Online Gender-Based Violence against Women* Environmental and Human Rights Defenders in Latin America

The cases of Ecuador, Peru and Colombia

*All people who identify as women

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fundación Multitudes is a non-profit organization founded in 2014 with the mission of reducing the gap between citizens and decision-making. With a multidisciplinary team of professionals and with an independent partisan seal, Fundación Multitudes seeks to articulate civil society organizations to have an impact on the public agenda by increasing participation, transparency, accountability, and implementing research-based advocacy.

At the global level, Fundación Multitudes advocates for human rights and democracy. Since 2020, with the Women's Observatory on Disinformation and Democracy launch, the organization has focused on fighting gendered disinformation, addressing foreign influence and threats against Latin American democracies.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AWID	Association for Women's Rights in Development
ART	Article
BHRRC	Business & Human Rights Resource Centre
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CEJIL	Center for Justice and International Law
DDHH	Derechos Humanos (Human Rights)
Escazú Agreement	Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation, and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia)
IACHR	Inter-American Commission on Human Rights
I/A COURT HR	Inter-American Court of Human Rights
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
IM-Defensoras	Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Mujeres Defensoras de Derechos Humanos (Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders)
INDEPAZ	Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz (Institute of Development and Peace Studies)
INEI	Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática (National Institute of Statistics and Informatics)
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and more
MAAP	Monitoring of the Andes Amazon Program
MESECVI	Mecanismo de Seguimiento de la Convención de Belém do Pará Follow-up (Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OGBV	Online Gender-Based Violence
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UN OHCHR	United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
UN WOMEN	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNP	Unidad Nacional de Protección (National Protection Unit)
WHRDS	Women Human Rights Defenders
WEDS	Women Environmental Defenders

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women environmental human rights defenders (WEHRDs)[1] matters are individuals who identify themselves as women and advocate for environmental rights (International Union for Conservation of Nature [IUCN], 2020a). Because of their role, women defenders are the target of offline and online reprisals (Front Line Defenders, 2024; United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 2016). Murder is the most extreme manifestation of this violence (Global Witness, 2024).

In 2023, the organization Global Witness (2024) registered the killing of 196 environmental defenders, clarifying that this staggering figure could be even "higher" (p. 14). Over 80% of documented murders occurred in Latin America (Global Witness, 2024).

This report investigates online gender-based violence faced by women environmental defenders (WEDs) in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. In this research context, online violence refers to attacks perpetrated through digital platforms to intimidate defenders and hinder their activism (Fundación Karisma, 2024; Posetti et al., 2021; IUCN, 2020; UN Women, 2020).

The **primary objective of this study is to listen to defenders' voices and experiences regarding online violence.** Thus, this investigation seeks to explore the nature of this violence, its effects on the personal lives and activism of women defenders, and the gaps in existing regulations to adequately protect them through a feminist and intersectional approach.

The research posed the following hypothesis: **Online violence is a severe yet underexplored form of aggression against women environmental defenders that increases the risks of experiencing offline attacks with physical and psychological consequences.** In order to evaluate this assumption, the methodology combines the implementation of focus groups and semi-structured interviews in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, in addition to desk research.

The key finding of this study is **the correlation between online and offline acts of violence described by the women defenders: interviewees perceive online attacks as an extension of the offline threats they have experienced.** Moreover, participants noted the differentiated impact of this violence based on their gender. The acts of violence shared by participants describe a pattern in which the target of the attacks points out their identities (compounded by the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and others) rather than their work or ideas. This fact may disproportionately affect women from marginalized groups because the misrepresentation of their identities serves to reinforce harmful social perceptions and norms.

Participants agreed that online gender-based violence heightens their vulnerability in public life. Additionally, the online attacks frequently include their families and collectives. As a result, many of the interviewees chose to restrict and self-regulate their participation in social media platforms.

Existing legal frameworks are inadequate in addressing the implications of online violence against women defenders because of the lack of policies attending to the nuances of this violence and its long-term effects on women defenders. Consequently, participants repeatedly called for better regulations to protect them and their close circles.

Overall, the findings confirm that online violence against WEDs is a systemic issue rooted in historical inequalities and reinforced by patriarchal and colonial structures. For this reason, addressing online attacks requires comprehensive policy reforms and legal protection, training activists, and raising awareness. Ensuring women defenders' online safety is a matter of justice and a crucial impetus to effectively respond to the climate crisis.

INTRODUCTION

The use of violence to silence women stems from the offline world to the online realm and vice versa (Posetti et al., 2021). Online harassment, disinformation campaigns, and threats *may* have a real impact on activists (Fundación Karisma, 2024; Posetti et al., 2021). Retaliation, even coming from social media platforms, immediately erodes the participation of women in society, undermining their capacity to freely and safely advocate for environmental rights (UN Women & Mecanismo de Seguimiento de la Convención de Belém do Pará [MESECVI], 2022). Moreover, in cases where women resist, reprisals "behind a screen" may turn into actionable threats (Posetti et al., 2021).

Attackers often take advantage of their anonymity online (Fundación Karisma, 2024; Marganski & Melander, 2021). In addition, social media platforms offer perpetrators the opportunity to communicate broadly without the immediate risk of being held accountable (Marganski & Melander, 2021). These possibilities may also help online attackers achieve a significant impact with minimal effort (Marganski & Melander, 2021). Furthermore, online gender-based violence has the power to invade "a victim's most intimate physical spaces, such as their home or bedroom" (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2021, p. 8).

In the particular case of women defenders, they face heightened risks not only because of their visibility and activism but also because of the identities they embody (IUCN, 2020b; UNGA, 2016). For instance, Indigenous women, members of the LGBTQI+ community, and Afro-descendants must deal with historical, overlapping, and interdependent systems of discrimination and disadvantage (IUCN, 2020b; Tran, 2021; UNGA, 2016).

The effects of OGBV extend beyond the visible impacts of attacks and affect defenders' well-being, heightening the urgency to develop holistic and nuanced strategies to protect women environmental defenders (Association for Women's Rights in Development [AWID], 2014; IUCN, 2020b; UN Women, 2020).

This report seeks to examine the gap in the analysis of the intersection of gender, environmental defense, and online gender-based violence by exploring the unique risks WEDs face. The present document works on the following hypothesis:

Online gender-based violence is a severe yet underexplored form of aggression against WEDs that increases the risks of experiencing offline attacks with physical and psychological consequences.

As a result, the findings of this research might contribute to the efforts of policymakers, civil society organizations, and human rights defenders to better protect women both online and offline.

This document is structured into six sections. The first part outlines the key concepts and definitions. Then, the report explains the methodology, risk assessments, and research limitations. Third, the results section discusses the trends identified around online gender-based violence against WEDs from Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, followed by the introduction to regional and national instruments that may contribute to tackling the problem. Finally, the document proposes a set of recommendations to strengthen the protection of WEDs in the online sphere and concludes with final thoughts and a way forward.

KEY CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

This section presents the key concepts and definitions underpinning the development of this research. While not exhaustive, these definitions provide a shared foundation for understanding and interpreting the report.

Human Rights Defender

A human rights defender is "any person or group of persons working to promote human rights" (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [UN OHCHR], 2004, p. 6). In 1998, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a resolution that formally recognizes the vital role of human rights defenders, emphasizing defenders' commitment to "communities," "democracy," and to secure the fulfillment of foundational rights included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNGA, 1999, p. 7). As part of their role, defenders may provide legal aid, facilitate human rights education, monitor and report abuses, organize advocacy efforts, or engage in direct action (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2008).

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has set clear jurisprudence on the fact that the exercise of the defense can be either sporadic or continuous and that the role is the most relevant feature of human rights defenders (Inter-American Court of Human Rights [I/A Court HR], 2020).

