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# **WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS**

Insights from the  
Struggle

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# Risk and the Wellbeing of Women Human Rights Defenders

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## **Abstract**

*Women human rights defenders experience gendered risks arising from social expectations about their roles and behaviour as women, including from within human rights circles. These risks impact upon their mental and emotional wellbeing. This article explores why it is difficult for women defenders to address the mental and emotional impacts of their activism and highlights how human rights communities can support them in practices for self- and collective care.*

## **Introduction**

In a study of 407 human rights defenders (HRDs) in Colombia, Mexico, Egypt, Kenya and Indonesia, in which 191 self-identified as a woman (46.9 per cent), 210 as a man (51.6 per cent) and 6 as transgender (1.5 per cent), we found that gender mattered significantly in experiences of security and protection.<sup>1</sup>

While harassment, intimidation, stigmatisation, threats and attacks were experienced by defenders of all genders, many of the risks experienced by women defenders contained explicitly gendered elements. Women defenders were affected by misogynistic

attacks, the normalisation of gender-based violence, stigmatisation, sexual baiting, sexual violence, and threats against family members. As a woman defender discussed, “I think there’s a gender difference between female and male advocates. For example, my male colleagues have never received a message that says, ‘I’m going to rape you’, ‘I’m going to shove my \*\*\*\* in you’. As women, we not only receive the same threats as men, we are also exposed to other risks as women.”

A Kenyan defender also described an attack against her, saying, “One [attacker] was very angry, he hit me on

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back of head; I fell, he stepped on me; I thought he was going to strip me. I was terrified. They kept hitting me, one was trying to undress me. I remember them asking me if I was circumcised.” A woman defender in Mexico recalled that after a protest, “men detained were battered, not women. Women were undressed and put in front of a physician to be examined. Women were reminded that they had kids and could be disappeared.”

Gendered slurs and threats of sexual violence are often used against women defenders and their daughters. As a Kenyan woman defender discussed, “in their speech they threatened and threatened me, they called me a useless woman and a prostitute that had been left by her husband.” Participants also observed that protection agencies, enforcement officials, community members and even fellow colleagues often did not take threats and harm against women seriously. Violence against women was commonly depoliticised and left unattended.

Institutional discrimination poses a particular threat to lesbian, bisexual and trans women, and the widespread societal rejection of their gender identities and sexualities amplifies the risk they face. As a trans woman defender in Colombia asserted:

“Many of the rights of gays, lesbians and trans persons are violated by the same entities that are supposed to protect us. I have denounced a lot of

events. The police have beaten me and burned me... Having made these denouncements has made me very vulnerable and exposed in the streets. There have been comments that the police want to harm me and even want to kill me for the denouncements that I have made.”

Often, when faced with systemic institutional discrimination, the approach of making public accusations and denouncements is not effective. Another trans woman defender in Colombia discussed how she made 150 reports to the police over a period of 10 years, but of these, “there has not been one disciplinary sanction towards the police. The response to our complaints and to the reporting by trans women, is – if you hit a gay person, if you torture a gay person or even kill her – nothing will happen. And the police have even said that to us: ‘Go ahead, report us! Nothing will happen!’”

Violence against women defenders varied according to the issues they worked on. Defenders advocating for the rights of women, girls, sex workers and LGBTIQ\* persons also experienced not only institutional discrimination, but also felt more vulnerable to threats and attacks due to the absence of public support for their causes. A woman defender who was attacked and her face cut for defending sex workers also experienced discrimination by the police, saying she ‘deserved it’. When asked if anyone came to her assistance, she responded: “No one

[helped]. If I did not have money on me, I would be dead...I was able to treat myself. Otherwise I would be dead today.”

## Risk and its impacts on families and loved ones

Families and loved ones play a key role in women defenders’ experience of risk. Often family members can be targeted, directly and indirectly, in attempts to force defenders to back down. In Indonesia, a defender stated with regret, “I think I jeopardised my family and parents who were respectable people.” Having to shield their families from their work places is an additional burden on women defenders. It also removed a vital line of support. A defender in Kenya reported how, after a security incident at a protest, she was not able to seek help: “I could not tell my parents since they did not want me to go to the demonstration in the first place.” Likewise, a trans woman defender in Colombia discussed not telling her mother about her human rights work in order to protect her from worrying. “I don’t want her to know that my life is at risk.”

Direct threats to families and loved ones are hard for defenders to bear, and are commonly used against women in particular. In Kenya, a women defender reported that her mother’s house was burned down as a clear threat against her, and in Mexico, a defender told of how her office was broken into and signs were left in warning: “I had two portrait pictures of my kids on my desk; they put some strange circles around. It was similar

for other colleagues.” Likewise, in Kenya a woman defender reported:

“I am a brave person by nature, but the first time I was very scared was when I was attacked by armed gunmen who made it clear I was standing up against very powerful people in the community. At that time, I was afraid for my son, I was afraid they would shoot him.”

Another woman defender in Mexico discussed the guilt she felt because of the risk her work entailed for her family. “I told [my children] the situation and that I would not quit [activism]... I think another world with justice is possible... my three children respected my decision, that was important. I am working my guilt in therapy.”

