



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# AN UNSTOPPABLE MOVEMENT

A GLOBAL CALL TO RECOGNIZE AND PROTECT THOSE WHO DEFEND  
THE RIGHT TO ABORTION

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**Cover photo:** Women take part during the International Safe Abortion Day in Bogotá, Colombia, 28 September 2023 © Chepa Beltran/Long Visual Press/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

**AMNESTY**  
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# AN UNSTOPPABLE MOVEMENT

## A GLOBAL CALL TO RECOGNIZE AND PROTECT THOSE WHO DEFEND THE RIGHT TO ABORTION

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Around the world, those defending abortion rights are under attack, including activists, advocates, educators, clinic escorts, accompaniers, doulas, and healthcare workers. They are exposed to stigmatization, physical and verbal attacks, intimidation and threats, and are criminalized through unjust prosecutions, investigations and arrests. Despite hostility and lack of recognition, they continue their work, helping countless women, girls and all people who can become pregnant access their right to abortion. They are a truly unstoppable movement.

Individuals and groups working to defend the right to abortion are Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) - defined as women, girls and gender diverse people defending any human right, and people of all genders defending women's rights and rights related to gender equality, including LGBTI rights. They often face attacks not just because of the issues they work on, but also based on who they are as women, girls, LGBTI people, people who are racialised, and others who experience intersecting forms of oppression. In a world in which gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms continue to be prevalent, WHRDs are exposed to additional risks because they challenge harmful social, cultural and gender norms that dictate restrictive gender roles, heteronormative sexual orientation or gender identity, and undermine sexual and reproductive rights (SRR).<sup>1</sup>

This report provides an overview of how WHRDs who defend the right to abortion are attacked worldwide. These attacks are not just a violation of the state obligation to protect and provide them with a safe and enabling environment, but also a powerful barrier to safe abortion for those who need or want it. As such, this report is part of Amnesty International's global campaign to promote the right to abortion for all.

Chapter one of this report outlines the obstacles to safe abortion that persist today, despite some significant advances in the past few decades. This progress has been achieved mainly thanks to the work of feminist movements, effecting change through evolving human rights standards around abortion, adoption of progressive laws, and court rulings increasingly recognizing abortion rights. Progress has also been made based on the development and roll-out of medication abortion worldwide, making abortion more accessible and acceptable for millions of women, girls and all people who can become pregnant, and giving them agency and control over their own bodies. Nonetheless there is still much work to be done. Today, abortion remains criminalized and heavily regulated in most countries, and total abortion bans persist in 22 countries. Even where there has been progressive law reform, access to safe and legal abortion can be difficult due to considerable barriers, particularly for those most marginalized. Moreover, there are targeted efforts by abortion opponents to reverse progress previously achieved. These efforts are gaining ground amidst a tide of anti-abortion and anti-gender public discourse, diminishing rule of law, disinformation campaigns, and attacks on civic space.

Chapter two of this report illustrates how in this context, countless WHRDs carry out their activities in antagonistic settings, and are subjected to severe hostility for the rights they defend. This chapter details the human rights violations and abuses they experience with real life examples and testimonies of close to 50 WHRDs from more than 30 countries around the world, all of them working on the frontline or advocating to make access to safe abortion a reality for all without discrimination. Information collected through interviews and research confirm that WHRDs experience stigmatization, physical and verbal attacks, intimidation, and threats, including in and around clinics, and are criminalized through unjust prosecutions, investigations, arrests and detention. Their human rights activities are also restricted and put into question, amid hostile political discourse driven by toxic narratives and disinformation. This violates their rights to live in safety and

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<sup>1</sup> See OHCHR, WHRDs infosheet, [ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/SexualHealth/INFO\\_WHRD\\_WEB.pdf](https://ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/SexualHealth/INFO_WHRD_WEB.pdf), the webpage of the WHRD International Coalition [defendingwomen-defendingrights.org](https://defendingwomen-defendingrights.org); and Amnesty International, *Challenging power, fighting discrimination* (Index: ACT ACT 30/1139/2019), 29 November 2019, [amnesty.org/en/documents/act30/1139/2019/en](https://amnesty.org/en/documents/act30/1139/2019/en)

to physical integrity, their well-being as a whole, and has a direct bearing on their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association.

