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Promotion and protection of human rights: human rights questions, including alternative approaches for improving the effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms

Protecting the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association from stigmatization

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the General Assembly the report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Gina Romero, in accordance with Human Rights Council resolution [50/17](#).

* [A/79/150](#).



Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Gina Romero

Summary

In the present report, the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Gina Romero, highlights the harmful impact of the increasing negative and stigmatizing rhetoric targeting civil society and activists on the effective enjoyment of these freedoms. She calls for decisive action to prevent and counter these narratives as part of the State's obligations to create an enabling environment and facilitate the exercise of these rights.

I. Introduction

1. The present report contributes to efforts by the mandate holder to change the negative narratives that portray and stigmatize associations and peaceful assemblies as enemies or threats to security and values. These hostile narratives, which have intensified and expanded, create undue restrictions and hinder the exercise of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association globally. They also contribute to large-scale violence and repression against civil society and activists, effectively denying these freedoms and undermining their essence. As identified by the Special Rapporteur, the widespread use of negative narratives is one of the global trends contributing to growing authoritarianism and the closing of civic space.

2. Many Member States echoed these concerns during the fifty-sixth session of the Human Rights Council and expressed support for advancing counter-narrative efforts as essential to protecting these fundamental freedoms from attack.

3. The report is therefore aimed at shedding more light on the impact of negative and stigmatizing rhetoric against civil society and peaceful protesters on the exercise of these rights and provides recommendations for countering this damaging phenomenon to ensure that everyone can participate in public life and contribute to seeking inclusive and sustainable decisions on the compounding crisis that communities around the world face today.

4. There are multiple examples of this stigmatizing rhetoric: “anarchists acting in the pay of lobbying and interest groups” (Algeria); “suspicious activities” (Algeria and Mali); “*maniobras extorsivas*” and “false news threatening public order” (Argentina); “extremist formation” and “online resources are ‘extremist’ materials” (Belarus); “institutionalized engineering of evil” and “manifestation of evil forces and affiliated with ‘Satan’” (Brazil); “participating in an insurrectional movement and attempted coup d’état” (Burundi); “You went to the UN to sell us” (Cameroon); “traitors to the country/republic” (Cameroon and Nicaragua); “undermine the rule of law”, “collusion with foreign forces” and “inciting subversion of state power/ Authority” (China); “*personas de desajustada mala conducta social*” and “*secta satánica*” (Cuba); “terror organizations” (Egypt, Israel and Nicaragua); “internal enemies” and “organization advocating the interests of a foreign power” (Georgia); “foreign-supported organizations/universities”, “jeopardize national security”, “headquarters of agents, agent sold on money” and “organizations that supports immigration, do not ensure the survival of the nation” (Hungary); “using foreign contributions to the detriment of the countries’ image” and “project the image of the country in a poor light” (India); “seeking to polarize society” and “enemy conspiracy, sedition, core instigators, oppose the country’s security and tranquillity” (Iran (Islamic Republic of)); “masterminding a guerrilla warfare campaign against the regime” (Myanmar); “*obispos del demonio*” and “coup mongers” (Nicaragua); “damaging family integrity” (State of Palestine); “negative propaganda against the country” (Pakistan); “masquerading as defenders of human rights” and “serving hidden agendas of deceit and violence on the ground” (Philippines); “activities knowingly aimed against the state security” and “undesirable organizations” (Russian Federation); “undermining order, religious values, good morals”, “inciting people to disrupt social order”, “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” and “disobeyed the King and disturb the peace” (Saudi Arabia); “wizards and witches” (South Sudan); “great evil”, “enemies of the country” and “corrupt women and destroy families” (Türkiye); “conspiracy to cause a public nuisance” and “extremist, mentally ill, misandrist, dangerous” (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland); “conspiracy” (United Kingdom and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)); “destabilizing agents” and “false pro-human rights missions” (Venezuela (Bolivarian

Republic of)); “activities attempting to overthrow the government” (Viet Nam); and “immorality and conspiring against Islamic values” (Yemen).¹

II. Methodology

5. For the preparation of the report, the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Gina Romero, benefited from 33 submissions from civil society, academics and legal professionals, featuring 36 countries from all regions. The report also draws from communications sent by the special procedure mandate holders and from numerous meetings and regional and global consultations with various stakeholders around the world and with regional human rights bodies, amounting to a total of 164 people. The findings in the report also draw from numerous online and in-person consultations with students, faculty members and other actors involved in the pro-Palestinian solidarity protests.

III. Conceptual framework and States’ obligations

6. International human rights law guarantees and protects the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (arts. 21 and 22) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

7. Under international human rights law, States have the obligation to refrain from applying laws and engaging in practices that interfere with the exercise of these rights. Any restrictions or limitations must be permissible under international human rights law, be prescribed by law and be necessary and proportionate in a democratic society in order to pursue a legitimate aim. Restrictions must not be discriminatory or impair the essence of a right. Under article 21, peaceful assemblies involving some level of disruption and “collective civil disobedience or direct action campaigns”, provided that they are non-violent, are protected (see [CCPR/C/GC/37](#)).

8. States also have the positive obligations to promote and protect the exercise of these rights, including by adopting legislative, judicial, administrative, educative and other appropriate measures to fulfil their legal obligations (art. 2 of the Covenant), and to provide effective remedies in the event of a violation of these rights. Furthermore, States must protect individuals and groups from actions by non-State actors that would impair the enjoyment of their rights (see [CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.13](#)).

9. Hostile and stigmatizing narratives targeting associations and assemblies, directly or indirectly, violate or facilitate violations of numerous human rights protected under the Covenant, including the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association (arts. 21 and 22), to hold opinions without interference and freedom of expression (art. 19), to non-discrimination (art. 2), to participate in public affairs (art. 25), to equality before the law and equal protection of the law (art. 26) and to the prohibition of arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy, family, home or correspondence (art. 17). The Covenant protects without discrimination the rights to life (art. 6), to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment (art. 7), to be protected from arbitrary arrest or detention (art. 9) and to enjoy equality before the courts and tribunals, be “entitled to a fair and public hearing by a competent, independent and impartial tribunal established by law” and be presumed innocent

¹ See [A/HRC/45/36](#), [A/HRC/52/67](#), [A/HRC/54/61](#), [A/HRC/56/50](#), [A/HRC/56/50/Add.2](#) and [S/2023/294](#). See also [ACSR/C/2024/26](#) and communications [BLR 10/2023](#), [BRA 1/2023](#), [BRA 2/2023](#), [CUB 4/2023](#), [GBR 6/2024](#), [GEO 1/2024](#), [HUN 1/2018](#), [HUN 2/2017](#), [HUN 7/2018](#), [IND 14/2018](#), [NIC 1/2023](#), [NIC 2/2023](#), [OTH 1/2024](#), [RUS 3/2024](#), [TUR 7/2023](#) and [VEN 4/2022](#).

until proven guilty according to law (art. 14). The right to life and to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment are among the absolute rights from which States are not permitted to derogate, even at a time of public emergency (art. 4). States also have an obligation to ensure protection from “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence” (art. 20).

10. The participation of communities and their ability to express views and be included in decision-making processes has been recognized universally as a threshold for peace, development and advancing climate justice goals. In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development Goal target 16.7 is aimed at ensuring “responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels”. At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2021, States renewing their commitment to sustainable development recognized that the “opportunities for people to influence their lives and future, participate in decision-making and voice their concerns are fundamental for sustainable development” (see General Assembly resolution 66/288).

IV. Hostile and stigmatizing narratives with an impact on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association

11. Negative and hostile narratives increasingly used to vilify and criminalize civil society and activists deepen the stigmatization of those exercising their rights to peaceful assembly and association. Stigmatization, whether intentional or not, especially when propagated by authorities, effectively denies these fundamental rights. It misrepresents legitimate exercises of freedom as illegal and those involved as criminals or threats to national security, public order or morals. This fuels harmful stereotypes, fosters hostility, justifies punitive measures and triggers undue restrictions on these rights.

