



FEM DEFENDERS

**The hatred against
women human rights defenders
– online and offline**



Kvinna till Kvinna

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– online and offline

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Kvinna till Kvinna

- 3 Lena Ag Foreword
- 4 #femdefenders Study
- 8 Chiya Sultany Iraqi Kurdistan
- 10 Lara Aharonian Armenia
- 12 Tsomak Oga Armenia
- 14 Brikena Puka Albania
- 15 Florence Boloko Mularika DR Congo
- 16 Anna Silver Sweden
- 18 Judith Kiros Final words
- 19 Bibliography



A tough task

Women's rights are constantly being threatened in Sweden and the rest of the world. Women are excluded from power, they are raped, subjected to forced marriage, murdered and violated – simply because they are women. Yet, women are not just victims. All over the world, there are people organising themselves and voicing their opposition. Standing up for girls' and women's rights to education, their own bodies, freedom of movement in society and the right to determine their own future.

They are our femdefenders!

Since The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation was founded more than twenty years ago, I have heard so many terrible and important stories that I would like to share with you. Women human rights defenders have told me how they have been subjected to serious threats, rape, extortion and malicious rumour-mongering as “punishment” for fighting for change.

But I cannot relay the stories to you – not all of them – as it would put many of these people in even greater danger. In several cases they are facing serious death threats.

This is a dilemma we have faced on a daily basis when working on the report you hold in your hands – a report about hatred and threats faced by women human rights defenders.



It did not come as a surprise to us that involvement in the fight for women's rights comes at a price. Nevertheless, now that we are looking at the results of this survey on cyberhate and attacks in public places together with previous research and in-depth interviews, we are forced to concede that the situation is worse than we thought.

Seven out of ten femdefenders who have responded to the survey have faced threats or hatred in public places. And 14 percent of these have survived murder attempts. This has to stop!

If you think about it, it is amazing that people continue to stand up for women's human rights – even though they face harassment, social exclusion and death threats. Even though they every day hold their breath as they open their email inboxes. Many of those I have spoken to say that it is public support and recognition that enables them to carry on with their work.

That is why it is absolutely essential that we call upon those in power to take note of these threats and act to bring an end to them. That is why we need to carry on talking about the threats femdefenders face and the global democratic problem that they represent. That is why I and The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation regard it as our most important task to provide support to and show solidarity with all the world's femdefenders.

Lena Ag
Secretary General
The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation

#femdefenders

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation works with women human rights defenders from all over the world. We know that they are vulnerable. We know that many continue their efforts to promote women's rights despite the risk to themselves and their families, physically as well as mentally. Some of them reach a point at which they no longer can or dare to carry on, often because their families are at risk. But most of them refuse to stop.

In compiling this report, it has become even clearer to us how vulnerable women human rights defenders really are. It has not been easy to find women who can, dare or want to share their stories. Still, this report includes six accounts from some of those who have chosen to speak out.

To get a better understanding of their circumstances, we sent a survey to women human rights defenders in Armenia, Georgia, Albania, Kosovo, Iraq and DR Congo. In total, we received replies from 66 femdefenders. The aim of the study has been to provide an

#femdefenders

Kvinna till Kvinna's name for people who work to promote women's rights.

SYSTEMATIC ATTACKS

In the western Balkans, nationalist and other extremist groups systematically subject femdefenders to threats and attacks. In Serbia, those who work to promote the rights of minorities and who highlight the consequences of the Balkan wars are particularly at risk.

In 2014, the Women in Black organisation was threatened and attacked on a number of occasions after calling for responsibility to be taken for the war crimes that were committed during the 1990s. In July, four activists were attacked in western Serbia when the organisation held a memorial ceremony to commemorate the Srebrenica massacre.



Connected and vulnerable. Threats are a daily reality for femdefenders in DR Congo. Photo: Cato Lein

updated picture of how women human rights defenders, be they demonstrating in town squares or making their presence felt on Twitter and Facebook, are persecuted, threatened and harassed – physically and verbally, online and offline. We have studied the hatred that manifests itself in public places and the cyberhate that streams through digital channels. We have also looked at current research on women human rights defenders to understand the situation they face all over the world.

