



Countering the Stigmatization of Human Rights Defenders

The ways in which human rights defenders are perceived affect their space for work and their security. Stigmatisation is a common method of deterring them, and occurs in different ways – from name-calling, shaming, insinuations, accusations, the spreading of false rumours and lies, to smear campaigns, judicial harassment and criminalization. The negative impacts of stigmatisation can be invisible, subtle, and long-lasting; they can result in more threats and attacks against defenders and the fragmentation of communities and movements. Countering the stigmatisation of human rights defenders is critical to their security and protection, as is the promotion of the legitimacy of their human rights practice.

Introduction

Perceptions of who human rights defenders are and what they do are dynamic, context-dependent, and often politically charged. In some contexts, there is little public awareness about human rights in general and about the work of human rights defenders specifically. This makes it easier for perpetrators to cast doubt on their actions, motives and morality, and to create false narratives about them.

Shaping public perceptions: State authorities and the media

State authorities – from heads of governments to local officials – play a powerful role in shaping public perceptions of human rights defenders. In Colombia, defenders in our study spoke of the ongoing legacy of former President Álvaro Uribe in publicly stigmatizing human rights defenders – including casting them as ‘guerrilla’, ‘terrorists’, and ‘enemies of the state’.

Stigmatisation tactics change over time and their effects can be subtle. As a woman defender working on the rights of political prisoners and victims of conflict in Colombia, explained:

Recently, there has been a decrease in the government referring to us as guerrilla fighters. This discourse has diminished. But what has continued is accusations like ‘human rights defenders that receive protection are costly’; ‘human rights defenders are just trying to get money’; ‘human rights defenders lie about threats or create them themselves’. Publishing things like this in media outlets generates a very big risk for our work... these accusations can create a divide between you and the communities that you are working with.

In Egypt, defenders in our study highlighted how human rights has been distorted by state authorities and how human rights defenders have been publicly defamed as ‘foreign agents’, ‘traitors’, and ‘anti-Egyptian’. In Indonesia, defenders have been negatively portrayed as ‘anti-Islam’,

'anti-development', and 'separatists'. In Kenya, defenders have been cast as 'unpatriotic' or 'corrupt'.

Beyond calling us terrorists, the most serious damage they can do is to our honour, our good name, our dignity. They know that this can do a lot of harm, so at certain points they have put a lot of energy into delegitimising us. They do propaganda; they attack us on TV and radio programmes. It is moral damage. It is very difficult to confront it, there is no means to combat it, no way of reaching the mass media to say it's not true, that corrections should be made.

Lawyer representing the victims of state crimes, man, Colombia

The media plays a powerful role in shaping perceptions of human rights defenders. In all five countries, defenders spoke about the dangers caused by the media misrepresenting their work and misquoting them. In Egypt, defenders in our study spoke about the pervasive negative effects of defamation campaigns against human rights, activism, and NGOs. A student activist, a man, observed,

Another thing that poses a threat - and not a small one - is media incitement; how the media is manipulated by the state so that anyone who works as a human rights defender is accused of treachery, and being funded from foreign countries. [The media] also informs citizens to report on human rights defenders if they suspect any activity. Any form of (political) activity is dubious.

Negative portrayals in the media have resulted in defenders losing support - even from families and loved ones. A researcher working on civil and political rights in Egypt, a man, observed,

The main issue is that the majority do not understand our work, which creates a gap. People get influenced by the demonization of human rights in the media. Even our families and relatives - they believe this and they start questioning us. So, you can imagine those who do not know us personally.

We are one of the permissible and authorized targets to attack for the state media apparatus in Egypt. The current offensive they are launching against us can take very severe forms starting from psychological trauma and to the point of incitement to murder. When a TV presenter... publicly accuses me of receiving foreign funds and training youth to topple the regime, my father calls me, and this causes personal stress for me.

Human rights lawyer, man, Egypt

Attacks that come from the media can have long-lasting effects. Negative portrayals affect not just in the moment, but they consume time, energy and resources because they demand a response. Human rights defenders are forced to prove their 'innocence' in the face of false accusations. As a group of men and women defenders from Ciudad Juárez in Mexico observed,

there is a social label [on us] - it is months of investigation and you are found guilty. [it then takes] six months, one year, to demonstrate that you are not guilty. But this is the primary idea - they expose you to public media - this is a threat.

However, defenders in this study also spoke of the importance of the media in generating public awareness of their work. They often found more support from alternative media outlets and were more able to communicate directly about their own work through social media platforms.



Strategies and tactics of stigmatisation

Stigmatisation tactics often draw upon nationalist, religious, homophobic, patriarchal, racist, and/or xenophobic sentiments in society to cast defenders in negative light.

A common approach is to cast doubt on the motives of defenders, for example, by accusing them of gaining financially, politically, or in other ways from their activism.

Funding is often used as a basis for stigmatisation, for example, by questioning the amounts of money defenders received, their sources of funding, and the motives of funders and the defenders themselves. As an Egyptian defender observed,

[There is] systematic defamation of human rights defenders and NGOs about funding.... money can be a source of danger and can be easily used to defame us.

Some defenders are painted by their accusers as 'corrupt', or as self-interested 'grant devourers'.

