

**URGENT
ACTION
FUND +
AFRICA**

FOR WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS



Midwifing the African Women's Human Rights Defenders' Platform

The Feminist Republik

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ABBREVIATIONS

HRD	Human Rights Defender
LBTQI	Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans*, Queer, Intersex
UAF-Africa	Urgent Action Fund Africa
WHRD	Women Human Rights Defender

SETTING THE CONTEXT

In July 2018, Urgent Action Fund Africa (UAF-Africa) brought together forty-five women human rights defenders (WHRDs) from across Africa and the diaspora to discuss the possibility of creating a platform that would facilitate more durable ways of supporting WHRDs and feminists working on the front line of social justice movements. The meeting drew together activists working across a range of issues from political governance, sexual and reproductive health rights, environmental and economic justice, arts activism, conflict and peacebuilding and Lesbian Bisexual Trans* Queer and Intersex (LBTQI) rights.

The overarching goal of the convening was to begin the process of defining a framework for a Holistic security, safety, wellbeing and collective care platform for African WHRDs that potentially provides litigation support, psychosocial support, training in individual and collective protection and security as well as network and engage in various lobbying and advocacy activities.

The idea for an African WHRDs platform is based on UAF-Africa's assessment of its grant making and movement strengthening work. Over the last five years, UAF-Africa has received an increased number of requests for holistic security, safety, wellbeing and collective care grants from WHRDs throughout Africa. These requests are informed by the rising attacks on WHRDs by state and non-state actors informed by the continued closure of civic space. The major drivers of these funding requests are the ripple effects of foreign funding restrictions by different African governments leading to the persecution of specific organisations and WHRDs¹, limitations to freedom of expression and association through restrictions on the right to protest and public assembly, a crackdown on internet access particularly around election periods, a roll back on legislative gains in relation to sexual and reproductive health and rights as well as the heightened threats and assassination attempts and murder of WHRDs. These constitute some of the major drivers of increasing requests for holistic security, safety, wellbeing and collective care grants.

Countries such as Burundi, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Tunisia, Nigeria, Egypt, and Gambia have provided the most visible examples of these attacks. In Cameroon, there have been reports of arrests of prominent

¹ "Hunting out Feminists in Egypt". 9th January 2017. See <https://www.awid.org/news-and-analysis/hunting-out-feminists-egypt>

activists², and the shutdown of the Internet³ aimed at limiting communication and possibilities for organising. In Burundi, the government introduced laws⁴ aimed at closely controlling the action of local and international NGOs. In Egypt, the government intensified its repression of civil society by introducing a repressive Law 70 of 2017⁵, published in the Official Gazette on May 29, 2017. The law ushered in unprecedented levels of repression and criminalizes the work of many NGOs and civil society groups advancing human rights, making it impossible for them to function independently. As a feminist funding mechanism, the nature of requests received pointed to the gendered nature of attacks on WHRDs. The use of rape and personal data to shame and discredit WHRDs are some of the distinguishing features of how women and queer organisers experience risk and threat to livelihoods.

The dynamics that shape social justice movements are compounded by the funding landscape that is seeing an increasing reduction in resources for women's rights issues as bilateral funders reframe their support for gender equality as a cross-cutting issue across other priorities. The entry of new actors and new money taking the form of increased public private partnerships has seen an expansion in corporate social investments and corporate philanthropy programmes. While welcome, these new actors tend to prioritize 'economic growth' and 'return on investment' rather than a rights-based perspective. The danger here is the erasure of the centrality of human rights and structural inequality as a basis to understand transformation as well as limited accountability mechanisms where these institutions are found to be the source of abuse.

Special procedures found within the United Nations and African Union human rights systems have proved limited in their enforcement capacity and inaccessible not only due to the processes associated with bringing a case against a member state but the length of time it takes to get an outcome. In addition, where individual cases receive international attention, the risk of reprisals for the individuals in question, their movements and those in their immediate community is high. Thought of in this way, the notion of collective protection and security is not only about individuals but also about movements, whether structured as organisations or not. Consequently, there is an urgent need to build and strengthen indigenous collective protection and well-being systems.

