



***“Women as Human Rights Defenders in Albania:
Challenges, Contributions, and Calls to Action”***

February 2025

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This report is the result of a collective effort shaped by the voices, insights, and courage of Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) across Albania. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the many women who contributed to this research by sharing their experiences, responding to the survey, participating in interviews and focus groups, and trusting us with their stories. Many of these WHRDs continue to operate in politically sensitive, under-resourced, or socially hostile environments. Their advocacy is often met with institutional silence, public discrediting, or personal risk. Yet, they persist in defending the rights and dignity of others. Their contributions form the core of this report.

We are especially grateful to the members of the Albanian Women Empowerment Network (AWEN) and other feminist and human rights organizations, who actively supported the research through outreach, feedback, and validation. Their solidarity and commitment strengthened every stage of this process.

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Above all, this report is dedicated to all women in Albania who challenge inequality, speak truth to power, and build movements grounded in care, justice, and collective resilience. Whether visible or working behind the scenes, your advocacy continues to shape a more equitable future for all.

Executive Summary

This report, *“Women as Human Rights Defenders in Albania: Challenges, Contributions, and Calls to Action,”* is a comprehensive examination of the realities faced by Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) in Albania today. WHRDs are at the forefront of promoting gender equality, advocating for marginalized communities, protecting victims of violence, and holding power structures accountable. Yet, they often do so under conditions that are unsafe, unsupported, and unrecognized.

The purpose of this research is to shed light on the complex and often underreported experiences of WHRDs in Albania—particularly those working at the intersection of gender equality, gender-based violence, social justice, and marginalized identities, including LGBTIQ+ individuals—and to provide actionable recommendations for improving their protection, recognition, and sustainability. While global attention to shrinking civic space has grown, there is a pressing need to understand how this phenomenon uniquely affects Women Human Rights Defenders—whose experiences of exclusion, threats, and resilience are shaped by gendered power dynamics and the nature of their advocacy.

The initiative was driven by an awareness that WHRDs in Albania, though central to democratic progress and human rights advancement, operate with minimal structural support and are increasingly vulnerable to backlash. From supporting survivors of gender-based violence to promoting gender equality, to defending the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons, WHRDs are often met with hostility, misinformation campaigns, and institutional neglect. The research aims to capture this reality, not only to highlight the challenges but also to affirm the leadership, strength, and impact of WHRDs across different regions and sectors.

The research employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative narratives obtained through in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions. The survey reached WHRDs from diverse backgrounds, including those working in urban and rural settings, with survivors of gender-based violence, marginalized communities, with youth, LGBTIQ+ groups, etc.

The structured questionnaire explored multiple themes, including activism focus, years of experience, types of threats faced, support systems available, and advocacy achievements. The interviews and FGDs provided in-depth reflections on resilience, resistance, and the lived experience of being a WHRD in a polarized civic and political climate. Ethical safeguards, including informed consent, anonymity, were central to the process.

Key findings

This research sought to document and understand the lived experiences of Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) in Albania, including the challenges they face, the strategies they employ, and the impact they generate across different levels of society. Through a combination of survey data, focus groups, and in-depth interviews, the study reveals a complex picture of resilience, risk, and structural exclusion that characterizes the work of WHRDs in Albania today.

The findings speak not only to the immediate environment in which WHRDs operate, but also to broader patterns of democratic governance, gender equality, and civic space dynamics in the country.

WHRDs are central to human rights advancement and community-level change. One of the clearest conclusions from this research is the pivotal role WHRDs play in Albania’s human rights and gender equality landscape. Whether through survivor support services, public awareness campaigns, legal advocacy, or community organizing, WHRDs are key actors in local democracy and social cohesion.

- 68.18% of survey respondents reported increasing awareness of human rights in their communities.
- 63.64% indicated their work directly empowered marginalized groups,
- 50% identified community-level transformation as a key impact, while 40.91% reported policy or legal change as a direct outcome

These contributions are often made with minimal institutional support, demonstrating the depth of WHRDs' commitment and the strategic value of their grassroots leadership.

WHRDs face multi-level, gendered risks and exclusion. The research confirms that WHRDs are subject to gender-specific risks and threats, including online harassment, defamation campaigns, and social stigma, which are often exacerbated by their focus on sensitive issues such as GBV, LGBTQI+ rights, and minority inclusion.

- 50% of respondents reported experiencing harassment or threats, with online/offline abuse and death threats among the most frequently cited.
- Over one-third noted smear campaigns and being labeled as “anti-family,” “foreign agents,” or “Soros-funded,” undermining both their credibility and safety.

In addition, WHRDs often operate in hostile social environments marked by patriarchal norms, political polarization, and rising anti-gender discourse, making their work emotionally and professionally demanding.

Intersectionality compounds this vulnerability: defenders working in rural areas or with LGBTQI+ or youth groups reported lower visibility, fewer protections, and less access to institutional resources than their peers in urban centers.

Institutional and legal frameworks remain inadequate. Despite Albania's international obligations under CEDAW, the Istanbul Convention, and the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, the country lacks a dedicated legal or policy framework to protect WHRDs. The state response to threats and rights violations remains inconsistent, often symbolic, and overly reliant on individual leadership rather than institutional policy.

- Most respondents had never filed a complaint with the Ombudsperson or anti-discrimination bodies due to lack of awareness, fear of retaliation, or previous negative experiences.
- Even when defenders engaged with institutional channels, they described the process as slow, dismissive, or ineffective.

Public funding for WHRD-led organizations is limited. Some defenders expressed concern about being excluded from state platforms or funding calls due to political bias or ideological disagreement.

WHRDs are strategically adaptive but remain undervalued. Despite the hostile environment, WHRDs demonstrate high levels of adaptive capacity and innovation. They rely on peer networks, digital tools, feminist alliances, and coded activism to protect themselves and advance their causes.

- 77.27% of respondents use capacity-building and public awareness campaigns as a core strategy.
- 72.73% report participation in informal peer networks that offer protection and solidarity.
- However, only 27.27% had access to psychosocial support, revealing a critical protection gap.

These strategies speak to the strength and self-reliance of WHRDs, but they should not be mistaken for sustainable solutions. The lack of structural support, institutional recognition, and legal guarantees limits the transformative potential of their activism and places an unfair burden of self-protection on those already marginalized.

Summary of recommendations

To ensure that WHRDs in Albania can continue their vital work safely, visibly, and effectively, this report outlines a comprehensive set of recommendations tailored to multiple stakeholder groups. These recommendations respond directly to the gendered risks, institutional gaps, and structural inequalities WHRDs face, while recognizing their central role in advancing justice, equality, and democratic values.

- **For government and policymakers**, the first step is formal legal recognition of WHRDs as a distinct group requiring protection under national frameworks. Current international commitments—such as those under the Istanbul Convention, CEDAW, and the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders—must be reflected in domestic law and practice. Concrete actions should include the establishment of a national protection protocol for WHRDs, confidential complaint mechanisms, access to legal aid and psychosocial support, and monitoring of gender-based hate speech and defamation. Moreover, WHRDs—particularly those outside Tirana and working in marginalized communities—must be systematically included in policymaking and monitoring bodies related to gender equality, anti-discrimination, and human rights.
- **Donors and international actors** are called to shift from project-based support to long-term, flexible, and feminist-informed funding models. WHRDs must be resourced not only as service providers but as political and social change agents. Support should include micro-grants for informal or unregistered groups as well, especially youth-led and rural collectives, as well as investment in care-centered protection strategies such as digital security, trauma-informed care, and emergency response. WHRDs should also be meaningfully engaged in EU accession processes, donor coordination platforms, and global dialogues on civic space and gender justice. International actors can further amplify WHRDs by funding community-based storytelling, alternative media, and localized advocacy tools that reflect their realities and priorities.
- **National human rights and oversight institutions**, such as the People's Advocate and the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination, have a critical role to play. They must institutionalize WHRDs as a priority group in their annual monitoring, develop survivor-centered and gender-sensitive complaint mechanisms, and actively engage public authorities in training on how to respond to gendered threats and online harassment. These institutions should also function as bridge-builders, facilitating dialogue between WHRDs and conservative actors to counter polarization and reduce social stigma.
- **Civil society and feminist networks** are urged to build intersectional alliances that go beyond organizational boundaries or thematic divisions. WHRDs working on GBV, LGBTQI+ rights, environmental justice, and Roma or Egyptian rights must be supported through collective care systems, shared infrastructure, and community-driven safety plans. Feminist spaces should prioritize intergenerational mentorship, elevate emerging voices, and embed practices of rest, reflection, and healing into their activism models. There is also a pressing need to document and archive the contributions of WHRDs, especially those operating in informal or grassroots contexts, through storytelling, oral history, and multimedia.
- **Media and the general public** hold immense power in shaping narratives about WHRDs. Journalists and content creators should actively counter misogynistic, anti-gender, and disinformation campaigns by presenting accurate, respectful, and empowering representations of WHRDs. This includes celebrating their community contributions, highlighting their leadership, and resisting framing them as “troublemakers” or “outsiders.” Local communities,

educators, and influencers can foster a culture of civic solidarity, recognizing and defending WHRDs' work as essential to Albania's democratic and social development.

- **The education sector and academia** should also play a transformative role. WHRDs and their work must be integrated into national civic education curricula, not only as historical actors but as present-day change-makers. Universities and schools should support feminist research, develop internships and participatory projects that connect students with WHRD-led initiatives, and create dialogue spaces that reflect on care, burnout, and movement-building.

Introduction

1.1 Purpose and significance of the research

Across the world, women play a pivotal role in defending human rights, challenging discrimination, supporting survivors of violence, protecting marginalized communities, and driving inclusive democratic change. WHRDs engage in this work at the frontlines of local movements, often in environments marked by insecurity, invisibility, and structural inequality. In Albania, WHRDs have been instrumental in advancing gender equality, safeguarding human rights, and building community resilience, particularly in the face of persistent gender-based violence, political polarization, and increasingly vocal anti-gender movements. Yet, despite their essential contributions, WHRDs in Albania continue to operate in contexts that are under-resourced, politically sensitive, and often hostile. Many face intersecting risks, including online abuse, public defamation, institutional neglect, and backlash from both state and non-state actors, including within their own families and communities. These risks are compounded by patriarchal norms, stigmatization, and a lack of formal legal or policy frameworks for their protection. Most of these women carry out their work with little recognition and under conditions that threaten both their personal safety and psychological well-being¹.

