



# SEMINAR REPORT

## SUPPORTING WOMEN, PROTECTING RIGHTS

How can the EU work to better safeguard  
the work of WHRDs and integrate  
an intersectional approach.

in cooperation with European Parliament

Liaison Office and KIOS Foundation



**AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL**







# SUPPORTING WOMEN, PROTECTING RIGHTS



**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL EXPERTS' SEMINAR  
IN COOPERATION WITH KIOS FOUNDATION AND  
EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT LIAISON OFFICE  
AT EUROOPPASALI 29<sup>th</sup> AUGUST 2019, HELSINKI**



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Last photo of the page: Lauri Heikkinen/Prime Minister's Office, Finland



# Summary

On 29<sup>th</sup> August 2019 – on the first day of the informal “Gymnich” meeting of European Union (EU) Foreign Affairs Ministers in Helsinki – the Finnish Section of Amnesty International hosted a seminar entitled “Supporting Women, Protecting Rights - How can the EU work better to safeguard the work of WHRDs and integrate an intersectional approach”.

The seminar brought together women human rights defenders (WHRDs) from El Salvador, Finland, Russia, Uganda, Bahrain and Ukraine to discuss how [the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders](#) could be implemented more effectively together with civil society representatives, government and EU and member state officials, how the guidelines could support women human rights defenders and what kind of threats women human rights defenders are currently facing.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of August and the second day of the Gymnich meeting, Finland [hosted a ministerial lunch](#), which was also attended by four international women human rights defenders who discussed the obstacles they face in their work and gave their recommendations to EU and member state representatives. For the first time in the history of the European Union, human rights defenders and representatives of civil society were invited to the lunch on the second day of the informal meeting of EU Foreign Ministers.

On August 30<sup>th</sup>, the Finnish Section of Amnesty International also organised an event for schools called “Muutoksen iltapäivä” (Afternoon of Change) where Finnish activists and international WHRDs gave inspirational speeches to the young audience on how to make a change in society. The event was also streamed on YouTube so that schools across Finland could attend. The schools who participated in the event had already participated in the Write for Rights campaign of Amnesty International.

During their visit to Finland, the women human rights defenders met also Members of Finnish Parliament and civil servants of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. Some of the embassies based in Helsinki had a chance to meet them as well.





**Foreword by Frank Johansson, Director of Amnesty International, Finnish Section**

## ***Together with women human rights defenders***



All over the world, people from various backgrounds are standing up for their right to peaceful assembly, freedom of expression and to demand economic and climate justice. They are human rights defenders.

It is usually these active citizens, who by standing in the frontline, are the first to see their human rights – what they are fighting for – violated. Those who stand up for women’s rights, LGBTI rights, indigenous people, refugees and migrants are at higher and intersecting risk of being targeted, smeared on social media, harassed and even tortured and killed.

The EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders are a commitment from the European Union to protect and support these brave people. It is a fantastic document, demanding that diplomats meet, engage and support those working for the defence and advancement of human rights. However, even though there are some examples of excellent work undertaken on the basis of the guidelines, it still – over ten years after its creation – needs a more coordinated strategy to deliver on these commitments.

***“It is usually these active citizens, who by standing in the frontline, are the first to see their human rights – what they are fighting for – violated.”***



# THE SEMINAR

In the seminar *Supporting women, protecting rights – How the EU can work better to safeguard the work of WHRDs and integrate an intersectional approach?*, the speakers discussed how the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders could be implemented more effectively; how these guidelines could support women human rights defenders; and what kind of threats women human rights defenders are facing at present. The Austrian Section of Amnesty International held a similar seminar called [Defending women, defending rights](#) ahead of the Gymnich meeting in Vienna, during the Austrian EU presidency in 2018.

The seminar was organised in cooperation with KIOS Foundation and the Liaison Office of the European Parliament in Finland and it was officially opened by three hosts, **Jarmo Oikarinen**, Head of the Liaison Office of the European Parliament in Finland, **Kim Remitz**, Director of KIOS Foundation and **Frank Johansson**, Director of Amnesty International Finland.

Following the opening remarks, the audience was introduced to the subject matter of women human rights defenders through two introductory notes, a speech by the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland, **Pekka Haavisto** and an interview with woman human rights defender **María Teresa Rivera**.

The first panel of the seminar was moderated by **Covadonga de la Campa**, EU Advocacy Coordinator from Amnesty International's European Institutions Office. The participants of the panel were woman human rights defender **Irina Biryukova**, Chair of the Political and Security Committee in the European Union External Action Service **Sofie From-Emmesberger**, former Ambassador of Finland to Russia **Hannu Himanen** and Director of the Unit for Human Rights Policy at the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs **Tarja Kangaskorte**.

The second panel was moderated by Gender and Inclusion expert **Elina Nikulainen**. The panel consisted of six women human rights defenders: **María Teresa Rivera** (El Salvador), **Memory Bandera** (Uganda), **Irina Biryukova** (Russia), **Vitalina Koval** (Ukraine), **Nedal Al-Salman** (Bahrain), **Jessikka Aro** (Finland), and Finnish MEP **Sirpa Pietikäinen**.

After the panels, **Eve Geddie**, Head of Amnesty International's European Institutions Office, introduced key findings and recommendations from Amnesty International's [report](#) on implementing the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders.

The seminar ended with concluding remarks by **Frank Johansson**, Director of Amnesty International Finland.







## Opening remarks by Pekka Haavisto, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland

The seminar was opened by the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland, **Pekka Haavisto**. [In his opening remarks](#), Minister **Haavisto** ensured that Finland would do its best to keep human rights on the agenda during its EU presidency. He was interested in hearing from women human rights defenders what Finland and the EU could do better in the field of human rights and how they could expand and improve their activity.

**Haavisto** wanted to draw attention to the challenges women human rights defenders face. Women human rights defenders are often in an especially difficult situation. Women human rights defenders who work on sexual and reproductive rights are being attacked and jailed. The same applies to defenders belonging to various minorities like the LGBTIQ community or human rights defenders with disabilities.

**Haavisto** also mentioned **Berta Cáceres'** case in Honduras and the killing of an indigenous leader and a lands rights activist in Brazil. Minister **Haavisto** also wished to highlight the importance of helping women human rights defenders in conflict zones, where rape is often used as a weapon of war. He also stressed the importance of the Istanbul Convention on violence against women and the need for Finland to do its homework in implementing the Convention.

In the field of human rights, the EU has plenty of potential to act: where the EU is present, there human rights should also be defended. According to **Haavisto**, the institutions already exist but we have to scrutinise what we can do better when it comes to human rights.

He stated that Finland should not be afraid of defending values and rights. Openness is key to a successful human rights policy and Finland strives to enhance it both in its own activities and internationally. In addition, Finland is open to criticism.

**Pekka Haavisto** highlighted the importance of coherence in human rights work. Finland needs to stand behind universal human rights in all situations. This is even more important today as the international rules-based system and human rights are being challenged. Against this background, human rights, democracy, gender equality and the rule of law have been placed as top priorities in the new Government's Programme and in Finland's EU Presidency Programme as well.

In too many countries, the situation of human rights defenders is becoming worse, Minister **Haavisto** continued. Some countries are drafting laws and implementing policies that aim solely at shrinking the space for human rights work. Many activists have been detained, some tortured or even killed. The testimonies from human rights defenders are extremely valuable for political leaders and civil servants as they offer an opportunity to hear from them directly about the challenges they are facing.



Minister **Haavisto** was particularly keen on seeking advice on how Finland and the EU could be more supportive. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland wished to be given recommendations on how to strengthen its support and how to implement the EU Human Rights Defenders Guidelines in a way that really helps communities in need. The Ministry wished to hear from the women human rights defenders how to act in situations where the local government is not cooperative or where international contacts may put persons or their families in immediate danger. He also wanted to learn about the best ways to give visibility and protection to women human rights defenders in countries where rights of women and girls lag behind international standards.

**Haavisto** affirmed Finland's continued financial support to local and international human rights organisations. It is vital that civil society participation is guaranteed at various international organisations and Finland will continue to support civil society representatives' access to various international conferences as part of the official Finnish delegation. Finland is also committed to cooperating with NGOs at local and international levels.

It is crucial that all the EU institutions, parliaments, member states and civil society work together for the protection of human rights and human rights defenders. Only then we can achieve sustainable results, concluded Minister **Haavisto**.



## Greetings from the Amnesty International WHRD Seminar in Vienna, challenges WHRDs are facing in their everyday life

### *Becoming a Woman Human Rights Defender*

**María Teresa Rivera**, a sexual and reproductive rights activist from El Salvador, was one of the women jailed under the absolute abortion ban in El Salvador because of obstetric complications. In 1998, abortion was criminalized under all circumstances in El Salvador.