Human rights defender in environmental matters

The concept of human rights defender in environmental matters describes the role of protecting and promoting environmental rights "in a peaceful manner" (UNGA, 2016, p. 4). This category includes Indigenous peoples, peasants, fisherfolk, environmental activists, social movements, journalists, and others concerned about the adverse use of land and natural resources and related ecological issues (UNGA, 2016).

Furthermore, the work of defenders involves demanding more effective measures to combat the climate crisis, which often means opposing state forces, corporate interests, or even organized crime entities (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre [BHRRC], 2023). For brevity, this report also uses the term environmental defender or environmental activists to refer to this group.

Women environmental human rights defenders (WEHRDs)

All individuals who identify as women and are engaged in protecting environmental rights are recognized as women human rights defenders (IM-Defensoras, 2013). This title remains accurate regardless of whether they describe themselves as human rights defenders (Protection International, 2021; UNGA, 2016). These individuals may undertake various initiatives and embody multiple identities (Protection International, 2021).

Violence Against Environmental Defenders

In the scope of this report, violence against women environmental defenders refers to the force exerted to intimidate, silence, or punish defenders because of their work in both online and offline spaces (Cruz & Dordevic, 2020). Such acts or attempts may encompass threats, harassment, defamation, and legal persecution, including assassinations (Front Line Defenders, 2024; Global Witness, 2024; UN OHCHR, 2004; UNGA, 2016). Additionally, this violence may be inflicted upon defenders' families and other members of their close circles (Global Witness, 2024; UN OHCHR, 2004; UNGA, 2016).

Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV)

Online attacks manifest in various forms, may be interpreted in multiple ways, and target different profiles, including activists (Fundación Karisma, 2024; Hiperderecho, 2017). Online gender-based violence makes evident the "systemic structural gender inequality, deep seated cultural and social norms as well as patterns of harmful masculinities" (UN Women, 2022, p. 1). According to Fundación Multitudes (2023), "online violence can be as devastating as the violence happening in physical space, restricting the right to live free of aggression and without fear; to participate in political, social and cultural life, access information and to exercise freedom of expression" (p. 9). Furthermore, attacks have a differentiated impact on women and marginalized identities, adding obstacles to the full enjoyment of their rights (UN Women, 2022).

Online gender-based violence has different expressions, and people can face one or many of these acts. Also, perpetrators might be either isolated or coordinated individuals. For the research, the categorization follows similar clusters to the ones drafted by Souza & Varon, (2021):

Insults: While embedding hostile or disrespectful language, insults do not necessarily aim to undermine a person's dignity. Criticism in the form of insults is exhibited across social media networks (Internet Lab, 2020).

Threats: This action aims to inhibit individual and collective advocacy efforts by seeking to instill a sense of fear in the victim (Center for Justice and International Law [CEJIL], 2021). As described in The Esperanza Protocol (CEJIL, 2021), "threats may not only constitute crimes under national or international law but also may violate multiple fundamental human rights," for example, to life, security, dignity, and privacy, among others (p. 7).

Privacy breach: The action of exposing personal data (doxxing), the non-consensual dissemination of intimate images, identity theft, or the leaking of intimate/private data, among others (Souza & Varon, 2021).

Information manipulation and attacks on information integrity: The concept refers to the nature of the information used and the intention to use it. According to Shu et al. (2020), it can seek to "persuade," "produce emotional reactions," "exaggerate situations,"

and “create confusion,” among others. Digital platforms, such as social media and instant messaging applications, are some vehicles to disseminate these pieces of information. Information manipulation can take the form of:

- **Disinformation**: To disseminate fake or inaccurate content with the purpose of misleading and/or deceiving the recipient (Shu et al., 2020).
- **Malinformation**: To share genuine information with the intention to cause harm (Greifeneder et al., 2020; Shu et al., 2020).
- **Misinformation:** To distribute “content that may be inaccurate, uncertain, vague, or ambiguous” without malicious objectives (Valenzuela et al., 2019).

In addition, Fundación Multitudes (2024) has addressed in previous research other representations of online gender-based violence such as discrimination, psychological violence, cyberbullying, cyberstalking, trolling, threats, online sexual harassment, and image-based sexual abuse.

In this report, we use the terms “survivor” and “victim” interchangeably. We recognize that, although similar, each term conveys nuances that are important for our message. While “survivor” is often used to empower and provide agency to those who have suffered the consequences of violence, “victim” also highlights the lack of justice served.

METHODOLOGY

This investigation aims to **expose the repercussions of online attacks against women human rights advocates working on environmental issues.** Thus, the study seeks to contribute to strengthening national legislative frameworks to protect Peruvian, Ecuadorian, and Colombian WEDs from gender-based violence perpetrated online.

The research took place between June and September 2024 with four specific objectives:

1. **To analyze** the academic and gray literature review about online gender-based violence and safeguards to environmental defenders.
2. **To explore** the nuances of online gender-based violence faced by women environmental defenders and the state responses contained in the current protection mechanisms and policies.
3. **To identify** patterns, challenges, and opportunities to bridge the gaps between literature, existing policies, and living experiences of women environmental defenders.
4. **To draft** recommendations with women environmental defenders to strengthen their current self-protection measures, organizations' frameworks, and state-led practices.

The desk research conducted between June and September combines academic and gray literature with contributions from regional and national human rights and environmental organizations. It also covers jurisprudence, international instruments, and national norms about digital security, violence against women, environmental justice, and protection for human rights defenders.

Then, local consultants **implemented a combination of focus groups and semi-structured interviews to contrast the desk research findings with women environmental defenders' experiences.** Focus groups were conducted online in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru to gather inputs from civil society organizations, journalists, and community representatives.

Each country researcher **scoped semi-structured interviews from up to ten local women activists per country, portraying their experiences around the risks and forms of violence** these women generally face, particularly online, their views on the effectiveness of national policies and mechanisms aimed at protecting their digital rights, and their recommendations for improving the current frameworks.

Research Principles: Feminist, Intersectional, and Human Rights-Based Approaches

Feminist, intersectional, and human rights-based principles underpin this research, ensuring that the **voices and experiences of women defenders are central to the analysis.**

The **study acknowledges the diverse identities of women defenders, encompassing aspects linked to race, sexual orientation, age, and ethnicity.** This positionality draws attention to the differentiated effects of violence on their bodies and integrity, leading to nuanced protection that responds to the overlapping and intersecting identities that women carry.

Finally, the **human rights-based approach aligns the research with international standards,** such as the Universal and Inter-American Human Rights Systems, following their guidance on the state obligations to secure fundamental rights.

Risk Assessments and Research Limitations

Considering that many participants were in some level of danger, the **research team undertook risk assessments, performing a background check of each profile to identify potential hazards** and subsequent mitigation actions.

Additionally, efforts have been made to **prevent any leakage of the participants' identities** so that the information they provided does not heighten existing risk.

All the focus groups took place in safe online meetings with a moderator and a person in charge of notetaking to allow participants to delve deep into their points of view. In addition, participants were granted the possibility of revoking their consent at any stage of the research cycle.

Consequently, the research was limited, to some point, by these challenges:

1. **Access to data and participants:** Online sexual violence was not widely covered since the implications both for the victim and the perpetrator are intimate and difficult to express in an open discussion. Access to women defenders, particularly those in rural and remote areas, may be challenging due to logistical and security constraints. Local organizations with trustworthy relationships with WEDs were crucial to connect with women and listen to their insights and conclusions.

2. **Security concerns:** The nature of the research, particularly regarding digital rights and OGBV, presents security risks for participants. Researchers used encrypted communication tools to safeguard the identities of interviewees, especially those facing high levels of risk. Additionally, a security protocol was implemented to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, especially during the writing process.

3. **Barriers to ensure representation:** Our research is limited to fully capture the intersectional nature of the experiences of women defenders. For example, some groups have restricted access to technological platforms or digital literacy to access safe online tools. Hence, the research also paid attention to the indirect representation of grassroots and isolated groups to avoid any potentially heightened risk.

