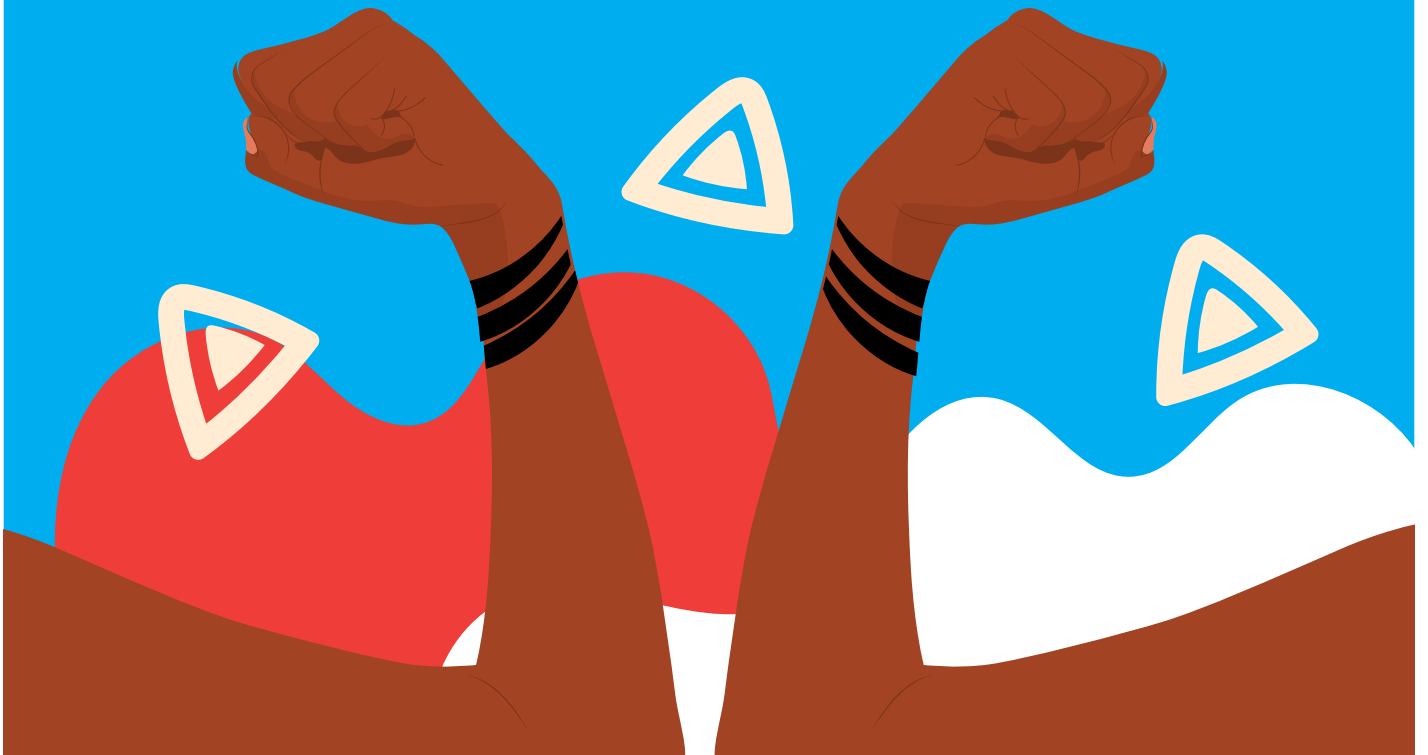




STORIES OF CHANGE UNDER DEFENDDEFENDERS' UN WOMEN PEACE AND HUMANITARIAN FUND-PROJECT



Introduction

About United Nations Women's Peace & Humanitarian Fund

The [United Nations Women's Peace & Humanitarian Fund \(WPHF\)](#) mobilizes critical support for local and grassroots civil society organizations working on women, peace and security and humanitarian action. WPHF is a flexible and rapid financing mechanism supporting quality interventions designed to enhance the capacity of women to prevent conflict, respond to crises and emergencies, and seize key peacebuilding opportunities.


In 2022, the WPHF launched the Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) Window to support WHRDs from/working in conflict and crisis-affected countries. This funding opportunity offers two forms of support i.e., Advocacy Support¹ and Safety Net²

About DefendDefenders

[DefendDefenders](#) was established in 2005 as the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project and registered in the same year as a foreign Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in Uganda. DefendDefenders serves as the Secretariat of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (EHAHRD-Net) representing thousands of HRDs and their organisations. The vision of the network is a region in which the human rights of every individual as stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are respected and upheld. The mission is to enhance the safety and capacities of HRDs in the region for greater resilience and effective fulfilment of their mandates.

DefendDefenders works in Uganda as well as in Burundi, Djibouti, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia (together with Somaliland), South Sudan, Sudan and Tanzania. As a secretariat for the Pan-African Human Rights Defenders Network (AfricanDefenders), DefendDefenders' work extends across the African region.

