



FOR WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS

Impacts of 'Counterterrorism Measures' (I'CTMs')¹ on Women's Human Rights Activism in Asia: Risks, Responses & Recommendations

**A Report of the Findings from a Meeting of Women Human Rights Defenders
Cohosted and Supported by
Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (UAF)
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'Counterterrorism' has hijacked the global agenda and undermined real commitment to issues of human rights, including the rights of women working in their own communities to protect and advance their individual and community-based social, economic and political goals. While others are also focusing attention on the nature and consequences of 'counterterrorism measures' (or 'CTMs') adopted around the globe since September 2001, a critical gap remains in the scope and specificity of 'on the ground' information available within the community of women human rights defenders as well as among policymakers and advocates on the specific impacts of these measures. How are women activists, operating in their own communities and in their own political contexts, being affected by 'CTMs,' what strategies have been adopted in response to these challenges, and what information would they individually and collectively like to share with the policymaking and funding communities so that their work to defend women's rights can safely and effectively continue?

In May 2011 a group of women human rights defenders who live and work in Asia gathered in Bangkok to address these questions. This report provides a summary of the risks experienced and observed among this group of women and recommendations to the donor and policy communities for addressing these risks. Specifically, Section A provides a brief overview of the design and aims of the workshop from which insights on the impacts of 'counterterrorism measures' were drawn. Section B describes major impacts observed across Asia by the women participants, including a broad shift in policy and practice from human rights to security; labeling and targeting that has served to divide and alienate groups that nevertheless coexist in society; and numerous constraints on personal freedoms. Section C details the personal and organizational impacts of 'CTMs', including the widespread sense of being watched and feeling

¹ While the events of September 2011 drew increased global attention to the issues of terrorism, there are many other political forces also at play. We recognize that innumerable human rights violations and crimes against humanity have been committed in the name of combating 'terror.' We do not support these actions and do not accept them as a legitimate means toward achieving a just and sustainable peace. We therefore use quotes when describing these measures, so as not to legitimize them in any way.

less secure, the importance of networks, and the consequences of funding shifts. Finally, Section D summarizes recommendations for both funders and policymakers coming from the women human rights defenders themselves.

A. Background

Sixteen women human rights defenders from across Asia² gathered in Bangkok in May 2011 to take part in a conversation on the complex issues of ‘counterterrorism.’ The meeting was designed to address the following knowledge-building objectives:

- to bring together a small and select group of women human rights defenders to collectively address and reflect on the impact of ‘counterterrorism measures’ on activism and movement building;
- to share information (focusing on experiences, insights, and strategies) among a group of regionally dispersed activists using both ‘sustaining activism’³ ‘and integrated security’⁴ frameworks;
- to build knowledge through one-on-one in-depth interviews with each of the activist participants;
- to compile on-the-ground strategies developed by activists for potential use by others facing similar circumstances in global civil society;
- to support networking and relationship building among women human rights defenders working in similarly difficult conditions in the region;
- to develop activist-based recommendations to influence donors and policymakers; and
- to strengthen the ability of the co-hosting organizations to leverage activist insights, experiences, and sustainability needs in the philanthropic community.

While the impacts of ‘counterterrorism measures’ are being felt globally, Asia was selected as a particularly well-suited focus of this effort for several reasons. First, a wide array of ‘CTMs’ have been adopted, both internally (by individual governments) as well as through external pressure (in direct cooperation with U.S. or other international ‘counterterrorism’ strategic efforts). Among these are ‘CTMs’ carried out through explicitly defense-related efforts, humanitarian and development assistance programs, U.S. and other international “anti-terrorism” financing laws, and cross-national investigation and interrogation procedures. In addition, many are concerned about the secondary effects of ‘CTMs’ on the choices by global funders who might be redirecting their resources to other programs and/or locations in order to avoid restrictions set in place under various ‘counterterrorism’ policies.

² The sixteen participants came from ten countries spanning the Asian continent: Azerbaijan, India, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand. As a reminder of the very real ways that ‘counterterrorism measures’ limit freedoms and opportunities, several individuals had to cancel their travel and workshop participation plans at the last minute due to tightened visa restrictions, including invitees from Afghanistan and China.

³ Sustaining activism focuses on preventing or mitigating those moments when an activist, a group, or a movement may, without support, stop being active. What is it that women human rights activists need in order to remain active, healthy, supported, protected and successful – in their personal lives as well as in their work as activists? Sustaining activism is one of UAF’s key research and advocacy projects and is the subject of a UAF publication, *What’s the Point of Revolution if We Can’t Dance?*, by Jane Barry with Jelena Đorđević (available on the UAF website).

⁴ The concept of integrated security is one that recognizes that security must be broadly construed, bridging individual and community, public and private, work and free time, the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual dimensions. The development of this concept has taken place within the community of human rights defenders, including work by UAF with support from Cordaid.

Second, violations of human rights resulting from the application of ‘counterterrorism measures’ are well-documented in many Asian countries. Intimidation of the civilian population, efforts to silence dissent or to suppress political opposition, immunity for law enforcement officials, and enforced disappearances, torture and arbitrary detention are just some of the findings by those who have surveyed ‘counterterrorism’ and human rights.⁵ The gendered impacts of the U.S.-led ‘counterterrorism’ strategy in Asia have also been investigated, and policy recommendations advanced.⁶ As the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders reported in December 2010, women human rights defenders in Asia faced the highest global levels of arrests, detentions and criminalizations.⁷

Finally, the three supporting organizations – UAF, FORUM-ASIA, and Cordaid – have already-existing relationships in the human rights community. The hope was that “candid conversations among friends” would yield important insights from the activists themselves. In order to make this a reality, great care was taken to ensure an appropriate environment and culture for the meeting, and a setting where information could safely surface. The insights shared in this report come from the participants themselves – through survey responses received prior to the meeting, through group discussions and activities during the meeting, and through, one-on-one, hour-long individual interviews with each of the participants. As much as possible, it is their words, insights and suggestions that guide the report.⁸

The following provides a summary of the risks experienced and observed among this group of women human rights defenders, the effects of these risks on the lives and work of activists, an overview of the principles of ‘sustaining activism’ and ‘integrated security’, and recommendations, both individually identified and collectively derived through workshop discussion, to the donor and policy communities for addressing these risks, and for implementation within the community of women human rights defenders.

