

WAHRDN REGIONAL COORDINATION



2025 ANNUAL REPORT ON THE SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS (HRDS) IN WEST AFRICA

Réseau Ouest Africain des
Défenseurs des Droits Humains



West African Human Rights
Defenders Network



Réseau Ouest Africain des Défenseurs des Droits Humains

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■■■■ **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ■■■■

This report has been prepared thanks to the collective commitment and contribution of many individuals and organizations who, despite a regional context marked by increasing restrictions on civic space, continue to work with courage and determination for the promotion and protection of human rights in West Africa.

The West African Network of Human Rights Defenders (ROADDH) expresses its deep appreciation to all its member national coalitions and partner civil society organizations, whose work in documenting, alerting, analysing and supporting human rights defenders (HRDs) was the cornerstone of this report. Their proximity to the realities on the ground, their contextual expertise and their constant commitment have made it possible to produce a faithful, rigorous analysis rooted in the experiences of HRDs, even in the most restrictive contexts.

Special recognition is given to the human rights defenders and women human rights defenders who, often at the risk of their safety and freedom, have agreed to share their experiences, testimonies and analyses. Their courage, resilience and perseverance remain a source of inspiration and a reminder of the crucial importance of adapted, sustainable and gender-sensitive protection mechanisms.

The ROADDH would also like to thank its technical and financial partners for their continuous support, trust and solidarity. Their support, both financial and strategic, has made it possible to strengthen the protection, coordination and advocacy capacities of the network and its members, in a sub-regional context characterized by major security, political and institutional challenges. This support contributes significantly to the sustainability of actions in favor of the defense of human rights and the protection of those who carry them.

Finally, the ROADDH welcomes the collaboration of regional and international institutions, as well as African and UN mechanisms for the protection of human rights, whose exchanges, recommendations and normative frameworks continue to feed into the advocacy for a safer, more inclusive environment that is more respectful of the legitimate role of human rights defenders.

This report is dedicated to all those in West Africa who tirelessly pursue the defence of human rights, convinced that justice, dignity and fundamental freedoms are the indispensable foundations of peaceful, democratic societies that are geared towards social and economic progress.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The year 2025 was marked by a significant deterioration in the working environment of human rights defenders (HRDs) in West Africa. With a socio-political situation marked by protracted political transitions, military regimes, persistent security crises, and contested electoral processes, civic space has shrunk significantly in many countries. States have increasingly used security legal frameworks – including anti-terrorism laws, cybercrime laws and anti-money laundering mechanisms – to restrict fundamental freedoms and criminalize civic engagement. In addition, the year was also marked by a notable disengagement of some international actors and donors in terms of support for human rights defenders, in a context of reconfiguration of global priorities, particularly as a result of major international crises that diverted attention from West Africa.

This Annual Report 2025 provides an overview of the situation of HRDs in the sixteen West African countries. It analyses major trends affecting the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly, documents emblematic cases of violations and exposes the structural challenges faced by defenders, with a particular focus on women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and defenders operating in contexts of conflict or instability.

An analysis of the legal and regulatory framework reveals a profound contradiction between the international and regional commitments of States and their implementation at the national level. While most countries are parties to international and African human rights instruments, these standards are often neutralized by vague, restrictive or abusive and discriminatory national laws. In 2025, arbitrary arrests, judicial harassment, bans on demonstrations, disbandments of organizations and increased digital surveillance have been recurrent practices, contributing to a climate of fear and self-censorship.

The report reveals particularly alarming situations in several countries, including Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Guinea, Togo and Guinea-Bissau, where defenders operate in highly repressive environments. Conversely, some countries, such as Cape Verde, Ghana and Sierra Leone, continue to offer relatively open civic spaces, although they are fragile and at risk of decline. The report also describes a growing instrumentalization of pan-Africanist rhetoric or anti-French sentiments, used in some contexts to justify restrictive measures, stigmatize civil society actors, and weaken the legitimacy of human rights defenders. Specific attention is paid to the situation of women human rights defenders, who face double repression based on their



Clément Nyaletsossi Voule
Chair of the Board

social status, civic engagement and gender. In 2025, WHRDs faced physical violence, sexist smear campaigns, sexual threats, digital harassment and increased financial insecurity. Existing national protection mechanisms are largely underfunded and rarely adapted to their specific needs.

Despite this worrying context, the report also identifies some good practices as well as positive dynamics, including the rapid and coordinated mobilization of civil society in the face of violations, the strategic use of public advocacy, some institutional advances in the protection of HRDs, as well as capacity-building initiatives in physical, digital and psychosocial security. These experiences show that there is still room for action and that regional and international solidarity remains an essential lever for protection.

Based on these findings, the report makes concrete recommendations to States, regional and international organizations, the Road to Peace, its member coalitions, and civil society organizations. It calls for renewed political will, strengthening protective legal frameworks and sustained collective action to ensure a safe, enabling and sustainable environment for human rights defenders in West Africa, which is essential for their contribution to regional stability, economic progress and the building of peaceful and inclusive societies.

I- INTRODUCTION

The year 2025 is part of a regional context marked by profound political, security and social changes in West Africa, with direct and worrying consequences on the exercise of fundamental freedoms and on the work of human rights defenders (HRDs). In several countries in the subregion, civic spaces continued to shrink, as a result of a combination of persistent security crises, sometimes protracted political transitions, contested electoral processes, and the adoption or application of increasingly restrictive legal frameworks. In this context, human rights defenders – key actors in the promotion, protection and defence of human rights – are on the front line. Their commitment to democracy, the rule of law, social justice and public accountability exposes them to increased risks, ranging from stigmatisation and smear campaigns to arbitrary arrests, judicial harassment, threats, enforced disappearances and, in the most serious cases, killings.

It is in this complex regional dynamic, marked both by worrying dynamics and by a decline in the commitment of international actors and donors to human rights defenders — due to a refocusing of global priorities on other major crises (Gaza, Ukraine, etc.) — that this 2025 Annual Report on the situation of human rights defenders in West Africa is part of the developed by the West African Network of Human Rights Defenders (ROADDH).

Regional context for the year 2025

During 2025, West Africa continued to face a significant deterioration in the human rights situation in several states. The security challenges linked to the expansion of non-state armed groups, particularly in the Sahel and coastal areas, have been used as a justification for the adoption of exceptional measures, often to the detriment of public freedoms. Anti-terrorism laws, anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism, as well as cybersecurity and cybercrime laws, were routinely used to restrict freedom of expression, freedom of association, and freedom of peaceful assembly. The lack of political consensus, marked by the weakening of opposition political parties by the powers that be, has left civil society as the only entity capable of opposing government abuses, which has led to it being stigmatized in several countries in the sub-region as a «masked political opposition»

At the same time, national political contexts have been marked by institutional transitions, controversial constitutional revisions and sometimes tense electoral processes. In several countries, these dynamics have contributed to further weakening the working environment of civil society organizations and human rights defenders, who are perceived as critical or dissenting voices.

The rise of restrictions on civic space has also resulted in increased control over the funding of non-governmental organisations, increased monitoring of the activities of civic actors and an increasing criminalisation of civic engagement, both in the public space and on digital platforms. These regional trends paint a worrying landscape for the protection of human rights and highlight the structural vulnerability of HRDs in West Africa.

Rationale for the report

In the face of these developments, the need to rigorously, credibly and systematically document the situation of human rights defenders in West Africa has become a priority. The production of this report responds above all to the need for visibility: to report on the realities experienced by HRDs, to highlight the violations of which they are victims and to draw the attention of national authorities, regional and international mechanisms, as well as technical and financial partners.

This report is also intended to be a strategic advocacy tool. Based on documented facts, legal analyses and emblematic cases, it aims to challenge public decision-makers on their obligations to respect and protect human rights, and to promote the adoption of legal frameworks and public policies that are more favourable to the work of HRDs. In addition, it is a tool for warning and mobilization. It seeks to encourage solidarity actions, strengthen coordination between actors working in the protection of HRDs and contribute to a better consideration of the specific risks faced by certain categories of defenders, including women human rights defenders and HRDs working in contexts of high instability.

