

## **WHRD IC: Commitment to challenge impunity**

### **Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition Report, 2009**

"[We]intend to begin a process of mobilization and reflection among key players in the human rights arena on matters affecting women human rights defenders, and to support the many and varied initiatives designed to deepen the understanding of human rights and push for universal application of human rights principles, especially in the current global context". (*Contextualizing the International Campaign on Women Human Rights Defenders, International Consultation on Women Human Rights Defenders Resource Book, 2005:16*)

In spite of a lack of funds due to difficulties in fund-raising in the current climate of the financial crisis, the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition (WHRD IC) forged ahead in 2009 to define and begin implementing its priority activities. These efforts were carried out largely through sheer commitment of the members who have contributed resources – funds, expertise, contacts, staff time, and facilities – to allow the Coalition to continue its work.

Much of the Coalition's advocacy, internally (influencing each other) and externally (lobbying in different fora) has borne fruit. Concretely, the Coalition has influenced its members, specifically human rights organizations to incorporate a sharpened focus on women human rights defenders in their programmes. At the international level, lobbying Special Rapporteurs resulted in an increase in the number of joint communications and reporting on women human rights defenders' concerns. At the national level, one of the outcomes of its outreach is the adoption of the women human rights defenders framework by other organisations supported by the Coalition and the creation of networks on women human rights defenders in other countries. The Coalition was also able to draw increased attention to defenders' issues at various levels and facilitate greater access to resources specifically to support women human rights defenders at risk. It also expanded its membership, attesting to its growing influence in the circle of women's rights, human rights and sexual rights movements.

#### **I. Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders**

Reviewing the urgent appeals responded to by Coalition members for 2008 – 2009, and communications and reports by the UN Special Rapporteurs and other civil society organizations, confirms the continuing need to prioritise protection and support for women human rights defenders. Over the last two years, urgent appeals were circulated among members of the Coalition at an average of at least one per week. For 2008, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders acted on about 121 communications pertaining to women human rights defenders, or an average of at least two cases per week.

The Coalition's 2008 survey of women human rights defenders showed that vulnerabilities of defenders are closely related to the focus of their activism. Attacks against women's organizations and LGBTI groups are directly linked to their specific advocacy on women's rights or sexual rights, which are perceived as transgressions in the increasingly conservative contexts where they operate. For example, a branch office of Shirkah Gah, a Pakistani women's NGO that has long focused on issues of violence against women and a network member of WLUML, came under successive attacks from alleged fundamentalist perpetrators in Peshawar. Similarly, in May 2008 unidentified gunmen open fired on an organisation combating violence against women in Iraq. In Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia, legal impediments and warrantless searches have obstructed the operations of LGBTI groups.

The more repressive the socio-political environment, the greater the risks for women human rights defenders in general. The recently established military regimes in Fiji and Honduras account for the increased threats against defenders in these countries. Women human rights defenders working in situations of armed conflict also continue to face heightened vulnerabilities. They are prone to abuses from various factions of the conflict, not just from government forces. As multiple cases from China and Iran illustrate, there are more violations against activists and their families in countries where human rights and fundamental freedoms are challenged.

An alarming trend is the increasing prominence of allegations of abuses committed by non-state actors, as right-wing politics gain ground and more conservative norms are arbitrarily imposed on women in local communities. Many of the identified perpetrators are fundamentalist elements that have committed multiple and vicious violations, but in several instances the alleged attackers were members of the family or community. Since the WHRD international campaign began in 2005, women human rights defenders have identified the debilitating impacts of suffering violations at the hands of their own families and communities, justified on the basis of tradition and religion.

Impunity persists. Many of the cases cited in the communications from Special Rapporteurs were continuing violations, and the rate of responses from the governments remain low. In a span of three months from August – October 2009, there have been three international petitions concerning the death and harassment of women human rights defenders working in human rights organizations in the Chechen Republic. This includes the killing of Natalya Estemirova, one of the participants in the 2005 International Consultation on Women Human Rights Defenders. Moreover, abuses committed by non-state actors have not been considered as serious forms of human rights violations. Available accountability mechanisms under international human rights law are inadequate to address the complexities of the levels of responsibilities of these different types of perpetrators.