Importantly, this research addresses both a knowledge gap and a recognition gap. Although global institutions have increasingly acknowledged the risks faced by WHRDs, localized, gender-sensitive research that reflects the realities of WHRDs in Albania remains limited. There is little documentation of how national context, such as religion, political transitions, donor dynamics, and social conservatism, shapes WHRDs' opportunities and risks. This report contributes to filling that gap by offering a baseline that captures the complexity, diversity, and strategic agency of WHRDs across geographic, ethnic, and sectoral lines. Through this, the research contributes to four overarching goals:

- *Documentation and visibility*: Elevating WHRDs' lived realities into the national policy and human rights discourse.
- *Recognition and legitimacy*: Positioning WHRDs not only as activists but as vital political and social actors shaping democratic and gender-just futures.
- *Protection and response*: Providing evidence for the development of more robust, inclusive, and context-sensitive protection mechanisms.
- *Solidarity and movement-building*: Laying the foundation for stronger feminist alliances, mentorship systems, and cross-movement collaboration at national and regional levels.

At a time when civic space is narrowing and gender-based violence continues to disproportionately affect women and marginalized groups, supporting WHRDs is not only a protective measure—it is a political and moral imperative. Investing in WHRDs strengthens democracy, sustains peace, and upholds the human rights of all. This report serves as both a tool for evidence-based advocacy and a call to action for state institutions, donors, national human rights institutions, media, civil society, and academia to recognize, value, and protect the defenders.

1.2 Who are Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs)?

Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) are women—acting individually or collectively—who advocate for, protect, and advance the full range of universally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms. Their activism spans numerous forms, including legal reform, advocacy,

¹ UN OHCHR – Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-human-rights-defenders/challenges-faced-human-rights-defenders>

community organizing, awareness-raising, service provision, and direct support to marginalized or vulnerable populations. The term also includes individuals of diverse gender identities who defend women's rights or work to dismantle gender-based discrimination and inequality.

What distinguishes WHRDs is not only the focus of their work but also the gender-specific risks and structural barriers they face. Rooted in patriarchal norms and unequal power relations, these risks are compounded by broader civic space restrictions, societal stigma, and lack of institutional support. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), WHRDs are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence, online harassment, defamation, smear campaigns, and attempts to discredit their activism through moralistic or misogynistic narratives. Such attacks often come not only from state institutions, but also from non-state actors—religious institutions, political groups, media outlets, community leaders, or even family members².

For example, WHRDs are frequently labeled as “anti-family,” “unpatriotic,” or “agents of foreign interests,” especially when their work challenges entrenched power structures or promotes the rights of women, LGBTQI+ persons, ethnic minorities, or other marginalized groups. The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders has noted a disturbing global trend of gendered disinformation campaigns and reprisals against WHRDs, including sexualized violence, intimidation, and digital surveillance (OHCHR, 2023).

In Albania, WHRDs operate across diverse sectors, regions, and identities. Many are at the forefront of struggles for gender equality, protection from gender-based violence, LGBTQI+ rights, Roma and Egyptian inclusion, disability rights, freedom of expression, and environmental justice. They serve as legal advocates, shelter managers, social workers, community organizers, educators, and public communicators. Some operate within established civil society organizations or networks, while others work informally at the grassroots or community level. Despite their impact, WHRDs in Albania are often under-recognized, underfunded, and exposed to harassment or neglect—particularly those from minority communities, rural regions, or working on issues considered “controversial” by public opinion or political authorities.

International frameworks such as the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (1998)³ and the European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders⁴ reaffirm that everyone has the right to promote and protect human rights, and that states have an obligation to ensure their safety and freedom from retaliation. However, these protections remain poorly implemented in many countries, including Albania, where civic space is increasingly fragile and gender-based discrimination remains deeply rooted in institutional and cultural systems.

It is also important to note that many women engaged in human rights work do not self-identify as “defenders.” This may be due to lack of familiarity with the term, concerns about visibility and retaliation, or the perception that human rights work must be formal, public, or professionalized to be legitimate. Yet, even when informal or unrecognized, their contributions are vital. Acknowledging their work is a critical step toward building inclusive protection frameworks and validating the diverse forms of feminist resistance taking place across Albanian society.

This research adopts a broad and inclusive definition of WHRDs. It aims to center their voices, document their experiences, and advocate for structural changes that ensure their protection, sustainability, and political recognition. In doing so, it contributes to larger efforts to build gender-just,

² [https://www.ohchr.org/en/women/women-human-rights-defenders#:~:text=Women%20human%20rights%20defenders%20\(WHRDs,rights%20related%20to%20gender%20equality](https://www.ohchr.org/en/women/women-human-rights-defenders#:~:text=Women%20human%20rights%20defenders%20(WHRDs,rights%20related%20to%20gender%20equality)

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-human-rights-defenders/declaration-human-rights-defenders>

⁴ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-guidelines-human-rights-defenders_en

democratic societies—where all people, regardless of identity, geography, or social status, can participate in defending and advancing human rights.

1.3 The Albanian context: Gender, activism, and rights defense

Albania has made notable strides in aligning its legal and institutional frameworks with international human rights and gender equality standards, particularly in the context of its European Union integration efforts. The 2008 Gender Equality Law introduced measures such as gender quotas to enhance women's representation in elected positions and mandated that budgets and policies consider the needs of both women and men. Currently, this law is undergoing revisions to address implementation challenges and to better align with recommendations from the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Despite these legislative advancements, structural challenges persist. Gender inequality remains entrenched in various sectors, and women's representation in decision-making roles, especially at the local level, is limited. Access to justice for survivors of gender-based violence is inconsistent, and funding for women's rights initiatives often relies on short-term, project-based, or external sources. Moreover, societal and cultural norms continue to impose restrictive expectations on women's roles, influencing perceptions of women's leadership and activism.

In recent years, the civic space in Albania has experienced significant constraints. According to Freedom House's 2024 report, there has been a deterioration of civil society space and erosion of the media environment, undermining the country's commitment to democracy. Civil society organizations face challenges such as political and economic barriers, social perceptions, and funding constraints, creating a multifaceted environment for their operation.⁵

Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) in Albania operate within this complex landscape. Their work often challenges entrenched gender hierarchies and seeks to dismantle systems that perpetuate violence, inequality, and marginalization. However, WHRDs frequently encounter resistance not only from institutional actors but also from communities, media, and even within their own families. Those working on issues such as LGBTQI+ rights, reproductive justice, anti-corruption, and anti-discrimination report higher levels of harassment and social stigma. This is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where patriarchal norms are more deeply rooted and support mechanisms are limited.

Furthermore, the contributions of WHRDs are often underrecognized in national narratives about civil society and political change. Their labor—frequently informal, voluntary, and relational—is rendered invisible in traditional definitions of leadership or activism. Many WHRDs lack institutional protections or access to donor funding, and some operate entirely outside formal structures, responding to community needs in innovative yet unsupported ways.

Documenting the experiences of WHRDs in Albania is thus not only a matter of evidence generation but also a political and moral imperative. It brings to light the often-overlooked contributions of women, strengthens the case for targeted protection mechanisms and inclusive policy reform, and reinforces the need for solidarity across movements, sectors, and borders. By amplifying the voices and realities of WHRDs, this research affirms their central role in building a more just, equitable, and democratic Albania.

⁵ Freedom House (2024). Nations in Transit. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/country/albania/nations-transit/2024?utm_source=chatgpt.com

2. Methodology

This research adopted a comprehensive mixed-methods approach to explore the lived realities of WHRDs in Albania. Combining qualitative and quantitative techniques, the methodology was guided by feminist and participatory principles that prioritize ethical rigor, contextual relevance, and the amplification of women's voices. The approach was designed not only to capture the risks and barriers faced by WHRDs but also to surface their agency, resilience, and strategies for effecting change in often restrictive or unsupportive environments.

2.1 Research design

The research process was structured around three core components: a desk review, a survey, and qualitative data collection through interviews and focus group discussions. This combination enabled a well-rounded understanding of both systemic and individual dimensions of WHRDs' experiences. The research focused on exploring institutional and social challenges, the tools and mechanisms WHRDs employ to sustain their work, and the impacts—both tangible and symbolic—of their human rights advocacy.

The design sought to answer several overarching questions: What challenges do WHRDs in Albania face? What kinds of threats are most common, and from whom? What strategies allow them to persist? And what are the visible and invisible impacts of their work on their communities and the broader human rights landscape?

2.2 Desk review

The research began with a desk review of relevant international, regional, and national literature. Key international documents consulted included the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (1998), the European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, and recent thematic reports by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders.

Regional publications such as Kvinna till Kvinna's 2023 study on WHRDs in the Western Balkans were particularly useful in identifying shared patterns across contexts, such as backlash from anti-gender actors, reputational attacks, and institutional neglect. National documents—especially those addressing gender-based violence, civil society participation, and the rights of marginalized groups—were reviewed to assess Albania's alignment with international standards and to identify gaps in protection, recognition, and support for WHRDs.

Insights from the desk review informed the development of research tools and allowed for contextualization of findings against broader policy and advocacy frameworks.

2.3 Primary data collection

Primary data was collected between December and January 2025, through a survey and a series of qualitative engagements.

The survey targeted 22 WHRDs across Albania from different age groups, geographic areas, and fields of activism. The structured questionnaire combined close-ended and open-ended questions to gather both demographic data and experiential information, including types of rights-based work, threats encountered, access to resources, perceived recognition, and impact. A purposive sampling strategy

was used to reach WHRDs actively involved in human rights work. Online distribution ensured broad accessibility, while AWEN also provided printed versions for WHRDs who preferred a hard copy.

In parallel with the survey, a series of 6 (six) in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a selected group of WHRDs from different backgrounds, sectors, and regions. These interviews explored the personal dimensions of rights defense work, including motivations, fears, and coping strategies, as well as experiences of resistance, institutional neglect, and community support. Participants also reflected on the structural and political conditions that shape their ability to act and offered recommendations for improving their safety, recognition, and effectiveness.

Two focus group discussions (FGDs) brought together WHRDs working in different sectors, especially those engaged in the protection of women's rights, GBV prevention, LGBTQI+ rights, and anti-discrimination work. The discussions offered a space for cross-sectoral reflection and collective meaning-making, helping to capture shared patterns, mutual support strategies, and recommendations for feminist coalition-building and resilience.

2.4 Ethical considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the study, strong ethical safeguards were implemented. All participants gave informed consent after being fully briefed about the purpose of the research, their right to withdraw at any time, and how their data would be used. Anonymity was strictly maintained, with identifying details removed from transcripts and visual data.

Particular care was taken when engaging WHRDs from communities facing multiple layers of marginalization, including LGBTQI+ defenders and rural activists. Interviews and FGDs were conducted in safe and trusted spaces. Data was stored securely and handled according to international best practices for research involving human rights defenders and vulnerable populations.

2.5 Data analysis

Quantitative data from the survey was analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends related to advocacy fields, types of threats, available support systems, and perceived impacts. Cross-tabulations were used to explore how responses varied across factors such as geographic location, sector of work, and years of experience.

Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups underwent thematic analysis. Transcripts were reviewed systematically to identify recurring themes, patterns, and notable divergences. Particular attention was paid to power dynamics, gender-based stigma and intersectionality. This approach allowed the research team to draw out the nuances of how WHRDs in Albania navigate their work in contexts of both direct and indirect opposition.

