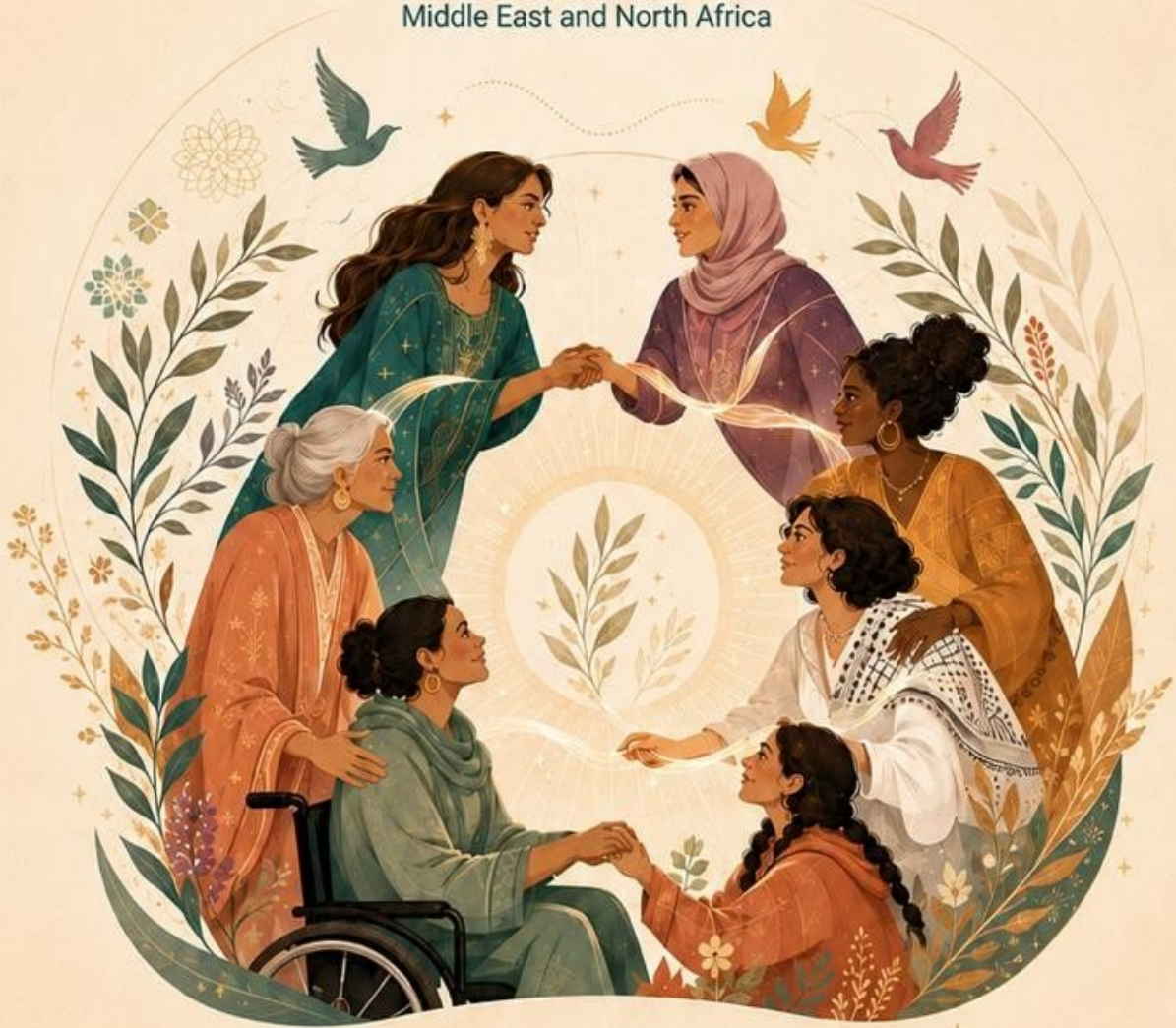


المنتدى الإقليمي الثاني للمدافعات عن حقوق الإنسان

الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا

Second Woman
Human Rights Defenders
Regional Forum

Middle East and North Africa



من ٢١ - ٢٣ آب ٢٠٢٦

21-23 August 2026

التضامن
Solidarity

الحماية
Protection

المساواة
Equality

الرفاهية
Well-being

الفضاء المدني
Civic Space

الشراكة
Partnership

الابتكار
Innovation

حقوق المرأة
Women's Rights

الأمن الرقمي
Digital Security

الناصرة
Advocacy

THE 2ND MENA WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS
FORUM REPORT

