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Autorías no Ditellianas: Meier, Larissa Daria; Nah, Alice M.

Autoría Ditelliana: Peña, Alejandro

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Political Activism and the Experience of Adversity

Larissa Daria Meier^{1,2} · Alejandro Peña³ · Alice M. Nah⁴

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Abstract

How do political activists who live and work in high-risk contexts experience adversity? How do they make sense of the diverse institutional obstacles, strategic risks, and situational deprivations surrounding their work and lives? This article introduces the notion of relational adversity to capture how different adversarial factors in the diverse arenas activists inhabit intersect with and co-constitute each other. To validate and develop our framework, we analyze 160 narrative accounts of human rights activists in Colombia, Egypt, Kenya, and Mexico and examine concrete configurations and patterns of adversity found among different types of activists. By considering how structural constraints, institutional deficits, and opponent repression connect with the social location of individual activists, routine practices and personal concerns, and with their bodily and cognitive state, the article advances a relational and experiential treatment of political activism that complements structural and strategic approaches and does better justice to the lived reality of contentious mobilization.

Keywords Political activism · Political sociology · Social movement · Risk · Relational sociology · Repression

✉ Larissa Daria Meier
MEIERL@tcd.ie

¹ Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence, Bielefeld University, Bielefeld, Germany

² Department of Sociology, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

³ Department of Political Science and International Studies, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires, Argentina

⁴ Department of Sociology, University of Durham, Durham, UK

M. is a lawyer providing support to political prisoners in Colombia. Because of his activism, he has “been living in a threatening climate of permanent fear since 1985.” He has received multiple death threats from paramilitary groups. On multiple occasions, M. and his family had to flee the country while back in Colombia his routines and movements are highly restricted. He works and lives under constant protection, moving in armored vehicles and the company of six bodyguards – “It provides me with security, but now I am like a fish in a tank. I am trapped in this world.” And yet, despite all these limitations and dangers, M. appears to be doing well. He has relevant local and international connections, and considers that he is alive thanks to them, appreciating “the urgent calls they make.” Moreover, he expresses confidence, calmness, and motivation about his work: “I do it with affection, and any sacrifice is worth it. I celebrate my professional successes. The effort I put in is worthwhile. (C11)

For almost a decade, L. has volunteered for the campesino reserves in Colombia. Being herself from a peasant family she noticed early on that the right of campesinos to their land was not respected by the state – “That’s why I became a human rights’ defender,” she recalls. However, L. conducts her activism in a territory where paramilitary and guerrilla groups compete for control, and violence and killings are “normal in the village.” She gets emotional as she says that she and her children live in “permanent insecurity” and that she has “been a victim of physical violence from people on all sides.” She is suspicious of the police and feels mistreated by the state. Though she remains active, the trauma, the continuous fear, and the daily deprivations weigh heavily on her. She admits having reached a tipping point, as she “would like to run away, or at least get my children out of here [...]. I don’t want them to have to live on the run like me.” But she is rooted in her area and has caring responsibilities for her aging parents. (C19)

The vignettes above illustrate contrasting ways in which human rights activists in Colombia experience insecurities, deprivations, and threats, and the emotional and personal effects these experiences have on them. Behind them lies an often unseen and fragile balance between the difficult yet routine challenges activists encounter in their work and lives and their overall motivation and ability to cope with them – a balance that has profound implications on their capacity to remain mobilized as it affects their confidence in state institutions, their ability to trust fellow activists, their belief in the potential for social or political change, and fundamentally, their mental and physical wellbeing.

This article sets out to explore the complex ways in which oppositional forces, institutional deficits, and personal vulnerabilities and circumstances compound into adversarial experiences for different human rights activists. What factors configure the adversity these activists encounter in their work and lives? How do supposedly exogenous and objective adversarial factors and circumstances intertwine with personal vulnerabilities, affections, and convictions, and how does this intertwining affect activists’ perceptions of the challenges and adversity they face? Our argument poses that these interrogations can be better served by approaching adversity relationally. Hence, rather than conceiving barriers to mobilization and collective action as the direct outcome of regime characteristics, the intensity of repression, or the lack of organizational resources, we contend that adversity is more productively conceptualized as a process that reflects the manner in which structural and situational deprivations and obstacles are perceived, felt, and decoded – that is, *experienced* – by individuals who are continuously and differentially situated in interacting and overlapping domains. Consequently, this experience of adversity configures and conditions political activism as a social *and* political endeavor.

To address this, our article advances the notion of “relational adversity,” conceiving this as the complex experiential process by which individuals sense and

relate with different occurrences, vulnerabilities, and challenges present in the multiple social fields constituting their social environment and life. We consider that a relational and experiential approach to adversity offers two vantage points to operationalize an “interactionist sociology of activism” and to better understand the situated and often over-determined functioning of deprivations, threats, and repression (Duyvendak and Fillieule 2015, 303; Fu and Simmons 2021). First, it recognizes that adversarial qualities in the external environment are not fixed properties but relations, “potentials for experience” that get actualized when sensed by situated actors acting in concrete contexts (Lembo and Martin 2022; Dépelteau 2015). Second, it underlines that the process by which these external qualities are actualized and lived, and the orientation to action they induce, is always *embodied* and *cultivated* – that is, dependent on socio-situational conditions as well as perceptions, beliefs, and cognitive assessments that are culturally specific as well as subjective (Cerulo 2014). In that sense, our conception of adversity as a relational experience seeks to better understand the “differential sensitization” activists show – in terms of perception, feeling, and judgement – for negative qualities in the world they confront, and to examine whether this differential sensitization induces different kinds of experience, of varying form, intensity, and effects, among different *types* of activists (Levi Martin and Vandebroek 2014, 110).

To empirically validate our proposition, we draw evidence from a large set of in-depth interview data with 160 human rights activists in four countries: Colombia, Egypt, Kenya, and Mexico. In these interviews, activists reflected upon their conceptions of security and insecurity, professional and personal challenges, instances of repression, deprivation, and harm; and upon how they coped with these challenges and dangers, including the physical and emotional toll all this had on them. Notably, while activists highlighted a variety of specific conditions and factors affecting them, they rarely did so in isolation. Rather, adversarial conditions and circumstances emerged as “relational bundles” where environmental opportunities, threats, and strategic calculations combined with personal circumstances and identities, past experiences, practical logics, daily concerns, and attitudinal states. Hence, police corruption was threatening because bribes were expensive, unemployment rife, and they had a family to feed. Threats of “being outed” (for example, for one’s sexual orientation or stance in relation to a culturally sensitive matter) were particularly serious as activists knew this would mean family rejection, the risk of getting fired, and the need to leave town. In contrast, death threats were less disturbing when it was not the first time, activists had well-trusted and responsive contacts at hand, and their children had reached adulthood or lived abroad. These relational configurations made clear to us that the level and type of adversity that activists experienced and perceived did not simply reflect the intensity of repression or how closed political opportunity structures were in these countries. Rather, adversity stood out as a relational assessment, situated, embodied, and lived, where environmental barriers and repressive threats intermeshed with social asymmetries, practical skills, and everyday worries that exceeded contention and the world of activism but that shaped, for better or for worse, the lives and work of activists.

