



# DEFENDING WOMEN – DEFENDING RIGHTS

## WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS’ PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES



In cooperation with  
Haus der Europäischen Union

**AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL**



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PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL EXPERTS’ SEMINAR  
IN COOPERATION WITH HAUS DER  
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**DEFENDING WOMEN  
DEFENDING RIGHTS**  
WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS  
PROTECTION AND CHALLENGES  
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INTERNATIONAL**



Haus der Europäischen Union · W

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# SUMMARY

On 29 August 2018 – a day before the informal “Gymnich” meeting of EU foreign affairs ministers in Vienna, Amnesty International Austria hosted a panel discussion entitled “**Defending Women – Defending Rights: Women Human Rights Defenders’ Perspectives and Challenges**”.

2018 marked a special anniversary year for human rights defenders: the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Human Rights Defenders Declaration and the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the revised EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders.

Yet today, looking at current developments across the world, space for civil society is shrinking. Human rights defenders are working under increasingly difficult conditions and face unprecedented levels of persecution, intimidation and violence.

In addition to the threats and attacks human rights defenders around the world face on a daily basis, women human rights defenders (WHRDs) face gender specific threats and violence. WHRDs are both women who defend the human rights of all and individuals of all genders who defend the rights of women. They experience multi-faceted abuse and are subject to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, including sexual violence, threats, harassment and defamation campaigns based on their gender.

The seminar brought together WHRDs from El Salvador, Indonesia, Kenya, Austria, Syria and Russia to discuss with civil society, government and EU officials those current challenges with the aim to demand greater protection and support for their work amid increasing attacks on fellow activists.

The **objectives** were to

- give visibility to WHRDs during Austria’s EU presidency, acknowledging the work they do and highlighting the threats and challenges they face
- discuss current struggles they face carrying out their work
- exchange successful and challenging stories on the protection of WHRDs
- explore ways in which the EU and its member states can promote a safe and enabling environment for WHRDs and highlight why it is important to do so

**Participants:**

- Opening Remarks: Georg Pfeifer, Head of Liaison Office of the EP in Austria; Annemarie Schlack, Amnesty Austria Section Director
- Introductory Notes: Karin Kneissl, Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs, Austria; Marty Huber, Queer Base, Austria
- Panellists: Kania Mamoto, Asia Justice and Rights, Indonesia; Maria Teresa Rivera, Sexual and reproductive rights activist, El Salvador; Wangui Kimari, Mathare Social Justice Centre, Kenya; Marianne Schulze, Human Rights Consultant; Evdokia Romanova, Youth coalition, sexual and reproductive rights activist, Russia; Majdoleen Hassan, Human Rights Lawyer, Syria; Mara Marinaki, EU/ EEAS Principal Advisor on Gender and on UNSCR 1325

**Audience:**

EU and EU member states’ diplomats. Representatives from the embassies of Spain, Finland, Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, Slovenia, Poland, Luxembourg, as well as the Swiss embassy, Austrian government representatives and representatives of the European Parliament, European External Action Service and the European Commission. Among the audience there were also numerous representatives of notable Austrian women’s rights and other civil society organisations.

# FOREWORD

## **Annemarie Schlack**

Amnesty International Austria Section Director



On the eve of the EU informal Foreign Affairs Council – the Gymnich meeting in Vienna, Amnesty International together with our cooperation partner “Haus der Europäischen Union” brings together Women Human Rights Defenders from very different regions of the world.

The passionate commitment of Brave women around the world inspires us: They stand for freedom, justice and solidarity, taking high risks. Working with and for Defenders has always been a key priority for Amnesty International and is a corner stone of our human rights work.

### **Why are we having this event today?**

Tomorrow the European Union’s Ministers of Foreign Affairs will convene at the Hofburg. And we would like for them to hear the voices of Human Rights Defenders.

We live in an age where the space for civil society is shrinking. This affects people in all countries, outside the European Union as well as within.

Human Rights Defenders are being targeted and attacked instead of supported and protected as stipulated in the Human Rights Defenders Declaration. Governments, armed groups, companies and other powerful entities and communities who

believe their interests are threatened by human rights are using a range of tactics and tools to silence and repress Human Rights Defenders.