We Are Tired, But We Are Here to Reclaim What Is Ours

Istanbul, Türkiye • 21–23 August 2026

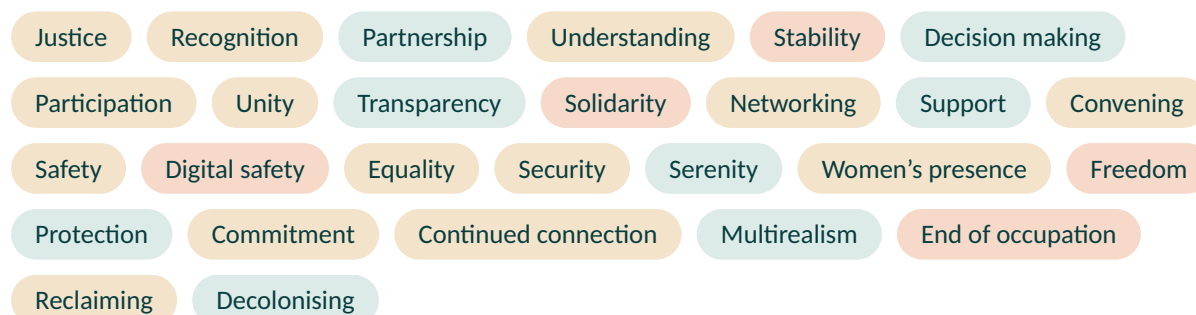
Organised by the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)

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Words We Carry

Words and aspirations that surfaced across the Forum.



A regional forum grounded in protection, solidarity, feminist organising, collective care and the right of WHRDs to shape the systems that affect their lives and work.

1 Overview

A regional space for women human rights defenders

The 2nd Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) Forum brought together 50 women human rights defenders, feminist leaders, civil society actors, CSO partners, donors and international human rights mechanisms, including the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, from 15 countries across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and beyond.



PROTECTION WELLBEING SOLIDARITY SUSTAINABLE MOVEMENT INFRASTRUCTURE

Purpose and approach

The regional forum, organised and facilitated by the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) in Istanbul in August 2026, provided a rare organic space for defenders to exchange experiences, identify shared challenges, build solidarity, and reflect collectively on the future of human rights work in an increasingly restrictive environment.

A shared regional reality

A central message emerged throughout the discussions: WHRDs are facing growing and interconnected threats, while the resources and institutional spaces available to respond to those threats are shrinking. At the same time, there is significant potential for regional solidarity, intergenerational organising, collective protection and new forms of collaboration.

"We are tired, but we are resilient."

Resilience, solidarity and sustainability

The discussions demonstrated that exhaustion and resilience are not contradictory. WHRDs continue to work under extraordinary pressure while recognising the importance of building collective structures that make their work more sustainable. Participants also reflected on how their individual efforts complement one another and can create an impact even when results are not immediately visible. As one participant reflected, echoing a sentiment shared by many defenders:

"The butterfly's effect is unseen, yet it never fades." — Mahmoud Darwish

2 Main Findings

2.1 Shrinking civic space and increasing repression

WHRDs across the region reported increasingly restrictive environments, including criminalisation, arbitrary detention, surveillance, restrictions on civil society organisations, limits on freedom of expression and assembly, and reprisals against defenders and their families.

COUNTRIES REPRESENTED

Algeria · Bahrain · Egypt · Iraq · Jordan · Lebanon · Libya · Morocco · Oman · Palestine · Saudi Arabia · Sudan · Syria · Tunisia · Yemen

Women defenders face additional gender-specific attacks, including defamation and smear campaigns, threats based on their personal lives, online harassment, gender-based violence and attempts to undermine their legitimacy as activists. These pressures are particularly severe in conflict-affected and politically fragile contexts.

“The WHRDs’ situation needs a holistic approach.”

Participants stressed that attacks against WHRDs are tied to the wider political, social and security environments in which they operate.