Finally, as the first regional annual report of its kind produced by the ROADDH, this document is part of a capitalization and institutional learning process, which will be consolidated and improved over the course of future editions.

Objectives and scope of the report

The overall objective of this report is to analyse and document the situation of human rights defenders in West Africa during the year 2025, exposing the major trends, persistent challenges, the most significant violations, but also the progress and good practices observed in the sub-region. Specifically, the report aims to analyse the legal and regulatory framework in which human rights defenders operate in West Africa, to document emblematic cases of violations that occurred in 2025, in particular those that have been the subject of monitoring, advocacy or protection actions by the ROADDH and its partners, highlight the specific situation of women human rights defenders and defenders in vulnerable situations, identify good practices and initiatives conducive to their protection, and make concrete recommendations to States, regional and international institutions, technical and financial partners and civil society actors.

The geographical scope of the report covers all sixteen (16) West African countries where the ROADDH and its member coalitions are active. Thematically, the report focuses mainly on civil liberties, the protection of human rights defenders, the legal and political environment for their action, as well as mechanisms for preventing and responding to violations.

2 - PRESENTATION OF THE WEST AFRICAN NETWORK OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS (ROADDH)



The West African Network of Human Rights Defenders (ROADDH) is a regional civil society platform dedicated to the promotion and protection of human rights defenders in West Africa. It was born from the common desire of national organizations and committed actors in the sub-region to pool their efforts in the face of the

growing challenges faced by human rights defenders, in contexts often marked by political instability, security crises and the progressive restriction of civil liberties.

Since its creation in 2005, the ROADDH has established itself as a key regional player in the human rights protection ecosystem, developing an integrated approach that combines advocacy, direct protection of defenders at risk, capacity building and cooperation with regional and international human rights mechanisms.

“For more information on the ROADDH, please see Annex I.”

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2.4. ROADDH at 20 years old: achievements and prospects

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The year 2025 marks a symbolic milestone in the life of the ROADDH, with the celebration of its twenty years of existence. These two decades of commitment have enabled the Network to consolidate its regional positioning, strengthen its institutional capacities and increase its impact in the protection of human rights defenders.

Among the main achievements of the ROADDH are the establishment of protection focal points, the development of strategic partnerships with regional and international organizations, as well as the progressive recognition of the Network as a credible interlocutor on issues relating to the protection of HRDs in West Africa.

However, the challenges remain considerable. The evolution of security contexts, the emergence of new forms of repression, particularly digital, and the persistence of restrictive legal frameworks call for a continuous adaptation of the ROADDH's strategies. In this perspective, the production of this first regional annual report is a key step, both as an advocacy tool and as a basis for reflection to strengthen the Network's action in the years to come.”

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3- METHODOLOGY

This annual report on the situation of human rights defenders in West Africa is based on a qualitative and analytical methodological approach, combining several data sources and information collection tools. This methodology aims to ensure the reliability, credibility and relevance of the analyses and findings presented, while taking into account the

“For more information on the methodology of this report, please see Annex II...”

constraints related to the security and political contexts in which human rights defenders operate.

For more information on the methodology of this report, please see Annex II.

4- LEGAL AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK FOR THE WORK OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN WEST AFRICA

The legal and regulatory framework in which human rights defenders (HRDs) operate in West Africa is a central determinant of their ability to carry out their activities freely and effectively. While there is a set of standards at the international and regional levels that recognize and protect human rights defenders, their transposition and implementation at the national level remains uneven and, in many cases, insufficient.

Most West African states are parties to key international and regional human rights instruments, which explicitly or implicitly recognize the right of everyone to promote and protect human rights.

At the international level, the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (1998) is the main frame of reference. It enshrines the right of individuals and groups to work peacefully for the promotion and protection of human rights, as well as the positive obligation of States to ensure a safe, enabling and reprisal-free environment. These principles are reinforced by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), to which all countries in the sub-region are parties.

At the regional level, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the resolutions and guidelines of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), as well as the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders in Africa, constitute essential normative frameworks. They recognise the legitimate role of HRDs and call on States to prevent violations, investigate abuses and punish perpetrators.

At the national level, several countries have enshrined the protection of fundamental freedoms in their constitutions (e.g. Ghana, Cape Verde, Senegal, Nigeria), and some have adopted specific laws or policies to protect human rights defenders (e.g. initiatives in Côte d'Ivoire, ongoing projects in Liberia).

However, the regional environment shows that these normative commitments remain largely theoretical. National legislation, instead of being the instruments by which international and regional standards are integrated and implemented into the domestic legal order, is increasingly used as a means of controlling, restricting or even denying the rights and freedoms that they are supposed to guarantee.

This structural contradiction manifests itself in a concrete way through different types of restrictive laws and practices, analysed below.

4.1. Laws on freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression

The freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression are the very foundation of the work of human rights defenders. In 2025, these freedoms continued to be severely restricted in West Africa, through legal frameworks and administrative practices that significantly limit the action of civil society.

Legislation governing civil society organisations imposes complex registration procedures, disproportionate administrative obligations and broad discretionary powers on public authorities in many national contexts. These mechanisms allow for suspensions, dissolutions or administrative obstructions that weaken human rights organizations in the long term.

In Côte d'Ivoire, the application of the June 2024 ordinance on the organization of civil society has strengthened the administrative and financial control of NGOs. This framework has been accompanied by repeated bans on peaceful marches and demonstrations, particularly in Abidjan, in a political and electoral context marked by an increased sensitivity of the authorities to any citizen mobilization.

In Togo, Law No. 2011-010 governing public meetings and demonstrations has been applied in a systematic and restrictive manner. It has served as the legal basis for banning many peaceful marches and prosecuting civic leaders, such as Armand Agblézé and Oséi Agbagno, illustrating a targeted criminalization of civic engagement.

In Benin, persistent restrictions on freedom of assembly combined with the use of the Digital Code to prosecute journalists, bloggers, and activists. These practices have contributed to a climate of fear and self-censorship, reducing the ability of defenders to speak freely on issues of governance and civil liberties.

In all these contexts, the violations observed take recurrent forms, ranging from arbitrary bans on meetings and demonstrations to the suspension of organizations, arrests during peaceful mobilizations and prolonged administrative harassment. These structural restrictions reflect

a desire for greater control over civic space and constitute a major obstacle to the legitimate exercise of human rights activities.

4.2. Anti-terrorism and anti-money laundering laws

The fight against terrorism and the financing of terrorism has become one of the main factors restricting civic space in West Africa. Laws adopted in this area often confer broad powers on security forces and judicial authorities, while providing limited procedural safeguards. In practice, they are applied disproportionately and are frequently used to curtail fundamental freedoms.

“The fight against terrorism and terrorist financing has become one of the main factors restricting civic space in West Africa.”

In Burkina Faso, criticism of security governance is sometimes equated with collusion with the enemy, which has led to the dissolution of nongovernmental organizations and the arrest of human rights defenders. In Mali, journalists and HRDs who exposed security abuses were forcibly disappeared, arbitrarily arrested, and prosecuted. In Togo, money laundering laws have been misused to prosecute HRDs.

These practices result in recurrent violations: arbitrary arrests, prolonged detentions, criminalization of the documentation of violations, instrumentalization and dissolution of organizations. They have pushed many activists into exile in other countries in the sub-region, particularly in Côte d'Ivoire. They illustrate how anti-terrorism and anti-money laundering legal frameworks, which are supposed to protect national security, are being used to restrict the work of human rights defenders and reduce civic space in the region.

