Navigating mental and emotional wellbeing in risky forms of human rights activism

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**Abstract:** How do people engaged in risky forms of activism understand and manage their mental and emotional wellbeing? What factors shape these responses? How is this significant for the sustainability of activism and human rights movements around the world? Drawing on a study with 407 participants who experienced high risks in human rights practice in Colombia, Mexico, Egypt, Kenya, and Indonesia, this article argues that cultures of human rights practice shape the way that mental and emotional wellbeing is understood and practiced. Gendered ‘feeling rules’ that valorize bravery, commitment, sacrifice, and selflessness complicate conversations about mental and emotional wellbeing, triggering feelings of guilt and self-indulgence in relation to self-care. Discussions about mental and emotional wellbeing are sensitive, culturally mediated, and laden with social and political implications. Some leaders are concerned that revealing their fears and vulnerabilities will lead to movement demobilisation. Mental health issues are thus made invisible. Participants in this study tended to rely on private rather than collective coping strategies; relatively few human rights groups and organisations adopted wellbeing practices. Crucially, however, activists affirm that their human rights practice enables them to experience and attain individual and collective wellbeing. This article discusses the maintenance of practices for self- and collective care that can sustain people engaged in activism in the face of high risks.

**Keywords:** emotions; feeling rules; activism; wellbeing; human rights defenders; risk

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# Introduction

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in repressive laws constraining civil society space around the world (Carothers and Brechenmacher, 2014; Poppe and Wolff, 2017) and more attacks and reprisals against people engaged in human rights activism (Dwyer-Smith, 2018; Rekosh, 2017). Human rights activism often entails challenging those in power, going against social and cultural norms, holding state authorities accountable, and demanding justice – acts that are provocative. In many places, perpetrators use fear, terror and violence to deter people from their activism (Jeffries, 2015; Gregory and Pred, 2007). Deterrence methods include harassment, stigmatization, surveillance, judicial harassment, criminalization, and unlawful arrest and detention, beatings, sexual violence, torture, kidnapping, killings, and disappearances (Forst, 2018). The perpetrators of threats and attacks might be state authorities (such as the police, security forces, or the military) or non-state actors (such as corporations, criminal gangs, and fundamentalist groups), or combinations of both. In a significant number of cases, their identities remain unknown (Landman, 2006; Forst, 2018).

Over the past few decades, protection actors concerned about human rights defenders at risk have been constructing a multi-level, multi-stakeholder international protection regime aimed at securing the rights of defenders as they act in the face of risks (Bennett et al., 2015; Nah et al., 2013). The term ‘human rights defender’ refers to people engaged in the promotion and protection of human rights, as expressed in the 1998 United Nations [Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/SRHRDefenders/Pages/Translation.aspx) (abbreviated to the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders). The levels and types of risks that human rights defenders experience vary, depending on the causes they fight for, their tactics and strategies, their identities, the levels and types of support they receive, and the social, political, and economic contexts of their practice.

The daily physical and psychological demands of human rights practice in risky environments can be incessant and overwhelming. People engaged in activism often find it challenging to draw barriers between their human rights activism and their personal lives (Bobel 2007; Vaccaro and Mena, 2011), particularly when they defend their own rights and/or live in the communities whose rights they fight for. As we found in this study (Nah, 2017), human rights activism is also often done on a voluntarily basis; when it is paid, funding is often limited and uncertain, leading to financial insecurity – yet another stressor (see also Satterthwaite et al, 2019). People engaged in human rights activism regularly experience stress, distress and trauma – both directly, as they experience risks, threats, and violence themselves, and vicariously, as they interact with victims of violence and human rights violations, such as through taking testimonies, documenting incidents, and witnessing abuses (Knuckey, Satterthwaite and Brown, 2018; Dubberley et al., 2015). Those directly threatened or attacked tend to have worse mental health outcomes (Holtz, Salama and Gotway, 2002; Joscelyn et al., 2015). Human rights defenders and protection actors alike have called for a more holistic – or ‘integrated’ – understanding of security that focuses not only on physical and digital security, but also on psychosocial wellbeing (Barry, 2011; Higson-Smith et al, 2016; IM-Defensoras, 2013).