What is a women human rights defender?

The UN defines a women human rights defender as a person who works to defend women's rights and promote gender issues. Most women human rights defenders are women, though not exclusively so. Those who participated in our survey are engaged in many different issues, but most of them state that they are fighting for women's rights (80 percent) and gender equality (59 percent). Many work with peacebuilding and reconciliation, as well as the rights of the LGBT community, and ethnic and religious minorities.

And they pay a high price for their efforts. More than 60 percent have

been subjected to threats or violence, either online or offline, and many of them state that they face threats several times per year because of their work.

Certain issues provoke their opponents more than others. Those that incite most hatred, threats or violence are efforts to:

- ✓ combat violence against women
- ✓ promote gender equality
- ✓ fight corruption
- ✓ promote greater influence for women
- ✓ change gender roles
- ✓ promote LGBT persons' rights.

The link between these issues is clear – they are all about changing structures and redistributing power. The work to improve women's situations and liberate people from narrowly defined gender roles goes hand in hand with efforts to combat corruption and increase women's power and influence in society. However, in a world where women are seldom included in decision-making or peacebuilding, such efforts to bring about change mean that people in positions of power will have to share. Violence is a tool to frighten women into silence and hold them back. ■

Hatred, threats and attacks in public places

THREATS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The situation facing women human rights defenders in the Democratic Republic of Congo is very difficult. Activists risk being subjected to sexual violence because of their work, in particular if it involves protecting women who report cases of sexual violence.

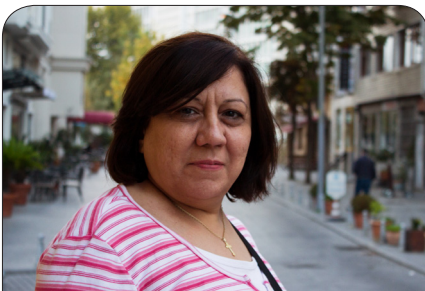
PAY FOR MOTHER'S SILENCE

P is a women human rights defender from North Africa whose family does not believe that her activism is suitable for a “respectable woman”. P regularly gives her mother money to stop her from telling P’s brother about her activism.

THWARTED BY THE POLICE

A grassroots organisation in Armenia reported threats to the police. But instead of launching an investigation into these threats, the police cast suspicion on the notifiers.

The organisation works with sex education and has a brochure about sex and relationships that is aimed at young people. The police started an investigation and accused the organisation of spreading pornography.



Liza Hido: “Worse every day”

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation’s partner organisation Warvin in Iraqi Kurdistan was attacked by the Islamic State (IS) in the summer of 2014 and the staff was forced to flee. A number of high-profile women, including doctors, women human rights defenders, lawyers and politicians, were murdered by IS and other armed groups in Iraq during the latter half of 2014. This development puts leading women human rights defenders all over the country at risk.

“The situation gets worse every day. The threats and murders mean that our manoeuvring space as defenders of women’s rights is shrinking,” says Liza Hido from the Baghdad Women’s Association.

Women who demonstrate for their rights risk being subjected to sexual harassment, abuse and rape. This became clear at the height of the Arab Spring. Harassment and abuse of women demonstrating in the Tahrir Square in Egypt was widely publicised.

When asked whether they have been subjected to threats of violence in public places, seven out of ten women human rights defenders said they had.

- ✓ 14 percent have been subjected to attempted murder but survived.
- ✓ 29 percent have received death threats in public places.

A classic rhetoric used against women human rights defenders involves attacking their identity as women. They are accused of being bad mothers or not being “real” women. Women’s honour is called into question and they are labelled as promiscuous. Perpetrators regard sexual violence as fair punishment for women who do not know their place.

Strategies to silence women

The opposition also manifests itself as whispers, rumours, slander and social exclusion. It is not always regimes or unknown individuals who pose the greatest threat to women human rights defenders. Many of them are pitted against their own families, relatives and friends. In smaller communities it can be impossible to remain anonymous. Neighbours, friends and acquaintances – all of them pose a potential risk to those who are vulnerable.