The core mandate of DefendDefenders is to enhance the safety, security and wellbeing of HRDs. To achieve this, DefendDefenders' work has to date focused on protection and security management, capacity building, technology development as well as advocacy, research and communication.



DefendDefenders is a partner of the WPHF Funding Window for WHRDs Safety Net mechanism, along with other NGOs, which also have regional expertise and proven track record in providing support to WHRDs. From September 2022, during the first phase of the project, DefendDefenders enhanced the safety, security and mental health of 46 WHRDs across 9 countries in Africa.

Through the WPHF, DefendDefenders, produces a collection of success stories to raise the profile of WHRDs, their work, achievements and the challenges they face while promoting and advocating for the rights of others.

¹ Advocacy Support: covers direct logistical expenses (transportation, visa fees, accommodation, translation, daily subsistence allowance, accessibility for WHRDs living with disabilities) to participate in, either individually or as a delegation, a meeting, event, or decision-making process, at the national, regional, or international level, which contributes to advancing human rights and peace.

² Safety Net: covers the urgent protection costs for individual WHRDs, who, due to their engagement for human rights and peace, currently face, or have faced risks with resulting impacts that continue to threaten their safety and/or ability to sustain their work. This grant could address protection needs such as short-term livelihoods, relocation costs, security/equipment, legal assistance, health care, and mental health. Grants are for amounts up to a maximum of USD 10,000 USD for a maximum of six months.

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 **Nita**

Protection Grants: A Lifeline For WHRDs during times of Conflict.

At 27 years old, Nita is a young and passionate human rights defender from Sudan who started her activism in 2013 while in the University's student union. She has since been involved in advocating for women's rights through her voluntary work with various women rights groups in one of the regions documenting human rights abuses against women and engaging in the democratic transition process. Between 2021 and 2023, Nita actively engaged in advancing women's political participation, coalition building, and contributing to political change in Sudan with various human rights organisations.

Unfortunately, with the outbreak of the April 2023 war, Nita lost her job and her economic situation became hard.

"I couldn't stop thinking about the wellbeing of my family. Without a source of income, I knew I couldn't look after them since I was the only one working." Said Nita "I also worried about my work and how I was going to continue documenting the ongoing violations in Sudan."

Nita was however fortunate enough to know about DefendDefenders through previous engagements. She was supported through the WPHF with a grant to rent a house, cater for living expenses and purchase a laptop and a modem to keep working.



“The grant took away the worry of my family. I honestly felt defeated because I couldn’t provide for them, but right now my father respects me even more. ”



Nita adds that her and her family are in a more secure location despite the ongoing conflict. She has also resumed her work by volunteering with different organisations so that she can help vulnerable women in the region.



Meela

Overcoming violence: Meela's Story of survival

According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the war in Sudan has resulted in thousands of deaths, the destruction of family homes, schools, hospitals and other essential services, massive displacement, as well as sexual violence.

For refugees like Meela who had experienced violence in her homeland, her journey from Sudan to Uganda was riddled with risk. The 35-year-old recounts the details of her journey to safety.

My name is Meela and I work with a women's rights organisation. Our organisation does a lot of work to provide legal aid to female survivors of violence, document human rights violations, raise awareness around women's rights and provide workshops on legal aid but linking them to peace building.

In April 2023 when the war broke out, I went for a mission in Blue Nile state to document cases and meet with survivors. When the mission ended, I prepared to travel to North Darfur however I got stuck in Khartoum for 58 days due to the intensity of the fighting. When I realised there was an opportunity to leave, I tried to get on a bus but I was stopped by some militia from the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) who also took all my valuables including a mobile phone, camera,



money and a laptop. I couldn't get on the bus without any money so I went back home.

After several days I attempted to leave by bus but I was once again stopped but this time it was the Sudanese Military Forces (SAF). They robbed me of my items and one of the men raped me. I was fortunately helped by some good Samaritans who took me back home to get help.

Because I had lost my phone, I managed to contact a friend in Kampala who was able to get in touch with DefendDefenders and receive the grant on my behalf. On June 24th I was able to flee Sudan and arrived safely in Uganda. Currently my security and health have improved, and I am economically stable. Thank you DefendDefenders!

Through the WPHF, DefendDefenders supported Meela with a grant that she used to relocate to Uganda, rent a house, cater for medical expenses, get psychosocial support and pay for her basic needs. The funding came at a time when women human rights defenders, especially those in conflict areas face challenges and dangerous situations that affect not only their physical well-being but also their mental and emotional health.



Brina

The fight against injustice: A former Chief Justice's struggle for freedom.

Human rights defenders face many threats . Often, those who abuse human rights are in a position of power (whether in politics or in a corporation), so they target HRDs, including women human rights defenders (WHRDs), who threaten their power. (DefendDefenders, 2021)

Brina is a former Chief Justice of Country X. She became the second female Chief Justice for that country, and is a well-known human rights defender and founder of the Association of Female Lawyers of Country X.

