

***Communities of Care:  
Strategies for the Protection of Women Human Rights Defenders in Chechnya and Beyond***  
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Luiza has seen many attempts to silence Chechen human rights activists. There was the car with tell-tale tinted windows and no number plates that tried to run over her sister after she gave a speech attacking Chechnya's poor human rights record. The constant emergency trips to neighboring republics with her children, having faced threats from gangs on the government payroll. The drive-by paintball shootings. These were thugs trying to keep activists in check, part of a wider effort to enforce women's compliance with a strict Islamic dress code.

As part of her work helping women survivors of state-sponsored violence, Luiza encounters regular violence and intimidation.

In 2008, the Kremlin-appointed President of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadirov, introduced a plan for "moral education" that included a decree requiring that all women employed in the state sector, and all female school and university students, wear headscarves. Kadirov's men enforced this decree by [shooting at girls that had their heads uncovered with paintball guns](#), physically marking them out for surveillance and public scrutiny.



Credit: Demotix

Luiza is obviously not alone: she is one of many women that the [Urgent Action Fund](#) supports. All face grave danger due to their work for human rights.

Living under this regime, meditation, yoga and other forms of self-care may seem like luxuries or distractions. In fact, they are essential components of sustained and effective social activism. They help people to manage the accumulated stresses and strains of a life lived in constant danger.

For Luiza, self-care starts with regular exercise to keep her body strong, her senses clear and her mind alert: "I think that human rights defenders should be physically prepared for unexpected circumstances," she told me, "at least in my life, my ability to run quickly has saved me several times."

But self-care isn't enough, especially for those who face seemingly insurmountable odds. There are so many activists like Luiza in the world, and few of them have access to the resources and opportunities they need to care for themselves. Activists gain strength in numbers, but they still need a way of making these opportunities available to everyone who requires them.

That means building *collective communities of care*.

The Urgent Action Fund has showed how a focus on self-care can privilege the leaders of organizations or those with more time and resources – those who speak English, for example, who tend to have more access to Western funding. Retreat centers and sustainability programs usually focus their attention on

those at the Executive Director level who tend to be seasoned activists from NGOs. These programs mostly overlook younger leaders and activists who frame their work outside of the narrow limits of the NGO sector, yet are still at huge risk of 'burning out.'

During a recent debate on [Organizing Upgrade](#), US social justice activists argued forcibly against prioritizing individuals over the collective. As one contributor bluntly stated: "Self-care stands as an importation of middle-class values of leisure, blind to the dynamics of working class (or even family) life, inherently rejects collective responsibility for each other's well-being, misses power dynamics in our lives, and attempts to serve as a replacement for a politics and practice of desire that could actually ignite our hearts."

This is an important critique. We need strategies for collective sustainability that make sense for activists and their communities. That doesn't mean abandoning self-care, but it does mean integrating it into broader cultures of community care that can sustain more people in relationship to one another.

What would a combination of self- and community care look like? For activists in Chechnya, it means creating individual and organizational security plans, for example, that ensure if one woman is threatened, there are others standing by to help to keep her safe. A security plan provides more options when things get especially dangerous, as when the car with tinted windows is heading in your direction.

Phone trees are vital – networks of people who can organize quickly to spread crucial information. Mandatory organization-wide attendance for security trainings can also help, by integrating self-care techniques like meditation with security basics like keeping multiple mobile phones to throw off surveillance.

These mechanisms help to guarantee that the collective work of activists can continue, despite the challenges that are faced by individuals. As Luiza told me: "Before I never even thought about self-care, but since I started to participate at the trainings on security, I've understood its importance. If you go without rest, one day you will not be able to continue what you do."

Collective childcare and rotating meal provisions for monthly meetings among activists are other ways of embodying these communities of care. Strategies like these ensure that activists' family lives, whatever they look like, can be integrated into their work by providing whatever support is necessary for them to function effectively.

Sending regular texts when traveling to remote villages ensures that someone knows where Chechen activists are at all times, in case of (un)expected trouble. In this system, when one person struggles, others are mobilized to support them.

Supporting the collective also diffuses risks to leaders by shoring up the capacity of other members of the community, thereby strengthening groups of individuals as a movement. Activists are more resilient when they do not stand alone.

If more activists could create communities of care like these, their work would become more transformative by reflecting their internal values externally - through the structures in which they operate. By contrast, structures that privilege sustainability for some - usually the more privileged - are not going to build more equal and liberating relationships.

Instead, a better balance is required between self-care and the health of the community so that all activists, not just their leaders, can get the support they need. Embodying compassion for ourselves and other people throughout our work for human rights will build the kind of social movements that more people will want to join.

### **Opportunities for Funders**

Human rights funders have an opportunity to find solutions that mitigate the risks faced by activists while contributing to their long-term sustainability. If there is one thing that Urgent Action Fund has learned, it is that security and sustainability strategies are not one-size-fit-all. Funders must develop relationships with the activists and movements they support to understand their particular needs and context.