Half of the women human rights defenders state that they have been subjected to rumour-mongering, verbal abuse on the streets and persecution. These are often well-developed strategies to silence those who work to promote women’s rights. Of those who state that they have faced threats or violence in public places:

- ✓ 21 percent have been subjected to sexual harassment.
- ✓ 19 percent have been abused.
- ✓ 10 percent have been subjected to sexual violence.

Many women human rights defenders receive support from their families and relatives, but even though this may be a relief, it can still lead to other problems. In traditional communities, their actions may bring shame on their families or even put them in danger.

Strained relations

Being a women human rights defender is often a lifestyle choice. It can be virtually impossible to distinguish between the private and public spheres. Hence the threats and violence also affect their private lives.

Eight of the femdefenders who completed the survey have been forced to flee with their families. One in ten state that family relations have been strained or that they have lost contact with relatives.

All this can ultimately prove to be devastating for women human rights defenders’ activism. Rumour-mongering results in isolation from society, which also means that people lose their safety net – and that in itself can present serious security threats.

“Having your house ransacked, being transported in the boot of a car, being interrogated until one o’clock in the morning.

Femdefender in DR Congo

Lack of legal protection

Reporting instances of harassment or violence is not always an option. Sometimes the perpetrators may actually be police officers or government officials.

It is also common that women who report such crimes face questioning or are labelled “liars” by the police, in particular if the crime in question concerns sexual violence.

In other cases there is a lack of legal protection for women who have been subject to sexual violence – what has happened may not actually legally be defined as a crime.

The Internet – opportunities and risks

The Internet is now one of the key channels for activism. Computers, mobiles and other digital tools are used extensively to communicate, network, share and gather information, as well as to seek and provide protection.

But the Internet presents risks as well as opportunities. Cyberhate follows the same patterns as attacks in public places and violence against women in general. It is often sexual harassment, threats of violence and rape. We recognise the gender-specific violence and its rhetoric on the Internet too, where attackers believe they have the right to tell women how they should behave. This also manifests itself through recordings of sexual abuse being spread online.

The Internet certainly creates a lot of opportunities, but it also presents risks. 55 percent of the women human rights defenders who completed our survey have faced threats on the Internet. Out of these, 14 percent have received death threats online.

A digital battleground

The digital sphere has turned into a battleground. Women human rights defenders are fighting two fronts on the web: for human rights and against hatred, harassment and threats. The same tools that facilitate their ability to spread their messages are used against

them to create fear and isolation. The Internet increases the risk of surveillance, control and censorship. States and non-state actors use it to access activists' identities and work, in attempts to silence them.

Women human rights defenders often face questions about their "role as women". One in three say that they have received derogatory comments about their roles as women, mothers, daughters and so on. Just as many have been threatened with slander unless they abandon their activism, a method that is also commonly used offline.

Danger to mental health

In recent years, the Swedish media has highlighted the cyberhate faced by women in Sweden. In 2013, Maria Sveland's book *Hatet (Hatred)* and Swedish Television's programme *Uppdrag Granskning* both addressed this problem. They received a great deal of attention and sparked considerable public debate. Nevertheless, it is still difficult to report threats and hatred against women who publicly stand up for feminism or against racism. Most cases are quickly dismissed. However, a first conviction against a "cyberbully" in Sweden was made in autumn 2014.

Digital violence damages victims' physical and mental health. Yet there is currently little knowledge or understanding

LEGISLATION THREATENS DEVELOPMENT

A worrying trend, and something that poses great danger to women human rights defenders, is that states take advantage of restrictive legislation to stop the fight for human rights. This is a development seen in Russia, Azerbaijan, Egypt, among others. States impede and limit civil society's ability to promote human rights.



SWEDEN LACKS A SYSTEM

Sweden has one of the highest Internet penetration rates in the world. Nevertheless, Sweden does not have a working system to register online threats of violence or gather statistics about how many people that have been affected. The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention has been tasked with reviewing this matter and the results are expected in 2015.

about the impact of digital violence, and more research is needed to show how this affects people.