Documenting violations against women human rights defenders remains a challenge. In the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders report released in early 2009 there were only three cases that explicitly referred to “women human rights defenders”. However, these cases from Nepal, Fiji and Iran reflected the successful and strategic use of the women human rights defenders’ framework by networks and groups associated with the Coalition. Overall, there has also been an increase in reports of LGBTI cases. However, in many of the urgent appeals or communications, the gender dimensions are seldom reported and in some cases, the sex or gender identity of the victims is not included. This makes it difficult to ascertain if these cases involve women human rights defenders. Identification of violations has also centred on infringement of civil and political rights, glossing over gender-specific offences or those more insidious abuse committed by non-state perpetrators. These gaps in documenting violations particular to women human rights defenders or to the nature of their work have to be addressed to break impunity.

## **II. Update on Coalition Activities**

A Coordinator continues to coordinate the activities of the and she has been hosted by the Center for Women’s Global Leadership (CWGL), from February - July 2009 then from October 2009 until May 2010. CWGL also hosted an Executive Committee meeting of the Coalition on 26 June 2009, discussing the resource development plan and fundraising alternatives for the Coalition. Pending applications for membership were also reviewed at the meeting. To date, International Women’s Rights Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAP-AP), the Center for Reproductive Rights (CRR), and the Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL) have joined as new members. A new communications officer, Tara Chetty, will join the Coalition as a volunteer from January - April 2010 to implement the communication plan and manage the redevelopment of the website.

Also in collaboration with CWGL, the Coalition organized a *Strategic Conversation: Addressing the Gaps in the Defence of Women Human Rights Defenders*, held from 27 - 30 June 2009, following the Executive Committee meeting. The conversation explored in more depth the thematic pillars of the 2005 Women Human Rights Defenders International Campaign and focused on the following topics: Families, communities, and culture - challenges facing women human rights defenders; direct accountability of religious fundamentalist political forces; and sexuality-baiting - the use of sexuality to attack women’s organising. The central outcome of the meeting was identifying the following priority areas of work for the Coalition (*c.f. Priority List of Activities, 2009 – 2011*):

1. **Monitoring Mechanism for Urgent Appeals.** As many of the members respond to urgent appeals, and on several occasions issue joint responses, one of the recommendations from the Strategic Conversation was for the Coalition to facilitate the development of a system for a comprehensive, systematic response to urgent appeals that meet the needs of women human rights defenders at risk. The Coalition

agreed to undertake a review to create a simple mechanism to track cases, evaluate responses and consolidate information on existing systems of support for women human rights defenders at risk. The review process is also expected to facilitate agreement on key principles and measures to improve the quality of assistance and coordination of responses among the members.

During the last quarter of 2009, a working group was established and Immaculada Barcia was contracted by the Association of Women in Development (AWID) as lead researcher to produce the following: 1) Mapping and assessment of the existing response-models of Coalition members; 2) Recommendations of key principles and concrete measures to improve the quality of assistance and coordination of responses by members of the Coalition; 3) A systemization of resources and tools for women human rights defenders at risk for wide dissemination in key languages on the Coalition website and other links.

2. **Production of Documentation Manual.** This is a follow up to operationalising the typology of violations developed in *Claiming Justice, Claiming Rights: A Guidebook on Women Human Rights Defenders (2007)*. It is intended to enhance the capacity of organizations to document and report violations specific to women human rights using feminist methodologies and strategically framed to challenge impunity. Not a manual for training, this is a set of guidelines to assist organisations in conceptualising and implementing documentation initiatives for different purposes.

With the International Service for Human Rights (ISHR) and IWRAW-AP taking the lead, an expert group consultation took place in Amman, Jordan on 9 August 2009, which produced the outline and work plan for the production of the guide. A team of writers and a working group was set up following the meeting in Jordan and a first draft is expected by May 2010. The publication will be completed by November 2010.

3. **Women Human Rights Defenders Global Report.** Following the completion of a survey in 2008, the Coalition continued discussions on the development of a more comprehensive global report on the situation of women human rights defenders. In a consultation with the Coalition on 19 June 2009, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, Margaret Sekaggya, signified her interest in focusing on women human rights defenders one of the annual reports she will deliver to the UN Human Rights Council before her term ends in 2011. This gave the Coalition added impetus to pursue the production of this report.

