Parliamentary Assembly
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Resolution 2554 (2024)[1]

Protecting women human rights defenders in Europe

Parliamentary Assembly

1. Women human rights defenders, in all their diversity, play a crucial role in promoting and protecting human rights, including women's rights and the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons, and in furthering gender equality. They are individuals or groups who act, in a peaceful and legal way, to promote and protect human rights. They are activists, members of non-governmental organisations, health workers, private-sector actors, researchers, lawyers, students, teachers, artists, trade unionists, bloggers, civil servants or journalists. They inspire societal change.

2. In a context of shrinking civic space, women human rights defenders often lack recognition and their contribution is minimised, a situation which is not helped by the extreme diversity of their status and areas of work. The Parliamentary Assembly recognises their important work, including that of young women human rights defenders, and calls for them to be given more support.

3. Women human rights defenders face multiple challenges and risks: they are often threatened and attacked for what they do, for the ideas they promote and for who they are or who they are perceived to be. In particular, they receive specific threats made against their person, both online and offline, aimed at silencing them. In particular, targeted online hate campaigns have been organised against activists who denounce patriarchal systems and cultures. Women human rights defenders are often victims of intersecting forms of discrimination. Transgender women human rights defenders and those with a disability or with a minority background are particularly at risk. The Assembly strongly condemns the attacks perpetrated against women human rights defenders, in all their diversity, and calls for an end to impunity for their perpetrators.

4. The rise in populism and misogyny has had a negative impact on the work of women human rights defenders in Europe. Anti-gender movements see them as a threat because they challenge the so-called "traditional vision" of women in society. Considering these challenges and obstacles, it is essential to combat misinformation about women's rights and women human rights defenders, and to ensure their safety online and offline. The Assembly recalls the responsibility of States to provide an enabling environment for women human rights defenders and to ensure their protection, in line with States' undertakings under international treaties.

5. The Assembly recalls the 1999 United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and the 2008 European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders and stresses the importance of their implementation. It also recalls the Declaration of the Committee of Ministers of 6 February 2008 on Council of Europe action to improve the protection of human rights defenders and promote their activities, and its Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)11 to member States on the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe.

6. The Assembly reaffirms its support for all human rights defenders and recalls its Resolution 2095 (2016) and Recommendation 2085 (2016) "Strengthening the protection and role of human rights defenders in Council of Europe member States", its Resolution 2225 (2018) "Protecting human rights defenders in Council of Europe member States" and its Resolution 2439 (2022) "Access to abortion in Europe: stopping anti-choice harassment". It reaffirms its support for the mandate of the Assembly's General Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders and whistleblowers. The Assembly provides an international platform for human rights

1. *Assembly debate* on 25 June 2024 (18th sitting) (see Doc. 15993, report of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, rapporteur: Ms Petra Bayr). *Text adopted by the Assembly* on 25 June 2024 (18th sitting).

defenders: its newly created Vigdís Prize for Women's Empowerment, launched in May 2023, will provide a further opportunity to raise awareness about the work of women human rights defenders to empower women in their countries and fields of activity.

7. In the light of these considerations, the Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States to:

7.1. sign, ratify and implement the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (CETS No. 210, Istanbul Convention);

7.2. implement the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders;

7.3. ensure the implementation of the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights related to the situation of all human rights defenders;

7.4. repeal laws, policies and practices that affect women human rights defenders, in all their diversity, and unduly restrict their activities;

7.5. revise criminal codes in order to include discrimination on the ground of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics, taking into account the intersectional dimension, if this is not yet the case;

7.6. investigate and prosecute perpetrators – including members of police forces – of attacks and threats against women human rights defenders, online and offline, including the publication of private information with malicious intent ("doxing") and specifically gendered attacks; and collect gender-disaggregated data on these attacks;

7.7. ensure that criminal proceedings related to gender-specific crimes are victim-friendly and respect victims' rights;

7.8. protect women human rights defenders from acts of intimidation and legal and administrative harassment;

7.9. foster the trust of civil society in public institutions, condemn smear campaigns against women human rights defenders and counter distortion of and misinformation about their work;

7.10. publicly recognise the role and contribution of women human rights defenders, in all their diversity, and guarantee their protection, ensuring a secure and enabling environment in which to carry out their activities;

7.11. provide predictable funding for the work of women human rights defenders, ensure transparency in the allocation of funding and allow them to access funds from international or private sources;

7.12. support the participation of women human rights defenders in legislative processes, in policy and decision making on matters concerning them at an early stage in the planning process, and when it comes to the evaluation and possible adaptations of policies and programmes;

7.13. introduce, if this is not yet the case, assessment of the impact of draft laws on gender equality and anti-discrimination;

7.14. ensure that national human rights action plans include specific provisions on women human rights defenders;

7.15. support programmes to ensure the safety of women human rights defenders at risk, including early warning mechanisms, foresee flexible funding for their activities and facilitate the granting of visas for women human rights defenders at risk;

7.16. raise awareness among diplomatic and consular staff and provide training to them on the protection of human rights defenders;

7.17. recognise the impact that attacks and threats can have on the mental health of human rights defenders and support recovery programmes;

7.18. provide training for police officers, prosecutors and judges on gender equality and on the role, work and legitimacy of women human rights defenders;

7.19. launch awareness-raising campaigns on the roles and contributions of women human rights defenders.

8. The Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States to strengthen equality bodies as important allies of women human rights defenders by securing high standards and sufficient funding.

9. The Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States that are Parties to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court to consider proposing an amendment to the statute in order to include the crime of “gender apartheid”, which is the institutionalisation of gender-based discrimination and exclusion of women and girls from all spheres of society.

10. The Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States which are member States of the European Union to support the inclusion of sexual and reproductive health and rights in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

11. Noting that women human rights defenders working on the protection of sexual and reproductive health and rights have faced numerous challenges and threats in recent years, the Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States to respect and ensure women’s autonomy and decision-making capacity when it comes to reproductive health and rights and, if necessary, to provide clear guidelines to doctors, pharmacists and patients in this regard, and to provide age-appropriate, comprehensive and inclusive sex education.

12. Considering that women human rights defenders often struggle to protect human rights and environmental rights that are infringed by private enterprises, the Assembly invites Council of Europe member States to support the preparation of a binding United Nations treaty on business and human rights in order to hold actors in the private sector accountable.

13. Inclusive feminist foreign, development and peace policies can provide an enabling framework for supporting women human rights defenders. The Assembly therefore invites Council of Europe member States to consider adopting such policies.

14. Considering that culture can be an instrument of change, the Assembly invites its member States to earmark funding dedicated to women artists, in all their diversity, working on the promotion of human rights, women’s rights and the rights of LGBTI persons.

15. The Assembly encourages national parliaments to demonstrate their support for women human rights defenders through practical action such as introducing new policies, including on equal treatment, anti-discrimination, sexual and reproductive health and rights, sexual orientation, gender expression and identity and sex characteristics, empowerment of women and gender-based violence, and by organising parliamentary events with their participation in order to establish and maintain dialogue.