However, women defenders also experience threats directly from their families because of their work, often also linked to societal expectations and stigma. A trans woman defender in Kenya reported how her work affected her relationships with her family: “They called me despicable... It was so hard I wanted to commit suicide. I could not proceed with my work at that time.” Likewise, in Egypt, a woman defender reported:

“I face this with my family when I try to defend a media personality they consider to be against the state, or against their inclinations at a given moment. This ranges from fighting with me to actual cutting ties. As

much as this appears insignificant compared to security threats, this psychological and social pressure may cause a person to back down at any given moment.”

## Violence within human rights circles

Women defenders also reported experiences of violence from within their organisations and movements. Sexism, discrimination, harassment and the lack of recognition for their work has contributed to toxic work environments. As a woman defender from Mexico elaborated,

“Sometimes [in my previous organisation] people approached me in a way that intimidated me. It was never direct, like in other spaces, but I felt burned out in some organisations even if I liked working in there, because I was tired of harassment... there were a lot of men harassing us, or mocking about our proposals. That is a form of violence.”

Other instances were more subtle, but nevertheless had significant impacts on the defenders who experienced them. For example, another woman defender from Mexico recalled, “we realised that gender components [in human rights work] were not named specifically when involving women human rights defenders... the work we made was not visible... was not recognised. [In the past] we were not vindicating ourselves as

women human rights defenders... many times men were the ones taking all the recognition [for our work].”

These experiences have had a chilling effect on women’s desire to participate in mixed-gender organisations. As a defender related, “when violence comes from within, from the closer sphere; such as sentimental partners, colleagues from the same organisations, machismo within social movements, when that happens, there is a peril of fracture, sometimes even more dangerous than that related to external actors.” Another stated:

“[W]e have learned that several women human rights defenders have been capable of responding against situations of torture, arbitrary detention, defamation campaigns by governments. Women defenders have confronted these type of situations and still continue their work. However, when the violence comes from their inner circle; within their families and organisations. In that case the impact on the work of defenders is extremely difficult.”

## Mental and emotional wellbeing

86 per cent of HRDs at risk in our study expressed that they were ‘somewhat concerned’ or ‘very concerned’ about their mental and emotional wellbeing. They were as concerned about this as they were about their physical security and

digital security. However, psychosocial support came through strongly as a gap in the provision for defenders. A woman defender in Kenya highlighted that, “[p]eople are more comfortable and are more socialized to deal with physical [security] because that is what we see and interact with. The minute you touch on mental health you are touching on a very soft spot for many people but there is need for a lot of awareness on that.”

When they do think about the topic of wellbeing, defenders often focus on the wellbeing of victims of human rights violations and abuses, rather than their own wellbeing. Defenders sometimes feel guilty when thinking about their own wellbeing; it feels self-indulgent. A woman defender working on land rights in Colombia expressed: “This is the last measure people take. We start by thinking about our children, our families, our communities; the last person we think about is ourselves. It is because of the ‘love for our art’; we are not looking to be protagonists or to serve our own interests.” Nevertheless, the psychological consequences of their work can be tremendous. Defenders in our study spoke about the challenges of living with pervasive fear and anxiety; of burnout and exhaustion; their inability to sleep; of their feelings of powerlessness in the face of oppression; of feeling ‘numb’ or emotionless; of being in constant ‘fight mode’; and of their fatigue, despair, isolation, and stigmatisation.

In human rights circles, there are strong social and cultural norms about self-sacrifice, heroism, and martyrdom. Especially in hostile conditions, risks are deemed as inherent in human rights practice. Defenders are expected to make personal sacrifices and to struggle; they are expected to face and manage risks or leave the work. Machismo culture and the pressure that defenders feel about needing to be (and to appear) ‘brave’, inhibit conversations about wellbeing. In some cases, defenders are concerned that talking about the threats and attacks they have experienced and about the anxieties that they feel, may perpetuate fear and discourage others from joining the human rights movement.

Some women defenders discussed how they had privately sought out counselling and support to help them cope with the toll of their work on their mental health. A defender in Mexico recalled, “I’ve been in very difficult circumstances in human rights organizations where they have taken me way beyond my limits [she cries]. So, that issue on emotional stability is really important and we don’t prioritize it, so what I personally did, was go to a psychologist... I think it’s the responsibility of the organizations to cover those expenses and provide for those services... the truth is that all of the emotional and psychological support that I’m receiving has saved me, literally.” In Kenya, a woman defender reported positively on how a regional feminist organisation was of help after a security incident:

“[I]t was more the mental and physical wellbeing, so they ensured that they were talking to me constantly, because I was confused and angry, they kind of put everything in place with communication over the phone... on the first night they made sure from the outside that they had booked a hotel that I went into straight from my house, and from there they contacted the human rights organisations in Kenya and told them what was happening.”

