



**Navigating Risk, Managing Security and Receiving Support:
A Study of Human Rights Defenders at Risk in Indonesia**

Summary of Findings

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Introduction

This paper presents key results from a research project examining how human rights defenders navigate risk, manage their personal security, and receive protection support in Indonesia.² We interviewed defenders who have experienced risk or threat in the past five years, both individually and in focus groups, and asked them to complete a survey. We adopted the definition of a ‘human rights defender’ as set out in the Declaration of Human Rights Defenders³, that is, anyone who promotes and strives for the protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

This paper highlights some of the key findings that emerged in this study, including: the impact of threats and attacks experienced; feelings about security; the security management practices that participants adopt; the experience of security training; the level of support for human rights work that participants receive; common barriers to security

¹ Reference: Nah, AM; Maliamauv, K; Bartley, P; Fernida, I dan Hernawan, B (2017) Navigating Risk, Managing Security and Receiving Support: A Study of Human Rights Defenders at Risk in Indonesia, Summary of Findings, Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York: York. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a workshop organised by Yayasan Perlindungan Insani / Protection International Indonesia and Komnas Perempuan in Jakarta on 13 September 2016.

² This research was also conducted in four other countries – Colombia, Mexico, Egypt, and Kenya – using the same research protocol. For more information on this project, see: <https://securityofdefendersproject.org/>

³ Formally known as the *Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, accessible at <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Defenders/Declaration/declaration.pdf>.

management; reflections on wellbeing and self-protection; and perceptions of ‘human rights defenders’.

The Participants in this Study

There were a total of 87 participants in this study, comprising 47 men, 39 women and one transgender person.⁴ They were from a wide range of backgrounds and engaged in a broad range of human rights activities in Manokwari, Jayapura, Banda Aceh, Palu, Poso, Morowali, Malang, Jakarta, Maluku, Ambon and Surabaya, including on issues such as anti-corruption, freedom of religion, land rights, women’s rights, LGBTI rights, and the rights of people in conflict situations.

The participants were between 23-70 years old, with a mean age of 39.8 years. 54.3% of participants were married, or living with a partner, 22.2% were in a relationship, and 23.5% were single. 61% had children. 67.1% live and work in urban and rural areas, 22.0% live and work in an urban area, while 4.9% live and work in rural areas. 85.2% of participants were employed, 7.4% were self-employed, and 7.4% were unemployed.

74.7% described themselves as conducting their human rights work as an employee or volunteer in a registered organisation (e.g. an NGO, university, association, charity, society, law firm, media house, religious organisation, government official); 31.3% described themselves as conducting their human rights work as a member of an informal/unregistered group, community or network; and 24.1% described themselves as conducting their human rights work alone.⁵

The participants described themselves as having conducted human rights work between one and 50 years, with an average of around 10 years. Most (65%) described themselves as leading others in human rights work most of the time (rather than following others most of the time).

Types of threats and attacks experienced

The type of threats and attacks most frequently mentioned by participants was being harassed and receiving threatening calls and messages. Other types of threats and attacks included: physical harm; threats to family members; being followed, monitored, or having surveillance conducted on them; being subject to investigations and criminal charges; and being portrayed negatively or defamed in the media. Some – in particular academics and journalists – suffered professional consequences (for example, being demoted, fired, or transferred). Women human rights defenders (WHRDs), LGBTIQ* defenders and HIV+ defenders also described the difficulties of living with discriminatory laws, practices, and cultures.

⁴ Most participated in both an interview (either individually or through a focus group) and completed the survey. However, a small minority only completed the survey.

⁵ Participants were allowed to choose more than one option.

Types of perpetrators

The most common type of perpetrator mentioned by participants were state actors, in particular, the police, the military, the national intelligence agency (*Badan Inteligen Negara*, BIN), as well as Members of Parliament, village heads, and government officials. The second and third most commonly mentioned type of perpetrator were corporations (particularly for those working on land rights and labour rights), and religious fundamentalists groups (particularly for those active on women's rights, LGBTIQ* rights, and religious freedom).

For some participants, threats and attacks were also carried out by vigilante groups, community members (especially those who could be easily influenced or paid to carry out attacks), armed groups, and armed civilians. Participants expressed worry about being unable to identify their perpetrators, as it made it difficult for them to anticipate and prevent threats. 'Bullies' on social media were also named as perpetrators by several participants.

