

Security for women human rights defenders

Purpose:

Looking at security from the perspective of women human rights defenders

Providing both women and men human rights defenders with additional security/protection knowledge and tools

Introduction

Although the security of women human rights defenders' is interrelated with the security of all human rights defenders, we have decided to dedicate a specific chapter to the security of women human rights defenders, because experience in the field shows that it is not systematically mainstreamed. There are multiple reasons for this and, ultimately they mostly originate from the social, cultural and religious context¹. This is why we have elected to introduce the topic with a short compilation of comments gathered directly from experience in the field which highlights the convergence of interests and the necessary collaboration between women and men human rights defenders.

Women human rights defenders

Women have always been important stakeholders in the promotion and protection of human rights. However, their role is not always acknowledged. Women work on their own or alongside with men in the defence of human rights.

Unfortunately, too often:

- ♦ they face not only gender-related violence outside their organisations but also gender prejudice and discrimination within human rights defenders' organisations themselves.

¹ Ethic of Care: In her book *In a different voice* (1982), Carol Gilligan (Harvard psychologist) asserts that while man morale is based on justice and rights, woman morale is based on care recognising the importance of human relations and the attention shown to the needs of the others. Thus, it is legitimate to believe that if men followed the ethic of care, there would be less violence.

- ♦ there is often an excuse to “postpone” women’s rights on the agenda or make it an “extraordinary” agenda item, as if there was a priority order instead of interdependence with human rights. This happens in mixed human rights defenders organisations.
- ♦ women human rights defenders are still considered by their male peers as auxiliaries. Male peers will often refuse tasks regarded as less fundamental, as if their masculinity depended on it.

Sexism, classism, racism, ‘casteism’, xenophobia and homophobia are all more or less subtle facets of the same logic underlying human rights violations against men, women, people of different sexual orientation, children, elderly, ethnic groups, poor people... They all have an impact on security: for example, in some places, pariahs are not considered at all within the security plan: neither positively (i.e. as people aware of their surroundings) nor negatively (i.e. as potential aggressor’s informers).

The concept of violence is often twisted:

- ♦ fighting “violence against women” instead of fighting male violence
- ♦ “domestic violence” as a euphemism for male violence.

By working on putting an end to male violence, domestic violence should drop as a result. They are not separate issues.

Women are often still considered lesser human beings, although modern science has established that gender differences do not imply an order of capacities. It sounds obvious but experience in the field and in workshops with defenders has shown that this idea is not necessarily integrated. This explains our insistence.

Since women have had access to school and education they have proved to be just as intelligent as men (only to mention the use of intelligence at school). There is often confusion between intelligence and access to information. The same can be said for ethnic minorities and any other discriminated against group: it is not an anthropological question, rather a social one. An educated individual/group might engage in a peer and substantiated dialectic and challenge the establishment. This might explain why too many girls and women are still not allowed to access education.

Women notice the contradiction between defending human rights on the one hand and discriminating against women on the other. Inevitably, sometimes, women would like to tell their male peers to go back to square one and come back once they are aware of it and are ready to change their behaviour. However, women stay and keep working alongside their male colleagues: more women join human rights’ actions organised by men, than men do women’s rights actions organised by women.

Where violence is perpetrated against women, be it against even one woman (or any other group or individual), it is not an issue of culture or religion but of power.

In the case of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu for example, apartheid did not end because the dignity of black people was suddenly recognised, but because some white people recognised they had lost theirs. The same can be applied to gender-based discrimination and to any other type of discrimination.

As long as male human rights defenders fail to see that gender-based discrimination originates from the same perverse logic that legitimises all the other types of discrimination, then the human rights defenders movement will be half the strength it could potentially be. Also, it will continue to serve the purposes of the human rights violators: to divide and rule.

Women's rights are not just women's rights

This chapter does not attempt to change minds and values, but to see how gender-based and all other types of discrimination impact on the security and protection of women firstly, but also of male human rights defenders. Thus, whilst a change in mindset may be too ambitious an aim, deterrence is not and this involves changes in behaviour. In this case, male solidarity on issues of women's security contributes to the security of all human rights defenders.