4.3. Cybercrime and cybersecurity laws

With the increasing digitalization of civic space, cybercrime and cybersecurity laws have

become central instruments for monitoring and restricting freedom of expression online. Often vaguely drafted, their criminal provisions

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allow for abusive interpretation that directly targets journalists, bloggers and activists. In Niger, blogger Samira Sabou was arrested on the basis of the cybercrime law. In Nigeria, the amended Cybercrimes Act, including section 24, is applied extensively against journalists and activists such as Omoyele Sowore, Scott Iguma and Isaac Bristol. In Benin, the Digital Code is regularly used to prosecute journalists and bloggers. These practices result in recurrent violations: prosecution for online publications, judicial harassment, digital surveillance and intimidation of bloggers, illustrating how digital legal frameworks are instrumentalized to reduce civic space and limit freedom of expression.

4.4. Restrictions on access to funding for organisations

Access to financial resources remains a crucial issue for the survival of human rights organizations in West Africa. Yet numerous restrictions limit their ability to function. Foreign funding is often subject to strict limitations, while disproportionate transparency requirements and excessive administrative controls further complicate access to resources.

“With the growing digitalization of civic space, cybercrime and cybersecurity laws have become central instruments of surveillance and restriction of freedom of expression online.”

In Côte d'Ivoire, NGOs face increased control over external funding. In Liberia, burdensome accreditation and certification procedures hinder their functioning. In Burkina-Faso, some organizations have been suspended or dissolved. The legal framework and official grounds for these “clean-up” operations of the associative landscape are based on the law on freedom of association promulgated in July 2025 .

These practices amount to genuine financial asphyxiation, leading to the suspension of activities and the marginalization of critical organizations, thereby weakening their role in defending human rights and promoting civic space.

4.5. Constitutional changes, electoral processes and political instability

Electoral processes and political transitions have had a direct impact on the working environment of human rights defenders in West Africa. In Guinea, the authorities banned demonstrations and arrested defenders advocating a return to constitutional order. In Senegal, political tensions have resulted in restrictions on demonstrations and the arrest of activists. In Niger, the legal and administrative tightening following the coup d'état has increased the obstacles to the work of defenders. These dynamics are reflected in recurrent violations such as preventive arrests, bans on demonstrations and threats against election observers, illustrating the fragility of civic space in contexts of political transition.

4.6. Specific laws for the protection of HRDs and their limits

In some countries, initiatives have been undertaken to protect human rights defenders, but their effectiveness remains very limited. In Liberia, a draft national protection policy has been developed, but it remains non-operational to date. In Côte d'Ivoire, the role of defenders is formally recognized, but no concrete protection mechanism has been put in place. These efforts, while symbolic, suffer from

significant shortcomings: lack of monitoring mechanisms, lack of dedicated resources, and weak ownership by the authorities. As a result, HRDs continue to operate in an environment marked by insecurity and the absence of real guarantees for their work.

4.7. Other provisions and restrictive practices

Beyond official legal frameworks, various administrative and security practices contribute to restricting civic space in West Africa. In Guinea-

Bissau, defenders faced abductions, physical assaults, and the invasion of civic spaces such as the Casa dos Direitos. In Mali, the recurrent use of the state of emergency maintains a climate of generalized fear that severely limits the action of committed organizations and individuals. In Togo, restrictions on movement and the instrumentalization of the justice system are used to weaken defenders and reduce their room for manoeuvre. These practices include intimidation, physical violence, arbitrary detention, and increasing self-censorship, illustrating how civic space is undermined even outside formal laws.



5- NEW FRONTS OF VULNERABILITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS : ENVIRONMENTAL, SOCIETAL, IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES



Free the defendants in detention !



Rokia Doumbia dite Rose
la vie Chère (Mali)



Ousmane Toudou
(Niger)



Moussa Tiangari
(Niger)



Adama Diarra dit Ben
le Cerveau (Mali)



Me Guy Hervé Kam
(Burkina Faso)



Mohamed Youssouf Bathily dit Ras Bath
(Mali)



Etienne Fakaba Sissoko
(Mali)

In a changing West Africa, new fronts of vulnerability have emerged for human rights defenders, reflecting an increasing complexity of risks beyond the classic restrictions on civic space. These dynamics are part of intersecting issues, particularly environmental, societal, ideological and political, and particularly affect certain categories of defenders, such as those committed to natural

“Human rights defenders engaged in environmental, land and extractive issues are among the most exposed to violations in West Africa in 2025. Their action, often located at the interface between human rights, economic interests and public policies, places them in an area of high conflict.”

resources or the rights of LGBTIQ+ people. In addition, the rise of anti-rights movements and the instrumentalization of certain political and identity discourses contribute to delegitimizing their action and further restricting their space for intervention, hence the need to adapt protection mechanisms to these new realities.

5.1. Human rights defenders working on the environment, natural resources and extractive industries

Human rights defenders engaged in environmental, land and extractive issues are among the most exposed to violations in West Africa in 2025. Their action, often located at the interface between human rights, economic interests and public policies, places them in an area of high conflict. In Burkina Faso, defenders denouncing the impacts

of artisanal and industrial mining activities have been threatened and subjected to administrative pressure, as their actions have been seen as an obstacle to development efforts and the fight against insecurity. In Mali, defenders working on abuses in areas affected by extractive projects and military operations have been exposed to arbitrary arrests and increased surveillance, limiting any independent documentation. In Guinea, mining-related community mobilizations have resulted in the prosecution of civic actors accused of disturbing public order and inciting social protest. In Ghana, while civic space remains relatively open, environmental advocates have reported judicial and economic pressure when challenging extractive projects with high financial stakes. These situations reveal a lack of specific recognition of the role of environmental HRDs, even though their actions are essential to the protection of the economic, social and cultural rights of affected communities.

5.2. LGBTIQ+ Human Rights Defenders (HRDs)

Human rights defenders from LGBTIQ+ communities in West Africa operate in a particularly restrictive environment, characterized by a triple vulnerability: legal, social and political. Although some countries such as Côte d'Ivoire do not criminalize homosexuality, the lack of explicit protections against discrimination keeps these actors in structural insecurity. The country attracts LGBTIQ+ people and HRDs fleeing other states. Conversely, in countries such as Senegal or Togo, the criminalisation of same-sex relations directly exposes LGBTIQ+ HRDs to the risk of arrest, judicial harassment or intimidation. Beyond the legal framework, these defenders face practical obstacles to carrying out their

“Human rights defenders from LGBTIQ+ communities in West Africa operate in a particularly restrictive environment, characterized by a triple vulnerability: legal, social and political.”

activities. The registration of organisations is often hampered, as observed in Ghana where recent legislative initiatives have explicitly targeted organisations perceived as «promoting homosexuality». In several contexts, LGBTIQ+ HRDs are forced to operate under the guise of more generalist health or human rights organisations, which limits their visibility and capacity for autonomous advocacy.

Their action is also restricted by the general shrinking of civic space, accentuated by laws on NGOs, cybersecurity or the fight against terrorism. These frameworks, while seemingly

“In several contexts, LGBTIQ+ HRDs are forced to operate under the guise of more generalist health or human rights organisations, which limits their visibility and capacity for autonomous advocacy.”

neutral, have a disproportionate impact on the most marginalized actors. For example, restrictions on international funding particularly affect LGBTIQ+ organizations, which are highly dependent on these resources, as has been observed in Côte d'Ivoire with the reduction of some external funding.

In addition, there is intense social pressure, marked by homophobia, conservative religious discourse and the risk of violence. Even in the absence of prosecution, LGBTIQ+ HRDs can be victims of threats, attacks or stigmatisation campaigns. This reality is particularly visible in contexts such as Senegal, where social mobilization against LGBTIQ+ rights is strong.

Finally, existing mechanisms for the protection of HRDs in the region remain largely insufficient and not very inclusive. Although countries such as **Côte d'Ivoire or Mali** have specific laws, these suffer from a lack of implementation, resources and independence. Above all, they rarely take into account the specific risks to which LGBTIQ+ defenders are exposed, who often remain invisible in protection mechanisms.