B. Risks: “We live and breathe our context”

⁵ The Eminent Jurists Panel on Terrorism, Counter-terrorism and Human Rights, an initiative of the International Commission of Jurists, is one of the important sources documenting the ties between ‘CTMs’ and human rights violations. Among other research methods, the Panel received testimony in a series of globally dispersed hearings. In Asia, they held hearings in South Asia (with testimony from individuals in Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka), Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand), and Pakistan. The findings of this three-year research effort by the Eminent Jurists Panel were published in a 2009 report, “Assessing Damage, Urging Action,” available at http://ejp.icj.org/hearing2.php3?id_article=167. See also the report by CIVICUS synthesizing findings from ongoing monitoring and an August 2010 World Assembly where over 500 civil society activists, official representatives and business leaders met to discuss solutions to global civil society issues, “Civil Society: The Clampdown is Real, Global Trends 2009-2010,” by Mandeep Tiwana and Netsanet Belay, December 2010, available at <http://www.civicus.org>.

⁶ See the New York University School of Law Center for Human Rights and Global Justice (CHR&GJ) report, *A Decade Lost: Locating Gender in U.S. Counter-Terrorism*, released in July 2011. The report focuses on gender effects in several global regions, including Asia, and focused on how U.S.-led ‘CTMs’ impact women and men differently, and how these measures use and affect gender stereotypes, including those on sexual orientation and gender identity.

⁷ “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Margaret Sekaggya,” presented to the United Nations General Assembly, 20 December 2010 (document A/HRC/16/44), available at <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/16session/A-HRC-16-44.pdf>.

⁸ Quotes in the discussion that follows come directly from the words of the workshop participants. In the interest of protecting these activists who continue to live and work in dangerous environments, the identities remain confidential.

Violence is not new to Asia. Many of the conflicts being waged today have roots spread across many decades. But the policies arising out of the events of September 2001 and other incidents of violence in the past decade have shifted the balance of global attention from human rights to security.⁹ As one activist put it, ‘counterterrorism measures’ are “just different sorts of tea in the same cup.”

Policies have shifted away from protection of human rights to increasing security.

Across the board, the women human rights defenders who gathered for this workshop see ‘counterterrorism measures’ as a collective step backwards and away from global commitments to human rights. “We have become victims of the ‘CTM’ agenda. We have been manipulated by fear of the unknown. Why are they calling it ‘terrorism’? It should be ‘security-ism’.”

The focus on ‘countering terrorism’ has resulted in a diversion of precious resources. As one Sri Lankan activist put it, “However much you put up for the solid iron gate, tomorrow you have to fix a window. Then you see the ceiling is not good, so hundreds of ways [to spend your resources and] finally the day arrives when you have to dig the ground in.” There is no end to this goal of security. For most people, “the biggest problem is getting three square meals, and you feel really bad when you see children who don’t have food, really bad about that. How can you justify spending so much for weapons when people are hungry?” Many workshop participants from across Asia found that resources once used for social services have been displaced. “From metal detectors to scanners, there’s a huge industry behind” these ‘CTMs’... “Arms manufacturers are sustained, [and governments are] sustaining arms against their own people.”

The shift, for many, was subtle. “I think I perceived ‘CTMs’ as a given, something that has to be done in terms of protection, security, or whatever purposes. But I just never really connected the various trends on my work and the work of my colleagues in other countries as related to ‘CTMs.’ As I look at it more critically ... [I see] a connection – more measures, more ... [and] huge trends emerging” with ethnic groups now being targeted as ‘terrorists.’ Similarly, one activist observed that security has been “normalized, [accepted as] the way of life, until you started to think on your own, and started to question why this is happening...”

“Harassment and intimidation, sexual abuse... some women [we know] have been victims of extra-judicial killings, [and this] in spite of a cultural [commitment of] respect for women.” This group of women human rights defenders has a far-reaching view of conditions in their own contexts. “We live in places where there is a long history of human rights violations. But ‘CTMs’ have served to endorse those violations rather than curb them. For example, torture had been practiced so long here in our country, and then we took it to the international organizations. Up until the point when these big countries enforced their ‘CTMs,’ there were checks and balances. Now those checks and balances have been removed. After 2001, anything goes.”

One of the activist participants summed up an argument asserted by many from across Asia: ‘CTMs’ have “become a convenient label to put on ... what the government would like to do or wants people to stop doing. It has become a tool of the governments to be able to circumvent the process of law, the constitution, whatever... I don’t think this has to do with terrorism for sure. But does it have something to do with ‘counterterrorism’? It’s a use of impunity, you know, like

⁹ Nearly all countries in Asia have experienced their own incidents of violence led by non-state actors since 9/11 – as well as before 9/11. It is not so much the events of 2001 that mark this one as especially significant as it is the post-9/11 policy aftermath that draws our attention. The U.S. and others have applied pressure and resources across Asia to adopt a new security focus.

you can avoid human rights stuff by using the word ‘terrorist,’ [and a country] can avoid international condemnation by using the word ‘terrorist.’” As another defender put it, “The name ‘terrorist’ made everything really sexy and fancy so government could do whatever it likes.”

In some countries, activists recognize that the police do not aim “to arrest but instead shoot to kill the [individual said to be a] ‘terrorist.’” Due process is absent in many contexts where ‘terrorism’ is the named threat. Workshop participants see this in their own neighborhoods. The police “arrest ‘terrorists,’ they always kill ‘terrorists,’ they assume [the suspects] are ‘terrorists,’ and they never arrest live.” This is not always due to a lack of law protecting the rights of the accused. In many of these same contexts, “there are strong regulations on law and everything, but not implementation. The focus is not really clear if the government wants to ‘counter terrorism’ or fulfill human rights. The focus is not really clear... They are not really committed on law.”

Perhaps most disappointing to this group of activists is the recognition that those who once upheld human rights as a supreme value have turned their backs on this commitment in the face of the ‘CTM’ agenda. As Leyla Yunus, Director of the Institute of Peace and Democracy in Baku, Azerbaijan, described, “All my life, in all my speeches, I talked about human rights as international values, and showed the legislation in Britain and United States as a flagship of democracy... [When the] presidential election [in my country] was totally falsified,” the U.S. did not stand up for democracy. The new president was “an honorable guest in the White House... You see this that everything is linked to ‘terrorism,’ ... and they are using all our oil.”

