



Wellbeing, Risk, and Human Rights Practice

Human rights defenders at risk often find it difficult to talk about their mental and emotional wellbeing, even when they are concerned about it. Cultures of human rights practice tend to emphasise self-sacrifice, heroism, and martyrdom. These norms inhibit defenders from expressing their anxieties and seeking help. How can we engage in discussions about wellbeing in human rights practice? How can we strengthen personal and collective strategies for wellbeing amongst defenders at risk?

Introduction

86 percent of human rights defenders 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.

In this brief, we highlight the recurrent themes on wellbeing that emerged through our interviews and surveys with defenders at risk in Colombia, Mexico, Egypt, Kenya, and Indonesia.

The important but insufficient focus on wellbeing

Although defenders at risk are concerned about their mental and emotional wellbeing, this is not discussed much

in human rights communities. Even amongst defenders themselves, it is often given only secondary attention.

As a transman defender in Indonesia observed:

Human rights defenders sometimes do not have concern for [their wellbeing], because they are busy assisting victims. Therefore, they sometimes forget to think about their own welfare. Sometimes, they also work too hard and do not have any rest or vacation, and so they are neglecting their mental and emotional wellbeing.

Defenders also tend to prioritise the necessity and importance of their work before thinking about their personal wellbeing. Their strong commitment to achieving human rights' goals propel them forward in spite of the challenges in their work.

A woman defender working on the rights of LGBTIQ* persons in Colombia observed:

This is a tough business. You are always stigmatised. We have to protect ourselves vis-à-vis our orientation. It's a question of trying to survive. But you have to get on with things, to come out on top, to fall a thousand times and get up each time.

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 campesino 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 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.

I compare our work to that of Sisyphus: extreme mental and physical strain with no apparent outcomes... [We are] working under the constant threat of being arrested at any moment, and some of us are being personally attacked on the media outlets. What makes it even more difficult is our knowledge that if we go to trial, the trial will more than likely be unjust and biased and it will lack transparency and professionalism.

Human rights lawyer, Egypt

Expectations about risk and sacrifice in human rights work

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.

Culturally mediated understandings of wellbeing

Amongst defenders we found different reactions to questions about 'mental and emotional wellbeing' in our study. Some defenders interpreted this as a 'Western' concept, leading to 'Western' interventions that were inappropriate for them.

As a leader of an indigenous community in Colombia said:

We don't really use the 'psychosocial' concept. We believe that the work we do as indigenous people is better for us. We are all in our right minds; we all have our five senses; we are not crazy. Just because there are armed groups present, it doesn't mean we are in a bad way.

However... there were 18-20 suicides in the last four years... We have tried 'Western' psychology, but it didn't improve matters. The indigenous medics have blessed us and offered advice. This has been better for us.

Defenders in our study noted that it was sometimes difficult to hold discussions about wellbeing with fellow defenders because it was perceived to be linked with 'madness' or needing to see a psychiatrist. Those who recognized the value of counselling and treatment noted difficulties with accessing these forms of support as well as the stigma associated with these. Others felt that locally relevant cultural and religious forms of support were more effective for them.

The reliance on private rather than collective coping strategies

Defenders in our study tended to rely on private coping strategies rather than on organisational support for their wellbeing. They shared how they gained strength from their spirituality, from being with their family and friends, and from engaging in hobbies. However, they also sometimes felt lost and alone in their struggles.

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 that he was 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 laugh together. Based on my experience, I believe, they also felt worried. It seems as if we do not received moral support.

Anti-corruption defender, Indonesia

Relatively few human rights NGOs embed wellbeing practices into their work, such as through providing supervision for case work; providing counselling; holding retreats; emphasizing work-life balance; and providing insurance and pensions.

The financial aspects of wellbeing

Many defenders discussed the financial insecurities of their work. They spoke about short-term funding, low wages, the lack of benefits, and expectations that human rights work should be conducted without pay. Some defenders in our study lost income because of the risks and threats they faced. Most had to raise money or spend their savings on personal security – such as bail, medical treatment, security equipment, and relocation. Financial insecurities were particularly challenging for defenders already struggling socio-economically.

A woman defender working on reproductive rights and maternal health in Kenya said:

We don't have a kitty or organisations that care for our health and families. No one is concerned about how you feed or pay rent and no organisations are ready to give you employment because you don't have papers or certificates... It's a challenge to human rights defenders, especially when sick and hospitalised, we have so many human rights defenders going through these - finance is the biggest issue.