Following a miscarriage in 2011, **María Teresa Rivera** was sentenced to 40 years for aggravated homicide. After four and a half years in prison, she was finally released in 2016 when a judge dismissed the charges against her. During her time in prison, **María Teresa Rivera** connected with other women in a similar situation and following her release she continued to speak up for sexual and reproductive rights in El Salvador. Today she lives in Sweden where she was granted asylum a few years ago.

**María Teresa Rivera** spoke about how she became a human rights activist, and a women's rights activist in particular, because she never tolerated injustice. She emphasized that people often think that you need to have a degree or a career in order to become an activist, but that is not the case in reality. Instead, one becomes a human rights activist through witnessing vulnerability and injustice. For her, this happened in prison, where she understood that she was not alone but that there were many more women in the same situation with her, unfairly condemned to prison.

In 2012, a civil society movement in El Salvador together with Amnesty International, [the Centre for Reproductive Rights](#) and other organizations initiated a campaign for the decriminalisation of abortion. **María Teresa Rivera** explained that through the campaign of [Las 17](#) she got to know other women who had suffered similar violations of human rights. As she listened to their stories, she got angry because she realized that many of these women were victims of sexual violence, but still the blame was laid on them and consequently they were incarcerated and punished for crimes they did not commit. Many of them are still in prison. Their rapists, on the other hand, are free.

She also told how these stories brought up memories of her own experiences of sexual violence — she was raped when she was eight years old. She knew she could not stay silent - as a poor woman the only thing she could do was to use her voice. She explained how fear prevents many from speaking, but it is essential that someone tells these stories *“so that the world notices what is happening with the women, not only in El Salvador, but in all of Latin America, and everywhere in the world where women’s human rights are violated.”*



## ***Sexual and reproductive rights are human rights too***

**María Teresa Rivera** repeated the recommendation that she gave the European Union in Vienna in 2018, stating that the EU should have direct contact with human rights defenders, give them visibility and pay particular attention to certain groups of human rights defenders, such as defenders of sexual diversity issues, reproductive rights and indigenous rights, all of whom still remain too invisible to the public.

She urged the EU to demand that El Salvador and all other states guarantee human rights for their citizens as well as the right to protect these rights, i.e. to be an activist.

She also said that it is extremely important for El Salvador, Latin America and the whole world that sexual and reproductive rights are made visible *“because sexual and reproductive rights are human rights, too.”*

The EU should also guarantee protection not only for the activists themselves, but for their families as well, since activists continue to suffer from everything from threats and discrimination to violence or even death.

**On behalf of all human rights defenders, she urged the European Union to be in direct contact with human rights defenders and pay special attention to sexual and reproductive rights activist groups and indigenous people since these groups are the least visible.**



## Panel: EU and member states' protection and support to WHRDs globally (Moderation: Covadonga de la Campa, Amnesty International EIO)

The first panel examined how the EU and its member states could promote and protect women human rights defenders and which actions they should put in place to protect WHRDs globally.

In her opening remarks, **Covadonga de la Campa** emphasised that human rights defenders are the last line of defence in a free and just society. They often assume great risks to defend and safeguard the rights of us all. It is crucial that as EU foreign policy is being discussed, human rights and human rights defenders especially are not taken as a side note.

### *Defending human rights in hostile environment: fighting torture in Russia*

**Irina Biryukova**, lawyer and human rights defender from Russia, spoke about her work in Russia and the harassment she had faced as a human rights lawyer. She works in an organisation called [Public Verdict](#) where she works to protect the human rights of individuals in detention facilities all over Russia. She has also provided assistance to citizens who have been suffered from illegal actions by police officers or other law enforcement agencies. Recently, Public Verdict has also helped citizens who have been targeted for participating in peaceful demonstrations against the government in large cities such as Moscow, St. Petersburg and Yekaterinburg.

Serious harassment against **Irina Biryukova** started after she revealed the torture of prisoners in a penal colony in Yaroslavl by publishing video footage of prison guards beating a prisoner.

She received death threats from the penal colony personnel and during a prison visit, officers closed her in a cell and demanded her to hand over the complaints lodged by the prisoners. Because of these threats, [she was forced to leave Russia](#) temporarily with her daughter.

Harassment against **Irina Biryukova** intensified when she gave information to the UN Committee on the Prevention of Torture and its report on Russia was released. Due to international publicity, she was provided formal protection by the Russian state, but in practice no measures were taken to ensure her security. After returning to Russia, **Biryukova** couldn't work as before since there were so many restrictions to follow in order to keep safe. Eventually, her employer hired a private guard for her so that she was able to move around the city and do her work properly.

There was also an online smear campaign against her. **Irina Biryukova** was called a ["foreign agent"](#) by the Russian authorities and everything she said in public was monitored. For example, she was blamed for taking money from the USA and being its collaborator. She was also accused of blackmailing the Russian state because of her close bonds to the USA. By fabricating these accusations, the Russian government wanted to shift the attention away from Russia's own problems.

When asked if the EU has been able to react adequately to the worsening human rights situation in Russia, **Biryukova** stated that international attention to human rights violations is crucial. The support from international organisations and the EU had helped her and now she feels safer than before. She considered the EU as a reliable supporter to human rights defenders, but it would be important to react to changing situations. In particular, she hopes for quicker responses from the EU for the requests of human rights defenders in Russia.



**Hannu Himanen**, former Ambassador of Finland to Russia, commented that in his view the EU has a “mixed record” in terms of reacting to situations where human rights defenders are at risk. It would be wrong to say that EU did not do anything, but it is clear that the organization has a real problem in countries like Russia. Sometimes action is taken by officials based in Brussels, which is important and effective, but many decisions in EU foreign policy require unanimity, and joint action can be blocked by a single member state. Many countries have considerable economic and other interests at play, and Russia works actively to break the ranks of the EU. Thus, the EU is divided and the effects of EU action could be improved.

However, according to **Himanen** there are positive examples: monitoring court cases is undertaken on a voluntary basis and burden sharing among the member states sometimes allows for sending monitors to more remote regions. Trial monitoring is a way to convey a message to the Russian authorities: Russia has committed to certain human rights standards and the EU is watching.

**Irina Biryukova** reminded the panel that it is not a secret that Russia is a police state and its authorities try to prevent all public criticism. Government-led media, with the help of ‘Kremlin’s trolls’, aim to discredit the human rights movement in Russia and block the voices of human rights defenders. International attention is important in disclosing and preventing human rights violations, as can be seen in **Oyub Titiev’s** case. The presence of EU and member state monitors in **Titiev’s** trials had a [positive effect](#) on the course of the process.

### ***Strong political leadership and coherence needed***

**Sofie From-Emmesberger**, Chair of the Political and Security Committee (PSC) at the European Union External Action Service (EEAS), stated that supporting human rights defenders is at the core of EU human rights policy, and since 2014, more attention has been paid to women human rights defenders. The EU provides financial support to human rights defenders through the EIDHR (European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights) and a specific mechanism for human rights defenders, [ProtectDefenders.eu](#), which facilitates emergency assistance to human rights defenders at risk. She stressed that the nature of actions by the EU and member states depends on the assessment of how to reach the best outcome, and much is done behind the scenes to ensure the safety of human rights defenders.

**Tarja Kangaskorte**, Director of the Unit for Human Rights Policy at the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, emphasised the need for strong political leadership and importance of high-level exchanges. *“I think that strong political leadership is actually the key: we should have strong and clear messages from our leaders on human rights violations and human rights issues...then we can change the situation on the ground.”*

She also pinpointed the need for coherence: the same message should be repeated at all levels, and human rights should be discussed in all political sectors and areas and not as a separate thing.

She sees the EU as a significant supporter of human rights: the EU is already doing plenty in the field. Her own experience as a deputy head of mission is that at the grassroots level, EU embassies and EU delegations work on human rights issues, also coordinating their efforts.

**Sofie From-Emmesberger** discussed the importance of mainstreaming and bringing up human rights issues and human rights defenders’ cases in high-level political dialogue. The PSC raises specific cases with external guests and schedules meetings with human rights defenders at the

beginning of country visits to collect their input and to be able to raise various concerns with authorities.

It is also important to mainstream human rights and the work with human rights defenders in various thematic and country specific strategies and policy papers and their implementation. To have a broader understanding of these issues, there needs to be continuous training for staff in the EEAS, EU delegations, member state embassies and foreign ministries.

Within UN fora, the EU supports the work of the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders and engages in negotiations on the human rights defender resolution at the Human Rights Council (HRC). Human rights defenders could also be included in broader resolutions, along with EU statements and speeches in the HRC. At the Human Rights Council, side events are a good way to provide the platform to those whose voices might otherwise not be heard.