In short, the situation of LGBTIQ+ HRDs in West Africa cannot be understood solely through the legal prism. It is the result of a complex

interplay between laws, state practices, political dynamics and social norms, which requires legal, institutional and societal responses.

5.3. Impact of anti-human rights movements on the work of human rights defenders

The year 2025 has confirmed the growing influence of ideological movements hostile to human rights, whose work has contributed to further weakening civic space and exposing some defenders to increased risks. In Senegal, for example, conservative groups have waged public campaigns against advocates committed to civil liberties and minority rights, exerting direct PARAM pressure on authorities to restrict

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certain forms of advocacy. In Nigeria, women’s and LGBTQI rights defenders have been targeted with disinformation and threat campaigns, often relayed on social media, contributing to their stigmatization and endangerment. In Côte d’Ivoire, civic actors working on governance and civil rights faced public accusations of social destabilization, brought by movements hostile to any criticism of the established political order. The lack of clear condemnation of these movements by the public authorities encourages the trivialisation of hate speech and reinforces a climate of insecurity for the defenders targeted.

5.4. Instrumentalisation of Pan-Africanism to stigmatise and delegitimise HRDs

A particularly worrying phenomenon, observed in 2025, is the misuse of pan-Africanist

discourse to delegitimize the action of human rights defenders, presented as bearers of foreign interests or contrary to African values. In Niger, defenders critical of the transitional government have been publicly accused of serving external agendas, justifying restrictions on their freedom

“A particularly worrying phenomenon, observed in 2025, is the misuse of pan-Africanist discourse to delegitimize the action of human rights defenders, presented as bearers of foreign interests or contrary to African values.”

of expression and prosecution based on security and digital laws. In Mali, this narrative has been used to discredit organizations documenting violations committed by security forces, equating their work with an attack on national sovereignty. In Burkina Faso, community leaders have been accused of betraying the national interest for relaying information to regional and international human rights mechanisms.

This instrumentalization of Pan-Africanism hijacks an ideal historically based on the dignity, justice and emancipation of peoples, to make it a tool for the moral and political disqualification of defenders, reinforcing the self-censorship and isolation of civic actors.

“This instrumentalization of Pan-Africanism hijacks an ideal historically based on the dignity, justice and emancipation of peoples, to make it a tool for the moral and political disqualification of defenders, reinforcing the self-censorship and isolation of civic actors.”

6- EMBLEMATIC CASES DOCUMENTED BY COUNTRY

6.1. Benin: the case of Comlan Hugues Sossoukpè

In 2025, the world of human rights defenders was shocked by the case of the kidnapping in Côte d'Ivoire and then the arbitrary detention in Benin of Comlan Hugues Sossoukpè, an investigative journalist, whistleblower and human rights defender from Benin. Founder and editor of the newspaper Olofofo, banned in Benin in March 2025, Mr. Sossoukpè is known for his critical positions towards the regime of President Patrice Talon. His commitment to human rights, democracy and good governance forced him to leave Benin in 2019, following threats received due to his media coverage of legislative elections held without the participation of the opposition and marked by a violent repression of protests. Settled in exile in Lomé, Togo, he had obtained refugee status there in 2021.

On the night of July 10 to 11, 2025, Mr. Sossoukpè was arrested and kidnapped by Ivorian police officers from his hotel room in Abidjan. He was then taken to the lounge of honour of the Félix Houphouët-Boigny International Airport, a space usually reserved for official figures, before being transferred by private plane to Benin, under police escort. He had been in Côte d'Ivoire since July 8, 2025 to take part in the Ivoire Tech Forum (July 9–11, 2025), at the invitation of the Ivorian Ministry in charge of digital transition and digitalization. Upon his arrival in Benin, at around 10 p.m. on July 10, 2025, he was handed over to the national authorities and immediately placed in custody at the Economic and Financial Brigade.

On 11 July 2025, Mr Sossoukpè was brought before an investigating judge, who notified him of the existence of an arrest warrant issued by the Court for the Repression of Economic Offences and Terrorism (CRIET). He was immediately transferred to the civil prison in Ouidah, where he remains in detention at the time of publication of this report.

On 14 July 2025, he appeared before the CRIET liberty and detention judge, who ordered his pre-trial detention. According to the order issued on that date, Mr. Sossoukpè is being prosecuted on charges of «incitement to rebellion», «incitement to hatred and violence», «harassment by electronic means» and «glorification of terrorism».

Faced with this worrying situation, the West African Network of Human Rights Defenders (ROADDH) has mobilized to alert public opinion and the competent authorities. In particular, the organization issued a press release on 11 July 2025 in which it expressed concern about the circumstances of the journalist's abduction and the risk of violations of his fundamental rights. In this context, the ROADDH also carried out preliminary investigations in collaboration with certain partners in order to gather information on the situation of the journalist and the conditions surrounding his disappearance.

In its press release, the ROADDH also put the region into perspective by recalling similar precedents. The organization referred to the case of Beninese cyberactivist Steve Amoussou, alias «Brother Hounvi», another refugee who was kidnapped in Lomé (Togo) on the night of 12

BEN - CIV 002 / 0725 / OBS 044 / Kidnapping / Refoulement / Arbitrary detention / Judicial harassment / Benin – Côte d'Ivoire / 18 July 2025 of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a partnership of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)



FREE COMLAN HUGUES SOSSOUKPÈ

August 2024 before being transferred to Benin, where he was later sentenced to two years in prison and a fine of one million CFA francs for «politically motivated insults» and «initiating and spreading false news». In drawing this parallel, the ROADDH sought to draw attention to the risks faced by some journalists, activists and human rights defenders in the sub-region.

Through this statement, the ROADDH renewed its advocacy for the protection of human rights defenders and prisoners of conscience in the region. In particular, the organization called on the Beninese authorities to immediately release cyberactivist Steve Amoussou, alias «Brother Hounvi», as well as anyone else detained for his opinions. Through the issuance of a warning, investigations, mobilization of international law, and advocacy with the authorities, the ROADDH sought to prevent human rights violations and promote respect for international standards for the protection of refugees and human rights defenders.

6.2. Guinea: Case of Omar Sylla alias Foniké Menguè and Mamadou Billo Bah

In Guinea, the year 2025 was marked by the persistence of a climate of repression against civil

society actors. The case of the arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance of Mr. Mamadou Billo Bah, coordinator of Tournons La Page (TLP) Guinea and head of the mobilization and branches of the National Front for the Defense of the Constitution (FNDC), and Mr. Oumar Sylla, alias Foniké Menguè, national coordinator of the FNDC illustrates the risks incurred by defenders engaged in peaceful mobilization and the denunciation of abuses of power.

Their arrest and enforced disappearance on the night of 9 to 10 July 2024, following the organisation by the latter of peaceful mobilisations against press censorship by the Guinean military authorities in recent months, has been widely denounced by the ROADDH as well as organisations such as the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) in a context of severe restrictions on public freedoms. They have still not given any sign of life to this day. These cases testify to the instrumentalization of the judicial and security system to neutralize the leaders of citizens' movements. The ROADDH has actively contributed to advocacy efforts aimed at their release and the respect of their fundamental rights.

6.3. Togo: the case of Tchalla Essowé Narcisse (Aamron)

On the night of May 26, 2025, the Togolese authorities arrested rapper and activist Narcisse Tchalla Essowé alias Aamron under conditions contrary to those provided for by Togolese law and the human rights conventions to which Togo is a party. The latter was then interned in a psychiatric hospital to the great displeasure of his relatives who specified that the artist never showed psychological disorders and that he was healthy in body and mind when he was arrested. Following this arrest, the ROADDDH issued a joint statement with the Togolese Coalition of Human Rights Defenders (CTDDH) on June 30, 2025 condemning this arrest as well as the repression of the peaceful demonstrations of June 5 and 6, 2025 in Togo.

