

Reconceptualising Exile through the Lived Experience of Human Rights Defenders

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INTRODUCTION

Around the world, civic space has been shrinking at an unprecedented pace. More than 70% of the global population now lives in countries where freedoms of expression, assembly, and association are severely restricted, and human rights defenders (HRDs) face escalating threats, criminalisation, and persecution.

Exile, once understood primarily as a drastic rupture, has become a widespread consequence of this global contraction of rights, reshaping the lives, identities, and activism of those forced to leave their homelands. Against this backdrop, the research *“Reconceptualising Exile through the Lived Experience of Human Rights Defenders”*, conducted between March and October 2025, investigates how exile is experienced, negotiated, and transformed across diverse regions. Drawing on 18 life-history interviews, expert consultations, case studies, and digital ethnography, the research reveals exile as a dynamic, multifaceted process that cannot be captured by traditional framings of rupture, loss, and passivity. Exile today contains profound vulnerability but also unanticipated forms of agency, solidarity, and political reinvention.

The research demonstrates that exile today is no longer captured by traditional assumptions of victimhood, passivity, isolation, or cultural loss. Instead, exile constitutes a process marked by both vulnerability and agency, one in which HRDs navigate legal precarity, social marginalisation, and emotional strain while simultaneously reconfiguring activism through transnational networks, digital platforms, and new forms of civic engagement. Findings also reveal substantial gaps in existing protection mechanisms, which remain slow, reactive, and territorially bound, failing to account for the mobility, intersectional experiences, and ongoing risks faced by HRDs before, during, and after displacement.

This executive summary highlights the study’s key insights, conceptual contributions, and policy implications aimed at improving institutional responses to exiled HRDs and enabling sustainable, dignified conditions for their continued activism.

STAGES OF EXILE

Departure

The classical perception of exile as a severe psychological and cultural break remains important, as HRDs continue to experience trauma, alienation, and the sense of being forcibly separated from their communities, languages, and everyday worlds. Yet, these narratives alone no longer capture the contemporary lived realities of HRDs.

Exile emerges as a continuum shaped by degrees of coercion, precarity, and negotiation rather than a clean divide between “forced” and “voluntary” departure. Many defenders narrate a long period of suffocation in which repression seeps into daily routines through legal harassment, raids, digital interference, interrogations, and the weaponisation of bureaucracy.

Their departure often reflects an accumulation of risk rather than a single decisive event, guided not only by self-preservation but by the desire to prevent harm from spilling over to colleagues, relatives, and communities. The decision to leave is often strategic, involving careful protection of evidence, encryption and distribution of archives, reduction of public visibility, and establishment of safe exit pathways. Exile, in this sense, begins long before borders are crossed.

Transit

Transit exposes a different dimension of exile; one often overlooked in policy frameworks.

In this phase, HRDs encounter legal limbo, social and economic precarity, and emotional exhaustion. They move between temporary shelters, short-term visas, or informal arrangements that offer neither stability nor a clear horizon.

Many describe this period as “living in a suitcase,” a time governed by uncertainty, fear of surveillance, and the constant recalibration of safety practices.

Transit becomes a governed temporality that both immobilises and disables activism, while simultaneously demanding resilience, discretion, and ongoing risk assessment. Although presented as an intermediate stage, transit can last months or years, shaping the psychological and political experience of exile as profoundly as departure itself.

Arrival

Arrival in a host country does not resolve these tensions. Instead, HRDs encounter new forms of exclusion embedded in social, bureaucratic, and economic structures. Legal protection may be granted, but its promise is often undermined by long asylum procedures, restricted work rights, the under-recognition of qualifications, and racialised or gendered discrimination in housing, labour markets, and public services.

Many confront a contradiction in which they are legally protected yet socially invisible, recognised as HRDs yet marginalised as migrants or refugees. This paradox of belonging is a central feature of exile in the contemporary world: one may possess legal status without genuine integration, citizenship without acceptance, and safety without a sense of home. At the same time, HRDs begin to rebuild their lives, forging new networks, learning new languages, and reconstructing forms of activism adapted to the political and cultural landscape of the host society.

RECONFIGURING ACTIVISM IN EXILE

Despite these challenges, exile reconfigures activism in profound ways. Many HRDs find that exile opens new avenues for transnational mobilisation, access to international institutions, engagement with diaspora communities, and participation in global advocacy networks. Digital platforms enable them to circumvent censorship and continue contributing to homeland struggles while maintaining safety. Some experience exile as a space of political rebirth, where distance from authoritarian regimes allows for sharper critique and more creative forms of resistance. Yet this renewed agency coexists with emotional fatigue, fragmentation of identity, and the weight of multiple responsibilities that include activism, family care, economic survival, and community support.

The study's intersectional approach reveals that not all HRDs experience this transformation equally. Women, LGBTQ+ activists, racialised minorities, and Indigenous HRDs often carry additional burdens, including gender-based violence, erasure within male-dominated exile networks, precarious economic conditions, and the persistence of stigma both from homeland communities and within host societies. These intersecting layers of discrimination shape access to protection, visibility, and opportunities for meaningful participation.

By integrating the lenses of activism, transnationalism, and intersectionality, the study demonstrates that traditional frameworks of exile, rooted in narratives of punishment, rupture, and isolation, are insufficient to capture the lived realities of HRDs today. Exile is not solely a condition of loss but a relational, multi-sited process in which vulnerability and agency coexist.

EXILE, MIGRATION AND DIASPORA

Furthermore, the research demonstrates that conventional distinctions between exile, migration, and diaspora have limited analytical value for understanding the lived realities of HRDs. Instead of separate categories, these conditions blend into one another depending on time, context, and political conditions.

Exile may evolve into diaspora as settlement becomes collective and long-term; migrants living abroad may be thrust into exile when conditions at home deteriorate, and refugees may take on transnational activist roles that blur legal boundaries. Similarly, the binary between forced and voluntary exile collapses when examined through experience: what appears voluntary from a legal perspective often unfolds under structural coercion, deteriorating safety, and systemic repression. Protection frameworks, however, remain tied to rigid categories that fail to accommodate these complexities. They are territorially anchored and often unable to follow HRDs through the stages of departure, transit, and early arrival, leaving critical gaps in support at the exact moments when defenders are most vulnerable.

RECONCEPTUALISING EXILE

Exile, therefore, must be reconceptualised as a processual, relational, and political condition. It is processual because it evolves over time and is governed by shifting legal statuses, risks, and opportunities. It is relational because HRDs' experiences are shaped both by disconnections from home and by emergent networks in exile, as well as by the impact of transnational repression. It is political because exile generates new forms of agency, activism, critique, and collective imagination that transcend borders. This reconceptualisation acknowledges exile not only as a site of suffering but also as a space of transformation where defenders reconstruct their roles, identities, and solidarities in ways that challenge authoritarianism at home and democratic shortcomings abroad.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research concludes with comprehensive recommendations to strengthen the protection ecosystem for HRDs. These include:

- establishing mobility-responsive legal frameworks;
- improving emergency relocation systems;
- integrating intersectional approaches in protection programming;
- enhancing access to psychosocial, economic, and legal support;
- safeguarding digital security;
- abling long-term integration and dignified participation in host communities; and
- fostering cross-border institutional coordination.

The study argues that sustainable protection requires moving beyond reactive, temporary models and embracing holistic, rights-based, and future-oriented approaches that acknowledge exiled HRDs as active agents within the global human rights movement.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates that exile is a transformative terrain where activism is reconfigured, identities are renegotiated, and new political possibilities emerge. It calls for a profound shift in how exile is understood, governed, and supported in the international human rights architecture.