On 15 February 2023, the WHRD reported to security officials and the media that there had been two separate break-ins at her home. On 22 February 2023, there was another break-in that resulted in the death of one person and injuring of two others. The former chief justice reported the case to police, but in a cynical turnaround, the police declared her a person of interest in the murder investigation, accusing her of involvement in the murder for ritualistic purposes.

According to her lawyer, Attorney S, "The night the former Chief Justice was detained, she reported that her and others arrested at her home were tortured. As her lawyers, we demanded for her release and managed to secure her freedom. However, she was later re-arrested by the

police. We then filed a motion for discovery so that the prosecution turns over all evidence to the defence ahead of the court hearing which is scheduled to start in August 2023."

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), in many instances, state actors such as police and other security forces are the most visible perpetrators of acts such as arbitrary arrests, illegal searches and physical violence against WHRDs, yet they bear the primary responsibility for assuring their protection. (OHCHR factsheet No 29)

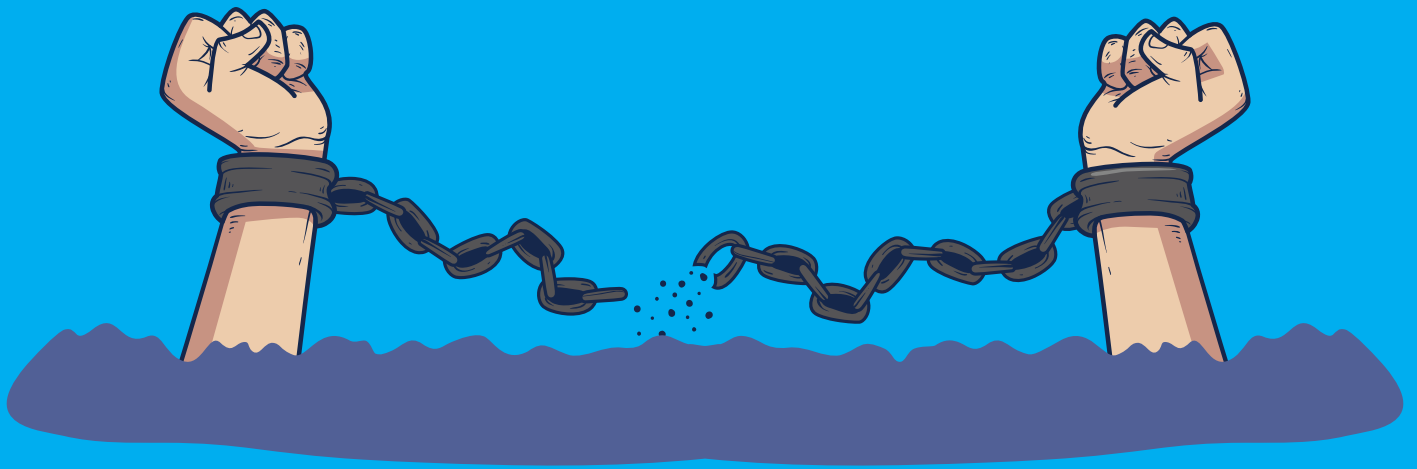
Nevertheless, since June 2023, some progress has been registered in improving the former Chief Justice's situation. On her behalf, Attorney S applied to the UNWPHF and received a grant from DefendDefenders for legal support.

"With the grant, we were able to renovate the prison cell and buy some mattresses to improve her living conditions. Although she is depressed, she seems to be handling it well, and keeping busy practicing her law, helping other women within the prison," says attorney S.

Additionally, her team has been able to organise a team of lawyers using the grant, to prepare her defence statements and pay salaries to staff members to continue operations. The former Chief justice was also able to record some video messages that are being broadcast so that the public can hear from her to counter the misinformation being spread.

"Right now, she wants to keep talking so that she can get her account out there - she wants to prove her innocence, and she wants to do it by the book. Thank you for the support, it came at the right time to help her prepare her defence. It costs a lot to set up a client's defence! I didn't even know about this program, but I tried it out and it worked," adds attorney S.

DefendDefenders WHRD brochure 2021. Available at <https://defenddefenders.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/WHRD-brochure.pdf>
Human Rights Defenders: Protecting the Right to Defend Human Rights. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/FactSheet29en.pdf> accessed on 17th August 2023.



Dora

From Detention to Support: Dora's Story of Hope



I realised that if I don't speak, nothing will happen, but if I speak, I know someone is listening and will do something about it, says Dora.

Dora, a 31-year-old woman human rights defender (WHRD) based in district X, in Uganda, started defending human rights way back in 2016, driven by the urge to change the events that were taking place around her community such as brutality, kidnappings, unjust persecution, torture and blackmail towards other activists and human rights defenders.

"No one seemed to be bothered and no one was talking about any of the things that were happening. I started speaking about these issues and I came to realise that whenever we speak, some positive change happens," she says.

Dora is a member of the National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders in Uganda (NCHRD-U) and also works with other organisations to raise concerns on issues like rights for; women, ethnic minorities, HRDs in the extractives, and sexual minorities amongst others.