Triangulation across sources—survey, focus group discussions, interviews, and literature—ensured analytical coherence and enhanced the reliability of conclusions.

2.6 Limitations

While care was taken to ensure inclusive representation and ethical rigor, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the study employed a purposive sampling strategy, drawing primarily from AWEN's network of member organizations and affiliated women's rights actors with whom the organization has collaborated. While this approach ensured trust, safety, and contextual relevance—particularly in engaging WHRDs on sensitive issues—it may have limited the inclusion of individuals or organizations outside these existing relationships. Consequently, WHRDs who operate independently or in more informal, localized, or disconnected settings may be underrepresented in the findings. Moreover, not all women engaged in rights-based work self-identify as “defenders.” Especially at the grassroots level, some may be unfamiliar with the term or avoid the label due to fear of stigmatization or reprisal. As a result, informal activism and leadership occurring outside of formal civil society structures may not be fully captured. While the research offers valuable insight into the experiences of a diverse cross-section of WHRDs, future studies would benefit from expanded outreach strategies to reach underrepresented and non-networked activists.

Second, the emotional toll of this work and fear of retaliation may have led some participants to underreport threats or frame their experiences cautiously. Even with anonymized data, some WHRDs may have felt unsafe discussing certain aspects of their work or personal history.

Finally, the research represents a snapshot in time. As political dynamics, civic space conditions, and funding streams change rapidly, the findings are best seen as a baseline to guide ongoing monitoring, dialogue, and action.

Despite these limitations, the research provides a robust and multifaceted account of the realities faced by WHRDs in Albania. It amplifies underrepresented voices, surfaces patterns of systemic challenge, and lays the groundwork for more responsive, feminist-informed support strategies.

3. Global and regional landscape and implications for Albania: WHRDs in focus

Around the world, WHRDs are at the forefront of efforts to promote justice, equity, and democratic accountability. Their activism spans a wide range of issues—from combating gender-based violence and defending reproductive rights, to advocating for LGBTQI+ communities, protecting the environment, and challenging systemic corruption. Yet, despite their crucial role, WHRDs face a global pattern of hostility and repression that is deeply gendered in nature.

WHRDs are subjected to a distinctive combination of threats: not only are they targeted because of the causes they defend, but also because their activism challenges patriarchal social norms and expectations about women's roles in public life. These threats are frequently gender-specific, ranging from sexualized online abuse and defamatory campaigns to physical violence, intimidation, and threats against family members. WHRDs are often portrayed as “troublemakers,” “morally deviant,” or agents of foreign influence, particularly when they speak out against state or religious authorities, defend sexual and reproductive rights, or advocate for LGBTQI+ communities.

In her latest report, the UN Special Rapporteur about human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, draws attention to the precarious realities of WHRDs operating in remote, rural, or highly conservative settings. These defenders, she notes, are often “invisible” to protection mechanisms and are frequently left to navigate threats on their own, without institutional support or public recognition⁶.

Additionally, the global rise of populist, anti-gender, and far-right movements has triggered a coordinated backlash against feminist values and the defenders who embody them. According to the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, attacks on WHRDs are increasingly transnational in nature, with similar tactics and narratives used across regions to discredit and threaten them. These include organized online harassment, defamation campaigns accusing WHRDs of undermining national identity or traditional values and coordinated legal harassment such as strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs)⁷.

In the Western Balkans, the structural vulnerabilities of WHRDs are compounded by limited institutional protections, political volatility, and deeply rooted gender inequalities. The 2024 Kvinna till Kvinna report on women's rights in the region paints a disturbing picture: WHRDs in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia report systematic underfunding, exclusion from policymaking, digital surveillance, and increasing hostility from both state and non-state actors⁸.

Particularly vulnerable are those defending reproductive rights, advocating for LGBTQI+ communities, or working on the rights of ethnic minorities such as Roma and Egyptians. These WHRDs often face compounded marginalization and are disproportionately targeted by smear campaigns that aim to stigmatize their causes as “anti-national” or “against traditional family values.” Public and media discourse in the region frequently delegitimizes their work, branding them as foreign-funded agents or ideologically dangerous.

⁶ [Out of sight: human rights defenders working in isolated, remote and rural contexts - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor \(A/HRC/58/53\) \[EN/AR/RU/ZH\] - World | ReliefWeb](#)

⁷ Kvinna till Kvinna (2023). [The state of women human rights defenders 2023](#)

⁸ Kvinna till Kvinna (2024). [Women's Rights in Western Balkans \(2024\)](#)

The regional context is also marked by weak legal and policy protections for WHRDs. While some countries in the Western Balkans have adopted human rights and anti-discrimination frameworks on paper, their implementation is uneven and rarely gender-sensitive. Protection mechanisms for defenders often focus solely on physical threats and overlook the psychological, reputational, and digital dimensions of risk that WHRDs routinely encounter⁹.

Albania's socio-political landscape presents a complex environment for Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs), mirroring broader regional and global challenges while exhibiting unique national dynamics. WHRDs in Albania operate within a civic space that is increasingly characterized by polarization, anti-gender rhetoric, and limited institutional accountability.

One of the significant challenges faced by WHRDs in Albania is the prevalence of online harassment and gender-based attacks. A study by the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) highlights that WHRDs are frequently subjected to online intimidation, including sexist language, organized smear campaigns, sexual harassment, and threats of sexual assault, rape, or murder. These attacks not only endanger the personal safety of WHRDs but also aim to delegitimize their work and silence their voices. According to this study, 83 % of women human rights defenders who were interviewed said they had experienced a violation of their digital rights at least once in their career. Women activists cited incidents of sexist language, organised smear campaigns, sexual harassment, and threats of sexual assault, rape, or murder. Just over 37 % of respondents said online hate speech was their biggest concern¹⁰.

Institutional support for WHRDs remains inadequate. While human rights defenders are formally involved in policy development, these consultations often lack genuine cooperation due to the absence of formal mechanisms at both central and local levels. Furthermore, widespread corruption and impunity create significant obstacles for WHRDs, undermining their efforts and exposing them to additional risks.¹¹

The legal and policy frameworks in Albania are insufficient in providing effective protection for WHRDs. There is a lack of specialized institutions tasked with safeguarding the rights of human rights defenders, and existing mechanisms, such as the Ombudsperson and the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination, often fall short in ensuring their safety. This gap in protection is particularly concerning given the targeted attacks and harassment faced by WHRDs, especially those working on sensitive issues like gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights¹².

The intersectionality of discrimination further exacerbates the challenges for WHRDs in Albania. Women from minority communities, such as Roma and Egyptian populations, face compounded barriers due to systemic racism, poverty, and social exclusion. These factors not only hinder their participation in public and political life but also increase their vulnerability to violence and exploitation.

Despite these adversities, WHRDs in Albania continue to play a crucial role in advocating for human rights, providing essential services to marginalized communities, and promoting democratic values. Their resilience and commitment underscore the need for context-responsive, feminist-informed protection strategies that address the specific risks they face. Such strategies should include the

⁹ Civil Rights Defenders (2020). Human Rights Defenders in the Western Balkans. Intimidation instead of recognition, available at: https://crd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/200611_HRD-REPORTS-ALL_ENGa_Web_Redused.pdf

¹⁰ IDM (2022). The Freedom to Defend Rights in Online Spaces: Challenges for Women Human Rights Defenders in Albania.", available at: <https://idmalbania.org/publication-cpt/study-report-the-freedom-to-defend-rights-in-online-spaces-challenges-for-women-human-rights-defenders-in-albania/>

¹¹ <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/location/albania>

¹² Civil Rights Defenders. Human Rights Defenders in the Western Balkans. Intimidation instead of recognition, available at: https://crd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/200611_HRD-REPORTS-ALL_ENGa_Web_Redused.pdf

development of comprehensive legal frameworks, institutional reforms to ensure accountability, and targeted support mechanisms that recognize and bolster the work of WHRDs.

In conclusion, the experiences of WHRDs in Albania highlight the pressing need for systemic changes to create an enabling environment for their work. Addressing the challenges they face is not only a matter of protecting individual defenders but also a critical step towards strengthening human rights and democratic governance in Albania.

4. Findings

4.1. Profile of Women Human Rights Defenders in Albania

This section presents a demographic and professional overview of the Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) who participated in the survey conducted as part of this research. It offers insights into their age, geographic location, years of experience, and fields of activism. This analysis centers on the individual trajectories, positionalities, and intersecting identities of women actively engaged in rights defense. Understanding *who* WHRDs are is key to designing protection mechanisms and support systems that reflect their realities.

Demographic overview of respondents: age, geographic location, years of experience, activism fields.

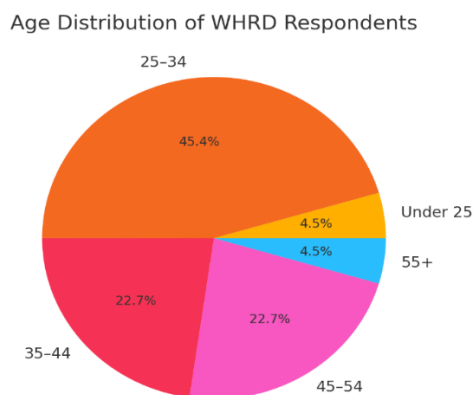
Age distribution

The age profile of WHRDs in this research reveals a predominantly young and mid-career cohort. Nearly half of the respondents (45.45%) are aged between 25 and 34, indicating that the defense of human rights in Albania is increasingly being driven by a new generation of feminist and rights-based activists. This group often balances professional advocacy with community engagement, bringing fresh energy and digital organizing strategies to the field.

The 35–44 and 45–54 age groups each represent 22.73% of respondents, highlighting the continued presence of experienced WHRDs who have played pivotal roles in foundational gender equality and anti-violence movements since the post-socialist transition. The youngest group (under 25) and the oldest (55+) are each represented by only 4.55%, suggesting that both early-stage activists and elder movement leaders remain less visible or less engaged in formal structures.

This demographic spread underlines the importance of intergenerational dialogue and leadership cultivation, particularly in light of burnout risks and the lack of long-term sustainability pathways for WHRDs. It also points to the need for better engagement strategies targeting senior defenders, whose knowledge and political histories remain underutilized, and for nurturing the leadership of very young WHRDs, who often begin their activism informally or outside the boundaries of recognized civil society.