The Global Report is not planned as a comprehensive study, but an indicative report on the situation of women human rights defenders for the period 2006 – 2010 (since there has been little focus on women human rights defenders prior to the campaign in 2005). It is expected to generate a baseline assessment documenting the general situation of women human rights defenders to inform the policy advocacy initiatives of

the Coalition. It will also pave the way for establishing a methodology and system of producing this report periodically (e.g., every four or five years). The concept note was discussed and a working group was formed in late 2009. Work on the report is expected to begin mid-2010 with Isis Women's Cross Cultural Exchange (Isis-WICCE) taking the lead.

4. **Advocacy on 'Sustaining Activism' with donors.** To develop more comprehensive, multi-faceted and long-term support for women human rights defenders, the Coalition has explored engaging with donors to discuss new and tested approaches to sustain women human rights defenders, their organisations and movements. The intent is to increase resources as well as women human rights defenders' access to existing and new forms of support not only in the immediate, but in the long term.

On 10 March 2009 the Coalition organised a meeting with donors on sustaining the activism of women human rights defenders. Several funders expressed interest and discussions are ongoing with: The Fund for Global Human Rights, Global Fund for Women, Cordaid and American Jewish World Service (AJWS). From 19 – 20 June 2009, Coalition member, Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (UAF), also organised a *Sustainability and Integrated Security Workshop* for members of the Coalition. A consultation between the Coalition and like-minded donors is planned for the first quarter of 2010 to translate these initiatives into concrete strategies for implementation.

5. **Advocacy at the UN and other fora.** The Coalition has been successful in its efforts to lobby UN Special Rapporteurs to address the concerns of women human rights defenders. The 2009 Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Countering Terrorism to the General Assembly centred on gender and elaborated on the links between terrorism, counterterrorism and women human rights defenders. There has been an increase also in the number of joint communications between the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders and other Special Rapporteurs on cases involving women and other defenders of human rights. With the appointment of one of the members of WLUML as Independent Expert on Cultural Rights, the Coalition is poised to engage in strategic lobbying at the UN on issues related to culture and religious fundamentalisms as suggested during the Strategic Conversation. Previous efforts by members to stop the UN Human Rights Council Resolution on traditional values were unsuccessful.

The Coalition has continued to raise public awareness on women human rights defenders, organising events in various fora such as the annual session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. It delivered joint interventions before the UN Human Rights Council and supported national lobbying initiatives such as the campaign against the criminalization of homosexuality that affect LGBTI defenders in Uganda; urgent appeals concerning the systematic arrests of members of the One

Million Signatures Campaign in Iran; and other numerous requests for joint endorsements of urgent appeals from women human rights defenders at risk in different countries.

One of the concrete impacts of the Coalition in its outreach is the adoption of the women human rights defenders framework by other organisations supported by the Coalition and the creation of networks on women human rights defenders at the national level: Urgent appeals from the One Million Signatures campaign sent to various fora has consistently reflected a women human rights defenders' framework; Komnas Perempuan in Indonesia expanded its conceptualisation of victim-survivors of violence against women to include women human rights defenders, particularly those stigmatized for the activism against the State; and in Nepal networks of women human rights defenders were set up in 65 districts.

### **III. Recommendations for Action**

Aside from concentrating on implementing the activities prioritised above, the Coalition should consider further action in the following areas:

#### **Advocacy**

- lobby before treaty bodies, which are less politicised, and look into the gender integration efforts at the Human Rights Council that could also foster strategic collaborations between different UN mechanisms;
- include 'terrorism and counterterrorism' and militarism in its advocacy themes;

#### **Outreach**

- Identify and support strategic initiatives to apply the women human rights defenders' framework at national and regional levels; and
- begin to establish linkages with other movements and constituencies such as the peace movement, alternative media and other philanthropic groups;

#### **Monitoring**

- Look out for the particular targeting of organisations advocating for basic women's rights or sexual rights in increasingly conservative environment;
- raise awareness on the growing abuses committed by non-state actors such as fundamentalist groups, and family and community members.

Much remains to be done, but the Coalition has proven its capacity and commitment to take on the persistent and new challenges confronting women human rights defenders. -

**Mary Jane N. Real, 12 January 2009.**