



## WEAVING RESISTANCE THROUGH ACTION:

STRATEGIES OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS  
DEFENDERS CONFRONTING EXTRACTIVE  
INDUSTRIES



**awid** women's rights



Women Human Rights Defenders  
International Coalition  
*Defending Women Defending Rights*

The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) is an international feminist, membership organization committed to achieving gender equality, sustainable development and women's human rights. AWID's mission is to strengthen the voice, impact and influence of women's rights advocates, organizations and movements internationally to effectively advance the rights of women. [www.awid.org](http://www.awid.org)

The Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition (WHRDIC) is a resource and advocacy network for the protection and support of women human rights defenders worldwide. An international initiative created out of the international campaign on women human rights defenders launched in 2005, the Coalition calls attention to the recognition of women human rights defenders.

[www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org](http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org)

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# Introduction

Women Human Rights Defenders are challenging extractive industries and taking on corporate power and vast economic and political forces. These inspiring stories of action and resistance tell us that extractive industries may have immense economic and political resources at their disposal; but they are not invincible. Corporate power is overwhelming in its scope, but it is not as all-encompassing and invulnerable as it seeks to appear. Resistance is not futile.

Forty-eight women human rights defenders from 22 countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa, participated in a research process of interviews and regional collective consultations conducted by AWID and the Women Human Rights Defender International Coalition (WHRDIC).

Confronting extractive industries means challenging powerful national and transnational corporations and global elites that operate in collusion with governments and often with religious and ‘traditional’ institutions<sup>(1)</sup>. For indigenous peoples, it is a familiar centuries-old struggle, against colonization and dispossession by foreign powers. For women, it also involves challenging patriarchy and traditional gender roles, as they assert leadership in defense of their rights, communities and territories.

The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders notes that out of 156 killings in 2015, 45% were defenders of environmental, land and indigenous rights<sup>(2)</sup>. Mining is the most lethal sector for environmental human rights defenders, followed by hydroelectric projects and dams, agribusiness and logging.

EXTRACTIVE INDUSTRIES in this report refer to all forms of industry that conduct extraction, exploitation and appropriation of nature and natural resources.

EXTRACTIVISM is an economic and political model of development that prioritizes profit and foreign investment above the rights of the people and the sustainability of the environment.

For the purposes of this document, ‘Woman Human Rights Defenders’ (WHRD) are women working for rights and justice, including individual and collective rights of people and planet.



All human rights defenders encounter major challenges but women human rights defenders also cope with gender-specific risks and violence. While all environmental human rights defenders may be stigmatized as “anti-development” or “unpatriotic”, women human rights defenders are also stigmatized because of their gender and sexuality, attacked through their families, threatened with sexual violence.

As women human rights defenders, we overcome ideological barriers by reaching people’s minds and hearts. We overcome psychological barriers of despair by inspiring hope and mobilizing communities; we overcome political barriers by generating political pressure through direct actions, street protests, litigation and media; we sustain movements and communities through difficult times by strengthening cultures of self and collective care and solidarity.

What makes a struggle successful? These stories demonstrate that the value of action and resistance goes far beyond meeting the goals of one campaign. Court cases may be lost, negotiations may fail, and governments may opt out on their promises; or years of successful campaigns and policy changes in favour of women’s rights can be reversed in a day, when a new administration takes power. Success can also be this: people’s life-changing realization of their collective rights; collective articulation of what “development” and life with dignity mean for a community; celebration of women’s autonomy and the building of trust and coalitions across movements.

We are sharing these stories of action and resistance from Latin America, Asia and Africa, while acknowledging that many powerful stories from these and other regions are still waiting to be told and heard. We hope to contribute to the learning exchange among women human rights defenders, activists and community organizers, and to inspire people and communities confronting corporate power in the struggle for rights and justice worldwide.

This publication is intended to lift up the power, creativity and resilience of women human rights defenders confronting extractive industries. It is a celebration of all women human rights defenders. We appreciate you. We are with you.

The struggle continues!





# Why Resist Extractive Industries?

Before introducing concrete strategies, let us ask:

**What does it mean to resist extractive industries?** Every movement, every community might offer a different answer. Acknowledging this diversity, this section offers a cross-regional exchange among women human rights defenders, and sets the stage for discussing strategies for action and resistance.

Confronting extractive industries is more than taking on a mining company or a hydroelectric project. It is to challenge an economic and political model of development. In the corporate world, development is equated with foreign investment and profits, a perception often shared by government agencies and state officials.

Despite their promises of economic development, prosperity and job creation, extractive industries have deepened existing social and economic inequalities. Rural, peasant and indigenous communities suffer particularly devastating effects. Extractive industries take over lands and natural resources, deprive people of their livelihoods, destroy the social fabric of communities, infringe on traditional ways of living and violate sacred sites of spiritual significance.

In the profit-oriented model of development, prosperity is equated with consumerism. Consumerism is the ideology that consumption of goods and services is central to the emotional fulfillment, value and identity of people in societies, so that "we are what we consume". For corporations consumerism creates new markets; for communities however, the consequences are contradictory. Beyond valued access to goods and services, consumerism may lead to the destruction of social solidarity, higher crime rates, and further environmental degradation.

To understand extractive industries, we must account for the history of colonisation, which is at the origins of the extractive development model. In Africa, colonial pillage turned into a post-independence model of corporate exploitation that continues depriving African people of their natural resources. Similarly, researchers establish historical continuity of extractive operations from Columbus' arrival to the Caribbean, to present-day transnational corporations operating in the Americas<sup>(3)</sup>. Global North-based corporations continue to maintain extensive control over Global South regions rich in natural resources

and human labour, collecting the profits and replicating colonial-era relations of economic and political domination and exploitation. Over time, the emerging BRICS economies (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) somewhat shifted the geopolitical lines but reinforced a similar model of extractivism.

In the face of profit-driven extractive development models, women defenders argue for alternative visions of development. For many defenders, the economy goes beyond the individual and encompasses the collective development of plans for the community.

