



PROTECTION OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN SOUTH SUDAN

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS?

BACKGROUND

In 2021, Peace Brigades International (PBI), Cordaid and WO=MEN - Dutch Gender Platform jointly published the Recommendations for the Protection of Women Human Rights Defenders. This resource was co-created in partnership with women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and Netherlands Embassy staff, with the aim to provide diplomatic missions with practical strategies and recommendations for safeguarding and supporting WHRDs.

In 2024, the Recommendations were externally reviewed for their effectiveness. The results of the review showed that they were a helpful and well-designed resource, and a valuable starting point for missions and diplomatic staff to engage with WHRDs. However, the Recommendations were found to be underused and having limited reach. This was due to them being perceived as too broad and overarching, highlighting a need for localisation and contextualisation of the tool, through translation and the creation of tailored versions.

These findings lead to the development of the first localised version of the Recommendations, redesigned for South Sudan through close collaboration between Cordaid's Global and South Sudan offices, local WHRDs, and representatives of Embassy staff.

With the upcoming closure of multiple missions, the presence of diplomatic staff in South Sudan is decreasing, and with it the attention for the safety of WHRDs. Our aim is for this localised edition to be used amongst international diplomatic missions to aid staff in establishing more effective and inclusive measures for the safeguarding of local activists.

Now more than ever, it is paramount to stay focussed on supporting the safety of grassroots activists and their organisations in South Sudan. We must do our best to enable civil society actors to keep up their essential work and stay strong in the face of hostility and repression.



Front cover of the 2021 Recommendations published by Cordaid, PBI and WO=MEN.



Participants in discussion during the consultative workshop held by Cordaid South Sudan in February 2025. (Photo credits: Orlando Moses / Cordaid)

PROTECTION OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN SOUTH SUDAN: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS?

Human rights defenders (HRDs) in South Sudan face many challenges, such as social, political, and economic limitations, violence, and other kinds of resistance. They are often harassed, attacked, excluded from decision-making and surveilled, all while dealing with financial constraints and lack of funding. Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) in South Sudan deal with additional challenges associated with their gender. In particular, many WHRDs are responsible for household duties, as well as the care for young children and elderly family members. These responsibilities compound the already heavy load they bear as activists in a country with extremely restricted civic space, struggling to rebuild after years of conflict.

For many WHRDs, especially younger ones, activism is more than a job. It's a big part of their identity, a lifelong mission tied to independence and liberation from conditions of deep marginalisation. Feminist and grassroots WHRDs push back against practices such as early forced marriages or domestic violence, which puts them at odds with those interested in preserving the status quo. In a place where peace talks and politics often ignore women, their calls for justice and accountability stir up resistance, making them targets for those in power, such traditional leaders or conservative government officials. Additionally, independent armed militias and violent extremists still exert heavy influence in many regions, compromising the stability and recovery of the country overall, and further threatening their safety through sexual violence and abductions. Therefore, the challenges WHRDs face can be different and often tougher than those for male HRDs, given their added societal vulnerability.

Indigenous WHRDs from places like Equatoria or Bahr El Ghazal face yet more struggles. Their cultures, lands, and rights are not respected, especially with land grabs or community conflicts happening around them. They don't have much access to public life or justice, and when they speak out against abuses by authorities, armed groups, or companies (mainly the extractives), they face bigger risks.

While South Sudan works towards peace, its unsteady government, weak systems and infrastructure, and ongoing fighting, make it a tough environment to operate in. Laws offer some hope, like the 2011 Constitution promising equality and the 2018 Peace Agreement giving women a share in leadership. Sadly, low effort, weak follow-through, and persistent harmful customs block progress, leaving WHRDs unprotected in an unstable country.

WHRDs need support that, above all, incorporates responsiveness to gender, but that is also sensitive to elements such as ethnicity, age, disability, sexuality or displacement, given that the risks they face can vary greatly based on these factors. To achieve this, their diverse voices should lead the way in setting priorities for external support. South Sudan has a helpful presence of diplomatic missions, which bring support, funding, and attention to these issues. When they work closely with local women-led groups, international organisations, UN teams, and diplomatic missions can have a big impact for the safety of WHRDs. Together, they can speak louder in policy talks, connect to resources for safety and growth, and push leaders to keep their legal promises.

The recommendations and issues highlighted in this document come from a thorough collaborative process, consisting of a consultative workshop and multiple interview rounds with WHRDs in South Sudan, facilitated by Cordaid. Dutch diplomatic representatives who are active in the country also took part. South Sudanese WHRDs and experts shared their experiences, focusing on their real lives amid conflict, and societal limitations. They also pointed out challenges they share with WHRDs worldwide, such as violence and exclusion, showing the need for localised action, but also beyond that, community. Indeed, network building was seen as a key way to help WHRDs stay strong, heard, and safe in a changing South Sudan.