**Hannu Himanen** stressed the importance of leadership on part of senior political figures, heads of European institutions, and the effective implementation of the Council's programmatic decisions. In his opinion, EU leadership and a strong united position by the EU would be needed in most difficult environments, where individual member states find it difficult to act.

According to his personal experiences as an ambassador in Indonesia and Russia, difficulties often emerge in concrete situations. For example, when travelling in some regions of Russia, ambassadors routinely meet opposition and NGO representatives and human rights defenders. They all know that the local security authorities are watching and sometimes even openly interfere with these meetings. Civil society representatives may face unpleasant consequences after meeting foreign diplomats.

In **Hannu Himanen's** view, the EU cannot be a credible actor for human rights if it does not stand united behind its own founding values. Some member states have lately taken up the rhetoric of 'traditional values' – a term that was introduced by Russia. *"Talking of traditional values is a direct attack against the UN human rights system. If the EU is not united in terms of what values we profess as the EU, we will have great difficulties in being successful."*

**Sofie From-Emmesberger** commented that both the High Representative and Secretary General of the EEAS have shown leadership in defending women's rights and human rights. It should also be noted that while it is true that the EU has not always been able to agree, in an overwhelming majority of cases the EU has been able to create a common position.

### ***Visibility and protection on social media — How to counter toxic narratives?***

In Russia, authorities try to silence human rights defenders and activists and label them as foreign agents. **Irina Biryukova** told the panel that many defenders have been questioned by the security forces after meeting foreign diplomats or attending certain events. As a lawyer, she is aware of the risks connected to such meetings, but on the other hand, international attention provides protection. People are also targeted simply for participating in a demonstration and intimidated so that they would not do it again. Human rights defenders know how to deal with police, but such situations are often scary.

She thinks that hate speech and attacks against human rights defenders is a huge problem. Much of the hate speech appears on social media, and one way for the EU to counter toxic narratives is to be more visible on social media. It is important that human rights defenders stand together



against toxic narratives, also internationally.

She reminded participants that social media can also protect human rights defenders. If something happens to a human rights defender, it can be brought up and discussed on social media. In fact, for her, the internet is the only channel to tell the public about her work since the government monitors other media, such as television channels. People are increasingly seeking information online.

**Hannu Himanen** thinks that the EU should react to hate speech and attacks against human rights defenders, but there needs to be a long-term strategy: it is not possible to react to every act of harassment. Civil society representatives should understand that governments are not always able to take action. Immediate reactions to human rights violations should not be seen as sole indicators of EU and member states' performance on human rights: often there are non-public actions going on as a part of a longer-term strategy.

He admitted that sometimes both the EU and member states are at loss what to do when dealing with difficult countries that openly violate international human rights law. Accountability is hard to achieve if impunity is the rule.

**Sofie From-Emmesberger** emphasized the importance of preventative work in the media and said that in addition to raising awareness on human rights, the EU should also be able to communicate to a broader public more clearly that human rights defenders are important and their work is crucial. One strategy promoted by the EU Special Representative for Human Rights is to focus on promising human rights stories and to present a positive narrative on human rights contributing to stability. Member states also have an important role in improving the visibility of EU human rights policy.

In her opinion, there is room for more visibility on human rights issues in the EU context. The Union should have a more strategic approach when it comes to human rights and media.

**Tarja Kangaskorte** added that EU delegations and member states should improve communications on what they are doing to support human rights defenders. It would be useful to have a more comprehensive picture of what actually is done.

### ***Vocal support and strategic alliances***

**Irina Biryukova** said she would like to see more attention and stronger condemnation of human rights violations in Russia, even if the situation in Russia is challenging. Her experience shows that the authorities fear publicity; all human rights violations should be made public, and action should be transparent. Certainly, Russian authorities are sensitive to EU critiques on human rights violations.

She noted that her own example is indicative of the fact that attention from Europe can fundamentally change the situation in particular cases.

It is also important to make information on human rights violations accessible to people. It has been encouraging to see that Russian people have been more eager to take to the streets and demonstrate against the government, even knowing there can be consequences.

**Sofie From-Emmesberger** highlighted the importance of multilateral cooperation, for example through the United Nations. The EU should strengthen its alliances with global partners and work more cross-regionally.

**Tarja Kangaskorte** agreed that the EU should find new allies and suggested that businesses and companies could also be involved more in protecting human rights and human rights defenders.

**Hannu Himanen** added that in multilateral fora, like the UN Human Rights Council, the EU needs to listen and be sensitive in order to work strategically together with allies from other regions. It needs long-term perspective, perseverance and alliances that hold. It is crucial that everybody is on board when it comes to supporting human rights defenders.

## **Q&A**

After the panel the audience had a chance to ask questions. During discussions the situation of Crimea and tensions between Russia and Ukraine were brought up. There was also a conversation about the importance of taking into account gender specific issues and intersectionality.

**Emma Achilli** from [Front Line Defenders](#) brought up the matter that when her organization asks diplomats to meet with human rights defenders, they often hear that meeting defenders would put them at risk. However, human rights defenders themselves are willing to meet – why would the diplomats make the decision?

**Hannu Himanen** said that in his experience, Finland and other EU member states usually are readily available for meetings with human rights defenders. In extremely dangerous situations, where there may be risk for personal security, they consult defenders to discuss if a meeting would serve its purpose. **Tarja Kangaskorte** had similar experiences from Beijing: there were regular meetings and it was important to be aware of the possible consequences.

**Nedal Al-Salman** gave an example from Bahrain. She had received a message from the EU delegation in Riyadh, stating that for her own security they would not meet her in Bahrain. She herself had a very different view: human rights defenders in Bahrain think that connections to the EU give them increased protection. When her colleague, a woman human rights defender, was interrogated and tortured, the interrogator said: “let’s see if the EU or the UN, or the US embassy will listen to you now, let’s see if you can reach them”, threatening her that human rights defenders are alone and cannot reach anyone. In **Al-Salman’s** view, it is more dangerous to be left alone, and she feels that meetings with diplomats give protection, rather than threaten human rights defenders’ security.

**Hannu Himanen** replied to **Nedal Al-Salman**, saying that in his opinion, the EU delegation should have consulted her about the meeting and respect her own assessment of the situation.



## Summary

There is need for coherence in supporting human rights defenders in all levels in the EU so that the same message is repeated across the board and all levels of action; such as following the trials of human rights defenders, creating policy papers on human rights defenders, implementing them and issuing public statements. As **Tarja Kangaskorte** pointed out: *"The same message should be repeated at all levels, and human rights should be discussed in all political sectors and areas and not as a separate thing."*

**Sofie From-Emmesberger** continued that it is important to mainstream human rights and the work with human rights defenders in various thematic and country specific strategies and policy papers and their implementation. To have a broader understanding of these issues, there needs to be continuous training for staff in the EEAS, EU delegations, member state embassies and foreign ministries. Furthermore, **Hannu Himanen** called for a strong united position by the EU and its member states to stand behind its founding values.

The change starts from strong leadership. **Hannu Himanen** stressed the importance of leadership on the part of senior political figures, heads of the European institutions, and the effective implementation of the Council's programmatic decisions.

To confront the current challenges human rights defenders are facing, it is essential to take stock of innovative responses and good practice. Trial monitoring was mentioned as one good practice which has a real impact for human rights defenders.

International attention is important in disclosing and preventing human rights violations, as can be seen in cases of **Irina Biryukova** and **Oyub Titiev**. The support from international organisations and the EU had helped **Irina Biryukova** and now she feels safer than before. She considered the EU as a reliable supporter to human rights defenders, but it would be important to react to changing situations. In particular, she hopes quicker responses from the EU for the requests of human rights defenders in Russia.

The role of social media was brought into discussion by **Irina Biryukova**. She thinks that hate speech and attacks against human rights defenders is a huge problem. Much of the hate speech appears on social media, and one way for the EU to counter toxic narratives is to be more visible on social media. It is important that human rights defenders stand together against toxic narratives, also internationally. The importance of preventative work in the media was noted by **Sofie From-Emmesberger**. In addition to raising awareness on human rights, the EU should also be able to communicate to a broader public more clearly that human rights defenders are important and their work is crucial.

The importance of meeting human rights defenders was also brought up. NGOs and other organisations often hear from diplomats that meeting defenders might put human rights defenders at risk. However, the diplomats should respect defenders' own risk assessment and consult human rights defenders before making any decisions.

## Panel: Smear campaigns and hate speech/attacks against WHRDs (Moderation: Elina Nikulainen)

The second panel discussed the obstacles and threats women human rights defenders (WHRDs) face in their work, and the effect smear campaigns and hate speech have on defenders' work and everyday life in different contexts. How does intersectional discrimination affect women human rights defenders? How do they cope with the risk of harassment and which kind of support do they need to continue their work? What can be done to stop or mitigate offline and online violence and harassment?

