

The space for human right defenders to operate freely around the world is shrinking. To promote the universal human rights is being criminalised. Governments and non-state actors use existing or new laws to harass and imprison activists. Femdefenders, activists fighting for women and LGBTQI rights, are particularly exposed.

BUILDING RESILIENCE – COUNTERACTING THE SHRINKING SPACE FOR WOMEN’S RIGHTS



The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation strengthens and promotes women's organisations in several regions around the world. We support femdefenders who live and work in conflict affected countries, so that they can continue fighting for women's rights.



Photo Kvinna till Kvinna

SHRINKING SPACE FOR FEMDEFENDERS

Freedom of speech, association and assembly are crucial building blocks in a democracy. When they are violated, the space for civil society to act is limited or even non-existent. This is the situation in many countries right now.

Civil society is of particular importance for women, as women are often excluded from official decision-making structures such as parliaments and city councils. When the space for civil society is closing, femdefenders have few arenas, if any, to fight for political influence, equality and women's human rights.

What is shrinking space?

When repressive governments or non-state actors use legislation, threats or violence to hinder the work of civil society, this is called "shrinking space". Governments tend to inspire each other; for example, Russia and Egypt have influenced restrictions on civil society organisations throughout their respective regions. According to Civicus, an organisation that measures the civil society space globally, only three percent of the people on the planet today live in countries with open civic space.

Who is a femdefender?

Femdefenders are women human rights defenders and other human rights defenders working for women's rights, feminism, gender equality and/or LGBTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex) rights.

Threats, harassment and violence

Femdefenders challenge traditional norms on how a woman should be and act and often find themselves targeted by people who want to discourage them. As conservative and nationalistic movements are growing in size and strength, the situation for women's organisations and femdefenders becomes increasingly difficult. Each public gathering or demonstration means a risk of threats or sexual harassments. Even false rumours of sexual assault are common since suspected sexual violence can damage a woman's reputation. Misinformation and false accusations about the work of femdefenders can cause entire communities to lose trust and turn their backs. Femdefenders find themselves totally isolated.

Traditional values and conservatism

Nationalism as well as social and religious conservatism limit women's access to public spaces. So-called traditional values put nation, traditional gender roles and the nuclear family at its core. It is used to legitimise violence against femdefenders and to de-legitimise their work. Smear campaigns are common; for example, accusations of being "bad mothers" or "prostitutes". Threats and smear campaigns are often coordinated and sometimes orchestrated by repressive governments or conservative groups. Threats against femdefenders are often not considered to be political attacks on freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, but rather to be non-political "violence against women". To not acknowledge women as political actors is an important part of the tactics.



What happens without strong women's organisations? Who will continue the fight against violence against women and for women's rights?



Hot topics and threats

In Kvinna till Kvinna's report Femdefenders from 2014, we conducted surveys on the frequency, type and nature of violence targeting femdefenders.

The survey showed that some issues tend to generate more violence than others. Among these are issues on

- Violence against women
- Gender equality
- Questioning power structures
- LGBTQI-rights
- Sexual and reproductive health rights
- Taking a stance against militarism
- Cross border work in conflict zones
- Actions against corruption and organised crime*

OUT OF THE FEMDEFENDERS THAT RESPONDED:

70 % had faced threats or violence in public places.

29 % had received public death threats.

14 % had survived murder attempts.*

Almost six billion people live in 106 countries where there are serious violations of freedoms of expression, assembly and association.

Source CIVICUS Monitor, 4 April 2017

* Kvinna till Kvinna. Femdefenders (2014)



Photo: Kivimo tili Kivimo, Susanna Rudenill

Femdefenders challenge deeply patriarchal norms on a daily basis. Shrinking space for civil society is a global phenomenon that directly affects their work, regardless of country or region.

Brutal smear campaigns

An anti-corruption activist in Montenegro was targeted with a smear campaign involving fake but very graphic pornographic videos. The campaign lasted for weeks on national TV and media, and the authorities did nothing to try to stop it. The person behind spreading the smear campaign had direct links to the government. He was also director of a so-called "NGO" for women's rights.

Witnessed a female activist being murdered

A well-known lawyer and women's rights activist from Egypt witnessed another female activist being murdered by the police during a demonstration. Instead of being a witness, she was accused of taking part in an illegal demonstration. The trial is constantly postponed. She was banned from travelling, subjected to judicial harassment and her bank accounts were frozen.

Common shrinking space strategies

- Femdefenders working with violence against women and trafficking, often find themselves and their work threatened by powerful businessmen or politicians. One femdefender had the address of her shelter exposed on national TV and was accused of running not a shelter, but a brothel.
- Threats against Macedonian organisations intensi-

fied in spring 2017 after ex-Prime Minister pledged to "cleanse" Macedonia's civil society.

- In Colombia, after the peace agreement, women's organisations testify how armed groups are now contracted by politicians to silence human rights defenders and critical voices.
- In Azerbaijan, it has since 2014 been almost impossible to register civil society organisations due to very demanding regulations on the procedure. Organisations have been forced to close, and activists have been imprisoned or left the country. Recently the government said they have facilitated the process, but have so far failed to show how.
- Travel bans are common ways to silence influential femdefenders in many countries. Travel bans add to the isolation of femdefenders caused by smear campaigns, making it impossible for them to travel and receive international support.

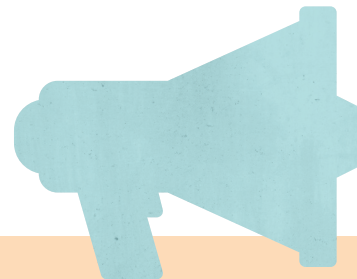


Foto: Camo Lein

A femdefender from DR Congo is so used to having arbitrary visits by police and other security institutions in her office that she decided to adopt a quite effective strategy – the messier her desk is, the less the chance of someone finding anything important.



FEMDEFENDERS SPEAK UP



The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation monitor legislative development and assists partner organisations in managing dire situations with regards to cuts in funding, travel bans, house searches, arrests, as well as personal security and psychological well-being under harsh pressure. This support demands flexibility and innovative methods as the conditions constantly change.

KVINNA TILL KVINNA'S ACTIONS TO STRENGTHEN FEMDEFENDERS INCLUDE:

- Constantly finding new ways to continue our financial support to partner organisations in repressive environments.
- Train femdefenders in security, risk assessment, psychological wellbeing and stress management.
- Monitor legislative changes affecting civil society

with a particular focus on gendered dimensions of the threats, as well as effects on the work of femdefenders.

- Advocacy and lobbying in relevant forums in the EU and UN and making such arenas accessible for femdefenders.
- Network building and creating safe places where femdefenders can exchange knowledge and coping mechanisms with colleagues from other countries and regions.
- Enabling and promoting cooperation between organisations to strengthen and reinforce advocacy and coalition-building.
- Long-term engagement and core support to local partner organisations.



RESEARCH SHOWS THAT A STRONG AND INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IS THE MOST CRITICAL FACTOR FOR IMPROVING WOMEN'S RIGHTS.



Photo Kvinna till Kvinna, Susanna Rudehill