

This submission is an excerpt of the article “The urgency of addressing gender-based violence against women environmental human rights defenders” (Luna, et al., 2021), published in IUCN Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy (CEESP) [Policy Matters 22 Special Issue on Environmental Defenders, Vol. III](#). This article is based on IUCN’s publication [Gender-Based Violence and Environment Linkages: The Violence of Inequality](#) (Castañeda Camey et al., 2020). The text presented herein is a shortened, restructured version.

[Excerpt]

The urgency of addressing gender-based violence against women environmental human rights defenders

Women and men defenders experience violence differently, with women human rights defenders (WHRDs) at a higher risk of violence, including gender-based violence (GBV) in the form of threats and/or acts of rape, kidnapping, torture, intimidation, criminalisation and misogyny ([Barcia, 2017](#); [Front Line Defenders, 2020](#)).

GBV arises from existing normative, discriminatory and exploitative gender inequalities, and is intimately related to how individuals and communities access, use, control and benefit from natural resources ([Castañeda Camey et al., 2020](#)). When there is increased pressure on the environment or competition over scarce resources, GBV becomes amplified and is employed as a means to reinforce sociocultural expectations that perpetuate gender inequality. This includes violently discouraging or halting women from defending their resources, territories and communities ([Ibid.](#)).

As Global Witness reported, while only 10% of murdered victims were women in 2017, they are often subjected to “smear campaigns, threats against their children, and attempts to undermine their credibility; sometimes from within their own communities, where macho cultures might prevent women from taking up positions of leadership” ([Global Witness, 2018](#)).

The overlapping and intersecting layers of discrimination have placed WEHRDs [women environmental human rights defenders] at a distinct disadvantage in their defence of the environment. In the Philippines, community leader Bae Rose Undag-Lumadong, who assumed leadership through long-held rituals in her Higaonon community, faced the double challenge of standing up to extractive projects in defence of her community’s land rights and getting her community to accept her in a position of power. In her role as a woman defender, she often received comments such as “you’re just a woman”, in some cases coming from Higaonon women themselves ([Heroepoetri et al., 2015](#)).

Violence against Indigenous women defenders

GBV experienced by WEHRDs can often be amplified when it intersects with other forms of discrimination, such as those based on race or ethnicity. Indigenous WEHRDs, who are often the vanguard of environmental defence, face disproportionate and intersecting forms of

gender-based and other forms of violence, due to a long history of discrimination associated with racism and socioeconomic and political marginalisation ([Castañeda Comey et al., 2020](#)).

Indigenous peoples, who lack legal recognition and protection of their rights, are rarely consulted in the formation of public policies and rarely participate in decision making related to their lands. The additional layers of discrimination Indigenous women experience based on their gender, both within and outside their communities, places them at greater risk of violence, exploitation, livelihood insecurity and marginalisation when they confront extractive industries ([Wijdekop, 2017](#); [ILO, 2017](#)).

For example, in Guatemala, Indigenous women lack legal recognition and awareness of their rights and endure barriers to public services and participation in decision making, exacerbating their vulnerability to economic and social exclusion, exploitation, marginalisation and GBV in defence of their environment ([Castañeda Comey et al., 2020](#); [Carlsen, 2014](#)). An Indigenous defender from Guatemala explains:

When they threaten me, they say that they will kill me, but before they kill me, they will rape me. They don't say that to my male colleagues. These threats are very specific to [I]ndigenous women. There is also a very strong racism against us. They refer to us as those rebel Indian women that have nothing to do, and they consider us less human. ([Barcia, 2017](#), p. 14)

Indigenous WEHRDs are also frequently criminalised. Luisa Lozano and Karina Montero, Kichwa women from the Saraguro people in Ecuador, working to defend Indigenous land rights, were charged with obstruction of public services and initially sentenced to four years in prison. According to the Urgent Action Fund for Latin America and the Caribbean (UAF-LAC), “[t]hey were violated and discriminated against for being Indigenous women at the moment of their detention” ([UAF-LAC, 2018](#)).

The struggle against GBV linked with extractive industries is all too familiar for Indigenous communities, which have fought against the adverse impacts of colonisation and resource appropriation for centuries ([Barcia, 2017](#)). GBV often sits on top of larger, more complex socioeconomic, cultural, and political circumstances unique to the context in which these industries operate ([Castañeda Comey et al., 2020](#)). Combating power asymmetries within these unique circumstances in order to tackle violence against women and men EHRDs [environmental human rights defenders] – Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike – is a significant challenge, as the circumstances often involve powerful corporate interests that are deeply economically intertwined with national governments.

UAF-LAC found that the majority of attacks against WEHRDs happen during violent forced evacuations where women are physically and sexually assaulted by police or paramilitary groups hired by extractive companies ([Carvajal, 2016](#)). For example, Indigenous Maya-Q'eqchis women were sexually assaulted and raped by police and security guards of the Guatemalan Nickel company during the forced eviction from their ancestral territories ([ibid.](#)).

Civil society organisations: their fundamental role in the documentation of gender-based violence and protection of WEHRDs

Recognising the lack of legal protection and accountability by governments, the work of civil society organisations (CSO) has been paramount in the defence of human rights, including women's rights and the rights to land and to a healthy environment; as well as in the protection of women and men HRDs.

CSOs have been essential in raising awareness (including through global campaigns), establishing methodologies and protocols for addressing violence, and contributing to the development of international and national mechanisms that guarantee safety and protection for women and men defenders. Through the provision of rapid-response grants in particular, CSOs also provide crucial financial support to women and men EHRDs and groups working on the ground. Additionally, they have taken the lead in collecting data and reporting violence, shedding important light on the gender-differentiated violence against WEHRDs.