The impact of threats and attacks experienced

89% of participants said that they were 'somewhat concerned' or 'very concerned' about their physical security.⁶ 91% of participants were 'somewhat concerned' or 'very concerned' about their digital security. 88% were 'somewhat concerned' or 'very concerned' about their mental and emotional well-being.

Interviewees spoke about the mental and emotional impact of the threats faced – such as mental exhaustion, trauma, and "feeling numb".⁷ Referring to defenders at risk, one WHRD said,

They need a space for their selves as person that don't have to talk on work all the time and enjoy their life. I am afraid they will be frustrated, and one day will choose other way, which contradict their previous values.⁸

They also noted feeling isolated and stigmatised for their work. One participant from a leading human rights organisation in Jayapura stated:

My extended family sometimes say cynically, 'Do you eat human rights?' I don't have anywhere to escape. All ways out have been blocked. I feel like [I am] living inside the cage. I immerse [myself] into Internet as I found freedom there. I am not paranoid. I feel OK. But I don't go to church anymore. People don't want to shake hands with me, particularly the non-Papuans.⁹

⁶ Participants were given the following options: 'I don't know', 'Not concerned at all', 'Not too concerned', 'somewhat concerned' and 'very concerned'.

⁷ Participant working on land rights and anti-corruption in Manokwari, interviewed in September 2015; Participant working on freedom of expression in Jayapura, interviewed in January 2016; Participant working on civil and political rights in Aceh, interviewed in March 2016.

⁸ Participant working on labour rights and civil and political rights in Malang, interviewed in November 2015.

⁹ Participant working on civil and political rights in Jayapura, interviewed in December 2015.

Some participants expressed worry about having to give up their human rights work, thus going against their principles and having to live without ‘following one’s values’, which they found difficult.

Participants expressed concern about the impact of their human rights work on their family members and loved ones. A participant working on LGBTI rights in Aceh expressed,

Under the Aceh criminal code, the punishment for being an LGBT is caning. If caning is used to punish me, it will affect also my family as the caning is implemented in front of the public. My family could be exiled from their village and I cannot get any job and live in Aceh.¹⁰

The participants in this study suffered financially from the threats experienced, not only as a result of the impact of threats on their lifestyles and livelihoods (such as the loss of a job or demotion) but also because of the costs involved in engaging in security practices, such as the cost of safe transport; the use of security-related equipment and tools; insurance; relocation; legal fees; fines and bail. Participants also described the difficulties related to working for low wages and facing funding-related job insecurity.

In order to manage their personal security, many defenders have had to make significant changes to how they lived their lives, how they interacted with others, and how they conducted their human rights activities (further elaborated below in the section on *Security Management Practices*). Participants also experienced the loss of personal liberty and freedom as they took steps to manage their security. Participants were also deeply concerned about the security of their family members and loved ones.

Feelings about Security

In response to the question, “What makes you feel secure?”, participants answered the following:

- Personal relationships
- Support from others for their work
- Their principles, values, and beliefs
- Networking, collaboration, and working with others
- Protection under the law
- Their religion, spirituality
- Professional recognition (having status in society, such as being an academic or lawyer; being licensed; or belonging to a union)
- Having security plans and standard operating procedures to follow

¹⁰ Participant working on LGBTI rights in Aceh, interviewed in November 2015.

In response to the question, “What makes you feel insecure?”, participants answered the following:

- The lack of legal protection, including impunity and the lack of accountability of state actors
- Their family members or loved ones being at risk
- The lack of resources, including financial insecurity
- The presence of the military, or having to interact with government personnel
- The lack of understanding or support from others (including facing prejudice and discrimination)
- Being visible in their human rights work

Security Management Practices

We asked participants in this study to indicate the frequency in which they engaged in some commonly adopted security management practices.

Table 1: The Frequency of A Selection of Security Management Practices

Security Management Practice	Percent who practice this ‘often’, ‘almost always’ or ‘always’
Assess the risks involved in their human rights work	60.1% ¹¹
Proactively manage the risks involved in their human rights work	63.4% ¹²
Follow a personalised ‘security plan’ (a plan of what to do in response to specific threats)	58.8% ¹³
When doing sensitive work, making sure that someone else knows where they are going and what they are doing	63.0% ¹⁴
Before doing sensitive work, making contingency plans in case things go wrong	50.6% ¹⁵

As mentioned, the participants in this study engaged in wide range of practices for their personal security.

¹¹ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 55.4%, Mexico 59.7%, Kenya 71.1%, Egypt 51.3% (Average 59.5%).

¹² Percentages in other countries: Colombia 58.1%, Mexico 67.1%, Kenya 66.7%, Egypt 39.5% (Average 59.0%).