On Structures, Relations, and Experiences

Recognizing that “the correlation with subjective perceptions and structural conditions may not hold true for some cases” (Kurzman 1996, 154), classic structuralist approaches to mobilization, generally based on political opportunity structures (POS) and other political macro attributes associated with “the extent to which the regime suppresses or facilitates collective claims” (McAdam and Tarrow 2019, 21), have over the last decades been complemented by culturalist, micro-foundational, and relational explanations of contentious politics and collective action. These latter perspectives have convincingly highlighted that mobilization as a sociological process is dependent on diverse interpretative, cognitive, and emotional mechanisms, as well as on the multiple “relational patterns that connect individual and organizational actors, as well as non-agentic elements such as events and cultural forms” (Diani and Misce 2015, 307; Goldstone and Useem 2012). While this shift has been extremely productive for overcoming the structuralist biases in social movement studies (Doug McAdam 2013) and confronting “the inadequacies of instrumental rationality as an explanation for strategic choice” (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 28), we consider some of the aspirations of this cultural-relational turn remain truncated.

On the one hand, much of the excitement that the sociology of culture and emotions generated for the analysis of contentious action pivoted on its potential to explain “how structural impediments are interpreted and used for the ends of mobilization” and how these interpretations varied depending on who the involved actors were and what they wanted (Johnston and Klandermans 1995, 22; Meyer and Minkoff 2004) – thus bringing closer micro-analyses of social phenomena with political “macro-sociological and empirical projections” (Bericat 2016, 501). This resulted in a better recognition that most if not all processes central to the process of contentious mobilization, from the activation of grievances, to the perception of threats and opportunities, to the formation and reproduction of shared identities, depended on identitarian and cultural processes as well as on emotional dynamics to acquire causal force (Goodwin et al. 2001; Goodwin and Jasper 2006; Jasper 2018; van Troost et al. 2013). On the other hand, more relational and interactionist approaches sought to put strategy, culture, and contentious action in more bounded and precise contexts, looking to map “the full range of relationships with other actors and groups that affects [social movement] activity” (Goldstone 2004, 356) and the concrete fields or arenas at play in social mobilization, the “micro-level building blocks [...] where weighty strategic engagement occurs” (Jasper 2021, 253). As such, the goal was also to “bridge the gap between what individuals are doing and the structures and logics that result from their efforts,” noting that the capacity actors have to mobilize resources and meanings, redraw social boundaries, and craft new networks and patterns of interaction depended on their position on specific social structures and on their (practical) ability to interpret dominant logics and taken-for-granted routines present in these structures (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 54).

Our understanding of political activism builds on these more positional and relational understandings of POS and macro-structural conditions more generally.

In particular, the recognition that political activism occurs across multiple arenas and fields and that activists' embeddedness in these arenas and fields mediates the efficacy of external opportunities, risks, and resources is fundamental for our own approach, and so is the idea that activists' perceptions, sensations, and motivations are crossed by "feeling-thinking processes" that are situated as much as embodied (Jasper 2014) – that is, they reflect interactive patterns, memories, and cultural schemas that reside in social spaces as much as they are "ingrained in brain and body" (Cerulo et al. 2021, 64).

At the same time, we think it is necessary to "level down" the political and socio-cultural reality of activism in order to more precisely grasp how activism is conducted and lived in practice. In particular, we contend that relational accounts of contentious mobilization and activism have tended to privileged certain domains and "episodes" in detriment of others, often in favor of more institutionalized and stable fields and players (i.e., the state, bureaucracies, corporations, social movement actors) or the more visible moments of the contentious process, generally those involving large groups of people mobilizing in the streets (Peña et al. 2021). Furthermore, these accounts often overlook that activists "are not only strategic actors" (Polletta and Kretschmer 2015, 52) but people who are continuously engaged in a variety of daily activities and routines that may have little to do with contention and "visible" social movement dynamics, inserted into an array of political, normative, and social orders that they do not necessarily question nor seek to change but that affect how they conduct their overall lives and work. Because of this, we consider it is necessary to add nuance to views that tend to over-homogenize the contexts and sites where activism takes place, or that treat all sorts of activists (and forms of activism) as equally exposed to the risks and challenges arising from supposedly common institutional, organizational, and socioeconomic conditions.

Accordingly, we argue for a relational *and* experiential treatment of adversity and activism that acknowledges the systematic, continuous, and seamless character of the social experience – what (Douglas 1970, 42) called "the situational nature of human existence" – and that better engages with the dynamic interactions taking place between contentious-strategic encounters and everyday contexts. To do this, we think it is possible to enrich certain ideas drawn from the previous literatures with insights advanced by political ethnography, an approach that puts "an explicit focus on how actors make sense and experience their worlds" (Fu and Simmons 2021, 1699) and brings to the front what Baiocchi and Connor (2008, 140) call the "lived experience of the political" – the manner in which mundane and normally invisible aspects of life are consequential for politics, and the diverse manners in which the routinary and the everyday encounter with the state and with semi-formal and informal politics. For instance, when examining the world of clientelism Auyero and Benzecry (2017, 191) conclude that that strength and effectiveness of political domination does not rest so much on reciprocity, incentives, or calculative reason but "on shared understandings learned in and through daily interactions between clients and brokers," developed over time and experienced in everyday life in relation to a multitude of spheres and problem-solving concerns. We consider that this "embeddedness in the everyday life" of clientelism (ibid., 181) applies very much to the world of political contention in general and human rights activism in particular,

as participation in collective struggles and social movements is “at least partially determined by the interplay between routines while mobilized and other aspects (past and present) of [activist] lives” (Perez 2018, 239; Masclat 2015). In this same line, we see that the manner in which activists perceive, relate, and react to threats, oppositional challenges, and vulnerabilities reflects contextual characteristics of the political worlds and cultural milieus they inhabit, as well as “the heterogeneous and sometimes even contradictory principles of socialization they internalize” as a result of their insertion in social arenas with role requirements, normative hierarchies, and social (and emotional) logics that may not necessarily align with each other (Filleule 2010, 5).

Of Arenas and Linkages: A Relational Model of Adversity

As indicated, we depart from the premise that a relational understanding of adversity requires consideration of the different arenas configuring the activism space. More concretely, we focus on the principal adversarial arenas that become activated in the process of contentious activism – understanding by arenas those socially constructed sites that endow individuals and groups with differential positions, resources, and skills, and that present them with dynamic configurations of rules and roles that shape dispositions and interactions (Jasper 2015, 14–15).

