation, protection and justice.

Ensure transparent and prompt justice for WEHRDs who have been attacked

- Ensure relevant authorities are fully equipped to conduct full and transparent investigations on attacks against WEHRDs, with oversight by specialist, independent human rights teams. Ensure such teams are given the resources they need to provide holistic support to victims and their families. Where such teams do not exist, they should be promptly established and empowered to oversee investigations on crimes against WEHRDs with specific training on how to identify, document and respond to reprisals. Resources for legal representation should be made easily available to defenders. All suspected sexual offences and murders of and involving women should be prioritised for investigation in order to help put an end to and punish sexual violence and femicide.

Establish strong and binding legal frameworks on business and human rights

- Fulfil duty to protect WEHRDs by creating, supporting and implementing robust, mandatory legislation that holds companies and financial institutions legally accountable for human rights abuses and environmental harm across their global operations and value chains. Adopt binding legislation to close governance gaps, deter abuse and ensure victims have access to justice. Corporate accountability laws must uphold the standards set out in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Adopt international and regional declarations, frameworks and mechanisms that protect defenders:

- In full coordination with civil society representatives, and other key stakeholders including representatives of community members, sign up to and implement international treaties containing provisions to protect WEHRDs.
- Develop and adopt a legally binding African regional framework for the protection of WEHRDs, grounded in African human rights standards. Include specific provisions on protection, participation, access to justice and accountability mechanisms, addressing threats, preventing reprisals and ensuring a rapid response to violence or intimidation against WEHRDs. Ensure the inclusion of WEHRDs in shaping and monitoring the framework, ensuring it reflects their lived realities.

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.
- Adopt or amend visa policies to facilitate the timely issuance of temporary humanitarian visas to WEHRDs who are at severe risk and make this information easily accessible and understandable.
- Help to build the capacity and increase the capability of WEHRDs and their organizations to conduct risk assessments, develop security plans and protocols, and mitigate and respond to threats in order to increase their safety and resilience.
- 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.
- Establish a more careful and effective response for WEHRDs in isolated, remote and rural areas, including collective rather than individual protection strategies. To meet

practical and immediate protection needs, any support must be as close as possible to where the defenders live and work.

- 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.
- Demonstrate leadership for the need to report, investigate and seek accountability for reprisals against WEHRDs. Help secure the safe and meaningful participation of WEHRDs in national, regional and multilateral decision-making. Couple the strengthening of policies and law enforcement with monitoring of attacks against WEHRDs as well as what happens after attacks to help prioritise actions to address impunity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thanks to all the brave and resilient women who were either interviewed for this study or cited in the report. Thank you to all the defenders across the globe fighting for our rights and the future of our planet.

Thank you to our allies cited in this report for sharing your data, and for the excellent work you are doing to document attacks and safeguard defenders.

We are especially grateful to our donors and funders for making this work possible.

Researchers and Authors: Sek Strategies, Ali Hines & Eryn Schornick
eschornick@sekstrategies.com / ahines@sekstrategies.com

This report was commissioned by Natural Justice led by Katherine Robinson, Linda Sansico and Tawonga Chihana.

Preliminary findings for this report were published ahead of UNFCCC COP30, November 2025.

The final research document was published in December 2025.

ANNEX

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW NOTES

Across all interviews (DRC, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Madagascar, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda), WEHRDs face overlapping layers of risk and discrimination - gender-based, political, and economic - compounded by weak protection mechanisms and shrinking civic space.

Country	Risk Level	Main Threats	Support Systems	Gender Dynamics	Notable Trends
DRC	Extreme	Armed groups, sexual violence, reprisals	Minimal, informal	Patriarchal, cultural taboos	Women-led grassroots movements under siege
Kenya	High	Digital/physical harassment, legal persecution	Strong coalitions, legal aid	Exclusion, community stigma	Rapid-response model effective but overstretched
Nigeria	High	Surveillance, defamation, gender-based violence	Informal networks, limited formal aid	Conservative norms, stigmatization	Digital threats rising; burnout common
Senegal	Moderate	Legal pressure, intimidation	Legalized associations, networks	Socioeconomic, not formal discrimination	Visibility increasing through organized coalitions
Madagascar	Moderate	Judicial harassment, intimidation	Emerging networks, weak coordination	Cultural constraints	Women's activism underreported
South Africa	Moderate–High	SLAPP suits, economic coercion	Strong coalitions, legal aid	Structural patriarchy	Subtle systemic violence, emotional abuse
Tanzania	High	State repression, arrests, displacement	Weak formal aid, external donors	Gender + cultural stigma	IP women marginalized; networks forming
Uganda	Severe	Criminalization, sexual violence, detentions	Limited NGO/legal aid due to funding cuts	Deeply patriarchal	Donor withdrawal weakening defense systems