The skewed nature of ‘CTMs’ is aptly summarized in this comment from Humaira Mumtaz Shaikh of Shirkat Gah Women’s Resource Centre in Pakistan: “Terror is based on fear. Thus, ‘counterterrorism’ should focus on countering fear, or how to make the people braver, arming the people with empowerment.” The ‘CTM’ agenda, for this group of activists, has exacerbated the fear, and at the expense of rights.

We’re not convinced this is really about ‘countering terrorism.’ Many citizens of Asia really do believe that ‘terrorism’ was a bigger threat following 9/11, and they trust the statements “of President Bush, and even Obama, that they are really after terrorists,” as explained by one of the participants from the Philippines, where the U.S. military has a strong presence. “But for us, in our organization, we believe, we strongly believe that there aren’t many ‘terrorists’ ... [Instead,] the U.S. is really interested in natural resources,” especially oil. “[T]hey are just saying that they are after ‘terrorism,’ or ‘terrorists’ ... [Those who] don’t believe, they cannot say it because they are afraid.” And what are they afraid of? “Afraid of being arrested.”

Feeling used is a common descriptor. Many Asian countries are rich in natural resources or are located strategically relative to other interests -- gateways and at times unwitting partners to U.S. military missions, or caught between the competing claims by multiple powers including the U.S., China and Russia.

Who is a ‘terrorist’? Labeling is used to suit many purposes. “Asserting one’s right to self-determination, this does not make one a ‘terrorist.’” But many in this group of women activists has been so accused, or have been charged with supporting “separatists and terrorists who pose a threat to security of our country.” Some have been accused as ‘spies.’ “Whatever issues we bring up to the public, such as discrimination, this results in police reports against us.”

Global targeting of Islam and fundamentalism has made it “very easy for us to brand Islam as a terrorist religion. And gradually you see how that has percolated into the psyche of the people,” as observed by one Indian activist. But “it is not only the Muslims that are being tagged but also the non-Muslims, especially when you are an activist and you join a protest, you can be tagged as terrorist or communist.” What is the impact of ‘CTMs’? It is the “threat of having your name on the billboard as a ‘terrorist.’”

Humans naturally divide into groups according to common identity, experience and interests, and naturally strive to gain advantage relative to other groups. We look to governments to help smooth out those differences and to ensure peaceful relations across differences. When human rights is the guide, governments are held accountable to standards of justice and equality for all. When security is a driving goal, it seems justifiable to separate groups according to standards of “threat.” Many countries across Asia are “divided by religious sectarianism, culture, ethnicity and, most important, huge economic disparity [which] means that lots of different groups are taking care of the underlying strife in ongoing confrontations that deny people their basic rights.” Officially or unofficially, many women’s human rights defenders find themselves operating in environments where groups are targeted by identity.

For some, this is very personal: A human rights defender from the Philippines finds that “The first risk I take is that I’m a conservative Muslim and I wear black abaya to work. The risk is in the link many make between Islam and the ‘t’ word. I might be branded a ‘terrorist.’” The stories of group labeling came from across Asia. “My ethnic group is not targeted as ‘terrorist’ but, for example, our accountant who is [a member of an ethnic minority group] and her family are targeted.”

“Restrictions are identity-based,” as experienced by Seema Duhan of India. “I would be perhaps the last person to be targeted ... because of my identity [as a member of the so-called majority]... mobility, for example, is so much interrelated to your identity. If you have certain facial features you will be spared; for others, nobody knows when you can go in, when you can leave.” In some countries, identity cards facilitate this labeling. “[I]t is obvious when you stop at checkpoints and they ask questions irrespective of who you are but based only on ethnicity, basically they will ask you to pull your ID card, which they don’t even have to look at. By the card itself they know what ethnicity you are... It is like in Rwanda, Tutsis and Hutus, they only have to look at your identification card. By looking at the lettering [on the card] they know which ethnicity you are.”

Labeling of groups plays out in many different arenas. Groups are stereotyped (“Muslims are radical, fanatic”), and the media points out what kinds of people to be cautious around (“people wearing beards, mustache, these types of clothing”). There is “constant fear that if your neighbor is a Muslim you need to be cautious. Muslims won’t get homes in so-called middle class areas.” It affects movement of people, and crossings of borders. Many “are not as aware of these particular challenges of border crossing... They may ask me what are you doing here, or why are you here and this kind of stuff. But they wouldn’t target me as a potential terrorist as they assume I can’t be,” based on appearance alone.

Social division was one of the most significant consequences of the global ‘CTM’ agenda experienced by this group of women’s human rights defenders. As one of the workshop participants observed, CTMs have long been seen as having negative effects. However, “what struck me the most is that one of the most insidious or nastiest things that has happened is the breaking up of smaller groups due to the fear of the ‘other’. And what struck me in these workshops is we are talking about how to rectify this current situation. We are talking about

waking up and bringing people together, when at the same time that is exactly one of the worst effects of the situations, that it is going to be hard to make allies,” that it is going to be very hard to bring groups together.

We are caught in between. It is the role of governments to provide for security, and it is these state actors who can directly apply limits on individuals and groups in the interest of ‘countering terrorism.’ An activist from Pakistan finds that the need for increased safety measures can have its own consequences. “If we seek protection from the army in places of intervention, then our work is compromised. People stop trusting us and we are labeled as ‘establishment’,

There are other labels and related threats that can come from within society as well. Human rights defenders face “discrimination in the church and community when labeled as communist insurgents,” or when their work puts them in a position of assisting social or political minorities. The rise of fundamentalism, partly in reaction to the global ‘CTM’ agenda, has multiplied the risks experienced in most of the countries where the workshop participants live and work. By its very nature, fundamentalism is opposed to freedoms characteristic of an open society, and activists are seen as challenging the preferred norms and rules. “Reactionary elements call us ‘American agents’ and ‘women with a western agenda.’ They are vindictive, and personal security is a big issue.”

Women human rights defenders often find themselves pushing against both state and social or religious rules. “We are shaking the normal structure of society – that women are supposed to be quiet, subdued, and giving everything over to men’s authority. We are challenging that, so we are challenging the system that is blessed by the government and the religious authority. So we are an elemental threat for them when we are saying things that they don’t approve of, and what they don’t approve is deemed a threat. So that is why we are in the hot soup we are in right now.” There is little refuge for women human rights defenders who are caught between state and non-state actors who are equally intent on limiting the voices and actions of the defenders.