More material has been produced in the context of the International Consultation on Women Human Rights defenders-Colombo- Sri Lanka, 2005².

<http://defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/pdf/WHRD-Proceedings.pdf>

Attacks on women human rights defenders

In her **2002 annual report to the Commission on Human Rights** Hina Jilani, the UN Secretary General's Special Representative on Human Rights Defenders stated:

Women human rights defenders are on a par with their male colleagues in putting themselves on the front line in the promotion and protection of human rights. In doing so, however, as women, they face risks that are specific to their gender and additional to those faced by men.

*In the first instance, as women, **they become more visible**. That is, women defenders may arouse more hostility than their male colleagues because as women human rights defenders they may defy cultural, religious or social norms about femininity and the role of women in a particular country or society. In this context, not only may they face human rights violations for their work as human rights defenders, but even more so because of their gender and the fact that **their work may run counter to societal stereotypes** about women's submissive nature, or challenge notions of the society about the status of women.*

² A very useful guide on women human rights defenders UNHCHR website at <http://www.unhchr.ch/defenders/tiwomen.htm> Also see *Report: Consultation on Women HRDs with the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General on Human Rights Defenders, April 4-6 2003*, Published by Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, and *Essential actors of our time. Human rights defenders in the Americas*, by Amnesty International.

Secondly, it is not unlikely that the hostility, harassment and repression women defenders face may themselves take a gender-specific form, ranging from, for example, verbal abuse directed exclusively at women because of their gender to sexual harassment and rape.

In this connection, **women's professional integrity and standing in society can be threatened and discredited** in ways that are specific to them, such as the all too familiar pretextual calling into question of their probity when - for example - women assert their right to sexual and reproductive health, or to equality with men, including to a life free from discrimination and violence. In this context, for example, women human rights defenders have been tried using laws criminalizing conduct amounting to the legitimate enjoyment and exercise of rights protected under international law on spurious charges brought against them simply because of their views and advocacy work in defence of women's rights.

Thirdly, human rights abuses perpetrated against women human rights defenders can, in turn, have repercussions that are, in and of themselves, gender-specific. For example, **the sexual abuse** of a woman human rights defender in custody and her **rape can result in pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS**.

Certain women-specific rights are almost exclusively promoted and protected by women human rights defenders. Promoting and protecting women's rights can be an additional risk factor, as the assertion of some such rights is seen as a threat to **patriarchy and as disruptive of cultural, religious and societal mores**. Defending women's right to life and liberty in some countries has resulted in the life and liberty of women defenders themselves being violated. Similarly, protesting against discriminatory practices has led to the prosecution of a prominent women's rights defender on charges of apostasy.

Factors such as age, ethnicity, educational background, sexual orientation and marital status must also be taken into consideration, as different groups of women defenders face different challenges and therefore have different protection and security needs.

The assessment of the protection needs of women defenders will help to clarify their specific and often different vulnerabilities and coping strategies. They can thus be more adequately addressed in emergency and day-to-day situations.

**THE DECLARATION ON THE ELIMINATION OF VIOLENCE
AGAINST WOMEN (1993) DEFINES VIOLENCE AGAINST
WOMEN AS:**

Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. (Article 1)

Violence against women shall be understood to encompass, but not be limited to, the following:

- a) ♦ Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation.
- b) ♦ Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women and forced prostitution.
- c) ♦ Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs. (Article 2)

Security of women human rights defenders

Women human rights defenders are paying a heavy price for their work in protecting and promoting other people's human rights. Women defenders have to confront gender-specific risks, and their security therefore requires a specific approach.

The causes will need to be taken into account in the security organisational policies and protocols. Here is a non exhaustive list of causes mentioned in the 2002 Hina Jilani report mentioned above.

- ♦ *Women may attract unwanted attention.*
- ♦ *Women defenders may have to break patriarchal laws and social taboos.*
- ♦ *There are specific forms of aggression against women defenders.*
- ♦ *Women defenders may come under pressure to "prove" their integrity.*
- ♦ *Male colleagues may not understand, or could even reject, women defenders' work.*
- ♦ *Women defenders may experience domestic violence.*
- ♦ *Women defenders usually have additional family obligations*
- ♦ *All these pressures place an additional burden of work and stress on women defenders.*

Towards better security and protection for women human rights defenders

Global permanent security policies and measures

Mainstreaming women's participation

In a nutshell, this means ensuring full participation by women alongside men in decision-making processes; putting women's security issues on the agenda, and placing women on a par with men in the process of taking security precautions. It is important to include women's experiences and perceptions and to ensure that women are defining security rules and procedures, as well as monitoring and evaluating them.