*"The roadmap we are using has been copied from the North, [...] we have to define our own concept of sustainable development, dissociate how other countries have done it and contextualize it to the African region."*

- Caroline Kiarie, Kenya



Bonita Meyersfeld from the Center for Applied Legal Studies (CALS) in South Africa advocates for a concept of development linked to the inclusion of people living in poverty and changes in their conditions. She explains "a project that will generate economic benefits can only be called development if those profits are reinvested in the community. If not, we are talking about exploitation, not development".<sup>(4)</sup>

Communities must have the power to define what the meaning of development is - it must not be forcefully imposed by corporations and state authorities. "For us, development has to do with the welfare and dignity of people and with the self-determination of how they want to live".<sup>(5)</sup> Sustainable development encompasses the need to preserve their territories and natural resources for their daughters and granddaughters. As Cristina Palabay from Karapatan describes, "development is equated with the ability to enjoy those territories in community and pass these territories on to future generations".<sup>(6)</sup>

Respect for nature is echoed in the respect for people and their diverse voices. Recognizing this diversity, women human rights defenders emphasize the importance of everyone's participation in defining what development means for them. It may differ depending on age, status in the community, gender identity, etc. In this, women human rights defenders across countries argue for centering women's needs and priorities, and countering violence and injustice against women.

***"It is a development model in which the concepts of sovereignty and autonomy include not only the territories, forests and rivers, but also the sovereignty and autonomy of the bodies and sexuality of women."***

**- Berta Cáceres, Honduras**

These are, in effect, new ways of relating "between people, between people and nature, and between people and nations of the North and the global South, [and] also demanding to reorganize the relations of power inside and outside their movements, towards weaving plural, interconnected and sustainable agendas".<sup>(7)</sup>





# Strategies for Action and Resistance

## Strategy 1. Community Consultations

Community members can use consultations as a direct participation mechanism to articulate needs and to make decisions. When formal participation mechanisms are dominated by men, this strategy is particularly significant for women.

Extractive operations are generally obliged to consult affected communities in order to obtain the free, prior and informed consent of the communities required by international human rights standards. Too often, however, these official consultations are extensively criticised for the misinformation presented to communities, inadequate representation of all affected groups (including women and ethnic minorities), political pressure on representatives, and failure to accommodate communities' claims. Consultations held by States, and particularly those held by corporations, may reinforce the imbalance of power instead of dismantling it<sup>(8)</sup>. Self-organized community consultations can present an inclusive and impartial alternative.

One example of community consultations working in favour of the community was in Guatemala, where thousands of women successfully participated in self-organized community consultations, despite social and cultural barriers. In a consultation in October 2010 organized in Santa Cruz del Quiche, in the south of Guatemala, more than 27,000 people were mobilised to reject mining, hydroelectric projects and monoculture that threatened their lands and livelihoods<sup>(9)</sup>.

Community consultations demonstrate the leadership that many indigenous women assume in their communities, in confronting mining and other extractive operations in their territories<sup>(10)</sup>. Women's participation in these processes of organizing have also contributed to advancing women's status and rights in the community. These consultations provide space to reflect on the situation of women in the communities and to discuss the impact of the extractive development model on the life, health and workload of women.

Community consultations thus serve a number of functions: enabling women's political participation, leveraging change to patriarchal norms, and articulating communal positions and collective decisions that can then be defended in relation to corporate and state actors.

### ORGANIZING community consultations

**ENSURING** information about the impact of extractive operations is accessible and understandable to all

**LISTENING** to all affected people and marginalised groups

**DISCUSSING** the impact of extractive operations on women and marginalised groups



## Strategy 2. Social Mobilization and Direct Action

**Social mobilization** is a process that engages people in awareness-raising and joint action for a particular goal. This process aims to bring about social, economic or political change through collective actions that rely on mass participation. **Street marches, rallies, demonstrations and social media campaigns** are all forms of social mobilization.

Social mobilization is first and foremost a transformative and deeply moving experience for the participants themselves. If organized in an inclusive way, it can bring people together and create a sense of belonging.

It is not accidental that for this profound emotional effect, mass gatherings have been extensively used by authoritarian regimes to advance aggressive nationalism. In the context of resistance however, social mobilization can remind people that they are not powerless, that they have rights; that their needs, dreams and hopes matter.

Mirtha Vázquez of Peru affirms the importance of social mobilization and its legitimacy:

*"It is the realization of the collective right to freedom of expression. Although there has been, here and there in this country, an attempt to make people believe that protest is a criminal act, that it is a violent act [...], it is worth regaining the idea that to protest remains a right<sup>(11)</sup>."*



Women and oppressed people taking to streets are challenging their exclusion from politics. Women's collective presence in the public sphere can, in itself, be a defiance of gender norms.

**Direct actions** are also taken collectively, but can be effective also in the hands of smaller groups. Examples include **strikes**, **occupation** of business and government premises, **blockades** of extractive operations sites, **civil disobedience**, as well as creative interventions like **street theatre** and **performance**.

### OCCUPATION OF CORPORATE FACILITIES

sends a clear message to the companies and the general public. An emblematic case of women-led social mobilization and direct action took place in the Niger Delta in Nigeria between June and August 2002. Thousands of women occupied oil terminals and other facilities of ChevronTexaco and Shell Petroleum. They were protesting decades of looting and life-threatening catastrophes caused by these corporations: destruction of entire ecosystems, contamination of water and soil, repeated loss of crops and food, and damage to people's health, among other irreversible damage. The security forces of the oil corporations reacted violently, and in one encounter about 800 women were injured<sup>(12)</sup>. Eventually, their relentless struggle gained extensive international coverage and solidarity worldwide. Corporate and government representatives were forced to negotiate with the women<sup>(13)</sup>.

The occupations were important in bringing together women of different ethnic groups. Women came together, leaving aside ethnic tensions, which Corporations have been manipulating, in order to divide communities, for instance by providing jobs to one community and not the other. Women's awareness of the gravity of the situation and their willingness to overcome tensions was vital to the success of their actions<sup>(14)</sup>.