"As HRDs, we use such platforms to engage as a collective," she says.

In June 2022, Dora organised a street demonstration in the town to raise awareness on the increasing prices of goods and commodities, in solidarity with colleagues in Kampala and eastern Uganda who were holding similar demonstrations. For her audacity, she was arrested brutally and detained for three days in a police cell.

"My arrest was the beginning of my problems. Because it was widely discussed on four radio stations, it put me in the limelight, so much so that I got a visit from top security officials and the Resident District Commissioner (RDC) of district X. They came to interrogate me and warn me against engaging in demonstrations. They were saying things like "Those things of Kampala, you will not bring to our city."

The threats did not stop even after she was released. Security officials continued to send her family messages designed to intimidate and dissuade her from maintaining her activism.

"They would say, "tell your sister she is weak, she will be got anytime. This is our city and we cannot tolerate such things here. I started leaving in fear, knowing that these people could get to me. It was depressing for me," she says.

With threats against her increasing, Dora had to put her activities on hold. She also decided to take her two children to boarding school and stayed in the house by herself. "But any slight noise would startle me. I think I was dealing with some kind of trauma," she says.

Isolated and nearly depressed, Dora sought support from her networks, and was referred to the WPHF call, to which she applied.

"Early this year in 2023, I received a grant from DefendDefenders that covered my relocation and therapy. You can't imagine but I had been battling mental health issues since June 2022 when I was arrested!" she says, with relief.

"Right now, I can say that I am in a better place since finishing my therapy. Mentally, I feel okay as I just needed a period to heal. I was also lucky that most of the public officials who were involved in my case, including the District Police Commander were transferred to other jurisdictions. This also helped me to heal faster knowing that those people who caused the trauma were no longer there. The fact that the doctor still checks on me and knowing that someone cares, also helped," She adds.

She also feels more secure since her relocation. "With this grant, I also managed to buy a new phone since my old one had been confiscated at the time of my arrest. Although they eventually returned it, I couldn't trust using it."

Now back to work, Dora says she is not giving up her activism. "In fact, some colleagues and I are following up on a case which is about to go to court, so I have not backed off from human rights work although I have reduced my online engagements because I still need to be cautious of my online safety as well," concluding, "All I can say that the grant has helped me a lot to navigate the psychological torture that comes with this work."




Elizabeth Ayen

The power of grants in Jonglei

Elizabeth Ayen is the executive Director of Jonglei women empowerment program in South Sudan. The organisation exists to empower women to stand up for their rights and promote women's economic empowerment (WEE) through livelihoods and entrepreneurship skills, including creating awareness on issues of gender-based violence (GBV) and supporting victims to access justice.

Jonglei women empowerment program has been in existence since 2011 and has since engaged in a number of activities in Jonglei state including but not limited to WEE, livelihoods, research, peace building, advocacy on women's rights such as 16 days of activism, commemorating women's International day, and emergency support.



“We started this organisation because we wanted to help women and girls in Jonglei. You see, in the greater administrative area, there is a lot of cattle rustling between different communities and during those raids they kill women and attack children. Currently there is ongoing fighting in greater Pibor³ and women are the most vulnerable as they are killed, raped or kidnaped.”

Elizabeth adds that as a grassroots organisation, they face many challenges typical of small organisations such as limited funding to meet their goals. On top of this, the area in which Jonglei women empowerment program operates is extremely remote and is only accessible by flights, also because it's a remote place, accommodation is a problem to staff members.

“One of the challenges is accommodation because that place is so remote, it is hard to get a place to sleep when we go there to conduct activities. Also, communication is a problem as some of our donors can't cover those costs. In the office we have only one desktop which is used by the finance officer and other staff to make reports.”

Relatedly, the organisation had a problem of internet connectivity and therefore had limited access to online information from especially working groups/clusters that they were not part of. With such challenges, Elizabeth narrates that working effectively was rather difficult. However, a ray of hope materialised through the UNWomen call that Elizabeth happened to find online, to which she immediately applied.

“I saw the online call for proposals from their website, and felt like I could be one of the beneficiaries. So, I applied because I wanted to get a computer which I knew would be of much help to the organisation. When I received the grant mid this year, I used it to buy a smart phone and a laptop. Now I can easily make reports and when I go to the field, I have some where to sleep.”

Elizabeth says that with the funds, she was also able to buy an internet package which enabled her to stay connected and correspond with key stakeholders such as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and other women human rights networks in Juba and Bor. As a result of the sustained communication and networking, the organisation received a certificate of registration from the South Sudan Human Rights Defenders Network and are now a recognised member.

“Jonglei women empowerment program is now recognised, and we have started attending meetings organised by the UNOCHA on invitation of the South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC).”

For Jonglei women empowerment, establishing relationships with various stakeholders, at both local and international level can facilitate effective delivery of their program within the community.

³ Pibor, Jonglei join forces to fight cattle rustling, child abduction. Available at <https://cityreviewss.com/pibor-jonglei-join-forces-to-fight-cattle-rustling-child-abduction/> accessed on 23rd August 2023.