This article is concerned about the ‘interior life of politics’ (Pulido, 2003). It examines how the experiences and beliefs of people engaged in risky forms of human rights activism are influenced by cultures of human rights practice and broader social and political perceptions about human rights defenders and activism. We found in our study that mental and emotional wellbeing – the subjective sense of ‘being well’ in terms of one’s mind and emotional state – as dimensions of overall wellbeing[[1]](#endnote-1), is not a topic that is easy to broachamongst those engaged in risky forms of activism. Such conversations raised issues that they feel ill-equipped to deal with and touch values that run deep. Gendered ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 1979; 1983) make it difficult for human rights defenders to share about the struggles they face with their mental and emotional wellbeing, contributing to the invisibility of the issue. Social and cultural norms that stigmatize mental health, or that cast such discussions as being ‘too Western’ and thus alien to daily life, further compound the problem. Leaders are worried that sharing their fears will lead to movement demobilisation. Human rights defenders tend to keep their struggles to themselves and to rely on private coping strategies rather than collective ones. Nevertheless, while activists experience high levels of stress, anxiety, trauma, and burnout, it is also their human rights practice – their continued resistance, refusal to give up, collective action, and solidarity with each other – that enables them to experience and attain individual and collective wellbeing.

# Emotions, activism, risk-taking

In recent years, scholars have been examining the multifaceted and central ways in which emotions figure in activism and social mobilisation (Aminzade and McAdam, 2002; Flam and King, 2005; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2004; Jasper, 2011). Emotions bring people together into collectives (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2001) and have been strategically used and fostered by organizers to maintain movements (Jasper, 1998). Some combinations of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ emotions, what Jasper (2011) refers to as ‘moral batteries’, are particularly powerful in motivating collective action, such as shame and pride (Britt and Heise, 2000; Gould, 2009); pity and joy; and hope and indignation (Romanos, 2014). With a moral basis, anger leads to indignation, a strong basis for mobilisation (Jasper, 2011; Rodgers, 2010; Romanos, 2014).

People manage their emotions as they interact with others. Arlie Hochschild (1979; 1983) highlights how people perform ‘emotional labour’ in workplaces, ‘the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display’ (1983, p. 7). Hochschild distinguishes between ‘emotional labour’ and ‘emotion work’, the former done publicly with commercial ‘exchange value’ and the latter constituting the same acts done privately for ‘use value’ – although scholars who draw on her work do not always make this distinction. ‘Feeling rules’ guide these actions – ‘standards used in emotional conversation to determine what is rightly owed and owing in the currency of feeling’ (1983, p. 18). Feeling rules often operate invisibly and can be made apparent by considering the difference between what people feel and what they and others think they should feel. As Hochschild observes, people give themselves and each other ‘rule reminders’ about what is appropriate to feel.

Feeling rules are reinforced in organisations and collectives. As Rodgers (2010) has argued, employees at Amnesty International were expected to demonstrate selflessness; they felt compelled to work until they were physically and emotionally exhausted and felt guilty for focusing on themselves. These are repeated themes in other studies about human rights activists (Barry and Đorđević, 2007; Barry and Nainar, 2008; Chen and Gorski, 2015; Norwood, 2013; Plyler, 2006; Satterthwaite et al, 2019). Bobel (2007) observed that people engaged in activism can have high expectations associated with the identity of an activist. In her study, the identity of an ‘activist’ was linked to a ‘perfect standard’ of people demonstrating deep commitment, sacrifice, humility, rigour, and willingness to bear the risks of activism. This ‘perfect standard’ became the criteria by which people engaged in activism judged themselves and others, so much so that some participants in her study avoided labelling themselves as activists because they didn’t think that they met the standard.

# Differentiating levels and types of 'risk’ and ‘cost’ in activism

Calling for scholarship that distinguishes between ‘low’ and ‘high’ levels of risk and cost in activism, Doug McAdam (1986) defined risk as ‘the anticipated dangers – whether legal, social, physical, financial and so forth – of engaging in in a particular kind of activity’ and cost as ‘the expenditures of time, money, and energy that are required of a person’ (p. 67). As McAdam observed, signing a petition may be a ‘low cost’ activity, but a ‘high risk’ one if there is a threat of repercussions. However, risks in activism can change quite quickly and unexpectedly, and cannot always be anticipated. Activists have, for example, been targeted for seemingly innocuous acts such as posting on Facebook or sending tweets. Activists thus contend not just with risk, but with uncertainty. McAdam and subsequent scholarship on high risk/cost activism have not focused much on costs related to mental and emotional wellbeing.