Figure 1. Age distribution of WHRD respondents



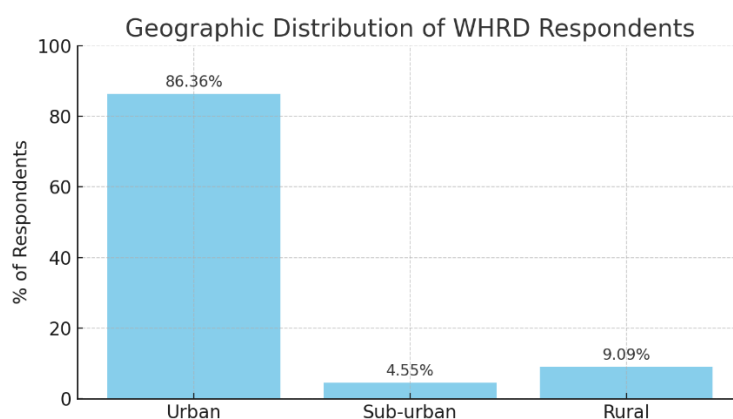
Geographic distribution

The geographic distribution of WHRDs in this study reveals a pronounced concentration in urban areas. A full 86.36% of respondents reported operating primarily in cities, compared to just 4.55% in suburban and 9.09% in rural areas. This locational disparity mirrors the uneven geography of feminist and rights-based activism in Albania and points to structural imbalances in how civil society resources, visibility, and networks are distributed.

WHRDs in urban centers often benefit from greater institutional proximity, media access, and opportunities for national advocacy. In contrast, those based in rural and suburban contexts must navigate layered forms of marginalization—including patriarchal community norms, limited donor engagement, and isolation from national feminist networks. Their work tends to be more informal, less visible, and more exposed to conservative backlash, yet it remains essential for reaching Albania's most underserved and at-risk populations.

Importantly, this urban bias should not be interpreted as a lack of activism in rural areas—but rather as a lack of institutional and policy infrastructure to support it. Many WHRDs operating outside of Tirana and other major cities remain under the radar of donors, media, and even civil society networks themselves, making their contributions less recognized and their protection less assured.

Figure 2. Geographic distribution of WHRD respondents



Years of experience

The data on years of experience among WHRDs in Albania reveals a field characterized by both enduring commitment and the steady emergence of new voices. The largest share of respondents, 27.27%, reported having 4 to 6 years of experience in human rights work. This indicates a strong presence of mid-career activists who are likely to be deeply embedded in their communities and advocacy networks, while still navigating challenges related to sustainability, recognition, and personal risk.

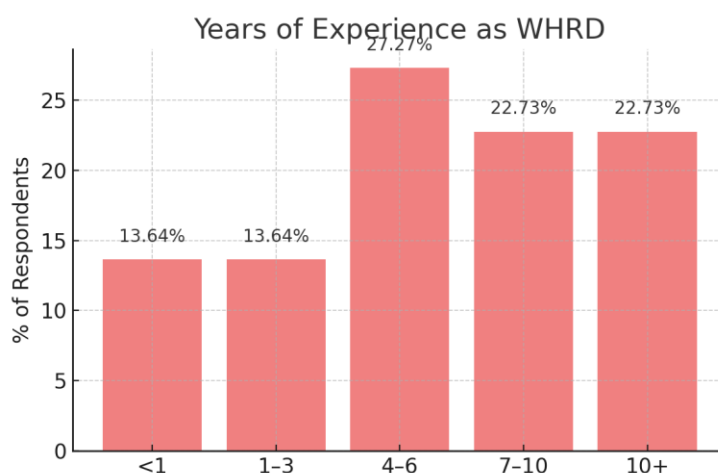
Notably, 22.73% of WHRDs reported 7 to 10 years of experience, and another 22.73% had been active for over a decade. These figures underscore the existence of a resilient and long-standing cohort of defenders whose continued presence speaks to enduring dedication despite persistent adversity. These experienced WHRDs form the backbone of rights-based work in Albania, often serving as mentors, trainers, and institutional memory for the broader movement.

At the other end of the range, 13.64% of respondents reported less than one year of experience, with an additional 13.64% falling in the 1 to 3 year range. This emerging group suggests that new activists

continue to enter the field, signaling both the appeal and urgency of human rights defense among younger generations. However, this early-career engagement also raises critical questions about sustainability: how many of these new WHRDs will be able to stay in the field, and under what conditions?

The simultaneous presence of newcomers and veterans suggests a movement in flux—one where intergenerational exchange and strategic support are vital. Entry points into activism must be matched with opportunities for long-term engagement, capacity-building, and protection from burnout or harm. If younger WHRDs are to remain active and safe, Albania's civil society and policy environments must offer not just inspiration but infrastructure for continuity.

Figure 3. Years of experience as WHRDs



Fields and types of human rights work

The survey results paint a compelling picture of the diversity, complexity, and political significance of the fields in which WHRDs in Albania are engaged. While their work is anchored in feminist principles, it extends far beyond a singular focus on women's rights—reflecting an intersectional approach that centers social justice, equity, and systemic transformation.

The most commonly reported area of engagement among respondents was women's human rights, cited by 90.91% of WHRDs. This high percentage affirms that gender equality and the defense of women's dignity, safety, and participation remain the core mission for many WHRDs in Albania. This focus often encompasses multiple thematic areas, including law reform, survivor support, and public education on rights and justice.

Closely following were ending violence against women (77.27%) and gender equality (72.73%), indicating that WHRDs play a central role in addressing one of Albania's most persistent human rights challenges: gender-based violence (GBV). Notably, 50% of respondents reported specific engagement in GBV-related work. This includes direct support for survivors, policy advocacy, and public campaigns aimed at disrupting the cultural acceptance of violence. In addition, another 50% reported working to combat discriminatory traditional values, suggesting that WHRDs are not only responding to immediate threats but also challenging the deep-rooted social norms that underpin inequality and exclusion.

Areas such as Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) were cited by 22.73% of WHRDs, while LGBTQI+ rights—still highly stigmatized in much of the country—were identified by only 13.64%.

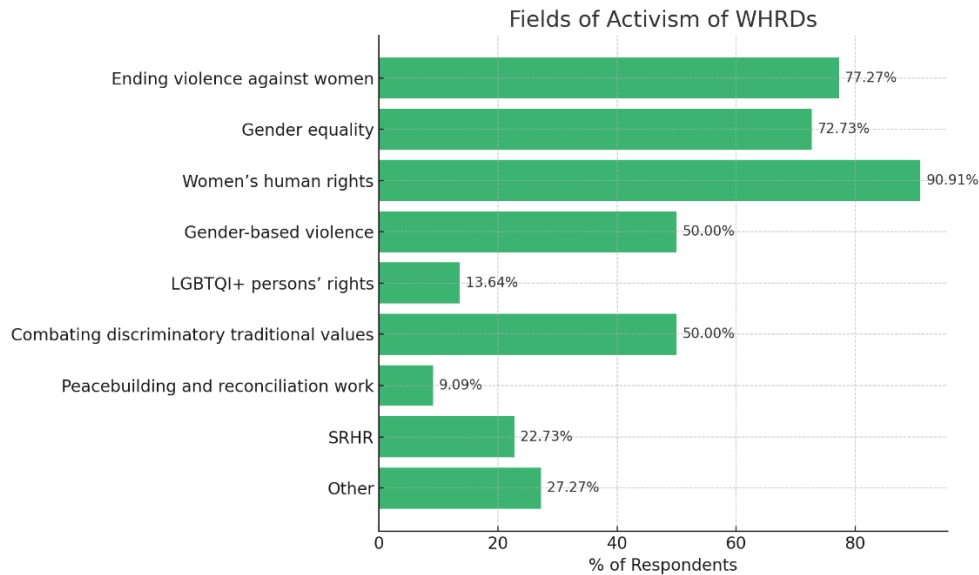
The relatively lower engagement in these areas does not necessarily signal a lack of concern, but rather reflects the heightened personal and professional risk that defenders face when working on issues considered controversial or “sensitive.” In these domains, WHRDs are often isolated, mischaracterized, or subject to harassment. Their work is frequently marginalized or omitted from mainstream funding and recognition structures, despite its centrality to achieving full human rights protections.

A smaller share of respondents reported working in peacebuilding and reconciliation (9.09%), while 27.27% selected “other” fields. These included emerging or community-rooted areas such as environmental rights, access to education, anti-trafficking, and support for youth leadership. Such diversity reveals that WHRDs are not only reactive responders to injustice, but also proactive architects of inclusive futures, adapting their activism to evolving needs and opportunities.

Crucially, most respondents were engaged in multiple areas of work simultaneously, reflecting the deeply interconnected nature of rights defense. A WHRD working on GBV might also be supporting LGBTQI+ youth or advocating for Roma women’s access to healthcare. This intersectional activism is both a strength and a source of vulnerability, as it increases exposure to backlash while also stretching resources and emotional capacities.

The chart below illustrates the range and frequency of focus areas selected by WHRDs in this study.

Figure 4. Fields of activism of WHRDs



4.2. Challenges faced by WHRDs

Despite their critical contributions to democratic resilience, justice, and the advancement of human rights, WHRDs in Albania continue to face an array of interlocking and systemic challenges. These are not only shaped by structural gender inequality and institutional fragility, but also by the wider global dynamics of shrinking civic space, populist backlash, and politicized attacks against feminist and human rights agendas. Drawing from both quantitative and qualitative data collected during this study, this section outlines the key barriers WHRDs face—legal, cultural, digital, and material—while highlighting how these challenges often intersect and compound one another.

Legal and institutional barriers

One of the most persistent structural challenges identified by respondents is the absence of a legal and policy framework that formally recognizes and protects human rights defenders, particularly WHRDs. Although Albania is party to numerous international agreements—such as the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (1998), CEDAW, and the Istanbul Convention—these instruments remain insufficiently operationalized at the national level. There are no specific legislative or administrative mechanisms in place to proactively safeguard the work or safety of WHRDs.

As a result, threats and violations—including those of a gendered nature such as online abuse, smear campaigns, or reputational attacks—are frequently ignored or inadequately addressed by state authorities. Only 36.36% of respondents reported receiving any form of support from government entities when facing harassment or intimidation, underscoring the systemic institutional neglect of WHRD protection.

Furthermore, this lack of recognition leaves WHRDs vulnerable to legal uncertainty and bureaucratic intimidation. Those working independently or in informal community settings—particularly in rural areas—often face difficulties registering their initiatives, accessing public spaces, or engaging with institutions on equal footing.

Social and cultural constraints

Beyond institutional failings, WHRDs operate in a deeply patriarchal social context that continues to question the legitimacy of women's public and political engagement. Many respondents noted that their work is seen as disruptive to traditional gender roles, family hierarchies, or community cohesion. This was especially pronounced in non-urban settings, where defenders reported a lack of community support, opposition from local leaders, and pressure to conform to gendered expectations of silence and obedience.

The data reveals that 22.73% of WHRDs had experienced pressure or threats from within their own families, highlighting the intimacy of resistance they face. These experiences were especially acute for young activists, and the ones working for most marginalised Roma and Egyptian women, and WHRDs with disabilities—groups who often navigate multiple and overlapping forms of exclusion.

In several interviews, WHRDs described a tension between their public activism and private responsibilities, with some withdrawing from networks or leadership roles due to community backlash or family-imposed restrictions. In this way, social norms act as both a visible and invisible barrier—limiting not only external support but also the internal confidence and sustainability of women's activism.