2.2 The mounting and unsustainable pressures on women defenders

Participants repeatedly described feeling tired, exhausted, drained and isolated. This exhaustion is not simply an individual well-being issue. It reflects prolonged exposure to violence, threats, political repression, displacement, financial insecurity and the continuous responsibility of responding to crises. WHRDs are carrying both the public burden of human rights work and, in many contexts, a disproportionate private and family burden.

“We know you are tired and you are exhausted.”

The Forum therefore highlighted the need to treat well-being, healing and collective care as integral components of protection and sustainability.

2.3 The limits of documentation as a pathway to protection

Participants repeatedly identified a gap between documenting violations and receiving practical protection. While international mechanisms remain important, defenders reported that communications and complaints can take too long to produce meaningful responses, particularly when a defender is facing an immediate threat.

“When W/HRDs are facing threats, timely action is important.”

There was a strong call for greater follow-up, coordination and responsiveness from international mechanisms, particularly in cases involving detention, reprisals, threats and criminalisation.

2.4 Growing distrust in international accountability

Participants expressed concern about the perceived selectivity of international attention and accountability. Questions were raised about why certain conflicts and countries receive greater international attention while violations elsewhere receive comparatively limited responses.

“Why do some people deserve more life than us?”

This reflects a broader concern about the credibility and legitimacy of the international human rights system, particularly when political interests appear to influence the degree of attention given to different crises.

2.5 Funding is increasingly affecting the survival of the movement

The funding crisis emerged as one of the most significant shared concerns. Cuts and changing donor priorities have resulted in organisations losing staff, institutional knowledge and long-term capacity. In some cases, organisations have been forced to close programmes or reconsider their existence altogether.

Participants also highlighted the specific vulnerability of feminist and WHRD organisations, which often receive limited resources while operating in some of the highest-risk environments.

“We lost the capacities we really needed and invested in their development.”

Funding restrictions can also become a form of political pressure, particularly where governments criminalise foreign funding, impose registration restrictions, or where sanctions and banking limitations prevent organisations from accessing resources.

3 Making the Protection Mandate More Responsive to WHRDs

UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR SESSION

The Forum welcomed the engagement of the new UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders and provided an opportunity for WHRDs to discuss the priorities and direction of the new mandate. The Special Rapporteur emphasised the importance of keeping defenders at the centre of the mandate through regular regional consultations, focus groups and applying participatory and intersectional approaches that reflect the different risks faced by defenders, including those affected by conflict, displacement, exile, discrimination and political repression.

THREE THEMATIC PRIORITIES HIGHLIGHTED BY THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR

HEALTH & WELLBEING

Understanding the longer-term impact of human rights work, including exposure to violence, threats, displacement and sustained pressure, and recognising wellbeing as an integral part of protection.