As part of this position, the West African Network of Human Rights Defenders (ROADDDH) has carried out several complementary actions aimed at documenting alleged violations and mobilizing human rights protection mechanisms. On the one hand, the network has contributed to the documentation and public revelation of cases of violations, in particular through the dissemination of testimonies of demonstrators arrested and detained in connection with the

demonstrations, such as those of Mrs. Amavi Kadanga and Bertin Bandiangou, as well as information relating to the conditions of arrest and detention of the artist Aamron.

On the other hand, the ROADDDH, together with the CTDDH, has called on a regional mechanism for the protection of human rights by officially drawing the attention of the President and the Commissioner Special Rapporteur on Togo to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to the reported facts. This approach was based on a legal analysis of the alleged violations in light of regional and international standards, including the provisions of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the Robben Island Guidelines on the Prohibition of Torture, the United Nations Convention against Torture and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Finally, through this initiative, the ROADDDH has engaged in advocacy with international and regional mechanisms to encourage the adoption of corrective measures, including the condemnation of arbitrary arrests and detentions, the release of protesters and prisoners of conscience still detained, the opening of an independent and impartial investigation into the events of 5 and 6 June 2025, as well as the identification of those responsible and the reparation of the damages suffered by the victims.

Confers Urgent Appeal GIN 001 / 0724 / OBS 031 Arbitrary arrest / Enforced disappearance Republic of Guinea of 18 July 2024 of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a partnership of the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)

7. SPECIFIC SITUATION OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS (WHRD)

The year 2025 has confirmed that women human rights defenders in West Africa are among the civic actors most exposed to reprisals, violence and strategies of state and societal repression. In a regional context marked by the gradual closure of civic space, the consolidation of authoritarian regimes, militarized political transitions and the persistence of armed conflicts, WHRDs faced a combination of risks related to their commitment to human rights and their status as women in highly patriarchal environments. This double exposure has accentuated their vulnerability and made their action more perilous than that of other categories of defenders.

“The year 2025 has confirmed that women human rights defenders in West Africa are among the civic actors most exposed to reprisals, violence and strategies of state and societal repression”

Information reported at the regional level shows that WHRDs active in the areas of women’s and girls’ rights, the fight against sexual and gender-based violence, the denunciation of female genital mutilation, the defence of sexual minorities and democratic governance were particularly targeted in 2025. In several countries, these women have been subjected to arbitrary arrests, prolonged detentions and abusive prosecutions, often based on security laws, cybercrime provisions or vague public order laws. The case of Grâce Koumayi Bikonibiyate, a Togolese midwife and activist who was detained for several months, illustrates the brutality of certain State responses. According to the information gathered, she was subjected to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment during her detention, revealing the absence of effective

safeguards for the protection of women defenders deprived of their liberty. Ms. Koumayi Bikonibiyate was officially charged with “undermining the internal security of the State” and “aggravated disturbance of public order,” offences punishable under Articles 663 et seq. and 495 et seq. of the Togolese Criminal Code. Other WHRDs have been subjected to repeated and arbitrary arrests for speaking out against structural discrimination. Ms Warda Ahmed Souleymane, a human rights defender and anti-slavery activist in the Republic of Mauritania, was arrested by the Mauritanian authorities on 31 October 2025. This arrest is said to be linked to her participation in the 85th session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (the Commission), and her intervention in a panel organized by the NGO Forum dedicated to racial discrimination and apartheid during which she peacefully called on Mauritanian citizens to raise civic awareness. These types of arrests, widely perceived as acts of intimidation, have been aimed at silencing a critical female voice and deterring other women from engaging in human rights defending.

Beyond judicial and police repression, WHRDs have been massively exposed to smear and stigmatization campaigns, often characterized by sexist and morally degrading discourse. These attacks aim to discredit their public legitimacy by attacking their reputation, privacy or moral integrity. Women journalists and fact-checkers were particularly targeted. A young journalist and fact-checker testified that she was publicly insulted, called a «prostitute» and exposed to a wave of harassment simply for carrying out her professional job of fact-checking. This type of attack, widely documented in 2025, contributes to a climate of hostility aimed at delegitimizing women’s speech in the public space.

“Women journalists and fact-checkers were particularly targeted.”

The year 2025 has also highlighted the growing scale of digital violence against WHRDs. There are reports of systematic online harassment, sexual threats, identity theft, coordinated smear campaigns and, in some contexts, judicial pressure related to the use of social media. WHRDs active online have been exposed to specific risks, particularly in countries where digital codes and cybercrime laws are used to criminalize critical expression. These practices have encouraged self-censorship, reduced the visibility of women's demands and weakened their ability to mobilize public opinion.

Women defenders operating in areas of conflict or high insecurity, particularly in the Sahel countries, faced increased risks. In addition to direct threats related to their commitment, they have faced physical violence, financial pressure, and increased surveillance of their activities. In these contexts, some

WHRDs have been forced to displace, live in hiding, or temporarily cease their activities to protect their safety and that of their loved ones. Financial pressures, often accompanied by tighter bank account controls and increased administrative requirements, have further increased their vulnerability.

The economic situation of women-led organizations or organizations working on women's rights deteriorated significantly in 2025. Reduced international funding, the abrupt withdrawal of some major donors and the introduction of restrictive legal frameworks have limited access to financial resources. In several countries, local organizations have been dissolved or suspended, while others have lost their eligibility for funding because they cannot comply with burdensome administrative requirements. This financial precariousness has directly affected WHRDs' ability to ensure their protection, to benefit from legal

or psychosocial support, and to continue their documentation and advocacy activities.

Despite the existence in some States of national laws or mechanisms for the protection of human rights defenders, the year 2025 revealed the inadequacy of mechanisms specifically adapted to the needs of women defenders. Existing mechanisms are often partially functional, little known to beneficiaries or lacking sufficient resources. They rarely incorporate a gender-sensitive approach, which limits their effectiveness in addressing the specific risks faced by

“Women defenders operating in areas of conflict or high insecurity, particularly in the Sahel countries, faced increased risks. In addition to direct threats related to their commitment, they have faced physical violence, financial pressure, and increased surveillance of their activities.”

WHRDs. The positive initiatives observed, such as certain forms of collaboration with the authorities or informal referral mechanisms, remain marginal and insufficient to reverse the major trends observed.

In this worrying context, the contributions collected underline the crucial importance of the role of regional organisations, technical and financial partners and transnational solidarity networks. Strengthening the institutional capacities of WHRD organizations, supporting their psychosocial well-being and establishing coordinated and flexible protection mechanisms appear to be top priorities. The protection of women defenders cannot be seen as a one-off response to crises, but must be part of a

In this worrying context, the contributions collected underline the crucial importance of the role of regional organisations, technical and financial partners and transnational solidarity networks.

Press release on the arbitrary arrest and detention of Ms. Warda Ahmed Souleymane, human rights defender in Mauritania
| African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

SOME WHRDS AFFECTED IN 2025



Warda Souleymane (Mauritania): arbitrarily arrested twice for denouncing discrimination against the Haratines.



Grâce Koumayi Bikonibiyate (Togo), midwife and activist: detained for several months because of her convictions; victim of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.



Joy Precious Baryoh, lawyer (Sierra Leone): arrested after a critical publication questioning the electoral legitimacy of the President.



Rosana Almeida, journalist (Cabo Verde): subjected to online threats after a critical report on the National Hospital.

Absence of protection mechanisms incorporating a gender-sensitive approach.



8. ENCOURAGING PRACTICES OBSERVED IN THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Despite a regional environment largely marked by repression, the criminalization of civic engagement and the restriction of public space, the year 2025 was also characterized by the emergence and consolidation of several good practices in the protection of human rights defenders and, more specifically, women human rights defenders. These initiatives, although often fragmentary, insufficiently institutionalised or dependent on the support of external partners, testify to the resilience of civil society actors and the existence of room for action, including in constrained political contexts.

