



## ‘Shrinking Space’: The Impact of Counter-terrorism Measures on the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

By Isabelle Geuskens

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### About Isabelle Geuskens

Isabelle’s journey into peace work started during 1998-1999 during her studies, when she lived in Belfast and conducted research about local communities’ experience of the Troubles, the Good Friday Agreement, and the impact of peace projects run by local community leaders. Upon obtaining her Master of Arts Degree from the University of Maastricht in 2000, she started working on a project-base in the field of women’s studies (University of Utrecht) and peacebuilding. This took her to Srebrenica during 2001, where she worked for the Working Group Netherlands-Srebrenica, during which she was involved in cross-community initiatives. In 2002, she became the Program Manager of WPP at the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR). Under her leadership, WPP started pioneering a program on engaging men for gender-sensitive peacebuilding. Since WPP’s establishment as independent foundation during October 2012, Isabelle serves as the WPP Executive Director.

In an important year for the Women, Peace and Security agenda, women’s civil society organizing is increasingly being affected by counter-terrorism measures.

2015 is a key year for women peace activists around the world. Following the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2122 on October 18, 2013, the Security Council members will convene a high-level review in October 2015 to assess progress at the global, regional and national levels in implementing UNSCR 1325 (2000), renew commitments, and address obstacles and constraints that have emerged in its implementation.

Fifteen years into its implementation, there are still a lot of challenges to be overcome. However, women peacemakers and activists are as resilient as ever. They continue to push the important message behind UNSCR 1325 forward, in environments that can be risky, unsupportive, or outright hostile. However, this resilience is closely tied to the existence of a vibrant civil society space.

It is therefore important to assess new challenges to women’s peace agency, posed by counterterrorism measures (CTM), which are increasingly having an effect on this enabling space. Peacebuilders are often hesitant to discuss their experiences openly, fearing damage to their reputation as well as other repercussions.

To this end, in early 2015 the Women Peacemakers Program, together with the Human Security Collective contacted a selection of partners to explore the particular impacts counter-terrorism measures are having on women’s organizations working for peace, which increasingly are being affected directly and indirectly. The findings are summarized below.

### *The impact of financial counter-terrorism measures*

Post 9/11 counterterrorism measures have impacted on civil society’s operational and political space in several ways. Some counter-terrorism mechanisms, such as the use of terrorist black lists and partner vetting systems are relatively widely known about. A lesser-known measure is the prevention of terrorism financing through the non-profit sector.

*\*<http://sustainablesecurity.org/2015/05/08/shrinking-space-the-impact-of-counter-terrorism-measures-on-the-women-peace-and-security-agenda/>*

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF), a highly influential global consortium established in 1989 by the G7, has developed an anti-terrorism financing recommendation for Non-Profit Organizations (NPO) - Recommendation 8 - in their Anti Money Laundering/Countering Financing of Terrorism standard. This standard assumes that non-profits are vulnerable to abuse for terrorism financing. To date, over 180 countries have endorsed the standard and as such, are subject to a peer evaluation by the FATF every 6 to 7 years. Receiving a low FATF rating immediately influences a country's international financial standing.

In recent years, a number of countries have started to use the FATF standard, and specifically Recommendation 8, as a pretext to clamp down on civil society space. Although countries often deny that it is the case, evidence is growing that upcoming FATF evaluations can have a preemptive chilling effect on civil society space. This is a direct result of governments' desire to show the FATF that they are capable of preventing terrorist financing abuse through their non-profit sectors. In addition, some states are starting to pass more restrictive non-profit laws *after* an FATF evaluation - as if the evaluation itself serves to legitimize the drafting of such laws.

As a result of these mechanisms, a growing number of women activists around the world are experiencing a shrinking civil society space for their peace and human rights activism: they are increasingly facing restrictive NGO legislation, suffocating financial regulations, intimidating surveillance practices and exhaustive reporting requirements.

### Restrictive legislation

Many women peace activists engage in civil society work that is critical and political. They often operate in high-risk settings, where they face repercussions because of the very nature of their activist work, which challenges established notions and bastions of (patriarchal) power. Several respondents reported that their governments are trying to control, limit, or stop critical civil society work through the development and passing of new Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) legislation. This new legislation is impacting on their space to operate, e.g. by putting restrictions on receiving funding support. As one activist from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region shared: *"The Rights and Liberties Committee at the Constitution Drafting Assembly has released their suggestion for the Constitution... namely that local civil society should be banned from receiving any foreign government funds."*

A women's organization based in South Asia observed a difference between the difficulties experienced by various organizations: *"There is enough funding for service delivery organizations and those who follow right wing politicians. However, there is no funding for the rights-based organizations, or for those that work towards alternatives. And women's peace activism in particular faces great challenges."*