Our relational framework has two analytical parts. On the one hand, we consider four basic arenas: (1) the institutional arena, (2) the oppositional arena, (3) the organizational arena, and (4) the personal arena. As we explain ahead, we treat these arenas as interlinked in multiple formal and informal ways, and their boundaries to be porous and shifting as these emerge from actors’ interactions and struggles – the reason why Bourdieu considered the problem of boundaries “a very difficult one” that admitted no a priori answer (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 100).¹ While evidently these arenas (even the oppositional one) can be sources of solidarity, support, and resources for mobilization, they can also contribute to adversarial dynamics that negatively affect activists – the focus of this article.

In terms of definitions, we consider that the *institutional arena* involves the more general socio-political environment where activists (and their opponents) operate, including the regime features explored by Tilly and others (e.g. Tilly 2006) but extending this to cover economic structures as well as cultural norms, public opinion, and socio-political cleavages at play in concrete polities. The *oppositional arena*, instead, is an emergent and situated sphere configured by the dynamics of conflict and repression surrounding contentious activism, which arise from the clash of interests and repertoires between individuals and groups promoting and resisting

¹ While we are aware of intricate discussions on the distinction between fields, arenas, and related concepts, in this article we opted to work with the term “arena,” as we see it as conceptually less restrictive, see Jasper (2021).

change.² As will be discussed in the methods section, we simplify interactions in this arena in terms of repressive modalities, ranging from highly coercive to “softer” and indirect formats, approaching these modalities as a proxy for concrete forms of interaction (Earl 2011; Davenport 2005). The *organizational arena* concerns the “work” environment of activists, including formal and informal solidarity networks, organizational structures, and movements where they are inserted, and the broader organizational ecosystem providing support to activism, be this local, national, or transnational (Loveman 1998) – recognizing that this ecosystem can also be a source of competition and insecurity. The final arena is the *personal* one. Here, we include activists’ more personal affective ties and roles connected with “life-spheres” conventionally understood as “beyond work,” for instance, in terms of family, friendship, and close community relations (Passy and Giugni 2000).

The second part of our model follows from an abductive engagement with our empirical data (an engagement explained in the methodology section ahead) and considers how different forms of linkage are configured by contentious action and structure the experience of political activism. These “relational linkages” actualize (potential) adversarial qualities in different arenas and embed them with meaning and with cognitive and emotional substance. As far as the activist experience is situated, cultivated, and embodied, linkages are an analytical construct we devise to unpack what is a continuous phenomenological process. Accordingly, linkages are the integrated outcome of actors’ concrete actions within and across different relational environments, what we refer as their *situational state*, and of their perceptual, emotional, and bodily condition as they act, including embodied knowledges linked with the social location and their biographical trajectory, that is, their *cognitive state* (Ignatow 2007; Lembo and Levi Martin 2022). In this manner, we see linkages not as mere ties among players but as experiential and dynamic configurations that capture how actors decode and sense certain issues across the diverse arenas they operate, integrating ties, dispositions, skills, and past experiences.³ The structured integration of these relational linkages shapes the experience of adversity and, consequently, the path of action individuals select to perform their activist role and the efforts and tasks they engage in to remain mobilized, ultimately shaping engagement and disengagement trajectories – something that for reasons of space we do not examine directly in this article but we plan to do in future work. An experienced activist, therefore, would be expected to possess additional situational and cognitive resources to sense and deal with adversity, shaping the manner they conduct their work and the precautions they take. Figure 1 represents schematically this process.

² By separating the oppositional field, we seek to distinguish those adversarial dynamics that result from inhabiting challenging general contexts from those that arise from being strategically targeted by opponents. This is in line with Earl and Braithwaite (2022)’s layered conception of political repression, as involving a spectrum of control forms, from general ones aimed at whole populations to targeted ones aimed exclusively at “extra-institutional” political actors.

³ As noted in Leschziner and Green (2013, 123), the strategic selection of a path of action is not just a product of arena-induced dispositional practice, but something that combines deliberate decision-making with habitual cognition.

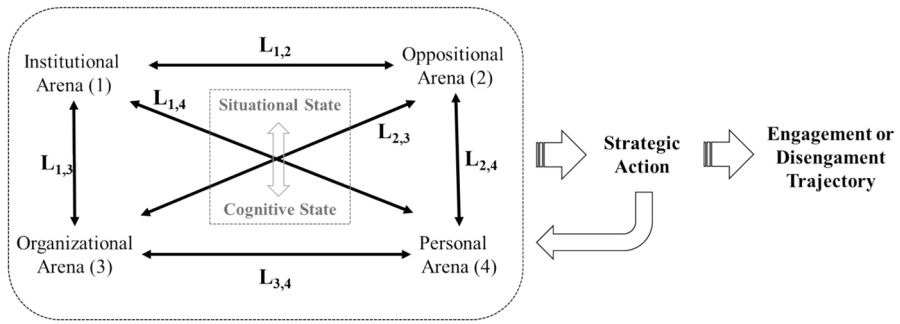


Fig. 1 A Model of Relational Adversity

While field-theoretic approaches tell us that interactions within and across arenas are structured, and clinical studies have long documented that “occupants of lower-status positions report more subjectively experienced distress than do their higher status counterparts” and have differential vulnerabilities (McLeod and Kessler 1990, 162), we expect different relational linkages to reflect differential adversarial combinations, depending on the activist’s situational condition and cognitive state. Hence, the basic idea for the functioning of our model is as follows. As political and human rights activism is aimed at challenging existing institutional, normative, and organizational arrangements in society, it elicits a range of reactions and interactions among players in different arenas that activate adversarial qualities and interests and potential risks and vulnerabilities reflecting the situational circumstances of a given activist. For instance, a threat, such as an anonymous phone call, is more dangerous if activists know they live in a place where the state colludes with criminal actors and where there is widespread impunity and corruption ($L_{1,2}$), where the activist community is weak and under-resourced ($L_{1,3}$), or where they are subject to systematic discrimination because of their identities or beliefs ($L_{1,4}$). At the same time, not only does an individual’s biographical trajectory and emotional state shape how they perceive and deal with vulnerabilities and dangers, amplifying or moderating adversarial dynamics in the other arenas, but activism and contentious dynamics have important psychological and behavior effects that can detrimentally affect personal relations (Fillieule and Neveu 2019; Vestergren, et al. 2017). Therefore, an intimidatory tactic such as the above can be expected to be more threatening if activists have small children that could be harmed ($L_{2,4}$), while institutional and organizational deficiencies are considered more serious against extant socio-economic frailties, for instance, if limited welfare provisions or precarious work conditions already put an activist’s family in a fragile situation ($L_{1,4}$, $L_{3,4}$).

The concrete form the intersection all these $L_{x,y}$ assume, we reiterate, is continuously mediated by social and psychological mechanisms, for instance, the degree of emotional exhaustion or the effectiveness of coping mechanisms as they experience emotional attrition (Peña et al. 2021), and by positional attributes, including status and the social and economic resources individuals have at their disposal to cope with threats and deprivations. As a result of this, we expect that different experiences

of adversity will condition the manner individuals live their activism and the decisions they take to remain mobilized (or not). While in this article we focus on the theme of adversity and examine how activists' adversarial experiences are patterned, we consider our relational framework is relevant to investigate other dimensions of contentious mobilization, such as coping mechanisms and motivational dynamics, the role of solidarity and support structures, and the adoption of risk-management or wellbeing-recovery strategies. We will comment further on these points in the conclusion.

