

The Situation of Human Rights Defenders Working on Climate Change and a Just Transition in Armenia

April 30, 2025

Joint Submission by:

Human Rights House Yerevan



Human Rights House Yerevan Members:

“Socioscope” Societal Research and Consultancy Center NGO

“Pink” Human Rights Defender NGO

“Women’s Resource Center” NGO

“Real World, Real People” NGO

PEN Armenia

Contact Information for the report:

Human Rights House Yerevan (HRHY)

119/2 Hovsep Emin,

0012 Yerevan, Armenia

info@hrhyerevan.org

<https://hrhyerevan.org/>

Ms. Nvard Margaryan

Email: nvard@hrhyerevan.org

I. Preface

1. This submission is a collaborative effort by a coalition of civil society organizations with significant expertise in monitoring, documenting, and reporting on human rights violations affecting human rights defenders in Armenia. It is grounded in first-hand data collected by the member organizations of Human Rights House Yerevan through their long-term monitoring and rights protection activities. The report focuses specifically on the threats faced by environmental human rights defenders in Armenia, including the increasing use of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), hate speech, smear campaigns, and other forms of harassment. The submission aims to contribute to the upcoming report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders to the General Assembly, with a focus on defenders working on climate change and a just transition. The submission draws on recent case studies and highlights the growing risks faced by those standing up against large-scale mining projects, which have become emblematic of the intersection between environmental harm, corporate interests, and shrinking civic space.

II. Introduction

2. Since the 2000s, mining has been a cornerstone of Armenia's economic strategy, often at the expense of environmental protections and community rights. Different mining projects have provoked widespread public resistance due to risks of cyanide pollution, deforestation, and threats to vital water resources, etc.
3. In recent years, the Armenian government has taken a more explicit pro-mining stance, acquiring stakes in mining companies (like Lydian Armenia CJSC, Zangezur Copper-Molybdenum Combine (ZCMC)), thus entrenching conflicts of interest and weakening state neutrality in disputes between communities and corporations.
4. Environmental defenders in Armenia include a wide range of actors: local activists and residents from affected communities, journalists, few independent media outlets, civic initiatives and civil society organizations, cultural and political figures who align with environmental justice movements. These defenders advocate for the protection of Armenia's natural resources, transparent and participatory environmental governance, and for a just transition to a sustainable, non-extractive economy.
5. Environmental defenders in Armenia operate in a hostile and shrinking civic space, facing a wide range of threats, including Strategic Lawsuits Against

Public Participation (SLAPPs), smear campaigns, harassment, and reputational and financial harm. Women environmental defenders are particularly at risk, as these campaigns often rely on misogynistic narratives, sexual innuendos, and false associations with foreign adversaries.

III. SLAPPs: Legal Weaponization Against Defenders

6. Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) have become a growing concern in Armenia, posing a significant threat to journalists, environmental activists, and human rights defenders. These lawsuits, often initiated by powerful corporations and government officials, are designed to intimidate and silence those who speak out on critical issues such as environmental protection and corruption. The rise of SLAPPs highlights the misuse of legal mechanisms to suppress public participation and freedom of expression, thereby undermining democratic engagement.
7. Since 2018, around 30 SLAPP cases have been filed by mining companies against activists and journalists, with the explicit aim of intimidating and silencing criticism, demanding excessive financial compensation.
8. From 2018-2020, Lydian Armenia filed 19 SLAPP lawsuits against residents and environmental activists, using the defamation suits to counteract and dispel the criticism over its mining project and attempt to be compensated for reputational harm. On top of that, the ZCMC mining company lodged an additional 10 SLAPPs between 2023 and 2024, demanding much higher monetary compensations.
9. With SLAPP cases the mining companies frequently target women environmental defenders. On 5 September 2018, Lydian Armenia filed court proceedings against environmental defender and independent journalist Ms. Tehmine Yenokyan demanding that she retract an allegedly defamatory statement that she had made regarding the company on 12 August 2018 during a rally in Jermuk, a town close to the site of the Amulsar mine. In its court proceedings, Lydian Armenian requested that Ms. Yenokyan be ordered to pay it 1,000,000 AMD (approximately €2,350) in compensation. On 15 December 2021, the Court of First Instance issued its judgment ordering Ms. Yenokyan to pay Lydian Armenia 12,000 AMD state duty and 100,000 AMD in legal fees. Ms. Yenokyan appealed the judgment to the Civil Court of Appeals. On 22 July 2022, the Civil Court of Appeals issued its judgment. In its judgment, it ordered Ms. Yenokyan to publish a statement in the media and on her personal Facebook page retracting the statement she had made on 12 August 2018. The Court also ordered Ms. Yenokyan to pay Lydian Armenia 1,000,000 AMD in compensation, plus 200,000 AMD in legal fees and 24,000 AMD in state fees. On 9 December