Juba, October 2025

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?	WHAT DO WHRDs NEED?	WHAT ACTIONS DO DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS CURRENTLY UNDERTAKE?	HOW CAN MISSIONS BRIDGE THE NEEDS GAP?
1. SECURITY AND HEALTH			
1.1 Threats of violence and harassment	• Immediate support and protection during acute risks or crises. Safe houses and emergency funds for evacuation. • Quick referral pathways and hotlines. • Safe spaces for WHRD to discuss and interact. • A direct, regular, and open line of communication with missions.	• Support referral pathways and programmes such as Shelter City. • Safe spaces for WHRDs on Embassy premises.	• Develop a strategy for the protection of WHRDs, embed and prioritise the topic in trainings for embassy staff. • Provide emergency funds for security, especially during critical times like elections. • Provide referrals to safe houses. • Improve access to embassy premises for WHRDs, especially if they are in critical danger.
1.2 Mental and physical health issues	• Prioritising health and well-being, including mental health support, counselling and self-care initiatives. • Access to medical insurance and social security coverage.	• Some missions support self-care activities like meditation.	• Enhance mental health and psychosocial services (MHPSS) and ensure they are accessible to all activists. These must include psychological first aid, psychotherapy, and complex trauma care. • Develop new forms of MHPSS in consultation with and based on the needs of WHRDs.

			• Advocate for medical insurance and social security coverage for activists. Support WHRDs in seeking and accessing care.
1.3 Digital threats and harassment	• Capacity strengthening on digital security and safety for protection online and of their devices and information therein. Provision of satellite phones.	• Use of more secure communication channels like Signal for communication. • Provide digital security trainings (inconsistently).	• Organise capacity strengthening trainings on digital security for WHRDs. Keep these trainings up to date and provide them cyclically, given the rapid advancement of AI and other technologies used for online harassment, as well as increased risk of misinformation and doxxing.
2. POLITICAL THREATS			
2.1 Political backlash, censorship and media suppression, rise in misinformation	• Advocacy for the passing of laws that protect women and civic space. • Pressure on the government to address restrictive laws. • Closer collaboration with local women's groups and international organisations. Support for inclusion of marginalised groups.	• Missions advocate for women's rights and engage with government officials. • Advocate for freedom of speech and expression and freedom of the press. • Sometimes presence at trials of WHRDs to hold government accountable.	• Increase advocacy efforts and pressure on the government to pass and enforce protective laws. • Enhance collaboration with local groups and ensure inclusion of marginalised groups in advocacy efforts from the beginning of program planning.

	• Missions to use their influence to hold the government accountable for violations. • Seek international and regional support for WHRDs. Lobby and advocate for a free civic space for human rights activities.		• Support network-building among WHRDs locally and worldwide. In particular, focus on inclusion of WHRDs in rural regions distant from Juba. • Missions should more actively use their influence to hold the government accountable and advocate for change. • Increase advocacy for freedom of speech and expression and freedom of the press. • Support legal assistance programmes to ensure (pro-bono) legal assistance for WHRDs at threat. • Support WHRDs in countering misinformation about their work at community, governmental, and international level.
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3. FUNDING AND CAPACITY

3.1 Access to funding	• Flexible funding for women's rights organisations. • Budgeting for the inclusion of marginalised groups, such as people with disabilities (PWD).	• Missions provide funding for various programmes and capacity-building initiatives, but face gaps in support between projects.	• Provide flexible funding and ensure inclusion of youth and PWD in budgeting for all activities and programs.
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	• Rapid emergency funding.	• Financial support to WHRDs local and national NGO (LNNGO) partners/networks.	• Bring in place a flexible rapid emergency fund, specifically targeting WHRDs. This should be designed to promote easy access, including through simplified procedures.
3.2 Sustainability	• Sustainable support for networks and initiatives. • Capacity building and strengthening.	• Missions sometimes provide capacity strengthening trainings (inconsistently).	• Proactively engage with WHRDs and their organisations, beyond just inviting them for meetings and events. • Engage with employees and beneficiaries of WHRD organisations, visit locations and communities, collect concrete information about their activities to improve communication, trust, and simplify fundraising processes. • Increase opportunities for capacity-strengthening trainings, including for resource mobilisation. • Ensure sustainable support for networks and initiatives, addressing gaps between project cycles.

			• Facilitate networking and be a connector with allies or likeminded stakeholders, including male HRDs and representatives of local authorities • Increased financial support to WHRD LNNGO partners.
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This resource was developed as part of the Just Future programme in partnership with:



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Layout by Jacqueline Molho

Cover image: Women human rights defenders who contributed to the development of these recommendations. Their photos are used with their consent, but identities are not disclosed for their protection.

ABOUT CORDAID

Cordaid works to end poverty and exclusion. We do this in the world's most fragile and conflict-affected areas as well as in the Netherlands. We engage communities to rebuild trust and resilience and increase people's self-reliance.

Our professionals provide humanitarian assistance and create opportunities to improve security, health care and education and stimulate inclusive economic growth. We are supported by nearly 300,000 private donors in the Netherlands and by a worldwide partner network. Cordaid is a founding member of Caritas Internationalis and CIDSE.

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