



Telebriefing:
PROMOTING INTEGRATED SECURITY THROUGH
PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS
October 30, 2013

Organized by IHRFG's Human Rights Defenders Working Group

Speakers:

- [Dr. Magda Adly](#), Director, el Nadim Center for Rehabilitation of the Victims of Violence and Torture (Egypt)
 - [Jelena Djordjevic](#), Member, Board of Directors, Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights
 - [Sierra Schraff Thomas](#), Protection Officer, Aluna (Mexico)
 - [David Mattingly](#), Director of Programs, Fund for Global Human Rights (Moderator)
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The vital work of defending human rights is fraught with risks. In addition to threats against their personal safety and security, human rights defenders (HRDs) may face exhaustion, trauma, and other forms of stress that affect their psychosocial well-being. These aspects of the work are seldom discussed and severely underfunded, which weakens the fabric of social movements. How can funders support essential programs that address the intersection of security and psychosocial support?

David Mattingly, Director of Programs, Fund for Global Human Rights

David Mattingly provided background information on the topic, and clarification of terms:

- At IHRFG's last conference, there was a one-day institute on ways for funders to support HRDs. The conversation continued at the July conference.
- Definition of psychosocial support: HRDs have a complex array of needs.
 - They face exhaustion, stress, and trauma while carrying out their work. These take a psychological toll.
 - To meet their needs, we can work with individuals or groups, helping to ensure that activists are able to do their work safely and effectively, sound in mind and body.
 - Funders need to address the criminalization of human rights defenders' work
- Some activists and donors feel that psychosocial support is not as high-priority of other types of support; this is not the case.

Dr. Magda Adly, Director, el Nadim Center for Rehabilitation of the Victims of Violence and Torture

Magda Adly discussed the main risks and challenges that face HRDs in transitional situations like Egypt, conflict areas like Syria. She depicted the way these specific needs relate to security, and the best ways for address them:



- The el Nadim Center provides short and long term psychological rehabilitation and support to victims of torture
 - Provides training to medical officers
 - They conducted a number of trainings on ways to support HRDs in Syria who suffer from trauma, anxiety, and exhaustion, working day and night to provide aid.
- HRDs in MENA and around the world face many risks and challenges in their work: violence, psychological trauma, and exposure to excessive stress
 - In Syria, Egypt, and Libya, HRDs have been kidnapped, harassed, suffered public acts of violence, and faced sexual violence.
 - Women's HRDs have been excluded from any transitional process.
 - Many players in the Syrian conflict have committed human rights violations.
 - These violations come from both from Assad and rebels.
 - Syrian HRDs face such afflictions as anxiety, PTSD, OCD, Nightmares, insomnia, and any number of psychosomatic disorders.
- It is highly important to look at all the threats to HRDs if you want to have a comprehensive strategy to help them.
 - How to do this? Support local groups who can have an important impact.
 - Make sure people treating them are aware of specific threats to HRDs.

Sierra Schraff Tomas, Protection Officer, Aluna

Sierra Schraff-Thomas provided an example of a model from the Mesoamerican context that strives to meet psychosocial needs of women activists:

- Aluna is an organization that provides psychosocial support directly to WHRDs in Mexico.
- Mesoamerican region is in a state of humanitarian crisis due to violence and violations of human rights.
 - There is wide-ranging inequality, impunity, and corruption, which has made access to justice difficult.
 - The militarization of public security and excessive use of force have had a tremendous impact on social movements, while failing to hamper the drug trade or organized crime.
 - Foreign investment and extraction of natural resources also harm human rights.
 - In 2012, there were 414 acts of aggression against WHRDs in Mesoamerica; these were mostly concentrated in Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico.
 - 36 WHRDs lost their lives in the past three years.
 - These acts were perpetrated mainly by local authorities and police; some were also committed by corporations, private security forces, spouses of the WHRDs, and members of the movements