BACKGROUND

The climate emergency and the multiple human rights crises are closely intertwined (IACHR, 2021; Pigrau, 2022). Life on Earth has become progressively more challenging because of the effects of rising global temperatures, including rising sea levels, changes in climate patterns, and a major loss of biodiversity (IACHR, 2021).

However, not all humanity experiences the same effects (IACHR, 2021). Groups and communities who "are currently in a situation of marginalization" or have historically had "limited access to decision-making or resources" become more vulnerable to the consequences of this multifaceted crisis (IACHR, 2021, p. 6). Therefore, those who stand up to represent these groups or the right to live in a safe environment have challenging work ahead that states should protect as they are fundamental for democracy and the pursuit of a clean environment (I/A Court HR, 2022).

Intersectional Perspective on Violence

Identities play a crucial role in understanding the roots and effects of violence against human rights defenders in environmental matters. Indeed, the type and implications of the violence inflicted respond to the "intersecting identities" defenders embody in terms of gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, age, education, and location (Crenshaw, 1991; UNGA, 2016; IUCN, 2020b, p. 1).

As violence is "defined" by "power" and "interpersonal relations", its effects tend to be higher when victims come from vulnerable settings and perpetrators have stereotypes, social norms, or culturally predominant settings in their favor (United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [UN ECLAC], 2007, p. 18).

Thus, women experience violence in unique ways, and attacks will turn even more specific as women defenders embrace other identities (UNGA, 2016; IUCN, 2020b, p. 1). Women encounter other expressions of violence depending on whether they live in urban or rural areas, their age, their socioeconomic status, their degree of academic achievement, and if they belong to an Indigenous or Afro-descendent group, among other categories (Tran, 2021; UNGA, 2016).

As an illustration, in patriarchal settings where women are often not expected to take on public roles or advocate for their communities, WEDs might suffer attacks containing a sexual component or an ultimatum to obey social mandates. The attack may come from external forces but also from within the defenders' communities or families (IM-Defensoras, 2013). Furthermore, attacks on young and older women activists frequently attempt against their experience and contextual knowledge (Cruz & Dordevic, 2020). At the same time, LGBTQ+ environmental defenders face discrimination and violence due to dominant narratives of homophobia and transphobia (Tran, 2021).

Even more, circumstances may become more complex when women defenders encounter obstacles in reporting incidents and accessing protective measures due to a lack of legal resources and language barriers. These structural obstacles are a frequent situation for Indigenous women defenders, as well as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds and rural areas (Tran, 2021).

Violence in the Online Space

Technology and online communications facilitate, expand, and exacerbate violence (Aziz, 2017). A brief list with the most critical characteristics includes the low-demanding infrastructure required to act, the difficulty for traceability of the attackers, and the potential of the snowball effect that rapidly escalates the message, independently of its purpose or accuracy (Aziz, 2017). All these elements rely on the "ubiquity" gift of the Internet, a potent aspect that extends to everything that this network contains, making gender-based violence an "omnipresent and relentless" reality (UNFPA, 2021, p. 8). Hence, online gender-based violence entrenches its means for victims of reprisals to confront and mitigate their aggressors.

Online gender-based violence is, then, a threat with an impact on women in public life, such as journalists and parliamentarians (; UN Women, 2022; UN Women, 2022b). As well as in the offline world, this violence disproportionately affects previously marginalized identities and communities, leading to physical, sexual, psychological, and economic consequences (Aziz, 2017).

For example, Fundación Multitudes led a study in 2022 during the implementation of the Chilean Constitutional Convention. Evidence pointed out that Indigenous women members of the Assembly were five times more likely to become targets of online violence and disinformation campaigns (Fundación Multitudes, 2022).

Similarly, Fundación Karisma (2023) mapped the obstacles Colombian women in politics confront in order to perform equally as well as their counterparts. In particular, the study found that the insults and attacks aim to deter women from political representation, impeding them from fulfilling their fundamental rights (Fundación Karisma, 2023). In addition, even if women persist in exercising a public role, the continuous subjection to OGBV has strong implications for their mental health (Fundación Karisma, 2023).

It is important to highlight that coordinated influence operations have been identified to focus on women political leaders (UN OHCHR, 2023). The report "How influence operations across platforms are used to attack journalists and hamper democracies?" shows how Brazilian women journalists were targeted in different ways on social media platforms (Internet Lab et al., 2022). These reprisals resulted not only in impunity (both by the platforms themselves and the justice system) but also in cases of auto censorship (Internet Lab et al., 2022).

However, evidence is scarcer when it comes to examples or case studies on the impact of OGBV on women human rights defenders in environmental matters.

To summarize, online violence constitutes a genuinely real problem that disproportionately targets women in public life, where there is an urgent need to further understand the implications and complexities when it targets WEDs.

International and Regional Frameworks

The international human rights instruments described in the chart contribute to tackling the need for women protection from violence in private and public spaces, the environment, and human rights defenders. However, it was found that digital technology advancements and their interlinks to human rights violations appear to be an emerging topic, pending specific instruments so far.

Still, the recognition of the continuum between offline and online identities can become a starting point to further demand the states for enhanced protection against OGBV (UN Women et al., 2021).

The following chart compiles pertinent international human rights instruments pointing to at least one of the research topics: women's rights, the right to a healthy environment, the right to defend human rights, and online gender-based violence.

The Escazú Agreement recognizes the vital role of human rights defenders as catalysts for "strengthening democracy, access rights, and sustainable development" (UN, 2018). As the **first regional binding treaty in Latin America and the Caribbean to address access to information, public participation, and justice in environmental matters**, it represents a significant step toward urgent protection.

Implementing this instrument at the national level **can enhance the protection of human rights defenders in environmental matters**, regardless of the source of attack. So far, Ecuador and Colombia have ratified the instrument, and Peru is pending fully agreeing on its entry into force (UN ECLAC, 2023).

International Human Rights Instruments

(Source: Author's own elaboration)

Instrument	Year	Name	Relevance
UN-Universal Instrument	1966	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966)	It ensures the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all civil and political rights (Art. 3), protects the inherent right to life (Art. 6), protects the right to hold opinions without interference, the right to freedom of expression (Art. 19), the right of peaceful assembly (Art. 21), the freedom of association (Art. 22), and the equality before the law (Art. 26), among other provisions.
UN-Universal Instrument	1966	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966)	It recognizes the right of all people to determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development. It recognizes the equitable right of men and women to the enjoyment of full economic, social, and cultural rights (Art. 3).
UN- Universal Instrument	1979	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979)	It provides a framework to combat gender-based discrimination and violence, promoting gender equality and mandating states to take measures to ensure women's full participation in public life. The CEDAW convention underscores the protection of women from violence and discrimination both offline and online.
UN-Universal Instrument	1988	Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights in the Area of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (Protocol of San Salvador)	It recognizes the right to health- the enjoyment of the highest level of physical, mental, and social well-being (Art. 10).. According to this instrument, everyone shall have the right to live in a healthy environment and have access to public services (Art. 11).
Inter-American Human Rights System-convention	1994	Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (Convention of Belém do Pará, 1994)	It protects the right that every woman has to be free from violence in both the public and private spheres (Art. 3), the rights women have to the recognition, enjoyment, exercise, and protection of all human rights and freedoms embodied in regional and international human rights instruments (Art. 4), the right of every woman to live free from violence (Art. 7), and outlines the duties States have to guarantee these rights.

RESULTS

Women environmental defenders from various backgrounds shared their experiences and insights about online OGBV during three focus groups conducted in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. The information collected was organized into key trends, challenges encountered, and recommendations to enhance protection frameworks. This section presents the main findings from these discussions.