To expand an understanding of the terrain, in early 2018 UAF-Africa undertook a scoping study to assess the nature of human rights response mechanisms available to WHRDs. The Fund was interested in assessing how attentive they are to addressing the threats identified through her grant making work. This scoping study was critical to establishing the gaps and

² See "Anglophone activists go on trial in Cameroon".

<https://www.dw.com/en/anglophone-activists-go-on-trial-in-cameroon/a-37542989>

³ "Cameroon shuts down internet in English-speaking areas". 26th January 2017.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/01/cameroon-anglophone-areas-suffer-internet-blackout-170125174215077.html>

⁴ See Reliefweb. 2017. "Burundi: UN experts raise alarm at growing repression of NGOs and human rights defenders" 6th February 2017.

<https://reliefweb.int/report/burundi/burundi-un-experts-raise-alarm-growing-repression-ngos-and-human-rights-defenders>.

⁵ Ahmed Gomaa. "Egypt's new NGO law will further shackle civil society". June 11, 2017

<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/06/egypt-ngo-law-ratified-sisi-crippling-restrictions-freedom.html>

identifying the comparative advantage that an African Women's Human Rights Defenders' platform would fill.

AN OVERVIEW OF EXISTING HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER'S NETWORKS IN AFRICA

NETWORK	SCOPE
Pan African Human Rights Defenders Network	Established in 1998 exchanging information across national and sub-regional human rights defenders (HRDs) networks to identify best practices for the protection of HRDs and encourage replication of these practices across the continent for increased impact Membership based: The North African Human Rights Defenders Network, DefendDefenders, The Southern African Human Rights Defenders Network and The West African Human Rights Defenders Network
East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (DefendDefenders)	A sub-regional network that represents more than 70 organisations and individual members. The mission of the network is to maximize the protection of HRDs, enhance the awareness of human rights work through strong linkages with like-minded local, national, regional, and international networks. Membership based: three types of membership categories which include the full member; Associate member and the Honorary member. Focus areas: Advocacy with the United Nations and African Union, research, digital security, capacity building, emergency protection and assistance for HRDS
Coalition of Women Human Rights Defenders in the Middle East and North Africa	The coalition was set up in 2015 to respond to the rapid political changes that were happening in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The coalition organises through a general assembly meeting, advisory and emergency committees. Focus areas: advocacy for the protection and empowerment of human rights defenders, disseminating the concept of human rights defenders and defining their role. *The coalition is independent from national funding and politics
National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders Uganda	A national coalition set up to coordinate HRDs in Uganda and effectively advance the protection and safety for HRDs. Membership: It has 149 members and the general assembly is the supreme decision-

	<p>making body. This comprises of all the coalition members and individuals.</p> <p>Focus areas: advocacy and networking, capacity building, protection safety and security management. The advocacy programme focuses on ensuring that government laws, policies and practices that support protection for HRDs; capacity building programme focuses on legal compliance for HRDs; Safety and security management: solidarity visits, field visits and referral services; 24 hour help for emergency response to facilitate direct support to HRDs and a rapid response taskforce to respond to HRDs at risk; Monitoring, documenting and reporting of human rights violations; Digital Training Component and Database Management</p>
National coalition of Human Rights Defenders Kenya	<p>Set up in 2007, its mission is to promote the safety and security of HRDs in Kenya through advocacy, capacity building and protection. It was set up after the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project carried out a capacity building training to reduce the vulnerability, risk and persecution of HRDs in Kenya. It transitioned to a fully operational Secretariat in 2012 after being hosted by the Independent Medico-Legal Unit (IMLU) and the Kenya Human Rights Commission between 2007 and 2011.</p> <p>Focus areas: legal support; medical and psychosocial support and relocation of HRDs whose work has exposed them to threats and high levels of risk.</p>

It is evident that at a continental level, there are human rights defender’s platforms that deal with issues faced by HRDs as a generalized group. There is only one regional focused platform that focusses on WHRDs and espouses feminist principles - Coalition of Women Human Rights Defenders in the Middle East and North Africa, which UAF-Africa was instrumental in resourcing. In effect, there is space for a pan African network that mobilises a broader and inclusive understanding of who WHRDs are and is attentive to the specific needs and risks generated by gender difference. Internationally, there are platforms that can offer useful lessons in terms of approaches for a Pan African WHRDs platform, two are outlined below.