Women human rights defenders all over the world need support to be able to protect themselves in this digital environment. Various groups have taken on the issue of digital security threats and provide training in online safety. One example thereof is *Digital First Aid Kit*. It was created by the Digital Defenders Partnership, which focuses on providing advice and information about the most common threats and attacks online. ■

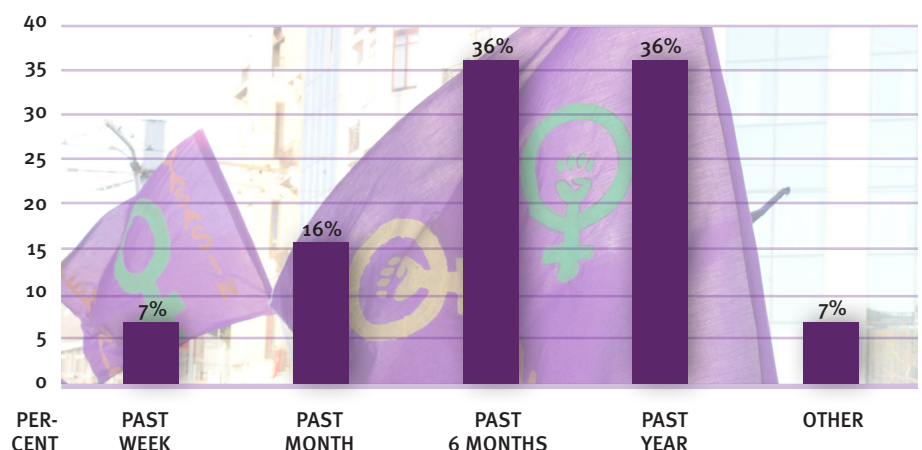
CROWDFUNDING FOR QUICK SUPPORT

The Women's Resource Center Armenia, which works to promote women's human rights and women's influence in conflict resolution, makes use of so-called crowdfunding.

Together with a Turkish organisation, the WRCA managed to collect more than 6,000 USD in just twenty days thanks to crowdfunding. The aim of the project was to bring together young feminists from Armenia and Turkey to foster solidarity and promote peace.



When did you last receive threats because of your activism, either online or in a public place?





My children are mainly affected psychologically. They're always afraid of going out at night.

Femdefender in DR Congo

The threats I receive are that they're going to kill me or my family. Some threats are linked to my religion or where I'm from. Some of this is because I've been successful. It makes me think about leaving Iraq, to escape to save myself, my family, to live in peace and security.

Femdefender in Iraq

I was nervous the whole time. When I saw someone on the street outside our house, I became suspicious. My body ached with all the tension. My arms hurt and I was completely exhausted.

Femdefender in Armenia

They extorted a large amount of money from me, as I work for a voluntary organisation. They were from IS and other military groups and they took 3,000 dollars. I gave the money to the terrorists to save myself and my family.

Femdefender in Iraq

The quotes are from our survey.

Continue despite the hatred

Our survey reveals a hostile world that poses direct threats to women human rights defenders. That has consequences. We asked how they are affected physically and mentally. 65 percent of the respondents said that they suffer psychological problems such as insomnia and depression. 25 percent have become afraid of visiting public places. More than 30 percent have extended their security strategies with additional locks and alarms, for example.

Other effects of threats and violence on women human rights defenders:

- ✓ 9 percent state that they suffer serious psychological problems including suicidal thoughts.
- ✓ 15 percent have at some point suffered physical injuries.
- ✓ 4 percent are suffering from lasting physical injuries.

Strong sisterhood

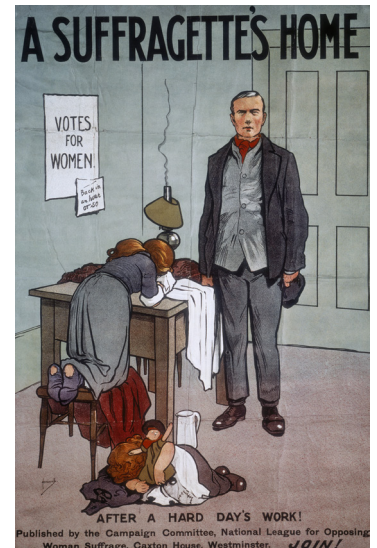
The fight takes its toll on women human rights defenders. For many of them, no matter how brave they are, the struggle becomes too hard. Four of those who participated in the survey are considering giving up. Some already have. Many of them are also being prevented from doing their work, or have been forced to abandon their efforts for periods of time.