The Offline and Online Continuum

Online violence is not an isolated phenomenon. According to WEDs, online attacks represent one form of aggression against their causes and work that operates in the context of a series of offline attacks. Therefore, participants perceive social media platforms as an extension arm of in-person violence.

Women defenders highlighted that **the line between the offline and online arenas is blurred, with each one continuously and negatively reinforcing the other.** For example, threatening flyers are now shared in-person and through messaging services, increasing the scope and frequency of aggressions.

Participants concluded that **there is a strong correlation between online attacks and in-person activities.** Interviewees agreed that attacks become more intense and reiterative when individuals or communities win prominence in the public sphere, particularly when addressing environmentally sensitive issues.

Examples include campaigning acts, presenting evidence before a tribunal, or making statements in parliament. Similar effects arise in offline events, such as during public conferences or press interviews.

On the other hand, **social media platforms give advocates the opportunity to amplify their work.** The participants highlighted that social media platforms enable them to establish connections with other organizations, create networks of solidarity, and increase awareness of their concerns. These benefits show that, when states guarantee a safe environment, online tactics can further advance advocacy objectives and increase influence.

The experiences of the participants actually illustrate the relationship between the online and offline continuum. Put differently, **women defenders rely on both realms to adequately advocate for their causes.** Thus, it is essential to combine offline and online initiatives with safety precautions in order to maintain their advocacy and build resilience against attacks.

The Pervasive Narrative Behind the Attacks

Participants indicated that **an underlying factor of online violence is the pervasive rhetoric against human rights defenders in environmental matters,** rooted in the willingness of perpetrators to create the perception that they are anti-progress, criminals, or opportunists. WEDs face similar messaging, but the **gender component turns these attacks intimate, targeting them personally instead of challenging their ideas.** The key categories documented are outlined below:

- **Identity-based attacks:** These attacks depict WEDs as shady, ignorant, overly emotional, crazy, excessively young to fully understand what they are standing up for, or excessively old to participate meaningfully in public life. Critics target women defenders for not adhering to traditional gender stereotypes, with comments suggesting notions such as, 'She should be at home taking care of her husband and children' or 'She is probably deceiving her partner instead of engaging in an activity.'

- **Body and gender expression attacks:** Women defenders reported receiving comments focused on their physical appearance, gender expression, or sexual behavior, employing derogatory terms.

- **Cause-related attacks:** Harmful messages stem from the ideas they represent. However, according to the testimonies, online messages infantilize women activists, referring to them as ignorant, manipulated, or paid.

Online Gender Disinformation and Other Attacks

Information manipulation and attacks on information integrity are the most widespread OGBV used by perpetrators to hinder the work of WEDs. Focus group participants and interviewees agreed that attacks are frequently organized by several parties, using several false or even authenticated accounts to target activists.

Participants described these attacks as "not sporadic". They denounced an increasing trend to design more sophisticated campaigns involving professional PR firms, opinion leaders, and like-minded media outlets to publicly undermine their role. **Tactics include mainly deliberately disseminating false content with the intention to cause harm (disinformation) or information with the aim to damage activists (malinformation).**

Additionally, the study's participants identified other strategies, such as:

- **Doxxing:** According to participant testimonies, the attacks are directed towards their online personas, disseminating unauthorized personal information. In addition, coercive violence—a tactic where attacks are directed at the accounts of their families—is also frequently present (Women's Aid, 2024).

- **Sexual online harassment:** Participants indicated that they frequently receive unexpected sexual and intimate messages from men seeking to engage with them. WEDs highlighted that these non-consensual communications tend to intensify during periods of heightened public engagement.

- **Hacking devices and accounts:** Participants described attempts to get unauthorized access to their personal and work accounts. In addition, WEDs regarded these acts as part of a continuous effort to shrink their digital presence. According to the participants, not all the incidents are identified on time, leading to tangible breaches in their access to the online public sphere.

  Another variant of these attacks is the creation of fake accounts and parody social media profiles, as well as communications interception or illegal surveillance, a tactic known as 'chuzadas' in Colombia (Center for Justice and International Law [CEJIL], 2020).

Perpetrators and Means

Participants concurred most times OGBV is carried out by parody or fake accounts, providing anonymity for the perpetrators. However, participants identified an increasing trend of using verifiable accounts from government representatives, corporations, and media outlets. These results are consistent with the literature about the state and non-state actors responsible for the violence against women environmental defenders.

In fact, participants agreed that **both corporate and government actors rely on the media ecosystem to disseminate disinformation campaigns** that shape agendas to counteract defenders' messages.

Furthermore, participants drew attention to the use of social media platforms to disseminate attacks from the perpetrators and the rapid escalation it has within the online public sphere. They reported that perpetrators use social media platforms like Twitter, (rebranded as X), Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and others to disseminate online gender-based violence. **Nonetheless, activists distinguished these platforms by the frequency and intensity of the attacks.**

For example, participants referenced Twitter as a social media platform where insults and violent rhetoric are more prevalent than on other social networks. In contrast, platforms like Instagram are perceived as less susceptible to such attacks. This differentiation helps activists to focus their efforts on mitigating online gender-based violence.

Intersectional Approach and Impacts on Women

Participants indicated that **attacks against WEDs are constant.** Attacks are not exclusively tied to gender or the defense of the environment but rather to the intersections of these identities with others, such as race, age, or socioeconomic status, among others.

The **focus groups and the interviews addressed the intersection between the defense of the environment and racial discrimination.** Indigenous women reported experiencing a combination of racism and sexism, and perpetrators feature them as ignorant, against progress, or unqualified to lead. **In these cases, attackers come from**

outside the communities -local governments, companies, police forces- but also come from within the communities. This group endures online attacks and mockery of the way they speak, dress, or share their traditional knowledge. Additionally, the distance between their homes and the justice operators' premises hinders their capacity to access justice.

Similarly, **age is a prevalent component that changes the trajectory and the impact of online gender-based violence on women environmental defenders.** Since young activists tend to have a more recurrent online presence, they are more likely to become a target of online gender-based violence. Still, they also tend to grow more capabilities to counteract it, while older women have less digital literacy, exhibiting more vulnerability to attacks.

Moreover, **socioeconomic factors also play a role in deepening the impact of digital attacks.** Women from rural communities concurred they have fewer resources to respond to the attacks. The interviews and insights from participants suggest that **grassroots groups have less access to training, capacity building, funding, and even access to the Internet in order to create a more sophisticated online presence** and timely respond to online violence. They are, then, more exposed to privacy breaches, hacking, and other attacks.

Online gender-based violence not only targeted the WEDs but also to their extended family. As a result, activists experience a sense of anxiety and uncertainty regarding potential retaliations against their close circles. Motherhood is weaponized and used as a means to create more fear among activists, making the disinformation campaigns against them personal, intimate, sexual, and familiar.

Beyond, violence might extend to their collectives, increasing the cost of their activism and public life. To illustrate, women mentioned that disinformation campaigns may spread hate speech targeting their close circles. **This pressure forces women defenders to choose between continuing their advocacy or protecting their loved ones.**

All the above has several repercussions on the physical health and holistic well-being of WEDs. **The groups discussed the emotional and social toll of these attacks on their lives**. For example, testimonies are shared situations where activists avoid posting personal information or content where people can recognize their faces due to the fear of being identified and attacked beyond the online sphere.

This withdrawal from public life and social media platforms **makes women feel isolated and continuously overwhelmed by the potential impacts of activists on their lives and integrity.** When women environmental defenders were interviewed, they frequently expressed feelings of fear, guilt, and powerlessness. Many participants actually shared that they have thought of abandoning their causes altogether to continue with their projects or, on the contrary, uprooting their lives and moving somewhere else to continue with their activism.