Our freedoms are squeezed. In every country represented by the workshop participants, ‘counterterrorism measures’ have effectively limited basic freedoms and narrowed the spaces within which the work of human rights might be carried out. Free speech is a right that might be limited for a number of reasons. When people speak out against the state they often find themselves at risk, but ‘CTMs’ have shifted that risk. As one activist recounted, “I understand [that someone faces possible arrest because of limits to] free speech. They can blame him for defamation, because he states cruel things against the president, and against state policies, but as a terrorist?! Come on, there’s no evidence of terrorism!”

Over time, policies that have “scuttled expression” have been set in place, and “slowly, slowly, our spaces of demonstrations [have been] stripped. And ... there was a shrinkage of assembling, and now there are so many do’s and don’ts about publication, speaking, expressing yourself freely. It’s just that if we start giving heed to all these notices, their work will become easier...” This example from an Indian human rights defender found parallels in other contexts. An activist in Thailand described a history of “protests and things that have led to government crackdowns and violence on both sides [to have eventually resulted in] government just calling them ‘terrorists.’ Suddenly they are not protestors, but terrorists. Then people back away from being called into any type of movement for fear that they will be disappeared, which is what has frequently happened.” It’s a process of self-censorship. In Nepal, yet another long-time human rights defender described when a “landless community started to demonstrate, and government opened fire on them, the justification was given that it was a threat to security of the country.

Anything that happens becomes a threat to security. So I think this ‘CTM’ or ‘war against terror’ is being used as a tool to push the people back.”

Restricting free expression has long-term consequences as well. A society lacking in free expression “is dangerous... [where there is] no independent TV, no independent channels on radio, no independent newspapers... young citizens will think that Muslims are enemies and they don’t like ‘us’... It is dangerous, it is necessary to do something, it is necessary to support democratization, education, freedom of speech, because if the young generation lacks education and information [and is filled] with such stupid propaganda... it is a horrible example for the future. In such situation, we have no future. I think it is more dangerous for society now, as an impact of this ‘anti-terrorism’ campaign.”

Our movements are restricted. “We rethink traveling.” In some contexts, there are “physical barriers to movement, closed roads, armed barriers; but we can pay corrupt soldiers to get around them.” With new barriers and new efforts to control borders, “the old ways of moving have been stopped. The result is that people will enter in a more dangerous way. They used to walk three days through the jungle to reach mail and phone, but then it started to be monitored and they have been forced to go another way through a land mine field, [with the result of people being] killed. Before, people would arrive safely in the back of pick-up trucks, with vegetables; now they are in container trucks and 54 people suffocated in one. So, this is a result of the border control tightening, and ... a result of ‘CTMs’.”

Many Asian countries have a history of open borders, with border populations dependent for their livelihoods on selling goods on both sides – fruit in season, salt, etc. Post-9/11 increases in border surveillance have created new risks. There are now “record instances of rape by border security forces. So you wouldn’t say this is a ‘counterterrorism measure’, but certain changes are there, because border surveillance became strong, and then women who were moving are going there and are suddenly seen as terrorists and then he can do anything to her. There are a number of cases of rape, and then we can’t solve the case even. We work on violence against women basically. And when we go to [one government] they say ‘Oh, this is the [other] government’s issue, we can’t do anything.’ And then [the other] government says, ‘Oh, this is [the other] government’s issue, we can’t do anything.’ So we get stuck in limbo, right?” We are left with fewer remedies for growing problems.

“Customs and visa applications are made more complicated due to one’s work as a women’s human rights defender.” Some borders are closed due to activism: “I cannot travel [to some countries] anymore after co-authoring reports... and interviewing human rights activists there.” Labeling and profiling have increased travel risks as well. “When you cross the border they can see that even if you are not profiled by the way you look, your passport indicates if you belong to certain ethnic groups. So then, you will probably be stopped for some time and interrogated... So one thing that came out of these ‘anti-terrorism measures’ is that the borders were strengthened, so now there are a lot more hurdles to jump over as opposed to before. If you are with a group that is being profiled, like 10 years ago it would be much easier for you to cross the border than now, and specifically the ethnic [groups that are now] targeted.”

Clearly, not all of the profiling is aimed at identifying ‘terrorists,’ but the drive to increase border security under ‘CTMs’ has created more obstacles, and more threats, to many. Sexual identity is one such category of threats. “People are extremely vulnerable to ‘CTM’s because they have to present either as man or woman, male or female, when crossing borders... [Those presenting alternative gender identities are not] labeled as terrorists but they are labeled as dangerous, and they have very intrusive procedures.” For a transsexual, heightened border security means being

subject to the border official's discretion to 'investigate.' "Officers could be extremely interested in whether you are a man or woman, and why does your passport say 'man' and you look like a woman? What is wrong with you? They can take you to another room and look at your body which is, you know, very humiliating. So trans-people are scared to travel..."

C. 'CTMs' Impacting Our Lives and Work: "The fish don't talk about the water"

We live our contexts day by day and often fail to notice the changes that take root over time. While some of the measures adopted to 'counter terrorism' involved sudden change, most have been experienced as small adjustments over time. Sometimes we don't notice until we step back. "How can you even think of solutions if you don't know that there is a problem?" One of the primary goals of this workshop was to provide opportunity for this group of women human rights defenders to step away from their contexts in order to think about the nature of 'CTMs' and to consider how these have affected their lives and work. The impacts are both personal and organizational. Some described "discouragement" and "burnout." By comparison to my work in the past, today "my work is more vulnerable and limited." "I am nervous all the time. I worry about safety, especially in terms of protecting the identities of our partner organizations." "Sometimes we are forced to close down our office due to insecurity." "It is frustrating to make very small steps because of these limitations. It is an expectation [in the funding world] that one will have success stories and a history of progress, but we cannot deliver this working [where we do]." Many of these activists have been involved over decades and have ambitions for achieving measurable human rights advances far beyond those that their current circumstances afford. "Every time it goes back to what you have lost." Focus has been shifted, and new goals have arisen. As Visaka Dharmadasa of Sri Lanka finds, "The best way to secure oneself is to make your enemy secured so that the enemy will not be an enemy anymore."