Online and offline harassment, threats, and defamation

Half of all survey respondents (50%) reported having experienced harassment or threats in the course of their work—confirming that intimidation remains a daily reality for many WHRDs.

The specific threats most commonly reported include:

- Online and offline harassment: 27.27%
- Death threats: 22.73%
- Smear campaigns or false accusations: 13.64%

Respondents also identified internet trolls (18.18%) and social media disinformation campaigns as significant sources of hostility. These patterns of abuse often carry a gendered tone, targeting WHRDs

with sexualized insults, accusations of moral deviance, or deliberate attempts to discredit their personal reputations.

Those working on LGBTQI+ rights, SRHR, or anti-discrimination were found to be particularly vulnerable to digital violence, with several noting that their private information had been deliberately exposed online in an attempt to provoke harassment and intimidation.

These findings are consistent with global trends highlighted in the 2023 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, which underscores the increasing use of gendered online reprisals—including sexualized hate, stalking, and algorithmic harassment—against WHRDs across the globe (OHCHR, 2023).

Such attacks are not isolated incidents. They represent a systematic form of backlash against women who challenge patriarchal power structures and question conservative interpretations of family, identity, or national values.

Reputational risks and mischaracterization

Attacks on reputation were identified by many WHRDs as a particularly damaging and persistent threat. Activists shared how they are often branded as “foreign agents,” “anti-family,” “Soros mercenaries,” or “enemies of Albanian values.” These mischaracterizations—frequently circulated by political parties, religious institutions, and partisan media—serve to delegitimize WHRDs’ work and isolate them from their communities.

Survey data supports this trend, with 9.09% of respondents citing anti-gender movements and political parties as sources of threats. These narratives are not incidental; they are part of a broader strategy to undermine feminist and human rights work by framing it as externally imposed, morally corrupt, or politically destabilizing.

Reputational damage often results in tangible exclusion: from funding opportunities, policy consultations, or public platforms. For many WHRDs, the risk of being “named and shamed” has led to self-censorship, withdrawal from coalitions, or burnout.

Unequal access to resources and participation spaces

Resource inequality is one of the most widely shared and deeply felt challenges among WHRDs. An overwhelming 95.45% of survey respondents cited limited access to funding as a core obstacle. For many WHRDs, particularly those operating at the grassroots level or in rural areas, project-based funding is difficult to access, inconsistent, or conditional on narrow indicators that do not reflect the complexity of their work.

This financial precarity is compounded by:

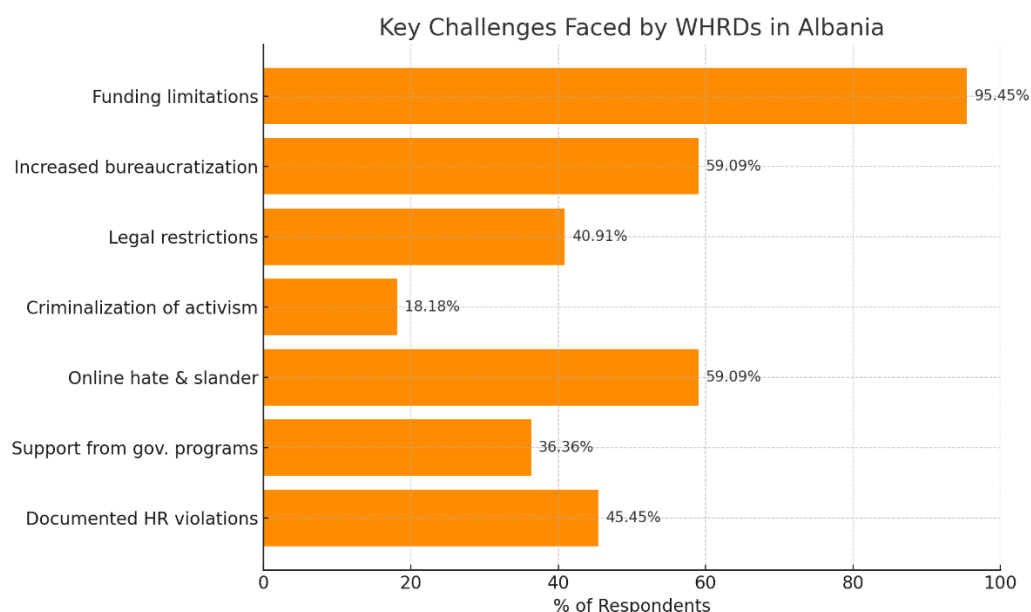
- Increased bureaucratic demands (59.09%)
- Legal uncertainty and restrictive frameworks (40.91%)
- Donor preferences for professionalized NGOs, often based in Tirana

These disparities create a stratified landscape in which urban-based, English-speaking organizations are more likely to access visibility, funding, and partnerships, while rural and minority-led efforts remain invisible. WHRDs from Roma communities, for example, shared stories of being excluded from consultations due to digital illiteracy or language barriers.

The strain of unpaid labor, often performed by women who are also caregivers or economically precarious, exacerbates burnout and limits long-term sustainability. Several WHRDs reported spending

more time applying for grants than actually implementing activities—highlighting the need for flexible, core funding and longer-term investments in feminist leadership.

Figure 5. Summary of key challenges faced by WHRDs in Albania



4.3 Contributions and impact of WHRDs

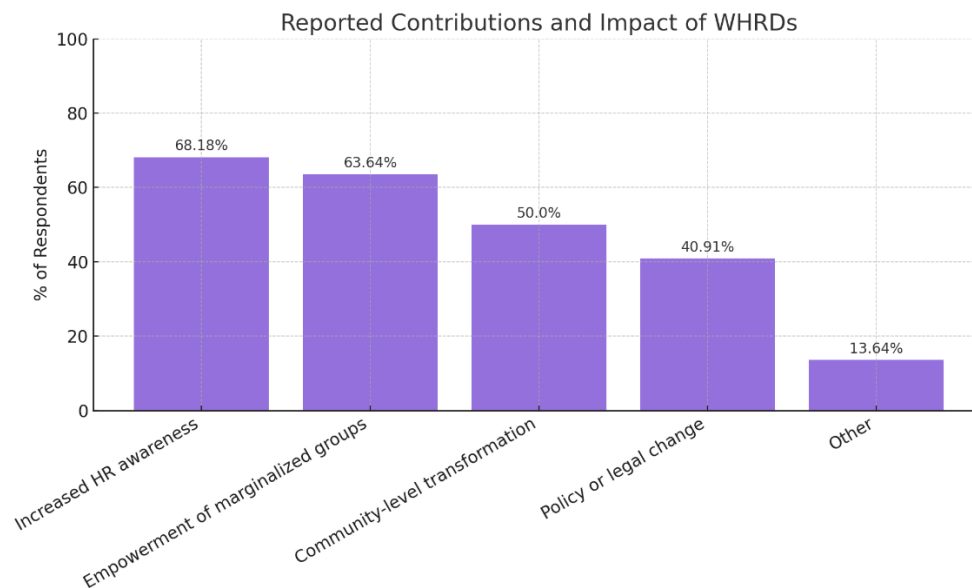
Despite operating within an increasingly hostile civic environment, WHRDs in Albania have demonstrated remarkable leadership, adaptability, and collective strength. Their impact transcends the boundaries of formal advocacy: WHRDs act as educators, bridge-builders, community organizers, and first responders in contexts where state institutions may be absent, indifferent, or even antagonistic. In doing so, they contribute not only to gender equality and human rights but also to Albania's democratic development, social cohesion, and institutional accountability.

Their work reflects a form of everyday resistance—often invisible and uncelebrated—yet deeply embedded in the daily life and collective identity of their communities. They are among the few actors connecting marginalized groups to public institutions, creating informal care systems, and challenging cultural norms from within.

Catalysts for structural and cultural change

Quantitative findings from the national survey clearly reflect the broad and multidimensional impact of WHRDs:

Figura. 6 Reported contributions and impact of WHRDs



As shown in the figure above the WHRDs' activism produces tangible and multi-layered change. As shown in the chart below, 68.18% of respondents reported that their work had contributed to increased public awareness of human rights. This finding highlights the vital educational role WHRDs play, particularly in environments where topics like gender-based violence, LGBTQI+ rights, and bodily autonomy remain taboo or misrepresented.

Through workshops, school campaigns, social media content, storytelling, and informal dialogue, WHRDs have expanded civic literacy and normalized conversations around dignity, justice, and equality. These efforts are particularly impactful in rural or conservative communities where such discourses may be met with resistance or silence.

In addition:

- 63.64% of WHRDs cited the empowerment of marginalized groups as a major outcome of their work. This includes Roma and Egyptian women, LGBTQI+ youth, women with disabilities, and girls in under-resourced rural areas. Empowerment here is not a vague aspiration—it refers to real, grounded activities: safe spaces for self-expression, leadership development, access to information, and the creation of informal networks of care and solidarity.
- 50% reported that their activism had triggered community-level transformation—a powerful indicator that WHRDs are not just “awareness-raisers” but embedded actors who challenge oppressive structures and promote relational change. These transformations often begin in small steps: shifting a teacher’s attitude toward gender equality, earning a mayor’s support for referral mechanisms, or building trust with a previously skeptical community.
- 40.91% of WHRDs identified policy or legal change as a direct result of their advocacy. While some of these interventions target national-level laws, many focus on local protocols, bylaws, or informal institutional practices—demonstrating that feminist influence is not always legislative but often embedded in bureaucratic routines, service design, or training curricula.

Transforming the GBV response landscape

One of the most visible and impactful domains of WHRD activism is the fight against gender-based violence (GBV). WHRDs have played a transformative role in building systems of support for survivors, often stepping in where institutions have failed or refused to act.

In many communities, especially where public institutions are absent or distrusted, WHRDs have set up parallel support systems—cooperatives of legal professionals, counselors, shelter providers, and survivor peer groups that operate informally but save lives.

Recognition, visibility, and continued struggle

While many WHRDs experience local-level recognition, especially from beneficiaries and community allies, their visibility at the national level remains low. Several respondents noted that their contributions are often overlooked by media outlets, omitted from national strategies, or included in policy consultations as a symbolic gesture rather than substantive engagement.

Nevertheless, WHRDs continue to resist. Their resilience is rooted in feminist solidarity, in informal support networks, and in a sense of purpose that transcends professional identity. As this research demonstrates, WHRDs in Albania are not passive recipients of external protection but active architects of social change, often working at great personal cost.

Their activism is not only about defending rights but about reclaiming space, challenging silence, and imagining new political futures. Investing in their work is not only a moral imperative—it is a strategic necessity for the realization of justice, inclusion, and democratic integrity in Albania.