When women human rights defenders are forced to give up, others step up. Passion, solidarity, determination and a strong sisterhood are what drive the fight onwards. 68 percent state that they are motivated to carry on.

Strategies for continued efforts

Despite the threats, women human rights defenders rarely have the time or opportunity to think about their own safety or well-being. Kvinna till Kvinna has therefore developed the concept of integrated security, which seeks to create a safe, respectful and structured environment for them to come together in groups to talk about their own safety, and physical and mental well-being. This gives women human rights defenders a chance to examine the threats facing them more closely and to think about how to carry on with their work. ■

Femdefenders of the past



"A suffragette's home." The poster shows how women who got involved in the campaign for the right to vote were accused of neglecting their husbands, children and homes. It was published by the National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage during the early 1900s in the United Kingdom.

Photo: Museum of London



Feminist role model. Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928) was a British political activist and leader of the suffragette movement, which campaigned for women's right to vote. The photo was taken in New York in 1913 by an unknown photographer.

Method

The survey was answered by 66 femdefenders. It consisted of 11 questions about the kind of threats and violence they face, both online and offline. Each question was then analysed separately and the results are presented based on the number of femdefenders who answered it.

Chiya Sultany
Iraqi Kurdistan

Nothing has scared me like the flag

“It was only me and Najat at the Amez office that morning. She was cleaning and I was sorting the books in the bookcase. Then we went out into the garden for a bit – and for once we actually locked the door behind us. When we went back in Najat shouted: “Chiya, Chiya, come!” She was standing in the kitchen – so shocked that

Chiya Sultany
Age: 24. Organisation: Amez.
Lives: Halabja, Iraqi Kurdistan.

If I had the power to change one thing: I live in a very conservative and narrow-minded community. I want to change that culture, I want

an open-minded community. All the women are angry with the culture that limits us, we want freedom!



she couldn't speak – pointing out through the window. At first I thought that a branch had fallen down from the tree, but it was a black flag hanging there in the tree – attached with a knife – the same flag that we know the Islamic State uses.

When we had checked to make sure that the person who had put up the flag was no longer there, we called the police. They came and took down the flag and the knife, without gloves. I said that they could find out who the culprit was if they took fingerprints.

The police officer replied: “Do you think that I have access to all fingerprints in Halabja? Who knows, maybe it's one of your employees having problems with a boyfriend.”

They had also failed to take us seriously on two occasions earlier in the spring, when we had found grenades and guns in

the garden outside the office.

But none of the threats have scared me as much as the flag and the knife. We all go around thinking what would have happened if we hadn't locked the door that morning. Imagine if it had been open and one of us had been killed? I also think about the fact that I belong to a minority, the Kakai. Imagine if they were targeting me, because I don't wear hijab, for example?

We don't know who is responsible for these threats, but it's probably someone who doesn't like us working for women's freedom. Someone who doesn't want women to become aware of their rights, but to stay at home, have children and take care of the home. But we have decided to carry on, despite the threats.

I love my job. There are so many women in need of help and support, and if I don't do it, who's going to help them?

Chiya Sultany has faced threats at work several times. On one occasion, she and her colleagues found grenades in the office garden.





*Lara Aharonian's family wants her to lie low and be more careful. But that's not an option for her: "I would die more like that."
Photo: Sahak Muradyan*

Lara Aharonian
Armenia

They threaten to burn and deport me

“ I want my name to be printed and my photograph to be shown. I don't want to be anonymous. I can't live like that. I think I'm less vulnerable if I'm visible. If I go around being afraid all the time, they'll win. My mum calls me from Canada sometimes, asking me to leave the country. Asking me to stop working. My husband asks me to lie low and be careful, but I cannot remain silent. I would die more like that. It's a personal choice.

In 2013, the political situation in Armenia changed when we took a step away from the EU. Armenia is now getting closer to Russia instead. Those of us working with gender issues and for abused women and LGBT rights have become targets. It's part of the rhetoric used to justify the move away from the West.

People started spreading pictures of me in social media. Many of us activists have had our names, photographs and personal information publicised. We're described as being dangerous to the state. As foreign spies who break up families, enable women to file for divorce and young people to become homosexual.