Another powerful method of stigmatising defenders is their judicial harassment and criminalisation. Some defenders in our study were charged under laws that restrict their right to freedom of expression, opinion, association and assembly, and some were subject to spurious or fabricated charges. Defenders struggled with the legal costs of defence, reputational damage, the loss of time, and uncertainty and fear.

The impacts of stigmatisation on defenders are wide-ranging - including greater insecurity, higher exposure to violence, the loss of public support, discrimination, strained relationships, alienation, mental and emotional distress, and the loss of funding and resources. Stigmatisation also contributes to the fragmentation and demobilisation of collectives, communities, and social movements.

Gender and stigmatisation

There is a gender dimension to stigmatisation. For the very same actions they undertake, men defenders can be praised and women defenders vilified. Women defenders spoke about being labelled as 'bad mothers', 'loose women', and 'prostitutes' for their activism and some were accused of 'bringing shame' to their families. Women defenders have been stereotyped as being 'rebels', 'gossips', or a bad influence. They have subject to 'sexuality baiting' - their sexuality or marital status discussed pejoratively. They have been subject to online harassment, attacks, and doxxing (the sharing of personal information online).

Women defenders observe with disappointment that their stigmatisation is sometimes met with silence, including by their colleagues.

Defenders of the rights of LGBTIQ* persons are particularly targeted and stigmatised by different groups. Threats can come from any person holding homophobic sentiments, however religious groups and state authorities are often cited by defenders as perpetrators.

We have had various instances of stigmatization by the police where they have taken me to the station without justification. They stigmatized us for going around with condoms for our sexual health campaign. It's not only this - they were demonizing human right work. They accused us of buying the goods that our colleagues [sex workers] supposedly stole from their clients; of selling drugs to them; and of extorting them for doing sex work in the street. Obviously, this sends a very strong message to the public about the work that we are doing. It is very dangerous for us.

Trans woman defender, Colombia

Supporters of LGBTIQ* persons, such as lawyers representing them in court, have also been stigmatised. As an Egyptian LGBTIQ* defender observed,

...lawyers are often vulnerable to stigmatization and humiliation inside police stations, prosecution offices, and courts. They are bullied and called 'debauchery lawyers', so they often refrain from dealing with these cases and prefer to handle a political case.

LGBTIQ* defenders have also been subject to stigmatisation from within human rights communities and their families. Defenders tell us how they have been called derogatory names, told not to talk about their lives, and told not to participate in public demonstrations as they 'shame' the human rights movement.



Strengthening the legitimacy of defenders

Despite the stigmatisation they experienced, many defenders in our study knew that they were also supported and respected - by the communities they served, by the victims of human rights violations they assisted, by fellow defenders in their country, and by international human rights groups. As a woman defender working on the rights of LGBTIQ* persons in Colombia said,

People see human rights defenders as a big deal. You feel protected; people see you as a tough type of person, very strong, very ethical, very well-formed. It is a nice feeling. It is something to be proud of. There is a lot of support.

Being internationally recognized as a human rights defender - such as through awards, fellowships and public campaigns - can have positive effects at the

local level. However, some people engaged in the promotion and protection of human rights do not identify themselves as human rights defenders. Some think that this term applies only to prominent, celebrated individuals who face risks, not themselves. Some deliberately avoid referring to themselves as human rights defenders, concerned about the negative attention this attracts. A defender in Egypt observed,

In the street, we cannot say we are [working on] human rights, we rather say we are a social organization – to gain the trust of people first – even when we are helping them in a case.”

Similarly, in Colombia, a woman human rights defender observed, “there are spaces in which I don’t say that I am a human rights defender because I’m not sure how people will react. I will say that I am a lawyer instead.”

Human rights defenders repeated stated that it was critical for state authorities to publicly recognize the role of human rights defenders and the legitimacy of their actions. As a woman defender from Colombia working on the rights of political prisoners and victims of conflict said,

The international community can help, but the local authorities are more important. It’s more important that they recognize your work and what you are doing. If they can recognize what you do as something valid – this provides many opportunities for security measures.

Implications for Practice

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

- Identify and monitor the tactics and strategies through which human rights and human rights defenders are stigmatised, tracing their multi-level effects
- Publicly denounce the stigmatisation of human rights defenders as well as any threats and attacks against them, acting to bring perpetrators to justice
- Advocate for the repeal and amendment of laws that restrict the right to freedom of opinion, expression, assembly and association, especially those used to harass and criminalise human rights defenders
- Invest in popular education about the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and the right of everyone to promote and protect human rights
- Provide support to defenders who have been stigmatized and criminalised
- Develop strategies to counter the stigmatization of human rights defenders, and to build communities of support for them and their activism
- Call for governments to publicly recognise human rights defenders and to protect them through laws, policies, and practices that adhere to the seven principles of good protection practices put forward by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Michel Forst (A/HRC/31/55).

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.



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Reference

Nah, A.M., Maliamauv, K. and Bartley, P. (2018) Countering the Stigmatization of Human Rights Defenders, Human Rights Defender Hub Policy Brief 5, Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York: York, available at securityofdefendersproject.org

Illustrations

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Design

Design and Print Solutions