12. Narratives often reflect and are employed to promote a particular point of view or set of values and are often used as a vehicle for influencing and changing public opinion and perceptions. Narratives are described as “cultural artifacts” that are “derived from the discursive frameworks that circulate in society”. As such, narratives are “discursive forms that express cultural values and play as vehicles for understanding and interpreting experiences”.² Narratives collectively shape public attitudes, legal frameworks and policy decisions.

13. Stigmatization is a complex process involving the devaluation, dehumanization and marginalization of individuals or groups based on actual or perceived characteristics or behaviours. Stigmatization is often based on attributes such as race, gender, sexual orientation or political beliefs, often resulting in profound social, economic and psychological impacts and reproducing and legitimizing inequalities. Stigmatization is also a form of power that may be used for political purposes, “a corrosive social force by which individuals and communities throughout history have been systematically dehumanised, scapegoated and oppressed”.³

14. Stigmatization of civil society, civic mobilization and activism often have a severe and lasting “chilling effect”, not only on directly affected individuals and groups, but also a detrimental impact on civic space broadly. Its impact is especially deeper for individuals and groups that already experience heightened barriers to exercise their freedoms and are subjected to inequality, marginalization, racism,

² Fabio Velasquez, *Del Conflicto al Estallido: Las Movilizaciones Sociales en Colombia 2019–2021* (Lima, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2024).

³ Imogen Tyler, *Stigma: The Machinery of Inequality* (New York, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023).

discrimination and violence because of, among other grounds, their gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age and/or migration status.

Actors facing stigmatization

15. The Special Rapporteur has observed and documented stigmatizing and hostile narratives that predominantly target civil society and activists challenging government policies and expressing dissenting views. In particular, activists working on the following areas are subjected to hostile stigmatization: accountability, promoting the rule of law, human rights and democracy; ethnic and religious minority issues, women's and reproductive rights, LGBTIQ+ rights; rights of migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees; rights of Indigenous Peoples and environmental rights; transparency, good governance, anti-corruption and electoral irregularities; and conflict and post-conflict issues, transitional justice and peace.

16. Those targeted with severe stigmatizing narratives also include children and young people participating in activism, such as activism related to environmental and social justice issues, and persons, including students, participating in pro-Palestinian solidarity protests. Unions and labour rights associations have also faced stigmatization for their legitimate activities.

17. Although the level and extent of stigmatization varies from context to context and may be subject to political, geopolitical or socioeconomic developments, it is alarming that various forms of stigmatization against civil society and activists are becoming a global pattern and are intensifying.

V. Stigmatizing narratives

18. Instead of addressing the compounding crisis and needs of society, such as those due to rising conflicts, insecurity, inequalities or the acute climate crisis, authorities have weaponized stigmatizing narratives to silence critical voices.

19. As noted in the report of the previous Special Rapporteur to the Human Rights Council at its fifty-sixth session (A/HRC/56/50), there is a global rise in propaganda and hostile narratives aimed at suppressing civil society, protests and social movements, often portraying them as "enemies". These narratives are often defended in the name of protection of national security and sovereignty, public order, morals, traditions and values or protection from foreign interference, or in the name of greater transparency. As highlighted in the report, such narratives often exploit unresolved historic and structural discrimination and racism, as well as historical and cultural grievances and fears.

20. Furthermore, civil society and activists are operating in an increasingly hostile and overly regulated environment providing a breeding ground for stigmatization and further fuelling stigmatizing narratives.

A. Actors involved in stigmatization

21. A broad set of actors is often involved in generating and disseminating stigmatization against activists and civil society, often supported with disinformation and smear campaigns, as well as populist rhetoric by authorities and public figures.

22. Globally, including in democratic States, government officials, including high-ranking ones, have been involved in generating hostile and stigmatizing narratives targeting civil society actors and peaceful protesters. Political discourse explicitly stigmatizing civil society and activism, as well as tacitly condoning such narratives

or failing to protect those exercising their rights to peaceful assembly and association, are major sources of stigmatization.⁴ Other sources, owing either to their deliberate actions or omissions (due to lack of sensitization, capacity, independence or integrity), include law enforcement, security and intelligence agencies, judicial bodies, legislators, political parties and the rise of authoritarian and anti-rights political actors.

23. Often authorities and public figures have used deliberately stigmatizing rhetoric against civil society and activists to discredit and exclude them from public discourse and restrict their ability to influence politics and decision-making.

24. Non-State actors also contribute to the stigmatization process. Media companies, often owned or controlled by ruling parties, Governments or powerful political figures, can spread and amplify stigmatizing narratives, turning public opinion against civil society actors and protests. Stigmatization is further propagated by social media platforms, businesses, investors, religious leaders, fundamentalist groups, anti-rights movements and even illegal actors, among others.

25. The stigmatizing actions of these actors are often interlinked and mutually reinforcing.

B. International actors and their role in contributing to stigmatization

26. Unfortunately, some actions by the international community have also contributed to the stigmatization of civil society and social movements. For instance, civil society groups in the Middle East, North Africa and other regions have reported that the repression of pro-Palestinian solidarity protests by “Western established democracies” – which call for ending the assault on Gaza and the occupation of Palestine – has set a negative example used to justify and normalize similar repressive actions by authorities against civil society in these regions.

27. In some cases, multilateral bodies have also contributed to the broad stigmatization of civil society. For example, the “Defence of Democracy” package and foreign influence registration scheme proposed by the European Union risks empowering the adoption of already widespread restrictions on civil society organizations, not only in Europe, but in other regions as well. Civil society associations may self-censor or decline international support for fear of such stigmatization or other adverse consequences of being labelled “foreign agents”.

28. The exclusion, sidelining and restriction of civil society’s effective participation in multilateral spaces, such as United Nations-supported events, peace talks and political discussions, contribute to stigmatization. The exclusion of civil society and women during the United Nations-hosted discussions between the Taliban de facto authorities and other stakeholders in Doha in 2024 sparked an international outcry, including condemnation by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.⁵ This move not only contradicted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#) on women and peace and security, but also appeared to legitimize the exclusion of women and women’s organizations from all decision-making and their criminalization and stigmatization by the Taliban in Afghanistan.

29. International civil society organizations also raised concerns of obstacles faced by civil society in accessing discussions of the Human Rights Council. The lack of

⁴ See also <https://rm.coe.int/study-on-stigmatisation-of-ngos-in-europe-en/1680af95df>.

⁵ See www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/06/afghan-women-and-girls-must-be-included-upcoming-doha-meeting-un-womens.

meaningful civil society participation in direct discussions during the 2024 high-level political forum to take stock of progress on the 2030 Agenda is also concerning. Furthermore, civil society has been subjected to smear campaigns and exclusion from multilateral spaces and to reprisal for collaborating with the United Nations by some authorities as well as by anti-rights groups (see [A/HRC/54/61](#)).

30. States have also contributed to the issue and empowered the perpetuation of such harmful practices by condoning political leaders responsible for such severe abuses of fundamental freedoms, in the name of geopolitical and security interests. This leaves civil society even more vulnerable.

VI. Use of stigmatizing rhetoric to clamp down on civic freedoms

A. Vilification, demonization and misuse of security and counter-terrorism measures and policies

31. States have misused or deliberately used the security paradigm to promote and reinforce stigmatizing narratives that demonize and criminalize associations and protesters.

32. Unjustified accusations of terrorism, facilitated by broad anti-terrorism laws, have been weaponized to stifle civic activism and civil society critical of government policies. Between 2011 and 30 June 2024, the mandate holder participated in 249 communications concerning at least 69 States, related to counter-terrorism laws and laws on countering the financing of terrorism that unnecessarily or disproportionately restrict fundamental freedoms. The mandate holder also addressed cases of misuse of anti-terrorism laws to arbitrarily arrest, criminalize and repress activists and protesters.