Methodology and Data

Our argument emerges from a long engagement with a large qualitative dataset of in-depth narrative interviews with human right activists at risk (Nah 2020). To select research participants, we relied on a purposive sampling strategy to identify activists who experienced situations of risk, threats, or attacks as part of their work while working in Colombia, Egypt, Kenya, and Mexico. The selection and interviewing, which took place between July 2015 and November 2016, was done by local research teams comprising a man and a woman familiar with the human rights community of each country, and who made special efforts to maximize variation among the activists sampled – in terms of type of activism, employment condition, place of activism, age, level of experience, and the area-issues of their work, covering topics such as civil and political rights, economic, social, and cultural rights, environmental, rural and indigenous rights, women, children, and LGBTIQ+ rights, and post-conflict issues and political crimes.

The notion of relational adversity we propose in this article emerges from an abductive engagement with this data, a continuous back-and-forth movement between induction and deduction to make sense of this unique and rich empirical material and to generate “novel theoretical insights that reframe findings in contrast to existing theories” (Timmermans and Tavory 2012, 174). Accordingly, our approach to the data was first cultivated and later theory-led, based on our knowledge and preferences for certain theories and ideas, and on insights and findings from our prior research. As our ideas and understanding of the data evolved, new doubts, questions, and hypotheses arose, leading us to revisit initial ideas, to engage with additional literature, and to alter initial research design decisions. This iteration resulted in a gradual refinement of our theoretical model and the framework for analysis (Vila-Henninger et al. 2022).

Therefore, our research design is not aimed at providing a causal account of adversity nor to assess a series of hypotheses gauging the causal relevance of a few variables. Instead, we are interested in validating the notion of relational adversity and demonstrating its value to inform the systematic analysis of activists' subjective experiences, perceptions, and assessments of risks and vulnerability, and to offer a more sensitive treatment of the “mutual simultaneous shaping” (Glaser 2007, 129) of structural, organizational, and individual-level factors.

To do this we analyzed and coded 160 interviews with human rights activists in Colombia (46), Egypt (39), Kenya (43), and Mexico (32), involving an equivalent number of men

and women participants (45% vs 52%) and a very small number of gender non-conforming activists (3%), and variation on other descriptive variables (years of experience, type of activism, type of organization, family composition, etc.), as shown in Table 1. The codebook used evolved through several iterations, and included a deductive side, informed by expected analytical categories derived from previous work and insights from diverse literatures dealing with the barriers to action that surround political activism and contentious mobilization, as well as an inductive part that reflected salient issues encountered during iterative readings of the transcripts. A research assistant coded all transcripts with the assistance of the MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software and then the authors conducted a (software-assisted) qualitative content analysis, looking at how macro structural conditions (i.e., impunity, weak state institutions, discrimination, etc.), meso-level phenomena (i.e., activist-opponent interaction, organizational ecosystem, etc.), and micro-level factors (emotional state, family structure, coping strategies) intertwined in different accounts of adversity. Table 5 in the Appendix section provides an overview of the adversarial factors coded in the four arenas.

Relevantly, we also evaluated each interview according to the level of adversity experienced by the activist (high, medium, and low), a more abstract and composite category. This is relevant given that, as previously pointed out, we understand relational adversity as a composite experiential process. Thus, while we accept that certain “objective” conditions and vulnerabilities (i.e., instances and intensity of repression, severity of institutional obstacles, socio-economic location, etc.) are central to the construction of adversity, we understand these exert differential effects on different types of activists depending in their organizational and personal circumstances,

Table 1 General Description of Interviewed Human Rights Activists

	Colombia	Kenya	Egypt	Mexico	Total
Women	23	21	17	23	84 (52%)
Women & Children Rights	2	11	7	10	30
Conflict & Justice Issues	10	1	5	6	22
Civil & Political Rights	3	3	5	1	12
Land & Indigenous Rights	5	1		4	10
LGBTIQ+A+	2	2		2	6
Environmental Rights	1	3			4
Men	20	21	22	9	72 (45%)
Civil & Political Rights	3	8	15	3	29
Land & Indigenous Rights	8	5	3	5	21
Conflict & Justice Issues	5	1	2		8
LGBTIQ+A+	3	1	2	1	7
Women & Children Rights		6			6
Environmental Rights	1				1
Gender Non-Conforming	3	0	1	0	4 (3%)
LGBTIQ+A+	2		1		3
Land & Indigenous Rights	1				1
Total	46	42	40	32	160 (100%)

their previous experiences, and cognitive and emotional situation and wellbeing. This measure of adversity thus provided us with a relevant tool to empirically note these differential effects. To measure adversity, we contemplated four issues: 1) the interviewee's assessment and description of their personal state, 2) the explicit mention of negative emotional and psychological markers (e.g., fear, insecurity, stress, loneliness), 3) mentions of partial demobilization and disengagement strategies (e.g., emigration, internal displacement, moderation of activities), and 4) an integral assessment of each transcript by the authors and the coder. This resulted in a classification of 48 (30%) activists as experiencing high levels of adversity, 67 (42%) medium, and 45 (28%) low (see Tables 6 and 7 in the Appendix).

Human Rights Activism and the Experience of Adversity

For reasons of presentation, we explore the relational functioning of adversity by distinguishing two planes: one focusing on linkages among the typically more strategic, "outer" arenas, the relational space delimited by the $L_{1,2}$ - $L_{1,3}$ - $L_{2,3}$ space in Figure 1, and a second centered on the "inner" personal arena, correspondingly, the $L_{1,4}$ - $L_{2,4}$ - $L_{3,4}$ space, where we highlight the role of more intimate and private factors. Our analysis aims to both demonstrate the interpenetration of different arenas in the experience of adversity and to reveal relevant ways in which this experience (and its intensity) is patterned for different types of activists in different contexts.

The Outer Side of Adversity

It is unsurprising that human rights activism is often met with opposition and repression, either from the actors who directly commit the violations or from groups that feel threatened by the changes to the status quo that activists promote and embody. However, while the vast majority of our interviewees were subject to multiple forms of opposition, when commenting on their experiences they systematically connected them not only with perpetrators and tactics but with broader social and institutional features in their environment. Some of these features were structural characteristics of the domestic context. Thus, in Colombia and Mexico, activists' exposure to repression intermeshed with the presence of powerful criminal and paramilitary networks and the collusion of the state with non-state armed forces; in Egypt, it related to the strong post-revolutionary authoritarian backlash, while, in Kenya, it was frequently associated with issues of poverty and communal conflicts.

