

Supporting and Promoting the Protection of Human Rights Defenders



Human rights defenders play a vital role in democracies, but they often face serious risks and challenges due to their important and legitimate work. The **right to defend human rights** is universally recognized, and OSCE participating States have all committed to providing those who do so with effective protection and support.

Who are human rights defenders?

Anyone who promotes human rights and strives for their protection and realization is a human rights defender, regardless of their profession, age or other status.

They may work alone or with others, as part of an informal group or a non-governmental organization, as a volunteer or professionally. Human rights defenders may be lawyers, trade unionists, staff of national human rights institutions (NHRIs), journalists, medical professionals, public servants, students, assembly monitors, whistleblowers or any member of the public, as long as they act through peaceful means and accept the universality of human rights.

The work of a human rights defender can include monitoring the situation of human rights, uncovering, documenting and speaking up about abuses, campaigning for justice and equal rights, litigating at courts or supporting victims of violations.

Risks and challenges

Human rights defenders are frequently targeted for their work. They face verbal attacks, smear campaigns, stigmatization, intimidation, physical violence, surveillance, judicial harassment and criminalization, arbitrary arrest, detention and imprisonment. The psychological risks and emotional toll can affect both their well-being and their ability to continue defending human rights.



ODIHR's Starlight Stadium eLearning game for human rights defenders

Shrinking civic space, growing restrictions on the freedoms of expression, assembly and association, and problems with access to funding are making human rights work increasingly difficult. Human rights defenders often lack opportunities for meaningful participation in public affairs, or are actively blocked from it, and face reprisals for engaging with the international community and human rights forums. In recent years, the securitization and polarization of politics and society, alongside backsliding on human rights, democracy and gender equality, has increased the pressure on human rights defenders across the OSCE region.

Certain groups of defenders are particularly at risk: those in exile face specific challenges, including in light of growing transnational repression. Environmentalists and those uncovering abuses of power and corruption are frequently targeted by state and non-state actors. Women human rights defenders, people working for the equal rights of sexual minorities, racial or religious minorities, refugees and migrants, people with disabilities or other discriminated groups, and defenders working in conflict settings face additional risks.

"The participating States will respect human rights and fundamental freedoms (...) They confirm the right of the individual to know and act upon [their] rights and duties in this field."

(Helsinki, 1975)

"The participating States further affirm (...) the right of the individual to seek and receive assistance from others in defending human rights and fundamental freedoms, and to assist others in defending human rights and fundamental freedoms".

(Copenhagen, 1990)

"They also emphasize the need for protection of human rights defenders".

(Budapest, 1994)

Need for protection

In line with their OSCE commitments and obligations under international law, participating States have to *respect* the rights of human rights defenders, *protect* them from abuses by others and take proactive steps to *promote* and *fulfil* their rights, including their right to defend human rights.

States should create a *safe and enabling environment* to empower human rights work. This includes protecting the dignity, physical and psychological integrity, liberty and security of human rights defenders, as well as ensuring the rights to freedom of opinion and expression,

peaceful assembly and association, the right to participate in public affairs, freedom of movement, the right to private life and the right to unhindered access to and communication with international bodies, including international and regional human rights mechanisms.

ODIHR's support for human rights defenders

In line with its mandate, ODIHR provides support to human rights defenders and promotes their protection in a number of ways:

- **Monitoring and reporting** on the **situation of human rights defenders**, raising awareness, nationally and internationally, of the obligations to protect them and fostering direct dialogue between states and civil society on the issues they work on.
- **Capacity building** through expert meetings, in-person training and tailored support for defenders and educators. ODIHR's **FreedomLab** platform has free eLearning resources and tools on how to conduct human rights work effectively and safely. For example, **Starlight Stadium** is a ground-breaking educational game on human rights monitoring.

- Direct **monitoring of peaceful assemblies**, the development of tools, **resources** and training for assembly monitoring (including an online **course for assembly monitors**), and regular exchanges between civil society and human rights defenders.
- **Promoting the independence and effectiveness of NHRIs** through ODIHR's tools and training, including the annual **NHRI Academy** organized with the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI), and via regular workshops and events for NHRIs from across the OSCE region.

Key ODIHR resources



Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (in 11 languages)



FreedomLab – A virtual space for human rights defenders



Starlight Stadium: eLearning game on human rights monitoring



Handbook on Monitoring Freedom of Peaceful Assembly: Second Edition



Strengthening the Resilience of National Human Rights Institutions Guidance Tool

For more information on ODIHR's work with and for human rights defenders, please visit <https://www.osce.org/odihr/human-rights-defenders>, or contact us at defenders@odihr.pl.

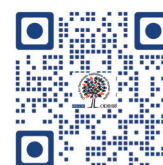
For ODIHR's free eLearning tools and other resources for human rights defenders, visit the online platform <https://freedomlab.io/>.



OSCE Office for
Democratic Institutions
and Human Rights

ul. Miodowa 10
00-251 Warsaw
Poland

Office: +48 22 520 06 00
office@odihr.pl



Follow ODIHR