33. Since the “war on terror” and the widespread adoption of overly broad and vague anti-terrorism legislation, States have increasingly adopted and spread narratives vilifying and delegitimizing peaceful protesters and activists as “terrorists” and “violent extremists”. This has further been facilitated as some States have expanded the already broad and ambiguous definition of “violent extremism”. Furthermore, States have used narratives around the protection of national security to target activists, as activists and protesters have often been labelled “anti-national” or as having “links or funding terrorist organizations” and “causing disorder” simply for their political participation.

34. Legitimate acts of expression have been portrayed as a form of terrorism, treason and a threat to State security. Restrictive public order measures have also been used to portray activists exercising their right to peaceful assembly as being a “threat to public order” or “rioters”.

35. Among those labelled as “terrorists” and stigmatized in the name of countering terrorism and terrorist financing are human rights defenders (including human rights organizations working on accountability for Israeli atrocities in the Occupied Palestinian Territory),⁶ humanitarian organizations, Indigenous Peoples and land rights activists (Ecuador and Philippines),⁷ the LGBTQI+ movement (Russian

⁶ See www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/04/israelpalestine-un-experts-call-governments-resume-funding-six-palestinian.

⁷ See communications sent to Ecuador (ECU 2/2013) and the Philippines (PHL 4/2023).

Federation),⁸ climate justice and environmental defenders (Austria, France, Germany and United Kingdom),⁹ peaceful protesters (Argentina, Kazakhstan, Iran (Islamic Republic of) and Peru)¹⁰ and journalists reporting on protests (such as during the farmers' protests in India).¹¹ Pro-Palestinian solidarity protesters, including those involved in protests organized by students on university campuses, have also been vilified by public authorities in some States as supporting "terrorism".

36. Likewise, broad national security laws and measures have been misused as a source for stigmatizing and repressing activists (such as pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong, China).¹² Stigmatizing narratives based on geopolitical divides have been used, especially targeting civil society actors critical of authorities, to portray civil society as an "enemy of the State", its values and history and "undermining" State sovereignty and national security.

37. Branding civil society, movements and activists as "terrorists" or "traitors" has a serious impact on their lives, well-being, family life and economic situation; it can silence them and lead to the defunding of associations and their unlawful dissolution.

38. In the Philippines, individuals labelled as "terrorists", "communists" or "enemies of the State" have been murdered; and the continuous "red-tagging" or labelling of individuals and groups as "communists" or "terrorists" has been found to be "a persistent and powerful threat to civil society and freedom of expression" (see [A/HRC/44/22](#), paras. 49 and 51).¹³ The Special Rapporteur and other experts have also raised concerns over the designation by the Russian Federation of civil society organizations (such as the youth democratic movement Vesna) as "extremists", leading to their dissolution and subjecting their members to arbitrary arrest and criminalization for actions related to the exercise of their legitimate rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of expression against the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹⁴

B. Narratives of preventing foreign influence and preserving national interests

39. There has been a rise of narratives labelling civil society and protesters as "foreign agents" and "agents of foreign influence", often basing such allegations on the type of funding that they receive. Those receiving foreign funding have been explicitly singled out and attacked with harassment and stigmatizing campaigns. This labelling is accompanied by excessive supervision and potential restrictions on access to resources for civil society. The "foreign agent" stigmatization further undermines the public trust needed for civil society to be able to do its work.

40. These narratives have become a widespread tool for stigmatization aimed at delegitimizing activists and associations and are enabled and entrenched by the wide adoption of so-called "foreign agent" laws, which have resulted in criminalization

⁸ See www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/12/un-experts-condemn-russian-supreme-court-decision-banning-lgbt-movement.

⁹ See https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/UNSR_EnvDefenders_Aarhus_Position_Paper_Civil_Disobedience_EN.pdf.

¹⁰ See the response of the Government of Argentina to communication OL ARG 4/2024 (available at <https://t.ly/JHgrd>); communication sent to Kazakhstan (KAZ 1/2022); and [A/HRC/55/67](#) and [A/HRC/56/50/Add.1](#).

¹¹ See communication sent to India (IND 2/2021).

¹² See communications sent to China (CHN 16/2023 and CHN 10/2021); and submission from the Committee for Justice, Egypt.

¹³ See also communication sent to the Philippines (PHL 4/2023).

¹⁴ See communication sent to the Russian Federation (RUS 30/2023).

and, in some countries, the mass dissolution of civil society organizations designated as foreign agents (Nicaragua and Russian Federation).¹⁵

41. This has been further supported by smear campaigns against civil society organizations receiving funds from abroad, including the publication by authorities of lists of such organizations. Lists have also been published on social media or by media outlets using negative stigmatizing language, targeting both the funding organizations and the civil society organizations themselves, as well as their staff, amplifying the stigmatization and exposing them to hate speech, vilification and attacks.

42. The Special Rapporteur received information that during the recent elections in some countries in the Africa region, civil society organizations working on election monitoring were subjected to stigmatization, being called “agents of foreign influence”, thus undermining their work towards free and fair elections.

C. Narratives exploiting discrimination and structural racism

43. Members of minority groups exercising their rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association often face additional hostile and stigmatizing rhetoric rooted in historical discrimination and structural racism. This includes discrimination based on religion, language, culture, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability or socioeconomic status. In many societies, these groups already experience social stigma, making such rhetoric easy to reinforce, spread and use as a powerful tool for suppressing freedoms and rights.

44. High-level politicians and authorities have exploited deeply rooted societal discrimination to build stigmatizing and hateful rhetoric aimed at silencing those who raise their voices, including by exercising their right to peaceful assembly. This stigmatizing rhetoric is often agitated or magnified by the media and social media, creating a dangerous environment. It incites violence by individuals and groups against those targeted by the harmful rhetoric and the entire community to which the activists belong.

45. The previous mandate holder found that in Peru participants in the social Indigenous Peoples-led protest were subjected to a severe stigmatization campaign grounded in structural and historical discrimination and racism against Indigenous communities (see [A/HRC/56/50/Add.1](#)). Reports have also been received that in India Muslim minority protesters against discriminatory laws and practices such as the Citizenship (Amendment) Act faced hate speech and flagrant incitement to violence by high-level political leaders and members of Parliament aimed at suppressing the protests, labelling the protesters as “anti-nationals” and vilifying and demonizing the Muslim minority in the country.¹⁶ This has exposed protesters and their community to violence, including vigilante violence, collective punishment and repression of peaceful protests, as well as to punitive actions, to which some media outlets allegedly contributed.¹⁷

46. With the rise of anti-rights movements, populism and fundamentalism, rhetoric grounded on the protection of morality and religious values has increasingly been used around the world by States and non-State actors to stigmatize civil society and

¹⁵ See [A/HRC/54/54](#) and www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/2023/Cierre_espacio_civico_Nicaragua_ENG.pdf.

¹⁶ See communication sent to India (IND 15/2020).

¹⁷ Submission by Amnesty International.

assemblies that promote gender equality and sexual and reproductive rights, including LGBTQI+ associations and peaceful assemblies.

47. In addition, authorities in some countries have further used sexual and gender-based violence as a tactic to perpetuate stigmatization against activists, exploiting discriminatory contexts and existent social stigma based on gender identity as a weapon to silence women activists and protest movements. For instance, in Afghanistan, Taliban de facto authorities have used arbitrary detention and sexual violence in detention against women activists as a tool to further stigmatize women protesters in front of their families and society, which also exposes them to honour killings by their families, in order to prevent them from protesting. The institutionalization of gender discrimination, which dehumanizes and stigmatizes women and girls, creates an environment conducive to radicalization and further suppresses women for raising their voices and participating in public life (see [A/HRC/56/25](#)). Regarding the protests in the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2022 inspired by women's rights and equality, the Human Rights Council's independent international fact-finding mission found that the "security forces played on social and cultural stigma connected to sexual and gender-based violence to spread fear and humiliate and punish women, men and children, including LGBTQI+ persons or their families for participation in the protests". The mission established a "pattern of cruelty directed at protesters on the basis of their gender and actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity" (see [A/HRC/55/67](#)). The Special Rapporteur received further testimonies of increased stigmatizing attacks using gender identity narratives to stigmatize and silence women activists and organizations promoting women's and LGBTQI+ rights by both authorities and conservative fundamentalist groups in the Middle East and North Africa region.