**MARCHES** are also a powerful tool in generating visibility for a cause. In October 2013, a group of nearly 300 Amazonian women in Ecuador, representing seven indigenous groups, walked more than 200 kilometers to the capital, Quito<sup>(15)</sup>. The women left the Amazon walking for days with their children, to demonstrate their opposition to oil exploration on their ancestral lands to the President of Ecuador. Although the President did not receive them, the people in Quito welcomed them and showed solidarity by providing food, clothing, and discussion spaces.

*"The march had a very strong impact and urban society identified with and felt committed to these rural women. The presence of these women and their march generated a lot of social sympathy and further fueled the collective imagination in defense of Mother Earth [...]. Having achieved this level of social acceptance, the national government could not discredit them in any way"<sup>(16)</sup>.*

**BODY POLITICS** plays an important role in women's resistance. The mere presence of women's bodies in the public sphere can challenge gender norms. On several occasions, women have also exposed their bodies to protest the violence and destruction of extractive operations.



In patriarchal systems, men exercise individual and collective control over women's bodies. Beyond direct violence, women must often cope with social, cultural and religious norms that degrade them and their bodies, as inherently damaged, dangerous, sinful or shameful. Alternatively, a woman's body can be elevated as sacred, as a source of honor for the entire family or community, or as a symbol of the community or nation. But a woman's body is never simply her own.

By exposing their bodies to defend their lands and communities, women are subverting these norms. They extract the enormous cultural power invested in oppressing and policing women's bodies - and use it in their struggles for people and nature. In taking control over their own bodies, women change the cultural meaning of a woman's body in a public space. Ultimately, they shift shame from women's bodies to shaming those destroying their communities and the environment.

Subversion of social and cultural norms is complex because it takes on meanings specific to each culture and community. The same act can have opposite cultural meanings in two different social settings. Indeed, exposure of women's bodies has been used to advance arguably neocolonial and Islamophobic agendas<sup>(17)</sup>. But there is no doubt in the power of this tactic and in the significance of women's autonomy over their bodies.

**OCCUPYING corporate facilities and sites of extractive operations**

**MARCHING and demanding to be heard**

**BUILDING alliances and solidarity to overcome "divide and rule"**

**CONNECTING rural and urban communities and movements**

**ALERTING medical and legal support to be prepared for police violence**

**EDUCATING participants of their rights and INFORMING of possible risks**

**PARTICIPATING and claiming power in the public sphere**





# Strategy 3: Women's Networks and Cross-Movement Solidarity

Women's organizations and solidarity networks are an effective strategy to leverage women's strength and gain recognition for their leadership. Rather than individually struggling with ingrained sexism and misogyny in gender-mixed organizations, women come together to build collective power.

Women human rights defenders gained further recognition and visibility with the creation of the Latin American Union of Women (ULAM). This network unites women affected by mining in Ecuador, Guatemala, Venezuela, Peru and Bolivia. It provides solidarity and support to defenders in the region, but also contributes to generate new opportunities for action and to consolidate partnerships at the international level.

Similarly, the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras), a network of more than 750 women defenders from Mexico and Central America, is contributing to regional solidarity, development of protection measures, and new cultures of resistance<sup>(18)</sup>. The Initiative brings together defenders from diverse social movements, including those particularly exposed to violence, such as environmental defenders and lesbian and transgender activists. It strengthens access to emergency protection, and to national, regional and international human rights mechanisms<sup>(19)</sup>.

In women's struggle in Niger Delta, informal networks were created among women from different ethnic groups, to oppose the oil industry in the area. The formation of these networks was central to overcoming generations of mistrust between the groups.

Establishing women's networks by no means precludes cooperation and alliances with gender-mixed organizations. On the contrary, women's networks build solidarity with organizations at national, regional and international levels. Collaboration and solidarity across movements is

important to increase the impact of women human rights defenders and their organizations. It is also a useful mechanism of protection, particularly where women defenders face risks of criminalization, social isolation and stigmatization.

*"There is no better protection for women human rights defenders than the strength and support of their own movements<sup>(20)</sup>."*

**FORMING** women-led organizations and networks to grow collective power

**BUILDING** networks across locations and themes for greater impact

**BRIDGING** tensions amongst ethnic groups

**SHARING** strategies and ideas of resistance and protection

**COLLABORATING** across movements to strengthen solidarity





## Strategy 4. Self-Care and Collective Wellbeing

In recent years, self-care and collective wellbeing has gained recognition as a critical, much-needed strategy for defenders. Women human rights defenders define self and collective care not only as a set of measures to address their physical and psychological well-being, but also as a political strategy to cope with burnout and to sustain their activism and their movements<sup>(21)</sup>.

In situations of grave risk or social pressure, women human rights defenders cope with high levels of physical and emotional distress. Combining human rights activism with providing for their families can be a financial challenge and impact negatively on their wellbeing. Predominant cultures of activism often push defenders to disregard their personal wellbeing and to sacrifice themselves for others and for 'the cause'. Traditional notions of femininity can intensify self-sacrifice expectations from women, both in social movements and in their families and communities. As a result, many defenders tend to operate under unsustainable work habits and impossible schedules, resulting in enormous stress and burnout.

*"In women's rights organizations and movements we're not acknowledging fully that our work involves constantly bearing witness to violations and violence, and that often the violence is close to us – it is being inflicted either on people that we know, or people like us. There's only so many times you can hear stories of terrible things happening to someone before it starts to affect you. And most activists don't have an organizational mechanism to help deal with that."*<sup>(22)</sup>



Recognizing this need, women human rights defenders and their organizations have begun addressing well-being through a variety of practices. These may include raising awareness to the impacts of human rights work on body and mind; developing a security and safety plan; allocating time and resources for recovery and healing from trauma or burnout; practicing physical, mental and spiritual exercises or traditions; learning methods to cope with stress; changing organizational culture and incorporating well-being in everyday work.

