

DEFENDING IN NUMBERS



Resistance in the Face of Repression

2017-2018



AHRD
Asian Human Rights Defenders





Younis Iqbal

serves as the founder and chairman of Anjuman Muzareen Punjab, a movement in Pakistan that aims to defend peasants and farmers' rights to land and livelihood

On 12 April 2018, six Policemen forcibly took Younis as he entered the Court for a trial. Younis had previously been charged in 2016 for protesting the illegal detention of farmers. Younis was held at an undisclosed location for four days before being formally charged for fabricated criminal allegations such as 'attempted murder, obstructing a public servant in carrying out their duties, and rioting while in possession of a deadly weapon.'¹²

¹² <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/younis-iqbal-arrested>

Women Human Rights Defenders

WHRDs can include any women¹³ defending human rights; or any person(s) of any gender defending women's rights or issues related to gender. However, in recognition of the specific and gendered experiences of women defenders, our data primarily focuses on cases related to WHRDs who are women.

WHRDs are ranked as one of most targeted group of defenders under FORUM-ASIA's records. Out of the 688 total cases recorded between 2017 and 2018, 126 cases involved violations against WHRDs. 92 of these cases were perpetrated by state actors. Some examples of the violations perpetrated against WHRD include: judicial harassment (58 cases); arbitrary arrest and detention (40 cases); intimidation and threats (35 cases); and violence (35 cases).

Although, evidently, WHRDs face similar threats to other defenders, they also face certain challenges specific to their group. For example, WHRDs are often exposed to

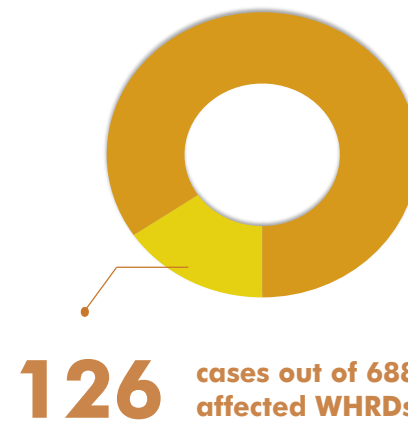
harassment that specifically targets them for addressing issues related to gender and sexuality. This has been reiterated through our conversations with WHRDs across Asia, who have reported being attacked, vilified and threatened, simply for defending reproductive and sexual rights or the rights of sex workers. WHRDs also tend to face certain abuses as a result of their gender as women. For example, while all defenders are subject to violence, WHRDs are additionally subjected to gender-based violence – violence perpetrated to a HRD by virtue of their gender. In the last two years, FORUM-ASIA documented 15 cases of gender-based violence, 12 of which targeted women specifically.

Another type of violation that shows a deeply gendered dimension is online attacks and harassment.

In the recent years, FORUM-ASIA has seen a noticeable trend of WHRDs being attacked for expressing themselves in online spaces.

This type of harassment can take the form of: sending abusive and threatening messages; inciting violence against WHRD on social media; and circulating false information to discredit WHRDs. The gendered

Total Cases of WHRDs



¹³ Interpreted to include lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and gender non-conforming persons.

nature of these attacks are often reflected in the way they employ explicitly sexual, sexist, and deeply misogynistic language and images. Revenge porn and threats of rape and sexual assault are some examples of this. The gravity of these forms of violations has largely been overlooked. WHRDs who have reported online attacks to authorities have often been dismissed, and virtually no legal mechanisms have been established to protect WHRDs from online harassment.

The systematic attacks against WHRDs, both for their gender and their work, stem from their role in challenging patriarchal ideas of gender roles, norms and structures that continue to be socially accepted.

Many perceive them to be threatening social, cultural and religious 'order' as they subvert ideas of womanhood and/or actively fight against gender injustice.

Given the pervasiveness of the attacks against WHRDs, our statistics only provides a snapshot of the risks these defenders face. WHRDs suffer a range of other abuses that are not considered conventional, and occur mostly within communities, which are not often reported as violations. This includes, for example, discrimination, stigmatisation, and isolation. There are also many other gender-based violations perpetrated against WHRDs that occur in places considered 'private', such as the home, and for this reason are underreported. This includes domestic violence, sexual harassment and abuse, and violence against the children of WHRDs. With this in mind, the situation of WHRDs is an even greater cause for concern.

In an era where feminist movements are

on the rise, the opportunities to address the issues women face widen. Yet important work remains to be done in demystifying and strengthening the solidarity of the feminist movement so that it can comprehensively address issues relevant to women generally, and WHRDs specifically.

92

cases of the violations against WHRDs were perpetrated by state actors

58

cases involved the use of judicial harassment, similar to previous years. Yet an emerging trend is online attack and harassment

35

cases involved the use of violence

Case Studies



Anchana Heemmina

is one of the co-founders of Duay Jai Group, which provides support to victims of torture in Southern Thailand



Angkhana Neelapajit

is the Commissioner of the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand



Pornpen Khongkachonkiet

is the Director of Cross Cultural Foundation, which aims to promote and protect human rights in Thailand

Throughout 2017, the three WHRDs were subject to online attacks and harassment. Numerous blogs, Facebook pages, and sites published content that discredited the work of WHRDs by accusing them of fabricating information on human rights issues, protecting criminals, supporting insurgency, and betraying Thailand. Manipulated images that negatively portrayed the WHRDs and misogynistic expressions were also used to vilify the defenders.



Ranjeeta Sadokpam

is a Researcher at Human Rights Alert (HRA) India - a NGO based in Manipur that monitors, documents, and campaigns against human rights violations



Rani Yan Yan

is an indigenous WHRD from Bangladesh



Huỳnh Thục Vy

is a prominent online blogger covering human rights issues, and the founder and former President of Vietnamese Women for Human Rights

On 28 February 2018, several police and army personnel visited Ranjeeta’s home claiming to be searching for someone named Somendro. During their visit, they demanded Ranjeeta to give detailed information about her family members, interrogated her brother, and then forced Ranjeeta and her family to sign an undisclosed document. This incident occurred after Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), the Government’s central investigating agency, began their investigation into a series of extra-judicial killings in Manipur – a case mandated to the CBI by the Supreme Court based on the writ petition co-filed by HRA India.

On 15 February 2018, Rani was physically attacked as she visited the hospital to see two girls who had been sexually abused. On that day, authorities came to place the two girls under the custody of their parents, as directed by the Court. The girls, however, refused to leave with their parents, in fear of their safety. As the parents and the Police began to resort to violence to take the girls away, Rani defied demands from authorities who ordered her to leave the premises, and instead stayed with the girls to ensure all parties respected their rights. That evening, 20 plainclothes officers switched off the lights in the room Rani was in, and severely beat up Rani and her colleague. They were kicked and punched, and were eventually dragged out of the hospital.

On 30 November 2018, she was sentenced to two years and nine months in prison after she splashed white paint onto Vietnamese flags to protest the State’s repressive governance, and circulated an image of the flags on Facebook, with a caption demanding the Government to address human rights issues. According to her and her lawyers, during her trial, the judges simply ‘took out their ready-made sentence and read it out’¹⁴ without conducting a proper hearing.

¹⁴ https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/flag_11302018141521.html