Prominent WHRDs international organisations and groups such as Just Associates (JASS), Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), and Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (UAF) have contributed to the creation of regional and subregional networks and organisations. [...] including the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development in Asia-Pacific, the Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders Initiative (IMDefensoras) in Central America, and WoMin and DefendDefenders in Africa. Many of these organisations are also members of the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition, which has developed conceptual methodological frameworks, tools and reports to document, prevent and protect WHRDs ([WHRDIC, n.d.](#)).

As an example, IM-Defensoras has developed the Mesoamerican Registry of Attacks against WHRDs, to collect and analyse data on attacks against WHRDs and their organisations in Mesoamerica. The registry includes any gender components of attacks and the types of rights defended, including land, territory and environmental rights ([IM-Defensoras, 2013](#)). The initiative documented 609 aggressions against W[E]HRDs between 2015 and 2016 in Mexico and Central America ([Osorio et al., 2016](#)). Similarly, UAF-LAC has collaborated with fourteen international and national organisations to document, analyse and present information to key stakeholders on specific attacks against WEHRDs across the region, including the differentiated impacts of such attacks and patterns of criminalisation used to silence their voices ([UAF-LAC, 2018](#)).

Women's voices and experiences provide unique knowledge and information and contribute to a better understanding of the gender-differentiated risks they are exposed to and provide a knowledge base to support demands and recommendations to the various actors involved, namely the state, businesses and human rights international organisations.

Conclusion

The various forms of violence inflicted on women and men EHRDs and the violation of their rights not only affect the lives of the defenders and their communities, but have larger implications for sustainable development and the conservation of global biodiversity. EHRDs

fight for a more sustainable and equitable future, an objective shared by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Guaranteeing their protection involves recognising and understanding the gendered and varying forms of violence EHRDs experience, unique to the context in which they defend their lands, environment and resources.

Adequate gender-responsive protections and policies for EHRDs are therefore essential for the preservation of ecosystems and sustainable use of natural resources. With greater legal protection from violence, including GBV, more financial resources can be garnered to support and protect EHRDs, and ultimately the preservation of vital natural resources. More legally binding agreements can also provide leverage in bringing legal action against state and non-state actors who do not comply, and simultaneously provide an easy-to-follow accountability mechanism for environmental programmes ([Castañeda Camey et al., 2020](#)).

In this vein, progress has been made internationally in recognising the need to support and protect EHRDs, including through the legally-binding Escazú Agreement in 2018, the revised draft of the UN Binding Treaty, and the landmark resolution from the UNHRC in 2019, which recognised the contribution of EHRDs to sustainable development and highlighted GBV specifically as a mounting concern. These steps are essential toward influencing and advancing the development of international legal mechanisms for the protection of EHRDs with a rights-based and gender-responsive approach. Building on the Escazú Agreement and other international resolutions and provisions will be essential as other regions and countries work to advance legal protections for EHRDs, with greater attention to gender considerations and GBV faced by WEHRDs ([Ibid.](#)).

Nevertheless, gender-responsive action must be taken not solely within international and national policies, but in the private sector and civil society. To end impunity for large corporations, and the governments that back them, power asymmetries between those with power, i.e. transnational companies and governments, and those with little agency, i.e. defenders, need to be dismantled through more rigorous legal protection. Gender-responsive rights-based policies and safeguards need to be implemented and enforced by the private sector to prevent human rights violations and GBV and provide appropriate protection and redress mechanisms for EHRDs.

Documentation can bring about changes in laws and legal mechanisms to prevent human rights violations ([WHRD-IC, 2015](#)). CSOs have been essential in the documentation of attacks against women and men EHRDs, and donors and international organisations can scale up support to and recognition of these efforts. Data collection and documentation from a gender perspective is key to better understand gender-differentiated risks and to adopt gender-responsive legislation ([Ibid.](#)). The dimensions of ethnicity, class, location, age, sexual orientation, among others, also need to be taken into account to understand the complexity of the situation faced by women and men defenders ([Osorio et al., 2016](#)). CSOs invaluable work should continue with properly designed and implemented interventions that fully integrate gender and GBV considerations to protect and support the work of EHRDs ([Ibid.](#)).

Key recommendations

- Strengthen and leverage policy frameworks and legally binding agreements in order to:
 - promote and support WEHRDs' work, acknowledging their gender-differentiated contribution to sustainable development and conservation;
 - hold state and non-state actors accountable for human rights violations and crimes against them; and
 - acquire more gender-responsive financial resources to support their efforts;
- Conduct and prioritise gender-responsive research that examines the systemic and root causes behind the violence experienced by men and women EHRDs and systematically collects data disaggregated by sex, gender, ethnicity, class, location, age, sexual orientation, among other variables;
- Design and implement gender-responsive tools and interventions to protect EHRDs; and
- Empower women and men EHRDs and CSOs by supporting them to advocate for increased legal protection to help combat a culture of impunity for corporate actors and governments and criminalisation of defenders, bearing in mind gender-differentiated violence and the need for gender-responsive measures.

Guaranteeing the gender-responsive protection of all EHRDs is essential in the fight to protect the environment and human rights. It is imperative for the achievement of the SDGs, the future health of the planet, and the safety of communities and individuals, that EHRDs are supported as they stand up and fight for a more sustainable, prosperous and equitable future.