“Here are the faces of the traitors. So now you know what they look like if you see them on the street,” is the message. At the same time they also make disparaging remarks about our organisation on national television.

Everyone has become frightened at work. There were threatening phone calls and I started reading all the terrible things they were writing about me online. How they were going to burn me and make sure I was deported from Armenia. I'm

Lara Aharonian

Age: 42. Organisation: Women's Resource Center Armenia. Lives: Armenia.

If I had the power to change one thing:



I put my hopes into reaching out, visiting villages and communities, strengthening women, talking to them and creating meeting places for change.

actually not afraid of the people making these threats. It's the unknown people, who can take the aggressive messages on board and do something crazy, who scare me.

I'm a leading person in my organisation and I can't show my fear. But I've stopped taking walks. I love walking, but I stopped, because I felt I was being followed.

Tsomak Oga Armenia

In their eyes I am a virus

“ In April 2011, my friends and I started the DIY club in Yerevan. Our idea was to create a place for dissidents, for people with different views. Later that year, I went to Istanbul having been invited by Turkish Pride to play with my girl punk band, Pin-cet, as we were called back then.

A year later, on 8 May 2012, I was woken early in the morning by a friend calling to say that DIY had been burned down. Afterwards we were able to use the neighbouring shop's surveillance camera to see three men in boots and jackets with large fascist symbols on their backs smashing

Tsomak Oga
Age: 34. **Work:** Gay activist, artist, punk musician. **Lives:** Sweden. **If I had the power to change one thing:** I'd get rid of the entire Armenian government. And if they disappeared, the police would also be replaced.



the windows of the club and throwing in Molotov cocktails. I'll never forget how people celebrated that DIY was burned down.

The police have not been helpful in investigating the crime. Many police officers thought it was a good thing. In the media, the story was reported on all television channels and newspapers, even outside Armenia. They wrote that I was a danger to Armenian families because I was gay, that I was a virus that needed to be destroyed, that I had to leave the country or they'd get rid of me in their own way.

On the wall outside DIY they wrote:

“If you rebuild it we'll burn it down again.”

“We're not going to leave you in peace.”

“Whore.”

Many representatives of the conservative parties praised the actions of the neo-Nazis. They said: “Yes guys, you did the right thing. People like Tsomak represent a big threat to our families, the nation and our children.”



Swastikas scrawled outside Tsomak Oga's club in Yerevan, which was burned down by neo-Nazis. Photo: Tsomak Oga

One politician said: “Why burn? If you see someone on the street who doesn't look like you but like... well you know who we mean, then we'll deal with them in our way.” Which means abusing and killing.

The people who burned down DIY did not get a prison sentence. A corrupt politician thought that the attack was good and paid their bail.

After that they started threatening my sister: “Tell Tsomak that she's a persona non grata, tell her to leave the country.” Eventually even my friends asked me to go. My sister and I left Armenia.

"I'll never forget how people celebrated that DIY was burned down," says Tsomak Oga. The photograph was originally published on www.fuflkorrespondenterna.com. Photo: Cathérine Söderberg



Brikena Puka
Albania

Portrayed as a pimp

“It was my colleague who received the threats. “Tell Brikena Puka that I’m going to kill her. I know everything about her.”

The man had come to our office to persuade his wife to come home after she had sought refuge and medical treatment following repeated abuse.

As director of a shelter for women who have been subjected to violence and trafficking, I’m used to these things. The threats are part of the job.

The woman chose to stay with us. But this man is a successful businessman. He has good relations with powerful politicians, and money to buy media space. He was not going to give up.

One evening, there were pictures of our shelter on the television. They described where it was located and showed my

photograph with my name. They claimed that I had prevented the businessman’s children from seeing their mother.

I can cope with having to meet a frustrated and angry man. I can deal with his threats. But I cried that evening as I thought about the other women at the shelter. They face such obstacles and difficulties in their lives. They have been subjected to so much violence. I also thought about myself and my colleagues. We work so hard. When the shelter was exposed, everyone’s safety was at risk. Everyone got scared. Just because of this one case.

