

Artists as Human Rights Defenders: AFI and INHR to Highlight the Crucial Role of Artists Fighting Oppression at Human Rights Council Side Event in Geneva

HEADLINE- Geneva: Artists from Afghanistan, Iran, and Russia Highlighted at Human Rights Council Event for Defending Rights through Creativity

Panel Advocates for Recognition of Artists as Human Rights Defenders

The discussion will include perspectives of artists and who use their creative voices to confront systemic oppression and advocate for gender equality

GENEVA, SWITZERLAND, July 10, 2024. Amidst the 56th session of the Human Rights Council, a panel convened by the [Artistic Freedom Initiative](#) (AFI) and [INHR](#) advocated for recognizing artists as human rights defenders. Featuring Afghan, Iranian, and Russian artists in exile, the event highlighted their courageous use of creativity to confront systemic oppression and advocate for social change, namely gender equality.

"The recognition of artists as human rights defenders is not just an acknowledgment of their bravery, but a vital step in pushing for change in societies under authoritarian rule," said Sanjay Sethi, Artistic Freedom Initiative's Co-Executive Director. "These artists wield their creativity as a powerful weapon against oppression, and our collective responsibility is to support and protect them. Their voices can inspire global movements and dismantle regimes of fear and repression."

In recent years, governments have systematically targeted artists and creative individuals to stifle dissent and exert control over public discourse in countries controlled by authoritarian regimes. Authorities seek to maintain a tight grip on the narratives that shape progressive societal values and beliefs by censoring artistic expression.

A current instance of this repressive trend has been unfolding in Iran since the death of Mahsa Jina Amini in September 2022. Iranian artists have been at the forefront of the "*Woman, Life, Freedom*" movement, enduring significant persecution. Artists played a crucial role in the protests, from impactful photo series and protest songs to poignant paintings and public performances. "Politics is not art, but art is inherently political," said Mania Akbari, the Iranian filmmaker who served on the panel discussion. Akbari added that she is creating stories that amplify human voices and that it is therefore vital to recognize the connection and the power this triangle—art, politics, and human rights—holds. Iranian artists used their work to convey powerful messages of resistance and calls for justice. These artworks have become symbols of defiance against strict oppression. Despite the inherent dangers, these creatives continue to stand against the regime's brutal tactics. The situation in Iran is emblematic of a more significant global issue where artists and cultural workers are often at the frontline of repression in authoritarian regimes.

The panel discussion at the Human Rights Council underscored the urgent need for international solidarity, immediate action, and the recognition of artists' role as human rights defenders (HRDs), recognizing their unique role in advocating for freedom and justice. The panel, moderated by [Sanjay Sethi](#), Artistic Freedom Initiative's Co-Executive Director, included rich and diverse geographical perspectives from:

- [Mania Akbari](#), one of Iran's most distinctive filmmakers who advocates for gender equality through her prolific films
- [Sahraa Karimi](#), an acclaimed Afghan film director, screenwriter, and university lecturer who was forced to flee her homeland in 2021 due to the Taliban's return
- [Elina Kulikova](#), a Russian theater director and artist who is known for her work on feminist and queer narratives and, after facing political persecution due to her stance regarding the Ukraine invasion, fled her country in 2022.

"At AFI, we defend artistic freedoms because artists drive social change. "Events like this at the HRC are pivotal in protecting artistic freedoms," said Sanjay Sethi. "Recognizing artists as human rights defenders amplifies their voices, giving powerful expression to those whose creative works have driven social and political movements worldwide. Building coalitions, informing the public, and framing artists' quests for change appropriately can play a pivotal role in highlighting their critical role in driving social change."

About [Artistic Freedom Initiative \(AFI\)](#) :

Led by immigration and human rights attorneys, Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI) provides pro bono immigration representation and resettlement assistance for international artists at risk. Dedicated to safeguarding the right to artistic freedom, AFI was founded on the notion that artists are uniquely situated to positively and powerfully effect change, provided their voices can be heard. As artists are increasingly censored, imprisoned, restricted from moving freely across borders, tortured, or even killed, it is more critical than ever that we safeguard the right to artistic freedom and zealously champion the courageous artists who exercise it. To this end, AFI directly assists artists who have experienced persecution, censorship, or other restrictions on their freedom of expression, and supports artists who have demonstrated a commitment to advancing progressive social change and fundamental human rights. Since 2017, AFI has taken on over 1670 legal cases involving artists at risk. For more information please visit: www.artisticfreedominitiative.org

About [INHR](#):

INHR is a U.S.-registered 501(c)(3) non-profit dedicated to improving access to the United Nations and enhancing the effectiveness of small and mid-sized states and NGOs. Trade associations, foundations, NGOs and UN member states use our services to improve their profile and effectiveness with UN agencies on issues of sustainability, human rights, health and disarmament. We have helped companies understand health implications of UN resolutions, shown lawyers how to advocate for accountability, and helped NGOs fund environmentally sustainable supply chains. Through offices in Geneva, Brussels, the U.S. and London, we train on climate change, women's participation, fundraising and more. Our free student legal advisor program for small delegations in Geneva and negotiation training for new Human Rights Council members help level the playing field for governments too.

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