8.1. Swift and coordinated mobilisation of civil society in response to violations

One of the major good practices observed in 2025 is the responsiveness of human rights organizations to arrests, threats and violence targeting HRDs and WHRDs. In several countries, national and regional networks have documented violations, issued early warnings and initiated public denunciation actions, helping to limit the isolation of defenders at risk.

In Guinea-Bissau, the collective reaction of civil society organizations following the violent intervention of the Rapid Intervention Police at the Casa dos Direitos on December 22, 2025, is a significant example. Following the arrest and

Despite a regional environment largely marked by repression, the criminalization of civic engagement and the restriction of public space, the year 2025 was also characterized by the emergence and consolidation of several good practices in the protection of human rights defenders and, more specifically, women human rights defenders.

beating of two employees of this emblematic human rights structure, as well as the forced closure of its premises, several national and international organizations issued statements of condemnation and engaged in active advocacy. This concerted mobilization contributed to the reopening of the Casa dos Direitos and the resumption of its activities a few days later, demonstrating the effectiveness of collective pressure and national and international solidarity.

Similar practices have been observed in the follow-up of emblematic cases such as the death threats made on social networks against Biram Dah Abeid and Warda Souleimane, or the prolonged detention of Moussa Tchangari, a human rights defender detained for more than a year. The systematic documentation of these cases, their dissemination to international partners and their inclusion in alternative reports have made it possible to maintain a minimum level of visibility on situations that might otherwise have been forgotten.

Biram Dah Abeid: Mauritanian human rights defender and President of the anti-slavery NGO Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA). He is being targeted by the authorities for his work and criticism of the government's apparent lack of efforts to end slavery and human trafficking. Biram Dah Abeid received the 2013 Front Line Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk. Biram Dah Abeid | Front Line Defenders

Moussa Tchangari, Secretary General of Alternative Espaces Citoyens, is one of the most recognized figures in Nigerien civil society. He has been working for many years to promote human rights, citizen dialogue and democratic values. On 3 December 2024, he was arrested after making public statements calling for dialogue and respect for human rights.

8.2. The central role of public whistleblowing and strategic advocacy

Public denunciation remained one of the most frequently used protection tools by human rights organizations. While this mechanism does not guarantee immediate physical protection, it helps to reduce the risk of enforced disappearance, ill-treatment in detention and violations committed in the shadows.

In Cape Verde, RECADDH's response to the criminalization of journalists such as Hermínio Silves, Daniel Almeida, Rosana Almeida and Carlos Santos illustrates this dynamic. By publicly denouncing prosecutions for «gross disobedience», online threats and accusations of impartiality by political actors, civil society recalled the status of journalists as human rights defenders and demanded respect for the Cape Verdean state's international commitments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights. human rights defenders. This advocacy strategy has made it possible to reposition the debate on the ground of international obligations and to strengthen the legitimacy of the targeted journalists.

In other contexts, public denunciation has also served as a deterrent to repression, including when organizations have chosen to make public the risks faced by their members in order to avoid more serious reprisals, as highlighted by some structures that have limited their public activities since the publication of critical alternative reports.

8.3. The progressive strengthening of institutional and legal frameworks for protection

Although often incomplete or still at the project stage, several institutional advances observed in 2025 constitute promising good practices. In some countries, legislation or public policies relating to the protection of human rights defenders have been drafted, discussed or partially adopted.

In Nigeria, the introduction of a bill on the protection of human rights defenders in the National Assembly, which has passed the second reading, represents a significant step forward. The parallel existence of a security incident reporting form for defenders to report threats and attacks is also a good practice in terms of information gathering and institutional response, although its effectiveness will depend on its practical implementation.

In Guinea-Bissau, the development of a draft national policy for the protection of human rights defenders, accompanied by advocacy for its official adoption, demonstrates a desire to structure a state response to the issue of protection, despite an unstable political context marked by institutional tensions.

In Benin, the operationalization in 2025 of the National Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture, entrusted to the Beninese Human Rights Commission, constitutes a major step forward in the protection of persons deprived of their liberty, including arbitrarily detained human rights defenders. This mechanism makes it possible to monitor places of detention, prevent torture and strengthen procedural safeguards, indirectly contributing to the protection of HRDs and WHRDs.

8.4. Capacity building in physical and digital security

In the face of the rise of online harassment, digital surveillance and prosecutions based on digital codes, strengthening the capacity of defenders in terms of security has emerged as a central good practice in 2025. In several countries, training on physical, digital and psychosocial security has been organized with the support of technical and financial partners. In Guinea-Bissau, the Human Rights Defenders Network, in collaboration with the Guinean League for Human Rights and with the support of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, disseminated the Front Line Defenders Security Manual in the regions and organised structured trainings in

“In the face of the rise of online harassment, digital surveillance and prosecutions based on digital codes, strengthening the capacity of defenders in terms of security has emerged as a central good practice in 2025.”

Bissau in December 2025. These initiatives have strengthened the capacity of defenders to anticipate risks, document violations and adopt protection measures adapted to their context.

In Benin, ROADDH-funded trainings raised awareness among defenders of good physical and digital security practices, while promoting exchanges on the evolution of civic space and possible adaptation strategies in the face of increasing legal restrictions.

8.5. Specific initiatives in favour of women human rights defenders

Some good practices have incorporated, although still to a limited extent, a gender-sensitive approach. Organizations have recognized the specific risks faced by women defenders, including gender-based harassment, digital violence, moral smear campaigns, and physical violence in conflict zones.

Referral initiatives, although often informal, have in some cases made it possible to refer WHRDs to legal, psychosocial or security support structures. The support provided to organizations working on the empowerment of women and the promotion of their rights, in particular through promotion centers and programs funded by international partners, is also a good practice, even if these actions remain insufficient to respond to the scale of the violations observed.

8.6. Cooperation and dialogue, even if limited, with certain State authorities

Finally, the existence of channels of dialogue between human rights organizations and certain

public authorities is a good practice that should be consolidated. In several countries, meetings have been held with ministries of justice or human rights to discuss restrictive laws, the situation of defenders and the necessary reforms.

In some contexts, governments have maintained cooperation with international human rights mechanisms and treaty bodies, providing opportunities for advocacy and monitoring.

The legal existence of civil society organizations, despite sometimes restrictive regulatory frameworks, also remains a fundamental achievement, allowing defenders to continue their activities, even in a hostile environment.

8.7 Relocation and shelters: a structuring good practice observed in 2025

Among the most significant good practices observed in 2025, the consolidation of temporary

The legal existence of civil society organizations, despite sometimes restrictive regulatory frameworks, also remains a fundamental achievement, allowing defenders to continue their activities, even in a hostile environment.

relocation mechanisms, respite stays and secure shelters has emerged as an essential pillar of the protection of HRDs in the sub-region. In the face of a surge in arbitrary arrests, smear campaigns, physical threats and increasing forms of transnational repression, these mechanisms have provided many HRDs and WHRDs with concrete solutions for shelter in safer environments, while allowing them to maintain their capacity to act.

Beyond the immediate response to the emergency, these mechanisms have played a central role in preserving the continuity of activist commitment. Respite stays have allowed HRDs and WHRDs who are particularly at risk to benefit from a time of physical, psychological and strategic rejuvenation, thus reducing the risk of exhaustion and forced withdrawal from civic space. This approach has strengthened chains

of solidarity between national organisations, regional networks and protection partners.

The year 2025 has also revealed the rise of refuge spaces managed by civil society actors, such as the Karibu refuge set up in Senegal by the Y'en a Marre movement, designed as a place of safety, rest and reconstruction for activists in distress. This type of initiative illustrates a major evolution: relocation is no longer seen only as an emergency displacement, but as an integrated mechanism for protecting, supporting and rebuilding the capacity of HRDs to act.