Platform	Scope
<i>Front Line Defenders</i>	Focus areas: Provide support to HRDs at risk including international advocacy. This includes: temporary relocation of

*The Mesoamerican Women
Human Rights Defenders
Initiative*

HRDs in emergency situations, an emergency 24-hour phone line operating in Arabic, English, French, Russian and Spanish, grants to pay for the practical security needs; trainings and resource materials on security and protection, including digital security and other opportunities for HRDS dealing with extreme stress

Approaches: the biennial Dublin Platform; the annual FrontLine Defenders Award for HRDs at risk, support for the work of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights Defenders, special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, observer Status with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and support the work of the Special Rapporteur for Human Rights Defenders at the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

Focus areas: Strengthen and mobilize women defenders from distinct social movements and organizations to ensure that they are recognised for their work, to increase their impact and protection within this extremely volatile environment for WHRDs in the region; feminist approaches are the central aspect of their protection work

Approaches: training for WHRDs, focus on issues of self-care, research on violations against WHRDs, urgent actions and human rights advocacy to raise awareness about the important but often invisible leadership roles played by women defenders in the advancement of human rights.

The context above informed UAF-Africa's decision to convening the Abuja Feminist Republik meeting but was also critical to grounding the discussions in the meeting. The background information above facilitated a brainstorming process on four main questions:

1. What would it be rooted in – values, principles, existing conceptual frameworks
2. What would it do? Key priorities
3. What would the platform look like – structure and form
4. What resources are needed?

The section that follows focusses on the key outcomes emerging from the discussions on the questions above.

AN AFRICAN WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS' PLATFORM (AWHRDP)

Discussions generated from the meeting emerged with the following consensus. That the AWHRDP will be a space that brings together feminist activists to promote the collective security and wellbeing of WHRDs in Africa. The platform will work towards promoting access to justice by documenting and seeking redress for the violence and violations that WHRDs face in different operational contexts. Although participants envisaged the platform as one that is physically located in an institution or independent, or a virtual space for information sharing it was also noted that a range of technological resources can be mobilised to build support and protection mechanisms for WHRDs on the continent.

WHAT IS IT ROOTED IN?

The contested nature of the human rights framework, as one that ignores the fact that access to rights is mediated by gender, class and race was pointed out as an important issue to

consider when building a platform that contains human rights in its name. Additionally, the fact that the term women’s human rights defender can be deemed as excluding gender non-conforming women as well as excluding what have been constructed as contested issues in mainstream African women’s rights spaces – such as abortion and queer rights - was raised⁶. For UAF-Africa, the definition of WHRD has evolved based on her grant making work. As Tawamba (2015) notes:

WHRDs span all levels of activism, joined together by their mutual concerns for achieving justice, liberty, peace, inequality and inequity. They manifest in diverse forms; from community and traditional leaders, market women, teachers, mothers, grandmothers, daughters, and LGBTIQI activists who defend social and economic rights - to indigenous women, lawyers, journalists, and academics to advance political and civil rights. These are defenders who are often overlooked because they don’t fit neatly into the orthodox or ideal definition. Whether as an individual or collective, in the private or public arena, these women are fracturing patriarchal attitudes, systems and structures that are embedded in every facet of our lives. It is vital that human/women’s rights organizations and the international community remain nimble and forward looking in recognising these women as WHRDs⁷.

It was agreed that feminist ethos would shape AWHRDP by drawing primarily on African feminist knowledge on gender and sexuality and existing conceptual tools developed by organisations such as JASS, as well as the Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists⁸. It was also agreed that the platform should be rooted in indigenous African wellbeing practices and approaches to collective care. There was an understanding that the name should be accessible, which means recognising the importance of laying claim to frameworks which are understood in the spaces where the platform seeks to influence both discourse and practice. However, it is the principles that drive the platform that should be important rather than the words contained in the name.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

1. The participants recommended that the AWHRDP should be an online and offline space.
2. A physical space for gathering, restorative, enabling of intellectual growth and rejuvenating such as a farm (Feminist Republik) as well as an online space for connecting.
3. An online space that archives WHRDs knowledge on collective wellbeing, security and resistance.
4. It can be based on a loose network or membership driven but should provide support to individuals and collectives.