For example, the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders designed a Rapid Response Fund for Security and Self-care. The Fund focuses on the wellbeing of women defenders and the sustainability of their movements. At the individual level, the fund provides psychological and health support to defenders who face direct violence or work with people experiencing violence. At the collective level, the fund works to strengthen the capacity of organizations to resolve conflicts, to develop institutional self-care policies and to conduct trainings on safety and well-being.

**ACKNOWLEDGING** the impact of physical and psychological violence, criminalization and intimidation on the minds, bodies and souls of activists

**UNDERSTANDING** what being safe and well means for individuals, movements and communities

**INCORPORATING** caring for oneself and each other as an integral part of the struggle

**ENSURING** time and space for activists to rest, reflect and recuperate

**RECOGNIZING** that family members of activists can be affected

**LEGITIMIZING** self-care and collective wellbeing in our cultures of resistance





# Strategy 5: Litigation

Defenders emphasize the value of litigation, while acknowledging its structural limitations. In several notable cases, courts have made it possible to obtain justice and remedies for human rights violations committed by businesses. For example, “the lawsuit of Nigerian farmers against Royal Dutch Shell plc filed in Dutch courts relating to oil pollution in Nigeria; the complaint of Ecuadorian citizens against Chevron Corporation related to oil contamination in Ecuadorian courts; or the criminal complaint by Colombian trade unionists against Nestlé S.A. in Switzerland concerning the murder of union leader Luciano Romero<sup>(23)</sup>.”

Litigation can have a strong impact on power dynamics between communities and companies. Initiating litigation can signal to the other party that you are serious and committed, and can get them to take your complaint considerably more seriously. Practically, the instigation of litigation can also, at least, temporarily halt the harmful activity that is affecting a community – for example, challenging the award of a mining license in court often has the effect of suspending the validity of that license, and therefore of stopping mining operations on site.

Litigation can also be a useful tool to bolster the positioning of women defenders and their organizations in negotiation processes. Firstly litigation can be a handy companion to mobilization, as a court case provides a rallying point for community organizing. Secondly, litigation makes news and therefore provides good content for an advocacy campaign that targets the media. Thirdly, litigation can interact in interesting ways with what matters most to corporations committing human rights violations: profit. Litigation that attracts public attention can affect a company's share price, allowing communities to ‘hit them where it hurts’<sup>(24)</sup>.

Preparing judicial complaints requires considerable financial and human resources. The obstacles, erected by companies and authorities, to accessing necessary information; the need to get a range of scientific experts on board; and the necessity to translate scientific technical terminology into language accessible to a judge, all add to the challenges that communities face when contemplating litigation. This demonstrates the imbalance between community resources on the one hand, and corporate resources on the other.



These obstacles are aggravated by the lack of an intersectional perspective (gender, racial, class, etc.) in methods to obtain evidence; the limited expertise of judicial staff investigating these types of violations; and the existence of prejudices and gender and racial stereotypes in judicial processes and communities.

Despite all these obstacles, where conditions enable, litigation can provide the space for women to amplify their voices and give their testimonies. It can also provide “**an opportunity to organize their own resistance against patriarchal structures within their own community and against the companies from the global North – they are thus no longer objects of a conflict between the communities and the companies, but become subjects of their own fight for justice**<sup>(25)</sup>.”

This litigation section has been co-written with Lisa Chamberlain from the Centre for Applied Legal Studies, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

#### **ORGANIZING and forming community-based groups**

#### **GETTING LEGAL ASSISTANCE to defend your rights in court**

#### **CHALLENGING the legality of licenses and concessions**

#### **USING complaint processes where available**

#### **SHARING your story with video, photography and social media**

#### **STAYING THE COURSE and not backing down**





intuit  
• identificar novas difunções e possibilidades  
sobre elas  
• participar de juntas formadas em diferentes  
movimentos  
• criando espacos conjuntos para politizar  
márias de difuntas voluntárias

# Strategy 6. Media and Communications

The media does more than spread information. It interprets the meaning of information, and thus shapes public opinion. There is a long history of media being used for state propaganda or corporate interests of its owners. Even independent media can be uncritical in promoting dominant ideologies, narratives of development, and gender stereotypes. Reporters can systematically privilege the voices of corporate leaders, and ignore the voices of human rights defenders - particularly women and indigenous communities. Corporations and state authorities have more power and resources to access the media and ensure that extractive projects are presented in a positive light, artificially manufacturing the consent of the public.

Despite this imbalance of power, the media can be a useful tool to amplify the voices and messages of women human rights defenders. Media coverage and social media platforms can enable defenders to inform their communities and societies, to challenge misinformed positions and to exercise political pressure on decision makers. The Amadiba Crisis Committee in Xolobeni, South Africa used media successfully after the murder of one of their key leaders in March 2016 to communicate their opposition to mining on their land. The outcry and publicity led eventually to the South African Ministry of Mineral Resources declaring an 18-month moratorium on mining in the area<sup>(26)</sup>.

In Thailand, Khon Rak Ban Koed Group uses social media to generate public support for their cause<sup>(27)</sup>. This women-led group was established by representatives from six communities in the Northwest of Thailand affected by gold mining operations, in order to monitor the impact on the environment, health and traditional ways of life. It was important for Khon Rak Ban Koed to convey how mining affects everyone, even people in other seemingly unaffected regions, and how it is affecting natural assets for future generations. Their Facebook page attracted over 10,000 followers, and a video clip produced by @NowThisHer about the group already reached many thousands of viewers.

Drawing on the experience and contexts of women activists in southern Africa and beyond, Just Associates, the Association for Progressive Communications and Women'sNet produced an

activist toolkit for feminist movement building<sup>(28)</sup>. The toolkit aims to assist activists to think through their communication strategies. It offers an exciting and practical guide to writing a communication strategy and reviews a number of information and communication tools and technology-related campaigns which can be used in organising.

Community radio is an important means for defenders to reach communities who have no access to other media outlets. For example, according to COPINH, "**in most indigenous communities [...] there is no electricity and the only means of communication and information they have is a small radio. In every home there is a radio<sup>(29)</sup>.**" These radios provide a space for communities to reflect on concerns about defending territories and natural assets.