Ensuring that gender-specific security and protection needs are addressed

As with other security needs, assigning responsibilities for addressing gender-based violence and security risks of women defenders is very important within any defender organisation or group. The individuals responsible for security will ideally have a good understanding of the specific needs of women defenders. It may sometimes be necessary to identify someone else who can bring specific knowledge and understanding to the issue. For example, one person might be in charge of security, but the organisation later decides to appoint a person with the right training and skills to be a focal point for gender-based violence. In such

cases, both people must work closely together to ensure that all security procedures run smoothly and respond to people's different needs.

Training

Training for all those working together in a human rights organisation is key to improving security and protection and should include developing awareness about the specific needs of women defenders.

Awareness raising

- ◆ on any confusion between social, cultural, religious values and women rights, human rights.
- ◆ on domestic violence against women which includes all physical, sexual and psychological harm occurring within the family, such as battering, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices which are harmful and a risk to women's lives.
- ◆ within the families of women rights defenders, and the need for taking the same courses of action as they do against the same violence outside the domestic sphere. Organisations should consider any possible contradiction between their aims and members agreeing on domestic violence. From a security point of view, it implies possible discredit to the whole organisation with possible consequent decrease in key stakeholders' support.
- ◆ on the fact that many women will be influenced, as far as security is concerned, by the fact that they have to take care of children and other relatives, in addition to their other work. Of how men could promote domestic task sharing without damaging their masculinity.
- ◆ on the fact that both women and men human rights defenders are often condemned for dedicating themselves to others instead of to their own families

In summary,

Differences in women's security needs are linked to their different roles, to different kinds of threats, and to differences between specific situations (such as detention, field work, etc.) The aim is to develop gender-sensitive responses to violence against women and other defenders.

Additional comment

Gender-based violence is always **under-reported**. A general awareness about gender-based violence within the organisation or group can make it easier for people to talk about gender specific threats or incidents. Willing staff members can also serve as "entry-points" for women and men defenders who want to find solutions to gender-based threats or violence against them or others in the organisation or community.

Sexual aggression and personal security

Statistically speaking, rape affects more women than men. Some men human rights defenders who have suffered it speak of it as sexual torture and are aware that it is what women go through. Rape is torture in itself as it attempts to the physical and the psychological integrity of a person.

As common law crimes are often a cover when it comes to human rights defenders, for the sake of proportion, one could speak of rape in a real common law crime and one must speak of sexual torture³ in political crime (repression of defenders' work where victims can either be pre-selected or opportunistic targets).

It is a crime of power and violence. Sexual torture is an alternative way for the aggressor to demonstrate his or her power over the victim.

Sexual torture is one of the consequences of physical aggression. Therefore, prevention needs to start with implementing all security measures described previously to reduce the risk of aggression. This is why, the prevention of sexual aggression might be similar to that of other aggressions.

Remember that in many cases women taken to a different location with a potential aggressor are raped (and beaten or even killed). Thus women should always make a strong and definite decision not to follow a potential aggressor (probably unless such a refusal would severely endanger her life or the life of others

All women rights defenders face the risk of sexual torture but not all women rights defenders are equal in front of it. It depends on the political, social, cultural, religious context. Some women will have to deal with the physical health and psychological consequences others, with the physical health, psychological, social, cultural consequences, the ordeal of reporting it and being questioned about it throughout the legal procedure.

Sexual aggression ought to be approached from all perspectives and consequences, the psychosocial dimension included. Like in all tortures, the sexually tortured person might experience feelings of guilt, "lost dignity", distrust, and in case of rape, also being filthy... Organisations might consider the possibility to analyse the concept of dignity: what is dignity? Who decides about the dignity of the other person? Who actually has lost their dignity: the one falling as low as torturing or the tortured?