Both risk and cost are subjectively defined and experienced within ‘objective’ parameters, such as legal penalties, arrest, and threats from non-state actors (Wiltfang and McAdam, 1991). People are willing to engage in high risks and costs when they value the goals of their cause (Almanzar and Herring, 2004). The social-structural location of activists – such as their sex, marital status, age, family income, ethnic identity, level of education, and urbanicity of residence – influence how they experience goals, risks and costs in activism (Almanzar and Herring, 2004; Wiltfang and McAdam, 1991).

Risk taking is emotionally charged. Both emotions and risks are configured through social and cultural processes; understandings about them are intersubjective and influenced by social interaction (Lupton, 2013a). Risks are often associated with harm, danger, and fear (Douglas, 1992; Lupton 2013b). In modern social life, strong cultural messages encourage individuals to avoid risks, act responsibly, and take precautions (O’Malley and Mugford 1994); people who take unnecessary risks are often characterized as careless or irresponsible, even deviant (Lupton, 2013b). In some cases, people engaged in human rights activism have been chastized for taking too many risks and for behaving ‘carelessly’, much to their chagrin.

Emotionally charged work can be simultaneously motivating and distressing (Rodgers, 2010; Jasper 2011). Activists committed to political activism and social justice face monumental tasks as they try to change oppressive systems and structures. This causes them to be susceptible to burnout when they fail to reach their goals after sustained effort (Pines, 1994; Gorski and Chen, 2015). Maslach, Jackson and Leiter (2018) identify three dimensions of burnout – emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation (the loss of feeling towards the recipients of one’s care), and reduced personal accomplishment. Studying racial justice activists in the United States, Gorski (2019) identified four primary causes of activist burnout: emotional-dispositional causes (related to intense commitment and a deep sense of personal responsibility), backlash causes (suffering negative repercussions of their activism and cumulative stress), structural causes (contending with unyielding structures of power), and, notably, – to the incredulity of activists themselves – in-movement causes (in-fighting and oppression among activists).

The intersectional identities of activists matter in their experiences of stress and burnout. Activists from minority and marginalized groups are both targeted for their activism and are subject to oppressive power structures (Steinfeldt et al., 2012). Davenport, Soule and Armstrong (2011) found that police in the United States were more likely to take action at African American protest events than in white protest events. Vaccaro and Mena (2011) found that queer activists of colour at an American university experienced racism and homophobia and struggled with external and internal pressures (demands from others and themselves to make change happen), limited social support, boundary management, and the lack of self-care. They experienced not only burnout, but compassion fatigue, and in some cases, suicide ideation.

Indeed, burnout is just one of a range of possible psychological outcomes of risky forms of activism. Using psychological screening tools, Holtz et al. (2002) found elevated levels of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms amongst human rights workers in Kosovo. Those who had experienced an armed attack and hostility from the population to their human rights work reported higher levels of anxiety. Similarly, using internet-based self-reported psychological measures and questionnaires with 346 human rights advocates of 51 nationalities, Joscelyne et al. (2015) found elevated levels of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression amongst human rights advocates, which were linked to trauma exposure, perfectionism and negative self-appraisals about the impact of their human rights work. While they found resilience amongst many of their respondents in general, this was significantly reduced amongst who had been directly threatened or attacked. In addition, 19 percent of respondents reported that they had taken time off from work for three months or more due to psychological distress or burnout.

# Methods

This paper draws upon a study that focused on how people who promote and protect human rights – human rights defenders – navigate risks, manage their personal security, and receive protection support in Colombia, Mexico, Egypt, Kenya, and Indonesia. These five countries were chosen because they have thriving domestic civil society movements that have experienced changing levels of repression and risk and in which discourses and practices concerning the protection of human rights defenders have evolved over time. In this article, the terms ‘human rights defender’ and ‘human rights activist’ are used interchangeably. Not all participants in this study self-identified as either of these, referring to themselves in other ways, such as a community worker, feminist activist, *campesino* (peasant farmer), lawyer, or NGO worker. Similar to Bobel (2007), we noted that there are social and political implications to the identity labels such as ‘human rights defender’ and ‘activist’, with some respondents seeing these as having a ‘high standard’ that they did not achieve. We selected participants based on their *actions* in promoting and protecting human rights, which is the basis for considering a person a ‘human rights defender’, consistent with the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

