

Protecting human rights defenders at risk

Connect.Reflect.Act Talk by Mary Lawlor, Founder and Director of Frontline defenders

Abstract

Human rights defenders, as crucial agents of change, are often exposed to harassment and violence at the hands of authoritarian governments, in an effort to close down, silence, restrict and discredit civil society. They find themselves at risk across the world, particularly female and LGBTI activists who challenge cultural stereotypes and are commonly exposed to a greater amount of harassment and violence due to the intersectionality of discrimination directed towards them. During 2015, 156 human rights defenders were killed in 25 countries and the trend of violence directed towards them appears to be increasing, even within liberal democracies. This demonstrates the need for reliable and accessible protection mechanisms for defenders. Frontline Defenders, a Dublin-based human rights organisation, plays an essential role in protecting human rights defenders, providing them with training to increase their security, enhance their advocacy and, when necessary, emergency relocation. This reaffirms a sense of safety for human rights defenders, and works to reverse the alarming trend of harassment and violence directed towards them which is contrary to the EU's values of moral courage, intellectual curiosity, openness, freedom, dignity.

The work of Frontline Defenders

At the core of the work of Frontline Defenders is the protection of human rights defenders at risk, people who work around the world for the rights of communities and help empower people. Last year, they provided 24 hour direct support to human rights defenders in 95 countries. The organisation provides training in security, risk assessment, advocacy towards oppressive governments, and emergency relocation among other services.

Governments recognise that human rights defenders are crucial agents for change, and that's why governments dedicate so much time and resources

in countering them. For Mary Lawlor, human rights defenders are made of fire of air, fire because of their passion and air because they walk on air despite their better judgement. In a strange way, repression is a measure of their effectiveness.

Last year 25 countries killed 156 human rights defenders. Human rights defenders working on land rights and natural resources as well as females and LGBTI defenders, who challenge cultural stereotypes, are especially at risk. She noted that sometimes LGBTI defenders are even stigmatised by others in the human rights community. She recounted stories of several human rights defenders who have been subject to oppression, including Alberta 'Bety' Carino Trujillo (killed in 2010) and Rene Martinez (killed June 2016 in Honduras). She noted that Europe is even failing to protect human rights defenders that are EU citizens, like Dawit Isaak (a journalist held in Eritrea for 15 years) and Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja (her former colleague carrying out a life sentence in Bahrain). She called on the EU to do something to help their human rights-defending citizens.

Worsening trends

The trend is that more countries are killing more human rights defenders, especially in Latin America. According to Ms Lawlor, "We have got to make the killing of human rights defenders a red line," and called on the EU to condemn all killings of human rights defenders as a policy. According to her, "restrictive legislation has spread globally like a virus." She noted that criminalisation and violence are often complimentary elements of a coordinated, well-resourced strategy of repression. Even among liberal democracies, human rights are increasingly seen as something optional that can be dismissed for economic gain. According to her, human rights defenders are facing new risks due to terrorist concerns and surveillance, including in European countries. In her view, these trends are at odds with the very notions that define Europe: moral courage, intellectual curiosity, openness, freedom, dignity.

She extended the challenge of supporting human rights defenders to the audience, by noting, "each person here can bring something to the protection of human rights and those that defend them." For, in her view, "human rights defenders are golden people; they spread hope and life on the darkest corners of the world—and hope is always stronger than fear."