Production of cultural content, like community radio, helps to link resistance to extractivism, to broad social justice agendas, including feminism and sexual diversity. It can amplify multiple voices and challenge patriarchal culture, for instance by ensuring that music is not demeaning to women and minorities<sup>(30)</sup>.

Finally, the media can be a powerful ally, as they can affect the reputation of the companies, influencing the value of the shares and the profits they generate. Between 2010 and 2011, a coalition of organizations in South Africa attempted to prevent coal mining near the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape by challenging Coal of Africa, a mining company that has its headquarters in Australia:

*"The coalition launched a targeted media campaign to raise public awareness about the danger mining poses to what is not only a World Heritage Site, but an important water source and a sacred place for many southern African people. Throughout this period, the coalition regularly produced press releases and carried out media briefings describing their legal interventions. These resulted in numerous articles appearing in major national publications<sup>(31)</sup>."*

The legal challenges and the media campaign reportedly caused enough negative publicity to help drive down the company's share price. Thus, while the media can serve as a medium of silencing and vilification of defenders, it can also serve as a catalyst for public pressure and social change.

## DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS with friendly reporters

PRODUCING content to be shared through community radio and other communications means: photographs, videos, interviews, press releases

CREATING own information leaflets and newsletters

CHALLENGING mainstream messaging

AMPLIFYING diverse voices from the community

USING social media to disseminate information to allies worldwide

CONDUCTING media trainings for members to be prepared for hostile media





## TO CONSIDER FOR ALL ACTIONS:

Understanding what the law says about your planned action.

Informing participants on anticipated risks before action.

Ensuring all participants understand legal implications and their legal rights.

Arranging for legal assistance and lawyers to be on call.

Having a plan for medical support if violence is anticipated.

Developing a safety plan that is attentive to different vulnerabilities among participants according to race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, residency status, economic resources, dependant family members, and other factors.

Alerting partner organisations, social movements, local and international human rights groups of actions (considering security risks).

Preparing press releases and media reports as part of communication strategy

Documenting actions with photography and video, if appropriate.

Check-ins with participants on physical and emotional wellbeing after the action/campaign.

Following up with participants to reflect and document learnings to strengthen future actions.

Taking the time to appreciate everyone's contribution.



# Case Studies: Resisting through Action

The following set of examples is shared to give you a deeper look into resistance strategies and actions. These real life stories demonstrate how, with creativity and resilience, women are applying different strategies in defense of their rights, communities and the environment.



## **Indonesia: Aleta Baun leads non-violent resistance against mining companies in the Mutis Mountain**

Aleta Baun, fondly called Mama Aleta, is an indigenous Mollo woman from the Mutis Mountain region in West Timor, Indonesia. For the Mollo people, this bio diverse region provides livelihoods, traditional medicine, and a deep spiritual connection. Weaving cloth using natural dye sourced from the forest has been a traditional skill of women in this region for generations<sup>(32)</sup>.

In the 1980s, local government authorities started issuing permits for marble mining in Mollo territory without prior consultation. Industrial mining led to deforestation, water pollution and damage to people's health.

Mama Aleta organized local people in opposition to the mining, travelling for days from village to village, speaking with communities about the impact of the mining on their ways of living. Her activism generated enemies. Local authorities and thugs hired by mining companies targeted Aleta<sup>(33)</sup>. She faced arrest, beating, death threats and even an assassination attempt, forcing her to leave her family for months. She was targeted specifically as a woman defender:

*"As a mother, they [the people from the mining company] knew that I needed to go home and take care of my family. They deliberately blocked my way so I could not get in the house and I was forced to leave home and live outside<sup>(34)</sup>".*

### **Weaving prevails over mining**

With courage and determination, Mama Aleta reached hundreds of people. In 2009, 150 indigenous Mollo women led by Mama Aleta spent an entire year occupying the entrance of a mining site, weaving traditional textiles. The idea came from the women in Fatumnasi, one of the marble mining sites.

*"In Fatumnasi women are the ones who have the rights over land. Women cannot live without water, soil and forests. They took the woven material from the forest, the dye from the forest. Weaving is the epitome of the forest. If the companies do forest clearing or take communities' land then they make the earth naked. This weaving protest wanted to demonstrate to the company that they should not make the earth naked<sup>(35)</sup>."*

There were many hardships. As the women blocked the mining site day and night, they suffered cold, rain, thirst and hunger, as well as violence and threats intended to break their spirit. At the same time, the protest shifted gender roles and strengthened the community. Women were the ones on the frontline, while men took care of the children and households. Neighbours helped to look after the children.

In 2010, after one year of peaceful protest at the mining site, public awareness and pressure forced the companies to abandon their operations.

***"We succeeded to stop the mining and make them leave the sites. This success is due to our persistence, patience, sincerity, and willingness to sacrifice".***

In 2013, Mama Aleta won the Goldman Environmental Prize. In 2014 she was elected as a member of the provincial parliament. Today, Aleta continues working with indigenous communities throughout West Timor to protect their forests, lands, and water.

**SPEAKING** with communities about the impact of extractivism on their lives

**ORGANIZING** people in resistance

**OCCUPYING** mining sites and blocking operations for as long as it takes

**CULTIVATING** traditional arts and crafts as a source of collective strength and resistance

**SHARING** labor and care work in the community

**AMPLIFYING** actions to generate public pressure

**PERSISTING** in the face of attempts to deter resistance

## **Colombia: Afro-descendant Women's March for Life and Ancestral Territories**

In December 2014, dozens of Afro-descendant women from the northern Cauca region of Colombia, walked more than 600 kilometers to the capital, Bogota to protest the impact of illegal mining on their territories. Defenders state that the government had granted more than 260 concessions for industrial mining in this area<sup>(36)</sup>. The right of Afro-descendant communities to prior consultation was violated, making the concessions illegal. Passing through many cities, they met thousands of people facing similar threats<sup>(37)</sup>.