to the building of diverse, inclusive and strong movements of women human rights defenders (see Table 1).<sup>2</sup> These involve, inter alia, recognising women defenders publicly and affirming their contributions at every level; ensuring that they are enabled to connect to each other and sufficiently resourced for their human rights practice; documenting threats and attacks against them and bringing perpetrators to justice; as well as developing protection mechanisms that follow the UN Special Rapporteur’s seven principles underpinning good protection practices – namely that they are rights-based, recognise the diversity of defenders, gender-sensitive, focused on ‘holistic security’, oriented to individuals and collectives, involve defenders in the choice of strategies and tactics, and flexible enough to meet the specific needs of defenders.<sup>3</sup>

### Implications for practice

In his report to the Human Rights Council on the situation of women human rights defenders, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Michel Forst, emphasised eight priorities that would contribute

**Table 1: The UN Special Rapporteur’s priorities for building diverse, inclusive and strong movements of women human rights defenders (A/HRC/40/60)**

<b>Priority 1</b>	Publicly recognize the importance of the equal and meaningful participation of women human rights defenders at every level and in every institution in society, devoting resources to achieve this aim in accordance with the principle of substantive equality
<b>Priority 2</b>	Ensure that women human rights defenders enjoy freedom of movement and have safe spaces and communication channels that enable them to meet and share ideas, experiences, resources, tactics and strategies regularly
<b>Priority 3</b>	Build a safe and enabling environment for women and all other human rights defenders to promote and protect human rights, ensuring that all non-State actors respect human rights and that all State actors respect, protect and fulfil human rights

<b>Priority 4</b>	Document and investigate all forms of risk, threats and attacks against women human rights defenders, ensuring that perpetrators – both State and non-State actors – are brought to justice and that these defenders have access to an effective remedy, including gender-responsive reparations
<b>Priority 5</b>	Develop protection mechanisms and initiatives that incorporate the Special Rapporteur’s seven principles underpinning good protection practices
<b>Priority 6</b>	Recognize that security must be understood holistically and that it encompasses physical safety, digital security, environmental security, economic stability, the freedom to practice cultural and religious beliefs and the mental and emotional wellbeing of women defenders and their families and loved ones
<b>Priority 7</b>	Recognize that sexism and discrimination against women, girl and gender non-conforming defenders exist in communities and human rights movements and take measures to address them
<b>Priority 8</b>	Ensure that funding enables women defenders in their diverse circumstances to promote and protect human rights in a continuous, sustainable and effective manner

The need for adequate psychosocial wellbeing is increasingly prominent in discussions of defenders’ security. However, many women defenders reported experiencing pushback from within their organisations with regard to the need for support. Most women discussed private strategies they used to support their own wellbeing in the absence of organisational or communal support.

In calling for more focus on wellbeing and self-care, it is important that the human rights community avoids ‘blaming the victim’ – that is, seeing negative impacts on wellbeing as being caused by the ‘careless’ inattention to self. As Ginger Norwood has observed, self-care can feel overwhelming and impossible to women

defenders who are already struggling with myriad risks.<sup>4</sup> Scholars and practitioners have emphasised the importance of examining wellbeing as a collective endeavour.<sup>5</sup> Such initiatives might include embedding practices of self- and collective care within groups and organisations, including the provision of supervision for case work, healthcare, counselling, insurance, and social security, as well as examining the effect of funding practices on sustainable activism. Satterthwaite and colleagues call for organisational and institutional responses to strengthen self- and collective care, not just through the provision of support to address symptoms but through the



reimagination and reorganisation of human rights practice.<sup>6</sup>

Last but not least, it is important to recognise that for some women defenders, spaces of activism are crucial spaces for wellbeing. It is therefore important to understand how such spaces need to be reshaped so that they do not replicate oppression, discrimination and violence, and how participation, acceptance and inclusivity can be strengthened in human rights communities.

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### **Endnotes**

1. For more information on this study, see the project 'Navigating Risk, Managing Security, and Receiving Support', available on <https://securityofdefendersproject.org/>, accessed 22 November 2019.
2. UN Doc No A/HRC/40/60 (10 January 2019).
3. UN Doc No A/HRC/31/55 (1 February 2016).
4. Ginger Norwood, Promoting self care and wellbeing among feminist activists and women's rights defenders: Reflections from Burma and Palestine (Santa Fe, NM: Upaya Zen Center, 2013).
5. Jennifer Alzate González, Anti-racist activism and community self-care at the University of Michigan. *Souls*, 17, No. 1–2 (2015): 11–19; Maik Müller and Clemencia Correa, Integrating a psychosocial perspective into human rights and protection practices: A case study of Peace Brigades International (PBI) Mexico, Human Rights Defender Hub Working Paper Series 2 (York: Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York, 2017).
6. Margaret Satterthwaite, Sarah Knuckey, Ria Singh Sawhney, Katie Wightman, Rohini Bagrodia and Adam Brown, From a "culture of unwellness" to sustainable advocacy: Organisational responses to mental health risks in the human rights field, *Review of Law and Social Justice*, 28, No. 3 (2019): 443-554. See also the website Resources for Resilience which 'seeks to promote resilience and improve mental health and wellbeing among human rights advocates' (available at <https://www.hrresilience.org/> accessed 22 November 2019).