We recruited participants who had experienced risks, threats or attacks within the past five years. Through purposive sampling, we selected participants from a variety of cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds who focused on a broad range of rights. We included those who focused on women's rights and sexual orientation and gender identity rights as well as people who had been stigmatized and criminalized for their human rights practice. In many cases, participants worked on several types of rights for different groups in society. Through the interviews, focus groups and surveys, we explored their experiences of risk, understandings of and management of personal security, tactics and strategies for security management, and experiences of protection support. This article focuses specifically on the qualitative data from this study concerning respondents’ reflections on ‘mental and emotional wellbeing’.[[2]](#endnote-2) We used this broad phrase in our study rather than more specific phrases such as ‘mental health’ or ‘psychosocial wellbeing’ as pilot interviews suggested that a broader framing of the issue would encourage respondents to share diverse perspectives while narrower framings would elicit resistance.[[3]](#endnote-3) This broad framing also enabled participants to respond to questions drawing on their own socially and culturally informed ideas about ‘wellbeing’.

407 people participated in this study, 191 of whom self-identified as a woman (46.9 percent), 210 as a man (51.6 percent) and 6 as transgender (1.5 percent). Of these, 391 completed a survey.[[4]](#endnote-4) Interviews and focus groups were conducted by human rights researchers in English, Spanish, Kiswahili, Arabic and Bahasa Indonesia in different regions in each country. When consent was given, interviews and focus groups were recorded, then translated into English and analysed through Nvivo. Ethics approval was received in June 2015 and data collection occurred between July 2015 and November 2016. Preliminary findings were shared and discussed with human rights defenders and protection actors through workshops in Jakarta, Nairobi, Bogota, and Mexico City in 2016 and 2017.[[5]](#endnote-5)

# (Gendered) feeling rules in human rights activism: Bravery, commitment, sacrifice, and selflessness

A strong theme amongst respondents was that they considered mental and emotional wellbeing among human rights defenders to be a critical but neglected aspect of personal security. 86.7 percent of 391 respondents to our survey were ‘somewhat concerned’ (26.6 percent) or ‘very concerned’ (60.1 percent) about their mental and emotional wellbeing[[6]](#endnote-6); they were just as concerned about this aspect of security as they were about their physical and digital security.[[7]](#endnote-7) This may come as a surprise to protection actors who support human rights defenders at risk, as physical (and secondarily digital) threats and attacks are often the key focus in protection activities. Protection actors also tend to venerate human rights defenders for being ‘fearless’ and ‘brave’ in spite of such attacks. In this study, human rights defenders expressed that they felt guilty for thinking about their own wellbeing. They felt that they should focus instead on the wellbeing of others, in particular, the victims of human rights violations who they saw as being in worse situations than themselves. They also spoke about the lack of time and space for self-care as they faced overwhelming demands in insecure environments.

Nevertheless, the psychological consequences of their work were tremendous. Respondents spoke about the challenges of living with pervasive fear and anxiety; of their inability to sleep; of their feelings of powerlessness in the face of oppression; of feeling ‘numb’ or emotionless; of living in panic; of being in constant ‘fight mode’; and of their fatigue, despair, desperation and isolation. They spoke about suicides amongst fellow activists. They shared about their pain when their colleagues, compatriots, and family members were attacked, killed or disappeared. This pain became woven into their work, further fuelling their activism. Especially in hostile conditions, those who engage in human rights activism are forced to consider the risks and costs of their actions. In doing so, they bear in mind the sacrifice and selflessness of friends and colleagues. A defender from Colombia who himself suffered death threats and repeated exile for years, observed,

There is a spirit of sacrifice involved in being a human rights defender. You have to be prepared to take the ultimate consequences. It is in the nature of this line of work. My friend… was killed, but he once said that ‘giving in seems worse than death itself’… This reaction, in a country where life is disregarded, is a profound sign of love for life. That none of this is in vain.

When feminist environmental rights defender Berta Cáceres of the Lenca people in Honduras was murdered on 2 March 2016, thousands of people mourned her death, declaring ‘*¡Berta no se murió, se multiplicó!*’ (Berta did not die, she multiplied!). As those who have suffered and died are mourned and memorialized, sacrifice and selflessness galvanizes others. Such feeling rules also lead to the veneration of human rights defenders as ‘heroes’. As a lawyer working on mining and environmental rights in Colombia, a woman, observed:

I’ve worked with human rights defenders who are at high risk… and what I saw was when people get lost in their ‘role’ as a human rights defender, or lost in their work and started forgetting about themselves and their life, they aren’t able to feel stable. I think this happens to a lot of human rights defenders when they start to feel pressure, or that they are saving people, or they are the hero – these types of expressions make it so they don’t enjoy normal things in their lives, and it creates a cycle of pain and rage of which they cannot get out of.

