

**Raising their voices: HRDs respond to the human rights crisis
The Situation of Human Rights Defenders in Armenia**

September 30, 2025

Joint Submission by:

Human Rights House Yerevan



Human Rights House Yerevan Members:

“Sexual Assault Crisis Center” NGO

“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

1. 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.
2. The report focuses specifically on two key challenges for HRDs in Armenia: the increasing use of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), and hate speech, smear campaigns, and other forms of

harassment on HRDs. The submission aims to contribute to the upcoming report of the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders on the situation of human rights defenders for the Special Rapporteur's report to the 61st session of the Human Rights Council.

II. Context: Civic Space and Patterns of Harassment in Armenia

3. In recent years, HRDs in Armenia have operated in an increasingly hostile and polarized environment. Both government representatives and opposition actors attack HRDs, instrumentalizing traditional and online media to discredit, stigmatize, and silence them.
4. Defenders are frequently portrayed as “foreign agents” or threats to “national values.” This rhetoric, amplified by political discourse, malign media outlets, organized troll networks, and nationalist groups—some allegedly linked to Russian actors—reinforces stigma and hostility, particularly against those working on reproductive rights, LGBT rights, equality, and accountability.
5. Harassment goes beyond rhetoric. HRDs face smear campaigns, online and offline threats, and misuse of the legal system. Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), defamation cases, and criminal complaints based on false allegations have become common tools to burden defenders with lengthy proceedings, drain resources, and intimidate others from engaging in rights-based advocacy. These tactics are often compounded by coordinated disinformation and hate speech campaigns.
6. Despite international standards requiring states to protect and affirm the legitimacy of HRDs, Armenian authorities have failed to provide consistent public support or effective remedies. Instead, the absence of safeguards enables far-right and nationalist actors to push recurring proposals to restrict NGOs, framing civil society as working “against the nation.”
7. As a result, defenders in Armenia face systemic harassment, delegitimization, and denial of justice. The cumulative effect is shrinking civic space, reputational damage, burnout, and reduced capacity of civil society to participate in democratic processes or advocate for reforms.

III. SLAPPs as a Tool to Silence HRDs

8. Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) have become a growing concern in Armenia, posing a significant threat to journalists, environmental activists, and HRDs. SLAPPs are abusive legal actions—typically framed as defamation or reputational harm claims—brought not to seek genuine remedies but to intimidate, silence, and burden individuals or groups who raise issues of public interest. In Armenia, these lawsuits are increasingly used both by powerful corporations and government representatives, weaponizing the courts as tools of repression.

9. Since 2018, nearly 30 SLAPP cases have been initiated by mining companies against activists and journalists, demanding excessive financial compensation and seeking to drain defenders' resources. From 2018 to 2020, Lydian Armenia alone filed 19 lawsuits against residents and environmental activists, attempting to neutralize criticism of its Amulsar gold mine project. Between 2023 and 2024, Zangezur Copper Molybdenum Combine (ZCMC) lodged at least 10 SLAPPs with much higher monetary demands, showing how such practices are becoming normalized.
10. One of the most emblematic cases is that of independent journalist and environmental defender Ms. Tehmine Yenokyan, who faced repeated SLAPPs from both Lydian Armenia and ZCMC. In December 2022, Armenia's Court of Appeals ordered her not only to retract a public statement critical of Lydian Armenia but also to pay nearly 1.2 million AMD (€2,900) in compensation and fees. The decision forced her to publish a retraction under threat of criminal liability. Later that same year, ZCMC also filed a defamation claim against her, demanding 6 million AMD (€14,150) in compensation for a Facebook post alleging environmental pollution. These cases demonstrate the severity of the chilling effect SLAPPs can have on individual defenders, discouraging them and others from speaking out.
11. Importantly, SLAPPs are not confined to corporations. In recent years, state officials and representatives of ruling institutions have also initiated or supported defamation claims, primarily targeting independent media outlets and investigative journalists working on corruption and governance issues. By misusing their public office to file lawsuits or encouraging allied actors to do so, government representatives create an environment of intimidation and retaliation. This practice sends a broader message that those who expose misconduct, challenge discriminatory policies, or advocate for equality risk facing legal harassment. These lawsuits are often accompanied by orchestrated smear campaigns in politically aligned media, which amplify the reputational damage and further undermine the credibility of defenders.
12. In Armenia, however, no legal safeguards currently exist to prevent SLAPPs or to ensure early dismissal of vexatious lawsuits. This gap enables powerful actors—corporate and governmental alike—to continue misusing the justice system with impunity. Without urgent reform, SLAPPs will remain an increasingly effective instrument for silencing human rights defenders, undermining democratic accountability, and shrinking civic space.