48. Civil society and solidarity groups aiding refugees and migrants have also been exposed to harassment and stigmatizing rhetoric, as well as to aggravated legislative, administrative and media attacks, including being charged with criminal offences for their humanitarian work and subjected to racist and xenophobic attacks by anti-immigrant groups¹⁸ and being accused of "undermining national security and unity". In addition to delegitimizing and criminalizing the work of civil society, this also feeds into the narrative of stigmatizing and dehumanizing people on the move.

D. Narratives related to preserving economic growth and development

49. "Anti-development" rhetoric has been used by authorities and politicians to target land rights defenders and climate justice associations and activists and those advocating for fair and sustainable development and questioning government development plans. In addition, in some countries, environmental activists have been stigmatized by authorities as being "anti-economic growth" or "anti-national interests" for defending community development rights and for "spreading misinformation".¹⁹ This rhetoric undermines the legitimacy of civil society and its ability to contribute to policy debate and socioeconomic development more broadly, also affecting fair and just development.

¹⁸ See <https://rm.coe.int/conf-exp-2024-3-en-study-on-civil-society-support-to-refugees-and-migr/1680b07d4c>.

¹⁹ Submission by the Freedom of Association Coalition, Indonesia.

E. Narratives exploiting historic grievances and conflict

50. Narratives are also being built to stigmatize civil society and protests around unresolved past grievances. For example, civil society organizations dealing with past crimes, such as with regard to the genocide in Srebrenica in Bosnia and Herzegovina, have faced smear campaigns and a hostile environment enabled by the denial of the crimes and the glorification of war criminals by the authorities in Republika Srpska.²⁰

51. In other conflict and post-conflict contexts, civil society and activists are also stigmatized and labelled as being members of armed groups in order to justify repression against them.

F. Stigmatization of children and young people

52. Children and young people are at the forefront of critical social movements and protests today, including for climate justice. Child activists, however, have often been denied political agency and their protests are being delegitimized by authorities and public figures, as well as through the media. Their right to peaceful assembly and their capacity to participate in public debates is often questioned, despite this right being explicitly protected by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In addition, children taking part in peaceful protests have been excluded from schools, their families stigmatized and criminalized.²¹

53. Students taking part in pro-Palestinian solidarity campaigns have been told that they do “not know what they are talking about” by politicians and the media, which is aimed at delegitimizing their protests. In many countries, youth protesters have been vilified as being “violent”, “radical”, “disruptive” and “terrorists” and subjected to abuse by law enforcement.

VII. Stigmatization and repression of global critical social movements and unions

54. The worldwide climate change and pro-Palestinian solidarity movements are among those facing increased levels of stigmatization online and offline by authorities and non-State actors. This stigmatization has triggered further sweeping restrictions and repression instead of creating a space for dialogue and addressing the crises that these movements are seeking to highlight and prevent.

55. States must not only refrain from stigmatizing these protesters but should also facilitate their rights to peaceful assembly and association, ensuring that any restrictions are evidence-based, on a case-by-case basis and meet the requirements of legality, necessity and proportionality while taking into account the significance of the aims of the protest from a rights-based perspective.

56. When public interest is high, as in cases of climate protection, human rights or States’ obligations to prevent and respond to international crimes such as genocide, it is crucial for States to recognize and support peaceful protest actions, including civil disobedience and other non-violent methods. Such actions are legitimate forms of protest and have historically been pivotal in major transnational social movements aimed at ending atrocities and advancing human rights and equality.

²⁰ See www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/bosnia-herzegovina-act-urgently-reverse-deterioration-civic-space-and.

²¹ See www.unicef.org/reports/free-and-safe-protest.

A. Stigmatization and repression of pro-Palestinian solidarity protest movements

57. High-level government officials, public figures and the media have used demonizing and vilifying rhetoric against global pro-Palestinian solidarity protests. This stigmatization has been framed as a fight against anti-Semitism and hate speech. In some Western countries, demonstrations were labelled as “hate marches” and “mob rule”, accused of “supporting extremism” and pre-emptively banned without evidence. States justified these blanket restrictions by citing risks of incitement to hatred, “glorification” or “support of terrorism” and potential threats to national security or public order. Protesters were vilified and criminalized for using Palestinian symbols, such as flags and the keffiyeh (traditional scarf), and for slogans such as “from the river to the sea” (which advocates for freedom, human rights and dignity for all in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory), or slogans written in Arabic. These actions have created a hostile environment for pro-Palestinian expressions and activists.²²

58. The Special Rapporteur is deeply concerned about the vilification and stigmatization of peaceful solidarity protests organized by students on campuses globally, including those protesting against the war in Gaza, and universities’ ties with companies alleged to be involved in war crimes. In various universities in the United States of America, such as Columbia University,²³ authorities and law enforcement have responded disproportionately, with vilification, criminalization, sanctions, arrests, detentions and the use of excessive force. In addition, students have faced excessive surveillance both online and on campus, allegedly by private security firms hired by universities.²⁴ Such actions are discriminatory, excessive and contrary to States’ obligations to facilitate the right to peaceful assembly. In some instances, heavily armed law enforcement and anti-terrorism units have been deployed, further stigmatizing solidarity protesters as “violent” and “a threat”.

59. Universities and law enforcement have failed to protect protesting students from vilification and threats experienced online and offline, exposing them to the risk of violence by the public. These excessive actions, based on and triggered by stigmatization, have a deep chilling and psychological impact on students and have disproportionate consequences, including suspension and loss of university housing and immigration status, thereby affecting their potential career prospects.²⁵

60. The media have significantly contributed to the stigmatization of peaceful encampments, often depicting them in terms of extremism and antisemitism (without clear evidence) rather than addressing the protest’s legitimate causes. Inaccurate reporting or misreporting has justified blanket restrictions, demonized student protesters, incited hatred and exacerbated the hostile environment for pro-Palestinian activists. This has implicitly led to the application of counter-terrorism measures against those exercising their legitimate rights.

61. Stigmatizing narratives against pro-Palestinian protesters have skewed public perception, painting them as being extremist, violent in nature or linked to terrorism, which has increased racism and hate.

²² See www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2024/02/israelopt-enabling-human-rights-defenders-and-peaceful-protests-vital-achieving; and submissions, including from Canadian Lawyers for International Human Rights.

²³ See communication OTH 71/2024.

²⁴ See <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/05/1149616>.

²⁵ See communication OTH 71/2024.

62. The Special Rapporteur also highlights concerns about Western donors suspending or restricting funding to several Palestinian and Israeli human rights and civil society organizations owing to unsubstantiated terrorism allegations. These decisions “further contribute to increased stigmatisation of Palestinian civil society, who have been targeted continuously with smear campaigns, and amplify the chilling effect on rights activists, especially from Palestinian and Jewish communities, and those calling for a just peace. They also contribute to the collective punishment of Palestinian civilians”.²⁶

63. Hate speech is unacceptable, and it should be properly addressed by targeting specific individuals or groups involved, applying the six-part threshold established by the Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence (A/HRC/22/17/Add.4, appendix), not by imposing sweeping bans and restrictions on the whole assembly and movement. Likewise, anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian speech should also be adequately addressed.

64. These unprecedented restrictions on pro-Palestinian solidarity movements risk triggering further curtailment of public freedoms, as already seen in some Western countries’ hardening of anti-protest laws and expansion of definitions of extremism.

