



Gender, Intersectionality, and Security

Women human rights defenders experience risks that are shaped by their gender, other aspects of their identities, the types of human rights issues they act upon, and the socio-political contexts in which they operate. Some women defenders experience higher levels of societal and institutional discrimination than others; some also experience sexism and discrimination within human rights movements. This Policy Brief examines how gender and intersectionality affects women defenders' risks, the issues they face, and their experiences of security and protection.

Gendered and intersectional risks

While defenders of all genders in our study experienced harassment, intimidation, stigmatisation and attacks, women defenders were also affected by misogynistic attacks, the normalisation of gender-based discrimination and violence, a greater incidence of threats against family members, and higher levels of sexual violence. As a woman defender in Mexico stated,

*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."*

Another woman defender working 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, threats of sexual violence, and 'sexuality baiting' are often used against women defenders and their daughters. A Kenyan woman defender working on environmental rights observed, "in their speech they threatened and threatened me, they called me a useless

woman and a prostitute that had been left by her husband".

Violence against women defenders varied according to the issues they worked on and their identities. Women defenders advocating for the rights of women, girls, sex workers and LGBTIQ* persons were exposed to greater threats and attacks due to the absence of public support for their causes. Those working on land and environmental rights also experienced high risks from companies and state actors.

A woman defender in Mexico recalled,

I remember that I worked on an abortion campaign in social networks. I have never received threats like those I received while working on that campaign, things like: "I hope your son regrets you being his mother"... things like that in Twitter, that is intimidating, very aggressive, having to do with sexuality, with the privacy of people... once there was a guy who entered into the offices and tried to sexually abuse me."

A woman defender in Colombia observed experiencing higher levels of violence as she shifted to work on environmental rights, where the threats were explicitly to "eliminate us from the face of the earth.... they are determined to finish off the existence of any opposition to megaprojects".

Societal and institutional discrimination

Women defenders observed that protection agencies, enforcement officials, community members and even colleagues often did not take threats and harm against women defenders seriously.

Societal and institutional discrimination is particularly acute for lesbian, bisexual, and trans women; the rejection of their gender identities and sexualities amplifies their risks. A trans woman defender working on LGBTIQ* rights in Colombia described 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!"

I realized that my denouncements weren't helping to solve the problem. They were just passing along what I had written to another office, but no one wanted to do anything. The authorities that have the capability to do something don't want to help the LGBTI community, and in particular, trans women. We aren't given the importance that we deserve. We are a group of people that, historically, have been discriminated against, excluded and criticized.

Trans woman defender, Colombia

Similarly, in Kenya, a woman defender who was physically attacked for defending sex workers experienced discrimination by the police, who told her 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."

Threats and attacks against family and loved ones

Direct threats to families and loved ones are hard for women defenders to bear. In Kenya, a women defender reported that her mother's house was burned down because of her human rights activism, and in Mexico, a defender spoke of how her office was broken into and signs 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 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."

...there are moments where either in a subtle or a very cruel manner you have to pay for defying the patriarchal logic. They say, 'How can you put your children in risk by participating [in politics]? If you are a mother, you could be the cornerstone of your home'.

Woman defender, Mexico

Pressure from family and loved ones

Women defenders also experience threats directly from their families, often also linked to societal expectations and stigma. A trans woman defender in Kenya reported how her identity and activism 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, a woman defender in Egypt 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.

Gendered stigmatisation also impacts on relationships with families and loved ones, which can be exploited by state and other actors.

The main challenge I face is being a girl, and the social consequences to facing problems with the security as a girl, such as the constant worry of my family regarding my involvement in politics and that if I get arrested, it will not be the same as if I were a boy, girls can be subjected to physical violations...

...the security agencies that watched me knew that this was a point of weakness, so they used to send me security calls at my home address, while my male colleagues would face different harassments; [they] knew that the security call could cause a serious problem at home, and may cause me to back down.

Woman defender, Egypt

In some cases, women defenders have been subject to domestic violence as a way of pressuring them to cease their activism.