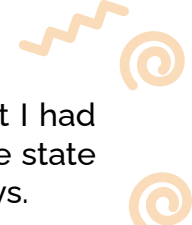
Unstoppable: Inga's inspiring story

The [#ENDSARS](#) protests in Nigeria were a series of demonstrations that began in October 2020, primarily driven by young Nigerians advocating for an end to police brutality and the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a controversial police unit with a history of human rights abuses.

At 25 years old, Inga was one of the brave WHRDs at the front line of the #ENDSARS protests. A vocal and ardent opponent of social, political, and economic injustices, she narrates that even after the protests in Nigeria, there was a lot of repression by the state and a lot of violence against protesters, many of whom were killed while others remain detained to this day. Inga was one of the panellists on the Judicial Panel of Inquiry set up to ensure justice for victims of the dissolved SARS and other police units. She says their inquiry found a systematic targeting of the #ENDSARS protesters:

"Even after this inquiry, the repressions did not stop, and more protesters started to leave the country. Some even started going missing. Those who were monitoring the protests also advised us to leave the country since we were at the front- line."

Among other HRDs, Inga was labelled a terrorist by her government and was placed on a no-fly list. Her bank accounts were frozen, and her passport confiscated.



“My entire life was disrupted including my studies. I was in my final year at school, but I had to leave abruptly. My family and I had to move a couple of times because we knew the state agents were coming after us. We were left emotionally traumatised and fearful,” she says.

But for her varied contacts in Nigeria's civil society network, Inga's options had grown extremely limited. “In the course of having to leave the country, the civil society in Nigeria became a reference point to receive support. I reached out to the WPHF and they agreed to help me. Through DefendDefenders, I was facilitated with temporary relocation and with other resources so that I am not stranded. The work I do has also continued through the financial resources and the psychological support I received. To that extent, DefendDefenders played a huge role in ensuring my safety,” she says, adding, “I want to appreciate DefendDefenders because it understands the context of Africa. It is an African organisation which is very well versed with the challenges of human rights defenders on the continent. They understand exactly what you need and how you need it.”



Kyla

From rejection to redemption

Kyla is woman human rights defender working with the women's organisation with support from Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA). She conducts awareness especially on domestic violence in relation to the family law of her country, with a focus on pregnant women and girls especially those that are raped and rejected by their communities and families.


Kyla acknowledges that although the work she does is fulfilling, she does face challenges as she narrates.

In July 2022, I set out to help a girl who was a rape victim. She was a neighbour's daughter and her family was sending her to the village because they did not want to report the case to the police as the rape had been committed by a family member.

I decided to report the case to the police so that this girl could get justice. When the girls' family learnt of this, they were not happy. My own family got angry with me because they didn't want me to meddle in another family's affairs and my brothers ended up destroying my computer and bicycle.



"You are wasting time helping community outcasts and rejects. This kind of work brings bad omen to the family." said my brothers.



I felt so disappointed with their actions and decided to move out of my family home. I rented a small house and tried to continue with my work but it was difficult without my computer and bicycle. Paying rent became costly while writing reports and moving around to meet victims became a challenge.

The turning point was when I was put in touch with DefendDefenders by one of my contacts in the civil society. He sent me the online application link and I immediately applied to the WPHF call.

I then received feedback from DefendDefenders who supported me with a grant. With the funds, I rented a small house and paid rent for 6 months. I also bought a computer and a modem and I am using the balance to cater for living expenses. My security has improved and with the new laptop, I am able to communicate and continue documenting cases.



Marie

Escaping Rebels & Starting Over

Marie is a 26-year-old woman human rights defender from Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and is dedicated to safeguarding the rights of children. She actively promotes awareness about human rights and speaks out against sexual violence perpetrated by the Mai-Mai group against women and girls in her village.

In June 2022, Marie received death threats from the leader of the Mai-Mai rebels. Fearing for her safety, she temporarily left the region and returned in February 2023 believing the situation had improved.

However, on the day of her return, she was apprehended by six Mai-Mai rebels who took her to the forest to their commander. Fortunately, she was released after two days. Marie continued to receive threats from the group and on the night of 22/03/2023 Marie's house was set on fire by the rebels. Marie believes that this was backlash from the Mai-Mai in response to her human rights work.

"They were sending me a message. They no longer wanted me in the village," Marie adds.

Following the loss of her home, Marie sought support from another human rights organisation, that fortunately referred her to the WPHF call to which she applied. In May 2023, DefendDefenders provided Marie with a grant to relocate to another region, where she has established a new home. She has also used the grant to cater for living expenses and provide for her immediate family.

"I am now safe. Although I haven't resumed my work, at least I feel safe!" said Marie.



June

Terror and Triumph: June's story

June is a 75-year-old woman human rights defender from DRC, who passionately advocates for women's rights and courageously exposes instances of sexual violence committed by the local police in her village. Due to her relentless efforts, On 2nd April 2023, she fell victim to the very brutality she sought to eradicate—two police officers raped her, causing physical injuries and health complications. June reported this heinous act to the authorities, but encountered resistance from the police commander, who dismissed the allegations against his subordinates.

