

5 March 2021

### **Azerbaijan: Smear campaign against woman human rights defender Gulnara Mehdiyeva**

In the last week of February 2021, a smear campaign against woman human rights defender **Gulnara Mehdiyeva** was launched in Azerbaijani media and social media. The woman human rights defender has been targeted for her support to victims of domestic violence and drawing attention to the issue of femicide, and in relation to the suicide of young woman in Baku., to whom she provided support. The intensified defamation efforts are taking place ahead of International Women's Day.

[Gulnara Mehdiyeva](#) is a prominent woman human rights defender, an active member of the Azerbaijani feminist community and an anti-war activist. She has been one of the organizers of the women's marches on International Women's Day in Baku in 2019 and 2020, as well as numerous other peaceful protests on issues such as domestic violence, femicide and other human rights violations.

On 5 February 2021, Gulnara Mehdiyeva together with other feminists held a peaceful rally in front of the Government House in Baku, holding posters with the words "the murder of women is political". The aim of the rally was to draw attention to endemic domestic violence and killings of women in Azerbaijan, and was organised in response to the brutal murder of 32-year-old woman, Banu Maharramova, whose dismembered body was found in a dustbin in the Nasimi district of Baku the previous week. The women were reportedly followed by police officers after the rally.

Following the suicide of Sevil Atakishiyeva on 18 February 2021, a 20-year-old woman whom Gulnara Mehdiyeva had been providing support to, the defender published screenshots of their conversations on social media. In the post sharing the screenshots, Gulnara Mehdiyeva wrote that Sevil Atakishiyeva had asked her to publicize their messages if something happened to her. The messages detail the physical and psychological abuse that Sevil Atakishiyeva was reportedly subjected to by family members. Following Gulnara Mehdiyeva's sharing of the messages online, a smear campaign was launched against her in the media and on social media by unknown individuals, blaming feminism for the death of Sevil Atakishiyeva.

On 23 February 2021, recordings of private conversations between Gulnara Mehdiyeva and her friend were leaked on a Facebook page with over 60,000 followers. The Facebook profile that released the private messages labeled Gulnara Mehdiyeva as "schizophrenic" and "mentally ill". Several days before the audio recordings were leaked, screenshots of her conversation with a woman who had requested the defender's support, had also been published on Facebook.

The leaking of these audio recordings and conversations is believed to be in connection with the hacking of Gulnara Mehdiyeva's accounts on Gmail, Telegram, Facebook and Instagram in the first week of March 2020 following the women's march, which was violently broken-up by the authorities. It has been [reported](#) that the forensics of the hacking can be traced back to "Sandman", a state-sponsored hacker dedicated to compromising the private information of human rights defenders and independent journalists. The recordings and screenshots of Gulnara Mehdiyeva's communications which were leaked on Facebook in February 2021 were reportedly downloaded from the defender's accounts that were targeted by the hacker in March 2020.

On 1 March 2021, in response to Gulnara Mehdiyeva's lawyers filing of a complaint for the attacks against her to be investigated, the Ministry of Internal Affairs informed the defender that the opening of a criminal case on her claim is not planned. According to Gulnara Mehdiyeva, the increasing pressure against her is connected to her work on the case of Sevil Atakishiyeva and her involvement in the planning of the upcoming women's march on 8 March 2021.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the smear campaign and harassment of Gulnara Mehdiyeva, as it believes that she is being targeted solely as a result of her work in promoting and protecting women's rights in Azerbaijan. Front Line Defenders condemns the intimidation and targeting of the woman human rights defender, which may have a chilling effect on civil society, and is not conducive to the creation of a safe and enabling environment in which defenders can carry out their work in Azerbaijan.

**Front Line Defenders calls on the Azerbaijani authorities:**

1. Cease and strongly condemn the ongoing smear campaign against woman human rights defender Gulnara Mehdiyeva conducted through Azerbaijani media and social media;
2. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Gulnara Mehdiyeva;
3. Take measures to ensure that government officials and other public figures refrain from making statements or declarations stigmatising the legitimate work of women human rights defenders and publicly condemn slander of women human rights defenders;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Azerbaijan are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.