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Families and Loved Ones in the Security and Protection of Defenders at Risk

Families and loved ones are central to the lives of human rights defenders. Drawing upon discussions with defenders from Colombia, Mexico, Egypt, Kenya and Indonesia, this brief discusses the complex ways in which families and loved ones are implicated in the security and protection of defenders at risk.

Families and loved ones as targets of threats and attacks

In all five countries, family members of human rights defenders have been targeted by perpetrators in order to disrupt the lives of defenders and stop their work. Defenders focus on the safety of family members and loved ones when thinking about their own safety. They report that their family members have received death threats and harassing calls; they have been followed and publicly stigmatised; in some cases, they have been harmed and even killed. As a woman defender working on the rights of the disappeared and of victims of violence in Colombia said: "There have also been pamphlets with the names of my grandchildren and bullets glued to them: they said, 'there will be more of these if you don't shut up.'"

Threats and attacks on families are a source of tremendous uncertainty, anxiety and stress. A woman defender working on women's rights, forced disappearances and violence against women in Mexico, said:

Uncertainty; you leave home, say goodbye to your family and you do not know if you are coming back... it is not like the risk of losing your job, a vehicle, a commodity; our work puts us in the position of losing our life or the life of a relative.

The insecurity that defenders live with is often pervasive, impacting not only the way they do their work but also the way they live their lives, their daily routines and habits, their family dynamics, and their relationships with others.

We had to change our life, the relationship with our family was impacted, the relationship with my partner... she and my family were the most affected... because [the government] had information about all the schools my nephew had attended... the mobile phone numbers that my father had used in the last 7 years... I had to talk with my family... [security] strategies had to be adopted by my family... we did not know if the attack was going to come against the most visible actor [me] or against my family circle.

Male defender working on the right to education, land rights, indigenous rights, disappeared persons and extra-judicial killings in Mexico

Defenders also feel terrible guilt that their families must bear the risks which arise from their work, and which are not of their choosing. To protect them, some defenders make the painful decision to cut off or limit contact with their loved ones, or send them away to minimise threats.

Families and loved ones as the reason for defending human rights

Many defenders promote and protect human rights for the sake of their family members and loved ones. In some cases, they seek justice for loved ones who have been killed or disappeared. Describing the centrality of family in his human rights work, a defender from Colombia working on land rights and the rights of victims of violence said:

> I began [this work] because I saw the necessity in my community and with my family. And in the midst of all this, we were abandoned by the State. There was no State support or presence where I lived. The public forces were abusive, and there was the presence of various armed groups… My father had a business that was attacked by the guerrilla and paramilitaries until he was forced to close it… My brother was killed for being a social activist. My father was assassinated as well. So, I decided to work in the defence of human rights.

Defenders see how violence destroys families and feel responsible for speaking up and resisting this violence. They turn their loss, grief, anger and sadness into sources of energy and motivation for their work. A woman defender seeking justice for her child who was murdered in Colombia said,

> We've all become ill at times over this, and we have lost other family members; my oldest son died of heartbreak over what happened… However, within the exhaustion, when we get together and reflect on things, we come out strengthened… The memory of our children demands that we carry on. [Perpetrators] do all of these things so that we might stop, but a mother's love is everlasting.

Families and loved ones as sources of support

For many defenders, families are integral to their protection and security measures. Family members act as key contacts for communication, bail them out of prisons, provide temporary shelter, and give vital mental and emotional support. Speaking about what made him feel secure, a defender from Indonesia working on freedom of expression and land rights said:

> I feel secure if I can stay with family. My family always understands what I am doing. I build risk awareness in my family. I also feel secure if I have social protection in the community or village. It is about building peer protection between us.

The more families were aware of the work of defenders and their reasons for this work, the more able they were to protect themselves and provide support.

> I think the support of my family is important. I think it's important that they know what I am doing, and that they understand the risk that my work involves. It's important for me that they support what I'm doing. There are even some parents that are part of our group; they assist the marches and the activities that we do. This is important for the group.
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> **Woman defender working on environmental rights in Colombia**

Families and loved ones as sources of harm

Some defenders spoke about the painful reality of the disapproval of families of their work. The stigmatisation of human rights defenders by state authorities and in the media is sometimes internalised by family members. A woman defender working on women's rights in Egypt, explained, "if they defame you, your family members will pressure you to stop working. Here they use this a lot, more than direct violence. They use family as a card against me."

In some cases, community members isolate defenders after an attack out of fear. A woman defender working on extra-judicial killings in Kenya whose son was severely beaten, kidnapped and killed in retaliation for her work said, "Instead of [the community] helping me, they isolated me, because they felt that I was transferring the threats to them."