Mining in the area dates to the era of colonisation and slavery. In 1637 enslaved Afro-descendant people were forced to mine gold for the Spaniards. In 1851, after a local revolt, they worked for 16 years to buy the mines, and continued artisanal mining. In contrast to large-scale industrial mining, traditional artisanal forms of mining do not produce toxic pollution and can be environmentally sustainable<sup>(38)</sup>.

Community attempts to defend their territories from illegal mining have been met with threats, violence and military presence. In May 2014, one such mine collapsed in the community of San Antonio burying more than 40 people. The mine closed down, but the illegal mining operations moved to other areas, and after a year reopened despite the apparent vigilance of the local authorities.

The women of Northern Cauca then decided to march to the capital. Starting with 30 women, by the time that they arrived in Bogota there were 130 participants.

*"The purpose was to collect women along the way, to educate them about the issue and to generate the solidarity that was needed when arriving in Bogotá, where meetings with the Constitutional Court and several government institutions had been planned. The purpose of these meetings was to demand compliance with several orders in which the Court requested that the protection of communities and territories be guaranteed," explains Charo Mina Rojas<sup>(39)</sup>.*

In the face of indifference from Ministry of Interior officials, the women decided to occupy the Ministry's building. Their demands included the removal of illegal mining machinery from their territories; the withdrawal of mining concessions granted by the government without prior consultation; respect for the right to prior consultation and consent; ensuring the protection of their community leaders; and an impartial investigation into illegal mining operations

in their territories and punishment of those found to be responsible.

Finally, after five days of occupation, the March of Afro-descendant Women of North Cauca signed an agreement with the national government who committed to take steps to eradicate illegal mining and ensure the security of women leaders and their communities<sup>(40)</sup>.

Today, Afro-descendant women emphasise the importance of this march, despite the failure of the government to fulfill most of its commitments. Charo Mina Rojas explains that

- a) they felt supported by the local communities they encountered;
- b) they demonstrated their convening capacities and the ability to mobilize local, national and international networks and allies in support; and,
- c) the march strengthened the political awareness of the participants and their communities, who recognised that their claims are based on their collective rights.

### **OCCUPYING public spaces (after informing participants of rights and risks)**

**SPECIFYING demands on extractive operations, protection for community leaders and human rights defenders, and access to justice.**

**NEGOTIATING and ensuring agreements are written and signed.**

**CONVENING AND MOBILIZING local, national and international networks and allies in support.**

**VALUING THE PROCESS of educating people and communities and creating regional and global connections, beyond the immediate objective.**

## Honduras: Solidarity actions multiply to demand justice for Berta Cacere

The assassination of Berta Caceres in March 2016 shook millions, resulting in a powerful wave of worldwide solidarity across movements. Berta was an indigenous feminist activist, the founder and General Coordinator of the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH) and a member of the Honduran National Network of Women Human Rights Defenders. She had been fighting for years against the construction of a hydroelectric project, Agua Zarca, by the Honduran company Desarrollos Energéticos S.A. (DESA). As a result, she faced criminalization, violence, death threats and finally her assassination.

After her death, national, regional and international human rights organizations and women's groups activated their networks denouncing her assassination and demanding justice. United Nations Special Rapporteurs and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights condemned the killing and requested an impartial investigation<sup>(41)</sup>. The Honduran government was pressured to abandon their original line of inquiry, which portrayed her killing as a 'crime of passion', and look into the likely possibility of corporate and military involvement in the assassination.

This mobilization brought the world's attention to the ongoing lethal violence against environmental activists in Honduras and elsewhere. It has also cast the spotlight on the complicity of European banks, financing the Agua Zarca project despite the opposition of indigenous communities. Following the killing of another COPINH member, Nelson Garcia, 12 days after Berta's assassination, the Dutch development bank FMO and FinnFund from Finland eventually announced suspension their financing of the hydroelectric project. **"If civil society networks keep up their pressure, the suspension of support by European funders must surely be the beginning of the end of the ill-fated and violent Agua Zarca Project"**<sup>(42)</sup>.

Worldwide, Berta continues to symbolize the courageous struggle for people and nature against profit-driven corporate violence and destruction.

**MESSAGING:** the call "Berta did not die, she multiplied" sparked a powerful wave of worldwide solidarity across movements

**FOLLOWING** the money to cast a spotlight on the complicity of investors, banks and corporations financing and profiting from harmful extractive operations

**LEARNING** about the international and regional human rights systems and how human rights defenders can use them

**ACTIVATING** networks locally, regionally and internationally

**USING** social media and online platforms for international coalition building, strategy sharing and organising solidarity actions

**GENERATING** international pressure on government to change policy and conduct impartial investigations



## **Self-care: Mesoamerican Human Rights Initiative**

On June 4, 2012, the leader of K'iche's Peoples Council (CPK) Lolita Chávez and her companions were intercepted by a group of armed men, shouting that they were looking for Lolita Chávez. Four women were injured in the incident. A day earlier, CPK had held a peaceful demonstration in Santa Cruz del Quiche to protest the mayor's corruption and discriminatory policies against indigenous peoples. In response, the mayor gathered soldiers and threatened CPK members, and filed a complaint to the Human Rights Ombudsman against the defenders.

Lolita participated in the safe spaces program of the Mesoamerican Human Rights Initiative. Her first stay provided her a space of rest and reflection away from a situation of permanent stress, harassment, and attacks against her, her family and her organization.

The program acknowledges the fundamental need to recognize the serious physical and psychological impact on defenders, and their entire family, and their need to receive support. Lolita's family members were able to stay and receive psychological and medical care, including traditional treatments, cultural experiences and recreation.

After several years of providing self-care and collective wellbeing for women human rights defenders in Mesoamerica, Casa La Serena, located in Oaxaca, Mexico, was inaugurated in 2016. It is a temporary stay house for recuperation, healing, rest and reflection for Women Human Right Defenders from the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras), who are experiencing situations of emotional or physical exhaustion, personal crisis, pain, losses or other impacts related to their human rights work.