This dynamic confirms a significant shift in protection approaches in the sub-region: the gradual shift from mainly reactive interventions,

focused on reporting violations, to more comprehensive mechanisms articulating early warning, secure accommodation, psychosocial support, relocation and post-protection monitoring. In this respect, the experiences carried out in 2025 constitute a major strategic achievement, likely to feed into the future structuring of a more harmonised, faster and more sustainable regional system for the protection of HRDs. Unfortunately, this practice can also be seen as a symptom of the inadequacy of national protection mechanisms. In other words, the more central shelters become, the more it reveals that states are failing to guarantee a safe environment.



9. RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1. Recommendations to West African States

States in the sub-region must fully recognise the legitimate, essential and protected role of human rights defenders (HRDs) in building democratic and peaceful societies. The current situation shows that practices such as arbitrary detention and prolonged pre-trial detention, smear campaigns, judicial harassment and online violence hinder the work of HRDs and slow down the implementation of certain activities deemed not to be in line with government directives.

Adoption and implementation of a protective legal framework

- Adopt a specific law for the protection of HRDs, in line with the UN Declaration on HRDs and African instruments, with clear implementing decrees and sufficient budgetary resources.
- Revise restrictive texts (cybercrime, security, terrorism, digital codes, funding of organisations) to prevent them from criminalising critical expression, journalism, online activism or the work of HRDs.
- Ensure the independence of the judiciary and the effective implementation of these laws, including for the cases documented in 2025: arbitrary arrests of Moussa Tchangari, Hugues Sossoukpé, Warda Souleimane, Grace Koumayi, threats against Biram Dah Abeid and Hamadi Yehdhi, as well as the criminalization of journalists in Cape Verde (Hermínio Silves, Daniel Almeida, Rosana Almeida, Carlos Santos).

Specific Protection of Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRD)

- Integrate a gender-sensitive approach into protection policies, including the prevention

of physical, psychological, financial and digital violence (doxxing, deepfakes, smear campaigns).

- Establish appropriate mechanisms, with psychosocial support, legal assistance and enhanced security for WHRDs, women journalists and rights defenders of marginalized groups (LGBTQI, ethnic minorities).

Dialogue and participation of civil society

- Establish regular consultation frameworks with CSOs and HRDs to facilitate their participation in legislative processes, institutional reforms and regional/international mechanisms.
- Encourage the application of the Constitution and Declaration 34(6) to enable CSOs and citizens to apply to the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights.

Priority recommendations to States

- Adopt and implement a national mechanism for the protection of HRDs, in particular for women journalists and activists against gender-based violence.
- Revise restrictive laws and the electoral code to secure the rights of expression, assembly, and association.
- Harmonize the legal framework for CSOs with the freedoms enshrined in national and regional instruments, and ensure stable funding for CSOs.

9.2 To Regional and International Organizations

Regional and international organizations (ECOWAS, African Union, ESA, African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, United Nations) must play a central role in protecting civic space:

Strengthening protection mechanisms

- Establish or support regional emergency funds for temporary relocation, legal and psychosocial assistance, with a particular focus on WHRDs and marginalized groups.
- Promote prevention and follow-up programmes, especially in contexts of political transition and security crisis.

Implementation and follow-up of regional decisions

- Ensure compliance with the decisions of the African Court and the ACHPR, facilitate CSOs' access to regional mechanisms, and strengthen oversight of civic space.
- Promote the exchange of good practices and solidarity among advocates, national networks and sub-regional coalitions.

Priority recommendations

- Create multi-year funding mechanisms to reduce reliance on one-time projects.
- Advocate for a legal framework conducive to freedom of association, expression and peaceful assembly.
- Facilitate access for CSOs to regional and international bodies to raise their concerns.

9.3. Attention CSOs

Observation and documentation

- Deploy observation and monitoring missions, including for targeted journalists, bloggers and HRDs, using secure digital tools.
- Document cases of intimidation, arbitrary arrests, physical and digital violence (e.g. Rodrique Ahego, Thomas Dixon, Chioma Okoli, Azuka Ogujiuba).

Civic education and awareness

- Conduct awareness-raising campaigns on rights, violence prevention and political participation.

Protection and resilience

- Develop physical and digital security protocols, provide legal assistance, and keep track of personal accounts and financial pressures.

9.4. To the attention of technical and financial partners

Flexible and sustainable financing

- Moving from a logic of one-off projects to multi-year and institutional funding.
- Directly support local CSOs, avoid outsourcing, and strengthen their autonomy and sustainability.

Support for built-in protection mechanisms

- Strengthen legal assistance, physical and digital security, psychosocial well-being, and continuous training of HRDs and WHRDs.
- Create national or regional emergency funds for HRDs at risk.

Promotion of synergies and exchanges

- Financing regional and South-South exchange programmes, sharing good practices and strengthening collective resilience.

- Provide technical support for the production of reliable data for use in advocacy.

Priority recommendations

- Establish flexible and sustainable funding mechanisms for CSOs.
- Strengthen the capacities of HRDs in the protection and use of regional and international mechanisms.
- Maintain active support for HRDs in crisis, including in conflict zones and for WHRDs.

CONCLUSION

The situation of human rights defenders in West Africa during the year 2025 reveals a worrying reality, marked by a continuous deterioration of civic space, a normalization of repressive practices and a growing weakening of existing protection mechanisms. In a regional context characterized by persistent security crises, protracted political transitions, contested electoral processes, and a rise in authoritarian governance, human rights defenders are increasingly exposed to systemic and multifaceted risks.

This report demonstrates that, despite the existence of relatively robust international and regional normative frameworks, the effectiveness of the protection of defenders remains largely compromised by restrictive national legislation, insufficient political will and increasing instrumentalization of security, counter-terrorism, financial and digital laws. The misuse of these laws to criminalize critical expression, citizen activism and independent journalism appears to be a major trend in several countries in the sub-region. Arbitrary arrests, prolonged detentions, judicial harassment, smear campaigns and online violence have emerged as recurrent tools of deterrence and repression.

This report demonstrates that, despite the existence of relatively robust international and regional normative frameworks, the effectiveness of the protection of defenders remains largely compromised by restrictive national legislation, insufficient political will and increasing instrumentalization of security, counter-terrorism, financial and digital laws.

The cases documented in 2025 confirm that certain categories of defenders are particularly vulnerable, including journalists, community defenders, actors engaged in democratic governance, election observation or the fight against impunity, as well as defenders operating in contexts of conflict or high insecurity. Women human rights defenders, in particular, suffer a double penalty: as defenders and as women working in environments deeply marked by patriarchal norms. Gender-based violence, moral attacks, digital harassment, sexual threats and family pressure are major obstacles to their engagement and visibility in the public space.

The cases documented in 2025 confirm that certain categories of defenders are particularly vulnerable, including journalists, community defenders, actors engaged in democratic governance, election observation or the fight against impunity, as well as defenders operating in contexts of conflict or high insecurity.

However, the report also recognises the dynamics of resilience, solidarity and innovation carried out by civil society actors. Rapid mobilizations in the face of violations, strategic advocacy, rigorous documentation of emblematic cases, capacity building in physical and digital security, as well as emerging institutional protection initiatives are a testament to the ability of defenders to adapt and resist, even in hostile environments. These good practices, although often fragile and insufficiently supported, are essential levers to be consolidated.

In this context, the role of the West African Network of Human Rights Defenders (ROADDH) appears more central than ever. Through the production of this first regional annual report, the ROADDH affirms its vocation to document, alert, coordinate and advocate for a safe and favourable environment for the work of human rights defenders in West Africa. This report is intended to be a visibility tool, an advocacy tool and a reference base for future actions, which should be strengthened and institutionalized.

The situation observed in 2025 calls for a collective, coherent and sustainable response. The protection of human rights defenders cannot be seen as a one-off or short-term measure, but must be part of a structural approach involving States, regional and international organizations, technical and financial partners, as well as civil society organizations themselves. Guaranteeing the safety of defenders means preserving the rule of law, strengthening democracy and ensuring the effective respect of human rights for all.