Some respondents reflected on how gender roles, *machismo* culture, heteronormative patriarchy and toxic masculinity were reasons for various forms of violence and their discomfort with wellbeing practices. Some men involved in human rights activism interpret the need for protection and wellbeing measures as signs of personal weakness. Expectations of them as ‘leaders’ and ‘heroes’ demanded that they undertook this work ‘without limits’. The leader of a non-profit organisation working on indigenous rights in Mexico highlighted the dilemma that men experienced as they engaged in risky activism:

[They think] ‘How do I dare to think about my safety when the matter is about the collective, the community, not about me, but all of us?’ There’s no way for them to understand it most of the time and there’s a chauvinist culture in everyone, where they think that, as men, no one will threaten them, scare them, and that doesn’t help.

Some respondents spoke about the need to change that narrative of martyrdom to one of valuing life. Reflecting on this, an activist working on migrant rights in Mexico, a man, said,

I’m not saying this from my worldview, but there’s a martyrdom mentality in Mexico; and not martyrdom in a religious way but rather in a way than the most you can do is to sacrifice your life for the people you defend, and we have tried to change the discourse… saying: We can do more being alive than dead.

Women defenders also spoke about how they were socialized to believe that they need to take care of others, not themselves. Those who chose to prioritize their wellbeing confronted feelings of guilt when doing so. A woman defender from Mexico expressed, ‘we as women give everything until we finish empty, we give more than we can, and we put aside our needs…’. A feminist activist providing psychosocial support for human rights defenders from Mexico opined, ‘even we women human rights defenders generate models that in order to be a good defender we should deliver all our being, being always available, being in good mood, being the mother of all the others...’. As Taylor and Rupp (2002) observed, women’s movements have drawn upon motherly love as an ‘emotional template’ for solidarity and as a justification for activism.

Those in leadership positions also felt inhibited about sharing their vulnerability. Some leaders were concerned that talking about the threats and attacks they experienced and about their anxieties would perpetuate fear, discouraging others from joining human rights movements. Part of the ‘emotion work’ (Hochschild, 1983) they performed was to demonstrate bravery and reassure others. Particularly in societies where fear, terror and violence are used as techniques of discipline, demonstrations of fearlessness and persistence in the face of threats and attacks become vital acts of resistance (Jeffries, 2015; Gregory and Pred, 2007).

# Cultural and economic dimensions of response to ‘wellbeing’

Amongst respondents we found different reactions to our questions about mental and emotional wellbeing. Some were perplexed, saying that they had not really contemplated such questions before and were not accustomed to talking about themselves in this way. Some saw ‘wellbeing’ as a ‘Western’ concept, leading to ‘Western’ interventions that were inappropriate for them. As a leader of an indigenous community in Colombia, a man, said:

We don’t really use the ‘psychosocial’ concept. We believe that the work we do as indigenous people is better for us. We are all in our right minds; we all have our five senses; we are not crazy. Just because there are armed groups present, it doesn’t mean we are in a bad way.

However... there were 18-20 suicides in the last four years... We have tried ‘Western’ psychology, but it didn’t improve matters. The indigenous medics have blessed us and offered advice. This has been better for us.

Respondents noted that it was sometimes difficult to hold discussions about wellbeing with fellow human rights defenders because it was perceived to be linked with ‘madness’ or needing to see a psychiatrist. An activist working on torture and witness protection in Kenya noted,

Mental health is generally not prioritized, not just for human rights defenders. It’s the lack of understanding of what it involves and the stigma associated with mental health... People think you are weak, you don’t have the capacity to manage it and that you might go crazy so people hide themselves in ‘let’s go for the action part of it’, and actually,… [they] have been wounded before, so the pain of dealing with their wound is so much that they can’t deal with their past. It’s easier to deal with the present and move on.