Below are some examples of effective funder strategies:

- Fund a security approach that fuses basics like security audits and trainings with self-care and psychosocial strategies to sustain individuals, organizations and movements.
- Fund security audits for your grantees and then the infrastructure (security cameras, guards, Virtual Private Networks (VPN), etc.) they need to stay safe.
- Fund regionally based retreat centers that focus on the intersections of security and sustainability, and refer your grantees there.
- Be flexible and creative in funding strategies to support more resilient organizations and movements: for example, childcare for women's organizations monthly meetings and family-wide health insurance.
- Be aware of the particular risks and context for women's human rights defenders and strategies they need to stay safe. For example, sexual orientation and gender-based threats and the targeting of children necessitate family-wide security strategies that include psychosocial support.
- Provide funding to ensure the whole staff can attend integrated security trainings, not just the Executive Director.
- Encourage grantees to ask for capacity-building funds to cover safe digital technology and integrated security trainings.
- Support grantees in developing a risk analysis and security plan, including support for staying in-community versus evacuation.
- Encourage grantees to establish networks to share information about threats. Early warning and prevention are critical.
- Provide core support instead of relying on project-specific funding. Core support has flexibility built in to allow grantees to deal with crises effectively.
- Provide training and resources to educate foundation staff about integrated security issues.
- Integrate questions around security into grantee discussions and relationships.
- Work in an encrypted way to ensure the safety of your grantees. Be cautious in communication with grantees. Transmit sensitive information discreetly, and be vigilant when communicating by e-mail or phone.

Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights welcomes the opportunity to share experiences and collaborate with other funders on these issues. For more information, please contact Keely Tongate at [keely@urgentactionfund.org](mailto:keely@urgentactionfund.org). If you are interested in learning more about the security and sustainability issues faced by activists, consider joining IHRFG's Human Rights Defenders Working Group. Please contact Sarah Tansey for more information at [stansey@ihrrfg.org](mailto:stansey@ihrrfg.org).

**Note: Some details in this article have been altered to preserve the anonymity of groups and individuals.**

### Resources for Funders and Grantees

#### **Human Rights Defenders and Grantmaking/Funding**

- [Risk and Responsibility: Protecting Human Rights Defenders, Grantmaking Strategy Paper](#)  
American Jewish World Service, 2011.

#### **Women Human Rights Defenders**

- [List of Materials and Resources for Women Human Rights Defenders](#)  
The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)
- [Urgent Responses for Women Human Rights Defenders at Risk: Mapping and Preliminary Assessment](#)  
The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), June 2011
- [Ten Insights to Strengthen Responses for Women Human Rights Defenders at Risk](#)  
The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)
- [Human Rights Defenders: Protecting the Right to Defend Human Rights](#)  
United Nations Fact Sheet No. 29

#### **Protecting and Ensuring Security of Human Rights Defenders**

- [Protection Manual for Human Rights Defenders](#)  
Front Line, The International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, 2005
- [Workbook on Security: Practical Steps for Human Rights Defenders at Risk](#)  
Front Line, The International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, 2011
- [Integrated Security, the Manual](#)  
Jane Barry, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, MDG3 Fund, and Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights
- [What's the Point of the Revolution if You Can't Dance](#)  
Jane Barry and Jelena Djordjevic (2008), Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (Available in Albanian, English, French, Serbian, and Spanish)
- [Insiste, Resiste, Persiste, Existe: Women Human Rights Defenders' Security Strategies](#)  
Jane Barry with Vahida Nainar, Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, Front Line – the International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, and The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2008 (Available in Arabic, Bosnian, English, French, Russian, and Spanish)
- [Catalogue of Publications and DVDs for Human Rights Defenders](#)  
Protection International, 2012
- [New Protection Manual for Human Rights Defenders, Third Edition](#)  
Protection International, 2009

#### **Digital Security**

- [“Countering Electronic Surveillance”](#): Watchdog Watcher's summary of a panel on information security hosted at Columbia Journalism School, including some tips from experts in the field.
- [Me and My Shadow](#): An online tool to find out how big of a “digital shadow” you cast
- [Obscuracam](#): A smart phone app that blurs faces in video and still images.

- [Safer Mobile's "Mobile Security Survival Guide for Journalists"](#): Helping journalists better understand the security risks inherent in working with technology.
- [Safety on the Line: Exposing the Myth of Mobile Communication Security](#)  
Freedom House, July 2012
- [Security-in-a-Box](#): Digital security and privacy for human rights defenders from Front Line Defenders.
- [Tactical Technology Collective Toolkits](#): Each of Tactical Tech's many toolkits, including their [Digital survivor Guide](#), are compiled by a team of international experts and are then rigorously peer-reviewed by an editorial team – with the needs of not-for-profit organizations and human rights advocates prioritized at all times.
- [Wireless Mesh Networking](#): An alternative way to get online that does not require a centrally-located broadcast infrastructure and can put users "off the grid."