### **Why do we focus on Women Human Rights Defenders?**

Women Human Rights Defenders face even more discrimination and attacks than other Human Rights Defenders because of their gender and because they often work on issues related to continuously embattled women’s rights and sexuality. They must defend themselves against smear campaigns, gender-specific hostility and sexual violence.

By bringing us all together, defenders, Human Rights experts, diplomats, government stakeholders and civil society we would like to give visibility to Women Human Rights Defenders, acknowledging the crucial work they do, and highlighting the threats and challenges they face.

We will hear their stories about current struggles they face carrying out their work.

We will exchange successful and challenging stories on the protection of Women Human Rights Defenders. And we will explore ways in which the EU and its member states can promote a safe and

enabling environment for Women Human Rights Defenders.

I thank you all for spending your time with us this afternoon, for speaking out, discussing together and listening to each other. It is so important for everybody that we now stand with the women who demand freedom and dignity for all.

In this respect, I would also like to reiterate our message – loud and clear:

We would like that **EU Foreign Ministers** regularly discuss the situation of Human Rights Defenders, and WHRDs in particular in their Foreign Affairs Council Meetings, to ensure their protection in real life, not just on paper.

- EU Foreign Ministers must recognize, support and protect brave women who fight injustice.
- In foreign policy, politicians and ambassadors must recognize the valuable achievements of human rights defenders and take a visible stance of support.

- Politicians and ambassadors should engage at every opportunity in discussions on HRDs in their foreign policy exchanges and legitimize the human rights issues HRDs raise.
- We therefore also call also on the Austrian government, as Austria is holding the EU Presidency, to put the situation of Human Rights Defenders - especially of Women Human Rights Defenders - on the EU's foreign policy agenda.

Also, we call on policy makers to put in place protection mechanisms in real life, not only on paper.

And finally, we call on the public to stand, together with Amnesty International, side by side with these brave women who are taking great risks to ensure that human rights are enjoyed by all and that women's rights are human rights.

We all can be Women Human Rights Defenders!



# DEFENDING WOMEN – DEFENDING RIGHTS

## WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS’ PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

The event was officially opened by the two hosts, Georg Pfeifer, Head of the Liaison Office of the European Parliament in Austria, and Annemarie Schlack, Director of Amnesty International Austria. Following the opening remarks, the audience was introduced to the subject matter of Wom-

en Human Rights Defenders in the form of two introductory notes, with the first speech given by the Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs of Austria, Karin Kneissl, and the second one by Marty Huber, co-founder of the NGO “Queer Base” (Vienna).



Georg Pfeifer, Head of the Liaison Office of the European Parliament in Austria

## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

### Karin Kneissl

Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs, Austria

In her opening remarks, Minister Karin Kneissl underlined that the protection of WHRDs is an important matter for Austria. Along with other governments, Austria declared in the 2030 agenda their will to support equality between women and men. The Minister stated, however, that the progress for women and girls remains unacceptably slow.

Minister Kneissl highlighted the courage of WHRDs, who have become symbols for the spirit of human rights, and the problems they face in everyday life. She stressed that WHRDs are very often endangered not only because they are exposed to sexual abuse and rape, but because they also challenge traditional notions of gender and society, which can lead to attacks against them or their families, undermining the ability to exercise their right to live free from violence.

Minister Kneissl said she follows with great concern the case of several WHRDs who were sentenced to many years in prison merely for removing their headscarf or for advocating human rights, including women's rights. She assured that the MFA is making every possible effort to support these courageous women, making full use of all diplomatic means.

The Minister criticised that there are no specific mechanisms in place to protect WHRDs, or, where they do exist, they are often hampered by

a lack of implementation or gender-sensitivity. However, fighting impunity is essential for the protection and security of WHRDs. Therefore the protection of WHRDs is a matter of particular concern for Austria, keeping in mind that public recognition, visibility and attention is key and can help to support the work of defenders.