**Elina Nikulainen** opened the panel by stating that we can look at papers and policies and easily forget that these are real lives we are talking about, lives of courageous people who put everything on the line for justice. Women human rights defenders face harassment and attacks offline and online. Online violence and harassment against women are not really a new phenomenon, they are simply a new manifestation of the same misogyny. Women are not meant to be heard, they are not meant to be critical. As women human rights defenders, they face specific and often additional challenges, especially if they come from other marginalized backgrounds. Furthermore, defending women's human rights, no matter who you are, garners aggression.

### *Introductory speeches from the women human rights defenders*

For the introductions of **María Teresa Rivera** and **Irina Biryukova**, please see above.

**Memory Bandera**, Director of Programs and Administration with [DefendDefenders](#) and human rights defender, talked about her work and how her activism began. When she was in high school, she noticed that girls could not adopt leadership roles in extra-curricular activities at school because they, unlike boys, were expected to go home and help with household chores. She wanted to make sure that girls had a role to play in terms of leadership in the school environment and started a network to promote girls' empowerment. She noted that often human rights work starts from personal experience and an individual's own passions.

She joined DefendDefenders to help people who are at the forefront of helping other people. Some human rights defenders are at imminent risk and need emergency support. Her work focuses on providing human rights defenders with skills, tools and strategies to protect themselves and the people whose rights they defend and to educate them about the human rights mechanisms that are available for them to keep their governments accountable. She has also worked to provide sustainable solutions for women human rights defenders at risk within their own communities to help them to continue their important work.

The first name of **Nedal Al-Salman**, Head of Women & Children's Rights Advocacy at [Bahrain Center for Human Rights](#) and human rights defender, means the struggle for your rights. **Al-Salman** became an activist because she wanted to be a voice for her people. When she was born, Bahraini people demanded equality and an end to discrimination: today, the calls are the same, but the human rights situation is even worse.



Human rights defenders are targeted and silenced in Bahrain. The director of **Al-Salman's** organisation, **Nabeel Rajab**, was in prison because of [tweeting](#). **Al-Salman** herself was under a travel ban for two years because of her engagement with international organisations, such as the EU and the UN.

She said that she needs everyone's voice and support to help Bahraini human rights defenders. For example, students could do research on the human rights situation in Bahrain and NGOs could raise awareness of the human rights violations in their media channels. The human rights situation in Bahrain does not get much attention and local human rights defenders are left without support.

**Vitalina Koval**, women's rights and LGBTIQ+ rights activist and human rights defender, pointed out that human rights defenders in Ukraine are working in a context of international aggression (war), which has resulted in thousands of cases of rape and other violations. After the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, a very strong community of human rights defenders emerged in the country. With the war going on and a post-Soviet legacy still lingering, civil society faces a great challenge in trying to build a society based on human rights.

The signing of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement helped to raise questions concerning the rights of women and LGBTIQ+ minorities. However, during the last three years, civil society groups have been targeted by far-right movements. Working with the EU has helped to build civil society in Ukraine.

**Jessikka Aro**, journalist and human rights defender from Finland, told about her struggle against a misogynist smear campaign. In 2014, she started to write about Russian propaganda and to investigate how Russian propaganda trolls affected people. She focused on the activities of a 'troll factory' in St. Petersburg and started a crowdsourcing investigation to find out if the trolls were able to manipulate people also internationally, for example in Finland.

Her family members have also faced threats and **Aro** was forced to move away from Finland to be able to continue her work and to live a somewhat normal life.

**Jessikka Aro** had tried to bring the people behind these attacks and hate speech to court. However, this has been difficult since the police do not have enough resources. In her view, national legislations against hate speech and gender-based discrimination should be more robust to protect everyone and our freedom of speech.

She also raised the fact that the language used in the smear campaign was deeply misogynistic, calling women "bimbos, whores, crack-whores and stupid people with hallucinations."

### ***Instances and effects of harassment, hate speech and smear campaigns***

The panel discussion started with the women human rights defenders talking about specific experiences and contexts of the attacks, especially smear campaigns or hate speech, they had encountered or witnessed in their countries or due to their activism.

**Irina Biryukova** told how she had received threats from officers at correctional facilities because her organisation had released videos showing how a prisoner was tortured [in a penal colony] in Yaroslavl. Thus, she and her daughter were forced to leave Russia temporarily. She also told that her employer had to hire a bodyguard for her to ensure her safety.

Harassment and the possibility of harassment happen both online and offline. **Biryukova** brought up how the so-called Kremlin trolls are trying to affect her work. Her organization is also considered [a foreign agent](#) by Russian authorities, which also makes working online challenging.

**Memory Bandera** told the audience that the attacks against her and other employees at her organisation are more indirect. Their attackers kept asking them why the organisation was supporting girls who were working, for example, on gender-based violence. They had experienced both online and offline threats, including people physically coming to their office and threatening them.

Her organisation and she herself had also witnessed direct threats from government officials from all over the world because of their engagement with the UN Human Rights Council. She had also witnessed phishing attempts. In some cases, people had pretended to seek their help but had actually tried to obtain information on human rights defenders they were working with. This has added to their workload because they have had to be more cautious.

**Nedal Al-Salman** told the audience how she had been a target of harassment after she had participated in [the Universal Periodic Review process](#) of her home country Bahrain. She and her colleagues were labelled as ‘traitors’ and their photos and personal information were published online and in an official newspaper. Others had experienced even more serious violations: her colleague’s car was burnt in front of her house and the prominent woman human rights defender **Ebtisam al-Saegh** was [sexually assaulted during an interrogation](#).

She said that speaking about attacks and threats, including difficult issues like sexual harassment, is important because by speaking about them we can save lives of other women human rights defenders.

**Vitalina Koval** said that she first received threats online via social media. They were organised by a local far-right group. In addition, local media published negative articles about her and the LGBTI+ community centre where she worked. There were also attacks against **Koval** and her fellow activists during International Women’s Day marches. In 2018, red paint was thrown at her during the march and she suffered chemical burns in her eyes.

The Ukrainian Section of Amnesty International offered legal assistance and now a court case has been filed asking for the attack to be investigated as a hate crime. The legislation on hate crime in Ukraine is inadequate and the Ukrainian Ministry of the Interior wanted to freeze the case.

**Koval** reflected on how hate groups always start with hate speech, often using gender-specific language, and then they turn to violence. The attacks and threats have forced her to move from her hometown and be more cautious.

**María Teresa Rivera** explained how in El Salvador sexual and reproductive rights defenders face a lot of discrimination and threats, since they are seen as “the worst of women”, as murderers, although in reality people do not know what they have lived through. However, this has made **Rivera** stronger, as these threats and discrimination show that more work is needed in order to change the mindset of people regarding the sexual and reproductive rights of women.

She also talked about other risks that she faces together with her family, such as the one imposed by the gangs in El Salvador. She explained how she had been blackmailed and had to pay for the gangs in order to keep her family safe. She couldn’t denounce it either because she feared for the consequences. Therefore, she emphasized how important it is to protect, not only the activists but their families, too.



In addition, she described the sexual violence she experienced in prison, how the male guards searched the women's genitalia for forbidden items. She also explained how due to the fact that she had talked about these experiences together with other women who have been released from the prison, the Salvadoran state wants to silence them and put them back in prison.

**María Teresa Rivera** argued that we all need to keep fighting in order to make sexual and reproductive rights more visible, so that they are brought to the forefront of human rights discourse and not left in the background. She concluded by emphasizing the importance of cooperation, saying that *"I know that all of us have rights and the rights are for all, but we need to fight together."*

**Sirpa Pietikäinen**, Finnish Member of the European Parliament, described the backlash against women and reminded that we all should be aware that these attacks and other harassment are a part of an authoritarian, fascist mentality and misogyny, which are on the rise. Hatred against women is Janus-faced: women are protected and praised, but as objects to be owned. Sexuality is used as a weapon against women. One goal is also to isolate women. As we have heard here, there are attempts to silence WHRDs and to send a chilling message: "Just look what happens if you dare."

She said that in order to defeat this misogyny we need to make problems visible, build networks and support each other.

### ***Specific challenges WHRDs face – The role of family and harassment against girls as examples***

**Nedal Al-Salman** brought up the challenges women human rights defenders face in a conservative, religious society. Sexual violence may stay hidden because rape victims will not speak up for fear of bringing shame to themselves and their families. Families of women human rights defenders may not accept their work, because of fear for their safety and the shame possible attacks could cause. For this reason, some women human rights defenders do not reveal that they are working on human rights. Women human rights defenders are often targeted by religious actors who think that speaking about women's rights is an attack against *sharia* law.

