

# HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS 101

## WHAT IS A HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER?

Human rights defenders are people who, individually or with others, act to promote or protect human rights. Human rights defenders may work on behalf of their own rights, the rights of people in their community, or the rights of others around the world.

Anyone who works for human rights is a human rights defender—activists, labor leaders, journalists, lawyers, doctors, grassroots organizers, or neighborhood leaders. In some circumstances, even government employees can act as human rights defenders. Defenders work on many different issues, from unlawful imprisonment to access to health care, and they often address the needs of people who most need protection, including persons of a particular race or ethnic group, women, and sexual minorities.

Human rights defenders also bear certain responsibilities. Their actions must be peaceful and respect the universality of human rights. For example, a human rights defender cannot claim to be a defender of minority rights but reject equality for women.

## WHAT DO HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS DO?

Human rights defenders protect everyone's human rights. They work locally, nationally, or globally to improve human rights by demanding accountability for human rights violations, calling for changes in laws and policies, or supporting and protecting victims of human rights violations. Human rights defenders use a variety of tools to promote and defend human rights. For example, they may:

- ➔ investigate human rights violations;
- ➔ monitor and document human rights problems;
- ➔ publicize and educate the public about human rights violations;
- ➔ expose human rights violations;
- ➔ advocate for change in government policy or practice; or
- ➔ provide goods or services that help people realize their human rights.

## WHY ARE HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AT RISK?

When human rights defenders advocate for change, they may disrupt the status quo. Such changes can be unsettling to those in power. Human rights defenders may be targeted by private actors, government officials, or corporations who wish to protect their own interests. Defenders face a range of risks from arbitrary arrest and detention to criminalization of their legitimate human rights activities. International human rights law seeks to protect defenders from these forms of attack and ensure they can exercise their right to defend human rights without interference.

## WHAT ARE THE RIGHTS OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS?

In 1998, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a document called the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders to explain the principles and rights important for human right defenders. The Declaration is based on human rights standards found in international human rights instruments, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The Declaration on Human Rights Defenders—which has the full support of the U.S. government—recognizes the special threats defenders face and lays out the basis on which defenders can seek justice. The Declaration also includes obligations of governments to protect the rights of defenders as persons or groups that fight for human rights. These include the rights to:

- ➔ seek the protection and realization of human rights at the national and international levels;
- ➔ conduct human rights work individually and in association with others;
- ➔ form associations and nongovernmental organizations;
- ➔ meet or assemble peacefully;
- ➔ seek, obtain, receive, and hold information relating to human rights;
- ➔ develop and discuss new human rights ideas and principles, and to advocate their acceptance;
- ➔ make complaints about official policies and acts relating to human rights, and to have such complaints reviewed;
- ➔ lawfully exercise the profession of human rights defender;
- ➔ solicit and use funding for human rights activity.

## WHAT SHOULD THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT DO TO SUPPORT HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS?

The Declaration on Human Rights Defenders calls on governments “to take all necessary measures” to protect human rights defenders against any violence, threats, or retaliation directed against them as a result of their activities to defend human rights. This includes:

- ➔ protecting defenders against threats or attacks by private actors;
- ➔ refraining from interfering with the work of defenders (for example, ensuring that law enforcement does not intrude on defenders’ rights to speak out or peacefully assemble, and that legislatures do not pass laws restricting defenders’ right to carry out their work);
- ➔ raising awareness about the profile and role of defenders in realizing human rights, including training public officials and law enforcement about the rights and responsibilities of defenders articulated in the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

## WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE ROLE OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN THE UNITED STATES?

Go to [www.DefendingRights.org](http://www.DefendingRights.org) to learn more about what defenders do, how they are targeted for their human rights work, and what you can do to protect them.