We are under surveillance. Nearly every workshop participant cited specific incidents of surveillance as a very real part of their lives and work. "We are under suspicion by government for possible relations with 'terrorism'. This results in phone tapping and control, auditing and review of internet, email and bank accounts." Many different examples came pouring out, including this one from the Philippines: "When I talked with [certain people, especially those who are in the movement] I would hear ringing in the phone, so I was thinking our phones were being tapped. We had to be careful in text messages, use our own language, not that we had anything to hide, but we were so afraid of being tagged as 'terrorists'."

Surveillance has also included harassment. One activist participant reported receiving "so many text messages [with terrorizing content, asking] what the party of women is doing, that I had to change the number... [But then it was] on my Facebook..., on my wall, so many of them say something bad" on Facebook. The identity of those trying to mar her reputation remain unclear.

Some have had their names and faces publicly broadcast, a dangerous breach of protection in a society where women human rights defenders are seen as a threat to the status quo and where those who might take action against them would not be held accountable.

Some reported being followed, being watched. While meeting with a friend who is also very active in organizing, we noticed "a man, maybe a 20-year-old man, was always looking at us. So I said we have to go. I have to go, you have to go... [Later] when I was riding a jitney, the man was also there... looking at me. So when we reached the traffic signal, I immediately stepped down. I even forgot to pay the driver." Now I feel "insecure when people are asking my whereabouts." It's not clear who to trust. Others agreed, "People feel watched, are watched."

Another said, we “definitely know the intelligence follows us. Last time we were at [a foreign] consulate they were taking photos and stuff and they said ‘ladies, we don’t need any more of you.’ I don’t know what it means... [D]efinitely, the computer watching has gotten worse. And the phones, they play with the phones sometimes.”

Is this related to ‘counterterrorism’? Some can make a very clear association, including one human rights defender in Thailand who found that, “Yes, [post-9/11], the surveillance changed. There was suddenly [more] training coming from the U.S. and Australia; they were doing military training all the time, ‘counterterrorism’ training, how to do information technology stuff. So, yes, I think people became aware that the capacity of the intelligence of the police and military went flying up after 9/11 and because of all the valuable resources they poured in.”

We have to watch what we say and have become more suspicious of others. Self-censoring is an obvious response when one is being watched. “I know that I cannot raise certain political issues and have to be very careful dealing with the police on behalf of others... Reporting at international events is seen as ‘plotting against the state’ which may be used against you in the court...” The lines change and “so you adapt to fit where the lines are.” Sometimes this means saying less.

We feel less secure. “We are more vulnerable, more watchful of what we are saying, [and wondering] if they hear it, how it can be used” against us. Some have experienced very direct threats to their bodies, their homes, their property. One participant recently had to move from one house to another because a friend who had been arrested “said that the military really described me, my house, where I was staying, my looks, and my body.” She was afraid and relocated. Shortly after the workshop convening in August 2011, long-time activist Leyla Yunus had her home in Baku, Azerbaijan, illegally demolished. It was more than a house in that it also served as headquarters to three NGOs and hosted numerous organizational meetings. The government has yet to answer to this. No compensation has been offered, bolstering the view that the demolition was an act by government to punish their human rights work.

Others find themselves at risk in their work. “Our office has been ransacked... our computer taken away... [After that,] there is always that fear... We constantly see police cars outside, but we try to take it positively... If there is a police car outside then we should feel more secure.” But we don’t know. “We have heightened our measures of security... Our door was once always open, but now, it is always closed because we fear that anyone could just come in and attack us. We take surveillance, take steps to make sure all our work is copied and make sure we have a safe place to file it. We have a crisis team always on alert if anything should happen, we have finance sources set aside for emergency use, and we have a legal team on alert... There is always the feeling that something is going to happen. There is not a day that goes by that we feel like we are free to do our legal advising work, our outreach program for women to know their rights, because we always think what is the impact of this, and who will attack, so we feel like we are always under surveillance.”

In spite of this, they continue with their work. An activist in Malaysia explained, “Whenever we face tribulation or problems, the first thing we do is call the staff because our main concern is their security and their families, and we ask everyone to voice out their problems and anxieties especially within themselves for their families and staff because we want to help the staff physically, mentally, emotionally. And the words that we [keep repeating among the] staff is that they can challenge us, but we will continue with our work. And we are still here.”

The risks extend to our families. “When you are a mother you always think of the well-being of your children, and you want your children to think that you are doing something good in this life...” Participants were especially concerned for the safety and mental peace of mind of their children and, as one activist from Manipur, India, pointed out, sometimes this means robbing them of innocence. “We have to make our children aware of the kind of work that we do and the risks involved with our human rights efforts. For example, we’ve had to share with our children the risks of human trafficking, including trafficking of child soldiers.”

Sometimes information is directly sought from the children of the human rights defenders. The child of one of the participants was pressured by her instructor at school, telling her ‘You should be careful,’ and asking for information. “My child just bit her lips, and then when she got home she told me... [and asked,] ‘What do I say?’ ... I told her ‘No, do not say anything.’ I did not attend her graduation. I let me sister attend instead.”

Family members are influenced by attitudes being communicated by others in their communities. For human rights defenders, this means that their families may not fully understand or support their work. A human rights defender in Indonesia explained that when she travels to another “country for a human rights meeting, sometimes I feel like my family thinks that I’m a member of a ‘terrorist organization’ ... [When I travel to a country] where ‘terrorist’ groups are growing... they are afraid of this ... so I send photos of my activity because I want to explain, ‘no, no, I am not doing terrorism activities!’”

The challenges are enormous, and the work takes a lot of time. Some confess to “a lot of family problems.” At times, the stress is too much. “Sometimes it is better to go away... To do the kind of work you do, it is your choice, but not your children’s choice or your family’s choice, and then you have to put food on the table.”

Our networking is more important than ever. For many of the women human rights defenders operating in Asia, being part of a global network makes all the difference in the world. “So far in our experience [we have seen that] if we have a police raid we have so many connections especially abroad, that we can exert pressure on the government such that they will make sure we don’t have a police raid again.” Successful international networking alliances include connecting with the international human rights community and getting coverage by international human rights organizations when things get tense, doing UN reporting, and making connections with diplomats and representatives of Western governments. Protection has been realized when “we raised our voice and alerted the international human rights defenders community... [and they in turn] questioned the government, ‘Where, exactly, are you going with this?’ ... It really helped us to remain strong inside and outside.”