B. Environmental activists

65. Despite fighting the climate crisis being high on the United Nations agenda and one of the priorities for the 2030 Agenda, it is concerning that climate justice activists continue to be subjected to aggravated vilifying and stigmatizing campaigns. Environmental activists continue to be labelled as “eco-terrorists”, “extremists”, “criminals”, “anti-development” and “foreign-funded” and “portrayed as serving the interests of ‘militant’, ‘extremist left-wing’, ‘communist’ and ‘terrorist’ groups” (see A/76/222). As a result, climate justice activists have been targeted by terrorism-related provisions and laws related to combating organized crime and protecting national security. Some countries have expanded anti-terrorism laws to include terms such as “radical environmentalism” as a category of “terrorism”.²⁷

66. A broad set of actors is involved in smear campaigns against climate justice activists, including high-ranking government officials, the media and powerful special interest groups.

67. Narratives against non-violent climate justice protests often cite the need to maintain public order and prevent disruptions. Public authorities, contrary to international standards (see CCPR/C/GC/37), “appear to consider any disruption as a form of violence or threat to public safety, and, on this basis, unduly restrict the exercise of the right to peaceful assembly or prohibit certain forms of protests entirely”.²⁸ For instance, the Special Rapporteur has received reports of environmental activists in Australia being falsely accused of preventing an ambulance from responding to an emergency, amplified by the media and social media.²⁹ In the United Kingdom, it is particularly concerning that “a young man has been sent to prison for four years due to his decision to come together with others [in an online

²⁶ See www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2024/02/israelopt-enabling-human-rights-defenders-and-peaceful-protests-vital-achieving.

²⁷ Submission by Novact, Spain.

²⁸ See https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/UNSR_EnvDefenders_Aarhus_Position_Paper_Civil_Disobedience_EN.pdf.

²⁹ Submission from academics and student staff, Faculty of Law, University of Technology Sydney, Australia.

video call] to discuss how to prompt government action through entirely peaceful means to address the serious threats posed by the climate crisis”.³⁰

C. Unions and labour rights activists

68. The respect and protection of workers’ rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association continue to deteriorate globally, especially for those in the informal economy. Unionists and labour rights activists face stigmatization and defamation campaigns, criminalization, arbitrary detention, attacks and targeted assassinations.³¹ In some States they were labelled as “extremists” and “western agents” and charged with terrorism-related offences, such as in Belarus, where independent unions were labelled “enemies” of the State and forcefully dissolved.³² In some countries, workers’ protests were violently repressed, with authorities perpetuating vilifying narratives, such as in Bangladesh where they were labelled “saboteurs” and “threats to the democratic process” or to investments.³³ In Zimbabwe, unionists advancing the rights of teachers in rural schools have been systematically criminalized and charged, including for “participating in a gathering with intention to promote public violence, bigotry and breaches of peace”.³⁴ In Europe, the rise of right-wing movements has encouraged regressive policies against unions and workers, contributing to the criminalization and stigmatization of strikes.³⁵ In Latin America, the labels “conspirators”³⁶ and “*vende patrias*” are commonly used. This climate of stigmatization and repression undermines the full enjoyment and protection of workers’ and unionists’ rights.

VIII. Stigmatization and repression of peaceful assembly and association

69. Hostile and stigmatizing rhetoric against civil society and activists has a severe impact on individuals and the broader rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association. This rhetoric leads to sweeping restrictions, fosters baseless suspicions, undermines reputations and isolates activists from their families and communities. It imposes excessive regulations, burdensome administrative requirements and heavy sanctions while cutting off their funding. Activists also face increased intimidation, physical attacks and online harassment, including sexual and gender-based violence, especially against women. In severe cases, activists’ families, including children, may experience harassment and attacks, both online and offline.

70. Contrary to international human rights standards on peaceful assembly (see [CCPR/C/GC/37](#)), States continue to misinterpret and misrepresent some disruptions and other legitimate forms of peaceful assembly as violence. Isolated acts of violence within an assembly are often used to brand the entire assembly as violent, legitimizing restrictions on participants or the entire event. Such stigmatization, which labels a whole peaceful assembly or sector as criminal, triggers broad restrictions and

³⁰ See https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/ACSR_C_2024_26_UK_SR_EnvDefenders_public_statement_18.07.2024.pdf.

³¹ See [A/HRC/53/38/Add.3](#); and International Trade Union Confederation, Global Rights Index 2023.

³² See communication sent to Belarus (BLR 6/2022); and www.ilo.org/resource/other/director-generals-report-latest-development-regarding-situation-freedom. See also (on Myanmar) www.ilo.org/publications/towards-freedom-and-dignity-myanmar.

³³ Submission by Amnesty International.

³⁴ Submission by Solidarity Centre. See also communication sent to Zimbabwe (ZWE 2.2022).

³⁵ See www.ituc-csi.org/global-rights-index.

³⁶ See communication sent to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (VEN 4.2022).

criminalization, undermines the principle of individual liability and may amount to collective punishment (see [A/77/171](#)), which constitute serious human rights violations.

71. The stigmatization of civil society and assemblies creates a broad chilling effect that has a significant impact on public participation. It restricts the ability to participate fully in society, exacerbates inequalities, fosters environments of fear and hostility, increases polarization and erodes trust between authorities and the public. This atmosphere provides fertile ground for the emergence of anti-rights movements.

A. Stigmatization and repressive laws

72. Negative and stigmatizing narratives spread by authorities and political actors have led to the expansion of restrictive legislation on peaceful assemblies and associations, which further exacerbates stigmatization, creating a mutually reinforcing harmful cycle. Although some laws may not be created with an intent to restrict or stigmatize civil society and may have legitimate objectives, their deficiency or broad definitions create space for misinterpretation and abuse by political actors, law enforcement, the media, companies or judicial institutions. Thorough impact assessments with the meaningful and inclusive participation of civil society are required prior to the adoption of legislation, especially affecting the rights of associations and peaceful assemblies, to prevent potential stigmatization. Between July 2023 and June 2024, the mandate holder sent 26 communications related to laws and bills, including on “foreign agents”, restricting civic freedoms in all regions.³⁷

73. Likewise, stigmatization rhetoric, branding a peaceful protest as “violent” and a threat to security or public order on the basis of isolated acts of violence or some disruption, led to authorities adopting harsher and more draconian anti-protest and public order legislation,³⁸ reinforcing the narrative for management and security control of peaceful assemblies and contradicting the State’s responsibility to facilitate the right to freedom of peaceful assembly without unwarranted interference (see [CCPR/C/GC/37](#)).

B. Stigmatization, violence and repression

74. Stigmatizing, vilifying and hostile rhetoric against activists and social movements is an underlying source and instrument for criminalization and repression.

75. Stigmatizing rhetoric, especially when spread by political leaders and other public authorities, enables and empowers law enforcement agents to use unnecessary and disproportionate force against peaceful protests and to arbitrarily arrest and criminalize those exercising their right to freedom of peaceful assembly. This rhetoric creates an environment in which law enforcement, instead of facilitating peaceful assemblies, unlawfully represses them, often using excessive force and committing serious human rights violations such as unlawful killings, serious injuries and torture and other ill-treatment during protests.

76. Branding activists and peaceful protesters as “terrorists” triggers the arbitrary application of terrorism and security laws,³⁹ leading to arbitrary detention, aggravated penalties, travel restrictions, asset freezes and unlawful surveillance. This often undermines their due process and fair trial rights. Criminalization based on

³⁷ See communications sent to Georgia (GEO 1/2024), Rwanda (RWA 3/2024) and Tunisia (TUN 1/2024).

³⁸ See communications sent to Argentina (ARG 3/2024) and the United Kingdom (GBR 16/2022).

³⁹ Submission by Forum Asia.

stigmatization violates the presumption of innocence principle, and the criminalization of associations and peaceful protesters is itself a means of stigmatization.