Similarly, in Egypt, a lawyer working freedom of expression, a man, observed:

NGOs in Egypt don’t offer psychological support for [their] employees… it also has to do with certain cultural imperatives prevalent within Egyptian society. For instance, if you work in an NGO and the director offered you see a psychiatrist, your immediate reaction is that you’ll poke fun at him. When in another culture, that would be considered normal.

We found that respondents across the five countries tended not to use psychological terms such as ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’, ‘vicarious trauma’, ‘compassion fatigue’, or ‘burnout’, although some spoke about stress, anxiety and depression. A few respondents in our study did seek the help of professionals, such as counsellors, psychologists, or psychiatrists – almost always with the financial support of human rights organisations and donors, as they could not afford these themselves. Others, however, felt that social, cultural and religious forms of support were more effective for them.

The human rights defenders in our study tended to rely on private coping strategies rather than on organisational support for their wellbeing. A woman defender in Egypt opined,

We underestimate what it does to us. It takes a very long time to recover even if next day we start our day with coffee and work. I do not think we have actually organized groups or organized processes to help us recover, it is all random efforts, you go to your friends or you crawl in bed or you go party until you forget what happened, nothing out there to tell you where to go, like for example violence survivors, we tell them go to these shelters, go to these non-governmental organizations, there was so may cases that said I reached depression because of what I have experienced.

Respondents shared how they gained strength from their spirituality. As an LGBTIQ\* defender from Colombia said: ‘My spirituality is helpful for me, and I find tranquillity in being alone with myself. Spiritual retreats help a lot. I find it hard to forgive, I’m working on that. It takes a lot of control to not become embittered.’ Many respondents spoke about the importance of support from family, friends, colleagues, and international supporters. Solidarity in times of difficulty was a very significant source of strength. However, they also sometimes felt lost and alone in their struggles. An anti-corruption activist in Indonesia, a man, explained,

We also do not get support from our colleagues when we face problems. They make the problem as a ‘simple matter’. For example, when my friend received a letter from the police that he was to be interrogated, other friends made it as a joke, such as, ‘be relaxed, we will accompany you. We will bring you food everyday if you are arrested.’ We laugh together. Based on my experience, I believe, they also felt worried. It seems as if we do not receive moral support.

We found that relatively few NGOs embedded wellbeing practices into their work routines. This was due in part to the lack of resources in relation to the incessant demands of work. Leaders of organisations spoke about wanting to address burnout amongst staff, but how they lack the time, personnel, and resources. A medical doctor working on the rights of prisoners in Egypt, a woman, said, ‘We always feel guilty that we cannot do everything, even when someone gets depressed or burned out, we say we will make programmes but we never do.’

Many respondents discussed the financial insecurities of their work, which contributed to their experience of stress. They spoke about having short-term funding, low wages, the lack of benefits, and expectations that human rights work should be conducted without pay. This resulted in human rights defenders not having social security, healthcare insurance, and pension provisions. As a lawyer working on the rights of political prisoners from Colombia expressed, ‘It’s a real labour of love, but it is a sacrifice. And that’s without the economic question; most human rights defenders don’t have financial security or much in the way of financial resources’.

Respondents in our study lost income because of the risks and threats they faced. Most had to raise money or spend their savings on personal security measures – such as bail, medical treatment, security equipment, and relocation. These financial costs were particularly challenging for those already struggling to make ends meet. Respondents often did not have the savings or the time to take breaks or to enable them to respond adequately to emergencies. Those who worked alone struggled even more. An activist working on the rights of prisoners in Egypt, a woman, shared, ‘I sometimes come across a case that won't let me sleep for four continuous days because I want to help even though I lack the resources.… People like me who don't work for someone else don't find the time [to rest].’ A community worker working on reproductive rights and maternal health in Kenya, a woman, observed:

We don’t have a kitty or organisations that care for our health and families. No one is concerned about how you feed or pay rent and no organisations are ready to give you employment because you don’t have papers or certificates... It’s a challenge to human rights defenders, especially when sick and hospitalized, we have so many human rights defenders going through these – finance is the biggest issue.

There is a link between the identity of defenders, the risks they face, and the resources and support they can access for their wellbeing. LGBTIQ\* activists, for example, often have narrower access to support mechanisms (see also Vaccaro and Mena, 2011). Seeking support outside of their own circles often requires them to ‘come out’, to expose themselves and the work they do.