Minister Kneissl highlighted that female genital mutilation (FGM), which also occurs in communities within Austria, is a topic very close to her heart. There are plans now to enhance the Ministry's budget for combatting FGM, including medical assistance for victims of FGM.

The Minister recapitulated that support for WHRDs includes more than just the one objective to make courageous women's lives free from prosecution. Moreover, "we must give them the certainty that their work will bring about change".

Minister Kneissl thanked Amnesty International for organising the discussion and inviting such courageous WHRD to Austria.

The Minister concluded that she misses "the courage in many decision-making forums", which makes her impatient, "because we are just repeating what we have already said. We need to be more courageous in our policies".

## INTRODUCTORY SPEECH

### Marty Huber

co-founder of the organisation  
Queer Base (Vienna)



## WHEN DO WE RISE?

Honestly, I was rather surprised when I was asked to hold the keynote speech for this event. I was wondering, when did I become a human rights defender who would be considered to have something worth to say to a room full of female human rights defenders from all over the world. My place should be in the audience and I should listen to you. Which I will do with great admiration after I finish.

For many years I have considered myself a community organiser caring for a safer space for queers, lesbian, gay, bisexual, inter and trans people. Being a genderqueer lesbian myself I thought this would be the right and necessary thing to do. To nurture a place where people could be and become the person they truly are.

I think that I was not born this way and speaking with Simone de Beauvoir's words, I was becoming - I became - someone who is longing for social justice and solidarity. Solidarity as a place where strangers are kind to each other.

I had to learn and unlearn a lot, I had to stand up for myself and for others. So my question for today and for the days after tomorrow is: What makes us

rise? What makes us stand up against powers that seem immensely bigger and stronger than us? As feminists we have known for a long time that the personal is political, and since my engagement in LGBTIQ community work and more so since we founded Queer Base to welcome and support queer refugees, I have listened to many stories of people who rose up from misery, torture, and out of psychiatric wards, on the quest for their very own rights, to live safely as a member of a sexual minority. Some of these stories are hard to bear, especially those of lesbians, trans women and feminised gay men, because their stories are like their bodies, they are precarious. Like a Cameroonian lesbian who reached out to us to speak about the traumatic events that made her leave the city where she used to study. After having been in Austria for 18 months, I happened to be the first person she talked to. For 18 months in a so-called safe country she did not feel welcome enough to come forward.

I would very briefly like to share one story of a lesbian, who, after her family found out that she was with another woman, mistreated and tortured her, her Christian community tried to cure her with more torture, and her brother tried to kill her.

She even tried to kill herself. But no, she stood up for herself, she sold all the little valuables she had and made her way out of the country that did not want her existence. She ran out of money on the way and got stuck in Libya. She went through hell, literally. When she made it into one of these wobbly rubber boats, she was just “whatever, whatever will be will be. No matter if I die in the sea, death is better than this”.

In the many hours of counselling, we just sat in silence because words failed us. No tears, just silence.

“So, it is not that mourning is the goal of politics, but that without the capacity to mourn, we lose that keener sense of life we need in order to oppose violence”, said Judith Butler in her book *Precarious Life – The Power of Mourning And Violence*<sup>1</sup>.

Sometimes even now it is hard to compile the emotions I have, considering these and many other stories I have listened to. I feel shame, anger and sadness. I know that the rapes, the enslavement, torture during the flight are not part of the asylum procedure. No asylum officer will listen to it. But still I wonder how often we have to break women in need before they make it behind the frontlines of fortress Europe. I know that there is an Austrian embassy in the town where this now acknowledged lesbian refugee used to live and could have applied for asylum if there were safe passages. Ok. She made it here, she got asylum. At last. She became her own Human Rights Defender. And she is a proud member of Queer Base.

It is not an easy coming of age. LGBTIQ refugees are often full of shame, full of stigma and self-hatred, they not only lose their countries of origin, but also their immediate families, their communities, churches. Their lives seem to be worthless, a burden to the closest family and friends. Very often, the stories of lesbians, trans women and

non-binary people are underreported. Their lives and their sexualities are not taken seriously, beatings are normalised, so is forced marriage and corrective rape. We might have heard of the abductions of gay men in Chechnya, how they get tortured, blackmailed and finally killed. But what have you heard of Chechen lesbian Muslim women and how dangerous it is for them to flee the North Caucasus region? And still these lesbians rise up and become fighters for their rights to live as whole human beings. To reach out for a place of safety and security.