I was named in one of Albania’s major evening papers as well. It said that our organisation was actually a disguised brothel. That the police and I had kidnapped the children and sold the business man’s wife. The article also claimed that I had ordered the children to be killed.

I was so sad for the children. We had really worked hard to make it easier for them and their mother to meet. I also thought about the general public who doesn’t know me. Who think I’m a pimp.

Brikena Puka

Age: 42. **Organisation:** Vatra. **Lives:**

Albania. **If I had the power to**

change one thing: It would be changing people’s attitudes to peace and good will.

When Brikena Puka’s women’s shelter was exposed on television, she cried herself to sleep. Photo: Vatra





Florence Boloko Mularika DR Congo

Florence Boloko Mularika

Age: 59. **Organisation:** Peace and Development Women's Coalition. **Lives:** Democratic Republic of Congo. **If I had the power to change one thing:** I want legislation to be followed and perpetrators to be brought to justice. It means a lot to the victims' rehabilitation and their chances of rebuilding their lives.

Florence Boloko Mularika works to combat sexual violence in DR Congo.

Mama, is that you again?

“They call in the middle of the night: ‘Mama Florence, where are you? We need your help. A girl has been raped.’”

I get up and call my driver. I need to wake him, because I don't have a driver's license. Then I go and make sure that the girl is taken to hospital. I call the lawyer and arrange a meeting. I call the police.

But I face obstacles. “Mama Florence, is that you again?” they say. “Do you know how powerful this man's family is? I can't arrest him. I'll have problems. Do you want me to lose my job?”

Later that day my daughter calls me. She tells me that she's received a text message from the rapist: “You need to talk to your mother. Our family is large and powerful.

You'll pay the price for what your mother is doing. We're going to take you away and rape you, and your mother will have to come looking for you.”

The perpetrator's father calls and wants to meet me. He wants to negotiate and says:

“Do you have a house of your own, Mama Florence? I can give you a house if you leave my son alone.”

But I won't sleep with the enemy. I tell him that the girl is still in hospital, because of what his son did to her. I tell him that I will do all I can to make sure that his son gets punished.

That's my life's mission. I help women who have been subjected to sexual violence to stop being victims and find their way back to

a life in the community. But on the other hand there's my family, who face threats because of my work. There have been times when I've thought about stopping for their sake. But then I think about that my family is protected. We live in a house with guards and locks. But the girls and women who do not have a voice, they need my support.

I'm planning for my 19-year-old daughter to move to her father in Canada and go to university there next year. Life is hard for her because of my work. People talk about her. “Look at her, her mother is always on the television talking about rape.”

My eldest son is already studying in South Africa. But my youngest daughter will carry on living with me for the time being.



Activist Anna Silver helps EU migrants in Sweden. After she appeared on television, she started receiving threatening phone calls and emails. Photo above: Anna Silver

Anna Silver
Sweden

Now, I have a protected identity

“When I was little I always felt excluded, I was bullied. Ever since then I have felt the need to help outsiders, those who are vulnerable. As a child I was not always able to intervene. That’s why it’s important to me now that no one silences me. People trying to drown out my voice through threats and violence, that would be like going back in time. It’s extremely important to me to take on the debate.

It started one day in January, I was at home doing some ironing and the television was on. Then there was a report about the ramshackle sheds where the EU migrants lived in Högdalen outside Stockholm, “shanty towns” they called them. I was

Anna Silver

Age: 31. **Work:** Activist for EU migrants’ human rights. **Lives:** Sweden. **If I had the power to change one thing:** I want to give everyone the ability to empathise with others. Our greatest problem is that people are unable to see life through other people’s eyes. That and ignorance.

shocked. I had never seen anything like that in Sweden before. I couldn’t stop thinking about it. The next morning, in bed, I created an event on Facebook to collect clothes. I thought just some of my friends from work at the empowerment centre for young women would help, but the response was huge. The day before the collection day someone from the newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* called. They wanted to do a story about EU migrants and had seen my event.

I hadn’t thought that there could be negative reactions. After appearing on television I started receiving phone calls, and text messages and emails. People were keeping an eye on me. One online discussion forum described a friend of mine who used to visit me, they thought he was my boyfriend. They called me “easy”. They also talked about me “soiling our country”.