Fortunately, June's perseverance and the support from fellow HRDs led to the arrest of the two perpetrators. However, the backlash for her outspoken stance on the prevalent sexual violence in her community forced her to leave her village. She was subjected to threats due to her courageous denunciation of the very violence she had suffered.

In her time of need, she reached out to DefendDefenders and requested support to relocate to another region and seek for treatment. Her request was honoured through the WPHF. The support June received enabled her to find a house in the new location, access necessary medical treatment, and sustain her basic needs.

As a testament to her experience, June emphasizes the importance of the ongoing support from DefendDefenders for human rights defenders who face threats and are at risk. She underscores the critical role similar organizations play in safeguarding those who risk their safety for the greater good.



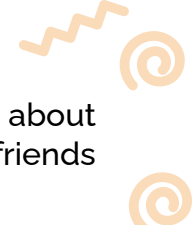
Escaping Fear & Intolerance

I have been doing activism for the last five years, both online and physically but since the 'anti-gay' law came out, I was targeted with online threats. They sent me threatening messages on my phone and email." ABA.

In May 2023 after the signing of the Anti-homosexuality Act, 2023 (AHA) by the President of Uganda, ABA describes what many women human rights defenders (WHRDs) in Uganda are experiencing because of the work they do in support of human rights for marginalised and minority groups.

Aba is a 29-year-old woman human rights defender (WHRD) working as the Executive Director of an organisation that provides mental health, legal support and capacity building to marginalised people in Uganda. These services are delivered in partnership with other like-minded organisations in Uganda.

Aba adds that the threats she experienced were not only targeted towards her, but her daughter as well.



“They verbally attacked my eight-year-old daughter asking her inappropriate questions about my personal life. And because of this, she didn't want to go back to school because her friends and teachers were continuously asking her questions about me.”

Aba says that she had to leave her rented house in the suburb before the landlord could ask her to, in order to reduce the tension that was already growing between her and her neighbours. But it was not just her neighbours. When her family came to know about her work, they too developed a hostility towards her, insisting that she abandon that area of work entirely. Stressed and strained from her family and friends, Aba was unable to leave her home to go for work for days, for fear of her and her child's safety. She says she considered abandoning her work altogether:

As a result, she experienced high level of stress, restrained and restricted movements that affected her safety and security to continue her work. “Attacking me is ok, but attacking my child made me feel emotionally down,” she says.

Desperate for a way out, Aba turned to one of her contacts in the civil society in Uganda, that in turn connected her to another organisation that provided free therapeutic counselling, which she is receiving to date.

In the meantime, Aba, reached out to DefendDefenders for further support and she was referred to the UN Women's Peace & Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) call for proposals, to which she applied. Through the grant, Aba was facilitated to relocate to a new home and pay some of her medical bills. She also found her daughter a new school and bought a router and an internet package to continue working from home.

“I moved to a residential area in Kampala, where I feel safer, and I have paid six months of rent. I have pneumonia which I contracted from prison, but I am now able to go for all my medical check-ups. My activism is going on smoothly although I had to reduce my online presence. I thank DefendDefenders for their support in my hour of need. Their response was quick as someone came to my aide immediately.”



Cate

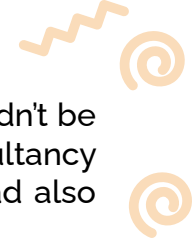
The hard reality & a journey to resilience

“My tenants are complaining about the work you are doing doesn't seem to be in line with the law. They want you to leave my house. So instead of losing all this income you should leave otherwise I will call the police on you.”

These are the words that Cate, a 28-year-old WHRD, was told during a conversation with her landlord as she tried to persuade her to reconsider her decision to evict her from her rented house. With this, Cate ended up closing her organisation for about two months as she looked for a new space and money for rent to relocate.

Cate is the founder of a foundation that supports minority rights and key populations' human rights for health care access (for HIV/AIDS) and empowerment. The organisation supports sex workers and transpeople. With the passing of the Anti-homosexuality bill in parliament, Cate started to face a lot of hostility from her neighbours and landlord.

“The neighbours who used to relate with me ceased to be friendly and became hostile towards me and my work. Mentally, I was disturbed and scared that I would be reported to the police. I couldn't work to support the people who would pick medicines and related needs, and some



who came couldn't get the services they needed. Those who were being referred couldn't be supported and the beneficiaries were stranded. I was also unable to continue with consultancy work to make an extra income, since the minority rights organisations I supported had also closed due to the law." She says.

Fortunately for Cate, the funding from the WPHF was made available at a time when women human rights defenders on the continent have few practical resources available in urgent, life-threatening situations. With this, she was able to receive a grant through DefendDefenders with which she bought a laptop, paid rent for a bigger space for twelve months, and met her daily transport, data and airtime costs.