4.4 Advocacy strategies and coping mechanisms

In an environment where backlash against gender equality, civic engagement, and rights-based activism is growing, WHRDs in Albania have demonstrated not only endurance but innovation. While state institutions remain unresponsive—or, at times, openly hostile—WHRDs have developed sophisticated strategies to continue their work, maintain safety, and adapt to rapidly changing political and social dynamics.

This section presents the key strategies employed by WHRDs to sustain their activism under pressure. It draws on both survey data and qualitative testimonies to explore how defenders build resilience, mobilize informal networks, repurpose digital tools, and organize intersectionally in the face of institutional neglect and systemic gender-based hostility.

Resilience under pressure: A strategic necessity

Faced with legal uncertainty, hostile public rhetoric, and psychological stress, WHRDs have come to see resilience not just as emotional strength but as a political act—a strategy for survival and long-term presence. Many defenders work in environments where speaking publicly about women's rights, LGBTQI+ inclusion, or state accountability can result in reputational harm or personal threats. Nonetheless, they persist.

Survey data reveal that WHRDs rely most strongly on internal capacity-building, peer support, and external alliances:

- 77.27% of WHRDs reported using capacity-building and training as a key resilience strategy. This includes formal workshops, skill-sharing across organizations, and informal mentorship to strengthen legal literacy, advocacy skills, digital security, and survivor-centered approaches.

- 72.73% relied on peer support networks, which served both as emotional safety nets and as practical mechanisms for responding to crises.
- 68.18% indicated that collaboration with international organizations gave them credibility, protection, and expanded platforms for visibility.
- Only 27.27% had access to mental health or psychosocial support, highlighting a serious gap in the holistic protection of WHRDs.

This data points to a consistent pattern: while WHRDs have developed robust informal strategies to manage risk, the absence of institutional protection and psychosocial care remains a critical vulnerability.

Informal networks, peer solidarity, and collective resilience

Qualitative interviews affirmed that feminist peer networks are central to WHRD survival. These networks are often informal but deeply functional, providing emotional refuge, crisis support, and practical tools. Defenders shared how they rely on other women to:

- Co-write funding proposals or advocacy briefs;
- Alert one another to digital attacks or surveillance threats;
- Share safe meeting locations, protection protocols, and trusted contacts in institutions;
- Offer emotional companionship and validation, especially after public defamation or burnout.

In several regions, these networks operate as parallel infrastructures of support in places where state services are either absent or distrusted. One participant called it “our underground sisterhood”—a decentralized system of care, activism, and emergency response that sustains WHRDs long after projects end or headlines fade.

Digital storytelling and advocacy: Reclaiming the narrative

Digital spaces are both tools and battlegrounds for WHRDs. While 50% of WHRDs surveyed reported experiences of online harassment or defamation, many also described digital advocacy as essential to their work—especially in settings where physical gatherings are unsafe or visibility is discouraged.

WHRDs in the research described a variety of digital tactics:

- Using encrypted messaging apps to share sensitive legal updates;
- Launching anonymous Instagram accounts or blogs to educate communities about GBV, LGBTQI+ rights, or local injustices;
- Creating short-form videos, memes, and art to reach youth audiences and counter dominant narratives;
- Coordinating discreet public education campaigns during 16 Days of Activism or Women’s Day via WhatsApp groups.

Yet digital fatigue, surveillance, and algorithmic targeting also take a toll. Several WHRDs reported pausing online advocacy following coordinated smear campaigns or after being targeted by political figures. As a result, digital security training is increasingly being integrated into feminist organizing spaces.

Risk navigation and tactical adaptation

Rather than confronting risk directly, many WHRDs engage in strategic adjustment—modifying their language, visibility, and formats to reduce backlash while still advancing their goals. These approaches are especially common among WHRDs in rural or conservative areas, where resistance is high and institutional allies are limited.

Examples of these adaptive strategies include:

- Reframing advocacy work around non-confrontational terms like “community health” or “youth engagement”;
- Distributing anonymous testimonials through art installations or local newspapers to raise awareness without exposing survivors;
- Taking temporary retreats from public forums after reputational attacks, while continuing advocacy behind the scenes.

These approaches reveal not weakness, but *strategic intelligence*—a capacity to read the political climate and act accordingly. WHRDs do not avoid risk; they manage it with precision, solidarity, and collective care.

Intersectional organizing and feminist alliances

Despite limited visibility and funding, WHRDs in Albania continue to form intersectional coalitions across issue areas, geographies, and identities. These alliances are often informal but highly strategic, united by shared feminist principles and the urgency of collective protection.

Such coalitions have taken the form of:

- Joint shadow reports to bodies like GREVIO, CEDAW, and the UN Special Rapporteur on HRDs;
- Cross-sector advocacy involving Roma, LGBTQI+, and anti-violence organizations;
- Collaborative fundraising and resource-sharing arrangements that reduce competition and strengthen sustainability.

These alliances often exist beneath the radar but wield substantial power. They are shaping national narratives, resisting anti-gender attacks, and building feminist futures—not only in policy but in practice.

4.5 State and institutional support for WHRDs

What emerges most clearly from this research is the persistent disconnect between the formal obligations of the Albanian state and the lived experiences of WHRDs. Despite the vital role WHRDs play in advancing gender justice and protecting marginalized communities, they remain largely unsupported and unrecognized by institutional mechanisms. Most WHRDs continue to rely on informal feminist networks and community solidarity to sustain their work, while formal protection, funding, and recognition from state or international actors remain scarce.

While some respondents acknowledged the visibility and legitimacy that international partnerships can offer—68.18% cited them as important support structures—only 36.36% reported receiving any direct assistance from Albanian government institutions. Even more concerning, fewer than a third (27.27%) had access to psychosocial care, despite facing high rates of burnout, harassment, and emotional toll

in their daily work. These figures reflect a broader systemic failure to prioritize the protection and sustainability of those who defend rights at the grassroots level.

Weak legal protections: Recognition without enforcement

Albania is party to key international human rights instruments relevant to the protection of WHRDs, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Istanbul Convention, the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (1998), and benchmarks tied to its EU accession process. These frameworks affirm the right to defend human rights and oblige states to ensure enabling environments for activists.

However, Albania lacks a domestic legal framework that explicitly defines or protects human rights defenders—let alone addresses the specific vulnerabilities faced by women. While constitutional guarantees for freedom of expression and association exist, they are inconsistently upheld, particularly when defenders challenge government institutions or advocate for the rights of marginalized communities.

Many WHRDs reported feeling “invisible in the legal system,” unaware of any existing legal remedies, or discouraged from seeking formal protection.

The absence of formal protections becomes especially dangerous in a climate where anti-gender rhetoric is rising, political discourse is increasingly polarized, and online abuse targeting women activists is normalized.

Institutional passivity and weak accountability mechanisms

When WHRDs report threats or violations—whether digital harassment, smear campaigns, or intimidation—state responses are often inadequate or nonexistent. Survey and interview participants recounted being dismissed by police, told to moderate their activism, or simply ignored. In many cases, complaints were filed with no follow-up, and perpetrators—including influential public figures—acted with impunity.

Although oversight bodies like the Ombudsperson, the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination, and local police structures technically offer reporting pathways, most WHRDs avoid them—citing distrust, inefficiency, and fear of secondary victimization. This reluctance is particularly pronounced when the perpetrators are non-state actors, such as conservative media figures or religious leaders. In these cases, law enforcement institutions are often reluctant to act, especially when the harm is verbal, reputational, or online.

This pattern of passive or dismissive responses has eroded confidence in the justice system and perpetuated a culture in which harassment and defamation are tolerated, if not implicitly condoned.

Gaps in funding and structural support

Beyond legal protection, WHRDs in Albania face systemic exclusion from institutional support and state funding. Grassroots defenders—especially those without formal NGO status—encounter significant administrative barriers when trying to access public grants, participate in institutional programs, or even receive recognition for their work.

Only a few municipalities in Albania offer support for civil society organizations delivering gender-based violence (GBV) services, and even fewer include mechanisms to support defenders working on more stigmatized issues such as LGBTQI+ rights, trafficking, or accountability in governance.

This is not simply a matter of resource scarcity—it reflects political choices about who is viewed as a legitimate actor in public life. The absence of core and flexible funding from state institutions further

entrenches inequality, making it nearly impossible for grassroots WHRDs to sustain long-term advocacy or support services.

Local engagement: Some promising practices amid a fragmented landscape

Despite the challenges, several WHRDs shared experiences of meaningful collaboration with individual public officials—such as progressive mayors, social workers, or police officers—who supported awareness campaigns, co-created survivor support protocols, or facilitated referrals. These interactions demonstrate that cooperation is possible, especially when built on mutual respect and a shared commitment to rights-based outcomes.

However, these engagements remain fragmented and often depend on the goodwill of individual actors. When such allies leave office or are reassigned, the partnerships often dissolve.

The lack of institutionalization in these partnerships renders progress fragile and inconsistent. There is an urgent need for formal, legal agreements and dedicated funding streams that can protect and sustain collaboration beyond electoral or staffing cycles.

Oversight institutions: A dormant but promising infrastructure

Institutions like the People's Advocate, the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination have mandates that theoretically align with the protection of WHRDs. Yet in practice, many defenders reported never having interacted with these bodies or being unaware of how to lodge complaints or request assistance.

This is particularly true in rural and marginalized areas, where awareness of these institutions is low and their presence is limited. WHRDs working on anti-discrimination, trafficking, or anti-corruption said they had never been approached for consultations or offered institutional backing.

If given adequate political independence, financial resources, and a clear mandate, these institutions could play a transformative role in:

- Monitoring violations and trends affecting WHRDs;
- Issuing public reports on threats to civic space and gender-based harassment;
- Advocating for WHRD-specific legislation;
- Providing legal aid and emergency assistance.

Currently, this potential remains largely underutilized.

The gap between international obligations and domestic realities

Albania's international commitments—through CEDAW, the Istanbul Convention, and EU integration benchmarks—require the creation of an enabling environment for WHRDs. Reports submitted to the EU Commission and UN treaty bodies often reference civil society participation and gender-based protection frameworks.

Yet many WHRDs view these references as symbolic rather than transformative. Several described these reports as “tick-box exercises” that produce no real change on the ground.

Unless these obligations are translated into concrete national policies, resource allocations, and institutional practices, the gap between global rhetoric and local reality will persist. Without meaningful domestic implementation, international frameworks risk becoming diplomatic performance rather than tools of protection.

5. Conclusion

This research confirms what many WHRDs in Albania have long known but have rarely seen fully documented: their work is critical to the protection of human rights, the strengthening of democratic institutions, and the advancement of gender justice—and yet, it is persistently undervalued, inadequately supported, and dangerously exposed to risk.

Across urban and rural communities, WHRDs provide services that are otherwise absent: legal advice, psychosocial support, awareness-raising, and protection for survivors of violence. They drive public discourse on taboo subjects, advocate for policy change, and mobilize community solidarity in the face of deep-rooted discrimination. Their contributions are not marginal—they are central to Albania's civic and human rights infrastructure.