CHALLENGES

Defenders identified challenges at all levels both with regard to state responsibilities as well as internally, as members of collectives or civil society organizations. According to participants, the lack of a thorough implementation of legal frameworks exacerbates the vulnerability of women environmental defenders. Additionally, the tension about the capacity to develop comprehensive protection protocols within the organizations appears to be a common trend.

Regulatory Challenges

Discussions from the focus groups and interviews carried out revealed that protection systems provided by governmental and judicial institutions are insufficient, weakening the defense work.

Participants claim that there is a lack of access to justice, which serves to the likelihood of the repetition and intensity since impunity takes over. In many cases, women human rights activists in environmental matters brought attention to the significant technical deficiency that law enforcement officials had in order to properly implement current legislation addressing online gender-based violence. As such, participants are more susceptible to OGBV as a result of this gap.

Moreover, because of what they described as a lack of institutional action, women environmental defenders expressed mistrust for the state's response. And because of that, some defenders have decided to place greater emphasis on personal and collective protective measures over state-led safeguards.

Examples include cross-posting to increase online presence, endorsement between organizational accounts, and limiting active engagement in the online public sphere. The latter has serious implications for women environmentalists' activism as it prevents them from fully exercising their roles.

Organizational Challenges

Participants concurred on the necessity of adopting streamlined digital security strategies within organizations working on environmental defense. Nevertheless, limited technical capacity, insufficient knowledge of cybersecurity and digital defense mechanisms, and the need for additional funding to implement enhanced security measures are significant barriers for civil society organizations attempting to design and implement efficient safety protocols.

Mitigation Interventions to Respond to OGBV

Women environmental defenders do not seem to agree on the strategies to respond to online violence. Some believe that ignoring the attacks is the best approach. In contrast, others think it is necessary to counteract attacks and insults since it damages defenders, their communities and their organization's reputations.

Generally, these are some of the actions participants concurred they take to counter online gender violence attacks:

- Blocking violent accounts and removing harmful or malicious comments.
- Enhancing the knowledge of grassroots communities on social media profiles management, cybersecurity, and online gender-based violence.
- Engaging external specialists to advise on online collective and self-protection strategies.
- Implementing cybersecurity measures, such as strengthening password protection, developing internal policies for information security, and avoiding open online networks.
- Restricting the use of social media for real-time activity reporting and opting for publishing posts after events to prevent real-time attacks.

Finally, participants **recognized that organizing is essential for supporting WEDs more effectively.** Participants emphasized the importance of developing a trusted network of individuals and institutions to report and respond to OGBV.

COLOMBIA

Context

Colombia is one of the most challenging and dangerous contexts for environmental and human rights defenders. Multiple reports highlight the country as one of the most pervasive ecosystems for those who can enact the defense of the environment.

In 2023, the Somos Defensores Program (2023) registered 765 attacks against human rights defenders. Later on, the Institute of Development and Peace Studies ([INDEPAZ], 2024) registered 137 deadly attacks against social leaders at the end of this report in October 2024. The IACHR (2019) has urged the Colombian Government to strengthen protection measures for activists and human rights defenders.

The digital landscape is vast since over 75.7% of the population has access to the internet through mobile devices, and 70% participates in social media (Digital Global Overview, 2024).

Expressions of Violence Against WEDs

Research in Colombia comprised **interviews with women environmental defenders recorded in September 2024,** enhancing the participation of historically marginalized groups. Additionally, **focus groups celebrated in September 2024 gathered participants** from civil society organizations who represented grassroots communities, NGOs, media and communications specialists, and members of academia, among others.

Death threats were a trend across participants. It is the most reiterative and direct form of violence they face, both offline and online. These threats were directed both at the defenders and their close circles, according to the testimonies gathered.

Anti-terrorist rhetoric was a prevalent online narrative identified, frequently associating women environmental defenders, particularly Indigenous women (Guardias Indígenas or Indigenous Guards), with terrorist groups. This tagging has further political and legal implications considering the presence of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC by its acronym in Spanish) as one of the most relevant agents of the internal armed conflict that affected the country for over 50 years.

Hate speech, disinformation, and smear campaigns were a trend across interviews. The online sphere facilitates speedy and anonymous attempts -many times performed by *troll* accounts- to undermine their personal and professional reputations, as well as to compromise their safety. Facebook was identified as a frequent platform for these attacks, with WhatsApp being another tool used to disseminate harmful content such as pamphlets and images threatening women defenders and calling them to leave their communities.

Finally, **participants and interviewees pointed out that violence extends to women environmental defenders' family members.** Perpetrators share private information (doxxing), an act defenders and organizations working alongside them interpret as the preamble for direct offline attacks (murders).

Relevant Law and Other Provisions

Colombia has developed a **comprehensive legal framework to tackle violence against human rights defenders**.

So far, the protection of human rights defenders has been upheld by a decree and general abstract principles present in the current legal landscape (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). The recent ratification of the Escazú Agreement can also open the door for further and more tailored protection (UN ECLAC, 2023).

As per the **violence against women, the law also has a comprehensive approach that responds to the need to enable a safe environment free of violence** both online and offline (see List of Regulations, Policies, and Legal Provisions below). Nevertheless, participants of the focus groups and interviewees pointed to the **lack of knowledge and willingness of authorities to pursue the complaints** they file after being victims of OGBV, discouraging the denouncement when attacks happen.

Sources indicated that **police and judicial systems often fail to provide adequate support when there is a breach in security due to online attacks** against women human rights defenders in environmental matters. They even declared that denouncing the attacks might expose them to revictimization, with officials asking inappropriate questions or charging them with the obligation to thoroughly document the reprisals to be admitted.

After analyzing the testimonies of women defenders and the contributions from participants in the focus group, we can see that **there is a lack of awareness and training from public officials to effectively interpret their obligations** with regard to securing a safe background WEDs.

Finally, participants declared **authorities tend to revert the burden of proof, leaving women who experience attacks worse off** as they need to gather the evidence to mobilize their case. This situation goes against the Colombian state's obligations of investigating, judging, and sanctioning under the provisions of applicable law.

Overall, while there are legal mechanisms in place to protect human rights defenders, they often **fail to provide adequate protection for women environmental defenders**, ignoring the nuances and specificities of online violence against women environmental and human rights defenders.

List of Regulations, Policies, and Legal Provisions

(Source: Author's own elaboration)

Instrument	Year	Name	Relevance
Constitutional chapter	1991	Constitution of Colombia	It includes the Right to a Healthy Environment (Article 79), the right to Life, Integrity, and Personal Security (Articles 11 and 12), the right to equality and non-discrimination (Article 13)
Criminal Code	2000	Law 599	It details sanctions for crimes against public safety and environmental resources (Articles 331-337) to penalize those who engage in environmental harm or resource depletion, as well as protection against threats and harassment (Articles 347, 348). It also includes provisions against defamation (Article 220) and assaults (Article 229)
Law	2008	Law 1257	It guarantees women a life free of violence, including psychological, physical, and sexual abuse (Articles 1 and 2), provides for the issuance of protection orders for women victims of violence (Article 9), adds the Right to Integral Protection (Article 19), and the right to non-discrimination (Article 15) and protection measures when women have been subjected to violence either in the private or public sphere (Chapter IV). Its primary goal is to guarantee women's rights to a life free from violence, including violence that occurs in both private and public spheres.

Law	2009	Law 1273- about data and information protection	Chapter 1 refers to offenses committed against the confidentiality, integrity, and availability of data and information systems. It penalizes the Violation of personal data (Article 269A), the Unauthorized Access to a Computer System (Article 269B) and the Interception of Data (Article 269 C), Computer Damage (Article 269D), Use of Malicious Software (Article 269E) and Violation of Personal Data (Article 269F).
Law	2014	Law 1719 - Law on Comprehensive Care for Victims of Sexual Crimes	This law emphasizes providing full assistance to survivors of sexual violence. It has special provisions for violence and its different means (Article 11), retaliation and silencing (Article 12), Rights and guarantees for victims (Article 13), and protection to guarantee access to justice for victims of sexual violence (Article 22), among other provisions.
Law	2023	Law 2294 that outlines Colombia's National Development Plan 2022-2026	The Plan declares a national emergency for addressing gender-based violence (Article 344). It includes mechanisms to protect women from violence as well as to overcome situations where women are subjected to violence due to prejudices, gender stereotypes, and structural unequal power relations.