**Memory Bandera** addressed the specific intersectional challenges young women and girls face in their human rights activism. She said that girls may not know how to cope with online and physical harassment, which may even lead to suicide.

In Africa the voices of children are not normally heard. The system does not allow children to say what they think. Thus, they have less options to act in society. Girls also face specific safety issues: walking to school or using transport like motorbikes or boats makes them vulnerable to sexual harassment. The participation of girls in political processes and peace processes needs to improve since they have great impact on their lives, but girls are never involved in these processes.

### ***Effective protective legal measures and support against hate speech***

**Jessikka Aro** said that it is all about "lawyering up". By this she meant that when a woman human rights defender is facing harassment she should find herself a lawyer and start filing these cases to the police as soon as possible. It is also crucial that the employers or organizations with which women human rights defenders are affiliated support the legal processes.

**Irina Biryukova** told the audience how her employer had to hire a personal bodyguard for her to keep her safe. She said that as a lawyer herself it is funny to think about finding a lawyer, as she is used to give others legal assistance. However, there should always be a security plan to follow in case of threats or harassment. As a lawyer and professional, she already knows to whom her client should talk to and who to contact. However, when she is herself the target of harassment, the situation is not the same.

She believes that one of the most effective ways to respond to threats, in both her and in any other case, is to talk about these problems as broadly as possible. It is important to report concrete things, such as what has happened and when. Social media would be a good place to do this. Media attention also helps in decreasing physical threats.

**Vitalina Koval** talked about her experiences of being part of [a global campaign of Amnesty International](#). She reminded the panel that apart from gaining more visibility, it is also about seeking support from authorities and NGOs.

She stated that the campaign had an impact on the security around public actions: this year all women's rights actions [on International Women's Day] went on peacefully, and they were well protected by the police. International presence at the events ensured effective police protection and showed the police that their actions are monitored. With the support of Amnesty International, it was also possible to work on her court case, which could become a strategically important precedent for litigating hate crimes in Ukraine.

**María Teresa Rivera** thanked the human rights organizations that had supported her. When state prosecutors of El Salvador filed an appeal to overturn the Supreme Court ruling, **Rivera** knew she had to seek refuge abroad or risk being sent back to prison would have actualized. According to her, the real reason for the new persecution was the fact that she had not remained silent but instead made her case visible for the world to see.

**María Teresa Rivera** feels that she is now able to speak freely and defend human rights. In her view, the EU should ensure that human rights defenders are able to flee their countries quickly if needed, before it is too late. Both the activists and their families need protection.

**Sirpa Pietikäinen** told the panel that the initiatives linked to the #MeToo campaign within the European Parliament are making progress, albeit slowly. She compared promoting human rights or gender issues to baking bread: you will have to do it every day. In principle, everyone says 'yes' to human rights and gender equality, but the real question is what to do and how. There is a large network in the European Parliament willing to develop more concrete measures to achieve change, as was done to implement the Sustainable Development Goals: indicators, gender budgeting, guidelines, impact assessment, good practices, reporting and feedback are all needed as well as training, low threshold tools and support to whistle-blowers to ensure early intervention and prevention.

### ***The importance of self-care***

The panellists also discussed their self-care strategies and what kind of support they get from their organizations.

**María Teresa Rivera** stated that whereas it is important to protect oneself, help and support from others is also needed. She explained how it is important for her to be able to share her own



opinions on social media, but she also needs to be careful due to the threat posed by the gangs and the Salvadoran state. Because of this, she does not have a lot of contact with people from El Salvador - only with people she knows are on her side.

**Vitalina Koval** stressed the importance of finding a balance between work and personal life. Her method to avoid burn-out has been to switch off her phones and have a few days' break from activism.

**Nedal Al-Salman's** piece of advice was to dance and listen to music, especially happy music.

**Jessikka Aro** said that a key element of her self-care is trying to support and help other people who have similar difficulties as she does. For her creativity is important, especially writing: Her book "Putin's trolls" was to be published shortly after the seminar. She also finds it important not to succumb to the harassers who try to threaten her to shut up. Instead, she will use every possible opportunity to discuss hate speech and share her experiences.

**Memory Bandera** told that her organization provides 'forced self-care', which means different kinds of group activities every two weeks. For example, they use art therapy to share with each other what they are going through. There are also psychologists available for staff.

**Irina Biryukova** said that in her organisation the whole office leaves Russia once a year for a week to discuss issues that have occurred in their work and to relax. She thinks that these kinds of 'forced vacations' are needed since one cannot work 24/7 and they can help to prevent depression. In addition, her boss knows her very well since they have worked together for a long time. Thus, her boss can sometimes advise her to take a holiday. There is also a psychologist available in her organisation.

### ***Recommendations for the European Union***

In addition to the recommendations **Irina Biryukova** made in the first panel, she hoped that opportunities for rest and self-care for human rights defenders would be taken into account in EU budgeting for human rights defenders.

**Jessikka Aro** proposed that the EU should do more to regulate social media giants that enable online harassment. She also emphasized the importance of diplomatic influence on authoritarian countries. She encouraged everyone to take action when encountering hate speech: it is important to stand united and try to tackle hate speech together.

**Memory Bandera** said that states should be encouraged to invite visits from UN Human Rights Council special procedures and regional human rights mechanisms, which can give concrete recommendations. She also hoped that the EU would support national and regional programs that provide spaces for human rights defenders to come together, discuss issues that affect them and come up with solutions.

**Nedal Al-Salman** said that the EU must prioritise engagement with human rights defenders and civil society on the ground. Engagement can provide a level of protection to human rights defenders, and EU representatives should respect human rights defenders' own security assessment when making decisions on meeting them. EU diplomats should never use security concerns as an excuse to refuse to meet human rights defenders. The European Union should also actively bring public attention to human rights violations in Bahrain because civil society space in the country is closed and there is no media freedom.

**Vitalina Koval** urged the governments of EU member states not to be shy to ask uncomfortable questions from the Ukrainian government. She also mentioned that human rights defenders in her country would need more information on educational programmes available for them in Europe, because on a regional level, there is a lack of information and experience with such resources. In addition, EU missions should have more information on exchange and learning programmes for activists working at the grassroots level.

**María Teresa Rivera** had already given multiple recommendations throughout the seminar but wanted to stress the importance of the EU taking action and initiating contact directly with human rights defenders instead of waiting for the human rights organisations to organize everything.

**Sirpa Pietikäinen** pledged to take note of the recommendations and take them forward. She emphasised the role of EU missions and especially women ambassadors. She encouraged them to be more active and suggested that the women ambassadors from EU countries could provide safe havens for women human rights defenders at risk. When it comes to hate crimes, we need to be clear about zero tolerance. She also encouraged women human rights defenders to contact members of the European Parliament (MEPs) directly: the intergroups, such as the LGBTI intergroup at the European Parliament, can take up various concerns, write to governments and pay visits to show that they are aware and watching closely. The European Parliament also issues resolutions on human rights situations in third countries.

## Q&A

After the panel, the audience had a chance to ask the panellists questions. There were questions on the situation of African domestic workers in Gulf countries, the role of men in supporting women human rights defenders and opportunities for the heterosexual majority to support sexual minorities. There was a strong consensus that no one should be silent when someone's rights are violated. It is also crucial to stand with women human rights defenders and support them. The responsibility of adults to educate children on gender and equality issues is critical. It was noted that more knowledge and training is needed about the specific challenges women human rights defenders face, and their situation necessitates immediate action.

## Summary

According to the report [Challenging power, fighting discrimination – a call to recognise and protect women human rights defenders](#), human rights violations against women human rights defenders often happen in challenging and hostile contexts, as was exemplified by the testimonies heard in the panels.

Women human rights defenders face similar risks as other human rights defenders, but there is a heightened risk for women human rights defenders to be a target of gender-based violence or that attacks may have gendered consequences, meaning that human rights violations have different impacts for women human rights defenders. **Nedal Al-Salman** gave the example of prominent Bahraini WHRD **Ebtisam al-Saegh** who was sexually assaulted during an interrogation.

Stigmatization and smear campaigns are commonly used tactics by both state and non-state actors to discredit human rights defenders, delegitimize their work, isolate them from the

community and reduce the support they receive. Name calling is a common feature. Smear campaigns can be seen in cases of **Jessikka Aro** and **María Teresa Rivera**. **Jessikka Aro** has been continuously attacked by trolls, while **María Teresa Rivera** talked about the persecution and discrimination she had experienced after becoming an activist. After she had been released from prison, she faced harassment and discrimination because she had demanded justice and talked about human rights violations in prison. **Irina Biryukova** talked about the consequences of restrictive legislation, which labels human rights defenders as “foreign agents” because of their human rights work in Russia. She had also experienced organized smear campaigns on social media, and **Vitalina Koval** from Ukraine had similar experiences. **Nedal Al-Salman** mentioned how she and her colleagues were labelled “traitors” and their photos and personal information were published online and in an official newspaper in Bahrain.

