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No Security Without Women's Agency

[Women Peacemakers Program](#)

Five months into 2017 and we have already witnessed a mass swell in mass demonstrations and public engagement worldwide. People everywhere are heading to the streets calling for social justice, transparency, democracy and human rights, with women activists on the forefront of many of these People Power initiatives.

However, at the same time we also witness another trend: governments worldwide are increasing surveillance and control over public spaces, are cracking down on activist dissent, and are heavily investing in hard security measures.

The recently launched CIVICUS Civil Society Monitor shows that over 3.2 billion people now live in countries in which civil society space is either repressed or closed. According to **CIVICUS Secretary General Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah** *"this means that the scope for citizen action is constrained and getting worse in much of the world, including some countries where one might least expect it. The spillover effect to other countries also cannot be understated"*.

As Maina Kiai, the former UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association (2011-2017) **recently** stated: *"The world has seen the most comprehensive rollback of civic freedoms since the end of the Cold War"*. As he explains, *"these two trends may seem paradoxical, but they are, in fact, inextricably linked. It is precisely because civil society can be so powerful, persuasive and persistent that governments are moving to restricting it. And it is precisely because civil society has been so successful in motivating change that those with power, including powerful business interests, are fighting back."*

This constraining of civil society space occurs not only directly, via openly harsh security policies, such as through the outlawing of protests and the harassment, jailing or killing of activists. Increasingly, challenges to civil society organizing are also coming from unexpected and more indirect angles. One of these challenges concerns measures to counter terrorism financing.

Recently, the Women Peacemakers Program (WPP), together with Duke University's International Human Rights Clinic (IHRC) released the research report **"Tightening the Purse Strings: What Countering Terrorism Financing Costs Gender Equality and Security"**. This report analyzes how Countering Terrorism Financing (CTF) regulations have adversely impacted women's rights activists and their organizations, circumscribing how, where, and in some cases, even if, women's rights organizations can undertake their core work on mobilizing human rights, gender equality, and advancing the women, peace, and security agenda.

In the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, the international community brought a new focus and urgency to prioritizing countering terrorism financing, including through domestic criminalization, expanded legal powers to sanction proscribed individuals and entities, mandatory counter-terrorism clauses in donor funding and partnership agreements, and new reporting requirements for financial institutions. The latter in turn led banks to develop their own increasingly risk-averse controls.

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In many contexts, civil society became the direct and indirect target of these rules to counter terrorism financing, losing critical access to resources, as well as the ability to fully use banking facilities, because of a regulatory assumption— much refuted, and since revised—that the sector was “particularly vulnerable” to terrorist financing abuse. While by no means alone in bearing the brunt of this legal and regulatory environment, the specific profile of women’s rights organizing and organizations has meant that they experience these rules in a number of adverse - and often gender-specific - ways.

However, the ways in which countering terrorism financing rules have been designed and implemented take little to no account of the specific features of women’s rights organizations, and the complex environments in which they operate. There has, instead, been a tendency to treat civil society organizations and their activities as homogenous and to diagnose problems with— and then devise solutions to— countering terrorism financing regimes that overlook, and may in some cases, deepen adverse impacts.

Our research was born out of a drive to fill this gap in understanding how responses to terrorism and violent extremism may, in practice, be undermining gender equality, and ultimately, security. It shows how women’s rights and their defenders across the globe are frequently squeezed between terrorism and violent extremism on the one hand, and counter-terrorism or preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) on the other. For example, 86.67 percent of the women’s groups surveyed for the research classified their organization’s work—including in areas such as peacebuilding and conflict resolution—as contributing to combatting terrorism and violent extremism. Yet, 90 percent said that counter-terrorism measures are having an adverse impact on work for peace, women’s rights, and gender equality generally. These impacts look as follows:

Firstly, while governments are required to ensure them a safe and enabling environment, in practice women’s rights organizations – which regularly challenge the status quo and power elites by promoting gender equality and raising awareness about human rights violations and abuse of power - frequently find themselves at odds with, and regularly actively targeted by, their own governments, including by those that criminalize such legitimate activities by labeling it as “terrorism.” Surveillance and threats with closure are some of the strategies used to control and curtail women’s activism.