⁶ See also “UN adopts landmark resolution on Protecting Women Human Rights Defenders”. 2013. https://justassociates.org/sites/justassociates.org/files/uploads/english/documents/final_joint_press_release_whrd_281113.pdf

⁷ Tawamba, Ndana. 2015. “At the margins of visibility: recognising women human rights defenders” <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/ndana-bofutawamba/at-margins-of-visibility-recognising-women-human-rights-defenders>

⁸ “The Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists”. 2006. http://awdf.org/wp-content/uploads/Charter_of_Feminist_Principles_for_African_Feminists.pdf

5. It can also be devolved with a host in each sub-region to provide a physical hub.

WHAT WILL IT DO?

1. The platform should add value to the work of WHRDs. It will not duplicate the efforts of similar platforms. For example, there are regional organisations that are already engaged in physical and online security training and advocacy.
2. Fill a niche by generating knowledge through contextual analysis and documentation of WHRDs individualised and collective responses and experiences of attacks.
3. Provide thought leadership on collective security and wellbeing of WHRDs by creating opportunities for debate and knowledge creation.
4. Drive the pursuit of accountability for violations committed by both state and non-state actors by maintaining an alert system on violations and risks.
5. The platform will be an avenue for bridge building and advocacy and will identify as well as work with key actors and stakeholders such as donors, civil society, intergovernmental bodies and legal networks.
6. Provide a platform to share information about who is doing what on the continent and funding opportunities available to WHRDs.

Other specific ideas around specific areas work that were identified included:

Advocacy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Defenders at risk through case documentation and support b. Engaging institutions/mechanisms (international and regional) c. Spotlighting WHRD issues d. Donor advocacy
Knowledge generation:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Monitoring trends b. Generate African centered knowledge on wellbeing and collective care

RISKS

The following risks were noted as important to keep in mind as the process of developing the platform evolves:

1. The risk of backlash, attacks due to the exposure of WHRDs at risk. It is critical that advocacy does not generate greater risks for those already under attack.
2. Risk that the dominant language will be English. There is need to plan for both translation and human resources to work across major language groups.
3. Funding and sustainability: That the lack of a bold, long-term strategic vision could render the platform dead on arrival given the funding environment that has privileged corporate interests and ignores the value of long-term investments.
4. Not truly embracing the indivisibility of WHRDs while building the platform particularly around LBTQI rights, abortion and religion.
5. The importance of politicizing the platform and avoiding language that focusses on political correctness rather than a structural analysis of the issues.

RESOURCING

The conversation on resourcing examined four major areas:

1. **Financial resources:** Three sources for funding for the platform were identified: self-generated income, external grants/donations and endowments.
2. **Physical and spiritual resources:** Centering health care as a key pillar especially sexual and reproductive health care. To do so consider resources that centre youth, mental health, indigenous African wellbeing practices and self-defence. It was pointed out that it is critical to disrupt the patriarchal idea of outsourcing protection to men by rethinking the feminist understanding of power to include self-defence as an expression of power.
3. **Conceptual resources:** Ensure that African feminist knowledge forms the basis for the platform's work and that knowledge production through diverse partnerships with researchers, writers and academic institutions form a pillar of its work. That creative resources should also be key.
4. **Human resources:** Generate a comprehensive data base of African experts on the African continent and the diaspora that can be drawn on. Specific interest groups and expertise to account for would include but not limited to women with disabilities, journalists, content creators, filmmakers, artists, lawyers, student leaders, academics, women in technology and politics and labour unions.

CONCLUSION

The meeting concluded by identifying the following as key next steps:

1. The platform will be launched in 2019.
2. UAF-Africa will host the platform.
3. While UAF-Africa will drive the founding phase they will work with other African Women's Funds and cross regional Women's Funds as well as regional and national women's rights organisations as partners and allies to build a durable infrastructure. In addition, a smaller strategy group will be put in place to support UAF-Africa deliver these commitments.
4. The naming of the platform, including determination of the platform interventions will be a collective exercise.
5. The Abuja consultation participants will continue to be involved at different stages of building the platform.