

CIVICUS release report on African women in civil society

JOHANNESBURG: According to a new report released by CIVICUS, women in civil society in Africa are particularly prone to intimidation and harassment. CIVICUS has called on African governments, regional bodies, the international community and civil society to do more to protect women human rights defenders on the continent.

Released to coincide with International Women's Day, the report, titled World Alliance for Citizen Participation, outlines the major challenges faced by women in civil society in Africa. These include deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and an increased risk of sexual harassment and violence due to the nature of their work.

Challenging environment

The report argues that the overall environment for women in civil society in Africa is particularly challenging. "Even in countries with ratified laws and protocols on the protection of women's rights, there are clear instances where government officials and security forces have shown lack of understanding of these laws and in some situations, blatant disregard for them," says Mandeep Tiwana, CIVICUS policy manager and one of the co-authors of the report.

Women human rights defenders (WHRD) are more prone to intimidation and harassment due to the nature of their work as compared to their male counterparts, CIVICUS said. Civil society groups working exclusively on women's rights, have to negotiate around additional sets of challenges and hurdles.

The report, which contains compelling testimonies from activists, points out that rather than engaging with critical voices from civil society, governments have frequently chosen to silence them, often through harassment, intimidation, threats of closure, arrests and worse.

Seen as challenge to culture, tradition

For African women activists and women's organisations, these threats are magnified. Defending women's human rights is often seen by state authorities, and even by communities and family members, as a challenge to their culture, tradition and way of life. On-going armed conflicts on the continent place women activists at even further risk of violence.

"The report is a testament to the courage of hundreds of women civil society activists who carry out their work amid attacks on their reputations, threats to their families and their own personal safety," says Tiwana.

The report found that often WHRDs are viewed with distrust and vilified as women of loose morals, traitors or spies because they do not conform to societal norms.

In Kenya, Tunisia and Egypt, they reported on-going intimidation by dissenters who labelled them "loose women" and their respective organisations training grounds for lesbians.

The report cites the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Sierra Leone as countries where WHRDs continually confront sexual harassment and assault with only minimal response from their respective

governments.

The report contains this statement from a WHRD in the DRC: "They finally got me when they threatened my children - I couldn't focus any more. They called and told me, 'we have your daughter, and we are raping her now'."

Need for voices to be heard

In stamping out the gender abuse of WHRDs in Africa, the report highlights the need for space for the voices of WHRDs to be heard and for civil society to work on strategies to protect women activists. In addition, governments need to be implementing human rights instruments with a gender lens.

"The absence of strong accountability institutions and widespread impunity has left the door open for human rights violations to go unpunished," Tiwana said. "In many countries independent safe watch dog bodies to protect WHRDs do not exist and in other places they have been co-opted and made redundant by politicians."

CIVICUS produced the report "The challenges faced by women in civil society in Africa with support from the African Women Development Fund and Trust Africa". It is available for download from the CIVICUS website.

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation is a global movement dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society across the world.

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