

THE STOCKHOLM FORUM ON GENDER EQUALITY

COUNTERING THE SHRINKING SPACE FOR WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS: A GLOBAL CALL TO ACTION BY THE BRAVEST WOMEN IN THE WORLD

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OVERVIEW

A global call to action by the bravest women in the world.

The shrinking space for women's organisations is an urgent threat, not only to the organisations themselves, but to all efforts for women's rights and gender equality. This session was aimed at drafting recommendations to policy-makers regarding the protection of women human rights defenders, combating the shrinking space, and the support to women's organisations. A call to action was delivered to the decision-makers at the forum.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Where are we? What is our reality? What challenges are we facing today?

What similarities and/or differences do we see across contexts? What are we doing?

The session started out with an example from Bosnia and Herzegovina about the shrinking space of women human rights, more specifically on the limit of freedom of rights and speech, which started out as a proposal on public order and peace. The session then continued with a discussion on the same patterns of shrinking space, surveillance and harassment of women human rights defenders all over the world.

There has been some progress, such as improved new legislation and the fact that victims of domestic violence have been recognised. However, it has become increasingly difficult for some women activists to continue their work in their home countries. Security is being prioritised and governments fear the mobilisation of both NGOs and of the population in general. Previously this has mainly been a problem in countries with weak states and oppressive regimes, but today it is increasingly also happening in the democratic world.

Problems activists face:

- Smear campaigns, detentions and threats to both themselves and their families, subjection to surveillance, and travel bans.
- This repression of space comes from different actors, such as governments, religious institutions, political groupings and other actors in society.

- According to the Kvinna till Kvinna report on reasons for a shrinking space: an increasing trend of fundamentalism and nationalism.
- NGOs are underfunded and women's organisations are politically marginalised.
- Women activists and journalists are exposed to hate campaigns, sexual harassment and threats of violence. There is a big risk that women withdraw from public space. Young women choose not to become involved. They are dependent of civil society to act.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Where do we go from here? What are the ways forward? What can we bring forward from this discussion and translate into action?

The most important thing to do is build a strong and independent feminist movement. It's time to act now.

Therefore, a Call for action by KTK has been developed. It was discussed among different women human rights defenders on how to make the Call for Action work in different contexts.

Key recommendations formulated per topic:

1. Impunity – this is a key cause pushing back women's rights NGOs, and young women activists need to put more pressure on repressive governments and faith-based organisations to respect universal human rights.
2. Be aware in consultations with civil society and pay attention to who is there, and to which parts of civil society that is invited when meeting with governments, embassies and international representatives.
3. Monitor and address the negative impact of international military missions and counterterrorism strategies.
4. Invest in women's agencies through flexible, core and long-term funding. The whole system needs reforming to become gender sensitive.

Increase resources to women's rights organisations to help them identify their own strategies for movement building.

There is a tendency of funding be given to larger NGOs and grassroots organisations, while the in-between sized advocacy groups, who do critical policy work, seldom receive any funding.

Do sufficient mapping of who is being funded, to avoid funding government-organised nongovernmental organisations (GONGOs) and the same groups of NGOs that always receive funding.

Core funding needs to include new voices, without drowning out the existing ones.

5. Look in to the role and strategies of large donors in this development.
6. Recognition of the work of women's activists is needed. Highlight herstories. Break the isolation of activists – focus on that women can work together and create needed networks.
7. Engage with women civil society not just as a box-ticking exercise. Visit organisations in rural areas as well.

New recommendations

- Pay special attention to women human rights defenders in conflict areas who are disproportionately affected (not least by security-related issues) and marginalisation
- Do not compromise. Focus instead on putting pressure on relevant societal bodies.
- Highlight the legal obligation to respect women human rights defenders and fight the impunity.
- Pay special attention to corporate interests.
- There is a lack of coordination among donors which needs to be dealt with.
- Address the abuse of funding mechanisms for surveillance purposes by the governments.
- Consult with a diversity of women human rights defenders when developing funding mechanisms.
- In addition to short-term solutions, donors need to support organisations working for long-term change. Beyond funding, provide other types of creative support to build their capacity.
- Emergency funding for women human right defenders is under direct threat.
- Prevent ‘pinkwashing’ and call this out.
- Have an intersectional perspective on who gets support.
- Don’t let women human right defenders become a target for national security and anti-terrorism.
- We need to understand the role of the internet in movement building. The definition of movement building needs to be broader.
- Address the fact that many women human rights defenders have been arrested and are incarcerated (in prisons and mental institutions).
- Change ‘women’s rights organisations’ to ‘women’s human rights organisations’
- Implement the commitments that are already there (preamble, refer to existing language). Put light on where language on women’s rights does not exist and highlight where there are opportunities for language on women human right defenders.

What is important for us?

- Conversations to not put everybody in the same box.
- Come together and strategise and pool resources to do the work.
- Donors are not discussing the problem with religious fundamentalism and nationalism.
- Preamble: diversity among women human rights defenders (including LGBTI organisations). ■

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