Sexism and discrimination with human rights movements

Women defenders reported experiences of violence from within their organisations and movements, as well as the lack of recognition for their work. As a woman defender from Mexico stated,

This is a type of attack and of threat unlike others, because it doesn't come from groups, nor from companies, it came from the NGO where I worked... I started criticizing... the organization, and then verbal attacks started; psychological attacks as well. For example, I wasn't called on for any meetings; they started blocking my work; all my work proposals were turned down; insults were made regarding my professional capacity, towards my person as well... At the end, they threatened to fire me, and consequently, they did.

Another woman defender from Mexico spoke about the effects of intimidation and harassment,

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 our proposals. That is a form of violence.

Others spoke about their contributions being side-lined and made invisible. A 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 talking all the recognition [for our work]".

These experiences have had a chilling effect on women's participation in mixed-gender human rights organisations.

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 with that related to external actors.

Woman defender, Mexico

Intersectionality, security, protection

Women defenders in Colombia and Mexico highlighted weaknesses in state protection mechanisms, in particular, the slow response times, the narrow focus on physical security, and the intrusions on privacy and family life.

The lack of inclusion of family members was a barrier to temporary relocation for women defenders. As a Kenyan

woman defender said, "For me it would be hard to be relocated because of my children. Maybe by relocating you can make things worse – so the best thing is to address things where you are."

Women defenders emphasised the important of holistic, multidimensional understandings of security. A woman defender from Mexico stated,

Something desirable we have proposed for new methodologies is to take into account gender specificities, forms of confronting fear, or security plans... comprising holistically a set of tools to continue working and getting support for living wellbeing, self-care healing, digital security, political incidence and case accompaniment, psychosocial and legal accompaniment, generating safe spaces such as shelters... Security is just a small part of the picture, protection is not just related to risk, but having the right to live in a context with good conditions to continue our work.

Yet, women defenders recognised that it was difficult to address mental and emotional wellbeing as a core aspect of security. A woman defender in Kenya observed,

People 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.

For women defenders, an intersectional analysis of security is fundamental. As a woman defender from Mexico said,

We should conceive safety from an intersectional sense, mainly when we're talking about safety towards women; because of my own circumstances as a young and poor woman, a woman at times with precarious work, a Mexico City woman with roots in Oaxaca and Michoacán; then every social sphere and structure enables us or puts our safety at risk.

Strength from relationships and solidarity with others

Relationships with others, networks, and safe spaces for sharing were important to women defenders' feelings of security.

As a woman defender from Mexico said,

[What makes me feel safe is] that currently there are women concerned for the security and protection of other women. That calms me a lot. It is not that I think that there are no men concerned with my security, but I know that if it is another woman, she will understand some aspects that for example my partner or my father won't, not because they do not want to understand or they do not have the sensitivity, but because those are different

experiences. That brings me a lot of security, [women solidarity] it is something that is already set up, at least amongst us. Even if sometimes we [women] are seen as offering 'non-professional protection' – I think this is partly true, we need to learn more – but constructing these spaces of solidarity is very necessary, sometimes these spaces take you out of very difficult situations.



Implications for Practice

It is important for policy-makers, practitioners, and human rights defenders of all genders to:

- Recognise how the risks experienced by women defenders are shaped by their gender, other aspects of their identities, the type of human rights issues they act on, and their socio-political contexts
- Address social and institutional discrimination against women defenders, especially in relation to access to justice
- Ensure that threats and attacks against women defenders are investigated, perpetrators brought to justice, and impunity resisted
- Recognise the significance and effects of sexism and discrimination against women defenders in human rights organisations and movements, taking clear measures to end these
- Assess women defenders' experiences of protection initiatives against the seven principles of good protection practices proposed by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders (A/HRC/31/35), including evaluating if they are gender-sensitive, using an intersectionality lens
- Ensure that women defenders are enabled to meet safely and to share ideas, experiences, strategies, and resources to support one another

About this project

This Policy Brief is based on research findings from the project 'Navigating Risk, Managing Security, and Receiving Support' which examines the experiences of human rights defenders at risk in Colombia, Mexico, Egypt, Kenya, and Indonesia.

Interviews and surveys were conducted with over 400 defenders between July 2015 and November 2016.



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Reference

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