GANHRI
Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions

Standing Strong

Challenges and reprisals against NHRIs and human rights defenders

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

National human rights institutions (NHRIs) play a vital role to safeguard human rights in countries across the globe. However, in carrying out their mandates, NHRIs frequently encounter significant challenges, including harassment, threats, and operational restrictions. These threats, often originating from state and non-state actors, endanger the safety of NHRI staff and limit their operational capacity.

This report summarises the findings of a survey conducted by GANHRI in March 2024, following the implementation of the *Global Action Plan to Support the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights Defenders and Civic Space*. The report highlights the current landscape of threats and proposes strategic recommendations to mitigate these challenges.

METHODOLOGY SUMMARY

SURVEY DISTRIBUTION

In March 2024, the survey was sent to GANHRI members with 22 responses received from NHRIs across all regions.[1]

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The survey, available in multiple languages, included quantitative and qualitative questions. Data were cleaned, translated into English, and analysed for trends using statistical and thematic methods to ensure accurate and comprehensive insights. To further enrich the findings, we supplemented the research with case studies, providing deeper context and practical examples.

1 The findings reflect the views of the responding NHRIs and may not be representative of all NHRIs globally. The results should be interpreted within the context of the sample size and response rate.

KEY FINDINGS

1. STRATEGIC PLANNING IN NHRIs

Strategic plans: 72% of respondent NHRIs have adopted strategic plans for their institution. The implementation period varies: two NHRIs have one-year plans for short-term agility, while others have plans spanning three to five years for long-term commitment.

Priorities: Human rights defenders (40%) and NHRI staff protection (33%) are high priorities, reflecting concerns about their safety.

- Among NHRIs that identify human rights defenders as a priority,[2] specific categories of women (54%) and journalists (45%) are among the most prioritised groups, indicating a widespread recognition of their vulnerability to violations of their rights.
- In relation to protecting civic space,[3] NHRIs prioritised protection of rights to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, which together make up nearly 45% of the total mentions.

Developing strategies: Most NHRIs are working on or planning to develop strategies to protect civic space and human rights defenders. There is significant variation in approach and engagement based on regional and institutional contexts.

2 There were responses to this question from 11 NHRIs, which is the basis for the calculation of the percentage.
3 There were responses to this question from 10 NHRIs, which is the basis for the calculation of the percentage.

2. THREATS TO HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND CIVIC SPACE

NHRIs report diverse and, at times, severe risks to civic space, human rights defenders and NHRI staff, reflecting complex dynamics. Lack of specific legal protections and robust legal frameworks make human rights defenders vulnerable to violations of their human rights.

Targeted groups[4]

Journalists 83%
Face threats, harassment and violence, especially in politically-sensitive areas.

Environmental human rights defenders 41%
Encounter criminalisation and violence due to opposition to environmental projects.

Women human rights defenders 25%
Vulnerable due to their advocacy on gender issues and against gender-based violence.

LGBTIQ human rights defenders 25%
Face severe persecution due to their advocacy for sexual and gender minority rights.

University students 8% and **activists** 16%
Threatened in regions with restricted freedom of assembly and expression.

Legal professionals 8%
Human rights lawyers and judicial workers face professional and personal risks.

4 These percentages are calculated based on the total number of NHRIs that specified particular categories (12 out of 21); this question allowed multiple choices. The figures presented in this report may be influenced by under-reporting of cases. As a result, the data may not fully capture the extent of the issues discussed. Readers should interpret the findings with this consideration in mind.

3. RISKS TO HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND NHRI STAFF[5]

Arbitrary arrests, prosecution and/or detention: 62% of respondent NHRIs reported that arrests, prosecutions and detentions were used to silence dissent, including extreme measures such as abductions.

Restriction of freedoms: Restrictions on freedom of expression, both online (47%) and offline (62%), are prevalent. These limitations hinder the ability of human rights defenders to communicate and advocate for human rights.

Harassment and intimidation: Widespread harassment (62%) and acts of intimidation targeting NHRI staff (47%) and human rights defenders (40%) were reported by many NHRIs. Specific threats to women human rights defenders (47%) and those working on gender issues were frequently mentioned. Smear campaigns (43%) are a tactic used to discredit human rights defenders and NHRI staff, undermining their work and reputation.