One of the main reasons why we founded Queer Base was that the flight for LGBTIQ refugees does not end after their arrival in Austria. Refugees who had to flee their countries because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity are not safe in regular camps. They still have to hide, cannot talk about their reasons of flight, have to pass in a wrong gender, are mobbed, molested and threatened again here in Austria. For many, the interview at the asylum office is the first chance to talk to somebody about their reasons. For many, it means that this is their first time to speak up in a foreign country in front of an interpreter who very often comes from their country of origin and to talk about their sexuality and their experience of persecution. They need to make their before muted voices heard.

But we as activists and supporters shall not fall into the trap of imaging these women as the subaltern that cannot speak. Like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak pointed out in an interview, being asked about her essay “Can the Subaltern speak”<sup>2</sup> and how we should listen to muted voices, she made very clear what the essential problem is:

„[t]here is no infrastructure for the subaltern to complete their speech act [...] so it's not a question of someone trying literally to listen to muted voices that's a metaphorical description of building infrastructure so that the citizen who is

1 Butler, Judith (2004): *Precarious Life – The Power of Mourning And Violence*. New York

2 Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (2008): *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Postkolonialität und subalterne Artikulation. Wien



cut off by the structure of the state can actually access them”<sup>3</sup>.

So, it is not about speaking for them, but about building infrastructures so they can access their basic human rights, so they can fulfil their speech act and become Woman Human Rights Defenders. Building these infrastructures is not from top down but is directed by the very needs of the people we are supporting, it is full of empathy yes, but without paternalism. We have to find the knowledge in all of us, and the courage to stand up and to speak truth to power together.

Mobilise and organise, do what is dear to your heart, if it is Grannies against the Right or the 2018 Women’s Referendum.

In many European countries, we are facing a neoconservative backlash, spaces for women are shrinking, reproductive rights are questioned, feminist and migrant initiatives are being financially drained, gender studies are being shut down. Refugees are illegalised and criminalised and even though Austria signed the Geneva Conventions it seems now official policy that no refugee should make it here and claim their right to apply for asylum. We need strong alliances, we need to stand up in solidarity with others and for our own dignity because women’s rights are human rights, are lesbian and trans women’s rights, are sex workers’ rights, are the right to apply for asylum.

When we rise together, another world will be possible and to close with Arundhati Roy “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing”<sup>4</sup>.

3 Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (2012): Interview on the occasion of the Kyoto Prize ceremony; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8iPj6qka3o>

4 Roy, Arundhati: Confronting Empire (2003): Talk at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2003 <https://ratical.org/ratville/CAH/AR012703.html>

## PANEL 1

# SPECIFIC CONTEXTS AND OBSTACLES FACED BY WHRDs

(Moderation: Guadalupe Marengo, Amnesty International/International Secretariat)

The first panel focused on the specific contexts WHRDs work in and the obstacles and threats they face. The panellists talked about their different fields of work and individual experiences. They pointed out the specific obstacles WHRDs might face because of who they are and what they do: i.e. gender-based violence, working within a patriarchal system, intersecting forms of discrimination, smear campaigns and stigmatisation, invisibility in society/movements and collectives, and lack of resources. The panel was moderat-

ed by Guadalupe Marengo (Head of the Global Human Rights Defenders Programme/Amnesty International/International Secretariat, London).