Women human rights defenders face many forms of gender-based online attacks. Online threats and verbal abuse are often sexual in nature and aim to reduce women human rights defenders’ reputation and credibility. **Jessikka Aro**, in particular, raised the fact that the language used in the smear campaign was deeply misogynistic, calling women “bimbos, whores, crack-whores, stupid people with hallucinations”. **María Teresa Rivera** was called a “murderer” for her activism on sexual and reproductive rights.

In many cases, women human rights defenders’ children and close relatives are attacked or threatened to force them to stop their activism. In countries where women are traditionally primary caregivers for the family, women human rights defenders also face enormous pressure, fear and guilt if their loved ones are put at risk for their human rights work. **María Teresa Rivera** told how she had to leave El Salvador because she was afraid for the safety of her family and her son. Also, **Irina Biryukova** had to leave Russia temporarily with her child whereas **Memory Bandera** addressed the specific intersectional challenges young women and girls face in their human rights activism. She said that girls may not know how to cope with online and physical harassment.

Unlike their male counterparts, women human rights defenders are more likely to experience pressure from their partners and family members, who may fail to support them and attempt to dissuade them from human rights activism and participating in public life. **Nedal Al-Salman** explained that the families of women human rights defenders may not accept their work, because of fear for their safety and also for the fear that they would be shamed by physical or even sexual attacks against them, or that they would be publicly labelled “immoral”. For this reason, some women human rights defenders do not reveal that they are working on human rights. **Nedal Al-Salman** mentioned that in the Gulf region, women human rights defenders are sometimes targeted by religious actors, who think that speaking about women’s rights is an attack against *sharia* law.

The rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, association and expression are essential prerequisites to effective human rights work and the creation of an enabling environment for civil society. In Russia, the foreign agents law, which stigmatizes human rights organizations and restricts foreign funding, has had grave effects on NGOs working to protect human rights. **Irina Biryukova** also explained how freedom of assembly has been violated by threats to demonstrators. **Nedal Al-Salman** told the audience about her experiences in working in an environment where civil society space was effectively closed, as the government of Bahrain seeks to curb all criticism and dissenting voices. In this context of a shrinking space for civil society, feminist, women and LGBTI-led organizations and collectives are at particular risk.



## How the EU and member states can efficiently support human rights defenders? - Recommendations from Amnesty International (Eve Geddie, Amnesty International EIO)

**Eve Geddie**, Head of Office and Advocacy Director of Amnesty's European Institutions Office (EIO), presented their recent report [Defending defenders? – an assessment of EU action on human rights defenders](#).

The report assesses EU and member state action for human rights defenders (HRDs), in line with their human rights commitments, above all the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders. It looks at key commitments and challenges in implementing the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders in Burundi, China, Honduras, Russia and Saudi Arabia, and draws on compelling testimonies of individual human rights defenders from these countries.

The five countries covered in the report were selected for their geographical diversity, their diverse relations with the EU and, above all, the serious challenges faced by human rights defenders working in them.

On the positive side, the report identifies many instances where the EU and member states adopted innovative and adaptive approaches to support human rights defenders. For instance, providing training on digital security and crowdfunding to human rights defenders in Russia, taking steps to overcome obstacles to trial observation in China and proactively using social media and other platforms to promote an enabling environment in Honduras and Russia.

However, there are three key areas where Amnesty International sees the need for improvement: strategy, visibility and innovation.

### **Strategy**

- EU support to human rights defenders seems to indicate a lack of overall strategy and consistency and there are clear disparities in EU action between and within the different countries analysed. For instance, there have been robust public messages supporting HRDs in China, yet limited or weak support for human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia.

### **Visibility**

- Many human rights defenders with whom Amnesty International spoke underlined an insufficient visibility of EU actions and channels of support. As a result, the EU's public actions and commitments to human rights defenders do not always reach their target audience. For example, EU statements on HRDs are not often translated into local languages.

### **Innovation**

- Amnesty International identified several good practices and innovative actions by the EU and its member states but these still need to be made more systematic and anchored in a broader, strategic vision of how the EU can best support and protect HRDs in practice.
- Thus, Amnesty International is pointing to an inconsistent implementation of the EU's policy on human rights defenders. Through this report, Amnesty International aims to provide constructive analysis and practical ways forward at this crucial and challenging moment for human rights, for human rights defenders, and for the EU.

## Key recommendations from the report:



### ! **Bring EU commitments on human rights defenders up to highest level**

Amnesty International is calling for **annual Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions** on EU action to promote and protect human rights defenders in its foreign policy and to boost political and practical action in support of human rights defenders.

### ! **Amnesty International would like to see more strategy and innovation in action for human rights defenders**

To confront the current challenges, it is essential to take stock of innovative responses and good practice and embed these within **a global strategy**. Such a strategy should seek to address new and emerging threats. This strategy should include ways to support human rights defenders with intersectional concerns who face heightened risks as a result. These include women human rights defenders, LGBTIQ defenders, indigenous human rights defenders and human rights defenders working on land/environmental/territory or business and human rights. Such a strategy could be taken forward at the country level and tailored to the national circumstances and needs.

### ! **Improve the visibility & the accessibility of EU action, commitments and channels of support for human rights defenders**

Amnesty International encourages the EU to develop **a global public communications strategy on human rights defenders**, including guidance and benchmarks on content, timing and level at which communications should be made and coordinated at various levels. It should also seek to enhance the impact and reach of EU actions, including through social media.

## GYMNICH LUNCH

After the EU foreign ministers' meeting, Minister for Foreign Affairs **Pekka Haavisto** [hosted a ministerial lunch](#), which was also attended by four international women human rights defenders to discuss the obstacles they are facing in their work and to give their recommendations to the EU.

*"Today, support is needed more than ever as human rights defenders around the world face a growing number of threats and attacks. Women human rights defenders, in particular, are often at risk. The lunch provided us an opportunity to discuss how we can best support the important work of human rights defenders in dangerous and challenging situations."*, said **Pekka Haavisto**.

The four women human rights defenders invited to speak at the lunch were **Memory Bandera**, **Nedal Al-Salman**, **Vitalina Koval** and Finnish disability activist **Amu Urhonen**.

**Eve Geddie** and **Frank Johansson** from Amnesty International and **Kim Remitz** from the Finnish KIOS Foundation were also invited as guests for the lunch.

In his opening words, Minister **Haavisto** emphasized Finland's strong commitment to human rights and supporting human rights defenders. As Finland focuses on the rights of women and girls, women human rights defenders, who often face great challenges in their work, were invited to speak at the lunch. High Representative **Federica Mogherini** commended the WHRDs for their extremely important work and affirmed the EU's strong commitment to support human rights defenders.

In her speech **Memory Bandera** told about the work of her organisation in conflict areas. She stated that women, in particular, are victims of violence in conflicts. Moreover, LGBTIQ or land rights activists and journalists are in danger. Human rights defenders are facing both physical and online harassment.

### **Memory Bandera expects:**

- ! Strong support from the EU and that it would systematically implement the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders in all situations.
- ! The EU should highlight the importance of visits by United Nations and African Union independent human rights mechanisms in its discussions with African counterparts.

**Nedal Al-Salman** told the EU Foreign Ministers that Bahrain had closed the civil society space almost completely. She herself has experienced harassment, for example travel bans. **Al-Salman** found it problematic that the EU does no longer actively contact the Bahraini activist for safety reasons. According to **Al-Salman**, the international contacts actually increase safety, and not the contrary.

### **Nedal Al-Salman urges the EU and its member states:**

- ! Increase contacts with Bahraini activists.



- ! Cease sales of intelligence equipment and devices to Bahrain that may be used to monitor human rights defenders.

**Vitalina Koval** said that Ukraine is in a war in which women have to pay a high price. Rape is common in conflict areas. Ukraine has suffered for its decision to align itself closer with the west. The EU should urge Ukraine to create legislation against discrimination and to address violence against women. It would also be important to support LGBTIQ activists.

**Vitalina Koval urges the EU to:**

- ! Call on Ukraine to fulfil its human rights commitments which are included in the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement.
- ! Pro-actively raise human rights concerns with the Ukrainian government at all levels.
- ! Support human rights organisations in Ukraine.

**Amu Urhonen** hoped that the EU would pay special attention to supporting people with disabilities. They need equality, resources and allies, not pity. According to **Urhonen**, the disability perspective must be taken into account in every matter and everywhere, since most of the time it is forgotten.

