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Online Ceremony Honours Human Rights Defenders at Risk

Four women human rights defenders and one indigenous community have won the 2020 Front Line Defenders Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk, honouring the defenders for their life-saving work. The winners from Iraq, Colombia, Sri Lanka, Armenia and Mauritania fight gender-based violence, lead peacebuilding movements, defend the rights of minority groups and protect indigenous land.

Watch the Online Award Ceremony:

[Front Line Defenders Website](#)

[Front Line Defenders Facebook Page](#)

[Front Line Defenders YouTube Channel](#)

available in English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Tamil and Armenian

Governments around the world are using the COVID-19 pandemic to attack and arrest human rights defenders. State security forces are using restrictions on movement, mobilisation and freedom of expression to target critical voices. HRDs from marginalized and stigmatized communities, already most at risk during COVID-19, are facing physical attacks, arrest, and criminal charges for helping their neighbours survive the pandemic. A Jury of Irish Parliamentarians selected these five regional winners in recognition of their courageous work in the face of extreme risks they endure while protecting their communities' rights:

Africa:	Mekfoula Mint Brahim (Mauritania)
Americas:	Guardia Indígena de Cauca (Colombia)
Asia-Pacific:	Juwairiya Mohideen (Sri Lanka)
Europe & Central Asia:	Lara Aharonian (Armenia)
Middle East & North Africa:	Fatima Al-Bahadly (Iraq)

Since 2005, Front Line Defenders has held its Award ceremony at Dublin's City Hall. This year, due COVID-19 restrictions, Front Line Defenders presented the Award in a virtual ceremony on International Human Rights Defenders Day.

“Human Rights Defenders Day is the perfect moment to recognize the incredible strength of local activists protecting their communities during this global pandemic,” said Andrew Anderson, Front Line Defenders Executive Director. “Among our five winners, they’ve endured physical attacks, arrests and an onslaught of defamation campaigns aimed at denying and delegitimizing the life-saving work they do. Defenders have long been the experts in violations perpetrated against their communities, and states have worked just as long to silence their dissent. COVID-19 has highlighted that HRDs are also, very often, the most critical actors in the fight to secure life-

sustaining humanitarian aid for the marginalized communities they represented. It is our honour to visibilize their work and stand beside them today.”

Front Line Defenders established its annual award in 2005. In 2018, the organisation began recognizing five winners from around the world.¹ The Jury for the 2020 Front Line Defenders Award was composed of Senator Ivana Bacik (Labour); Seán Crowe TD (Sinn Féin); Cormac Devlin TD (Fianna Fail); Gary Gannon TD (Social Democrats); and Jennifer Carroll MacNeill TD (Fine Gael).

The 2020 Regional Award Winners:

Africa

[Mekfoula Mint Brahim, Pour une Mauritanie Verte et Démocratique, Mauritania](#)

Mekfoula Mint Brahim is a woman human rights defender fighting against religious extremism and discriminatory practices in Mauritania, in particular the discrimination against women and members of the Haratine and sub-Saharan African communities. She is the President of Pour une Mauritanie Verte et Démocratique (For a Green and Democratic Mauritania), a human rights organisation founded in 2009, leading women’s empowerment projects in rural areas. She is also a member of Alliance pour la Refondation de l’Etat Mauritanien (AREM), an organisation promoting good governance and fighting against impunity. Mekfoula was arrested and detained twice in February this year with other HRDs as part of continuing harassment against her for hosting a Pour une Mauritanie Verte et Démocratique and AREM meeting at her home.