However, the way in which this $L_{1,2}$ linkage manifested in activists' narratives exceeded any general regime characteristics. As the proximity analysis in Table 2 reveals, activists discuss repression in light of broader factors in their contexts, such as the lack of institutional safeguards, high levels of violence and crime, and the presence of prejudices and oppositional attitudes in public opinion and civil society.⁴

⁴ A proximity analysis counts the presence of two codes within a certain distance in the narrative (in this case, within +/- three paragraphs) and provides an indication of closeness of two given issues, for subsequent inquiry. The results in table 2 are nonetheless indicative, as the semi-structured character of the interviews potentially skews the relative proximity of different issues and codes.

Table 2 The Institutional-Oppositional Linkage (L1,2)

INSTITUTIONAL ARENA	OPPOSITIONAL ARENA							
	Intimidation	Physical Assaults	Criminaliz.	Disinform.	Surveillance	Resource Deprivation	Kidnap. & Torture	Stigmatiz.
Impunity	54	14	4	12	13	3	6	4
Weak Institutions & Corruption	31	11	6	8		6	4	2
Political Violence	16	11	11		5		6	
Crime	18	4		2	6	4	5	
Group Discrimination	9	9	2			6		2
Social Norms & Culture	12	4	5			3		4
Political Cleavages & Polarization	6	2	7	4	4		2	
Public Opinion	2	2	2			2		4
Ethnic Divisions	6			2		2		
TOTAL	154	57	39	28	28	26	23	16

Accordingly, most activists did not see repression solely as the actions of a violent state or opponents but as part of an overall obstructive context that made them vulnerable: “Institutions don’t resolve anything. Other apparatuses don’t investigate, they are permissive; in fact, they pursue and stigmatize us” stated a Colombian activist (C24), while a Kenyan one declared: “I fear the system in the police, you don’t know who is who. It’s been a lot of threats from all sides [...]” (K38). This bundling of repression and institutional deficits fed into a vicious circle where repressive strategies and impunity foster distrust for the state and feelings of political isolation, and this distrust and isolation make repression more threatening and likely. A women’s rights activists in Mexico summarized this: “The highest risk is knowing that your life can be taken away, and the conditions are ripe for that to happen” (M26). The institutional-oppositional linkage emerged as particularly severe in locations where authoritarian logics of control and repression permeated state institutions – as put by an Egyptian activist “[...] you could be not doing any activism and being a normal person and you still can be in the risk of being randomly arrested in the street for no reason” (E8) – or in contexts where powerful paramilitary or criminal organizations competed with the state for influence, configuring environments of generalized danger beyond activism. A Mexican activist described such an environment in war-like terms:

We are in the midst of a war, but we do not behave as if we are in such a war [...] it is an atypical war; there aren’t two armies, you cannot even say that the whole territory [is at conflict] but there are sections of that territory that are at war [...] there is not an identifiable adversary, you don’t know when [the perpetrator] is the state, when [it] is organized crime [...]. (M4)

Importantly, the manifestation of this linkage was not uniform, as different types of activists focused on different grievances, institutional deficits, and

societal inequalities and, as a result, encountered different repressive configurations. For example, activists working on women & children or LGBTIQ+ rights put more emphasis on social norms and prejudices while those dealing with civil and political rights or conflict and justice issues targeted more “political” aspects (polarization, political violence, weak institutions and corruption). This differential emphasis correlated with the constellation of perpetrators they encountered: while the latter were more frequently targeted by government and security forces, 50% and 35% of LGBTIQ+ and women & children rights activists respectively mentioned community actors as perpetrators (compared to 13% of civil & political rights ones). Similarly, the activists that pointed to corporate perpetrators dominantly worked on environmental, land, and/or indigenous rights issues.

Contrary to the classic expectation in social movement theory, the fragmentation of authority and power did not seem to provide activists with additional political opportunities. Rather, in contexts marked by serious institutional weaknesses and high distrust, activists experienced a more diffuse and complex adversarial environment, as political allegiances and dependencies were often unclear and opposition and repression could emanate from multiple directions – from community actors, criminal groups, and private businesses but also from collective and individual actors that were officially part of the state but acting independently and clandestinely. Furthermore, in this type of context, skilled oppositional actors leveraged institutional and organizational deficiencies as part of their repressive strategies. Thus, as shown in Table 2, it is interesting that the most common tactic of repression in our sample is intimidation (mentioned by 77% of interviewees), a modality that explicitly draws from extant uncertainties and dangers in the context. A Mexican activist illustrated this logic:

A colleague accompanied a women survivor of violence, the companion of this survivor was a *cacique* [local power broker] with links to *narcos* and organized crime, he pursued her ex-partner [...] we received threats [...] by telephone, through rumors ‘someone is saying that your organization is hiding criminals, I recommend you be careful because people in here are bad and can kill’ [...] it is easier when the attacks are institutional [...] the problem is more difficult at the micro level, when you have caciques, entrepreneurs.... (M14)

Similarly, criminalization tactics entangled activists with the judicial and criminal system, so that as put by an Egyptian activist “If the justice system is prosecuting you, there is nowhere to turn to” (E5). In our sample, it became clear how this made these tactics particularly effective to repress poorer activists, who often worked in grassroots organizations and as volunteers (and as we point ahead, were mostly women), and who lacked the money to pay bribes, fines, or bail, or against activists who already faced substantial discrimination in their societies, such as LGBTIQ+ activists.⁵ A Kenyan environment activist recalls her experience after being arrested in a mass protest:

⁵ As explained in the following section, this also structures the $L_{2,4}$ linkage, as poorer activists point to precarity as the principal adversarial stressor surrounding their family wellbeing, while richer ones emphasize more safety considerations.

Table 3 Level of Adversity by Activist Organization (% and Absolute Frequency)

	LOW	MEDIUM	HIGH	Total
Grassroots	20.4 (11)	40.7 (22)	38.9 (21)	100.0 (54)
NGO	28.9 (26)	44.4 (40)	26.7 (24)	100.0 (90)
INGO	55.6 (5)	22.2 (2)	22.2 (2)	100.0 (9)
Journalist	42.9 (3)	42.9 (3)	14.3 (1)	100.0 (7)
Total	28.1 (45)	41.9 (67)	30.0 (48)	100.0 (160)

The NGO category includes important variation, ranging from well-resourced organizations with relevant political and international links, to smaller entities where activists may work voluntarily and part-time

I was taken for fingerprinting. I was terrified when they said I was funding an outlawed group [...]. They said that for that reason they can keep me for as long as they want. [...]. My brother gave in his notebook and my sister had some savings to pay for my release, and then began a long and painful process in court for the next year. (K31)