Threats to safety: Killings and threats extend to human rights defenders' families (23%), creating a climate of fear.

Legal and policy challenges: Emergency measures and restrictive laws (47%) complicate the human rights environment.

Budget cuts: Financial constraints limit NHRI operations and effectiveness (38%).

5 This question allowed multiple choices.

4. STAKEHOLDERS RESPONSIBLE FOR ABUSES[6]

State actors[7]: 90% of NHRIs identified government agencies as the primary source of threats against human rights defenders, using legal and extra-legal means to suppress dissent.

Non-state actors: 38% of NHRIs reported that corporations and other non-state entities, particularly in the extractive industries, pose significant risks to human rights defenders defending environmental and land rights.

Other groups, including **businesses, political actors and governmental representatives**, were each mentioned by 4.8% of respondents.

5. COOPERATION WITH THE UNITED NATIONS AND/OR REGIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS SYSTEMS

Prevalence: 31% of respondent NHRIs reported having been targeted by intimidation and reprisals due to their cooperation with the UN or regional human rights systems.

- Political pressure, government officials refusing access to documents, and lack of respect for the NHRI's mandate and follow-up were each reported by NHRIs, making these the most common challenges.
- Public smear campaigns, lack of recognition of NHRI's mandate, and work of NHRI publicly discredited were each reported by 3 NHRIs.
- Disproportionate budget cuts, delayed appointment of commissioners, undue interference with member selection, and lack of cooperation with NHRI were each reported by 2 NHRIs.
- An attempt to poison known field contacts was mentioned once.

These reprisals threaten the safety of NHRI staff and human rights defenders and significantly hinder their ability to operate effectively and independently.

6 This question allowed multiple choices.
7 There were responses to this question from 19 NHRIs, which is the basis for the calculation of the percentage.

In your hands

CONCLUSION

The survey responses reveal critical issues faced by human rights defenders and NHRI staff, including significant harassment and intimidation. Arbitrary arrests and detentions are employed to suppress human rights defenders. Moreover, threats to life and safety are a grave concern, with reports of threats against human rights defenders and their families. Additionally, women human rights defenders encounter unique and gender-specific challenges, such as gender- based violence and harassment. Based on these findings, urgent measures are needed to protect human rights defenders and NHRI staff.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthen legal frameworks

- Advocate for laws that protect human rights defenders, especially women human rights defenders.
  - **Who should lead?** National governments, justice ministries, and NHRIs.
- Review laws that limit the rights and freedoms of human rights defenders and ensure compliance with international human rights standards and obligations.
  - **Who can do this?** Lawmakers, NHRIs and legal advocacy groups.
- Implement the 2018 Marrakech Declaration.
  - **Who is responsible?** NHRIs, in cooperation with civil society, the state and partners, including the United Nations.
- Implement the Global Action Plan to protect human rights defenders and civic space.
  - **Who can help?** GANHRI, NHRI regional networks, NHRIs, in cooperation with human rights organisations, governments and civil society.

Strengthen capacity building

- Offer training programs for NHRI staff, human rights defenders and civil society.

  Who can provide this? NHRIs, human rights organisations, international and national NGOs and institutions, GANHRI and NHRI regional networks.

- Create resources to support human rights defenders advocacy and protection work.

  Who can help? NHRIs, universities, and human rights organisations.

Foster regional and international cooperation

- Promote regional networks to share ideas and best practices.

  Who can drive this? NHRI regional networks, human rights organisations and international and national NGOs and institutions.

- Support NHRIs in forming partnerships with global human rights groups.

  Who can assist? GANHRI, NHRI regional networks, UN partners, international organisations, regional human rights bodies and NGOs.

Establish protection mechanisms

- Set up national systems to protect human rights defenders, including emergency response services.

  Who should take action? Governments, justice ministries and NHRIs.

- Ensure physical safety through safe houses and security measures.

  Who can help? States, safeguarding agencies or units, NHRIs and NGOs.

Build public awareness and support

- Run public campaigns and educational programs to highlight the value of the work of human rights defenders, and the challenges they face.

  Who can lead this? Governments, NHRIs, media, civil society and human rights organisations.

GANHRI
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Palais des Nations, Geneva, Switzerland | www.ganhri.org | info@ganhri.org

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