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES AND INSIGHTS

Theme	Description	Implication
Shrinking civic space	Governments increasingly criminalize dissent	Need for legal and diplomatic pressure

Theme	Description	Implication
Gendered impunity	Attacks on women defenders rarely prosecuted	Require gender-specific justice reforms
Economic precarity	Environmental activism jeopardizes livelihoods	Link protection to income diversification
Intersectional gaps	Rural, Indigenous, and youth women excluded	Inclusion in policy, leadership, and funding
Digital security	Digital surveillance now a first-stage threat	Urgent need for digital protection training
Healing justice	Mental health needs ignored in activism funding	Integrate psychosocial support into protection programs

TRENDS

Escalating Threats and Shrinking Civic Space

- In nearly all countries, threats against women defenders are increasing since 2024, coinciding with rising extractive activities, land grabs, and authoritarian trends.
- Patterns of escalation are consistent. Digital harassment and surveillance → community/family intimidation → legal summons → physical attacks or displacement.
- Perpetrators range from armed groups (DRC, Uganda, Tanzania) to corporate–state alliances (Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria).

Gendered Vulnerabilities and Patriarchal Barriers

- WEDs are targeted because of gender and because of activism.
- Patriarchal norms, low literacy, and cultural taboos limit women’s access to justice, leadership, and protection.
- Secondary victimization—harassment, disbelief, or mockery when seeking justice—is common.
- In societies with formal gender equality (Senegal, Madagascar), informal norms still silence women.

Systemic Resource Gaps

- WEDs lack financial, legal, and logistical protection.
- Most support is training-based (digital or advocacy), not protective or financial.
- Emergency funds exist (e.g., Kenya, Nigeria) but are small, delayed, or urban-biased.
- Francophone–Anglophone language barriers limit access to donor and NGO support.

Conflict, Corruption, and Extractives

- Environmental defense intersects with armed conflict, land grabs, and illegal exploitation.
- DRC, Uganda, Tanzania: high physical danger and impunity due to armed actors or state repression.
- Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa: corporate–state collusion and legal harassment (e.g., SLAPP suits).
- Senegal and Madagascar: less violent, but economic coercion and intimidation remain dominant.

Emerging Leadership and Grassroots Agency

- Despite risks, women are organizing—forming networks, cooperatives, and advocacy coalitions.

- Examples include: *Women in Mining* networks in DRC and Kenya. *Cross-regional coalitions* in South Africa. *Community-led legal associations* in Senegal and Madagascar.
- These groups blend environmental defense with livelihood protection, anchoring activism in daily survival.

Access to Justice and Information

- Justice systems are weak, patriarchal, and often corrupt.
- Information access is restricted by literacy, technology, and geography.
- Urban women defenders are more visible and supported; rural defenders remain isolated and invisible.

Psychological and Socio-Economic Toll

- Constant exposure to violence, displacement, and family threats causes PTSD, burnout, and chronic fear.
- Women defenders carry double burdens of activism and domestic responsibility.
- Few mechanisms address healing or psychosocial support, especially in South Africa and DRC.

Intersectionality and Inclusion Gaps

- Indigenous women, youth, and sexual minorities face compounded exclusion.
- Women often lack recognition as “defenders,” preventing access to protection funds or mechanisms.
- Intersectional approaches (Kenya, Nigeria) show better resilience outcomes.

Positive Practices Emerging

- **Kenya:** Rapid-response funds, legal aid, and digital safety training.
- **Senegal:** Legally recognized defender associations increasing legitimacy.
- **South Africa:** Legal coalitions and SLAPP resistance with international visibility.
- **Nigeria:** Community-based informal protection networks.
- **Tanzania:** Cross-border solidarity during displacement (e.g., Ngorongoro case).