### Intimidating surveillance practices

Some respondents reported that their national governments were engaging in nationwide campaigns of invasive NGO inspections, using harassment tactics such as personal intimidation and threatening activists with the closing down of their organizations: *"When I received a grant from one (domestic) Foundation, I was getting calls from the intelligence bureau and had to supply them with three-years of audited statements, a list of Governing Board Members and staff members. [...] They visited my home three times, to ask me questions."*

Some women's groups also faced demanding reporting requirements because of government regulations: *"In some locations, all civil society organizations have to submit a copy of their annual report to the police, armed forces, and intelligence offices of the state."*

## ‘Better safe than sorry’

The FATF standard has had a great impact on the financial service industry, particularly on banks. There is a growing body of evidence that shows that banks’ risk averse behavior - due to fear of sanctions when not abiding by the FATF standard, which may include the withdrawal of their banking license, freezing of assets, hefty fines - has resulted in the withdrawal of bank services to civil society active in conflict areas. As a result of the “better safe than sorry” attitude of the banks, a growing number of civil society organizations are experiencing great difficulties in making or receiving money transfers. Over the years, many donors have become careful in grantmaking - with some donors avoiding partners in high risk, terrorist prone areas, and a number of donors are tightening their own due diligence.

Women’s peace organizations more easily fall prey to these restrictions. This is partly because women’s organizations usually operate on small budgets, which means they often do not have the leverage to negotiate a solution with their banks, which big donor organizations and charities are often still able to do. Several respondents mentioned facing challenges with their banks, ranging from delays in receiving their funds; to banks requesting additional project information before releasing the funds. Some activists reported that certain banks would no longer release foreign funds to their organizations, or had refused to provide their organization with a bank account. One activist made mention of a bank closing a women’s organization’s bank account.

A respondent from the MENA region shared: *“Sometimes we are facing difficulties during the money transfer process, it takes a long time for us to receive the funds, and some correspondent banks reject the amount. Recently a new system has been introduced: there is a limit on the amount we can withdraw on a weekly basis from the bank. This means we cannot pay all our organizational expenses on time, such as staff salary, rent, activity expenses... Everyone is calling us for their money, and we have to promise them that we will pay them next week... Sometimes we are taking loans from other people just to cover our expenses.”*

In addition, several reported that direct access to funding is getting more difficult. This is partly due to donors’ increasingly preferring to channel funds via large organizations capable of producing grant proposals according to their demanding guidelines, as well as able to absorb rigorous reporting and auditing requirements. Increasingly, these complex and time-consuming requirements are clashing with the reality on the ground. Many women’s organizations are operating on very modest budgets with a combination of limited paid staff capacity and/or volunteer efforts, in a demanding environment that is at best challenging and at worst highly insecure and hostile. An organization based in Europe reported significantly increased pressures on human resources regarding donor reporting: staff found themselves working overtime to meet the requirements of this related additional bureaucracy, and on some occasions had to seek external advice.

## Cumulative effect

As such, counter-terrorism measures - whether subtly or bluntly - are having an impact on the civil society space women activists so desperately need to do their critical work for peace and women’s rights, worldwide.

As one respondent, whose organization had been severely impacted, summarized: *“We face an increase in expenditure (because we want to avoid targeting, we now travel in groups, which is more costly); increased surveillance of our movement and programs (officials are asking for reports and bank advices, including that of our personal bank accounts); postponing or cancelling of some of our programs or keeping low profile for some time; mental unrest of our members; impact on the reputation of our organization as our work was projected as “anti-national”, which has affected the outreach of our member organizations. Also, a few partner organizations have left the network fearing repercussions by the government.”*

The cumulative effect of the range of pressures is that the enabling space for women’s civil society work is shrinking and therefore progressive and pioneering work for inclusive development, peace and women’s rights becomes frustrated. The implications for broader security concerns are worrying. When alternative civil society voices and constructive seeds of change are not provided with the soil to take root, threats to the daily security of people and communities are given free reign. As such, opportunities for actors looking to exploit these vulnerabilities increase.

It is important for civil society to come together to exchange experiences as well as document and monitor the impact counterterrorism measures are having on their peace and human rights work, in order to engage in collective advocacy. It is equally important for the Women, Peace and Security community to engage with the different CTM stakeholders and vice versa, to raise awareness about the importance of safeguarding critical civil society space worldwide, so that women’s voices and actions for peace and human rights can continue to change the world for the better.

**Background Note:** In early 2015, the Women Peacemakers Program (WPP), together with the Human Security Collective (HSC) contacted a selection of partners in the field, to gain insight into the multiple ways the CTM agenda is affecting their work for peace and women’s rights. The findings are summarized in WPP’s [Policy Brief: Counterterrorism Measures and their Effects on the Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda](#).



**International Women’s Day for Peace & Disarmament**