³ UN declaration against torture : " (...) torture means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted by or at the instigation of a public official on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or confession, punishing him for an act he has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating him or other persons. (...)

A permanent organisational policy ought to include:

- mainstreaming women rights defenders specific needs
- tackling organisation gender-discrimination
- considering cultural impact on victims of sexual abuse and torture
- ...

Specific protocols:

- women rights defenders on field missions
- Public relations with stakeholders in protection
- handling consequences of sexual abuse and torture such as unwanted pregnancy and HIV/AIDS.

When defining these protocols do not forget that:

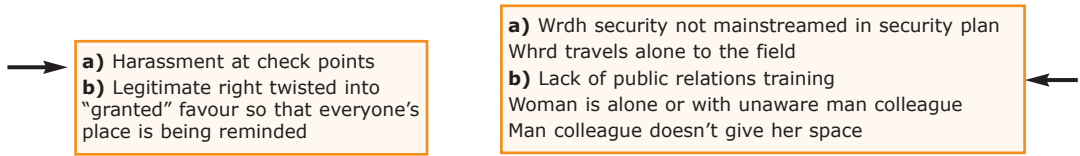
- Some women human rights defenders don't dare to mention that they have experienced sexual abuse and torture with their man peers as they fear stigmatisation or discredit (let's remember that victims often experience a feeling of guilt although totally unjustified)
- In some countries mixed organisations hardly ever speak about it.
- Some man human rights defenders have strong opinions on abortion. On the other hand, they are not necessarily ready to foster the unwanted child. In many countries, as abortion is not permitted either by law, culture or religion, infanticide has become a real option alongside with child abandonment. The latter contributing to the witch child phenomenon and the increase in child soldiers, let alone all other social blight. Also, women could consider taking the day-after pill (a pill which will provoke menstruation regardless of the fact that she might or not be pregnant)
- There is no right or wrong choice, there are consequences that ought to be assessed within the organisation.
- **It is important to use the risk assessment tool**

Example:

Risk: Women may attract unwanted attention.

List all related possible threats/consequences of the above considered risk. Then, per threat/consequence, list respective current vulnerabilities and capacities. Then determine desirable capacities to reduce vulnerabilities and work on them.

In other words, the risk needs to be unfolded as much as possible, like peeling an onion layer after layer. For each layer (threat/consequence) determine related vulnerabilities and capacities



RISK= $\frac{\text{threats/consequences} \times \text{vulnerability}}{\text{capacities}}$

Women may attract unwanted attention

- Open-minded organisation
- Stereotypes are a work item and also include whrd awareness about keeping a professional attitude.
- Human resources available

(Indicate, among the above general capacity inventory, which ones could be specifically related to your vulnerabilities "a" and "b". Then, determine which others you need to develop).

Reacting to a sexual aggression⁴

The options for response to a sexual aggression are just as limited as for all other physical assaults and strictly up to the victim. There is no right or wrong way to react. As all other choices, they imply consequences. In all cases, the primary objective is to survive. The options available to the victim of sexual aggression can include the following:

- 1 ♦ **Submit.** If the victim fears for his or her life, they may choose to submit to the crime.
- 2 ♦ **Passive resistance.** Do or say anything distasteful or disgusting to ruin the aggressor's desire for sexual contact. Say you have AIDS (although the aggressor's reaction might be: so what? I have it too, or he could get more violent).
- 3 ♦ **Active resistance:** Try any type of physical force you can muster to fight off the aggressor such as striking, kicking, biting, scratching, shouting and running away.

In all cases:

- if possible, try and mention the condom. In some cultures and religions it is falsely considered as "consent" but at the end of the day it is their problem. Yours might be bigger as you might have to live with pregnancy, health consequences and, among all possible recurrent thoughts, also the "what if?"). It means that women human rights defenders might consider keeping condoms on them or wear a feminine condom when in mission to risky areas. It implies talking about it in the organisations and including it in the budget. The same goes for the day- after pill and any hospital treatment (see later: PEP)
- if possible try and gather as much information about the aggressor(s). It might help there and then to concentrate on something and it will definitely help to file the legal case and reduce the probability of impunity.