¹³ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 42.7%, Mexico 58.0%, Kenya 64.0%, Egypt 34.6% (Average 51.6%).

¹⁴ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 77.4%, Mexico 90.4%, Kenya 80.3%, Egypt 71.8% (Average 76.6%).

¹⁵ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 52.7%, Mexico 63.0%, Kenya 70.3%, Egypt 53.9% (Average 58.1%).

The most commonly mentioned practice was *receiving support from others*, in particular, fellow human rights defenders (also see Table 2 below). They also received help from friends, work colleagues, family members, neighbours, and other members of their community. Some mentioned receiving assistance from embassies, religious bodies, state authorities, and lawyers.

Indeed, participants noted the importance of *building allies* as a key strategy for their security. This helped them to strengthen their work, minimize risks faced, assess their security situation more effectively, and expand their networks of support. In particular, participants noted the importance of building allies with other human rights defenders, grassroots communities, government representatives (including the police and state security), the media, local leaders, academics, International NGOs, and religious groups. In some cases, participants had to *relocate* themselves or their families, either temporarily or permanently. Some had to do so multiple times. While relocation helped them (and their families) to stay safe, it also resulted in their isolation and separation from loved ones. Some also relied on *accompaniment*, either provided more formally through an organisation or organised with the help of friends and family.

Some participants mentioned trying to *decrease their visibility* for their own security, for example, by staying at home, reducing their activities on social media and with the mass media, masking their appearance in public, and avoiding certain people and places. On the other hand, some tried to *increase the visibility* of their work and the risks they faced as a security strategy, for example, by using social media to discuss their work, releasing press statements, collaborating on documentaries, and engaging in other forms of media-related actions.

A smaller number of participants mentioned the importance of having *insurance coverage*. A HIV+ participant, in particular, mentioned that health insurance was a critical part of 'security' in human rights work. Another participant stated that having insurance provided by their organization was important for their sense of security.

There were fewer references amongst participants to using CCTV cameras, which seems to be more common in other countries.

Security Training

59.3% of participants stated that they had received some training on security management. Men received more training than women (67.4% of male participants compared to 48.6% of women participants). The average number of trainings received was 1.27 per person.

Those that had attended security management trainings had mostly found them to be very beneficial and useful for recognising and reducing risks. Recommendations for future training sessions stressed the value of more practical and hands on exercises. These could take the form of case studies, simulations of threats and role-plays. Some

participants suggested running trainings in conflict areas and organizing practical exercises in the field. Other recommendations included using materials that are focus on different work situations, simpler modules, and linking HRDs to protection organisations. There was widespread consensus that training should be more frequent with follow up sessions and individual action plans.

Level of Support for Human Rights Work

The participants in this study reported receiving very high levels of support for their human rights work.

Table 2: The Level of Support Received from Human Rights Work

Levels of support described as being ‘High’ or ‘Very High’ from their:	Percent of participants in Indonesia
Partner	63.8% ¹⁶
Parents	61.9% ¹⁷
Close Friends	74.3% ¹⁸
People doing human rights work in the same country	75.6% ¹⁹
People doing human rights work in other countries	58.3% ²⁰

¹⁶ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 55.1%, Mexico 64.4%, Kenya 52.0%, Egypt 48.7% (Average 56.8%).

¹⁷ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 48.7%, Mexico 53.5%, Kenya 35.1%, Egypt 21.3% (Average 44.1%).

¹⁸ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 53.8%, Mexico 78.1%, Kenya 61.1%, Egypt 68.4% (Average 67.1%).

¹⁹ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 64.5%, Mexico 73.0%, Kenya 70.2%, Egypt 65.3% (Average 69.7%).

²⁰ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 47.4%, Mexico 45.2%, Kenya 37.7%, Egypt 58.7% (Average 49.5%).

Barriers to Security Management

We asked participants to identify the level of significance of specific barriers to them managing their security.²¹

Table 3: Barriers to Security Management

Barriers to security management described as being a 'very significant barrier' or a 'rather significant barrier':	Percent of participants in Indonesia
Lack of Technical Support from Experts	79.0% ²²
Lack of Knowledge	75.4% ²³
Lack of Money	70.3% ²⁴
Lack of Support from Leaders in my Organisation / Group	65.0% ²⁵
Lack of Support from Family	64.4% ²⁶
Lack of Support from Close Friends	58.1% ²⁷

More women (89.2%) in this study expressed the lack of technical support as a significant barrier compared with men (67.5%). They also expressed receiving significantly less security training than men.