- María Teresa Rivera, sexual and reproductive rights campaigner, El Salvador/Sweden
- *Klementyna Suchanow, Women on Strike Movement, Poland (unable to attend)*
- Kania Mamonto, Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR), Indonesia
- Wangui Kimari, Mathare Social Justice Centre (MSJC), Kenya



f.l.t.r. Wangui Kimari, Kania Mamonto, María Teresa Rivera, Guadalupe Marengo



**Kania Mamonto**, from the organisation Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR), explained that the priority of her organisation, which is involved in documenting human rights violations in Indonesia, was to turn victims into survivors and activists. She outlined the many gross human rights abuses in her country, Indonesia, and emphasised the importance of investigating the truth, as in Indonesia the truth is not always well known. With AJAR Kania Mamonto conducts a region wide project called “Unlearning impunity” for survivors and relatives of victims of the 1965/66 massacres. The project should enable people to heal by creating networks to support each other. Mrs. Mamonto told about a traumatizing experience when her

group was attacked during a gathering by violent groups who prevented them from leaving the building for several hours. She said that although she feels real fear as a WHRD investigating the truth, she will continue her work, as she is driven by memories of the survivors and their struggles. “Despite the violence,” she said, “I cannot stop. Nothing can stop me”.

***“I DON’T KNOW WHAT IS MY ENEMY.  
IS IT JUST MY FEAR? OR IS IT REAL?”***

Kania Mamonto about her trauma after an attack.



***“WE ARE WOMEN. WE ARE COURAGEOUS, WE ARE STRONG. WE ARE FIGHTERS. WE CAN’T BE SILENCED. WOMEN HAVE A RIGHT TO THEIR OWN BODIES.”***

María Teresa Rivera

**María Teresa Rivera**, a sexual and reproductive rights activist from El Salvador, said she wants to spread the awareness that sexual and reproductive rights are indeed rights. Her aim is to make the women of her country, El Salvador, become aware of the existence of these rights. Not knowing your rights as a woman also means that society accepts and tolerates human rights violations against women in El Salvador. Mrs Rivera explained the implications of the total ban on abortion in El Salvador and the immense suffering it causes for women. Dozens of women who allegedly had an abortion or a miscarriage are criminalised and sentenced to long prison terms. María Teresa Rivera told her own story – she was sentenced to 40 years for aggravated homicide after she suffered a miscarriage. After four and a half years in prison, a judge finally dismissed the charges against her and she was eventually released in 2016. She could not see her then 10-year-old son during all those years behind

bars. During her time in prison, she connected with other women in a similar situation (“Las 17 y Más”). Since her release, she tries to make her own story, and those of others, known internationally. She also highlighted the problem of women across the world who are imprisoned for having had an illegal abortion. She identified the discrimination that she herself faced in not being able to find work after her imprisonment. Further threatened by a reopening of her case, María Teresa finally fled to Sweden with her son, where she lives in exile now. All of her life, Mrs Rivera pointed out, she suffered from human rights violations, and the state never protected her. At the age of eight, she was raped, but the perpetrator was never brought to justice. Speaking up, uniting and not staying silent is crucial for María Teresa Rivera. She emphasised the strength that she and women like her feel. “We are fighters,” she said – fighters against the “chauvinistic society treading on us”.



f.l.t.r. Wangui Kimari, Kania Mamonto, Guadalupe Marengo

**Wangui Kimari**, of the Mathare Social Justice Centre (MSJC) in Kenya, told about her community work in the second largest poor settlement in Kenya, Mathare. Her organisation— in addition to many other projects – investigates and documents police violence and extra-judicial killings in her community. The Mathare Social Justice Centre issued a report in 2017, *“Who is next? A Participatory Action Research Report Against the Normalization of Extrajudicial Executions in Mathare”*, researching and documenting 50 cases of extrajudicial killings in Mathare and 803 in the whole country between 2013 – 2016. According to MSJC this is only a fraction of all extrajudicial killings in Mathare and in Kenya broadly. Mrs Kimari highlighted that only a short time ago there was no discussion on that topic, and that such killings by police forces had become “normalised” in Kenyan discourse. The police either denies the killings or justifies them under the pretext of fighting criminals. Those who stand up and demand justice are mostly affected – especially when coming from poor and marginalised areas. Wangui Kimari expressed her gratitude that it

has somehow become more common to address these human rights violations now. Making it public, documenting and researching police violence, building alliances and bringing cases to court to fight impunity is driving her “fight for dignity, justice and solidarity.”