WHRDs can stay in the house for two weeks either as an individual, with their family, or in a group. The house relies on the principles of collective political work and individual care, and incorporates holistic remedies and ancestral medicine. It also includes an integrated approach to protection and a follow-up plan to ensure that the participants carry these benefits into their activism, lives, and communities.

**ACKNOWLEDGING the impact of physical and psychological violence, criminalization and intimidation on the minds, bodies and souls of women human rights defenders**

**UNDERSTANDING what being safe and well means for activists, movements and communities in each context**

**INCORPORATING caring for oneself and each other as an integral part of the struggle**

**ENABLING activists to rest, reflect and recuperate, by providing time, space, material support and social legitimacy**

**RECOGNIZING that family members of activists can be affected and deserve support as well**

**LEGITIMIZING self-care and collective wellbeing as part of cultures of resistance**



## **South Africa: The Women of Marikana Cry Together**

South Africa has about 90% of the world's platinum and almost all of this is found in North West Province, known as the Platinum Province. Yet this wealth does not reach the people of this land, and the mineworkers and their families are forced to live in poor, undignified conditions. In August 2012, mineworkers at Lonmin PLC's Marikana mine in Rustenburg went on strike demanding a wage increase<sup>(43)</sup>. On 16 August 2012 the South African Police Service shot and killed 34 striking mineworkers at Marikana. The deaths, referred to as the Marikana Massacre, represent the highest number of deaths in one incident at the hands of the South African Police in a democratic South Africa.

### **Voices of the women of Marikana**

Without the women of Marikana, mining would not be possible. They are the foundation of their communities – they put food on the table, raise children, care for the sick and elderly, and sometimes work as mineworkers themselves. In the aftermath of the massacre, these women came under unimaginable strain with their grief over the loss of loved ones and the hardships caused by the ongoing strike. Ignored by the public discourse, the women of Marikana have organised protests, fought to have their voices heard at the Marikana Commission of Inquiry and continue to strive for better living conditions for their community.

The women formed a community-based organisation called Sikhala Sonke, which literally means “we are crying together” but can also be interpreted as “we are all in the same pain”.

### **Claiming the right to peaceful protest**

In September 2012, Councillor Paulina Masutlhe, a community leader who was supporting the families of the deceased, injured and striking mineworkers, was shot in the leg with rubber bullets by police during a raid and later died in hospital. Sikhala Sonke organized a peaceful protest to the police station to honour Paulina’s life, and to call for peace in the community.

The legislation governing protest in South Africa is infamous for being an obstacle to exercising the constitutional right to protest<sup>(44)</sup>. Using a frequent practice of ‘misinterpreting’ the laws, the municipality attempted to prevent their march, but the women of Sikhala Sonke did not back down and sought legal

assistance from the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS) to take the matter to court. The court ruled in their favour and reaffirmed their constitutional right to protest.

### **The Marikana Commission of Inquiry**

In October 2012, President Zuma appointed a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the killings at the Lonmin Mine in Marikana in August 2012. The Commission examined the conduct of Lonmin, the police and the unions in relation to the killings. Very little time was spent on the second phase of the inquiry - the broader systemic inequality and living conditions in the mining industry which led to the strike.

It became apparent that the Commission was not going to hear the testimonies of the Marikana women, despite them being severely affected by the killings. The women attended the Commission on a daily basis, sitting silently in the back. In the three years that the Commission sat, just one hour was allocated to the Chairperson of the Sikhala Sonke to articulate the concerns of the women of Marikana.

In partnership with CALS, Marikana women made a documentary showing their living conditions and their protest action<sup>(45)</sup>. The video was used as evidence at the Marikana Commission of Inquiry during the cross examination of one of Lonmin’s executives.

## **The struggle continues**

In June 2015, the women filed a complaint with the compliance advisor of the International Finance Corporation (IFC) of the World Bank that had invested in Lonmin. As part of the proceedings, a mediation process with Lonmin began. In December 2016, Sikhala Sonke decided to withdraw from the mediation process, upon reaching the conclusion that Lonmin had engaged in bad faith and repeatedly avoided addressing any of the core issues. It is now up to the IFC to investigate Lonmin's failure to meet its own obligations<sup>(46)</sup>.

Sikhala Sonke, now a registered non-profit organisation, continues to fight for a better Marikana community. Despite state and corporate efforts to undermine their constitutional rights, the women continue to tell their own story, engage in civil society forums, with government, with the media, with mining companies and the community at large, for a better life.

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**ORGANIZING and forming community-based groups**

**PROTESTING police violence and defending your lawful right to protest**

**PARTNERING with human rights lawyers to defend your rights in court**

**USING complaint processes (where available)**

**PARTICIPATING in public forums: monitoring, documenting, intervening**

**SHARING your story with video, photography and social media**

# Tools and Resources for Action and Inspiration



Below are just a few of the many resources that can help you in building your strategies for action and resistance.

**WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS CONFRONTING EXTRACTIVE INDUSTRIES: CRITICAL RISKS AND HUMAN RIGHTS OBLIGATIONS:** a policy report with a gender perspective which analyses forms of violations and types of perpetrators, quotes relevant human rights obligations and includes policy recommendations to states, corporations, civil society and donors.

<https://www.awid.org/publications/women-human-rights-defenders-confronting-extractive-industries>

**OUR RIGHT TO SAFETY: WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS' HOLISTIC APPROACH TO PROTECTION** for elaborated account of dimensions of security and safety: personal safety, safety for family members, institutional safety, collective safety, digital security, and measures addressing structural violence.

<http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/2014/03/11/our-right-to-safety-new-report/>

Find more resources on WHRDIC website

<http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/our-work/resources/>

**CHALLENGING CORPORATE POWER: STRUGGLES FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS, ECONOMIC AND GENDER JUSTICE:** a research paper outlining the impacts of corporate power and offering insights into strategies of resistance.