**Amu Urhonen urges the EU to:**

- ! Respect the agency of people with disabilities and ensure with adequate resourcing that their voice is heard.
- ! Support projects where disabled people are in the lead.

Amnesty International highlighted the good practice of inviting human rights defenders to speak in the context of the Foreign Affairs Council meetings and urged the EU and its member states to include exchanges with HRDs in future Foreign Affairs Council and formal Council working group meetings.

Finland invited human rights defenders and civil society representatives to attend other meetings in EU fora during its EU Presidency.

During the COHOM (Working Party on Human Rights) meeting in October 2019 Russian woman human rights defender and human rights lawyer from [Human Rights Center Memorial](#) **Tatiana Glushkova** spoke about the situation of Russian human rights defenders and her work. **Frank Johansson**, Director of the Finnish Section of Amnesty International, presented the report [Defending defenders? – an assessment of EU action on human rights defenders](#) and its key findings while **Emma Achilli**, Head of European Union Office of [Front Line Defenders](#), spoke about the challenges women human rights defenders are facing.



Photos: Lauri Heikkinen/Prime Minister's Office, Finland



## Concluding remarks

The EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders provide a practical framework for EU and member state action on human rights defenders in third countries, committing diplomats to engage with human rights defenders, and to pro-actively move out of their comfort zone in support of human rights defenders. In the seminar, we heard first-hand testimonies from brave women human rights defenders from around the world working in difficult and threatening environments where EU support can make a crucial difference. During the seminar, we also heard innovative ways in which the EU Human Rights Defenders Guidelines could be implemented to protect defenders and promote their work.

By participating in the seminar and providing visibility to human rights defenders, the diplomats set great example of good practice and pointed out a positive way forward. Amnesty International thanks the Finnish EU Presidency and Foreign Minister **Pekka Haavisto** for inviting four women human rights defenders to speak at the lunch during the informal meeting of the EU Foreign Ministers on 30<sup>th</sup> August. This was an excellent opportunity for women human rights defenders to speak directly with EU decision-makers at the highest level and to set a positive precedent for inviting human rights defenders to Council meetings.





# Ideas and recommendations



Both the panellists of the seminar and women human rights defenders at the informal lunch of the EU Foreign Ministers shared their ideas on how the European Union and its members states could better support women human rights defenders.

## Visibility, accessibility and coherence

- ! The EU should systematically implement the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders in all situations.
  - The EU should be more time-sensitive in its actions and act more urgently in cases of immediate risks.
- ! The EU should be in direct contact with human rights defenders and give them visibility.
- ! Trial monitoring has proven to be an effective way to support human rights defenders.
  - Responsibility sharing among the member states sometimes allows sending monitors to more remote regions.
  - Trial monitoring is a way to convey a message to the authorities: to remind them of their human rights commitments and to signal that the EU is watching.
- ! Human rights issues and human rights defenders' cases should be raised at all high-level exchanges and political dialogues.
  - The EU and its member states should not be shy about asking uncomfortable questions about human rights concerns when engaging with counterparts from third countries.
- ! There is need for coherence in supporting human rights defenders at all levels in the EU:
  - The same message should be communicated at all levels up to highest level.
  - Human rights should be discussed in all political sectors and areas - mainstreamed and not as a separate thing.
- ! It is also important to mainstream human rights and the work with human rights defenders in various thematic and country specific strategies and policy papers and their implementation.
- ! To have a broader understanding of these issues, there needs to be continuous training for staff in the EEAS, EU delegations, member state embassies and foreign ministries.
- ! In response to human rights concerns, a strong united position by the EU is needed. The EU cannot be a credible actor for human rights if it does not stand united behind its own founding values.
- ! At all levels, the EU and member states should improve communications on what they are doing to support human rights defenders, a view to transparency, predictability and above all the impact of their actions.



- ! The EU should have a more strategic approach when it comes to human rights and media.
  - The EU should explicitly communicate to a broader public that human rights defenders are important and their work is crucial.
  - The EU should actively bring human rights violations to public attention, especially in countries where civil society space is closed and there is no media freedom.
  
- ! In the sphere of multilateral cooperation, the EU and its member states should strengthen their alliances with like-minded partners and work more cross-regionally.
  - In multilateral fora, like the UN Human Rights Council, it is important that the EU and its member states work strategically together with allies from other regions.
  - Businesses and companies have a role in protecting human rights and human rights defenders, starting with their own practices.
  
- ! It is crucial for the EU and its member states to consult human rights defenders themselves and to take their concerns on board in their external action.
  - The diplomats should consult human rights defenders and respect their own risk assessment on the usefulness and safety of a possible meeting.
  
- ! Women human rights defenders are encouraged to contact members of the European Parliament. Individual MEPs, delegations and the intergroups can take action to support defenders and the European Parliament also issues resolutions on human rights concerns, including the cases of human rights defenders.
  
- ! States should be encouraged to invite visits from UN Human Rights Council special procedures and regional human rights mechanisms, which can give concrete recommendations.
  
- ! The EU should not sell intelligence equipment and devices to countries which may use them to monitor human rights defenders.

## Resources

- ! The EU and its member states should pro-actively provide more information on training possibilities for activists and human rights defenders working at the grassroots level.
  
- ! Opportunities for rest and self-care for human rights defenders should be taken into account in EU and member state budgeting for human rights defenders.
  
- ! The EU should support national and regional programs that provide spaces for human rights defenders to come together, discuss issues that affect them and come up with solutions.

## Tackling hate speech

- ! In order to counter toxic narratives, the EU and its member states should be more visible on social media. It is also important that human rights defenders stand together against toxic narratives and receive support online – everyone can take action when encountering hate speech.
- ! Social media can also protect human rights defenders. If something happens to a human rights defender, it can be brought up and discussed on social media.
- ! The EU and its member states should act to regulate social media giants that enable online harassment.
- ! The EU and its member states should fully support women human rights defenders facing harassment in efforts to report harassment and start legal processes.
  - The employers or other organisations with which women human rights defenders are affiliated should support legal processes.

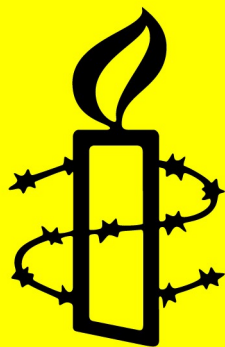
## Intersectionality

- ! The EU and its member states should pay special attention to supporting disabled people and support projects where disabled people are in the lead. The voice of disabled people should be heard.
- ! The EU should pay special attention to sexual and reproductive rights activist groups and indigenous people since these groups are among the least visible.
- ! The EU should guarantee protection not only for the activists themselves, but for their families as well.
  - The EU should consider gendered implications and needs in its practical and logistical support to women human rights defenders, for example, when providing visas or relocation.





**TOGETHER WITH  
WOMEN  
HUMAN RIGHTS  
DEFENDERS**



## Women human rights defenders (WHRDs)

### Memory Bandera Rwampwanyiri

Human rights defender

*Zimbabwe/Uganda*

Memory Bandera is a US-trained Zimbabwean who lives in Uganda. Currently, she is the Director of Programs and Administration with DefendDefenders (the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project). DefendDefenders is a regional organization seeking to protect and strengthen human rights defenders in the East and Horn of Africa subregion, including Burundi, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia (together with Somaliland), South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. DefendDefenders protects human rights defenders who are in danger and offers training for human rights defenders in protection and security as well as in advocacy, human rights monitoring and reporting, among other things. The organization also promotes human rights defenders and their work at regional and international platforms.

Prior to joining DefendDefenders, Bandera worked with the International Law Institute's African Centre for Legal Excellence (ILI-ACLE) and with Youth Action International. She is a founding member of the Girl Child Network Zimbabwe (1999); co-founder of Tariro-Hope and Health for Zimbabwe's Orphans (2003); and Girl Child Network Uganda (2009).



## María Teresa Rivera

Sexual and Reproductive Rights Activist

*El Salvador/Sweden*

María Teresa Rivera was one of “Las17 y Más” – more than 17 women jailed between 1990 and 2011 under the total abortion ban in El Salvador because of obstetric complications. Following a miscarriage in 2011, Rivera was sentenced to 40 years for aggravated homicide. After four and a half years in prison, she was finally released in 2016 when a judge dismissed the charges against her. During her time in prison, María Teresa Rivera connected with other women in a similar situation and following her release she continued to speak up for sexual and reproductive rights in El Salvador. Her outspokenness led the public prosecutor’s office to reopen the case against her. To avoid persecution María Teresa Rivera left El Salvador with her son to seek asylum in Sweden. She is the first woman to have been granted asylum for abortion-related persecution.