Identity, wellbeing, and access to resources

There is a link between the identity of defenders, the risks they face, and the resources and support they are able to access for their wellbeing. LGBTIQ* defenders, for example, have narrower access to support mechanisms. Seeking support outside of their own circles often requires them to 'come out' and to expose the work they do. This is similar for women defenders working on sensitive issues. As such, their spaces of work remain one of the few spaces for strengthening wellbeing.

[After the attack] I decided to go home to where my parents are; it was bad, a lot of stigma and discrimination from my family. They called me despicable. "You have dropped our name to mud, we are ashamed of you, you have dropped our name to mud, you have no shame, God will see you through hell."

It was so hard I wanted to commit suicide. I could not proceed with my work at that time. There was a state of panic and risk for all the LGBTIs [in my area]. I stayed underground until things were safe.

Transwoman defender working on LGBTIQ* rights in Kenya

Wellbeing through human rights practice

Human rights work connects defenders in meaningful ways, allowing them to experience what they feel is fundamental to their wellbeing. For some, living positively and continuing with their work in spite of threats was in itself an act of resistance.

For such defenders, it is not a question of choosing between human rights practice and wellbeing – rather human rights practice is done to maintain wellbeing.

... the combat against repression was a healing process... the claim that "Yes, it was the state" was our way of healing the wound; it is an emotional need and also a statement to make us stronger, make ourselves feel less vulnerable, less alone. Our uprising is against loneliness; it is a trust network; it is love politics; subversive love...

Woman, student and feminist defender, Mexico



Creating space for wellbeing

The defenders in this study welcomed more emphasis on self-care, managing emotions, and discussions about wellbeing. They valued discussions about how to develop networks and how to build collective strategies for protection. In security training sessions, they valued sharing their experiences of risk and their self-protection measures with other defenders; they also valued hearing the experiences of others.

They noted the importance of creating spaces for self-reflection on the amount of risk involved in their work and their level of commitment to the cause.

A human rights defender has to love life. To help others, s/he cannot fall into the trap of scepticism or defeatism. We have to overcome our internal and external limits, and that is only possible if we take care of ourselves. We have to transmit optimism and transformative messages; we can't be with the victims in order to sow further misery. In general, human rights defenders have an enormous capacity to enjoy each moment in life.

Human rights lawyer, Colombia

Implications for Practice

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

- Develop spaces for self-reflection on the individual and collective wellbeing of human rights defenders, especially those at risk.
- Recognise and address norms and expectations that make it difficult for defenders to engage in discussions about wellbeing.
- Move beyond 'Western' approaches to understanding wellbeing. Recognise, document and share other social and cultural forms of conceptualizing and strengthening wellbeing.

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.



Centre for Applied Human Rights
University of York
Yorkshire House
6 Innovation Close, York Science Park
Heslington, York YO10 5ZF
United Kingdom

+44 (0)1904 325830
cahr-admin@york.ac.uk
york.ac.uk/cahr

- Approach wellbeing not as the sole responsibility of individual defenders but as a collective responsibility.
- Review how individuals, groups, communities and stakeholders strengthen individual and collective strategies for wellbeing. These include mainstreaming practices of self-care and care for others; embedding wellbeing practices in collectives; and understanding the effect of funding practices on sustainable activism.
- Devote financial resources to wellbeing practices that are culturally relevant and contextually appropriate. These may include provision for healthcare, counselling, insurance, and pensions.
- Recognise that for some defenders – such as LGBTIQ* and women defenders – spaces of work are crucial spaces for wellbeing. It is therefore important to understand how spaces of work 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.

Principal Investigator

Alice M. Nah

Research Team

Sherif Azer
Patricia Bartley
Peter Cousins
Indria Fernida
Kholoud Hafez
Budi Hernawan
Irina Ichim
Katrina Maliamauv
Erick Monterrosas
Patrick Mutahi
Paola Pacheco Ruiz
Emily Schmitz

For more information

securityofdefendersproject.org
security-of-defenders-project@york.ac.uk

Reference

Nah, A.M. (2017) Wellbeing, Risk, and Human Rights Practice, Human Rights Defender Hub Policy Brief 1, Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York: York, available at securityofdefendersproject.org

Illustrations

Lara Luna Bartley

Design

Design and Print Solutions