The panel then considered the question of how to bring about societal change in countries where human rights abuses are rife. Human rights abuses across the world were discussed, i.e. in Rwanda, in countries where female genital mutilation is still the norm, and in countries, particularly across Latin America, where abortion is illegal. The problem of double standards in many countries was highlighted: in countries such as El Salvador, i.e., it is accepted as normal for a woman to be violated and killed by the state, yet those human rights abuses are happening inside the very state that has signed all possible international conventions. The international community is satisfied with the fact that the country has signed up to human rights conventions and the offending state is allowed to act with impunity.

Wangui Kimari cited some examples of hope: in her experience it was possible after some time for those who had been on the attacking side to join with WHRDs in helping to rebuild and change attitudes. She observed that changes such as these can be brought about by engaging locally on the ground: by conducting community research, by organising community discussions, especially in poor urban settlements, in order to change attitudes at the grass roots level. Kania Mamonto also mentioned that the setting up and support of smaller justice centres (justice centre working groups) had in her experience been helpful in changing attitudes about sexual violence. Building dialogue and alliances among civil society institutions and networks to support each other is a key element.

The discussions ended with the following recommendations:

- Wangui Kimari recommended that the EU rethink its policy of supporting police reforms

in Kenya since the early 2000's, for while this policy has been in place nothing has changed and the killings continue. She suggested that the EU listen more to the voices of Kenyan WHRDs on the ground and that, when EU representatives meet with Kenyan ministers, they make reference to the specifics of the work that WHRDs in Mathare and other places are doing.

- In relation to Indonesia, Kania Mamonto recommended that the EU encourage the Indonesian government not to put pressure on WHRDs and to prioritise human rights as WHRDs are vulnerable not only to physical but also to psychological attacks.
- María Teresa Rivera said that women in El Salvador already receive some helpful support from outside when in prison, but what they also need is help from states. She recommended that states be asked to safeguard WHRDs. The agent that first and foremost must guarantee safety and allow human rights to be defended without fear is the state.



***“I WANT KENYA TO BE KNOWN FOR THE COURAGEOUS, RESILIENT AND DETERMINED EFFORTS OF YOUNG PEOPLE COMING TOGETHER TO STAND UP FOR ANOTHER WORLD. FOR DIGNITY, FOR EQUALITY AND FOR JUSTICE (...) WE ARE DOING THIS WORK KNOWING THAT THERE IS NO PLAN B”.***

Wangui Kimari



f.l.t.r. Majdoleen Hassan, Evdokia Romanova, Mara Marinaki, Marianne Schulze, Covadonga de la Campa Alonso

## PANEL 2

# PROTECTION AND EMPOWERMENT

(Moderation: Covadonga De La Campa Alonso, Amnesty International/European Institutions Office)

The EU and its member states have a duty to protect HRDs by taking a visible stance of support for HRDs and stepping up their engagement with third countries to promote civil society and deliver on their stated human rights commitments. This panel looked into challenges faced by WHRDs, and some success stories of protection of WHRDs, and explored ways in which the EU protection mechanism (EU Guidelines for HRD) for WHRDs can be strengthened.

- Mara Marinaki, EU/EEAS Principal Advisor on Gender and on UNSCR 1325/WPS
- Marianne Schulze, Human Rights Consultant, Vienna
- Majdoleen Hassan, Human Rights Lawyer, Syria
- Evdokia Romanova, Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, Russian Federation



**Evdokia Romanova**, a sexual and reproductive rights defender from Russia, first told her own story: She was charged for “spreading non-traditional sexual propaganda” in Russia for sharing articles on social media. When her case became public, she received a lot of support from activists worldwide who wrote letters of protest to the government. This visibility of her case has on the one hand helped and empowered her to fight for her rights. On the other, Evdokia became a target for resentment and hate speech in her community.

Another problem Mrs Romanova identified is the lack of knowledge about international human rights protection mechanisms amongst the human rights defenders community itself. In this respect, more human rights education programmes can help, specifically reaching out to local grassroots initiatives in the regions. Another problem that many Human Rights Defenders face is that they work at grassroots level and most of them do not know about international mechanisms that they can invoke in order to enforce their rights.