Currently, Cate has picked up the pieces and is receiving new clients. She however has to work stealthily/ carefully so as not to raise suspicion from the neighbours and the health centres that supply her with medical kits and drugs for her clients.

"With the laptop, I can work from home and do reporting so that I reduce the number of times I have to go to office. In these times, it is important that my colleague and I don't draw a lot of attention to ourselves," she says.

Cate adds that although she has resumed work, mentally she is still scared because of the law and the perceptions of people about her and her work. It is the hard reality for many WHRDs in this line of work.




 **Gina**

Finding safety: A WHRDs' tale

My name is Gina, and I am 34 years old. I work with digital rights, and I am very vocal about the work I do and the people I support. I am a WHRD advocating for the rights of sex workers and women in the minorities' community.

Before the Anti-homosexuality Act, 2023, (AHA, 2023) most of my neighbours who knew that I worked with that community, had never raised any complaints. Although, there was one man who always made sexual advances towards me, I used to ignore him. But with the passing of AHA, 2023, this man started harassing me as his advances intensified.

Additionally, I grew afraid of what my neighbours would do so I stayed inside my house for long hours. I limited my movements because I felt I could easily be targeted. I couldn't talk to other people, and I had to stop going to work out of fear. I wasn't free in my own country, and it wasn't a nice feeling. When I got tired of hiding, I left my home and started living with a friend.

However, my situation began to improve when I heard about the support from WPHF. I immediately applied and I was successful. When I received the grant, I quickly found a house near my place of work and paid four months' rent for it. Its more secure and I can now sleep better. All visitors are screened through a security check before they access the premises. I also bought an internet package using the grant so that I am able to work online on the days when I cannot go to office.



Hilda

The Struggles of an Underprivileged Minority

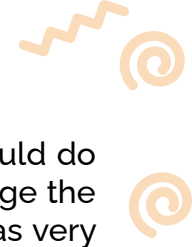
"If you were my son, I would behead you myself" said one police officer to Hilda.

Hilda, a 28-year-old woman human rights defender (WHRD) is a member of the sexual minorities community who advocates for the rights and respect of others. Hilda engages in advocacy and awareness creation at a minority rights organisation in Uganda, where she works as a Programs Officer.

On 18th Feb 2023, Hilda was arrested for allegedly working for an NGO that supports sexual minority rights in Uganda and for allegedly engaging in homosexual activity.

The police detained her and two co-workers who were at her home that evening and took them to a police station in Kampala. Hilda adds that while the police officers led them away, they talked to the by standers telling them that they should be careful that she would recruit their children into homosexuality.

Hilda adds that while at the police station, they were subjected to degrading body inspections and that they were beaten by the other cell mates on the orders of the police officers. They spent a total of three days in a police cell until a lawyer they had contacted from Ubuntu Law and Justice Centre secured their bond. They continued to report at the police station until 30th March when the case was eventually dropped.



“When we were released, I couldn’t go back home for fear of what the neighbours would do so I rented a small hotel room for about two weeks while asking for handouts to manage the hotel bills. The entire ordeal left me traumatised and at some point, I felt suicidal. I was very unsettled, and this started affecting my productivity at work as I couldn’t attend meetings and to other tasks,” he says.

In March 2023, Hilda applied to the WPHF call from which she later received a grant that she used to meet her living expenses and to relocate to a new rental unit where she paid six months of rent in advance. “I also used the grant to replace my phone, a laptop and other items that were confiscated by the police officers as evidence, including those that were destroyed. This support complemented the psychosocial support that I was receiving from Dignity International,” she says.

“In a few months, I was able to bounce back and now I feel much safer, I no longer live in fear. DefendDefenders and UNWomen gave me support that I needed at the time, and it got me out of that situation. other organisations should pick a leaf on how to support HRDs at risk,” she concludes.



Lora

Still standing: A WHRDs' tale

Lora is a 42-year-old women human rights defender (WHRD) and the Executive Director of a minority rights organisation; she is an environmentalist and an activist. She is also part of the National Coalition of human rights defenders in Uganda.

Between July 2022 and December 2022, Lora faced a series of threats and attacks which she believes were motivated by the work that she does. These incidents were characterised by evictions from office premises and a home break-in that led to the loss of important documents and equipment.

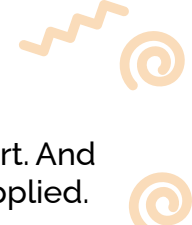
In particular, on the evening of 3rd December 2022, Lora was attacked by two unknown men while she was heading home. The men tried to undress her while they continued to hit her and hurl insults. The boda-boda rider who was carrying her, rode off in fear of also being attacked.

Lora believes that these men intended to rape her, if it wasn't for another oncoming motorcycle that scared them away. They left her with a warning of how they would get her the next time.

This incident left Lora with bruises, injuries and some trauma.



"Mentally I was affected, I felt unwell and the trauma from a previous incident [sexual harrassment] was also triggered."