Indeed, the character of the organizational arena *and* the position individual activists occupy within it, play a fundamental role in amplifying or dampening adversarial experiences, as activist organizations and communities often function as a ‘surrogate’ for the state, providing activists with substitute “public” goods, such as protection, social safety nets, and institutional support (Kagan 2011). Our analysis indicates the presence of diverse patterns according to variation in organizational conditions – such as area of activism (depending on the context, some issues are more contentious and dangerous than others), organizational role (grassroots versus professional), employment condition (volunteers versus paid), and geographical location (urban versus rural) – and the manner these conditions intersect with social asymmetries and vulnerabilities. As shown in Table 3, the intensity of adversity is higher among grassroots activists, 70% of them being women or transgender activists with informal jobs (56%) or working alone (22%), and lower among those activists, women or men, working in formal and larger organizations, such as INGOs.⁶ This can be expected as these type of activists not only tend to have less resources available but also because they may lack the practical knowledge and connections to access formal support schemes or mobilize elite ties in their favor, struggling more to shelter themselves from adversarial linkages with the institutional context and the oppositional arena – with a Colombian activist working in rural settings talking of two classes of activists: “The ones who are able to get cautionary measures, etc. are in the center [in Bogotá], because they can get access to the state. Out here we don’t get the same attention” (C15). On the other hand, those working for formal organizations or with connections to international networks benefit from greater protections in terms of legal advice, money and training, and also in terms of informal

⁶ As expected, adversarial linkages and social vulnerabilities compound, with 100% of grassroots *and* volunteer activists *with* high adversity levels being women or transgender.

contacts with local or foreign elites, a point further discussed below. A professional full-time activist working on housing rights in Kenya underlined how his group's international connections granted him security when dealing with criminalization and imprisonment, as the police was aware that "there were people out there following up on this matter" (K3) – with an international philanthropic organization paying his bail and a foreign diplomat putting pressure on the Minister of Internal Security to guarantee his safety.

In turn, the capacity of repressive actors to infiltrate civil society, a particular problem in Egypt and Colombia, where the state sees civil society communities as harboring dissidents and threats to the regime, directly brings adversarial factors *from* the institutional and oppositional environment *into* the organizational arena, deactivating its compensating function and turning it into a source of adversity rather than of support. This corresponds with observations in the literature, indicating that generalized repression and negative institutional conditions, such as corruption and political polarization, can undermine organizational support by weakening intra- and inter-organizational solidarity and trust, potentially fragmenting whole civil societies (Matthies-Boon 2017). This negative complementarity is present in our data, with 48% of our respondents highlighting public prejudice against the human rights community and 27% pointing to fragmentation, competition, and distrust within civil society as important aggravating factors in their work and lives. Ambiguity of allegiances and normative commitments feeds into distrust, caution, and – in some cases – a sense of paralysis in the broader activist community, as activists felt they could not easily distinguish perpetrators from allies: "From that event, my safety networks increased and my idea of the infiltrator changed [...] I thought that the infiltrator is always a man with a military-style haircut and no, it was a young woman..." (M14).

Moreover, following the color revolutions in post-communist countries in the 2000s and the Arab Spring uprisings in the early 2010s, many authoritarian states passed laws restricting foreign aid to NGOs, seeking to deprive local activist groups from independent resources while turning their international connections into markers for opposition and repression (Christensen and Weinstein 2013). This is clear in Egypt where the revolution brought substantial visibility to human rights organizations, but this proved "a double-edged sword" (E18), as the state and security services used this enhanced visibility to identify and target them with defamatory campaigns and sanctions. This sowed additional distrust between activists and civil society – "now you don't know who is with you and who is against you even in the civil society field" (E16), undermining the capacity of the activist community to cooperate and provide a collective answer to state attacks: "When I wrote my first statement on the crackdown on civil society organization, I sent it to all the NGO's I knew. 90% of them refused to sign it. They were afraid of jeopardizing their own organization when they could easily come next" (E2). When complemented with adverse personal circumstances and the difficulties of everyday life, these challenges facilitate co-optation or energize demobilizing sentiments. An activist working on policy brutality described lingering feelings of "historical betrayal" in the human rights community in Kenya, as "many of the foot-soldiers in the struggle against Moi [Daniel Arap, president of Kenya between 1978 and 2002] were co-opted by

the following regimes because they felt betrayed, they were left in sickness and poverty” (K2).

Logically, solutions to these problems often seek to insulate the organizational ecosystem from institutional authority by way of additional resources and security measures, mainly in the form of national and especially international protection mechanisms (Bennett et al. 2015). However, for many activists in our sample, these mechanisms are either not available or constitute another source of insecurity, given their low trust in the state and security forces (see section ahead). In these cases, activists attempt to deal with the external side of adversity by relying on narrower or more “intimate” social networks, in the form of territorial and communitarian groupings, quite salient among land and indigenous rights activists, the “safe spaces” created by gender rights activists, or more “everyday” affective bonds, such as family and friends. But these ties can also result in negative adversarial complementarities. This takes us to the second relational space.

The Inner Side of Adversity

The centrality of the personal arena makes evident the systemic and multidirectional character of adversity as an experiential process. Our analysis demonstrates that adversarial factors in the institutional, oppositional, and organizational domain “permeate” the activists’ personal sphere and, at the same time, that personal vulnerabilities and negative affective dynamics in their intimate contexts have repercussions on how they perceive the environment and deal with challenges and dangers arising from their work.

The two vignettes at the beginning of the article illustrate this clearly. One activist, a high-profile lawyer litigating political crimes, who accepted that his natural condition was “to live under threat” and “like a fish in a tank” due to constant security measures, expressed conviction about his work and satisfaction with his life: “you have to live happily and calmly, and enjoy yourself; life can’t become a permanent state of terror” (C11). Confident about the security measures he and his family lived under, he expressed a certain optimism about changes in the country, including the peace process, and about debates between the human rights community and the government. This compares very differently to the adversity experienced by the second activist, a *campesina* and land rights woman activist who lived her whole life in direct exposure to conflict, violence, and numerous forms of exclusion. She expressed outright fear about the (then) upcoming peace process:

To tell the truth, I’m afraid. There’s going to be a demobilization of the guerrilla. I don’t feel resentment towards them, but one of the guerrilla negotiators and his family is from my village [...] Who knows what will happen to me in 2016? I’d like to run away, or at least get my children out of here, so that they can have a better future somewhere safer. (C19)

Both activists experienced severe repression and faced common institutional deficiencies and political divisions and conflict in Colombia. But their social location,

biographical experiences, *and* personal circumstances were markedly different. The first, a highly educated man, could count on well-established ties to national and international allies, economic security, high mobility, and a robust family structure relatively shielded from violence and deprivation. The second was a woman with Afro-Colombian and indigenous heritage that experienced domestic abuse, worked under precarious conditions, was burdened by significant family responsibilities, and lived in a poor and violence-ridden neighborhood.

Behind these examples lay one of the most salient findings about the way the personal arena intersects with the other three domains: while human rights activism constitutes a principal dimension of our interviewees' identity and a primary driver of their commitment and resilience, our data demonstrates a continuous effort to maintain a separation between the world of activism and their intimate lives, be this in terms of preventing the intrusion of the former onto the latter, or of trying to keep personal vulnerabilities and difficulties from "spilling out" and complicating external adversarial dynamics. Furthermore, as the personal arena is commonly conceived as the ultimate refuge from the discomfort, harshness, and angers of the outside world, external transgressions into the personal arena are experienced as deeply disturbing and as a major aspect of overall adversity, as they can disrupt personal relations (i.e., family, friends), private spaces (i.e., home, schools), and social practices (i.e., eating out, walking around), often simultaneously. This informs a second major insight: those activists whose personal arena is more exposed and fragile, or who have less resources and connections to protect it, are more affected by relational adversity and its linkage complementarities.