Furthermore, embassies should reach out more to human rights defenders, and use their funds to help them. Making the Visa procedures easier for human rights defenders and their families would also be a highly constructive move.

Evdokia Romanova urged human rights defenders to directly ask for help and assistance, and to connect with each other to create vital networks. She also emphasised that everybody can contribute to the protection of WHRDs by – e.g. – sharing a story, organising a peaceful protest and making WHRDs heard.

***“I BELIEVE THAT EVERYBODY HAS THE RIGHT TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES AND BE WITH THE PERSON THEY LOVE. I HAD THE CHOICE TO BE SILENT. I CHOSE NOT TO BE SILENT.”***

Evdokia Romanova



**Majdoleen Hassan**, a human rights lawyer from Syria now living in exile in Austria, highlighted the countless human rights violations in Syria: People are not allowed to express themselves, the media is not allowed to report freely. Women are suffering especially and their rights are not respected. Muslim women in particular face great difficulties. In 2011 there was a revolution, peaceful demonstrations turned into a civil war. Many people were and continue to be detained or kidnapped by the government or fundamental groups. Women are especially at risk of sexual assault and violence. It is hard to defend human rights under the current regime, explained Majdoleen Hassan. The situation can erupt at any time. She explained that women's vulnerability to become victims is two-fold: Not only are they often arrested, but following their release, they also become victims in their own families or communities because of a certain stigma now attached to them. That is why many women are afraid of raising their voices. Majdoleen Hassan nevertheless urges women to speak up, not only in Syria, but all over

the world, to let everybody know what is happening on the ground.

Addressing the question of what the EU member states can do to help the situation, she made the following pleas: First, they must be more aware of whom they are selling weapons to. Second, the EU member states must take action to protect the many HRDs who are in jail. Third, they must play an active part in finding the WHRDs who have gone missing. It is, she said, the duty of the EU member states to create a safe space for WHRDs in the EU, and to support them.

Majdoleen Hassan explained that the plight of women in prison in Syria is ignored. The UN has stopped counting the victims of the Syrian war. She criticised the lack of intervention on the part of the EU and the UN: Neither are taking any steps to free women imprisoned in Syria or to find the women who are missing – even though more than 10,000 women have disappeared or been arrested. Ultimately, it is the Syrian women themselves, and the Syrian people in general, who pay the price. Many women have taken up arms, many have been forced into child marriage or prostitution. There are organisations on the ground to help but they do not have the force of the law behind them.

Majdoleen Hassan took a critical view of the help provided from outside of Syria, primarily because there are no means of evaluating the work that is being done and many aid organisations are operating out of the reach of the regime or are working with militant groups.

Majdoleen Hassan closed by calling for the creation of a network of cooperation between WHRD organisations, via which experiences and information could be exchanged. Hearing about other WHRDs' experiences, for example in Iran, could be highly constructive, and, given the world in which we live now, easily achieved.

***“IT IS THE DUTY OF THE EU MEMBER STATES TO  
CREATE A SAFE SPACE FOR WHRDS IN THE EU.”***

Majdoleen Hassan

**Mara Marinaki** from the European External Action Service highlighted that the best organisation for defending human rights and human rights defenders (ranging from bloggers to environmentalists and indigenous human rights defenders), especially WHRDs, is the EU.

Every Human Rights Dialogue with third countries also highlights cases of human rights defenders. Outlining the challenges that WHRDs face, she explained that the EU is fully aware that WHRDs are the ones who are the most exposed and the least protected. They are the first to notice when situations take a turn for the worse. This applies especially to behaviours by religious and political leaderships. WHRDs are the first to pay the price. One can observe this development in many countries, currently particularly in Egypt where WHRDs are under massive attack.

Mara Marinaki explained that the EU had provided targeted assistance to those at risk under the “Protect Defenders Programme”. In 2017 more than 220 women were given assistance via this programme, 160 in 2016, and 50 in 2015. At present, the EU has eight special projects currently being implemented.