# Wellbeing *through* human rights practice

Human rights activism connects defenders in meaningful ways. For some, living positively and continuing with their work despite threats were vital acts of resistance. For such activists, it is not a question of choosing between human rights practice and wellbeing – rather their human rights practice was a way of strengthening their individual and collective wellbeing. A feminist woman human rights defender in Mexico said,

... the combat against repression was a healing process... the claim that ‘Yes, it was the state’ was our way of healing the wound; it is an emotional need and also a statement to make us stronger, make ourselves feel less vulnerable, less alone. Our uprising is against loneliness; it is a trust network; it is love politics; subversive love...

A leader of a *campesino* community in Colombia observed that living ‘ordinary’ lives in the face of violence was itself a form of resistance:

The best therapy is in doing what you enjoy. When you can’t do something that you were born to do, it makes you uncomfortable. For [our community], the psycho-social question means staying organized, keeping busy with projects. Together we discuss and debate things, we share; that is therapy for us. We don’t need a professional psychiatrist.

The importance of living differently in the face of oppression, in congruence with their values and beliefs and with the support of others, is a form of ‘healing’ for human rights defenders at risk. This is why discrimination, sexism, and marginalisation within human rights movements can be particularly damaging. Women defenders in our study reported experiencing violence from within their organisations and movements, as well as the lack of recognition and support for their work. A woman defender from Mexico spoke about the effects of intimidation and harassment:

Sometimes [in my previous organisation] people approached me in a way that intimidated me. It was never direct, like in other spaces, but I felt burned out in some organisations even if I liked working in there, because I was tired of harassment… there were a lot of men harassing us, or mocking our proposals. That is a form of violence.

These experiences have had a chilling effect on women’s participation in mixed-gender human rights organisations, and on the level of support that they and LGBTIQ\* defenders received from fellow activists. As a feminist woman defender from Mexico stated,

When violence comes from within, from the closer sphere; such as sentimental partners, colleagues from the same organisations, *machismo* within social movements, when that happens, there is a peril of fracture, sometimes even more dangerous than with that related to external actors.

Woman defenders also observed that it was challenging to incorporate wellbeing actions into an organisation when women were willing to process their emotions together, but men chose not to participate – highlighting again, gendered responses to wellbeing. Several respondents highlighted the importance of ‘psychosocial accompaniment’ for individuals and communities, complementing physical forms of accompaniment. In general, the respondents in our study welcomed more emphasis on self-care and collective care, the management of emotions, and discussions about wellbeing in security trainings. They also valued conversations about how to develop networks and how to build collective strategies for protection.

# Discussion

If repression constitutes any action by the state that ‘raises the contender’s cost of collective action' (Tilly (1978, p. 110), these costs are also borne mentally and emotionally. Emotional reflexivity can help activists to understand and manage the emotional impacts of their practice and contribute to personal sustainability in activism and to the sustainability of social movements more generally (Brown and Pickerill, 2009; Cox, 2011; King, 2005). In this study, we found that the mental and emotional costs of risky activism arose not just from threats and attacks by perpetrators, but from the social, cultural, political and economic conditions that mediate responses to the risks and costs of activism.

Powerful gendered ‘feeling rules’ in cultures of human rights practice around the world that valorize bravery, commitment, sacrifice, and selflessness, inhibit activists from focusing on their own mental and emotional wellbeing; they lead activists to consider self-care as ‘self-indulgent’ or a ‘luxury’ and to feel guilty for focusing on themselves (see also Barry and Đorđević, 2007; Barry and Nainar, 2008; Rodgers, 2010; Gorski and Chen, 2015). These feelings rules do not exist just in specific human rights organisations such as Amnesty International (Rodgers, 2010), they resonate powerfully throughout human rights communities in different geographical locations, amongst people who have never met each another (see also Satterthwaite et al., 2019). There are also social and political implications associated with being deemed ‘unwell’. Aside from possible social stigma, some respondents in our study – in particular, leaders – were concerned that emphasis on the risks and costs of activism would lead to movement demobilization and to perceptions that perpetrators were successful in their deterring measures. The management of fear and its (potential) effects, as others have found, is part of the emotion work needed to sustain activism in the face of high risks (Flam, 1998; Goodwin and Pfaff, 2001).