The findings of this study underscore that WHRDs operate within a landscape shaped by multiple, intersecting layers of vulnerability. They face legal ambiguity, institutional neglect, and a widespread lack of formal protection. While Albania is party to several important international human rights frameworks, these commitments have not been translated into meaningful national policies or practices that safeguard women defenders. Many WHRDs are unaware of formal complaint mechanisms, and even when they do report threats or harassment, their claims are often ignored, dismissed, or met with secondary victimization.

The risks WHRDs face are not only institutional but also social and cultural. This research highlights how patriarchal norms, community stigma, and public misrepresentation continue to delegitimize women's rights advocacy. Activists are frequently labeled as “anti-family,” “foreign agents,” or “troublemakers,” with smear campaigns often orchestrated by political actors or amplified by conservative media and religious leaders. These attacks are particularly acute for WHRDs working on LGBTQI+ rights, sexual and reproductive health, or minority rights, where public backlash is especially intense.

Digital spaces, while offering platforms for awareness-raising and storytelling, also expose WHRDs to significant online harassment. From coordinated disinformation campaigns to the deliberate exposure of personal information and death threats, defenders—especially younger women and LGBTQI+ activists—face a hostile digital environment. Despite these threats, digital advocacy remains a vital outlet, especially in regions where public activism is constrained.

Resource inequality is another persistent challenge. Most WHRDs report limited or no access to core funding, and many rely on volunteer labor to sustain services. Only a small percentage receive support from public institutions, and access to donor resources is often concentrated in urban areas or within formal organizations. Grassroots WHRDs—particularly in rural or suburban regions—are frequently excluded from consultation processes, funding mechanisms, and national visibility.

The research also revealed a strong concentration of WHRDs in urban areas (86.36%), with rural defenders making up a small minority. This urban dominance in the civic ecosystem reflects broader patterns of infrastructural imbalance, digital exclusion, and political marginalization. WHRDs working in remote areas face heightened isolation, fewer protection options, and limited access to supportive networks—yet they continue to fill critical roles within their communities.

Despite these adversities, the impact of WHRDs is both measurable and meaningful. Nearly 70% of survey respondents indicated that their work had increased awareness of human rights, while over 60% cited direct empowerment of marginalized groups. WHRDs have helped transform local institutional responses to GBV, provided leadership in anti-discrimination campaigns, and offered essential services

in contexts where state presence is minimal or mistrusted. Their influence is particularly visible at the community level, where long-term engagement has led to shifts in social attitudes, strengthened referral pathways for survivors, and created safe spaces for expression and solidarity.

Importantly, WHRDs are not merely reacting to crises; they are proactively building coalitions, shaping public discourse, and asserting feminist values in an often hostile civic space. The research shows that peer support networks, capacity-building, and international alliances have served as critical tools for resilience. WHRDs adapt to risk with a combination of creative advocacy, informal safety strategies, and intersectional organizing—demonstrating a sophisticated political and emotional intelligence that is rarely recognized in institutional settings.

At the same time, the emotional toll of this work cannot be ignored. Burnout, fear, and a deep sense of invisibility were recurring themes throughout the research. Many WHRDs continue their work despite lacking protection, sustainable income, or even basic acknowledgment. They operate with immense courage—but often in solitude.

The findings of this report are not simply a reflection of individual hardship. They point to systemic failures in how Albania conceptualizes and supports human rights defense—failures that leave defenders vulnerable and weaken the country's broader human rights architecture. WHRDs in Albania are not asking for symbolic recognition; they are calling for structural change that affirms their rights, resources their work, and ensures that their activism is not punished but protected.

This research contributes to making their voices heard and their realities visible. It offers a foundation for collective action, policy advocacy, and a renewed commitment to feminist, intersectional, and community-based approaches to human rights. Because when WHRDs thrive, societies become more equitable, democratic, and humane.

6. Recommendations

WHRDs play a vital yet often underrecognized role in advancing justice, gender equality, and democratic values in Albania. In light of the findings in this research, specific actions must be taken by national institutions, international actors, civil society, and the public to ensure that WHRDs are protected, valued, and meaningfully supported. These recommendations focus squarely on WHRDs' lived experiences, unique risks, and diverse contributions—and are not general to civil society more broadly.

For government and policymakers

1. **Formally recognize WHRDs in national policy and law.** Develop legal recognition of WHRDs as a distinct category, with explicit reference to their gender-specific vulnerabilities. This should be aligned with Albania's obligations under CEDAW, the Istanbul Convention, and the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.
2. **Establish a dedicated protection protocol for WHRDs.** Create a rapid-response and protection mechanism tailored to WHRDs, including confidential complaint procedures, legal aid, shelter access, and mental health support. This should be institutionalized under relevant ministries, not reliant on individual discretion.
3. **Create outreach and support mechanisms at the municipal level.** Ensure that local gender equality offices and social service units are trained to engage with and support WHRDs—particularly in rural and suburban areas where defenders are more isolated and under-resourced.
4. **Monitor and respond to gendered threats and reputational attacks.** Mandate institutions like the Audiovisual Media Authority and the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination to monitor and publicly condemn disinformation or smear campaigns targeting WHRDs—especially those working on LGBTQI+, anti-discrimination, or reproductive rights.
5. **Include WHRDs in public decision-making and monitoring bodies.** Institutionalize the participation of WHRDs—especially grassroots and informal defenders—in gender equality councils, anti-violence working groups, and oversight bodies. Selection should reflect geographic and identity-based diversity.

For donors and international actors

1. **Fund WHRDs not just as service providers, but as political actors.** Move beyond project-based service delivery to fund WHRDs' advocacy, watchdog roles, legal reform work, and community education—particularly in sectors that face backlash or politicization.
2. **Support informal and emerging WHRDs.** Provide microgrants and light-touch application processes for unregistered WHRDs or emerging youth-led collectives. Tailor funding schemes to overcome barriers related to language, administration, and digital access.
3. **Prioritize care-based and holistic protection.** Fund WHRD-led initiatives that integrate digital security, trauma-informed care, rest strategies, and emergency assistance. These must be embedded in feminist values, not only framed in security terms.
4. **Build visibility and recognition into donor engagements.** Ensure WHRDs are included in donor coordination meetings, human rights monitoring missions, and strategic dialogues—particularly those related to EU accession, gender equality, and anti-discrimination agendas.

5. **Support local storytelling and community-rooted media.** Resource WHRDs to document and disseminate their own narratives through podcasts, short films, or visual art—especially for rural or minority women whose voices are often erased.

For National Human Rights and Oversight Institutions

(e.g., *People's Advocate*, *Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination*)

1. **Institutionalize WHRDs as a monitoring priority.** Introduce WHRD-specific indicators in annual human rights reports and civic space monitoring. Track attacks, defamation, or access to justice for WHRDs and report disaggregated data by sector and identity.
2. **Develop survivor- and WHRD-centered complaint mechanisms.** Ensure accessible, confidential, and gender-sensitive reporting systems for WHRDs who experience threats. These mechanisms must avoid re-traumatization and ensure follow-up.
3. **Offer guidance and training to public institutions on WHRD protection.** Build internal capacity among law enforcement, judiciary, and public officials to understand WHRD rights and responsibilities, including how to handle gendered threats with sensitivity and accountability.
4. **Act as bridge-builders with non-state actors.** Facilitate dialogue between WHRDs and conservative institutions (e.g., religious leaders, local councils) to prevent polarization, mediate narratives, and de-escalate tensions.

For civil society and feminist networks

1. **Reinvest in intersectional feminist alliances.** Strengthen connections among WHRDs working across sectors—GBV, LGBTQI+ rights, environmental justice, Roma and Egyptian rights—to build common political agendas rooted in solidarity, not competition for resources.
2. **Establish a WHRD care and protection framework.** Develop community-driven protocols to respond to burnout, harassment, or digital violence. These should include buddy systems, rest policies, security plans, and healing spaces led by and for WHRDs.
3. **Mentor and elevate new voices.** Create structured mentoring, coaching, and leadership spaces for younger or rural WHRDs, particularly those working in informal or precarious settings. Prioritize the transfer of feminist knowledge and movement history.
4. **Build alternative archives of WHRD contributions.** Document case studies, oral histories, and campaigns that celebrate the work of WHRDs in non-institutional ways. Create a living history of feminist resistance in Albania through multimedia, art, and community memory.

For media and the general public

1. **Uplift WHRDs as legitimate, knowledgeable actors.** Promote accurate and nuanced media representations of WHRDs—not as “victims” or “troublemakers,” but as leaders in social change. Collaborate with journalists to ensure respectful coverage.
2. **Challenge harmful narratives in public discourse.** Media watchdogs, educators, and cultural institutions should actively dismantle anti-gender and misogynistic rhetoric, and confront the framing of WHRDs as “anti-family” or “foreign agents.”
3. **Celebrate WHRDs' contributions in local communities.** Organize public recognition events, exhibitions, or storytelling circles in municipalities to acknowledge WHRDs' work. This could be linked to International Women's Day, 16 Days of Activism, or other civic milestones.

4. **Build a culture of allyship at the grassroots level.** Teachers, parents, community leaders, and youth should be encouraged to support WHRDs by speaking out against threats, learning about their work, and defending their right to be visible and vocal.

For the education sector and academia

1. **Integrate WHRD work into civic education curricula.** Update national education programs to include the role of WHRDs in democracy, rights protection, and social justice —framing defenders as community leaders and not outsiders.
2. **Encourage feminist and human rights research.** Fund university-led or WHRD-led participatory research projects documenting local activism histories, policy gaps, and feminist knowledge production.
3. **Establish internships or mentorships linking students to WHRDs.** Create experiential learning opportunities for students in law, social work, or political science to engage with WHRD organizations and movements.
4. **Foster cross-generational dialogue and feminist pedagogy.** Facilitate learning spaces that bring together established WHRDs, educators, and youth to reflect on activism, care, burnout, and social change.

Annexes

Annex 1: Survey instrument (questionnaire)

Questionnaire for Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) in Albania

Dear Participant,

This survey aims to explore the experiences, challenges, and contributions of Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) in Albania. Your insights are vital for creating a supportive environment for WHRDs. All responses will remain anonymous and confidential.