**“THE EU IS FULLY AWARE THAT WHRDS ARE THE ONES WHO ARE THE MOST EXPOSED AND THE LEAST PROTECTED.”**

Mara Marinaki

Mara Marinaki further explained that the Istanbul Convention [Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence] is currently in the process of being ratified by the EU. The Istanbul Convention gives the EU the power to hold member states accountable if they shy away from their responsibilities to protect women against gender-based violence. There are many on-going projects, including “Project 2030” and the “spotlight initiative”, which serve to highlight the importance of combatting violence against women. In these instances, it is civil society that is leading the way. Outlining the steps that the EU has taken in relation to the situation of women in the Syrian conflict, Mara Marinaki explained that the EU supports the peace process in Geneva and supports Syrian women in grassroots organisations. The EU has been in contact with leading figures of the opposition in order to understand what is needed on the ground.

Mara Marinaki noted that effective mechanisms that protect WHRDs are in place: The EU has a network on the local level. Additionally, the EU is trying to give HRDs greater visibility, and it is for this reason that meetings with HRDs happen not behind closed doors but out in the open – in order to show the public that the EU fully supports HRDs. Mara Marinaki ended by observing that, whilst the EU is still far from perfect, it remains very committed. She added that the EU could pay more attention to special groups, such as LGBTIQ, indigenous people etc.

***“THE OBJECTIVE OF THE EU MUST BE TO FOSTER AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS CAN OPERATE FREELY.”***

Marianne Schulze



The final speaker was **Marianne Schulze**, a human rights expert from Austria. The objective of the EU, she said, must be to foster an environment where human rights defenders can operate freely. She noted that a major challenge in this regard currently faced in EU member states and across the globe is the “normalisation of violence”. This has to be tackled, and one way of doing this, she said, is by casting a spotlight on the work being done by investigative journalists. Cases where journalists are killed in the course of their investigations need to be made public. Also deserving of attention, she said, is the fact that many signatory states of the European Convention on Human Rights are not fulfilling their obligations under it.

Mrs Schulze put up for discussion how much this “normalisation of violence” is spreading and how much it hinders EU action.

She referred to the “Me Too” movement and the ongoing discussion about sexual harassment and violence in Germany, where women who speak up about their own experiences are suppressed.

The discussion moved to the visibility of WHRDs and the panel concluded that it is the way the media industry is constructed that is responsible for WHRDs’ voices not being heard. The media industry remains very Western and very male. That is why the issues of women in Afghanistan and Iran are not getting attention and why the media continues to reinforce gender stereotypes.

Another question Mrs Schulze put up for discussion is the credibility and sustainability of the EU’s (and its member states’) engagement in women’s human rights. The panel concluded that in a climate where there is a huge backsliding against women’s rights, it is necessary for the EU to be genuine about implementing human rights on the ground and to make sustainability a meaningful term again. Mrs Schulze ended with a question: How genuine is the EU about caring for women’s rights when it cuts funding for women inside the EU whilst at the same time providing money to combat violence against women outside the EU?

# RECOMMENDATIONS BY THE WHRDs

## The EU/MS should:

- Listen directly to HRDs
- Reach out to HRDs
- Raise human rights issues in each and every one of their exchanges with the authorities of third countries to examine the situation of HRDs
- Help HRDs living in different areas to meet and exchange experiences and ideas in a safe environment
- Adopt safety measures for HRDs
- Give visibility to HRDs and the issues they represent
- Pay special attention to particular groups of HRDs (LGBTIQ, indigenous groups)
- Improve its track record on communication with HRDs and on engagement with their issues
- Strengthen preventative action, so that steps are taken before a defender is put at risk. Publicly and visibly denounce abuses against defenders
- Invest in sustainable mechanisms
- Genuinely implement the EU HRD guidelines
- Issue Foreign Affairs Council conclusions on HRDs before the end of the year
- In countries in which the EU is funding police reforms (for example in Kenya), put in place oversight mechanisms to ensure that reforms are actually implemented and that human rights abuses are monitored



# ES BEGINNT HIER

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