ECUADOR

Context

The country has gone through extensive protests due to the cut in fossil fuel subsidies that led to strikes and road cuts, according to the media (Prensa Latina, 2024).

More recently, the authorities from the Ministry of Energy decreed programmed electricity cuts that lasted up to 14 hours per day due to the ongoing hydric crisis that has affected power plants' capacity to comply with regular standards (El País, 2024).
The capital city, Quito, was recently hit by massive fires, and 2024 became the year with the highest number of burnt hectares in the past 14 years (Primicias Ecuador, 2024).

These recent incidents add up to the persisting human rights crisis. Human Rights Watch (2024) stated that the country "has seen a sharp increase in violence and activity by organized crime, which took homicide rates to unprecedented levels" (para. 1).

In January 2023, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk, confirmed the increasing inequality gaps in the pursuit and guarantee of economic, social, and cultural rights (UN OHCHR, 2023).

Inequality gaps translate to access to the internet. The organization Freedom House has declared the internet as "partly free", scoring 64/100. The report pointed to obstacles to equal access in urban and rural areas. In addition, the civic space has relevant restrictions for NGOs and media outlets to function without potential reprisals linked to their work (Freedom House, 2024).

Expressions of Violence Against WEDs

In September 2024, **our research interviewed women environmental defenders, ensuring the participation of historically marginalized groups.** In addition, two September 2024 focus groups brought participants from civil society organizations, including members of academics, NGOs, media and communications specialists, and grassroots communities.

The **energy cuts limited the capacity for rural women to fully engage with the interviews.** Furthermore, for women with access to the internet, the main reason to withdraw from the study was a sense of insecurity, arguing that they were scared of communicating their situation online or by phone.

Still, participants emphasized that online gender-based violence constitutes a complex manifestation that has real impacts on women environmental activists' emotional, social, and economic lives. **Even if they do not recall it as such during their interventions, there is a strong acknowledgment of online gender-based violence**, considering it as part of their risk independent of the source.

Participants agreed that **disinformation campaigns are a widespread form of online attack** as a tactic used to dismiss the potential contribution women activists can make in environmental matters. Women participants in the study concurred that **perpetrators are mainly state actors -local politicians, majors, ecclesiastical leaders-** who have decision-making or influencing power over the communities in which women defenders partake.

Participants, specially those who work in rural communities or alongside them, perceive a higher incidence of attacks via WhatsApp than other means. **Disinformation and misinformation constitute two of the most pervasive ways** to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of environmental activism led by women.

Findings are consistent with online trends, where **narratives use terms such as "*crazy*" or "*not attuned to the new times*".** Furthermore, women shared examples of insults around their physical appearance rather than on their ideas.

Testimonies also expanded on the gaps in accessing safeguards to interact in social media. Whilst **national organizations can procure a team to update institutional accounts and, therefore, security protocols,** rural community leaders or grassroots environmental activists lack the resources to strengthen their online presence.

Intersectional vulnerabilities play a critical role when describing the tags perpetrators use to refer to women in environmental activism, making race, age and socio-economic vulnerability factors that intensify the attacks. While women with children experience coercive acts, single women are mocked and dismissed in their opinions. Young women environmentalists are ignored and dismissed, calling them childish or ignorant. Indigenous women are imitated in the way they speak since Spanish is not their mother tongue.

The impacts on women activists are multiple, but participants highlight that the online attacks have a **tangible impact on their relationships with their family, friends, and communities.** Death threats imply women are experiencing fear for their lives and the lives of their close circles. Finally, depression sits as a consequence of continuous exposure to attacks, and, in some cases, some of them express having suicidal thoughts.

Relevant Law and Other Provisions

The Ecuadorian legal landscape has many layers of protection for women environmental defenders, starting from its 2008 Constitution. The foundational chart considers the right to nature and integrity in its broad spectrum.

Ecuador also has **other provisions to enhance protection for women environmental defenders that can be constructed from the multiple instruments** the country has created. In fact, the 2009 law specifies the human rights defender category as a subject to special protection from political violence. More recently, the 2018 law to prevent and eradicate violence against women includes a holistic perspective, including their well-being in the public and private spheres.

Despite counting on these provisions, **grassroots women activists in the Amazon and the Ecuadorian Sierra hardly recognize when they are targets of online gender-based violence.** In one case, they even shared the mockery and amplified pernicious messaging, considering it a joke rather than a threat. It is possible to conclude that grassroots groups and women who take part in them have limited access to resources such as training, awareness-raising campaigns, and other pedagogical tools to counteract digital gender-based violence.

Additionally, **some women ignore potential provisions they could use to enhance their security**. Interviewees recognize that they have heard of some of the laws, but they do not have further knowledge on when or how to enact them in their favor.

When they do have access to legal protection, **women activists encounter substantial cultural barriers set in patriarchal foundations and perspectives** that underestimate the effects of these acts of violence. Participants emphasized that online violence is more challenging to present as evidence to give account, and they often receive comments that they are overreacting to offensive and threatening acts through digital platforms. In some other cases, **the state actors, such as local police or justice operators, are close to the perpetrators,** undermining their ability to successfully navigate the legal system in order to ask for protection.

Overall, women recurred to pairs and their collectives to seek protection by asking them to endorse their causes. **Community-based protection has been the answer for many of the participants,** especially when they are far from urban centers. They choose to counteract violence by blocking perpetrators' accounts or content as well as to promote solidarity actions between groups to ensure their complaints have broader outreach.

List of Regulations, Policies, and Legal Provisions

(Source: Author's own elaboration)

Instrument	Year	Name	Relevance
Constitutional chapter	2008	Constitution of Ecuador	Guarantees personal integrity (Art. 66), including physical, psychological, and moral integrity. Recognizes the Rights of Nature (Chapter IV).
Organic Law	2009	Organic Electoral Law, Code of Democracy	It specifies that gender-based political violence is an aggression committed by a person or group of people, directly or indirectly, against women who are candidates, activists, elected or appointed officials, public officeholders, human rights defenders, feminists, political or social leaders, or against their families (Article 280),
Criminal Code	2014	Código Orgánico Integral Penal (COIP)	Criminalizes intimidation (Art. 154), Discrimination (Art. 176), Hate Crime (Art. 177), Gender-Based Violence (Art. 78.1), Libel (Art. 182), among others.
Law	2018	Law for the Prevention and Eradication of Violence Against Women	It aims to prevent and eradicate all forms of violence against women, including girls, adolescents, young women, adult women, and older women, in all their diversity, in both public and private spheres (Art 1), determine the State obligations in this regard (Article 5), considers the different types of violence including Physical, Psychological, sexual, economic and patrimonial, symbolic, political and Gynaecological-obstetric violence (Article 10) among other provisions
Law	2019	Organic Law of the Ombudsman of Ecuador (Ley Orgánica de la Defensoría del Pueblo)	Title 3, Chapter 1 acknowledges the fundamental work of these defenders in promoting and safeguarding human rights and the environment. It outlines the state's duty to provide adequate protection and guarantees for their safety, ensuring they can conduct their work without facing threats, harassment, or violence.