<https://www.awid.org/publications/challenging-corporate-power-struggles-womens-rights-economic-and-gender-justice>

## Emergency Response

Front Line Defenders, see Tools for Human Rights Defenders

<https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/>

Online Directory of Urgent Responses for WHRDs  
<http://urgent-responses.awid.org/WHRD/>

Submitting a complaint with the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders  
<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/SRHRDefenders/Pages/Complaints.aspx>

Submitting a complaint with the African Commission on Human and People's Rights  
<http://www.achpr.org/mechanisms/human-rights-defenders/>

Submitting a petition with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights  
<http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/portal/>

Urgent Action Fund's Rapid Response Grant  
<https://urgentactionfund.org/apply-for-a-grant/>

## Holistic Approach to Safety

Capacitar Emergency Response Kit  
[http://www.capacitar.org/emergency\\_kits.html](http://www.capacitar.org/emergency_kits.html)

Digital Security First Aid Kit for Human Rights Defenders  
<https://www.apc.org/en/irhr/digital-security-first-aid-kit>

Holistic Security Guide  
<https://holistic-security.tacticaltech.org/>

Resource Library of the African Institute for Integrated Response to Violence Against Women & Girls & HIV/AIDS  
<http://airforafrica.org/resources/>

Security in a Box - Digital Security Tools and Tactics  
<https://securityinabox.org/en/>

Women Human Rights Defenders' Security Strategies: Insist, Resist, Persist, Exist.  
<http://www.peacewomen.org/node/89301>

What's the Point of Revolution If We Can't Dance?  
<https://urgentactionfund.org/resources/publications/>

# Information, Change and Policy Tools

Business, Civil Freedoms & Human Rights  
Defenders Portal  
<https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/bizhrds>

Dismantle Corporate Power Campaign for a United Nations Binding Treaty for Transnational Corporations on Human Rights  
<http://www.stopcorporateimpunity.org/binding-treaty-un-process/>

United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders: Report on the Situation of Environmental Human Rights Defenders  
<https://www.protecting-defenders.org/en/reports-and-documents>

We Rise: Movement Building Reimagined -  
<https://werise-toolkit.org/en>

Working with the United Nations Human Rights Programme: A Handbook for Civil Society  
[http://www.ohchr.org/EN/AboutUs/CivilSociety/Documents/Handbook\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/AboutUs/CivilSociety/Documents/Handbook_en.pdf)



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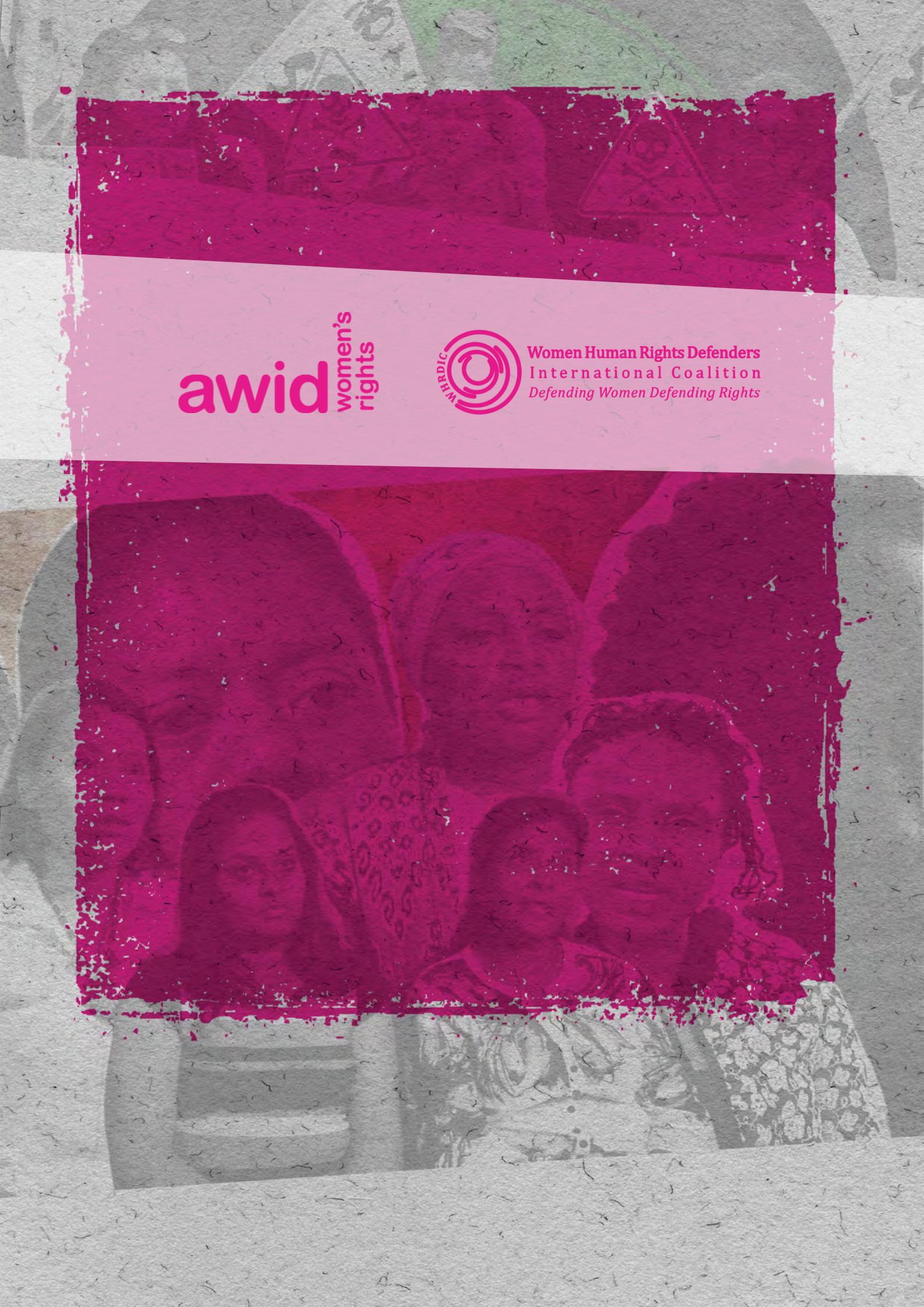
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**awid** women's rights



**Women Human Rights Defenders  
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