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We must protect women human right defenders

The UN General Assembly votes this week on a resolution to protect women human rights defenders.

This vote recognises the courageous women who defy patriarchy every day, everywhere in the world, to champion human rights. They hold communities together in times of war – and hold the key to building peaceful communities when the guns go silent. In so many male-dominated institutions, they campaign for women’s voices to be heard. They stand with men in public squares to challenge autocratic leaders.

These women embody the commitment made by the international community in 1948 when the world enshrined the equal rights of all human beings “without distinction of any kind” in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The UN recognises and protects the vital role played by human rights defenders. But there is a growing consensus that women who choose to challenge human rights abuses face particular risks and need particular protection. They can be harassed and verbally abused. They face gender-based violence including rape. Their children and their families may be targeted. Often, they come up against entire systems of laws and cultural values designed to silence them.

In the past, resolutions on human rights defenders have passed in the UN General Assembly by consensus. But we are very concerned that not all countries are prepared to support this week’s vote.

To be clear, a vote to protect women human right defenders is a vote for human rights.

On the other hand, a vote against the bravery, sacrifice and determination of millions of women worldwide is a vote against the values to which we aspire. It is a vote against dignity and hope.

We urge all Member States of the General Assembly to do the right thing and vote in favour.

***Gro Harlem Brundtland** is a former Prime Minister of Norway and former Director-General of the World Health Organization. **Hina Jilani** is a lawyer and pro-democracy campaigner from Pakistan. She was UN Special Representative on Human Rights Defenders from 2000-2008.*

*Both are members of **The Elders** (www.theElders.org), a group of independent leaders working for peace, justice & human rights worldwide.*