As Carolina Castillo, an activist from northern Mexico put it: *“We work in a very conservative state. Our work is stigmatized because of false and wrong information spread by the authorities. I have received threats and I have been put under surveillance. So we have learnt to work under the radar for our protection. We are not doing anything bad, we are simply trying to provide support and enable human rights and social justice. It is absurd that we face reprisals for something the state should be doing.”*<sup>2</sup>

Amongst the WHRDs interviewed, healthcare workers explained how they are often isolated, unsupported, and not recognised as human rights defenders. As they determinedly provide essential health services despite hostility, they should be protected and enabled. Yet, all too often they face criminalization, harassment, stigmatization, verbal threats, and actual violence, as well as ostracization and burnout.

For example, Grace Howard, a defender from the USA observed: *“The fact that the physician is wearing a bullet proof vest and holding a gun while he’s doing your abortion, [...] he’s doing that because of the protesters outside that know his home address. Just that is so crazy and [...] should never happen. That’s so intense and scary.”*<sup>3</sup>

Dr Guillermo Ortiz, an obstetrician who conducted life-saving work and advocacy for Beatriz, a Salvadorian woman with a high-risk pregnancy in 2013, said: *“I faced a difficult situation with attacks, stigmatization, including to my own family, just for offering treatment to a young woman who absolutely needed it. [...] They removed me from the direction [of the obstetrics department of the hospital]. When I applied for other positions, they didn’t consider me [...] It was a very hard moment, a very difficult situation”*.<sup>4</sup>

And a gynecologist from Nigeria explained: *“I face harassment and stigmatization for the work I do. The stigma is among fellow professional colleagues who make remarks that are demeaning to me. On the basis of religion, they preach to me about the sins committed for supporting abortion care, the killing of “the unborn children” and the hellfire that awaits all murderers. [...] It makes me ask myself if I am doing the right thing, it makes me doubt what I am doing and it makes me uncomfortable, not confident and afraid to want to talk publicly sometimes!”*<sup>5</sup>

At the root of these attacks lie systemic oppressions, such as patriarchy and racism. Stigma is at the centre of these assaults because WHRDs challenge these oppressive systems by defending the right to access essential health care, including abortion. These systemic oppressions must be challenged to find long-term solutions.

Chapter three of the report outlines States’s obligations to ensure abortion rights for all which is also key to protecting and enabling abortion rights defenders. This year marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary since States at the UN General Assembly adopted by consensus the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and it has been 10 years since States adopted a resolution on the particular risks and protection needs of WHRDs. Human rights law and standards are clear both on the right to abortion, and on the right of all human rights defenders, including healthcare staff, to be recognised and protected.

The report ends with a series of recommendations for States and other actors to fulfil these obligations and ensure a safe and enabling environment, so that all WHRDs, particularly those who defend the right to abortion, can engage in their activism and work without fear of being criminalized and free from threats, coercion, intimidation, or violence, and receive the necessary support and funding for their activities.

#### **In particular, Amnesty International urges States to:**

- Guarantee SRR for all women, girls and all those who can become pregnant, including by ensuring timely, safe, and effective access to abortion.
- Publicly and unequivocally recognize that the work of WHRDs to defend the right to abortion is legitimate and integral to the promotion and realization of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Amnesty International, November 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Amnesty International, October 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Testimony of Dr Guillermo Ortiz before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in the case of Beatriz et al. vs El Salvador, (video), 22-23 March 2023, [youtube.com/watch?v=1A4aqi8-LYY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1A4aqi8-LYY)

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Amnesty International, October 2023

- Ensure WHRDs working on the right to abortion, such as activists, advocates, educators, clinic escorts, accompaniers, doulas, and healthcare workers are not criminalized, intimidated, or attacked. Those who attack them must be held to account.
- Ensure that health-care providers are protected and fully supported in their workplaces, by developing specific protection protocols.
- Ensure that all WHRDs working for the right to abortion can access necessary support and resources, including funding for their activities.

A full list of recommendations can be found with the full report (Index: POL 40/7420//2023)

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IS A GLOBAL MOVEMENT  
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS.  
WHEN INJUSTICE HAPPENS  
TO ONE PERSON, IT  
MATTERS TO US ALL.**

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