77. False and vilifying narratives have also been used for legitimizing and justifying orders for unnecessary and unlawful use of force, including “shoot to kill” and the use of lethal force when, for example, protesters are framed as “terrorists” or “rioters” or a “threat to national security”.

78. In Peru, the stigmatization of protesters as “enemies”, “terrorists” or “*terrucos*” was the underlying trigger instigating the violent repression of social protests by the armed forces and law enforcement, which led to 50 deaths and hundreds of injuries inflicted in the context of the social protests between 7 December 2022 and 30 March 2023 (see [A/HRC/56/50/Add.1](#)).

79. Furthermore, the deployment of excessive law enforcement resources, including protective equipment, significantly reinforces the stigmatization of peaceful protesters. This approach can perpetuate narratives depicting protests as a whole and all protesters as violent or dangerous, instilling fear in the public and deterring participation.

80. As a positive practice to de-escalate violence in the context of protests and prevent the reinforcement of harmful stigmatization, law enforcement and authorities should prioritize dialogue and negotiations, including through the deployment of dedicated appropriate dialogue units (see [A/HRC/55/60](#)). Such a technique has most recently proven successful in the response to some pro-Palestinian solidarity encampment protests.

81. Provocateurs have also been used as an instrument to stigmatize protests and to legitimize the banning or dispersal, including through the use of force, of peaceful assemblies. Likewise, the subjecting of certain communities or areas to excessive surveillance, and “preventing detentions” in connection with their potential involvement in protests, has a stigmatizing effect as it creates and reinforces perceptions that these communities are susceptible to violence and a risk to criminal activity.

82. The use of language by political figures and high-level officials to portray non-violent protest actions as “extremist”, “*golpistas*” or “radical” exposes them to further violence, including by the public. Equating participation in peaceful protest with “radical activities” increases hostility around the rights to peaceful assembly, including peaceful protest, and participation. Such labelling further subjects to stigmatization, criminalization and violence journalists, medics, lawyers and others exercising their professional duties during the protest.

83. As noted, media reporting can exacerbate stigmatizing narratives that result in restrictions and violations regarding peaceful assemblies. By focusing on violent incidents and uncritically amplifying stigmatizing narratives, the media may portray an entire assembly as violent. This distortion impedes accurate reporting and can prompt authorities and law enforcement to respond disproportionately, including by unlawfully banning assemblies or using excessive force against peaceful protesters. Such reporting can also stir public hostility and resentment towards protesters, delegitimize their actions and messages and potentially provoke hostility towards law enforcement, which may escalate violence.

84. The Special Rapporteur stresses that when actors, especially those in a position of influence by virtue of their office, use vilifying and stigmatizing rhetoric against collectives, such as civil society and assemblies, their speech deepens political polarization and halts the prospect of democratic dialogue. Political actors and those in authority should instead foster an environment conducive to democratic dialogue

in order to address the grievances of the communities, which also prevents the stigmatization of peaceful assemblies.

85. In line with the Model Protocol for Law Enforcement Officials to Promote and Protect Human Rights in the Context of Peaceful Protests, as part of the facilitation approach, law enforcement should ensure that “officials and public messages use neutral language and avoid stigmatizing or hostile rhetoric regarding a protest, its organizers or participants or other actors involved” (see [A/HRC/55/60](#)).

C. Stigmatization and impunity

86. The Special Rapporteur recalls the findings of the report by the previous mandate holder on advancing accountability for serious human rights violations in the exercise of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association ([A/HRC/53/38](#)), in which he found that such narratives limit access to justice, “help entrench impunity” and lead to the evasion of accountability for serious human rights violations, as well as encourage the reoccurrence of abuses and deny victims the right to justice, reparations and truth.

87. Stigmatization plays into the authorities’ policy of negation and denial of abuses against civil society and protesters, while shifting liability to those exercising their fundamental rights. Civil society, activists and protesters, mischaracterized as criminals instead of being provided with access to justice and effective remedy for serious abuses, such as enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention or unlawful use of force by law enforcement, have faced detention and long-term sentences for their legitimate activism, including death sentences (such as for allegations of treason and terrorism), and in some cases tried in specialized courts or military courts, thereby denying their fundamental rights.⁴⁰

88. Stigmatizing rhetoric by authorities, underpinned by laws and measures granting sweeping powers to law enforcement agencies, legitimizes the otherwise unlawful use of force and exempts responsible authorities and law enforcement officials from accountability. When such narratives are spread by high-level public authorities, they can create bias within law enforcement, prosecution and judicial institutions, leading to a failure to hold responsible parties accountable. This lack of justice further exacerbates the impact of stigmatization. Victims and their families often face additional stigmatization when seeking justice or being vocal about abuses related to the exercise of their freedoms.

89. The Special Rapporteur received disturbing information of a stigmatization campaign against the families of victims of enforced disappearances in Pakistan, profiling them as being linked to “terrorists” and “conspiring against the country” and, as part of this narrative, allegedly charging them with terrorism, sedition and hate speech.⁴¹

90. Overturning stigmatizing narratives against civil society and protesters is an important element for ensuring justice, truth and reparations for victims of serious abuses of human rights violations due to the exercise of their fundamental freedoms. The recognition through judicial decisions of the human rights violations inflicted in the context of exercising these freedoms is vital for restoring the dignity and rights of the activists affected, and civil society as a whole. Overturning the stigmatization is also important for restoring and preserving the memory of the peaceful protest and

⁴⁰ Submission by Forum Asia. See also www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/12/myanmar-un-human-rights-chief-alarmed-death-sentences-secretive-military and <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/07/1123172>.

⁴¹ Submission by Amnesty International.

its legitimate objectives (see [A/HRC/53/38](#)). In cases of serious violations, in particular large-scale abuses in the context of protests and against associations, it is vital as part of the truth-seeking and investigation process to examine the role of stigmatizing narratives directly or indirectly contributing to such abuses and the specific roles of different actors.⁴²

91. Considering the scale of harm and the severity of human rights violations that stigmatizing narratives against peaceful protests and civil society can inflict, sometimes amounting to crimes against humanity, public officials should be held accountable for generating or spreading hostile and stigmatizing rhetoric that instigates, incites or facilitates abuse, repression and serious human rights violations. Victims of stigmatization should receive adequate reparations that account for the diverse impacts of harm, including psychological damage. Holding accountable those who intentionally generate such narratives, especially when their actions incite hatred or violence by law enforcement or non-State actors, would deter the use of stigmatization as a tool of repression.

IX. Role of technology

92. Digital technologies and the Internet have provided new opportunities for the exercise of these rights; however, they have also introduced new forms of oppression on civic freedoms, including facilitating and contributing to the large-scale spread and amplifying the impact of stigmatization against people participating in public debates and mobilizing through the use of technologies.

93. The Special Rapporteur is concerned about the use of digital technologies such as facial recognition and biometric systems for profiling individuals involved in assemblies and civil society activities. Stigmatization often leads to intrusive surveillance and profiling of activists to repress or detain them, sometimes to prevent their participation in protests or as a reprisal. Claims have been made that technology was used to identify students in peaceful pro-Palestinian solidarity protests on campuses, resulting in sanctions motivated by stigmatization. According to the digital component of the Special Rapporteur's tools for law enforcement, decisions on using digital technologies "must take into account the wider range of rights and freedoms implications including less visible impacts such as the potential for stigmatisation and chilling effects". The guidelines state that "digital technologies should not be used to categorize, profile or remotely identify individuals, including by biometric means, before, during, or after protests", asserting that "such technologies at protests [are] inconsistent with the obligation to facilitate the right to peaceful assembly".⁴³

94. Technologies have also facilitated online harassment and smear campaigns, doxing, cyberbullying, hate speech, dehumanization, impersonalization, intimate image abuse, trolling or deep fakes, which have been used to further stigmatize activists.⁴⁴ Digital technologies, while providing an opportunity for activists in exile to continue their public activism and join cross-border solidarity movements, have also facilitated transnational online repression and the expanding stigmatization of activists in exile. In particular, women, girls and others facing discrimination and gender-based stigmatization, including LGBTQI+ persons (see [A/HRC/56/49](#)), are more likely to be targeted on account of their public activism. The impact on these

⁴² See Fabio Velasquez, *Del Conflicto al Estallido: Las Movilizaciones Sociales en Colombia 2019–2021*, on the impact of narratives on peaceful protests in Chile and Colombia in 2019 and 2021.