- Most at risk are WHRDs working on territorial and resource rights, those working for women's right to life free of violence, and against impunity, and for the protection of journalists.
- WHRDs face gender violence. Many don't identify as HRDs, and are rejected by community when step out of traditional roles
- Strategies that complement existing protection mechanisms:
 - Support for building and strengthening national networks
 - Regional spaces for community
 - Urgent action and visibility
 - Documentation and analysis of violence against WHRDs
 - Emphasis on self-care
 - Rapid response funds
- Networks are now in place in Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico involving over 300 WHRDs, due to the efforts of the Mesoamerican Woman's Human Rights Defenders Initiative.
 - These networks focus on developing risk analysis, psychosocial services, self-care, case-response, assessment, and reporting practices.
 - They provide workshops and resource development.
 - The national networks create a feminist alternative, in response to the lack of community for WHRDs, victim-blaming, the normalization of violence, and justification of violent acts.
 - It constitutes a unique regional system for documenting aggression.
- Aluna is a member of the Mexican National Human Rights Defenders Organization, drawing on founder Clemencia Correa's 20 years of experience in psychosocial support. It seeks to confront impact of political violence, strengthen WHRDs' own tools and wellbeing, so they can carry out their work.
 - The psychosocial perspective helps recognize effects violations have on victims and families, and account for coping mechanisms.
 - Aluna works primarily with HRDs and journalists.
 - Specific activities include integral psychosocial accompaniment, providing space and accompaniment to those impacted so that they can understand the causes and effects of political violence, understand the impact on individual and societal level, develop personal and group coping mechanisms, evaluate risk, and take security methods, strengthen ideological conviction, and decision-making capabilities.
 - Focuses on group processes, instead of individual therapy.

Jelena Djordjevic, Member, Board of Directors, Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights

Jelena Djordjevic spoke as both a funder and an activist- provide specific recommendations for donor engagement:



- What happens when we create a space where we can be safe and discuss and heal?
 - Jelena, together with a group of several feminist activists, gathered perspectives of 68 LGBT rights and women's rights activists in a forthcoming report supported by the Oak Foundation.
- She would like to discuss psychosocial support in terms that activists around the world might be more comfortable using: wellbeing, self-care, heart-mind-body, soul work, self-defense.
 - The language we use has a deep meaning, so she would like to expand the language we use to approach activists lives in a more holistic way.
- We must embrace activists as a whole, not just when they're strong, but also create spaces to support vulnerabilities and fragility.
 - Context of human rights defense changes slowly, and is full of violence. Many activists came into their movements with their own traumas.
- What is needed?
 - Supporting and sustaining individuals and collective. The 'I' is integral to 'we', 'we' is integral to 'I'.
 - We must start this conversation and create a safe space: a physical, spiritual, mental space where people can be who they are, share concerns, worries, losses, and not feel isolated. To have this space for individual and collective empowerment is priceless.
 - Every space that funders create, every gathering with grantees, could be a safe space—while developing strategies, meeting with grantees, give them space to breathe, and heal.
 - Empower in a more holistic way. These are the spaces where we can work on our bodies and our emotions.
 - The loss of connection to self, bodies, families, world in activists can be hard to recognize.
 - It doesn't happen all at once; instead, it's a slow, subtle change caused by the effects of stressful and traumatic events.
 - It leaves an activist with the loss of self-esteem, confidence, disconnection from life, and a loss of vitality. Once we have this space where we can name how we are in the world, a healing can start.
- When we have this moment to start healing, connect to inner strength, activists feel open-hearted, proud, safe, secure, grateful, spontaneous, passionate, vibrant, and hopeful.
- There is no one way to support wellbeing; there are many different ways to do this. We must acknowledge that it takes time, and devote time to rest and recuperation.
- There are groups of activists that are spontaneously forming around the world, understanding that there is something wrong with the existing culture of activism.
 - We are depleting our bodies, minds, lives.
 - We want to keep up resistance, strengthen ourselves for the long-haul.