I did receive support from the national coalition in form of medical care and moral support. And one of the board members sent me the link to the WPHF call for proposals to which I applied.

After a few days, DefendDefenders contacted me and I received a grant for relocation, installation of a security system and equipment including purchasing a laptop.

Right now, I see my security has improved, I feel more secure and I am confident that even when I am not at home, my children remain safe since I can monitor the system with my phone. With an extra laptop, my staff can now work better since they don't have to share equipment.

I appreciate the work DefendDefenders is doing towards the safety and protection of women human rights defenders like myself.



Fara

Standing up against oppression

“

They told me that I am acting like a man because I was doing this kind of work.

Fara

Fara is a 28-year-old woman human rights defender living and working in one of the refugee settlements, in Uganda. Through her organisation, she advocates for women inclusion in society through education, job opportunities and other socio-economic rights.

She started engaging in human rights work in 2018, during her studies at one of the Universities in Uganda because she hated seeing girls and women being mistreated.

“I started this organisation to help refugees. I try to defend girls and women so that they know their rights. They should not be mistreated because of who they are, whether a girl or a woman,”

she says, noting that she draws her motivation from her childhood memories of her father's displeasure in having borne eight girls and only one boy.

Over the years, through her organisation, Fara has managed to reach and support about 51 women and girls who dropped out of school with psychosocial services.

However, early in this year, Fara faced some challenges while supporting a young 17-year-old girl with her case.

"There is a girl who was defiled and impregnated by a rich businessman in the settlement. Her parents wanted her to get married to the rich man but when she approached me, I advised her to report to the police. I encouraged her to also consider going back to school after the delivery of her baby. This man started threatening me, saying that I could not stand in his way and that I didn't know what I was doing."

Fara adds that although the case was reported to the police, they did nothing to deal with the situation. Apparently, the police officers and the businessman were friends. Nevertheless, she continued to follow up the case.

"Because I refused to abandon the case, the police officers and the businessman started threatening me. They told my sisters that they would kill me. They knew that if they could intimidate my sisters, that would get me to abandon the case. Indeed, I got scared because I didn't want my sisters to be harmed. I decided to leave the refugee camp and stayed in the university with some friends for about one month. Because of the ongoing threats, two female employees left the organisation. When I returned to the camp, the threats and harassment resumed. As a result, I reached out to someone in DefendDefenders who advised me to send an application to the WPHF call for proposals."

DefendDefenders with funding from WPHF supported Fara with a grant to cover relocation, house rent and living expenses. Fara added that she used part of the grant to start a small business so that she could sustain herself and her sisters.

When asked how the grant has turned things around for her, she had this to say:

"Right now, I feel safe. Before, I was hopeless, and I regretted why I started this war. I didn't know who to run to, but now I am really confident knowing that I have someone behind me. I am confident that these people will not touch me. Also, I have not given up on the case. I am using some of the money from the grant to cover transport costs to go back to the camp and follow up on the girl and encourage her to advocate for herself. I still face challenges in pursuing the case. But I am doing it in secret by encouraging the girl to pursue justice for herself."



Janat

Targeted for speaking out: A refugee's courage

I was able to raise funds through money from my business, donations from my family and supporters outside the country to buy medicine and food. I am a trained public health practitioner, so I was able to also run a small pharmacy in the camp," says the 39-year-old WHRD.

Before fleeing her country - Burundi in 2015, Janat worked as a volunteer for a local NGO, for four years. She honed her passion for defending the rights of women and girls by supporting teenage mothers and their babies to live and thrive in society.

In Uganda, Janat continued to work and support other refugees especially children and PWDs arriving in a Refugee Camp, by providing them with food and medicines at the reception center.

However, Janat's security became an issue of concern when some unknown people started calling her phone and threatening her, accusing her of discouraging Burundian refugees from returning home before their safety was guaranteed.



"They would ask; "which responsibility do you have to stop people from returning to the country?"

She also says that more unknown people visited her home in her absence and threatened her children.

According to Janat, these people were targeting her because she had raised concerns about the situation of human rights in Burundi in an earlier meeting.

“On 8th March, a delegation sent by the Burundian government held a meeting to mobilise Burundian refugees in the camp for repatriation back to the country. They painted a picture of improvements in the human rights situation, yet this was not the case. Because I had been selected by other refugees to represent them at the meeting, it was my duty to highlight the current context in Burundi, characterised by the continued human rights abuses and criminalisation of human rights defenders. These people were not happy, so they came after me,” she explains.

Janat adds that she reported a case at police, but nothing was done. Due to fear of leaving her children home alone, she stopped working at the refugee reception centre and closed her pharmacy. She eventually sought support from DefendDefenders and was facilitated to relocate her family out of the camp and into the city center.

Janat says, “Life is better, and we feel safer but we still keep to ourselves and spend most of the time at home for fear of meeting any Burundian who may be a threat.” Despite the difficult circumstances, she has not abandoned her work “I continue to work online to mobilise funds through my networks so that I can raise money for food and medicine for new arrivals,” she says.