Plan	2020	National Plan for the Prevention and Eradication of Violence Against Women (2019-2025)	Axis 3: Leadership and Transformation of Sociocultural Patterns, implementing safeguarding for ancestral knowledge of women in indigenous communities. Axis 5.6 refers to the Prevention of Violence Against Women, including dissemination of content in audiovisual, radio, written, and digital media that incites, produces, or reproduces violence against women.
Criminal Code (reform)	2021	Organic Reform Law of the Comprehensive Organic Penal Code for the Prevention and Combat of Digital Sexual Violence and to Strengthen the Fight Against Cybercrimes	It includes provision to sanction harassment (Article 154.2), psychological violence against women and their family circle (Article 157), sexual harassment (Article 166), sextortion (Article 172.1), revealing third parties' secret or personal information (Article 179), among others.

PERU

Context

Global Witness (2024) recorded 58 environmental defenders murdered between 2012 and 2023, with over 15 occurring in the last three years, pointing to a spike in violence against this collective. The rising number of deaths among environmental activists has been connected to the existence of organized criminal groups and illegal economies, highlighting the Amazon as a hotspot for retaliation (Monitoring of the Andes Amazon Program [MAAP], 2024).

The Human Rights Coordinator or Coordinadora de DDHH (2024), an NGO that collects data from Peruvian civil society organizations, has documented more than 5,816 acts of aggression against human rights activists. Environmental defenders are in the spotlight, with 2,139 registered attacks and 797 attacks documented against women human rights defenders (Coordinadora Nacional de Derechos Humanos [CNDDHH], 2024).

Organizations reported that the historical gaps between grassroots communities and political/economic powers have expressed over the years with escalating violence since 2022, when people from historically marginalized groups took over the streets to protest against political instability (McClintock, 2023; Murillo, 2023). The organization Freedom House (2024) reported a decline in the status of political and civil rights, expressing concern due to government corruption, restrictions on freedom of assembly, and judicial independence.

Finally, its internet penetration constitutes another expression of the gaps mentioned above, with the highest rates in urban Lima (88,5%) and the lowest in the rural areas (48.5%) (INEI, 2024).

Expressions of Violence Against WEDs

The interviews with WEDs were conducted in Peru, enhancing the participation of historically marginalized groups. Additionally, a focus group gathered participants from civil society organizations who represented grassroots communities, NGOs, media and communications specialists, and members of academia, among others.

The expressions of violence identified in the focus groups and **interviews include verbal threats, physical assaults, judicial harassment, and online gender-based violence**. OGBV encompasses aggressive comments on social media platforms, harassment, **threats received through WhatsApp (a standard communication tool in rural areas), and coordinated smear campaigns on Facebook seeking** to discredit their work and personal lives.

Several interviewees highlighted that the violence they face on social media is seen as part of a broader pattern of systemic violence that extends into the online sphere. In addition, women defenders pointed out that penetration of the internet in rural areas heightens the obstacles to defending themselves from digital attacks. OGBV often escalates during moments of heightened visibility, like when they participate in forums or public debates (Zoom bombing).

Such attacks have led to self-censorship – avoiding posting content or using social media personal accounts- and increased anxiety among consulted women defenders, as the online space becomes unsafe for them to express their views or advocate for their causes.

Relevant Law and Other Provisions

The Supreme Decree N° 004-2021-JUS shaped the legal framework in Peru to protect human rights defenders, and it served as the foundation for the Intersectoral Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (Gob.pe, 2021). Oversight is a shared responsibility between nine government agencies, including the Ministry of Women, the Environment, Security, and Human Rights (Earth Rights et al., 2022; Gob.pe, 2023).

However, **participants declared they were not familiar with the mechanism nor its impact on their security.** Furthermore, they criticized these regulations for their lack of implementation and limited budget allocation. The participants indicate that a lack of political will and appropriate institutional coordination mainly causes insufficient responses.

The country also **exhibits law provisions to sanction violence against women, bot,h offline and online.** In addition, there are special safeguards for women in public life, but the law does not explicitly mention human rights or environmental defenders. Indeed, women environmental defenders declared they face additional challenges despite the creation of such laws since patriarchal structures are deeply embedded in political life and Peruvian institutions.

Participants ignored whether the protection mechanism for defenders had specific clauses on gender violence or they distrusted the state's capacity to provide a comprehensive response to attacks.

To the date of this study publication, **Peru had not yet ratified the Escazú Agreement, and the pervasive rhetoric against defenders was part of a disinformation campaign to stop the country from recognizing this instrument (UN ECLAC, 2023)**. According to a study published by Gamboa (2021), the more robust criticism arose from regional government representatives, the Peruvian Congress, and business associations such as the country's main business federation. Social media was one of the most prominent arenas for misinformation and polarizing campaigns (Clínica Jurídica Ambiental de la Facultad de Derecho PUCP, 2020; Gamboa, 2021).

List of Regulations, Policies, and Legal Provisions

(Source: Author's own elaboration)

Instrument	Year	Name	Relevance
Criminal Code	2004	Crimes against privacy	Violation of privacy (Art. 154), Illegal Trafficking of Personal Data (Art. 154-A), Improper Use of Computerized Records (Art.157) (Hiperderecho, n.d.)
Criminal Code	2004	Crimes against honor	It regulates Insult, slander or false accusations, and libel (Arts. 130,131,132 respectively) (Hiperderecho, n.d.)
Law	2013	Law N° 30096	It explicitly addresses forms of digital violence, such as hacking and identity theft, providing a clearer legal pathway for prosecuting these crimes.
Law	2015	Law N° 30364 - Law to Prevent, Eradicate, and Sanction Violence Against Women and Members of the Family Group	It aims to establish comprehensive mechanisms for preventing, eradicating, and sanctioning all forms of violence against women due to their gender and against family members in both public and private spheres. It establishes mechanisms, measures, and comprehensive policies for the prevention, assistance, and protection of victims, as well as for the reparation of the harm caused.
Legislative Decree	2018	Legislative decree N° 1410	Legislative Decree Incorporating the Crimes of Harassment, Sexual Harassment, Sexual Blackmail, and Dissemination of Images, Audiovisual Materials, or Audio with Sexual Content into the Criminal Code and Amending the Procedure for Sanctioning Sexual Harassment.
Protocol	2019	Protocol to guarantee the protection of human rights defenders in Perú of 2019	The Protocol adopted by the Minister of Justice and Human Rights is relatively short as compared to the Model Law. However, it establishes a decently comprehensive Protection Mechanism. Article 7.2.14, however, lists various human rights defender rights that, when at risk, can trigger action by the Protection Mechanism (International Service for Human Rights [ISHR], 2024).

Law	2021	Law N° 31155	It "establishes mechanisms for addressing, preventing, eradicating, and sanctioning harassment against women due to their gender in political life, with the aim of guaranteeing the full exercise of their political rights and ensuring their participation on equal terms" (Gob.pe, 2021, para. 1).
Decree	2021	Supreme Decree No. 004-2021-JUS	It establishes the Intersectoral Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders. This decree creates a framework to coordinate efforts across government sectors to safeguard human rights defenders from threats and violence. (Gob.pe, 2023)
Resolution	2021	Ministerial resolution N° 134-2021-MINAM	It establishes guidelines for the protection, recognition, and safeguarding of individuals and communities who defend the environment.
Resolution	2023	Ministerial resolution N° 223-2023-MIMP	This directive aims to ensure a safe environment for women defenders, offering protection from violence and harassment while promoting their work in defending human rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To Governments and Policymakers

- **Ensure Accountability and Awareness:** It is not enough to simply create laws or plans; governments must ensure accountability and actively disseminate information about the existence of these protections. For example, Peru's *Supreme Decree N° 004-2021-JUS*, which established the Intersectoral Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, has faced challenges due to lack of awareness and implementation. Governments should ensure that public officials and the general population are informed about these mechanisms through educational campaigns and training programs. This will help ensure that women environmental defenders are aware of their rights and know how to access protection, and that authorities are held accountable for enforcing the laws.