- One example comes out of the Mesoamerican Initiative: In Honduras, after the coup, the movement really came together by working on their collective wellbeing.
- What are some gaps in the service that is being offered?
 - Retreat centers exist, but they are not specialized to support complex lives and needs of activists, and are not built with perspective of social justice.
 - Only recently are there ones run by activists for activists—these are truly safe spaces for talking, strategizing. Learning centers.
 - Who has access? Where are they? What languages are used? Must consider these questions.
 - What is culturally appropriate when you are working on the body and emotions is different.
 - Look to spaces in the activists' own regions where there is an understanding of the world around and the struggle. What are the needs?
- More conceptual clarity is necessary:
 - How is wellbeing connected to security?
 - What is the holistic approach?
 - Is there one way to promote psychosocial support?
 - We must deepen the clarity, build the spaces, and connect practitioners.
 - We must support and document what it means to bring wellbeing into the organization, document how the dynamic in the organization changes. Is the leadership open to changes?
 - It is crucial to document these initiatives within and between organizations.
- How is this happening transnationally?
- Power exists in having joy and love in a society that doesn't allow this. This has revolutionary potential.

Question-and-Answer Session:

Human rights defenders programs have multiplied and new players have entered the field. Could you characterize the different approaches? The State Department has implemented its Dignity for All program for LGBT activists. How is this different from Urgent action's approach?

Jelena: Urgent Action is run in contact with activists. It was created due to activists saying there was a need for rapid-response programs. They respond in 72 hours, provide service in the necessary language, and are seen as part of the movement. There is less bureaucracy than in other programs. People from other organizations come to them, and can ask what mechanisms they should be developing. UA pools and shares its expertise. It is part of activist world, and highly in touch with activists' needs, particularly of women's rights defenders and LGBT defenders.



David: The Fund for Global Human Rights tries to integrate all these issues into their overall general support grantmaking so they provide resources for groups that are promoting psysocial services in regular grantmaking, not doing it through separate funds for HRDs. Other members of IHRFG's Human Rights Defenders Working Group are doing the same.

A Participant from Freedom House: Dignity for All started in late fall of last year. Their work revolves around emergency assistance, providing small grants for HRDs or civil society organizations, particularly if there was loss of equipment and resources, or a need for legal assistance. They have several partners in a consortium. These partners are located in MENA, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and throughout Europe. They provide advocacy support, and just started in the fall of 2012.

One issue they've faced so far is that it is important not to frame the funding as, "There's a defender who's at risk; here's a check." The National Endowment for Democracy has a database of urgent action funds worldwide, and that's more or less their formula. Freedom House is working with Frontline Defenders about this problem in funding; there are movements that need money, but this approach is a band-aid. How can we make the approaches more effective, and really support movements. How can we be a partner and not just another funder? By focusing on this question, we can move forward.

Catherine Townsend: One of the speakers was talking about how to integrate this approach into grantmaking. This brings into question relationship between donor and grantee. It's hard for grantees to disclose these types of issues; culture of personal sacrifice is strong. How can donors acknowledge these issues, be supportive of grantees, not undermine self-care, wellness?

Jelena: One way to address this concern is by creating the space. Even just by asking simple questions like, "How are you?" "How is your life?" funders can get to know the people you work with. Urgent Action Fund published a book on WHRDs. There was a story in there of a WHRD from Nepal who was involved with women's rights for 10 years. One day, she was killed by husband. Nobody within her organization knew that she lived the same violence in her daily life that she was fighting against in her work. As we open these spaces, we must open discussions about the culture of activism. It starts with trying.

Sierra: Yes, it's about putting value in theses exchanges. It's not just a small-talk "How are you?"; it's "How ARE you?"

A Participant from Frontline: Frontline has a platform for HRDs where they provide temporary humanitarian visas, and take defenders to Ireland. They provide a trained ear at this platform. It's just for three days, and is kind of shallow, in a way. However, if defenders want to talk to someone, they can. They currently have two activists with them: an Afghan woman who's really burnt out, and a Guatemalan activist working on mining issues, who has 30 lawsuits against him. They are often asked to provide counseling. How far should they go down that road? They are very wary of recommending psychological care for anyone. After all, might this approach make things worse, rather than better?



Jelena: This is why I wanted to use broad term outside of psychosocial support. Not everyone is comfortable with therapy, and it doesn't work with everyone. Bring professionals. People respond to various possibilities. We can pool the potential of the people around us to heal activists.

Listen to the recording [here](#).