The primary reason given for not prioritizing self-protection was the belief that risk was inherent to the work they choose to do. As a woman participant said,

People who work in human rights realize that they will face risks, but mostly they recognize that this is the choice of life. They have to be strong. Therefore, they don't really care to protect their selves.

This, however, cannot be separated from a broader perception of a 'hero' and 'heroine' within the Indonesian culture in which selflessness and sacrifice are the key identifying factors. Therefore, defenders who serve people's rights are perceived and constructed as ones who should be prepared for sacrificing their private lives and wellbeing for others. The 'hero' and 'heroine' perception influences not only the ways in which people treat defenders but also the way NGOs and donors behave.

²¹ Participants were given the following options: 'Very significant barrier', 'Rather significant barrier' and 'Not really a significant barrier'.

²² Percentages in other countries: Colombia 66.2%, Mexico 73.6%, Kenya 89.4%, Egypt 78.6% (Average 77.0%).

²³ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 65.8%, Mexico 71.9%, Kenya 57.9%, Egypt 73.7% (Average 68.9%).

²⁴ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 86.4%, Mexico 82.1%, Kenya 92.2%, Egypt 73.1% (Average 80.8%).

²⁵ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 38.4%, Mexico 43.8%, Kenya 54.0%, Egypt 53.4% (Average 50.9%).

²⁶ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 25.0%, Mexico 16.2%, Kenya 25.0%, Egypt 55.9% (Average 37.3%).

²⁷ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 33.8%, Mexico 22.9%, Kenya 35.5%, Egypt 48.6% (Average 39.8%).

Reflections on Wellbeing and Self-protection

Of the participants who discussed wellbeing in their interviews, a third of them stated that human rights defenders generally did not prioritise their own wellbeing. About half of them said that the wellbeing and protection of survivors took priority over their own. As a WHRD working on land and minority rights in Aceh stated, “Usually we are dealing only with the protection of our clients or victims that we assist. We forget about our own rights. We realise it [is important], but we are not prioritising it.”²⁸ A WHRD also stated that while she understood that her own needs mattered, it felt “egoistical” to give priority to it, instead of focusing on others.²⁹

The idea that one needed to be strong, and also to ‘appear strong’, came across in comments made by other participants. Some believed that to talk about their fears and their worries would in some way ‘perpetuate the risk’. Some even expressed concern that speaking openly about their risks and the fears would discourage others from entering into human rights work.

About half of those who spoke about wellbeing engaged in activities that focused on their mental and emotional wellbeing. All of the activities mentioned, however, were ‘personal / private’ in nature (such as spending time with family, engaging with hobbies, and praying). To this end, personal relationships were an important part of how participants talked about their wellbeing, protection, and security strategies.

Participants did not mention ‘wellbeing activities’ that were part of their organisational work culture. Only one participant spoke about seeking mental health services through their organisation to address the experience of trauma. Another participant noted that wellbeing was not taken seriously in organisations, and how colleagues ‘laughed it off when concerns were raised’. He said,

We also do not get support from our colleagues when we face problems. They make the problem as a ‘simple matter’. For example, when my friend received a letter from the police to be interrogated, other friends made it as a joke, such as, “be relaxed, we will accompany you. We will bring you food everyday if you are arrested.” We will laugh together. Based on my experience, I believe, they also felt worried. It seems as if we do not received moral support³⁰.

For some participants, engaging in the work itself was key to their own wellbeing. Participants frequently said that their principles and values were the reason they did human rights activities, and that these were a source of strength. Their wellbeing came from knowing that they were doing work that was their ‘calling’. They also learned how to cope

²⁸ Participant working on land and minority rights in Aceh, interviewed in April 2016.

²⁹ Participant working on migrant and women’s rights, interviewed in Jakarta in January 2016.

³⁰ Participant working on anti-corruption in Jakarta, interviewed in January 2016.

with difficulties from survivors of human rights violations and abuses, and gained strength and support from their community of activists.

Financial insecurity was an aspect of wellbeing that some participants discussed. Some participants expressed concerns about their lack of social security and social insurance; some had no savings or financial provision for old age. Several also mentioned the importance of knowing that their family would be taken care of if anything happened to them.

Perceptions of Human Rights Defenders

Of the participants in this study, only 46% referred to themselves as a human rights defender.