2022, the Court of Cassation rejected Ms. Yenokyan's cassation appeal against the Civil Court of Appeals' judgment. In accordance with the judgment of the Civil Court of Appeal, and to avoid incurring into criminal charges, Ms. Yenokyan thereafter published a statement in the media and on her personal Facebook page retracting her statement of 12 August 2018. Ms. Yenokyan also paid 1,224,000 AMD (approximately €2,900) to Lydian Armenia. Ms. Yenokyan applied to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) regarding violations of the rights to freedom of expression and a fair trial. December 2022, ZCMC, the largest mining company in Armenia, wrote to Ms. Yenokyan requesting that she publicly retract a statement she had published on her personal Facebook account on 1 December 2022, in which she had stated that: "Yesterday, the pipeline leading to the tailings dump of ZCMC again broke down, the Voghji river was again polluted, a criminal case was initiated again and it will be again forgotten, they will cover it up and move on." Despite Ms. Yenokyan's reply to ZCMC's letter and request for further clarification, on 3 January 2023, ZCMC filed proceedings for defamation against her before the Court of First Instance. In its court proceedings, ZCMC requested that the Court order Ms. Yenokyan to retract the statement she had published on her personal Facebook account on 1 December 2022 and to pay ZCMC compensation of 6,000,000 AMD (approximately €14,150). After the Court of First Instance returned the claim to ZCMC for correction, ZCMC resubmitted its claim on 6 February 2023.

10. Lydian Armenia also filed defamation lawsuits against other women environmental defenders, including Ms. Ani Khachatryan, Ms. Nazeli Vardanyan, and Ms. Arpine Galfayan, among others.

Recommendations

- Enact legislation that safeguards women environmental defenders from judicial harassment and protects their rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly.
- Strengthen judicial training on SLAPP cases to ensure that judges can recognize and dismiss these abusive lawsuits promptly.
- Ensure that public officials and political figures refrain from using the legal system to suppress criticism and engage in constructive dialogue with civil society.

IV. Smear Campaigns and Gendered Harassment

11. While women environmental defenders are highly active, their visibility also exposes them to disproportionate and targeted violence, including gender-

