

# GENDERING DOCUMENTATION: A MANUAL FOR AND ABOUT WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

A PUBLICATION OF THE  
WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS INTERNATIONAL  
COALITION



Pro-women's rights graffiti in Cairo by human rights defender and graffiti artist Mira Shihadeh. "Don't treat me according to my appearance only; treat me like a human being". Credit: Front Line Defenders.

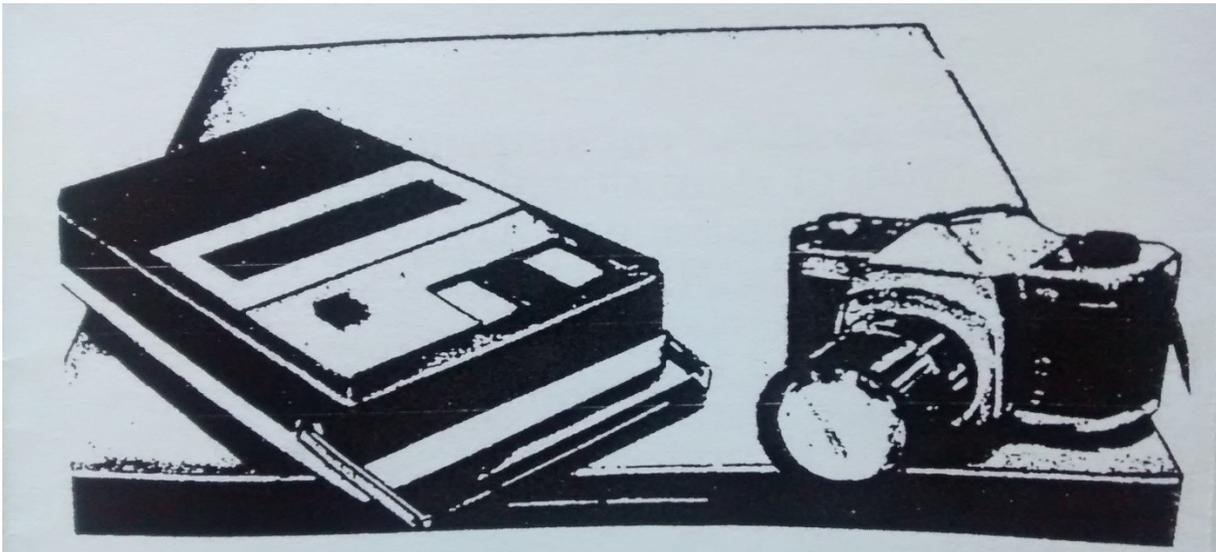


Image from 1983 flyer of Women's Video Collective of the Seneca Women's Encampment for a Future of Peace and Justice.

To mark International Women Human Rights Defender Day (29 November) and International Human Rights Day (10 December), the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition is introducing its new publication, "Gendering Documentation: A Manual For and About Women Human Rights Defenders".

**The manual will be posted in pdf form in coming days on the website of the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition**

[www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org](http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org)

Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) around the world are fighting for freedom, justice and fairness. We are connected to many political movements, including, but certainly not limited to, working for the rights of women. We are engaged in strategic and creative political and social struggle. As defenders, we face bodily harm and threats, social condemnation and legal restrictions on our organizing. We are targeted for who we are and for what we do.

**Yet, the experiences of women human rights defenders often go unnoticed, partly because of the very systems of inequity we are challenging.** In both the global North and South, many with political, religious, military, familial and community authority try to stop our activism - and to keep us from making claims through sharing narratives about our experiences and ideas.

***Gendering Documentation: A Manual For and About Women Human Rights Defenders* challenges this silence.**

### **About the manual**

*Gendering Documentation: A Manual For and About Women Human Rights Defenders* is designed for use by those who document and research already and those who want to in the future. **It highlights, celebrates and encourages documentation as a politically motivated telling of women human rights defenders' narratives.** It helps readers to

understand the circumstances and realities of WHRDs all over the world, from not being taken seriously as human rights activists, to the use of the ubiquitous tactic of physical and sexual assault to punish WHRDs' activism.

**This pioneering project rests in the ideas that WHRDs work with bravery and resilience, and that documentation of our experiences of both abuses and activism is critically important.** For many, documentation is a courageous act of resistance.

The manual proposes a series of guiding questions that can be used by individuals or organizations to record violations against WHRDs, to promote discussion and to guide decision-making about using documentation for strategic advocacy. It rests on the idea that these kinds of questions, among others, add nuance that is commonly lost in discussions about women human rights defenders

### **What the manual does**

***Gendering Documentation: A Manual For and About Women Human Rights Defenders* goes beyond traditional human rights documentation guides to provide a unique tool for capturing the specific nature of contexts facing, advocacy of and violations against WHRDs.** It explores abuses related to gender, their gendered consequences, the many purposes of documenting WHRDs' lives, various forms of WHRD advocacy with documentation, and steps to take to create documentation processes and products that are both gender-sensitive and gender-responsive.

With specific attention to the predominant contexts that shape WHRDs' lives, the manual argues that violations against WHRDs are not "gender-less", nor are our decisions about our activism.

*This publication is dedicated to Sunila Abeysekera, a Sri Lankan feminist and human rights activist who helped launch this project within the International Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition. In addition, it is inspired by the thousands of women human rights defenders across the globe who take risks every day to fight for justice.*

*Edited by Cynthia Rothschild, with contributions from the Documentation Working Group and present and past members of the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition.*

### **Chapter Outline:**

Chapter 1 serves as an overview and offers an introduction to critical issues about Women Human Rights Defenders and the Manual; it gives an analytical synopsis and discusses purposes, objectives, approaches, and terminology, among other topics.

Chapter 2 focuses on what documentation is, what its many purposes could be and the reasons it is important to document experiences of WHRDs. From preserving memory to seeking to address systemic discrimination that enables violations against women human rights defenders, documentation is a critical step in advancing the protection and promotion of women human rights defenders and our activism.

Chapter 3 focuses on what should be documented, with a focus on “context” and “environment”. It is divided into two parts. Part 1 (“Gender and Critical Issues”) discusses foundational issues related to gender including documenting the range of “common” violations against women human rights defenders. Part 2 (“Context and Environment”) focuses on the contexts and environments (and the nexus across these) that enable violations to take place and shape WHRDs’ activism. This section emphasizes gender inequality, patriarchy and heteronormativity, militarism and conflict, fundamentalisms, globalisation and neo-liberal policy and crises of democracy and governance – all of which are analytical pillars of the Women Human Rights Defender International Coalition.

Chapter 4 provides a practical tool for documenting violations against women human rights defenders including preparation, the process of documentation, and the follow-up to documentation. It poses questions to guide this process. It applies and interweaves a feminist methodology to documentation to ensure as much as is possible that the act of documenting is an empowering experience for women human rights defenders.

Chapter 5 outlines different uses of documentation, including for various advocacy sites. It is also divided into two parts. Part 1 (“Advocacy for social change, protection, justice and accountability”) discusses several strategies and some of the ways people have used documentation for protection and promotion of the rights of WHRDs at the local, national, regional and international levels. Part 2 (“More formal advocacy”) offers basic information and starting points for more formal WHRD advocacy using documentation at intergovernmental levels, including at the United Nations.

Chapter 6 provides a brief overview of digital security. While all forms of security are of utmost importance to WHRDs, this chapter emphasizes some of the ways WHRDs are at risk in using the internet and new media, and offers some specific ideas about protecting ourselves and our documentation.

The main annex of the manual lists WHRD resources, including various publications from WHRD International Coalition members.