One blogger has spent a great deal of time profiling me. When I changed jobs, someone rang my future boss warning that I was



Anna Silver spent a night in one of the sheds where the EU migrants in Sweden live.

“bringing gypsies to the municipality”. How could that person know that I was going for a job interview? Through a friend, someone on Facebook?

One of the many threatening phone calls was from a man who ended by saying: “See you soon.” Then, I’d had enough.

I moved. Getting a protected identity has meant everything to me. The Swedish Tax Agency made me feel safe. I have three dogs, so I have to go out every evening. But don’t forget, I can lock my door. Imagine living in a shed.

Differences unite

I meet up with a friend. I haven't seen her for a long time, too long, and I ask how she is. She raises an eyebrow: "How do you think?" She hasn't been living at home for a while now. It isn't safe there anymore.

When I read The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation's study about the hatred and threats faced by women human rights defenders all over the world, I am immediately struck by the thought: This is something I recognise, it's not unfamiliar.

I read the texts in the *femdefenders* report and am reminded of the reactions my dear friends face when they speak out about their political visions. Their home addresses and numbers are published online and they are bombarded with hate mail. They start hesitating before opening their inboxes, before publishing blog entries and articles, before opening their mouths. And that is the desired effect.

We have recently started discussing cyberhate in Sweden for real. We have started looking at how the Internet – which can be used to enable activism and organisation for feminism, anti-racism, transfeminism and people with disabilities – can also facilitate the spread of hatred and threats. In many cases it is enough just to stand out or diverge from social norms – not being a man, or white, or straight, or cis*, or living according to society's norms – to be exposed on online hate sites. But if the person in question is a woman actively working for women's rights, the situation can become extreme.

I read the texts and think: Sweden, Albania, Iraq. So many people who feel threatened by the thought of a change of power, so many people

using whatever tools they can – the threat of violence, often sexual violence – to silence feminist efforts for change. This means that only certain people can be involved in politics, involved in building society and the world. This means that there is a serious and international democratic problem.

While I am struck by how similarly the violence affects women around the world, I am also beginning to see the differences. Being respectful of these differences and paying careful attention to them is, to me at least, the essence of supportive feminist work with international claims. And understanding how patriarchy affects women differently depending on their sexuality, class, gender and nationality means understanding that the battle also needs to be fought on several different frontiers simultaneously. Otherwise, we risk erasing the differences and thereby the critical perspective of the power structures through which even we women are shaped in relation to one another. As the feminist activist and critic Audre Lorde wrote: "It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences."

The differences between women can be sources of solidarity, strength, mutual sympathy and cooperation based on equal terms.

When I read the testimonies in *femdefenders*, I start wondering what I can do to support other women in their struggle, whose activism is openly counteracted both on interpersonal and national levels. First of all,

I think it's important to listen to other women and their needs, and not assume that a specific feminist analysis necessarily applies to everyone. The point of entry should also be cooperation rather than charity work, for while the first recognises all women as actors, the other risks reducing them to recipients of preferential benevolence – a benevolence that can often fail.

Finally, I believe that it is important to take responsibility for national trends, which can have an adverse impact on women internationally. Examples of this include nationalism, warfare and European migration policies.

Xenophobia in Europe and Sweden has gained political ground with parliamentary representation. Combating this is, in my opinion, a feminist political act and an expression of international solidarity. It also ensures feminist and anti-racist discussions in Swedish public life.

Reading the texts about the *femdefenders* nonetheless conveys hope. The feminist movement is broad, international and strong. All over the world, people refuse to give up the fight for human rights. Through cooperation and solidarity, we grow even stronger. And that's when we will see change.



Judith Kiros

Judith Kiros
Feminist and
anti-racist writer

* A person whose legal, biological, social gender and gender identity is linked, and is unequivocally male or female.



Read more!



More portraits of femdefenders can be found on:
www.kvinnatillkvinna.se/en/femdefenders

Femdefenders all over the world continue to fight for women's rights. The photo shows a demonstration to combat violence against women in Lebanon.

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The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation
strengthens women in conflict affected regions.

www.kvinnatillkvinna.se/en
www.facebook.com/kvinnatkvinnafoundation



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