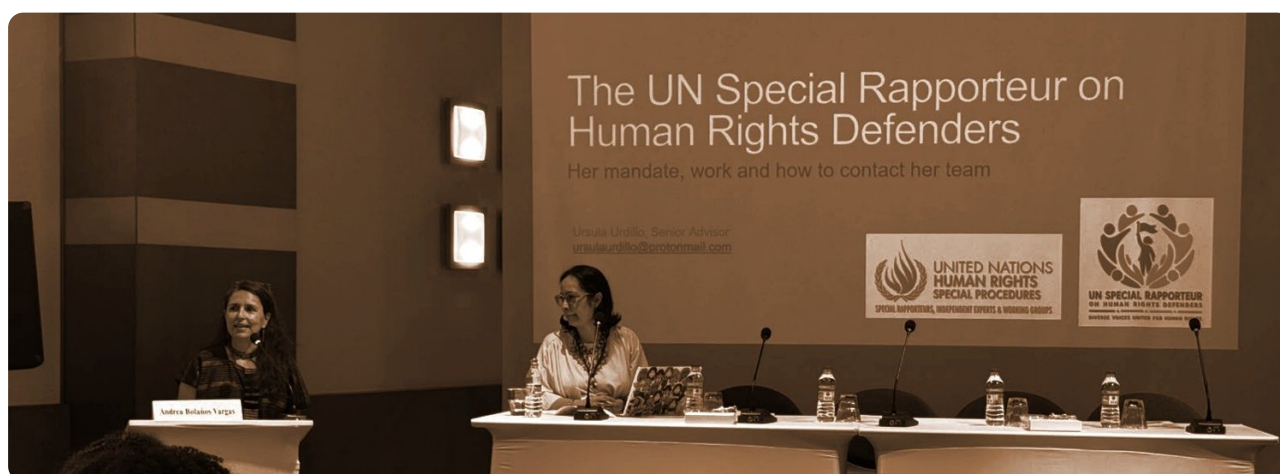
CRIMINALISATION

Examining the increasing use of legal and judicial mechanisms to intimidate, silence and restrict legitimate human rights work.

PROTECTION MECHANISMS

Exploring how existing protection models can be strengthened and adapted to different contexts, moving beyond documentation and advocacy towards effective and sustainable protection.

The mandate will also use country and thematic reports, communications with States, public statements and engagement with other UN mechanisms to amplify individual cases and identify broader patterns of violations. Particular attention will be given to defenders in conflict, exile and displacement, as well as emerging threats to civic space and digital security. The Special Rapporteur also stressed the importance of making reports accessible and useful to defenders and maintaining regular dialogue with civil society.



The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders presents her mandate, work and how to contact her team.

3.1 Main concerns raised by WHRDs

Participants welcomed the renewed focus on wellbeing and participation but highlighted several gaps that require attention.

TIMELINESS

Protection responses need to be faster, particularly when defenders face detention, reprisals or immediate threats.

FOLLOW-UP AND IMPACT

Documentation and communications do not always translate into concrete protection or government action.

UNEQUAL ATTENTION

Concerns about the perceived selectivity of international attention across countries and crises, particularly in the MENA region.

COUNTRY-LEVEL ENGAGEMENT

A call for more sustained and context-specific engagement with defenders in countries experiencing prolonged repression.

ACCESSIBILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

Clearer information on how cases are selected, how to engage with the mandate, and what outcomes can realistically be expected.

INNOVATION

More strategic and creative approaches are needed as governments increasingly adapt to international accountability mechanisms.

The discussion underscored the need to strengthen the link between documentation, advocacy and practical protection, while ensuring that the mandate remains responsive to the realities and priorities identified by defenders themselves.

3.2 Mapping the effectiveness of protection mechanisms

Building on the discussion about the accessibility, responsiveness and impact of existing protection mechanisms, participants took part in a participatory **Protection Effectiveness Meter** exercise to assess how these mechanisms function in practice from the perspective of WHRDs.

Participants identified mechanisms at the national, regional and international levels, alongside support provided through civil society organisations, networks, partnerships and emergency response mechanisms. They then placed these on a five-point scale reflecting perceived effectiveness, accessibility and responsiveness.

The scale ranged from **1**, mechanisms that largely exist on paper but provide limited practical protection, to **5**, mechanisms considered effective and responsive, particularly in emergencies. The exercise highlighted an important gap between the formal existence of protection mechanisms and WHRDs' ability to access timely and meaningful protection in practice.



Results of the Protection Effectiveness Meter, with mechanisms placed on the 1–5 scale.

WHAT THE EXERCISE SHOWED

Participants expressed greater confidence in rapid-response mechanisms, civil society organisations, trusted partners and networks, and emergency support structures. Formal national and international mechanisms remained important, but were frequently perceived as slower, harder to access, inconsistent in their response, or limited in their ability to provide immediate protection.

4 We Are Facing More Threats

The Forum identified a set of interconnected threats affecting WHRDs and the wider civil society ecosystem.

- 1 Criminalisation, detention and judicial harassment.
- 2 Surveillance and digital monitoring, including spyware.
- 3 Online harassment and coordinated smear and defamation campaigns.
- 4 Gender-based violence and threats against defenders and their families.
- 5 Forced exile, displacement and difficulties obtaining visas or safe relocation.
- 6 Restrictions on civil society registration and operations.
- 7 Shrinking and increasingly politicised funding.
- 8 Sanctions and banking restrictions affecting organisations.
- 9 Attacks against journalists, feminist activists and human rights organisations.
- 10 Weak or delayed government responses to international mechanisms.
- 11 Disproportionate and selective accountability: mechanisms often fail to reflect the severity and scale of abuses, or apply different standards across contexts.
- 12 Loss of experienced staff and institutional memory due to funding cuts.
- 13 Increasing pressure on younger women entering the human rights and feminist movements.