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. **Age:**
 - ☐ Under 25
 - ☐ 25–34
 - ☐ 35–44
 - ☐ 45–54
 - ☐ 55+
2. **Primary location of work:**
 - ☐ Urban
 - ☐ Sub-urban
 - ☐ Rural
3. **Years of experience as a WHRD:**
 - ☐ Less than 1 year
 - ☐ 1–3 years
 - ☐ 4–6 years
 - ☐ 7–10 years
 - ☐ 10+ years

Section 2: Focus areas of work

4. **Which are the focus areas of your work/activism? (Select up to 3)**
 - ☐ Ending violence against women
 - ☐ Gender equality
 - ☐ Women's human rights
 - ☐ Gender-based violence
 - ☐ LGBTQI+ persons' rights
 - ☐ Combating discriminatory traditional values
 - ☐ Peacebuilding and reconciliation work
 - ☐ Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)
 - ☐ Other (please specify): _____

Section 3: Challenges and threats

5. **Have you or your organization been harassed or threatened (online and/or offline) in the past couple of years because of your work?**
 - Yes
 - No
6. **If yes, in what ways have you or your organization experienced harassment and/or threats? (Select all that apply)**
 - Harassment
 - Smear campaigns and false accusations
 - Restrictive regulations and legislations
 - Death threats
 - Administrative or bureaucratic burdens
 - Criminalization of activism through legislation
 - Other (please specify): _____
7. **Where do these threats come from? (Select all that apply)**
 - Government/authorities
 - Traditional or community leaders
 - Religious actors
 - Anti-gender movements
 - Far-right or extremist groups
 - Political parties
 - Internet trolls
 - Family members
 - Other (please specify): _____
8. **Which issues do you believe put activists most at risk? (Select up to 3)**
 - LGBTQI+ rights
 - Combating discriminatory traditional values
 - Anti-gender rhetoric
 - Countering corruption
 - Environmental activism
 - Freedom of expression
 - Other (please specify): _____

Section 4: Civic space and obstacles

9. **How does the shrinking space for civil society manifest itself? What do you see as the main obstacles? (Select up to 3)**
 - Financially (less funding opportunities)
 - Increased bureaucratization
 - Legal restrictions
 - Criminalization of activists
 - Slander and online hate campaigns
 - Other (please specify): _____
10. **If you work in a context of shrinking or closed civic space, what do you think are the reasons behind it? (Select up to 3)**
 - The government fears political change and the power of civil society
 - The government is becoming more authoritarian
 - Increasing influence from anti-gender movements
 - Increasing nationalism in society, with hostility towards "foreign funding/foreign agendas" and "western ideas"
 - Society has become more conservative, with increasing attention on traditional values and norms

- Other (please specify): _____

Section 5: State practices and recommendations

11. **Please describe the main challenges and/or good state practices that Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) encounter when conducting their human rights-related work in Albania.** *(Open-ended response)*
12. **What recommendations do you have for authorities in Albania on how to overcome any challenges specified above, and on how to improve the protection of HRDs?** *(Open-ended response)*
13. **From January 2022 to December 2024, have you (or your organization) directly experienced or documented any human rights abuses, including undue restrictions on the activities of HRDs, or instances of attacks, threats, or intimidation against HRDs in Albania, or area where you operate (including based on gender, or other prohibited grounds of discrimination)?**
 - Yes
 - No
14. **If yes, please provide specific examples with relevant details (including date and facts of the case; alleged perpetrators; any official complaints/appeals; State responses; etc.). The examples can be illustrative of a trend and do not have to include all cases of concern.** *(Open-ended response)*

Section 6: Support mechanisms and impact

15. **Do you or your organization conduct any activities related to the protection of HRDs ?**
 - Yes
 - No
16. **If yes, please describe the activities, and what impact they have had.** *(For example: legal assistance to HRDs seeking redress or remedies; visiting HRDs in detention; raising individual cases with the government or international bodies on behalf of HRDs; commentary on laws impacting HRDs, etc.)* *(Open-ended response)*
17. **What types of support are available to you as a WHRD?** *(Select all that apply)*
 - Organizational (NGOs, networks)
 - Community support
 - Governmental programs or protection
 - International bodies (UN, EU, etc.)
 - Other (please specify): _____
18. **How adequate do you find these support mechanisms?**
 - Very adequate
 - Somewhat adequate
 - Neutral
 - Somewhat inadequate
 - Very inadequate
19. **What has been the most significant impact of your work?** *(Select all that apply)*
 - Policy changes
 - Community-level transformation
 - Increased awareness of human rights issues
 - Empowerment of vulnerable groups
 - Other (please specify): _____

Section 7: Personal and organizational resilience

20. What strategies do you or your organization use to stay resilient in the face of challenges? *(Select all that apply)*

- ☐ Peer support networks
- ☐ Access to mental health services
- ☐ Capacity-building and training programs
- ☐ Advocacy and public awareness campaigns
- ☐ Collaboration with international organizations
- ☐ Other (please specify):

Annex 2: Interview and FGD guides

Interview guide for Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs)

Estimated time: 45–60 minutes

Section 1: Introduction and informed consent

- Brief the participant about the purpose of the research and how their input will be used.
- Explain that participation is voluntary, responses will remain confidential, and identities will not be disclosed without consent.
- Ask for verbal or written consent before beginning.

Section 2: Background information

1. Can you briefly describe your work as a human rights defender?
2. What issues or causes are you most actively engaged with (e.g., GBV, LGBTQI+ rights, Roma inclusion, environmental justice)?
3. How long have you been involved in human rights advocacy?

Section 3: Challenges and threats

4. Have you ever experienced threats, harassment, or pressure related to your work?
If yes:
 - What form did it take (e.g., online harassment, smear campaigns, family/community pressure)?
 - Who were the main perpetrators (e.g., authorities, community leaders, anonymous online users)?
5. Have you ever felt the need to censor yourself or reduce your visibility due to safety concerns?

Section 4: Institutional and legal environment.

6. How do you perceive the support (or lack thereof) from public institutions?
7. Have you reported any violations to the police, Ombudsperson, or other institutions?
8. What was the outcome?
9. What legal or policy changes would improve your ability to work safely and effectively?

Section 5: Support and solidarity

10. What kind of support (formal or informal) do you currently receive from networks, donors, or communities?
11. What forms of solidarity have been most helpful—emotional, financial, legal, public advocacy?
12. Are there support systems you wish were available but currently don't exist?

Section 6: Impact and visibility.

13. What do you consider the biggest impact of your work so far?
14. How is your work perceived within your community or by institutions?
15. Do you feel that WHRDs in Albania are recognized for their contributions?

Section 7: Looking Forward.

16. What keeps you going despite the challenges?
17. What would make your work more sustainable in the future?
18. What message would you want policymakers, donors, and the public to hear?

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guide for WHRDs

Estimated time: 90 minutes

Group size: 6–8 participants

Section 1: Introduction and ground rules

- Welcome participants, introduce the facilitator, and explain the purpose of the discussion.
- Emphasize confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time.
- Encourage respectful dialogue and sharing of diverse views.

Opening Round

1. Please introduce yourself (first name or pseudonym), where you work, and the cause you are most passionate about.

Thematic clusters

A. Experiences and risks

2. What are the most common risks or challenges you face in your work as WHRDs?
3. Are these risks increasing, decreasing, or staying the same in recent years?
4. Are there certain topics or advocacy areas that attract more backlash?

B. Support mechanisms

5. What types of support—emotional, legal, financial—are currently available to you?
6. Where do you turn for help when facing threats or burnout?
7. Do you feel adequately protected by institutions or existing laws?

C. Strategies and resilience

8. What strategies have you used to protect yourselves or your work (e.g., digital security, alliances, media engagement)?
9. How important are feminist networks or solidarity groups to your well-being and impact?
10. Can you share examples of how your collective action has made a difference?

D. Visibility and recognition

11. Are WHRDs recognized and valued in Albania?
12. What would help shift the public narrative and better reflect your role and impact?

Closing Round

13. What would you like to see change to better support women like you in human rights work?
14. One word or phrase that summarizes what keeps you going in this work?

Wrap-up

- Thank participants.

- Offer contacts or follow-up options for those who would like a summary of the research or future collaboration.
- Reaffirm confidentiality and appreciation for their time and courage.

Annex 3: Glossary of key terms

This glossary provides definitions of key terms and concepts used throughout the report. Where applicable, definitions are adapted from internationally recognized frameworks such as the United Nations, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and relevant feminist and human rights literature.

Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs): Women who, individually or in association with others, act to promote or protect human rights—including those working on women's rights and gender justice, regardless of their professional title or institutional affiliation. The term also includes individuals of diverse gender identities who defend women's rights and face gender-based risks in doing so (OHCHR, 2019).

Human Rights Defender (HRD): Any person who, individually or collectively, acts to protect and promote the human rights of others. This includes civil society activists, journalists, legal advocates, and individuals challenging discrimination, inequality, and state abuse. The term is derived from the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (1998).

Gender-Based Violence (GBV): Harmful acts directed at individuals based on their gender. It includes physical, sexual, psychological, economic, or structural violence and disproportionately affects women, girls, and gender-diverse persons. GBV is both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality.

Intersectionality: A framework that examines how overlapping identities (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, disability) create unique and compounded experiences of discrimination or privilege. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, it is essential to understanding the complexity of WHRDs' experiences.

Civic Space: The environment that enables individuals and organizations to participate freely in public life, including through freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. Shrinking civic space refers to the erosion of these rights through legal, political, or social constraints.

Patriarchal Norms: Social structures and belief systems that prioritize male authority and systematically disadvantage women and gender-diverse individuals. These norms often manifest in laws, traditions, and cultural expectations that restrict women's participation in public and private life.

Smear Campaigns: Deliberate efforts to discredit or delegitimize individuals or groups, often through false accusations, misrepresentation, or targeted misinformation—commonly used against WHRDs to undermine their legitimacy and isolate them socially.

Feminist Organizing: Collective action rooted in feminist values and aimed at dismantling systems of oppression based on gender and other intersecting inequalities. Feminist organizing often involves horizontal leadership, care-based practices, and a commitment to justice and transformation.

Solidarity Networks: Formal or informal alliances between individuals, communities, or organizations to provide mutual support, safety, and visibility—especially in the face of risk, repression, or isolation. WHRDs frequently rely on solidarity networks for emotional, legal, or practical protection.

Self-censorship: The act of refraining from expressing certain opinions, engaging in activism, or undertaking specific work due to fear of backlash, threats, or social sanction. It is a frequent coping mechanism among WHRDs operating in hostile or polarized environments.

Informal Organizing: Human rights work carried out outside formal organizational structures, often due to lack of resources, legal recognition, or risk of repression. Many WHRDs in rural areas or marginalized communities engage in informal organizing, relying on community ties and personal networks.

Digital Security: Measures and tools used to protect online communication, data, and identity from surveillance, hacking, or harassment. For WHRDs, digital security is an essential component of personal safety and strategic activism.

Misogyny: Hatred of, contempt for, or prejudice against women and girls. Misogyny may manifest through violence, harassment, institutional neglect, or rhetorical attacks—often targeting WHRDs to silence their advocacy.

Psychosocial support: A range of services and interventions aimed at addressing the emotional, psychological, and social well-being of individuals—especially relevant for WHRDs exposed to chronic stress, trauma, or burnout in their work.

Protection Mechanisms: Legal, institutional, or community-based systems designed to prevent or respond to threats against human rights defenders. Effective mechanisms for WHRDs must be gender-sensitive, context-specific, and survivor-centered.

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