## Irina Biryukova

Lawyer

*Russia*

Irina Biryukova is a lawyer and human rights defender from Moscow working on protecting the rights of individuals in detention facilities all over Russia. She currently works at Public Verdict Foundation (Obschestvennyi Verdikt), a non-political, not-for-profit organisation, which provides legal assistance to protect the human rights of those individuals, who have fallen victim to misconduct by Russian law enforcement authorities. Her work involves continuous legal cooperation with Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch in Russia, as well as for a number of national and international NGOs. She has received threats due to her work and in the past she has been forced to leave Russia temporarily.



In addition to working for Public Verdict Foundation, she is accredited at the Russian Ministry of Justice as an independent expert in the anticorruption evaluation of legislation and regulatory acts and legislation and regulatory acts bills, and works as a lawyer. Previously she has worked with Civic Assistance Committee (Grazhdanskoe Sodejstvie), a regional, public charity dedicated to helping refugees and migrants, and as a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Civil Law (family law, housing rights) at the A. Griboedov Institute of Law and Economics.



“  
**By defending  
ONE, we defend  
EVERYONE.**

**Irina Biryukova**  
Human rights defender, Russia

### **Nedal Al-Salman**

Women's and child rights activist

*Bahrain*

Nedal Al-Salman is the Head of Women & Children's Rights Advocacy at Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR). BCHR works carrying out advocacy, training, workshops, seminars, media campaigns on human rights and reporting to UN mechanisms and international NGOs. The BCHR has also participated in many regional and international conferences and workshops, in addition to testifying in national parliaments across Europe, the European Parliament, and the United States Congress.

In the past Al-Salman has been banned from travelling outside Bahrain. On 26 November 2017, she was stopped at Bahrain International Airport by Bahraini authorities and prevented from leaving the country. Previously Al-Salman had been placed on travel ban on 29 August 2016, while en route to Geneva to participate in the United Nations Human Rights Council, she was informed by officials at Bahrain International Airport that the Public Prosecution had ordered a travel ban against her. She was subsequently banned from travelling in March and June 2017 again, when the UN Human Rights Council sessions were held in Geneva. Bahrain's authorities have also imposed arbitrary travel bans on dozens of other activists and women human rights defenders in recent years.

“  
**My name means struggle  
for your rights. I was born  
in a year when people  
demanded the same  
rights I defend today.**

Nedal Al-Salman  
Women’s rights defender, Bahrain



**AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL**



### **Vitalina Koval**

Women’s rights and LGBTIQ+ rights activist

*Ukraine*

Vitalina Koval is a relentless defender of women’s rights and LGBTI rights from Uzhgorod, Ukraine. Vitalina Koval has been central to the LGBTI community in Ukraine. She helped set up a community centre - a safe space for LGBTI people within the growing hostility of the country. Due to her activities organizing events such as Women’s day marches and other art and cultural events, she has been a target for attacks by far-right groups.

“  
**I want to defend equality  
and human rights and I  
am not going to back  
out. We might struggle  
now, but in the end, I  
know we will win.**

Vitalina Koval  
LGBTI rights defender, Ukraine



**AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL**



## Jessikka Aro

Journalist

*Finland*

Jessikka Aro is a Finnish award-winning investigative journalist working for Finland's public service broadcaster Yle. In September 2014, she began to investigate pro-Russian Internet trolls, but became a victim of their activities herself. This harassment led to three people being convicted in October 2018. In 2019 Aro was notified that she was to receive an International Women of Courage Award but this was rescinded just before the ceremony.

In 2014 Aro started to investigate pro-Kremlin social media troll techniques. Her work focuses on how trolls from Russia are influencing debate in other countries which is putting her at the center of the 'fake news' and 'trolling' worlds. Aro's book "Putin's Trolls" about the Kremlin's information warfare and training reporters and the general public to recognize and counter online disinformation was published in September 2019. Aro is also lobbying for better legislation to counter hybrid threats and protect citizens from state-sponsored online security threats. Due to her work, Aro is a target for international propaganda and hate speech.

Aro is especially concerned with how trolls are unduly influencing citizens within her own country and how this disinformation is being spread unknowingly through social media sharing. Her work is routinely used in the investigation of online trolling, of a propaganda or political nature.



“**Fake news from Russia and the propaganda trolls are a threat to freedom of speech and human rights. Human rights belong to people, not trolls.**”

Jessikka Aro  
Human rights defender, Finland



## Other speakers

### Hannu Himanen

Before retiring from the Finnish Foreign Service in 2017, Hannu Himanen was Ambassador of Finland to Russia in 2012 to 2016. Earlier, he was Ambassador/Permanent Representative to the UN Organisations in Geneva (2008–2012), including the UN Human Rights Council, and Ambassador to Indonesia (1996–2000). In 2003 to 2008, he served as Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Ministry in charge of strategic management. In 2005, he was in President Martti Ahtisaari's team mediating a peace deal in the Indonesian province of Aceh.

Himanen's other foreign postings during his 40-year diplomatic career include New Delhi (1979–1981), New York/UN (1981–1984), Moscow (1986–1989) and Vienna/CSCE (1989–1991).

Outside the Foreign Service, he participated in the Fellows Program of the Center for International Affairs at Harvard University in 1995–1996. He was Vice President for International Security and Governance of the EastWest Institute (Prague Center) in 2001–2002.

Since retirement, he has appeared frequently in the media as a commentator on Russia, Finnish security and European affairs. In October 201, he published a book entitled *West or East: Finland and the Return of Geopolitics* (in Finnish).

### Tarja Kangaskorte

Tarja Kangaskorte is the Director of the Unit For Human Rights Policy at the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. She joined the Foreign Ministry in 2002 and has served abroad in the Finnish Embassies in Vienna (2003-07), Bangkok (2007-2010) and most recently in Beijing (2015-19). At the Ministry Kangaskorte has served for example as Diplomatic Adviser to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and as Team Leader for Southeast Asia and Oceania.

### Sofie From-Emmesberger

Sofie From-Emmesberger is the Chair of the Political and Security Committee (PSC). Before taking up her duties in the EEAS, she served as the Ambassador of Finland to the PSC, Ambassador of Finland to Kenya and other missions as well as the Director of the Unit For Human Rights Policy at the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

### Sirpa Pietikäinen

Sirpa Pietikäinen, M.Sc. Econ., is Finnish Member of the European Parliament representing European People's Party (EPP) since 2008. Pietikäinen was Finland's Minister of Environment in between 1991 and 1995 and a Member of the Finnish Parliament from 1983 to 2003.

At the European Parliament, Pietikäinen is substitute Member of the Environment, Public Health and Food Security Committee (ENVI) and Member in the Economic and Monetary Affairs Committee (ECON), and Member in the Women's Right and Gender Equality Committee (FEMM).

She is a keen advocate of people's rights, member in Parliament's LGBTI intergroup and member in the interest group on Women's and girl's rights.

## **Pekka Haavisto**

Pekka Haavisto is the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland and former leader of party Green League. He returned to the Finnish Parliament in the Finnish parliamentary elections of March 2007 after an absence of 12 years and was re-elected again in 2011, 2015, and 2019. Between April 1995 and April 1999 he was the Minister of Environment in the Lipponen I Cabinet. In October 2013 Haavisto was appointed as the Minister for International Development. He has also been a member of the Helsinki City Council. Haavisto was appointed as the Minister for Foreign Affairs in the Rinne Cabinet on 6<sup>th</sup> June 2019 and again in the Marin Cabinet on 10<sup>th</sup> December 2019.

In autumn 2014 Haavisto was appointed as Foreign Minister's Special Representative for African Crises. In addition, he has worked as the European Union Special Representative (EUSR) in Sudan and Darfur (2005-2007), and as a Special Advisor for the UN (ASG) in Darfur peace process (2007). Haavisto has also led several missions to conflict areas as the Chairman of UNEP's post-conflict work in 1999-2005.

## **Moderators**

### **Covadonga de la Campa**

Covadonga de la Campa is the head of the EU Foreign Policy Team at Amnesty International's European Institutions Office (EIO). She has worked at Amnesty International for over nine years, first as a campaigner and researcher in the Middle East programme and most recently coordinating advocacy and acting as director of EIO. Prior to joining Amnesty International she worked for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Syria.

### **Elina Nikulainen**

Elina Nikulainen is a Gender and Inclusion expert who for over 10 years has worked on women's and minority rights in Asia, the Pacific and Europe for various UN agencies and INGOs. Her special focus has been on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Gender Mainstreaming. During the seminar she worked as the acting Executive Director of UN Women Finland.

During the past few years Nikulainen has increasingly worked on the intersection of technology and violence against women, including as a European Women's Lobby's trainer on prevention and response to online violence through the #HerNetHerRights campaign.