Knowing the importance of networking, this workshop was planned with the hope of supporting and deepening relations within the Asian women’s human rights defenders community. This was reinforced during the days together in Bangkok. As one shared at the start of the second day, “Yesterday was a great day for me. Being a human rights defender in [my country] is a hard struggle. [I was able to] share the same kinds of situations of our hard struggles [with others]. What makes it easy is that we laugh, we are here in solidarity, we learn from each other.” As another participant noted, “We come from different countries and backgrounds, and still we find that there are more commonalities than differences. We face the same obstacles for justice for everyone. Everyone is equal before the law. It is important to create solidarity.”

As critically important as it is to be part of a network, working in these circumstances at times makes us “feel isolation from the human rights movement.” We need to be connected both

internationally and locally, and those connections are not always easy or possible to maintain. ‘Counterterrorism measures’, which have allowed for “new limitations, new infringements on rights,” are at the root of at least some of this isolation. Government communicates its ‘CTM’ message and “uses its tools. People [in response] are scared of terrorists or scared of being held as a terrorist. ‘CTMs’ have broken down alliances and networks. People are viewing groups as ‘other’ and are afraid.”

Our limits are being tested. Very trying circumstances require flexibility. One Pakistani activist described her work as guided by “an agenda from my heart. I don’t feel like I go to work every day, I feel like I go to a place of happiness where I am ready to fulfill my desires, and thank God it is there. So it is important to keep organizations strong also, though we are finding it difficult. Lots of people are complaining of organizational funding not coming in now. And that is creating lots of problems. And then they say you must give time off for people that give humanitarian work. Well we can’t, because it is difficult to replace them, and we don’t have the kind of funds where you can have two people instead of one. I work all alone, I mean I have my teams there but they are doing other things too, but they help... We want to build women-friendly spaces, we want to teach them skills, we want to be able to give them food on their table. If they can’t have skills right now they shouldn’t go hungry. We are not service providers, but sometimes we have to do it. And sometimes that is the only way we can enter into a space where people are not threatened by us and slowly, we can reach them. Because they will fear that you are coming with questions and wanted research, and think ‘I don’t know what you are going to do with it,’ so we go in and teach them skills and slowly the women come in with their stories themselves. We don’t even record. We ask their permission if they allow it, we don’t take details if they don’t want us to. We just write whatever we can. We did think about recording, but then we thought that women might not say everything, at least in the beginning.”

It is hard for those who do not live the life of a grassroots activist to understand the deep level of dedication to the cause that drives these individuals forward. Many communicated dual and competing emotions, exhaustion on the one hand, and passionate commitment on the other. The challenges in my country have “taken me, torn me apart... I don’t have any personal space, family space, anything. I am totally burned out, but who can protest that? Things are definitely changing.” Some feel like walking away, finding other things to do. For others, walking away is not an option, though they might want to. “When you have no options and are forced to stay in your own circumstances, you try to make a different image for yourself.”

Sometimes you feel it in your body. It might be “very subtle, but it is out there... When I was [traveling in an especially restrictive area], I almost felt like I had this heavy load that I was carrying in my head, ... which to me was something important because I was there to interview human rights defenders. It was heavy. When I came back I almost felt like I could breathe easier... And in reality we also had restrictions on the internet and [publications were] banned for a long time and things like that. But compared to [that other context] it was like a paradise.” Many others described symptoms of bodily stress.

The concept and practice of integrated security techniques – exercises that stretched body as well as mind, emotions and spirits – were very meaningful for this stressed-out group of human rights defenders. It was an eye-opener for many. As one participant from Indonesia commented, “Normally when we talk about ‘security’ we are talking in terms of police, etc., not ourselves. This is a very important workshop for me.” Being “careful about accepting meanings and definitions that are not in our control” – such as a traditional view of security – was a point of wisdom that all embraced. “We need to define security so that it is meaningful for us. Integrated security and sustaining activism are about sustaining the movement.” This was a take-home set

of knowledge as well. Some committed to continued efforts to focus on personal “well-being and to share this back home” with other women human rights defenders. In fact, building support in the donor community for well-being and integrated security opportunities emerged as a top recommendation from this group of activists who need reinforcement at a deep and personal level in order to continue doing what they do under very trying circumstances. One participant summed it up by saying, “I heard very similar observations about ‘CTMs’ among participants; some countries are worse than others, but this holistic approach to security is new for me – not only protection with arms, but also opportunity to reflect on how we can live; wellness. We need to provide security for ourselves in order to secure others.”

Resources are tight. “Yes, our international funders have cut tremendously this year. But I would like to think it is from the global economic downturn...” Resources might be tight for a number of reasons, but sometimes they are stretched thin because our attention is being diverted. A workshop participant who works in Malaysia, for example, explained that her organization has had “to hire lawyers to defend and protect our rights, seek advice and set up meetings and strategies with allies. All of this costs time and money, and takes away from doing our core work.” When the work of ‘human rights’ have raised too many alarm bells, we’ve taken up “charity work as a point of entry.” This limits our message, but we have to “find a way to dig out.”

Some of the organizations represented among the workshop participants receive no regular program funding from international sources. Activists do their work no matter whether they have the money or not. “Our group will still be there even without funding. Of course, funding helps in many cases. But if funding would control us, in our work and advocacy, we would rather not have funding. So we look for other ways and means in order to survive... For me, personally, it’s not how hard it is for NGOs to get money but instead how hard it is for them to be heard.”

Sometimes funding creates problems for us. When funding sources are limited, sometimes we have to shift our programs in order to maintain funding. “It is no longer ‘human rights and empowerment,’ but anti-trafficking.” “It is not LGBT as a human rights issue, but always linked with HIV prevention and condom distribution.” Shifting interests and demands of funders create problems for at least some of the activists. “Funders aren’t the police, they aren’t military, they aren’t government. So I don’t know why they feel like they need to [require us to] buy this or do that. There has to be trust built-up, and if you trust the organization then you give the money. And I don’t get where funders suddenly became developers. Some funders suddenly want to be ‘partners’. We aren’t looking for partners, we are looking for funding... I say do what you do well, which is to give support, and now they are turning it into ‘due diligence’. If you want to be a development organization, be one. If you want to be a donor organization, do that. But the two, I don’t think they marry well.”