- **Strengthen Legal Protections Based on Existing Frameworks:** Leverage the national and regional legal instruments in place, such as Colombia's *Law 1257 of 2008* and Ecuador's *Law for the Prevention and Eradication of Violence Against Women (2018)*, to develop regulations that address online gender-based violence (OGBV) more effectively. Ensure these regulations prioritise protection for women environmental defenders and recognize intersectional factors, including gender, race, and socioeconomic status.

- **Equip Law Enforcement and Judicial Systems:** Develop comprehensive training for law enforcement, prosecutors, and judges on the nuances of OGBV, especially concerning women defenders. This should include mechanisms for expedited investigation and prosecution, aligned with Colombia's *Criminal Code* (Law 599, 2000) and the *Intersectoral Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders* in Peru. Ensure these protocols address the complexities of online platforms and digital evidence collection.

- **Establish Judicial Guidelines to Address OGBV:** Implement protocols that incorporate due diligence, as stated in international instruments like *CEDAW*, for preventing, investigating, and sanctioning OGBV. This should ensure that judgments go beyond punitive measures and tackle the root causes of violence, while also holding both material and intellectual perpetrators accountable, as seen in the case of Ecuador's *Organic Penal Code (COIP)*.

- **Regulate the Use of Social Media by Public Authorities and Impose Sanctions for Attacks on Women Environmental Defenders:** Implement clear regulations governing the **use of social media by public authorities**, ensuring that they do not engage in or endorse campaigns of **harassment or disinformation** against women environmental defenders. Sanctions should be enforced in line with national laws on **hate speech**, **defamation**, and **cyber harassment**.

- **Develop Tailored Protocols for Online Gender-Based Violence:** In light of the limitations of the ***Escazú Agreement***, establish national protocols that explicitly address the nuances of **online violence** against women environmental defenders. These protocols should align with judicial frameworks, such as *Ecuador's Penal Code reforms*

for digital violence (2021), to ensure expedited investigation and appropriate sanctions for perpetrators.

- **Promote Public Awareness Campaigns Based on National Legal Frameworks:** Governments should promote the value of women environmental defenders, as outlined in *Ecuador's National Plan for the Prevention and Eradication of Violence Against Women (2019–2025)*. These campaigns must counteract disinformation and attacks on these women, highlighting their crucial role in addressing climate change.

To Donors and International Organizations

- **Align Funding with Legal Protections:** Encourage the integration of digital protection strategies as part of project funding criteria, ensuring alignment with existing legal protections like Ecuador's *Law 1273 on Data Protection (2009)* and Colombia's *Law on Comprehensive Care for Victims of Sexual Crimes (Law 1719, 2014)*. Prioritize flexible funding for grassroots organizations in rural areas that lack access to such protections.

- **Support Legal Literacy Programs:** Fund initiatives that help women environmental defenders understand their legal rights under national frameworks like *Colombia's Law 2294 (National Development Plan 2022–2026)* and *Ecuador's Organic Law of the Ombudsman (2019)*, to help them better navigate legal systems and access justice for OGBV.

- **Support Accountability Mechanisms and Monitoring of Legal Frameworks:** Donors and international organizations should provide funding for the development of **accountability mechanisms** that monitor the enforcement of existing legal frameworks, such as **Peru's Intersectoral Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders**. This includes supporting civil society in monitoring state compliance and ensuring that laws and policies are not just implemented on paper but enforced in practice. Regular reporting and evaluation of these frameworks should be part of this effort.

To Civil Society

- **Promote Knowledge of Legal Recourse:** Raise awareness within civil society organizations about the specific legal protections available to women environmental defenders under national laws like Peru's *Supreme Decree N° 004-2021-JUS*. Develop collective strategies to enhance the legal literacy of defenders, helping them utilize these mechanisms effectively.

- **Create Cross-National Networks:** Strengthen networks that allow defenders to exchange information on best practices for navigating the legal systems in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. Collaborate with international organizations to monitor compliance with the Escazú Agreement and related legislation in protecting women defenders from OGBV.

- **Raise Awareness on Escazú's Limitations and Advocate for Complementary Measures:** Civil society organizations should advocate for the **broader application** of the *Escazú Agreement* to include **online gender-based violence** and push for its integration with national frameworks. Develop collective strategies to help women defenders navigate legal mechanisms like **Peru's Intersectoral Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders**, while filling in the gaps left by Escazú.

- **Promote Community-Based Legal Literacy and Digital Security Training:** Civil society organizations should promote **legal literacy and digital security training** at the grassroots level, particularly in rural and marginalized communities. This includes educating women defenders about their rights under national and international laws, such as *Ecuador's Law for the Prevention and Eradication of Violence Against Women*, and providing practical training on how to safeguard themselves from **online gender-based violence**. These efforts should focus on ensuring that all women, regardless of their access to formal legal systems, are empowered to protect their rights.

A Way Forward

- **Although social media platforms have an outstanding potential to amplify the advocacy work of WEDs, online presence can expose them to significant hazards.** This duality emerged in the three focus groups conducted with women defenders from Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, where participants reflected on how digital violence exacerbates the hardships they already face in their environmental defense.

- This report confirms **how tangible the online-offline continuum becomes when it comes to WEDs.** Disinformation campaigns, intimidation, hacking, and harassment are the most common digital aggression tactics reported by defenders and the effects were real, palpable and noticeable in their day-to-day struggles.

- In particular, women defenders' experiences embody the **influence of patriarchal and colonial structures on the violence they suffer.** Violence is grounded in misogynistic preconceptions over women in public life, targeting their personal lives, intimate relationships, bodies, as well as their ideas. Women environmental defenders shared testimonies and examples of being infantilized, sexualized, and discredited based on sexist stereotypes.

- These patriarchal structures appear again in the online gender-based violence expressions, where **disinformation appears as one of the most prominent trends among participants**. Other attacks, such as doxxing, harassment, privacy and security breaches were also identified by WEDs.

- The **impacts of online gender-based violence are vast and long lasting**, if women environmental defenders and their communities do not have access to knowledge and means to counteract violence. Effects vary, as the violence imposed over

these women results from their intersecting identities, but fear, shame, and a sense of powerlessness appear both in the desk research and the participant's lived experience.

- Online gender-based violence also hinders women environmentalists' chance to navigate justice systems. **Despite the international instruments and national legal frameworks, historical hegemonic views impose over women, adding more obstacles to exercise access to justice.** When women denounce, they are either mocked or underestimated. They have also experienced a reverse in the burden of proof, having to use their resources to gather evidence or entirely cutting the possibility to seek redress.

- Although online sexual abuse was less frequently discussed, participants highlighted its significant impact, emphasizing the need for further attention and exploration.

- Moving forward, WEDs need urgent attention from States, International Cooperation and fellow civil society members. **As they move forward with their activism, access to digital literacy, resources, and adequate protection to confront digital attacks remain crucial,** in order to enhance their capacities to prevent and counteract attacks.

- Moreover, robust legal frameworks, policy reform, public officer training, and social awareness recognizing and embracing the different identities compounded in environmental defense are compulsory in the route of building an online space free of violence against WEDs.

- **Future research should focus on a more profound exploration of the intersectionality of these challenges in women's environmental advocacy.** Studies can further examine strategies to strengthen defenders' capacities as well as to set stronger foundations for a further recognition of WEDs as agents of democracy. Additionally, investigating the effectiveness of legal frameworks and protective measures in different contexts would provide valuable insights into how to coordinate state agencies better to safeguard women defenders, both online and offline.

- In their work to guarantee the sustainability and protection of the planet, women defenders are forced to choose between their cause and their lives. The urgency to protect those who defend our planet has never been more remarkable. **Ensuring the safety and security of women environmental defenders in the online and offline continuum is a matter of justice and a critical step in addressing the global human rights crisis.** WEDs defenders are standing up for life in its most fundamental ways, and their protection must be a priority for all.

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