Secondly, in terms of their finances, the majority of women’s groups tend to operate on small and medium-sized budgets, mainly made up of short-term and project based funding. They tend to be highly reliant on foreign funding, and because of the size of their budgets, end up having little financial resilience. As such, they bear the brunt of their government’s foreign funding laws, which restrict their access to foreign funding.

Thirdly, women’s groups are also being impacted by banks’ de-risking behavior. Broadly defined, the latter encompasses the risk management practices by which financial institutions reduce or lower risk exposure. Particularly when there is little civil society expertise within these institutions, women’s organizations - which tend to be smaller in size - can easily become perceived as low-profit, high-risk clients, especially when it concerns groups working in conflict zones, or activist groups that need to operate under the radar because of repressive governments. As a result, women and women’s rights organizations may end up driven out of the formal financial sector. The women activists surveyed for our research described how they faced delays in financial transfers, problems in terms of opening accounts, and in some instances even outright account closures. This in turn has serious repercussions for their safety and their programs, and ultimately, for the human rights of their beneficiaries.

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Fourth, increasingly women's groups encounter a risk-averse donor community, which pulls out of funding their work, especially in conflict areas where terrorist groups are also active; include complex anti-terrorism clauses in their contracts; come up with very demanding application criteria and administrative procedures that exclude or strangle grassroots women's initiatives; as well as show a tendency to favor established and often international organizations. Amongst surveyed women's organizations, this has led 41.67 percent to not apply for much-needed funds, and 16.67 percent to actually refuse offered grants. As a result, the civilian population that women's groups cater for – often vulnerable women and girls - are left without the level of support they need, both in terms of receiving life-saving services, as well as the protection of their rights. Regularly, this happens in areas - such as those in close proximity to, or under terrorist control - where needs are highest and women's rights are most under pressure.

Lastly, all the above-mentioned factors directly affect the safety and security of women activists. For example, 15 percent of survey respondents indicated they had experienced harassment or prosecution under countering terrorism financing measures, while four times that figure—60 percent—expressed concern regarding such harassment or prosecution. Several of the respondents mentioned struggling with high levels of stress and burnout in the organization, as well as finding it difficult to keep staff because of the increasing work load and many insecurities that come with the work.

Nonetheless, women's groups try to keep going, showing creativity in coming up with adaptive measures to face the above-mentioned challenges. For example, where resources and financial access have been cut off, women's rights organizations report various coping mechanisms—the most common of which is cash-carrying—to be able to keep accessing vital resources. Unfortunately, these adaptive strategies themselves contribute to a deadly vicious cycle, by further increasing women activists' safety risks (carrying bags of cash around in conflict zones), as well as by pushing women's activism underground into a “shadow realm”, which makes them more vulnerable to targeting by state and non-state actors wanting to undermine their agency.

Overall, it is not only ironic that women's civil society ends up becoming squeezed between terrorism and violent extremism and responses to them. It is dangerous; as it ends up hitting those parts of civil society that are crucial drivers of change from within, and which make up a significant proportion of the moral compass of our societies.

In times of growing turbulence, societies everywhere need to treasure its forces of inner resilience, which these agents of change represent. However, these groups can only thrive when they can operate in an environment that enables flexibility, risk-taking, and freedoms of association and assembly.

When security measures and risk avoidance policies and practices end up contributing to a stifled progressive civil society sector, this ultimately can end up catering for an environment that is actually conducive to those with bad intentions. It is this kind of risk-taking that requires more of the international community's focus and discussion. For only a holistic and inclusive human-rights based approach to security, which fosters women's agency, will be able to deliver stability, prosperity, and peace - for all.