Women defenders have been more willing to engage in discussions about mental and emotional wellbeing than men defenders. Indeed, they have been leading the way in calling for self and collective care within human rights movements (Barry and Đorđević, 2007; Barry and Nainar, 2008; IM-Defensoras, 2013). Nevertheless, such discussions are still relatively rare; in many places around the world, human rights defenders suffer without avenues to share their feelings with others and to access support. As we found in our study, human rights defenders tend to rely on private rather than organisational coping strategies to manage their suffering.

Cultural and economic factors shape responses to mental and emotional wellbeing. Some activists reject discussions about ‘wellbeing’ as a ‘Western’ approach with ‘Western’ interventions unsuitable for them. Some prefer to name their issues in alternative ways and to engage with more familiar forms of wellbeing practices that resonate culturally and spiritually. It is important therefore that donors and other protection actors avoid prescribing specific ‘fixed’ solutions to activists, which tend to be based on their own (socio-culturally informed) paradigms of what ‘wellbeing’ and healing entail, and instead, enable them to explore a range of approaches to wellbeing that they may find more suitable for themselves.

There is a danger that discussions about wellbeing and self-care end up ‘blaming the victim’, wherein the negative impacts on wellbeing are viewed as being caused or sustained by the ‘careless’ inattention to self. Calls for attention to wellbeing can be overly prescriptive and judgmental, dictating to human rights activists that ‘responsible behaviour’ entails taking on wellbeing practices on top of many other responsibilities and obligations. Self-care can feel overwhelming and impossible to activists who are already struggling with myriad risks (Norwood, 2013; Loewe, 2012).

Scholars and practitioners have instead highlighted the importance of examining wellbeing as a collective endeavour (González, 2015; Müller and Correa, 2017, Satterthwaite et al., 2019). Such initiatives might include mainstreaming practices of self- and collective care; developing a deeper understanding about the effect of funding practices on sustainable activism; and devoting resources to culturally relevant and contextually appropriate practices, including the provision of supervision for case work, healthcare, counselling, insurance, and social security. Satterthwaite et al. (2019) call for organisational and institutional responses to strengthen self- and collective care, not just through the provision of support to address symptoms but through the reimagination and reorganisation of human rights practice.[[8]](#endnote-8)

**Conclusion**

There is still much to be understood about the ways that activists understand and manage their wellbeing, particularly when they have suffered, or continue to suffer, from loss, grief, trauma, and burnout. Subjective understandings of wellbeing are informed by social and cultural ideas about ‘wellbeing’ and ‘mental health’, and activists who are already stigmatized because of their human rights practice are concerned about being further stigmatized by connotations that they are mentally ill. A complex relationship exists between mental and emotional wellbeing and human rights practice. While there are mental and emotional costs to human rights practice, it is also a crucial part of how activists achieve individual and collective wellbeing. Human rights activism addresses systemic inequality, injustice, and impunity – the structural causes of pain and suffering. It is therefore important to recognize the damage caused by harassment, discrimination, marginalisation and violence within movements (Chen and Gorski, 2015; Gorski, 2019; Jonsson, 2016; Forst, 2019) and to take specific measures to address these. Rather that conceiving of self-care and collective care in terms of a withdrawal from activism, it is crucial to examine how spaces and cultures of activism can be reshaped so that they do not replicate oppression, discrimination and violence.

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1. For a comprehensive discussion on the challenge of defining wellbeing, see Dodge et al. (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For other research findings from this study, see: <https://securityofdefendersproject.org/>, accessed 18 October 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. We found, as Pavis, Masters and Burley (1996) did, that ‘lay people’ feel more comfortable with a broader term such as ‘psychological and emotional wellbeing’ than ‘mental health’, which connotes mental illness. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Most participated in a semi-structured interview or focus group and completed a survey; a small number completed the survey without participating in the interview or focus group and vice versa. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. We had planned to do the same in Cairo, but decided against it because of security concerns. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Respondents were asked ‘In general, how concerned are you about your mental and emotional well-being?’ and were given five options to choose from: ‘Not concerned at all’, ‘not too concerned’, ‘I don’t know’, ‘somewhat concerned’ and ‘very concerned’. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. 85.0 percent stated that they were ‘somewhat concerned’ (26.9 percent) or ‘very concerned’ (58.1 percent) about their physical security, while 84.1 percent stated that they were ‘somewhat concerned’ (24.0 percent) or ‘very concerned’ (60.1 percent) about their digital security. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See also the website Resources for Resilience (available at <https://www.hrresilience.org/>, accessed 18 October 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)