

38th session of the UN Human Rights Council Item 3 - Joint Oral Statement

Panel on impact of violence against women human rights defenders and women's organisations in digital spaces

Thank you Chair and distinguished panelists,

ISHR, Amnesty International, the Association for Progressive Communications, AWID, FORUM-ASIA and OMCT are pleased to put forward some inputs to this panel on behalf of the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition¹.

Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) are increasingly engaged in digital spaces to, among others, expose human rights violations, mobilise their communities for action, document the experiences of their movements and share information globally. This has allowed for new opportunities for awareness and accountability. At the same time, it has exposed them to further risk of online harassment, smear campaigns, intimidation and violence with clear gender dimensions aimed at delegitimizing their work to defend human rights.

The gender-based discrimination and inequality that exists in society gets amplified online. As everyone is entitled to the same protection of rights online as they are offline, the first step towards addressing online violence is to recognise that it is a legitimate and harmful manifestation of gender-based violence.

We are particularly concerned over the recent cases of online harassment and violence against WHRDs, which are emblematic of a broader trend:

- Egyptian activist, Amal Fathy, used social media to expose sexual violence. She currently faces unsubstantiated charges of “incitement to overthrow the government in Egypt,” “spreading false news on Facebook”, and “abuse of social media.”
- Vietnamese dissident blogger, Pham Doan Trang, was allegedly kidnapped by security officials earlier this month. Vietnamese legislators have subsequently adopted a cyber security law which would only further contribute to the clampdown on the freedom of expression in the country,
- Mexican blogger Tamara de Anda (also known as "Plaqueta") last year used social media to draw attention to personal experiences of street harassment. She was then the subject of widespread criticism and mockery online that contained threats of physical aggression, sexual content and sexist jokes.

We thank the panelists for outlining the State obligations to facilitate an enabling online environment and ensuring accountability for violations in this regard. We further ask you:

1. What is the relationship between the right to privacy and the prevention of online gender-based violence, in particular the use of encryption, pseudonyms and anonymity tools?
2. What needs to be done to strengthen WHRD movements so they can better protect themselves?
3. What more can be done to ensure better private sector accountability to prevent, remedy and eliminate online violence based on gender and sexuality?

¹ Full list of Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition members can be found at <http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/about/members/>. Luchadoras also supports this statement.