⁴ Most of this information has been adapted from Van Brabant's book *Operational Security in Violent Environments* and from World Vision's and the World Council of Churches' Security Manuals.

- if possible, try and concentrate on mentally separating the body from the mind.

In all cases, do whatever you must to survive. Go with your instincts. No one knows how they will react in such a situation (or any other type of torture) and your way to react will be right for you and the given situation.

In many places, sexual torture takes proportions beyond imagination. Where basic security logic would suggest not to go to a field mission before having built enough deterrence power as the risk of being sexually tortured by fighting parties is extremely high, some human rights defenders organisations and individual women rights defenders decide to go beyond their own security thinking about the many other victims. Although the line between acceptable and non acceptable risk is personal and organisational, we can't but insist on the basic security rules. During trainings, the brainstorming as gone as far as considering analysing the following options in case of sexual aggression during a field mission: the woman right defender could invoke AIDS (whether it is a collective sexual torture or not) and instil the doubt that as no one knows who might have AIDS, all might be affected. She could also tell the aggressor that she has her periods which means that as a prevention she would need to consider wearing stained sanitary towels during the whole field mission. She could wear more layers of clothes hoping that rescue would come in time.

HIV/AIDS is blight on society and does not have gender barriers.

In some countries where sexual torture of women has become a war weapon, many women are considering meeting with the aggressors and "explain" how it is affecting them all: how the point is not whether to sexually torture women in order to achieve repression rather see that it is leading to collective death: it has become a question of life or death for all, aggressors included. It is a time bomb for all, let alone the cultural genocide.

Many men human rights defenders also work on sexual torture against women and the related cultural rejection. Yet, some of them assert that they would repudiate their wives if it happened to them.

One man human right defender once questioned a male colleague (working on changing family attitude towards sexually tortured women) who considered it as adultery. He simply said to the latter: "it depends on what your wife represents for you".

It is the underlying question. Too often, a woman is considered mainly a sexual object/property: once "broken", drop it and take another one

A woman is often considered a mother, daughter, sister, wife of the man. Hardly as a woman with her own identity. Fortunately, many women can count on their man colleagues who give genuine support to their women peers.

All human rights defender organisations and groups should have preventive and reactive plans in place to deal with sexual aggressions.

Where possible, and depending on the local context and access to medical laboratories, the following should be available:

- ♦ medical visit/care before washing – (to take a semen sample or any other sample for DNA analysis)
- ♦ pictures of the victim)
- ♦ psychological support
- ♦ reporting to the competent authority and filing cases.

In all cases, the reactive plan should include, at the very least, providing the victim with **effective healthcare, including psychological care**, followed by legal support.

To prevent pregnancy, the victim should be offered the morning-after pill (within 24 hours): this is an emergency contraception (not an abortive pill).

Although not guaranteed as it depends on many variables, “Post-exposure Prophylaxis (PEP)” can be considered. A post-rape kit is available in some hospitals, containing treatment intended to stop the transmission of several diseases for victims who have managed to receive care within 72 hours of being raped. In any case, check immediately and regularly for sexually transmitted diseases⁵

a careful balance must be achieved between ensuring that the victim has access to the relevant specialist support, and ensuring that the organisation reacts in an appropriate and supportive way.

Please also see *Preventing and reacting to aggressions* in Chapter 1.5.

Summary

Women suffer gender-based abuse, harassment and torture determined by patriarchal culture. Mixed human rights defenders’ organisations all too often reproduce it at their micro level. Security for women human rights defenders is security for all human rights defenders.

It needs to be mainstreamed within the security policies and protocols of organisations. More is needed than just a strict risk assessment. It requires also:

- ♦ questioning roles and attitudes
- ♦ working on false assumptions and changing gender-driven attitudes.
- ♦ positive discrimination to assist changes
- ♦ security budget should consider including “condoms, the morning-after pill, triple-therapy, ...

Again, there is no guarantee of results. Sexual torture comes after physical aggression. By reducing the exposure to the latter, the probability of sexual torture will also decrease.

⁵ More information: International Committee of the Red Cross-ICRC : <http://icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/congo-kinshasa-feature-201207A>