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Executive Summary

## Women Human Rights Defenders Concept Papers

The Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRD) program is issuing a series of concept papers that aim to introduce the notion of WHRDs: who they are, what they do, and why they should be considered as a distinct group of human rights defenders. The categories of WHRDs analyzed in the concept papers include: vocational women (doctors, nurses, and teachers); students; political candidates; civil society activists; protesters; and workers (industrial and agrarian sectors). The focus on WHRDs does not aim at setting WHRDs as a separate category, but to highlight the risks and challenges they face because of their gender so as to develop responsive strategies.<sup>1</sup>

The main international instrument on human rights defenders is the United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, commonly known as the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. According to Article 1 of the Declaration, a human rights defender is any person "who promotes and strives for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms." Such a broad categorization was employed in order to avoid exclusion, including instead everyone who advocates for human rights.<sup>2</sup> WHRDs adhere to the definition of human rights defenders above. In addition, the international campaign on women human rights defenders defines them as women "active in human rights defense who are targeted for who they are and all those active in the defense of women's rights who are targeted for what they do."<sup>3</sup>

The concept papers emphasized the fact that although the activities that the latter categories of women engage in in the defense of human rights vary, they are all targeted for who they are and what they do. In the case of workers such as Amal al-Saed, for example, she was beaten and sexually harassed, stripped of her headscarf and jacket, as a punishment for protesting against the administration of the Gazl and Nasseg factory at al-Mahalla factory. In cases in which violations are not gendered, they have gendered consequences. In the example of female workers, Wedad al-Demerdash testifies to an incident in which a female worker involved in the negotiations with Hussein Megawer, president of the Egyptian Federation of Trade Unions, was forced to quit her job by her husband.

<sup>1</sup> Report submitted by Special Representative of Secretary-General on Human Rights Defenders, Hina Jilani, to the 58<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on Human Rights, E/CN.4/2002/106, 27 February 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Report submitted by the UN Special Representative on Human Rights Defenders, Hina Jilani, to the 62<sup>nd</sup> session of the Commission on Human Rights, 23 January 2006 (E/CN.4/2006/95), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Defending Women, Defending Rights; Proceedings of the International Consultation on Human Rights Defenders (2006), p.1.

The concept papers do not only shed light on the nature of violations faced by WHRDs, but also the ways in which they challenge norms that forbid their human rights defense. In the case of university students, for example, Kholoud Sabir, Professor at Cairo University *College of Arts*, testifies to a sit-in in which female students resorted to excluding themselves from the rest of the sit-inners and read Quran. Reading the Quran publicly was an attempt at showcasing their belief that, although they are spending the night outside their homes, they are still “respectable”, religious women who deserve respect, not admonition.

The Papers thus offer a bird eye view of the situation of WHRDs in Egypt as a whole, what kinds of violations they face, the ideas upon which such violations are based on, and the ways that WHRDs attempt to fight back, not just the violations, but also cultural norms that dictate what is acceptable of WHRDs as women.