

# Urgent Action Fund - Protecting Activists

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## Women human rights defenders face increased threats

The physical and psychological risks associated with human rights activism (particularly in conflict-affected regions) are widely understood by allies and advocates around the world. Numerous international solidarity networks have been established to document and prevent violence against human rights defenders (HRDs). In addition, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders in 1998 and appointed a Special Representative on HRDs in 1999. Women defenders often face additional threats because their activism challenges the traditional passive roles assigned to them in male-run societies. When they choose to work on women's rights issues in particular (such as reproductive health or sexual rights), they often face even stiffer penalties from society. Further, WHRDs (and often their female family members) face threats to their bodily integrity including sexual violence.

## Activists securing their own safety

In a world where police, the military, international peacekeepers and even family members can become violent perpetrators, women activists often take the protection of themselves and their families into their own hands. Urgent Action Fund (UAF) is at the forefront of the philanthropic sector in supporting the safety of women activists, in politically unstable or conflict-affected areas especially, through Rapid Response Grantmaking. We have seen over and over again that the first line of protection for WHRDs lies in the sensibilities and training of activists themselves. They need to be aware of the potential risks associated with their work and have access to a set of viable responses and preventive measures.

## High-risk factors for WHRDs

Women human rights defenders in repressive and violent circumstances face multiple dangers from both within their own families and communities, and from the outside – repressive governments, international and national corporations, political/religious extremists, nationalists and sometimes even democratic governments. The intimidations range from subtle or psychological manipulation to blatant, violent and physical threats. Traditional definitions of security are rooted in militarism or aid delivery and do not recognize the particular situations and dangers that local women activists face. For example

- § Gender-based violence against women
- § Lack of access to sexual and reproductive health care or psychosocial support
- § Restricted access to and participation in decision making and information sharing
- § Structural discrimination and violence in society

## The *defending the defenders* collaborative initiative

In addition to its Security & Protection Grants, UAF initiated an in-depth field research project in 2005 that documents the specific nature of the security threats faced by WHRDs and the different strategies that activists have developed to protect themselves. UAF's partners in the project are Kvinna till Kvinna (KtK) in Sweden and the Front Line International Foundation for the Defense of Human Rights Defenders (Front Line) in Ireland. *Defending the Defenders* involves interviews with women activists operating in four different contexts:

- War/violent conflict
- Religious extremism
- Repressive or nationalist governments
- Post-conflict violence

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A review of current literature from the broader areas of human rights, humanitarian response and conflict intervention revealed that security protocols for humanitarian aid work and international peacekeepers generally overlook local activists altogether. Those that do address HRDs tend to be gender-blind and do not offer specific information on the threats faced by women or suggestions for protection that are necessarily applicable to women. In response UAF and its partners conducted field studies with activists from and in: Algeria and Tunisia, Bosnia and Serbia, Burma, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran, and Nepal.

### Initial findings

- Women human rights defenders rarely see themselves as such, particularly when their work is focused on 'women's issues' such as reproductive justice.
- Sometimes women (at first) do not even see how they are differently or more at risk than their male counterparts because the general danger is so high. Interviews revealed stark differences in the level and type of attacks experienced by WHRDs, however.
- Some groups of women are clearly more vulnerable to attack (more invisible/less supported) than others, including those marginalized based on class, sexuality, race, religion, and so forth.
- The level of threats and violence that WHRDs face correlates to the level of controversy around their chosen issue area (for example, sexual rights in the Middle East, reproductive justice in Latin America or trafficking in the Caucasus).
- Publicity and visibility can increase the support available to WHRDs by rallying others to their cause, but it can also place them in grave danger when their work requires them to be clandestine or underground.
- Cultures of impunity and the functional rule of law are a major issue. Often, the 'law' is whoever is best armed, and those actors tend to also be the perpetrators of violence against WHRDs.
- Across the board, women noted increasing isolation – being cut off from friends, family, spiritual leaders and the outside world – as one of the most dangerous and debilitating aspects of their work, especially in armed conflict situations.

### Improving security for WHRDs

In order to adequately and appropriately protect WHRDs, both activists and their allies need to understand the full range of threats and risks that are involved in human rights work in various contexts. UAF's goal is to document those risks – as well as the strategies that WHRDs have evolved in response. The report will be used as a tool to improve activists' own ability to proactively mitigate threats. It will also help the funding community to understand 'security' from the vantage point of WHRDs in the field, encouraging more effective and appropriate grantmaking.

During the time that we have been researching security for defenders, UAF's Security & Protection grantmaking has increased significantly, and in 2006 more than 47% of the interventions we supported incorporated security concerns into their strategies. As with all of UAF's research, the findings of *Defending the Defenders* will further refine our own criteria and approaches to grantmaking.