Human rights activists are very much aware of the difficulty of keeping their work and private lives separated, and of the emotional cost involved in having to "choose between protecting their relatives and continuing their work" (Forst 2018, 10), a tough but frequent dilemma for individuals who see their advocacy as a vocation and a duty rather than as a job: "I have chosen this path myself, but my family didn't, so all the time I fear that my family might be harmed," stated an Egyptian activist (E28). For this reason, when major personal-level vulnerabilities get coupled with repressive risks threatening their family's physical or economic welfare and safety, the cognitive and emotional impact can be quite severe, ranging from feelings of guilt and generalized insecurity, to more severe states, such as terror and emotional paralysis.

Moreover, depending on the alignment between their personal values and identities and their activism, some activists were further exposed to tensions and risks associated with dominant norms structuring their communities and family relations, tensions that were often exploited by opponents who often inhabited the same social milieus. In our sample, this was the case for LGBTIQ+ activists, who were particularly vulnerable to stigmatization and public smearing tactics that exposed their intimate life to their relatives, neighbors, and employers. A trans woman Kenyan activist working in Mombasa described her experience fleeing and hiding from a homophobic mob:

I decided to go home to where my parents are, it was bad, a lot of stigma and discrimination from my family. They called me despicable. 'You have

dropped our name to mud, we are ashamed of you, you have dropped our name to mud, you have no shame, God will see you through hell'. It was so hard I wanted to commit suicide. I could not proceed with my work at that time. (K19)

In this regard, while activists certainly find comfort in the support they received from their family or co-workers, several were negatively impacted by the lack of solidarity and emotional support they encountered from those they were expecting it from. In fact, a number of interviewees shared the stress and pain they felt as a result of blaming or rejection by loved ones as a consequence of their activism – with this rejection mentioned as particularly damaging in comparison to that expected from more “obvious” opponents. Depending on the resources available to the activists and the overall political and cultural context, personal acquaintances share their concern for being exposed to stigma, pressuring activists to abandon their activism or take distance from them:

I am trying to think of all the things my mother says, because to me she is a true mirror of our society [...]. They see us as entitled brats, we are never satisfied, we only look at the negative, always angry. [...] We are seen as irreligious, immoral, angry at everything from God to society to the state. We are seen as belonging to Western culture. (E8)

At the same time, our data shows that the salience of impunity, economic deprivation, or crime is accentuated if activism is seen to expose the family to unnecessary or excessive risks, leading to situations of crisis and conflict with partners or family members. A woman Colombian activist provided a dramatic illustration of these concerns, connecting personal factors with external institutional deficits ($L_{1,4}$) and with repressive threats ($L_{2,4}$):

The fear of your family being harmed, that freezes us a lot. Because we don't know where would they [threats] come from and we know the police won't do a thing. On the other side, we know the police may be involved. So we're lost, totally unprotected. I split up from my partner who moved to [another country] following interrogation and imprisonment. My daughter has real emotional difficulties and is having treatment, she is very aggressive and she responds as though she is always on the defensive, as though she or I are about to be attacked. (C15)

While these intersections are complex and difficult to disentangle, we can observe certain patterns connected with how personal factors affect the experience of adversity. For instance, as mentioned previously, there are clear indications that adversity experiences are gendered, with 35% of women activists in our sample classified as high adversity (and 75% of gender non-conforming, but of a very small sample), in comparison with 22% of men activists. The structure of the family, for instance, having children, also matters, and given gender asymmetries in society, the workplace, and the household, we see adversity becoming more pronounced among poorer women activists with children, as shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4 Level of Adversity, Grassroots Activists by Gender (% and Absolute Frequency)

Gender	LOW	MIDDLE	HIGH	Total
Women	10.7 (3)	35.7 (10)	50.0 (14)	100.0 (27)
with children	9.5 (2)	33.3 (7)	57.1 (12)	100.0 (21)
no children	16.7 (1)	50.0 (3)	33.3 (2)	100.0 (6)
Men	10.7 (3)	35.7 (10)	50.0 (14)	100.0 (27)
Non-Conforming		33.3 (1)	66.7 (2)	100.0 (3)
Total	20.8 (11)	39.6 (21)	39.6 (21)	100.0 (53)

* Children data is not available for 4 interviewees

Simultaneously, we can also see that activists with different levels of adversity express different personal stressors and preoccupations. Thus, activists with low and medium levels of adversity made reference to family safety considerations (61%) accompanied with life routine disruptions (44%) as their main concerns. High adversity activists, on the other hand, experienced similar levels of safety concerns but followed by references to high-disruption family crisis (54%) and concerns about precarity and socio-economic wellbeing (51%). When we further zoom into high adversity activists of low socio-economic status, we find that precarity becomes the top personal-arena worry, followed by high-disruption family crisis (83% and 61% respectively), and this accentuates even further if this subset is narrowed to women/transgender activists with children, with 88% mentioning precarity followed by safety considerations (75%).

However, the significant variation we find in our sample when crossing the intensity of adversity with other occupational and socio-demographic variables supports our proposition that there is no simple relationship between social position and adversarial experience as this is mediated by multiple social and political dynamics linking socio-political belongings, biographical histories, and cleavages of social conflict. For instance, our data suggests that certain group belongings among activists seem to align with enhanced adversarial perceptions (and experiences) and with motivations and forms of resistance. This is clear among feminist activists in our sample, who recurrently stressed how patriarchal norms aggravated repressive risks, social pressures, and negative inter-organizational dynamics, as well as for land and indigenous rights activists who frequently connected the repression affecting them with their marginalized (often indigenous) identities and long histories of communitarian struggle. This bundling could partly explain why, as shown in Table 6, 57% of LGBTIQ+ activists interviewed experience high adversity levels and so did 57% of environmental activists. Exploring how these intersections may be structured for other types of activists working and living in locations and contexts is something that deserves further analysis and that we discuss in the final section ahead.

Conclusion

This article has proposed a relational model of adversity aimed at unpacking the complex yet integrated experience of danger, vulnerability, and risk surrounding human rights activism in high-risk environments, and the manner external

socio-political conditions systematically interact with personal level and socio-cognitive factors to shape and structure this experience. While we consider the analysis provided validates the theoretical and analytical relevance of our framework, we reckon it has additional potential to inform important lines of inquiry in the sociology of activism and contentious action.