Flipchart from the funding discussion: barriers WHRDs face in accessing funding.

THREATS REINFORCE ONE ANOTHER

Criminalisation can lead to loss of funding; funding restrictions can weaken organisational protection; online attacks can increase physical security risks; and prolonged repression can contribute to burnout and withdrawal from public life.

5 Defending Rights Amid War and Repression

Although each country's context is distinct, participants identified common patterns across the region. In a dedicated panel, participants from selected countries highlighted the main threats facing WHRDs in light of the impact of war on the movement.

Palestine

Targeting of human rights organisations, journalists and defenders; restrictions linked to sanctions and banking; and the devastating impact of the long-lasting conflict on civil society. Palestinian WHRDs stressed that they work not only on women's rights but across the broader human rights agenda.

Iraq

Fragility of democratic institutions, increasing sectarianism, threats against WHRDs, restrictions on civil society and growing anti-gender movements. There was also strong emphasis on the achievements of the feminist movement and the importance of investing in younger women.

Bahrain and the Gulf

Restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, organisational dissolution, arrests, exile, surveillance and discrimination, plus the lack of dedicated funding and international attention for Gulf defenders.

Yemen and Morocco

Gendered political violence, defamation, restrictions on women's political participation and the need to strengthen transnational feminist solidarity.

Sudan

Extreme risks facing women documenting violations, including detention and violence, and the deteriorating conditions faced by women in displacement and refugee camps.

Syria

Defamation, social media attacks, gender-based targeting and the challenges facing feminist organisations amid political and social instability and the lack of accountability in a transitional period.

Tunisia

Increasing criminalisation, detention and restrictions on civil society, alongside the growing burden placed on women defenders working in an increasingly authoritarian environment.

How war and conflict affect women human rights defenders

Direct and indirect impacts identified by WHRDs across the region



Source: WHRD participants' experiences and reflections during the regional forum. The impacts are interconnected and may occur simultaneously rather than sequentially.

6 But There Are Opportunities

Despite the severity of the challenges, the Forum demonstrated significant opportunities for collective action.

6.1 Informed regional and transnational solidarity

The convening itself demonstrated the value of bringing defenders together across borders. Participants identified solidarity and networking as essential at a time when both funding and civic space are shrinking.

"We need such a space to be regular, just to exist and feel togetherness."

There is an opportunity to sustain such a space on a regular basis in order to strengthen regional networks that enable defenders to share information, respond collectively to threats and develop joint advocacy.

6.2 Intergenerational organising

Participants valued the fact that the space was inclusive and allowed WHRDs from different backgrounds and age groups to come together. They emphasised the importance of bringing younger women into feminist and human rights movements. The Forum created an opportunity for knowledge transfer between established leaders and emerging defenders, while also recognising that younger generations bring new approaches, technologies, perspectives and strength.

“I am so happy to be with women who are younger than me, to get the strength I thought we had lost.”

6.3 Collective wellbeing and healing

Participants identified collective care, women’s circles, healing and safe spaces as important components of movement resilience.

“Healing in meeting, safe space, opening up, new experience, curiosity, hardship unpacking, belonging.”

The Forum intentionally created space for a more organic process in which WHRDs could be present without pressure to speak, explain or perform resilience. Participants were able to decide when to talk, what to share and when simply to listen. Wellbeing was integrated throughout the Forum through creative and embodied practices, including painting, collective reflection, movement, dance and daily closing rituals.



Participants painting together during a collective wellbeing session.