At a time when West Africa is going through profound and uncertain changes, the recognition, protection and support of human rights defenders is not only a legal and moral obligation, but also a prerequisite for the stability, peace and sustainable development of the sub-region. This report is intended to contribute to this collective imperative and a renewed call to action.

At a time when West Africa is going through profound and uncertain changes, the recognition, protection and support of human rights defenders is not only a legal and moral obligation, but also a prerequisite for the stability, peace and sustainable development of the sub-region.

APPENDICES

ANNEX I : PRESENTATION OF THE WEST AFRICAN NETWORK OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS (ROADDH)

The West African Network of Human Rights Defenders (ROADDH) is a regional civil society platform dedicated to the promotion and protection of human rights defenders in West Africa. It was born from the common desire of national organizations and committed actors in the sub-region to pool their efforts in the face of the growing challenges faced by human rights defenders, in contexts often marked by political instability, security crises and the progressive restriction of civil liberties.

Since its creation in 2005, the ROADDH has established itself as a key regional player in the

human rights protection ecosystem, developing an integrated approach that combines advocacy, direct protection of defenders at risk, capacity building and cooperation with regional and international human rights mechanisms.

1.1. History and mission of the ROADDH

The ROADDH was created to respond to an urgent need for coordination and solidarity between human rights actors in West Africa. Faced with the increase in violations targeting defenders, the isolation of national actors and the inadequacy of protection mechanisms adapted to local realities, the Network's mission is to strengthen the collective resilience of human rights defenders in the sub-region.

The main mission of the ROADDH is to contribute to the creation and maintenance of a safe, enabling and enabling environment for the work of human rights defenders in West Africa. This mission is based on the promotion of international and regional human rights standards, the protection of defenders at risk and the strengthening of the visibility of issues related to the defence of human rights in the sub-region.

By placing human rights defenders at the heart of its action, the ROADDH adopts an approach focused on the concrete needs of actors on the ground, while placing its interventions in a regional and strategic perspective.

1.2. Mandate and areas of intervention

The mandate of the ROADDH is based on several complementary areas of intervention, designed to respond to the challenges faced by human rights defenders.

Mission :

Upholding Rights and Freedoms

A West Africa that respects human rights and fundamental freedoms, with a civic space conducive to the work of human rights defenders

Vision :

Uniting and Influencing

Uniting and supporting the actions and strengthening the organizational and operational capacities of human rights organizations in West Africa. Influencing the development and implementation of policies and mechanisms for the protection of human rights defenders at all levels, in order to improve the safety and impact of their work

Advocacy and campaigns are methods of action of the Network. ROADDDH conducts advocacy at the national, regional and international levels to influence public policy, promote the adoption of protective legal frameworks and denounce laws and practices that unduly restrict civic space. These actions are based on legal analyses, documented reports and close collaboration with member coalitions.

The protection and support of defenders at risk is another fundamental axis of the ROADDDH's mandate. The Network implements appropriate protection mechanisms, including emergency assistance, temporary security, relocation, legal and psychosocial support, as well as individualized follow-up of cases of defenders at risk.

Capacity building for member organisations and human rights defenders is also an integral part of the ROADDDH's approach. Through training, regional workshops and exchanges of experiences, the Network contributes to improving the skills of actors in terms of protection, documentation of violations, advocacy and use of regional and international human rights mechanisms.

In view of the regional context of marginalization of sexual and ethnic minority communities, the ROADDDH has undertaken for several years at both the regional and national levels to include and take into account the needs of NGOs working on these communities by the National Coalitions in order to better protect them.

Finally, the ROADDDH attaches particular

importance to cooperation with regional and international human rights mechanisms, including those of the African Union and the United Nations. This cooperation aims to strengthen the visibility of national situations, to facilitate access for defenders to existing protection mechanisms and to promote better consideration of West African realities in international bodies.

1.3. ROADDDH member coalitions and focal points

16 Countries	9 Countries	5 Countries	2 Countries
West Africa	Francophone	Anglophone	Lusophone

The ROADDDH is made up of national human rights coalitions from all 16 West African countries. These coalitions, rooted in local realities, form the backbone of the Network and play a central role in the implementation of its actions.

Member coalitions include documenting violations, identifying defenders at risk, implementing protection actions at the national level, and participating in regional advocacy initiatives. They also contribute to the preparation of the analyses and reports produced by the ROADDDH, including this annual report.

Through this network model, the ROADDDH fosters a dynamic of solidarity, information sharing and strategic coordination, which is essential to face challenges that often transcend national borders.

APPENDIX II - METHODOLOGY

This annual report on the situation of human rights defenders in West Africa is based on a qualitative and analytical methodological approach, combining several data sources and information collection tools. This methodology aims to ensure the reliability, credibility and relevance of the analyses and findings presented, while taking into account the constraints related to the security and political contexts in which human rights defenders operate.

2.1. General methodological approach

The development of the report was guided by a human rights-based approach and focused on the protection of defenders. It favours the triangulation of sources, in order to limit biases, strengthen the validity of the information collected and ensure as faithful a representation as possible of the realities experienced by human rights defenders in the sub-region.

The report adopts a regional perspective, while incorporating national analysis and illustrations where necessary to highlight trends, contextual specificities and cross-cutting dynamics affecting the work of human rights defenders in West Africa.

2.2. Data sources and collection tools

The information analyzed for this report was collected through several complementary channels: The research desk was an essential foundation for data collection. It has included the review of legal and normative documents (constitutions, laws, decrees, regulations), national, regional and international human rights reports, as well as publications from civil society organizations, regional and international mechanisms and credible media. This document review made it possible to analyse the legal frameworks,

normative developments and general trends observed during the year 2025.

A structured questionnaire was sent to member coalitions as well as to ROADDH partners in the different countries of the sub-region. The questionnaire aimed to collect qualitative and quantitative information on the situation of human rights defenders at the national level, including documented violations, applicable legal frameworks, political and security contexts, as well as good practices and positive initiatives observed. The responses provided by the coalitions were a central source of information from the field.

The review of the declarations, communiqués and reports of the ROADDH was also mobilized. It made it possible to identify emblematic cases that were the subject of advocacy, alerts or protection measures by the Network during the year 2025, as well as to analyse the recurrent trends in violations of the rights of defenders.

Other relevant sources were used in a complementary way, including exchanges with human rights defenders, information from ROADDH's strategic partners, and data collected through the protection and monitoring activities carried out by the Network and its members.

2.3. Data processing and analysis

The information collected was subject to a qualitative analysis process, based on the classification of the data by thematic (legal framework, types of violations, profiles of defenders, national contexts) and by country. Particular attention was paid to the consistency of information, cross-checking of sources and compliance with the principles of confidentiality and security, especially when the data concerned defenders at risk.

The cases presented in the report were selected on the basis of criteria of relevance, sufficient

documentation and direct involvement of the ROADDH or its partners, in order to avoid any unnecessary or non-consensual exposure of the defenders concerned.

2.4. Ethical and security considerations

Given the sensitivity of information related to human rights defenders, the data collection and processing process has incorporated strict ethical considerations. Anonymity was maintained when necessary, and information that could endanger individuals or organizations was not published.

The ROADDH ensured that the production of the report did not jeopardize the safety of defenders or ongoing protection actions, while ensuring a fair balance between the need for visibility and the imperative for protection.

2.5. Limitations of the report

Despite efforts to ensure comprehensive and balanced coverage, there are some limitations that need to be taken into account when reading the report. Restrictions on access to information in some countries, fears of reprisals expressed by some defenders, and security constraints may have limited the collection of complete or up-to-date data.

In addition, the report focuses mainly on cases documented or followed up by the ROADDH and its partners, which means that some violations could not be included. These limitations, however, do not detract from the relevance of the trends identified and the analyses proposed, but call for a contextualized reading and a gradual strengthening of documentation mechanisms for future editions.





*Over 20 years of service
to human rights in West Africa*

Réseau Ouest Africain des
Défenseurs des Droits Humains



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Defenders Network

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