



Women in the human rights field: navigating the path to impact without burnout

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Abstract: Burnout severely limits women’s ability to create impact within the human rights field. Left unaddressed women human rights professionals are overwhelmed and exhausted. Multiple steps can be taken for women to have a positive impact without burnout.

Human rights advocates, activists, lawyers, defenders, and researchers encounter trauma and stress in their work. They are exposed to abhorrent abuses, review distressing material and evidence—whether oral, written, or photographic—often work in dangerous environments, and may be threatened directly or experience smear campaigns. Consistent exposure to human rights violations, together with heavy workloads and job demands, pressure to perform, urgent deadlines, and lack of work-life-health balance can cause severe disruption to mental, physical, and psychological wellness. This eventually culminates in [burnout](#).

It is worth highlighting that, on June 12, 2025, a team of two Global Campus alumnae, namely Anita Amendra and Melina Pele, co-hosted their first [webinar](#) to support women in human rights. Within the space of 10 days, more than 50 women signed up and women are still signing up (currently over 80 women globally) after the event to receive

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the recording and access the support. This, together with the powerful shares of women's experiences of burnout in human rights, highlights the urgent need for support for women human rights defenders.

Surprisingly, there is a lack of research on [mental health](#) in the human rights field and even less on burnout in women. Fortunately, the field is waking up to the reality that human rights defenders are human too, and, as such, suffer too. The real changes are yet to be made. This post addresses the urgent need to preserve the wellbeing of women in the human rights-related work.

As they defend the rights of others and strive for impact in their work, human rights advocates frequently neglect their own wellbeing: physiological, psychological, mental, emotional and spiritual. While anyone working in the human rights field can suffer from burnout, women, particularly working mothers, tend to feel it more acutely. This can lead to a wave of resignations of women, with a growing number of them considering whether it is worth it at all. This represents a devastating loss of talent in the field.

What is burnout?

Burnout, as defined by the [World Health Organisation](#), is characterised by overwhelming physical or emotional exhaustion; feelings of cynicism or detachment; and a sense of ineffectiveness.

However, the [Burnout Study in Women](#), which looks at the roles and responsibilities women face and their impact on burnout, identifies the latter as occurring in 'any domain over which a woman has responsibility'. This includes personal, health, family and home, not only work-life. The cited study has found that women carry most of the home and parenting responsibilities. Juggling children's schedules, extracurricular activities, planning travel, cooking meals and managing health appointments result in a heavy mental load for [all working women](#).

Stress on women in the human rights field is highly due to exposure to direct or indirect trauma, systemic inequalities, gender bias and disparity in the workplace, inadequate salary, and the emotional toll of the work.

Another issue to consider is the possible lack of support of structures in the workplace to provide for the biological, hormonal and cyclical needs of women. A significant portion of women worldwide experience some form of debilitating uterine conditions, for instance endometriosis affects 10 percent of [women and girls globally](#) and adenomyosis affects [20 percent of women](#). Workplace adjustments are also lacking for [motherhood](#) and [menopause](#). When the trajectories of womanhood are not adequately and reasonably accommodated within the structures of the human rights workforce, the path towards burnout in women accelerates. Biologically, women have different needs yet are often forced to operate within workplaces not designed and adequate for them. In the aforementioned webinar on June 12, 2025, and the subsequent research calls, women provided testimonials of their difficult experience with regards to, for example, inadequate spaces for expressing milk for breastfeeding mothers.

It must be highlighted that high value in human rights-related work is placed upon [commitment and sacrifice](#). Women are [often inclined](#) to prioritise other's needs over their own, or down-play and minimise personal trauma and experiences by comparing them to violations of the people they help. There is an undercurrent fear of stigmatisation if they were to reach out for help, as if seeking help reveals weakness and suggests they were incapable of doing the job. However, seeking support is a sign of radical strength and self-preservation. It is a sign of commitment and dedication to the field.

Telling women to do yoga or breathing exercises is not going to resolve the problem alone and avoid the challenge of burnout. There is also more than suggesting women to engage in 'self-care', to stop taking on more projects, to delegate tasks, to sleep more, or to drink more water.

Critically, there is a [systematic recognition](#) and understanding that individual women have different needs, and that, as women age, these needs change. Therefore, a complete shift in the human rights working environments that are currently provided for women is required. Employers and senior management—be that international institutions, law firms, NGOs, charities, grassroots initiatives—have a 'duty of care' to mitigate the rapid acceleration of burnout in women in the human rights field. The spaces women work in, the career ladders women have fought for the right to climb, and the ceilings women strived to reach, were not created with women in mind.

Way forward

There are multiple steps that can be taken to face the challenges addressed above:

1. Acknowledging that burnout for women becomes a [real possibility](#) if work-health-life balance is not maintained. It is important to foster a working culture where women trust they will not be ostracised if they recognise they are approaching burnout.
2. Early intervention is crucial. Women themselves may not know that they are near burnout. Spot hidden signs early. Some only understand they are in [burnout](#) when it is too late, or they are sitting in a doctor's office with a serious illness. They may have realised at some level that something is not right. This can show up in a variety of ways including:
 - Fatigue
 - Brain-fog
 - Forgetfulness
 - Depression
 - Lack of energy or vitality
 - Health Conditions such as auto-immune disease
 - Inability to sleep
 - Anxiety

- Overwhelm
- Feelings of emptiness
- Mind-body disconnection
- Lack of purpose or drive
- Break-down of relationships
- Financial insecurity
- Detachment from emotions

However, they may attribute this to another reason or self-blame and may not be aware that they are burning out. Self-projected limiting beliefs like feeling worthless, not being up to the job, or not being skilled enough, can sabotage their courage to seek support. Women may also cover up, overcompensate, or take more on their plate than they can reasonably cope with. It can be difficult for them to refuse to take on more work tasks or to set boundaries around family and homelife.

3. [Educating and informing](#) women about the potential psychological and emotional impact on mental health. It is important to equip and resource women with techniques, tools and strategies on how to mitigate the adverse health effects of human rights-related work. These life skills must be taught throughout their careers, as well as within educational institutions providing human rights and law degrees and relevant qualifications.
4. [Implementing mental health support](#) structures in the workplace. This can include tailored individual and/or group coaching, counselling, therapy, and peer-to-peer forums for open and supportive dialogue. These can give women a safe space to be heard, have their feelings and experiences listened to and validated, and learn alternate ways of managing their energy.
5. [Systematic de-stigmatisation of women](#) human rights professionals who reach out for support due to burnout, empathy fatigue, direct or secondary PTSD, vicarious trauma, mental health conditions, or lack of provision for menstrual, maternal or menopausal needs. Women may hide their feelings from superiors or team members, fearing that it looks like they are incompetent. Women work hard to get a seat at the table, so admitting there is something wrong can feel like stepping back.
6. Collective building of supportive, non-judgmental local and international [networks and communities](#) of women in the human rights field, providing a safe space to share experiences.
7. Bridging the gender pay gap and encouraging women to learn about wealth creation and financial security. Studies show that the [gender pay gap](#) exists. The

human rights field attracts self-sacrificing, highly compassionate, and over-giving women who dedicate hours, months, even years to unpaid or under-compensated work. They commit to hours of overtime because they are passionate and care deeply.

With knowledge of how to create sustainable wealth, take care of their needs and wellbeing, and manage their energy and time, women can have the vitality to contribute with their valuable skills to human rights-related causes, instigating impact without burnout.