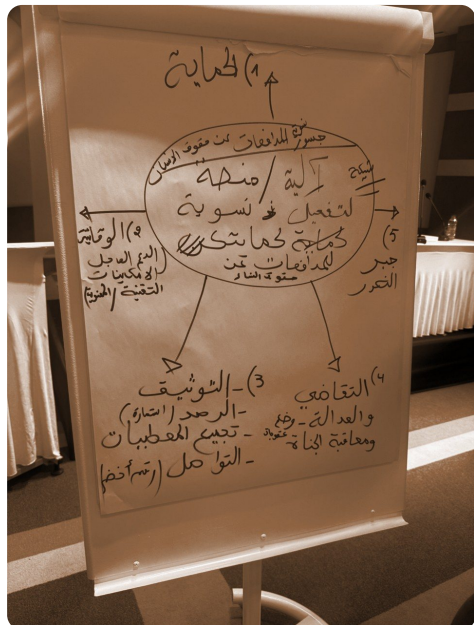
TREE OF LIFE

One exercise invited participants to express their emotional landscapes, the impact of conflict and their journeys as defenders through individual artwork. The images were then symbolically disrupted, reflecting how violence, displacement and repression can alter lives in ways beyond an individual’s control. Participants subsequently reconstructed the artwork together as a **Tree of Life**, identifying what grounds them, what keeps them standing, what they are working towards and what they want to carry forward for future generations. The process created space to explore loss, resilience and recovery while also experiencing rebuilding as a collective rather than individual act.

Each day also ended with movement, dance and celebration, creating intentional moments of joy, connection and release alongside difficult discussions. These practices reinforced a broader message of the Forum: wellbeing and collective care are not separate from human rights work, but part of the infrastructure that enables WHRDs and their movements to continue. This suggests an opportunity to move beyond conventional capacity-building models and invest in the human infrastructure that allows movements to survive.

6.4 Reimagining the future: designing a WHRD-led support mechanism

The Forum invited participants to use feminist imagination as a practical tool for thinking beyond the limitations of existing systems. Participants were asked to imagine that funding and other restrictions were removed and to design mechanisms that could respond more effectively to the realities and needs of WHRDs.



Group flipchart sketching the proposed protection mechanism.

Working in groups, participants developed two proposals. The first envisioned a **protection mechanism for women human rights defenders**, bringing together several interconnected forms of support: **documentation and monitoring; legal support and access to lawyers; networking; psychological support; capacity-building and training; and access to resources and funding**. Participants emphasised that such support must respond to the specific circumstances and needs of defenders rather than operating as a single standardised intervention.

The second group developed the idea of a **feminist protection network**, connecting WHRDs with different sources of expertise and support. The model included **lawyers, human rights organisations, digital security expertise, international mechanisms and other actors able to provide protection or specialised assistance**. The discussion also highlighted the importance of solidarity, knowledge exchange and drawing on different forms of expertise within and beyond the movement.

Rather than choosing between the two models, participants ultimately decided to merge them into one integrated mechanism. Their discussion demonstrated that effective protection cannot be reduced to emergency assistance alone. Participants envisaged a holistic, feminist and WHRD-led structure capable of connecting protection, legal and digital support, wellbeing, documentation, expertise, networks and resources according to defenders' different needs and contexts.

WHRDs are not simply beneficiaries of protection mechanisms; they hold the knowledge and experience required to shape and design them.

A principle running throughout the Forum, aligned with its call for protection approaches that are more accessible, responsive and grounded in defenders' realities.

6.5 Trusted organisations as direct points of contact

The Forum highlighted an opportunity for trusted organisations to play a more sustained role as direct points of contact for WHRDs. Where an organisation has already established trust within the community, it can provide a reliable channel through which defenders can seek in-

formation, raise concerns, access support, or be referred to appropriate protection mechanisms.

Strengthening these direct relationships could help bridge the gap between WHRDs and existing protection and accountability systems, particularly in contexts where formal mechanisms are perceived as inaccessible, slow, or unresponsive.

“I felt that the organisation was someone I could turn to directly as a trusted point of contact when I needed support.”

A trusted organisation could therefore serve not only as a source of support, but also as a consistent and familiar point of contact before, during, and after periods of heightened risk.

6.6 Collective engagement with donors

The funding crisis also presents an opportunity for collective advocacy. Rather than organisations addressing the crisis individually, the Forum identified the potential for regional organisations to collectively map funding gaps, identify excluded contexts and engage donors on more sustainable and locally responsive funding models.

“Some donors ask us to be resilient. I am not sure how helpful such advice is. They should listen, not preach, sometimes.”