Others agree but have managed to soften the demands of funders over time. As one participant explained, “I am lucky to have very good partners who have funded us for the last 10-12 years... Sometimes I fight with them and say ‘Ok, no, please don’t touch me, if you trust me, don’t tell me where to put the money. I know how to do this.’ And then they say, ‘ok, ok, just give us the report.’ It is that kind of flexibility and really generous support that has helped us to grow and ... become sustainable.”

Certain conditions attract new “external organizations to come in and want to fix things... They create ‘pocket NGOs’, inviting and creating group after group, and then they go away after three years... I think the whole notion of an organization asserting ‘We can fix the situation of a

particular country...’ needs to be changed and rethought. And it is very important for us to support the people’s organizations. Movements. You know? And then unless grassroots movements, people’s organizations, become strong, no matter what we do things will not change. So if I were given the choice, then I would start with building alliances with the people’s organizations, building alliances with the grassroots movements... So it is important for international funding organizations to understand that dynamic and really facilitate and support the movements rather than creating new NGOs and funding other multi-nationals.”

Similar skepticism was expressed by another defender who sees that sometimes the funding fails us. “Suppose you have taken on a particular agenda item. You have proceeded with that when you had funds. And somewhere in the middle, some crisis happened and that funding gets stopped. That funding can get stopped because of many reasons, because of the government or because the foreign funding agency is not able to deliver the funds, and so on. Now this particular agenda with which this particular civil society organization is moving forward, it has to stop until it can mobilize the funds. It brings down their credibility. So sometimes I am really skeptical of foreign funding.”

Funding from the West sometimes stigmatizes the recipients of the funds. Among other things, the recipient organization might be seen as a “friend of the ‘counterterrorism’ issue.” In some circles, funding from the West is seen as having an agenda, one that is contrary to local faiths and traditions, including the Islamic faith.

Reporting requirements create problems as well. Funder reporting has different standards, and “the financial report is more difficult with lots of requirements... [In my organization,] sometimes we discuss what information is dangerous or not dangerous and how to assure that we get the protection also, because some of that information has effects on us, especially for fundamentalist groups. They feel they are the target and object of our work. So, yes, sometimes we discuss ... how to get protection [with these reporting requirements]. Maybe that information could get into the public. I know it is [unlikely], but ... [the issues we deal with] ... are sensitive to publish.”

Some groups are disadvantaged in the competition for support. Language is one barrier to support. This is not necessarily a new issue, but it creates obstacles to communicating the changing circumstances and shifting needs under ‘CTMs’. When organization staff do not speak English or another Western language, they face “an extra obstacle to accessing all the different protection mechanisms that they would otherwise have access to. I almost feel bound in a way, like it’s hard for me to move on and do something else because I feel I need to be involved with this in case something happens. They are more vulnerable and they don’t know English and they might not have as many good connections.”

Organizational experience is another variable affecting support. When applying for funding you have to know how to package things. “I mean at the end of the day you do the kind of work that you do anyway no matter what, but when you are packaging it to the funder you package it differently. It’s in the language. You have to know what the donor organizations are looking for. So you have to be extremely sophisticated... Some are exposed to this kind of language because we were working elsewhere, so you are used to this kind of packaging... Those who have worked with large organizations have been briefed on how to write proposals. But working for a locally based organization, you wouldn’t know – ‘How come our proposals are not right? ‘This is what we need, and how come we are not getting the money?’ So the real grassroots organizations are going to be losing out...”

We need to cultivate and support young leadership. The life of a woman human rights defender is very demanding, and made more so under the ‘counterterrorism’ agenda. The energy to keep the movement on a forward track will come from new individuals joining in. But how to attract young leaders into the movement? That is the challenge. The workshop participants agreed that activists are born, not made, and are guided by their hearts and minds to the causes they believe in. Numbered among the workshop participants were both younger and older women, evidence that new individuals continue to be drawn to human rights activism. However, difficult circumstances, such as those that arise time and again when security is an issue and when surveillance is rampant, serve as a deterrent to others. As one long-time leader in her own country’s movement commented, “One thing which is making me step back is that I genuinely want our organization to grow and move forward. So I am quite clear that I need young leadership... As long as I will be there no one will grow. I know that also because my shadow is quite big...”

More generally, the women human rights defenders who gathered together from across Asia to share their experiences and insights recognized the need for strong support, both within and from outside their countries, and the resources to back up that support.

The global effort to counter the threat of terrorism has changed the context within which human rights issues are addressed. Women human rights defenders face risks posed by their own and other governments, by groups competing for influence in civil society, and international policy efforts to promote the ‘CTM’ agenda. Not every challenge can be attributed to ‘counterterrorism,’ and for many ‘CTMs’ are just one more set of obstacles along the path towards achieving the goals of human rights. However, elevating security as a primary goal of the international community has consequences for everybody. Longstanding differences and disagreements are handled differently when wearing the lenses of ‘counterterrorism’ versus ‘rights.’ On the one hand, we find ourselves intent on rooting out differences, threats, ‘the other.’ Alternatively, we could be focusing on our commonalities, strengths, the things that will bring us together in pursuit of common goals. One key function of governments is to help moderate among these competing interests. However, a ‘counterterrorism’ focus justifies efforts to single out rather than seek balance among differences. Women human rights defenders often find themselves sitting in precarious territory as challengers of a variety of traditional power structures. Identified as ‘the other,’ it isn’t a far leap to be called a ‘terrorist’ or ‘supporter of terrorism,’ and to be treated accordingly. Finding oneself labeled as a ‘western sympathizer’ can have equally troubling results. Even without official government policy, a global emphasis on ‘countering terrorism’ creates an environment where those who are committed to defending women’s human rights will find less support and protection for their efforts within their own communities.

For this group of activists, the global ‘counterterrorism’ agenda is compromising the achievement of women’s human rights.

D. The Personal is Political: Recommendations from the Ground

Workshop participants were asked very directly to identify useful and appropriate steps that might be taken to address the impacts of ‘counterterrorism measures.’ These include requests

directed at the international policy and donor communities as well as more personal recommendations for the activist community.