> Social isolation for human rights defenders is not a good thing. Being condemned by people around you and your family is not a pleasant feeling. I personally feel that this is the most dangerous part – social stigmatization.
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> **Woman defender working on freedom of the press and women's rights in Egypt**

Gendered and patriarchal ideas over what makes a 'good woman' and a 'good daughter' affect how families interpret the work of women defenders. When asked to reflect on how society perceives human rights defenders, a woman defender working on civil and political rights in Egypt shared:

> I am trying to think of all the things my mother says, because to me she is a true mirror of our society, which I do not deal with… We are seen as irreligious, immoral, angry at everything from God to society to the state. We are seen as belonging to western culture.

Patriarchy, machismo and gendered expectations can also lead to intimate partner violence and sexual harassment at work. Women defenders struggle to find spaces to address the violence they face from within their families and human rights communities. As a woman defender in Mexico observed,

> Throughout my work with women human rights defenders, I have realised that domestic violence, and macho violence within organisations and families is present... when the violence comes from their inner circle, within their families and organisations, the impact on the work of defenders is extremely difficult... this is a structural issue; it is about the reproduction of macho violence in all spheres of life for women human rights defenders. This is not just normalised, it is also stigmatised. Openly talking about this implies questioning the political congruence of the discourse and actions in human rights within organisations.

LGBTIQ* defenders also face rejection from their families and loved ones for their sexual orientation and gender identity. They have been forced out of their homes, threatened by family members, cut off from social networks, stopped from doing their work, and made to live in fear of being found out by their loved ones. Describing the experience of a volunteer that worked with her, an LGBTIQ* defender from Egypt shared:

> A family of a volunteer who joined our team knew about her sexual orientation and knew that she was working for the LGBTI cause... her family locked her up in the room and then took her to a sanatorium. Her mother then threatened us, saying, if we do not go near her daughter she will not harm us [by telling the police].

In some cases, family members change their minds. A trans woman defender in Kenya described how she experienced rejection from her family but this changed, saying "They changed positively, we worked our way out of the situation, we found ways to meet and talk." This highlights the importance of working with families to address negative ideas about human rights work, gender, LGBTIQ* rights and other stigmatised identities, and to build acceptance and support for the work and identities of defenders at risk.

Families and loved ones as integral to the security and protection of defenders

Defenders' families and loved ones are integral to their sense of self, identity, safety, wellbeing and purpose, and need to be included in protection measures. As a male defender on socio-economic rights and land rights in Colombia said:

> When they give you a vest or a cell phone, this is only designed to protect the individual, but... All the people that surround me could also be at risk because of my work... There needs to be more collective protection... What will happen to my family if only I am protected? In Choco, when we talk about the family, we are referring to an extensive family. We are talking about the family of the entire process.

For LGBTIQ* defenders, part of their work involves challenging traditional ideas of what a 'family' constitutes, and protecting the sanctity of those families.

Defenders spoke about the need to create an infrastructure of support for families and loved ones that combine measures for physical security, financial security, and psychological support, both in their presence and absence, should be they be detained, exiled or even killed.

A human rights lawyer in Egypt described some of his security plans:

I have spoken with my father and older brother in the case of my arrest and we agreed on who my lawyer would be and a list of substitute lawyers that could defend me in case that lawyer is also in prison. They have their names and phone numbers, and I ask my family not to visit me in prison and to contact the lawyers for any information they might need about me.... [I]n the case of emergency or arrest, I leave some money aside for my wife and daughter to be able to survive on... [W]hat reassures me is that the community of lawyers is quite tight and supportive in such cases.

The safety, care, and provision for families and loved ones is critical in the security and protection of defenders at risk. As a defender from Kenya said, when asked what he thought of when he thought about his security: "How safe am I? How safe is my family? My family comes first, before me."

Implications for practice

- Recognise the centrality of families and loved ones to the identity, wellbeing, security and protection of defenders.

- Question assumptions around definitions of a 'family', allowing defenders to define who constitutes their family.

- Include family members and loved ones in the development and implementation of security plans and protection measures for defenders.

- Develop interventions for the emergency and longer-term support for family members and loved ones, including in the possible absence of defenders.

- Analyse the effects of protection measures on family members and loved ones, especially children, working to mitigate negative effects.

- Recognise that families and communities can be sources of harm for defenders. Develop interventions to counter stigmatisation and build acceptance for the work and identities of defenders among their families and loved ones.

- Recognise the importance of connecting families who have experienced violence and trauma and building collective support structures with them.

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