7 What Needs to Change

7.1 Recommendations for donors

- Increase flexible, multi-year and core funding for WHRD and feminist organisations.
- Establish and/or expand rapid-response and emergency funding for defenders facing immediate threats.
- Fund organisational resilience, including staff retention, digital security and physical security.
- Provide dedicated funding for the wellbeing of WHRDs and feminist organisations, including psychosocial support, rest and recovery, care practices, and measures to avert burnout.
- Support smaller, emerging and less formally structured feminist initiatives where appropriate safeguards can be established.
- Ensure funding strategies do not systematically exclude organisations operating in politically sensitive or conflict-affected contexts.
- Increase funding specifically dedicated to feminist movements and WHRDs.
- Support regional networking, convening and coalition-building as essential movement infrastructure.
- Recognise collective and organisational protection as part of defender protection.
- Support young women defenders and intergenerational leadership.
- Explore mechanisms for longer-term, locally led and feminist funding models that reduce dependence on short-term project cycles.

7.2 Recommendations for the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders

The Forum welcomed the engagement of the new Special Rapporteur and identified several opportunities for strengthening the mandate. Participants called for:

- Sustained regional and country-level consultations with WHRDs.
- Stronger follow-up on individual cases and government responses.
- Faster responses where defenders face immediate threats.
- More systematic documentation of gender-specific attacks against WHRDs.
- Greater attention to criminalisation, online attacks, defamation and reprisals.
- Stronger coordination between relevant UN Special Procedures.
- Greater attention to defenders in conflict, occupation, exile and displacement.
- A stronger link between documentation, advocacy and practical protection.
- Recognition that protecting defenders also requires protecting the organisations, networks and civic spaces through which they work.

7.3 Recommendations for the WHRD movement

- Strengthen regional and transnational informed solidarity.
- Develop collective emergency and protection mechanisms.
- Invest in intergenerational leadership and mentorship.
- Build shared strategies around digital safety and online attacks.
- Develop collective advocacy towards donors and international institutions.
- Continue creating spaces for collective healing and wellbeing.
- Strengthen collaboration between feminist, human rights, peacebuilding and other social movements.

8 Strategic Investment Priorities

The Forum demonstrated that investment in WHRDs is investment in the resilience of the wider human rights ecosystem.

The current funding crisis presents an opportunity to rethink how support is structured. Short-term project funding alone is insufficient for organisations working through prolonged conflict, authoritarianism, criminalisation and shrinking civic space.

FUTURE INVESTMENT COULD PRIORITISE



The Forum also demonstrated that defenders themselves possess the knowledge, networks and strategies needed to respond to the current environment. What is increasingly required is sustained, flexible and trusted support that allows them to determine what those responses should look like.

9 Conclusion

The strongest message emerging from the Forum was not one of defeat, but of collective resilience.

Participants acknowledged the exhaustion, shrinking civic space, attacks on human rights institutions and severe funding challenges they face. Yet they also identified solidarity, connection, intergenerational cooperation, feminist organising and collective action as sources of hope.

The Forum itself demonstrated the importance of creating spaces where WHRDs can come together, feel heard and recognised, and simply exist without having to wear a mask or perform resilience. For many participants, being in the presence of women who continue to defend human rights despite profound loss, heartbreak and personal hardship was both humbling and deeply inspiring. The opportunity to share experiences with others who understood their realities helped participants feel less alone, more connected and, ultimately, stronger.

“We need to reclaim what is ours by helping each other.”

This speaks not only to reclaiming civic space and human rights principles, but also to reclaiming solidarity, collective strength, care and the spaces in which women defenders can support one another.

The priority moving forward is therefore not simply to ask how WHRDs can continue doing more under increasingly difficult circumstances. It is to ask what structures, resources and relationships are needed to ensure that they can continue their work safely, sustainably and on their own terms.

The Forum provides a foundation for that next phase:

From
isolation
to
connection

From
documentation
to
protection

From
short-term survival
to
long-term resilience

From
fragmented responses
to
collective regional action

*Despite exhaustion and profound challenges, WHRDs remain present, connected and committed to defending human rights. They are tired, but they are here; and they are **reclaiming what is theirs.***

Second Women Human Rights Defenders Regional Forum — Middle East and North Africa · Organised by the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)

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