About one-third of participants interviewed individually (32.7%) thought that the term 'human rights defender' was perceived negatively in their country, while 14.2% thought that it was perceived positively, and 53.1% thought that people had mixed perceptions about human rights defenders.³¹

Participants observed that members of the public were largely unfamiliar with the term 'human rights defender'. There was a broad sense that this was an 'exclusive' term, used primarily among human rights circles. Participants said that the public were more familiar with the terms 'NGOs', 'activists', 'public defenders', and 'community assistant' (*pendamping masyarakat*).

The lack of familiarity with this phrase however didn't automatically mean a lack of support for the work done. As two participants noted, members of the public may not be familiar with the term 'HRD', but they recognised the work they did.³² The respect gained because of their work also translated into increased support for their security by the community.³³ Another participant said, "the public does not understand and tends not to care about [the term] 'human rights defender'. However, if they are facing [a] problem, they will ask us to help them."³⁴

The perceived lack of familiarity and understanding of what or who a 'human rights defender' is also prompted some participants to recommend that defenders, actors interested in protection, and State actors educate the public (and themselves) on the terminology.

In Papua, some people think of human rights defenders negatively as 'independence activists' or 'separatists'. Elsewhere, human rights defenders are sometimes perceived as being 'anti-development' (*penghambat pembangunan*) and 'anti-government'. In Aceh, they

³¹ Based on transcripts from 49 individuals.

³² Participant working on freedom of expression in Jayapura, interviewed in January 2016; Participant working on civil and political rights in Aceh, interviewed in March 2016.

³³ Participant working on freedom of expression in Jayapura, interviewed in January 2016.

³⁴ Participant working on anti-corruption in Jakarta, interviewed in January 2016

are sometimes accused of as being anti-Islam, in particular ‘anti-Shariah’, and “secular, pluralist, liberal, imperialist”.³⁵

When people perceived the work of human rights defenders positively (often by grassroots communities or villagers), there was also sometimes a perception of defenders as being ‘fearless’, which led to unrealistic expectations. As one WHRD said,

the terminology of human rights defender in Indonesia is very exclusive. People will think that human rights defenders are the supermen, superwomen or people who dare to die from the high-risk work. However, people don’t understand that all human beings – as long as they are doing something in defending various rights and talking on truth and justice – can be called human rights defenders. The problem is that people don’t understand the real terminology of human rights defenders. It should continue to be disseminated.”³⁶

Recommendations

These are some of the recommendations made by the participants in this study.

Recommendations for State actors

Broadly, the recommendations of participants to the State centred on recognizing the work of human rights defenders, educating State actors of the rights of human rights defenders, and enacting policies to protect the rights and work of defenders. ‘An environment where they can work without fear’ was frequently noted as fundamental to the notion of security among participants. At the heart of this was a legal, administrative, social and cultural environment that actively defended the work of human rights defenders and ensured accountability for violence.

Recommendations for Protection Actors

The participants in this study also made the following recommendations for actors who provide protection support and assistance to human rights defenders, including NGOs, embassies, UN agencies, and donors.

- Understand the financial strains experienced by defenders at risk, and provide financial support. Donors, in particular, need to recognise the importance of providing funds for the prevention and mitigation of risks as well as other protection-related activities. These should be incorporated into annual plans and budgets of human rights organisations.
- Take families into account and include them and their wellbeing in protection initiatives

³⁵ Participant working on freedom of religion in Aceh, interviewed in March 2016.

³⁶ Participant working on labour, civil and political rights in Malang, interviewed in November 2015.

- Think about longer-term solutions for security, not just immediate actions (such as safe houses, emergency funds, sabbatical leave, self-care training)
- Lobby the State for better protection mechanisms for human rights defenders at risk
- When facilitating relocation, ensure that support systems are in place during relocation and after human rights defenders return. Relocation programmes for human rights defenders should include work or activities best suited to their abilities and human rights goals. Understand also that relocation in itself isn't sufficient, and that mental health assistance (for example, to address trauma) is important too.
- Involve human rights defenders in the design, development and implementation of protection plans and security arrangements in a transparent way so that these initiatives are empowering
- Recognise that some protection initiatives, while well intended, can also have negative consequences on defenders. For example, accompaniment can result in the loss of privacy
- Raise awareness amongst activists, community organisers, and others of their right to defend human rights. They face many risks but may not think of themselves as human rights defenders and may not be identified as such by others
- Implement better systems of coordination within human rights networks with quicker response to protection requests
- Involve the Bar Association, the National Commission of Human Rights, National Commission of Violation Against Women and Witness and Protection Institution into protection mechanisms for human rights defenders.