1. Recommendations for the Policy Community: “The medicine should not kill the patient”. Much of the inspiration for measures adopted locally come from policies and models crafted elsewhere. Global ‘CTMs’ are being applied in contexts where they do not belong, causing diversion of focus and resources away from the real issues that concern any particular community. It seems perfectly justifiable that resentment against ‘outside influence’ might ensue. At the same time, the arguments of ‘counterterrorism’ influence global perspectives. A ‘counterterrorism’ agenda spawns suspicion and distrust on a global scale extending to issues such as applying increased travel-related restrictions, ethnic and racial profiling, and withdrawal of financial support for locally-directed human rights, development and humanitarian work. For human rights activism, where the issues and networks are truly global in nature, the consequences can be devastating when it means a loss of both community and global support.

a) U.S. and other leaders promoting the global ‘counterterrorism’ agenda need to understand how measures adopted to ‘counter terrorism’ have undermined fundamental human rights, and take responsibility for reasserting a broad commitment to achieving these basic rights. Discriminatory profiling must be rejected, and efforts to bridge differences across groups and to identify and work together towards common goals need support. Infringements on free expression and free movement need to be curbed.

b) Where ‘counterterrorism measures’ are applied, the U.S. and other supporters of these efforts must comply with international human rights and humanitarian law. Among other things, this means ensuring due process and rejecting harmful practices such as secret detention, rendition, torture and degrading treatment. We also need to understand the economy of countering ‘terrorism’. Who is benefitting?

c) Human rights should be reestablished as a primary motivator of foreign policy. This will become apparent when human rights are consistently and not selectively applied across all cross-national relations, and where abuses of rights are not tolerated because of other interests, such as oil and other natural resources.

d) Human rights protections start at home. The global ‘counterterrorism agenda’ has undermined human rights abroad as well as on domestic grounds. Those who are leaders in ‘countering terrorism’ need to be leaders in human rights as well. Due process needs to be applied in all cases, including with respect to those accused of supporting ‘terrorism,’ and profiling of domestic populations based on racial, ethnic, religious or other characteristics cannot be tolerated.

2. Recommendations for the Donor Community: “We are in this together”

a) Include support for activist wellbeing and integrated security. Women human rights defenders need resources to provide ongoing security for themselves – to strengthen in body, mind, emotion and spirit – in order to attend to the security of others.

b) Recognize the particular risks as well as opportunities facing women living under ‘counterterrorism measures.’ Women can be subject to great harm – physical, psychological, and other – where security measures are unleashed. But empowering women to address these issues creates openings as well. Women don’t need just protection, but power to serve as problem-solvers. Ask for their recommendations. What problems can they solve?

c) Bandage work – or reacting to threats and damage already inflicted – is not enough. Crises need responses, but efforts to prevent the crises from escalating need support as well. Activists living and working in their own communities need support to identify, innovate and implement programs and approaches to their own challenges. We need to understand what a crisis is doing to the psyche of a nation.

d) Create opportunities that will draw in the next generation of activists. Human rights blossoms across generations, and has done so under the care and vigilance of the generations. Support is needed to bring in younger activists and for approaches and tools that resonate with the young, including new technology, new forms of communication, and more holistic organizational supports.

e) Funders are also activists and can be important advocates for those they support. When visibility is an advantage, when drawing attention to threats and risks, the philanthropic community has a vital role in making information public and communicating urgent appeals. The donor community is not just a resource base but a part of the network for change.

f) Facilitate good information and resource exchange through language support. Those who do not speak English or other major Western languages can be left out of the global exchange of ideas and funding. Making materials accessible in more languages, using the services of those with language skills, and providing assistance to those who need help in constructing successful funding proposals would draw in many who feel silenced by language barriers.

g) Support research to better understand political context, including CTMs, and get that knowledge out there. The world is a complex place; one size does not fit all. For example, the CTM issues facing Southeast Asian countries are not the same as those facing Central Asia. What are the policies, practices and structural violations within countries? What are the objectives being sought by the US, the EU, the UN and others in different corners of the world? These are not the same and should not be hidden under the broad and shady cloak of ‘counterterrorism.’ And as knowledge is gained, the philanthropic community has a responsibility to educate – the broad public, other funders, and policymakers.

h) Donors share responsibility for getting this conversation going and for accepting responsibility to change their funding decisions as biases and consequences come to light. Some donors already see these needs, and understand that as funding gets tighter and more restricted, the on-the-ground staff is left with less and less to work with, increasing tests to personal and organizational resilience, and lower likelihood of achieving human rights success. A discussion needs to be started in the donor community itself to bring in a broader level of support

i) Recognize that most funding goes to groups already in power, and these may not be the only or the best avenues for achieving lasting change. We have seen time and time again that real change, real empowerment, begins on the ground, from the bottom up, where communities are identifying their own problems and their own solutions rather than trying to match somebody else’s agenda. Funding needs to reflect this.

3. Recommendations for the Community of Women Human Rights Defenders:
“Always know that you have a friend out there who supports your beliefs”

a) Make self-care a priority. Security starts with oneself. Take steps to protect and nurture your own body and health, family, home, relationships and work environment.

b) Share self-care information with friends and colleagues.

c) Create a security plan. Know your options, what to do and who to contact in an emergency. Identify safe houses and visa options in case you have to leave the country or take someone out.

d) Let others know where you are. Keep at least some of your colleagues (at least two or three of them) informed of your whereabouts.

e) Be careful who you trust. Know who you are working with, develop and check with your network, and cross-check a situation before deciding to help.

f) Be wary of your communications. Technology creates new vulnerabilities. Consider using code language when passing on an important message.

g) Be sure you have friends in the media who support you and your work.

h) Carefully consider your own role in peace building. Strive to be neutral in your dealings, not taking sides. Look into all aspects of a situation – including the big picture and not just the parts – before coming to a judgment. Any criticisms offered should be constructive in nature, and should include alternative ways for achieving resolution.

About Our Organizations

Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (UAF) is a global women's fund that uses strategic philanthropy to protect, strengthen and sustain women's human rights defenders.

FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights organization headquartered in Bangkok, Thailand, representing 47 member groups across Asia committed to the promotion and protection of all human rights, including the right to development.

Cordaid is an international development organization based in The Netherlands. Cordaid works with a network of nearly a thousand partner organizations in numerous countries of the global south.