IV. Violations Against Defenders of Reproductive Rights

13. Reproductive rights remain among the most sensitive and contested issues in Armenian society, situated at the intersection of political, cultural, and religious tensions. Defenders working in this field often encounter backlash not only from conservative groups and nationalist actors but also through institutional barriers and targeted defamation campaigns.
14. Women's rights defender Lara Aharonian has faced a particularly emblematic case of such violations. For the past seven years, she has been entangled in a defamation lawsuit after being falsely accused of "perverting children" and "spreading pedophilia." These accusations reflect a broader smear tactic frequently used against gender equality and reproductive rights advocates in Armenia, framing their work as morally corrupt or threatening to traditional values.
15. Rather than delivering justice, the judicial process itself has become a tool of harassment. The case has been repeatedly delayed and obstructed. Six months ago, the trial was restarted under a new judge, resetting the entire process. Since then, the court has been stalled for four consecutive months, repeatedly revisiting the same procedural motion concerning the statute of limitations—re-examining for the third time whether Lara's initial claim, filed seven years ago, was submitted on time.
16. This cycle of endless delays and procedural stalling represents more than inefficiency; it constitutes a denial of justice. The drawn-out proceedings prolong Lara's exposure to stigmatization, keep the defamatory accusations in circulation, and prevent closure or accountability. Such tactics not only silence the defender directly affected but also send a broader message to others in the field: those who challenge discriminatory narratives around gender and reproductive rights risk being dragged through years of legal limbo, reputational harm, and emotional distress.
17. In this way, the case illustrates how defenders of reproductive rights in Armenia face smear campaigns, institutional obstruction, and safety risks, leading to self-censorship and weakening the broader movement for gender equality.

V. Violations Against Defenders of LGBT Rights

18. The work of LGBT+ rights defenders in Armenia takes place against a backdrop of high levels of stigma, hostility, and politicization of LGBT issues. Defenders not only face threats, harassment, and hate speech but are also vulnerable to institutional retaliation when they attempt to hold decision-making bodies accountable.
19. A recent case illustrates how procedural irregularities can be used in ways that undermine defenders' ability to participate in national and international platforms. On 25 June 2025, a decision was circulated within the Country

- Coordinating Mechanism (CCM), announcing a formal reprimand and temporary suspension of participation for Mamikon Hovsepyan, a long-standing health and human rights defender. According to Mamikon Hovsepyan and “Pink” human rights defending NGO, instead of providing clarification or responding substantively to the concerns raised, the CCM Secretariat initiated proceedings under vague and inconsistently applied standards. The decision contained internal contradictions, relied on documents not previously shared or approved by CCM members, and failed to reference any formally adopted procedure. No clear evidence was presented, and the reasoning provided was insufficient.
20. Beyond the impact on an individual defender, Pink underscores that this precedent sends a broader chilling message. For LGBT+ organizations and defenders, this means reduced visibility, restricted participation in decision-making spaces, and increased vulnerability to retaliation.
 21. Such practices contribute to self-censorship and burnout among defenders, while the voices of LGBT+ communities are excluded from platforms where their perspectives are crucial.

VI. Recommendations & Key Messages to the Special Rapporteur

On SLAPPs:

- Recognize SLAPPs in Armenia as a systemic and escalating threat to human rights defenders, journalists, and activists, particularly those working on environmental issues and sensitive topics.
- Urge the Armenian authorities to adopt legal mechanisms with a clear criteria for identifying abusive lawsuits, mechanisms for early dismissal, and safeguards against excessive damages and costs that impose financial and psychological burdens on defenders.
- Encourage the judiciary to develop specialized training to help judges distinguish between legitimate claims and SLAPPs, and to dismiss abusive cases promptly.

On protection of defenders:

- Call on the government to provide effective protection measures for human rights defenders, especially those advocating for reproductive rights and LGBT+ rights, who face heightened risks of smear campaigns, online harassment, and legal harassment.
- Urge authorities to publicly condemn hate speech and stigmatizing rhetoric directed against human rights defenders, and to hold accountable those spreading incitement and threats, including members of parliament and political figures.

- Recommend that authorities establish a transparent system for recording and monitoring threats and attacks against human rights defenders, including data on investigations and prosecutions, to address the current climate of impunity.

On accountability and impunity:

- Call for independent, prompt, and impartial investigations into all cases of attacks, harassment, and intimidation against human rights defenders.
- Urge public officials and government representatives to refrain from weaponizing the legal system against critical voices and to instead engage in constructive and respectful dialogue with civil society organizations.

On international support:

- Encourage donors and international partners to provide sustainable funding for the legal defense of human rights defenders targeted by SLAPPs, ensuring that defenders are not silenced by financial pressure.
- Stress the importance of psychosocial assistance and wellbeing programs for defenders under attack, as prolonged harassment, legal persecution, and stigmatization create severe risks of burnout and trauma.
- Ask the Special Rapporteur to explicitly raise these concerns in communications with the Armenian government, ensuring that Armenia is held accountable to its international commitments and its accepted recommendations.