⁴³ See www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/Toolkit-law-enforcement-Component-on-Digital-Technologies.pdf.

⁴⁴ See communication OTH 22/2024.

groups is even more severe and lasting owing to their gender and the additional stigma that they face in society.⁴⁵ Such attacks have also been generated, sponsored or condoned by States.

95. The online stigmatization of and general lack of remedy and protection for victims have an elevated and prolonged psychological impact on the targeted activists, including severe depression and creating a state of constant anxiety, isolation and silencing of victims as they have “nowhere to go to receive help”. The severity of the impact may amount to psychological torture (see [A/HRC/43/49](#)).

X. Countering stigmatization: changing narratives

96. Contesting and reversing harmful narratives that have especially been imposed with the use of State power and resources or through disinformation, misinformation and violence is very difficult.

97. However, there have been some positive efforts by civil society, the international community and donors, among others, aimed at responding to and countering these narratives.

A. Changing the narrative by ensuring an enabling normative framework

98. Enhancing understanding of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association by strengthening the normative framework is important to counter stigmatization through misinterpretation of these rights and misuse of restrictions.

99. Valuable efforts include clarifying and advancing the right to access the resources of associations, led by the previous mandate holder (see [A/HRC/53/38/Add.4](#)) and by the donor community, such as the World Movement for Democracy initiative on access to resources.

100. To address and change the negative narratives around peaceful protests, a vital contribution has been made through the Human Rights Council resolution on the right to peaceful protest (see [A/HRC/56/L.19/Rev.1](#)), in which the Council reinforces the notion that peaceful protests should be facilitated, echoing the Model Protocol developed by the previous Special Rapporteur. This effort is reinforced by civil society awareness campaigns on the right to peaceful protest (including “Protect the Protest” and #freetoprotest).⁴⁶

101. To curtail the narratives alleging that not-for-profit organizations are linked to terrorism or terrorism financing, important steps include the amendments to recommendation 8 of the Financial Action Task Force seeking to address its “misapplication” that had “led countries to apply disproportionate measures on non-profit organizations”, as also documented by the mandate holder. Especially important is the Task Force’s clarification that not all associations are vulnerable to terrorism financing, as well as the update of its best practices to combat terrorist finance abuse.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ See www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/explainer/2023/11/creating-safe-digital-spaces-free-of-trolls-doxing-and-hate-speech.

⁴⁶ See www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/freedom-of-expression/protest and www.article19.org/campaigns/freetoprotest-2.

⁴⁷ See www.fatf-gafi.org/en/publications/Fatrecommendations/protecting-non-profits-abuse-implementation-R8.html and www.fatf-gafi.org/content/dam/fatf-gafi/guidance/BPP-Combating-TF-Abuse-NPO-R8.pdf.coredownload.inline.pdf.

B. Countering anti-rights narratives

102. Other initiatives are aimed at developing narratives to counter stigmatization by promoting messages of hope to reinvigorate public support for democracy and human rights. They seek to shift the narratives that polarize societies by creating the sense of “enemy” in the face of civil society and activists.

103. Inspiratorio is an organization that creates “alternative, diverse and hopeful narratives, to challenge the dominant interests that have established narratives about the world, perpetuating and normalizing injustice, oppression and inequality”. Others include the Hope Institute, Hope-Based Communications, Puentes, Global Narrative Hive, the Open Global Rights change of narrative and the International Resource for Impact and Storytelling.⁴⁸

104. As stigmatization is fostered by the democratic regression and spread of anti-rights agendas, actions seeking to bolster popular support for democracy and human rights and counter narratives of authoritarianism are most needed. Campaigns such as #thankyoudemocracy by the Global Democracy Coalition⁴⁹ within the framework of the most recent Summit for Democracy⁵⁰ are helpful. The adoption of a feminist foreign policy by various States is a crucial move to shape the debate and advance inclusive governance and decision-making.

105. To curtail anti-rights narratives, new paths for engaging in public debates and communicating about human rights are needed. The project Reimagining Human Rights by the creative studio Fine Acts⁵¹ is a good example, as well as the Faith for Rights framework developed by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights, which helps to address the narrative portraying the advancing of rights agendas as against religions and beliefs. The CREO community in Latin America advances the same objective.⁵²

C. Enhancing space for dialogue and inclusion

106. To counter the stigmatization and isolation of civic actors, and as part of recognizing the valuable and legitimate role of the civil society sector, efforts by multilateral organizations to create a safe space for inclusive participation for diverse civil society organizations, such as during critical climate justice, development and peace and security discussions, are essential. The #UnMute campaign, supported by civil society and some States, calling for greater participation and moving from token inclusion to the active and equitable participation of civil society in United Nations discussions, should be supported. In some countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, engaging with non-traditional allies to protect women’s rights and foster networks of allies to defend activists is a successful strategy.⁵³

⁴⁸ See www.inspiratorio.org/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email, <https://podernarrativo.org>, <https://storyforimpact.io> and www.openglobalrights.org/strategies/narratives.

⁴⁹ See <https://globaldemocracycoalition.org>.

⁵⁰ See <https://summit4democracy.org>.

⁵¹ Inputs from Hope-Based Communications. See also www.metgroup.com.mx/civilstory/en/message/case-studies.

⁵² See <https://seeinghope.fineacts.co/human-rights-a-brilliant-way-of-living-our-lives> and https://creocomunidad.org/?utm_medium=email&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-8hYSr5n6GNPIrOQoBjsd_xg1NzgE5RAPdOP_1uBMRE06_LuFvc_m0B5qU9-MtUAqkD7ANm5iGwz4cvgyQtmRGji6pTjg&_hsmi=316051540&utm_content=316051540&utm_source=hs_email.

⁵³ Middle East and North Africa consultation.

D. Solidarity and building resilience

107. To remove the stigmatization that has triggered the criminalization of and violence against activists, solidarity initiatives shedding light on the personal stories of people who are arrested or murdered for exercising their freedoms and calling for their immediate release and justice are very important. Examples include Stand as my Witness, focused on the harassment and wrongful imprisonment of human rights defenders, and #Setthemfree,⁵⁴ focused on political prisoners and prisoners of conscience. Awards, tributes or other forms of public recognition of the work of civil society and activists are additional way to promote their value. This helps in countering the stigmatization of activists as being “undesired”, “suspicious” or “criminals” for the exercise of their freedoms and, in many cases, it serves as a protection measure.

108. Providing support and relevant funding by donors to associations targeted with stigmatizing and hateful rhetoric would enable them to adequately respond, which would otherwise exhaust significantly their resources and ability to operate.

109. It is not possible to list all the different stakeholders, in particular civil society, independent media outlets and journalists, that use social media and other digital tools to create or diversify narratives. Some relevant initiatives are Media4Change, which generates new narratives for the media, the #jagärhär initiative in Sweden, which defends people and organizations attacked online, and Bloqueo Masivo a Trolls in Argentina.

110. The pro-Palestinian solidarity encampment protests are another important example of countering stigmatization through cross-border solidarity movements.⁵⁵

E. Awareness-rising through documentation

111. Documentation and measuring the existence and impact of harmful narratives is needed, including information about the long-term chilling effect that these have on the exercise of public freedoms specifically and on other human rights. La Plataforma Nicaragüense de Redes de ONG is a good example.⁵⁶ Only when it is fully understood that closing an association involves more than crossing out a name from a record is the importance of protecting civil society and of stopping persecution and criminalization easier to defend.

