SI WHERE WE STAND
Supporting Women Human Rights Defenders/Activists

Where Things Stand...

“Human rights defenders are often criminalised, targeted with smear campaigns, discredited, threatened, arbitrarily arrested, and face violence because they advocate for human rights. According to Front Line Defenders Global Analysis 2018, 321 human rights defenders in 27 countries were targeted and killed for their work in 2018. More than three-quarters of these were defending land, environmental or Indigenous peoples’ rights, often in the context of extractive industries and mega projects. More than 80% of those killed had previously received a specific death treat” (Voices at Risk 2019).

On 24 December 2017, at its seventy-second session, the UN General Assembly adopted by consensus Resolution 72/247 to mark the twentieth anniversary and promotion of the implementation of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Declaration on Human Rights Defenders). The General Assembly condemned all acts of intimidation and reprisal by State and non-State actors, including against human rights defenders and their legal representatives, associates and family members, and strongly called upon all States to give effect to the right of everyone, individually and in association with others, to unhindered access to and communication with the United Nations.

Despite this affirmation of support, there have been increasing infringements and attacks on individual human rights defenders as well as increasing hostility to civil society organisations defending human rights. Cases include travel bans, detention and confiscation of passports, arrest, interrogation and imprisonment. This not only relates to activity within a country but also to individuals and organisations attending and contributing to events at the United Nations.

The UN Secretary General and his staff continue to draw attention to Member States' new policies and legislation that aim to restrict the activities of civil society, including withdrawal of funding for international aid programmes. There is a disturbing trend in the use of national security arguments and counter-terrorism strategies by Member States as justification for blocking access by communities and civil society organisations to the United Nations. During 2018, a number of NGOs and human rights defenders, activists, and experts, have been labelled as “terrorists” by their Governments. The Secretary General and his staff have drawn attention to violations in approximately 30 countries.

Women human rights defenders have been subjected to sexual assaults often with State officials involved. Several women human rights defenders have been killed for their advocacy. Human rights defenders, especially indigenous people defending their land rights, allegedly have been subjected to attacks by representatives of major commercial corporations in recent years.
And Where Things Need to Go...

Freedom of speech is fundamental to the implementation of the UN Declaration of Human Rights and all the consequent resolutions and agreements.

Civil Society and individuals speaking on behalf of human rights should be able to do so in an arena of openness and free exchange of opinions and viewpoints without being subjected to abuse and harassment, or worse.

The recent (2019) UN Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association indicated, in detail, the necessity to uphold this, the right to freedom of assembly, for civil society to ensure the implementation of the SDGs and uphold international law, demonstrating that these rights are indivisible from other human rights. They are instrumental to achieve the full enjoyment of other human rights as they enable the exercise of a number of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights.

Fundamental Action

All Member States of the United Nations should implement the international agreements which enable a diversity of viewpoints to be heard and for representatives of civil society, especially human rights defenders, to voice an opposing view to that of the State or the corporation.

Supporters and defenders of human rights across all fields – education, health and medicine, climate change and environment, land, arenas of conflict – should be recognised by all. The civil society organisations and NGOs who act in this role should be able to do so in an environment of openness and freedom of speech.

Further Action Required...

All levels of Governments should:
• engage with civil society representatives to build mutual trust.
• recognise that working in partnership with civil society can encourage solutions to major issues.
• ensure that it is possible for alternative viewpoints to be voiced safely within their jurisdiction.
• ensure that legal protection is provided especially by State bodies including defense forces and police.

Where Soroptimist International Stands...

These are the principles that Soroptimist International strongly supports and will advocate for on behalf of Women human rights defenders:

The role of civil society, including through a free press, is crucial in holding Governments accountable for respecting and fulfilling human rights.
Upholding international human rights for all, especially that enshrined in international laws and agreements, is critical to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. SI will continue to advocate for human rights defenders and especially for the protection of women human rights defenders.