First, a key avenue for additional investigation concerns the relationship between adversarial linkages and activists' relative social location, and the way segmentations and intersections in terms of class, employment, ethnicity, gender, ability, and others interact to create distinct adversarial experiences. Our analysis has shown that experiences of adversity are patterned, i.e., that individuals who occupy different socio-economic locations, have different personal vulnerabilities, or work on different issues, among other variations, are exposed to and struggle with different types of risks, challenges and dangers. Some of these similarities are rather intuitive, such as when socio-economically disadvantaged activists or activists with children are more sensitive to institutional deficits and repression, while others, such as differences between fields of human rights work, are more nuanced. Regardless of their complexity, further analytical elaboration and empirical investigation into these patterns is key to advance a number of emergent lines of research in the political sociology of conflict, such as variation in threat perceptions, differential responses to repression, and distinct collective security experiences (Crawford and Hutchinson 2016).

Second, approaching adversity relationally carries important implications for how scholars understand individual and collective trajectories of mobilization. The type of adversarial space confronted by activists certainly affects the measures they adopt to cope with insecurity, risk, and emotional and social challenges. A relational treatment of adversity directs attention to the diverse, practical, and often mundane ways through which people coexist with adversity and how they routinely and continuously seek to recreate security for themselves and for others. More comprehensive and grounded investigations of these insecurities and vulnerabilities, and of the security logics and coping practices activists devise, is therefore relevant

to understand the continuity, erosion, and decay of activist engagement, beyond a dyadic understanding of mobilization and demobilization. Moreover, our approach can better capture the situation of a wider array of human rights and political activists, bringing to the fore the situation of that “unseen” majority working informally, voluntarily, and quietly and whose vulnerabilities perhaps more profoundly intertwine with localized identities, livelihoods, and territorial and community attachments, hence informing the work of policymakers and civil society actors seeking to improve the security and protection of human rights defenders.

Lastly, our relational and experiential approach to adversity challenges the predominant understanding of contention as a public affair and the corresponding sidelining of the private dimension of activism. In fact, one of the most salient findings from our empirical analysis is that the capacity individuals possess to avoid damaging complementarities between the external and strategic world *of* activism and internal and affective relationships supposedly *beyond* activism regulates the intensity of the adversity they experience. This insight, as emphasized by feminist scholars, puts into question the often implicit and elitist assumptions enclosed in mainstream conceptions of activism and political mobilization that presume that work and life can, and should, be separated. For many of our interviewees this is clearly not possible, while for others it may not even be desirable. Moreover, our data evidence that individuals in vulnerable social locations are not only more exposed to repression, institutional deficiencies, and patterns of social antagonism, but also find it harder to keep external risks and dangers at bay from intruding into their private lives. Our analysis offers evidence that it is precisely the continuous intrusion of the public domain into the personal sphere and the fluid interaction of contextual, strategic, and socio-affective factors, which grants adversity its holistic character and its demobilizing potential. Making more explicit the implications of this interaction and the conditions that make the separation between the strategic and the personal feasible for a privileged few, constitutes an important step for devising more inclusive and comprehensive approaches that better capture the realities of contention and life of the many.

Appendix

Table 5 Adversarial Factor Codification per Arena (Frequency, Code per Document)

INSTITUTION ARENA	Frequency	%	OPPOSITIONAL ARENA	Frequency	%
Weak Institutions & Corruption	76	48%	Intimidation	123	77%
Impunity	61	38%	Criminalization	61	38%
Political Violence	50	31%	Physical Assault	53	533%
Public Opinion	47	29%	Surveillance	47	29%
Crime	44	28%	Disinformation	33	21%
Social Norms & Culture	33	21%	Stigmatization	19	12%
Group Discrimination & Prejudice	32	20%	Bureaucratization	17	11%
Political Cleavages & Polarization	30	19%	Kidnapping & Torture	16	10%
Ethical Divisions	11	7%	Resource Deprivation	14	9%
Documents with coding	157	98%	Documents with coding	160	100%
Documents without coding	3	2%	Documents without coding	0	0
Documents analyzed	160	100%	Documents analyzed	160	100%
ORGANIZATION ARENA	Frequency	%	PERSONA ARENA	Frequency	%
Public Prejudice against Human Rights Community	76	48%	Family Safety Considerations	61	38%
Limited Political Access & Institutional Support	50	31%	Altered Routines & Work/Life Balance	44	28%
Limited Organisational Resources	47	29%	Economic Precarity	35	2%
Civil Society Fragmentation, Competition & Distrust	43	27%	High Disruption (Relocation, Breakups, etc.)	33	21%
Documents with coding	134	84%	Low Disruption (Tensions, Discussions, etc.)	22	14%
Documents without coding	26	16%	Documents with coding	97	61%
Documents analyzed	160	100%	Documents without coding	63	39%
			Documents analyzed	160	100%

Table 6 Level of Adversity per Type of Activism (% and Absolute Frequency)

	LOW	MEDIUM	HIGH	Total
Environmental Rights	14.3 (1)	28.6 (2)	57.1 (4)	100.0 (7)
LGBTIQA+ Rights	7.1 (1)	35.7 (5)	57.1 (8)	100.0 (14)
Conflict & Transitional Justice	26.7 (8)	33.3 (10)	40.0 (12)	100.0 (30)
Land & Indigenous Rights	28.1 (9)	40.6 (13)	31.3 (10)	100.0 (32)
Women & Children Rights	44.4 (16)	33.3 (12)	22.2 (8)	100.0 (36)
Civil & Political Rights	24.4 (10)	61.0 (25)	14.6 (6)	100.0 (41)
Total	28.1 (45)	41.9 (67)	30.0 (48)	100.0 (160)

Table 7 Level of Adversity per Country (% and Absolute Frequency)

	LOW	MEDIUM	HIGH	Total
Kenya	44.2 (19)	23.3 (10)	32.6 (14)	100.0 (43)
Colombia	15.2 (7)	45.7 (21)	39.1 (18)	100.0 (46)
Mexico	31.3 (10)	50.0 (16)	18.8 (6)	100.0 (32)
Egypt	23.1 (9)	51.3 (20)	25.6 (10)	100.0 (39)
Total	28.1 (45)	41.9 (67)	30.0 (48)	100.0 (160)

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Declarations

Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate and Publish This article analyses data from the research project *Navigating Risk, Managing Security, and Receiving Support: The Experiences of Human Rights Defenders in Colombia, Mexico, Kenya, Egypt, and Indonesia* (<https://securityofdefendersproject.org/>) led by Dr. Alice M. Nah, with ethics approval from the Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology Ethics Committee at the University of York, UK. Participants gave informed consent to participate and for the research findings to be published.

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Larissa Daria Meier is an Assistant Professor in Conflict Sociology at Trinity College Dublin. Her main research areas are political conflict and social change, with a particular focus on political violence, social movements, civil society, and the far right.

Alejandro Milcíades Peña is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Studies at Universidad Torcuato Di Tella in Argentina. His research focuses on the relationship between social mobilisation, conflict, and political order and change, combining approaches from international relations, political sociology, and comparative political economy.

Alice M. Nah is an Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology at Durham University. She conducts research on the protection of human rights defenders at risk and migration and asylum in Asia.