112. Limited access to information facilitates disinformation and stigmatization. Initiatives providing documentation allow the public and opinion-makers to have a better understanding of the impacts of harmful narratives on human rights and enable more critical debates. Some initiatives include:⁵⁷

(a) Information about the impact of the abuse and misuse of less lethal weapons in the context of protests, including the project Unhealed Wounds;

⁵⁴ See www.civicus.org/index.php/involved/support-campaigns/stand-as-my-witness and www.helpsetthemfree.org.

⁵⁵ Middle East and North Africa consultation.

⁵⁶ See <https://libertadasociacion.org>.

⁵⁷ See <https://inclo.net/pillars/civic-space/unhealed-wounds>, www.frontlinedefenders.org/open-cases, www.globalwitness.org/es/standing-firm-es, <https://carnegieendowment.org/features/global-protest-tracker?lang=en>, <https://monitor.civicus.org> and <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map>.

(b) Use of artificial intelligence to share the experiences of activists in jail, such as Realidad Helicoide, providing virtual reality simulation about life in the El Helicoide prison in Caracas;

(c) Publication of a list of global open cases of detained human rights defenders, and documentation of human rights and land defenders and environmentalists killed per year per country, and accumulated per decade;

(d) Mapping initiatives such as Global Protest Tracker, Civicus Monitor and the Freedom House map; also, to help with public understanding of the scope of global campaigns or solidarity movements, mapping of pro-Palestinian peaceful assemblies and encampments has been useful.

113. To counter the narratives supporting the adoption of restrictive laws on the basis of the “lack of transparency of the sector” or about “suspicions on their actions”, civil society created communities of practice of accountability for global, regional and national (Colombian) civil society.⁵⁸ Campaigns such as “Civil society: it works!” in Poland, “Utopias exist” in El Salvador, Neon in the United Kingdom and Komons in Spain are aimed at reversing the narrative that civil society actors are “undesirable”.

XI. Conclusion and recommendations

114. Stigmatizing and harmful narratives generated and spread by both State and non-State actors undermine the essence of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, leading to serious human rights violations, impunity, closing of civic space, erosion of human rights, polarization and undermining of democracy. Detecting, monitoring and promptly countering stigmatizing narratives is integral to States’ obligations to respect, protect and enable the exercise of these rights. It is also paramount for preventing undue legal restrictions and repression of these freedoms, which create a cycle of repression and stigmatization.

115. Countering stigmatization against civil society and peaceful assemblies requires a holistic approach to change the narrative through legal reforms, institutional measures, accountability, tackling discrimination and promoting different narratives.

116. Urgent actions are required at the local, national, regional and international levels to ensure that those advocating for rights, peace, climate justice and equality are not vilified or stigmatized, so that people can engage safely in public debates for a better and safer future for all.

117. States should:

(a) **Ensure that public rhetoric supports and respects fundamental freedoms, promptly condemn and address harmful rhetoric and promote alternative narratives to prevent the portrayal of individuals and groups exercising their fundamental freedoms – including non-violent acts of civil disobedience – as threats or criminals, by both State and non-State actors;**

(b) **Promote an environment of public dialogue and inclusion in decision-making processes, respecting civil society and social movements as equal partners;**

(c) **Ensure that the legislative framework, including proposed laws and policies, aligns with international human rights law and standards, avoid**

⁵⁸ See www.csostandard.org, www.rendircuentas.org and <https://transparenciacolombia.org.co/ong-por-la-transparencia>.

imposing undue restrictions on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, repeal or amend laws that are incompatible with these standards and refrain from adopting new laws or policies that impede or obstruct these freedoms or foster stigmatizing narratives;

(d) Ensure that any restrictions on peaceful assemblies, including protests, comply with international human rights law, incorporate measures to prevent stigmatization into law enforcement protocols and guidance, including the adoption of the Model Protocol and its components, and integrate stigmatization prevention strategies into training for law enforcement, in particular for those in commanding roles;

(e) Apply a human rights-based approach to the acquisition, use and management of digital technologies and any associated data to prevent stigmatization impacts, especially on groups in vulnerable situations;

(f) Strictly refrain from using technology against associations or in the context of assemblies for indiscriminate and/or untargeted surveillance and surveillance based on group affiliation, and from using spyware or other forms of equipment interference to target the digital devices of civil society and activists, and guarantee the right to effective remedy for those affected;

(g) Ensure protections in law, policy and practice against vilification related to the exercise of fundamental freedoms, in compliance with international human rights standards, including freedom of expression and hate speech;

(h) Ensure accountability for both State and non-State actors that spread stigmatizing and hate rhetoric that incites violence, discrimination and human rights violations against activists and protesters, in line with international human rights law and the Rabat Plan of Action, and provide reparations for victims, ensuring that reparation programmes address both individual and collective harm caused by negative rhetoric;

(i) Conduct comprehensive, inclusive and publicly accessible research into existing harmful narratives and their impact on public freedoms, including evaluating the effects of legislation related to “foreign agents”, counter-terrorism, money-laundering, cybercrime and public order laws, with special assessments focusing on the impact of these narratives and legislation on vulnerable and marginalized groups;

(j) Address the root causes of stigmatization, including structural discrimination and racism, and ensure a safe, non-discriminatory environment for everyone to exercise their rights to peaceful assembly and association without discrimination;

(k) Ensure public access to diverse and reliable information sources, promote and strengthen a free and diverse media sector and improve digital literacy among all communities;

(l) Respect and ensure academic freedoms and raise awareness, including through inclusion in school curricula, of the historical positive achievements of rights movements and protests.

118. State authorities and public figures should cease and refrain from using narratives and political discourse that discourage and criminalize the exercise of fundamental freedoms.

119. The international community should:

- (a) Refrain from actions and/or rhetoric legitimizing and reinforcing stigmatization of civil society and peaceful assemblies;
- (b) Promote and implement positive narratives encouraging the facilitation of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, including by strengthening international and regional normative frameworks;
- (c) Denounce, in a public and timely manner, stigmatization rhetoric employed by States to target civil society and peaceful protesters and use diplomatic pressure to counteract this;
- (d) Provide international support and solidarity with stigmatized civil society, including those forced into exile, to counter and delegitimize stigmatizing narratives;
- (e) Provide funding and institutional support to civil society organizations to strengthen their resilience and capacity to protect and mitigate harm from stigmatization;
- (f) Raise awareness of stigmatizing narratives and their impact for civic space, civic participation, human rights protection and sustainable development;
- (g) Ensure the meaningful inclusion and equal participation of diverse civil society and grass-roots participants in discussions and negotiations related to climate justice, peace processes and other critical matters.

120. **Business, transnational corporations and social media companies should:**

- (a) Enhance human rights due diligence policies in line with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and ensure that business activities, including the production, trade and use of technology, do not intentionally or unintentionally contribute to stigmatizing activists, including peaceful protesters and land rights and environmental activists;
- (b) Ensure transparency, human rights due diligence, accountability and access to remedy to prevent undue restrictions on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association online;
- (c) Conduct broad, multi-stakeholder consultations with civil society, including those in exile, and international and regional human rights bodies to develop effective strategies for detecting, responding to and countering the stigmatization of civil society and activists, as well as the online spread of disinformation and anti-rights agendas;
- (d) Reform business models that prioritize engagement and profit over information integrity to prevent the generation and amplification of harmful content that stigmatizes civil society and assemblies;
- (e) Ensure consistent and transparent content moderation to limit the spread of disinformation and hate speech and remove harmful, vilifying and dehumanizing messages against civil society actors or activists, consistent with freedom of expression standards and the Rabat Plan of Action, and ensure transparent procedures and the ability to challenge content violation removal and provide access to remedy.