Americas

[The Indigenous Guard of Cauca, Colombia](#)

The Indigenous Guard of Cauca - Kiwe Thegnas (Defenders of Life and Territory), member of the organization Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas del Norte del Cauca (ACIN), CRIC branch, is a community life and ancestral resistance composed of women, men, boys and girls who defend their territories in a peaceful, unarmed way. It was created in the violent region of Cauca in southwestern Colombia, and in 2001 began operating as an organised collective. The majority of the indigenous guards belong to the Nasa indigenous group, which is the largest and most organised, and they have trained other communities throughout Colombia over the years to defend their own territories. Their communities have been subjected to multiple forms of violence resulting from the presence of armed actors, the drug trafficking economy and multinational exploitation. Among its many activities, the Guard carries out collective protection actions with its communities, gives talks on awareness raising and peace, tours their territories, gives humanitarian protection for child victims of armed actions, rescues injured people in the context of warfare under the framework of humanitarian action, carries out training on anti-personnel mines (ERM), and organises relief actions for communities that have been massively displaced from their lands. Because of its role, the Indigenous Guard has been subjected to multiple attacks from different actors who seek to break the peaceful resistance of the communities they represent.

Asia-Pacific

[Juwairiya Mohideen, Muslim Women’s Development Trust \(MWDT\), Sri Lanka](#)

¹ The five regions are: Africa, Americas, Asia-Pacific, Europe & Central Asia, Middle East & North Africa.

Juwairiya Mohideen is a Muslim woman human rights defender based in Puttalam in the North West of Sri Lanka. She and her family are part of the northern Muslim community that were forcibly displaced by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in October 1990. 30 years later, she continues to live in a refugee settlement in Puttalam. Juwairiya started her work with the Rural Development Foundation providing support for the IDP community. Over a fifteen-year period, she identified a critical gap in dedicated support for women and girls within the local human rights/humanitarian aid sector. In 2010 she established the Muslim Women's Development Trust (MWDT), on which she serves as the Executive Director. MWDT provides daily practical support, comfort, advice and legal assistance to women and girls facing abuse, violence and discrimination. Juwairiya is at the front line of calls for reform in Muslim personal laws which deny Muslim women and girls the basic rights enjoyed by their non-Muslim sisters in Sri Lanka. Juwairiya has been undeterred by threats against her and her family, blatant misinformation and attacks on her character and being labelled as a traitor and shunned by parts of her close knit community.

Europe & Central Asia

Lara Aharonian, Women's Resource Center Armenia

Lara Aharonian is a woman human rights defender working to advance women's rights in Armenia. She is co-founder of the Women's Resource Center Armenia, a non-governmental feminist organization based in Yerevan that works to empower women and girls to become active citizens by combatting gender stereotypes and providing psychological and legal support to survivors of gender-based violence in Armenia. Lara Aharonian has extensive experience advocating for women's rights, gender equality and the inclusion of trans, lesbian and bisexual women, in addition to raising awareness on women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. She is also a Board member of Human Rights House (Armenia). After giving a speech in defence of marginalized groups, including LGBT women, at the National Assembly of Armenia in March 2018, Lara came under constant attack from far-right groups and individuals. The new government that came to power following the Velvet Revolution in 2018 does not publicly attack HRDs, but Lara and others are increasingly targeted by right-wing and nationalist groups, and the government is failing to ensure protection for HRDs.

Middle East & North Africa

Fatima Al-Bahadly, Al-Firdaws Society, Iraq

Fatima Al-Bahadly is an Iraqi woman human rights defender from the city of Basra in southern Iraq. She is the founder of Al-Firdaws Society, an organization focused on protecting women and girls affected by war and strengthening their role in peace building. Al-Firdaws provides literacy, education and skills workshops and works to bring an end to violence against women in areas where women are most marginalised, including rural areas. Fatima and her organisation raise awareness among community members about the impact of child marriage and early school leaving on women and girls, calling on religious clerics and tribal leaders to recognise the important role that women play in society. Fatima also works with youth to combat the militarisation of society. She fights against the recruitment of children and youth to militant groups and works on their reintegration into society. Due to this work through the years, Fatima has received of death threats and has faced severe social pressure from her tribe.

Interviews with the five awardees can be facilitated in various languages.

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