- based smear campaigns, online defamation, surveillance, and sexist abuse, Accusations of treason and collaboration with enemy states, with mining companies implicated in orchestrating or encouraging these campaigns.
12. Women environmental defenders face an intense layer of harassment designed to discredit them as activists and as women. These campaigns often rely on misogynistic narratives, sexual innuendos, and false associations with foreign adversaries.
 13. **Online disinformation and sexist framing:** Troll farms and fake accounts spread defamatory content about female activists' personal lives. Women are called "hysterical," "untrustworthy," or "morally corrupt." Offensive sexist posts have been published on Facebook against Msses. Ani Khachatryan and Tehmine Yenokyan, describing them as 'loose women', 'made pregnant by activists' and so on. In April 2019, Tehmine Yenoqyan and Ani Khachatryan applied to the Yerevan Court of General Jurisdiction to seek remedy for insulting materials published on Facebook against them, and nobody was taken responsible for spreading hate speech.
 14. **Foreign agent narrative:** Environmental NGOs are labeled as traitors working for Azerbaijani interests. These baseless claims aim to delegitimize environmental activism and erode public trust in civil society by falsely accusing local groups of undermining national interests. Such narratives are not only defamatory but deeply harmful to public discourse and cohesion, especially in a country facing significant geopolitical tensions. Moreover, they risk reversing against the very institutions and actors propagating them, undermining both state credibility and societal resilience. Particularly concerning is the appropriation and distortion of regional dynamics: authors of these smear campaigns have drawn direct parallels between Armenian environmental defenders and so-called "fake" activists from the neighboring autocratic regime of Azerbaijan. This includes bizarre comparisons with state-staged actions, such as the closure of the Lachin corridor and the public strangulation of a pigeon—events widely recognized as propaganda exercises. By co-opting these narratives, those behind the Armenian campaigns reveal an uncomfortable alignment with the tactics of oppressive regimes, rather than upholding democratic standards of public participation and environmental accountability.
 15. **Physical intimidation:** During public hearings, women environmental defenders have been shouted down, physically intimidated, or excluded from the discussion. Women environmental defender, lawyer Ms. Nazeli Vardanyan was assaulted while attending a public hearing regarding the "Karmir Sar" cement mine project.

16. **Digital surveillance:** Women environmental defenders report unauthorized photos, doxing, and the distribution of intimate or manipulated images. Ms. Tehmine Yenoqyan filed a complaint to the police on September 6, 2018 in relation to video and photo materials containing abusive comments, circulating on Facebook, and based on the video surveillance of her house in Gndevaz village. The police opened a criminal investigation, which led to the identification of two individuals in relation to the camera surveillance and the fake Facebook accounts, who are connected by working relations with Lydian Armenia. The case was then closed by the Vayots Dzor Regional Prosecutor's office.

Recommendations

- Ensure that environmental impact assessments are transparent and participatory, with meaningful input from civil society and affected communities.
- Carry out an independent prompt, effective and impartial investigation into attacks on human rights defenders and end the atmosphere of impunity against human rights defenders.
- Register and compile statistics of threats and attacks against human rights defenders, along with information relating to their investigation and rates of prosecution.
- Ensure effective investigation of criminal cases initiated by women human rights defenders and take measures to protect them from hate speech.

General recommendations to the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

- Acknowledge the heightened risks faced by women environmental defenders and integrate their protection into international human rights monitoring and reporting frameworks.
- Condemn gender-based repression of women environmental defenders and promote gender-responsive protection measures.
- Organize a dedicated online meeting between the Special Rapporteur and Armenian women environmental defenders to discuss the findings of this submission and identify urgent protection needs.

V. References

<https://hrhyerevan.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/SLAPPs-report-2025.pdf>

<https://hrhyerevan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/HRHannualreport2019hy.pdf>

<https://hrhyerevan.org/en/news/slapps-conference/>

<https://rightsinddevelopment.org/news/armenia-environmental-defenders-defamation/>
<https://cvmedia.am/page2-1602-&lung=en-88>
<http://rm.coe.int/files16e-2024-armenia-amulsar-gold-ngo-report/1680aeb9d>
https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/ACSRC_2023_2_to_HE_MFA_from_Aarhus_SR%20on_Env_Def_complaint_17.04.2023.pdf
<https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/response-by-zcmc-cjsc/>
<https://friendsoftheearth.eu/news/armenian-activists-criminalized-for-exposing-harmful-mining-project/>
https://friendsoftheearth.eu/news/declaration-abusive-use-legal-proceedings-silence-activists-armenia/?fbclid=IwY2xjawEXBktleHRuA2FibQIxMAABHSca83juVSlelLQt7sURjIU2H8xtbd-nakV1jBu9VHMppo9VbdTVScPV2w_aem_dswNIQmQS63xo-LdzP2umA
<https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/armenia-judicial-harassment-and-defamation-campaigns-against-several>
<https://www.ecolur.org/en/news/mining/15910/>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6A3NB09IKY>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ays_nghWRwU