



HANDOUT

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FORMAT:
INDIVIDUAL
EXERCISE,
GROUP
DISCUSSION

Family Session

For women activists, our families mean everything. And when we say family, we mean it in the broadest and best sense. The family we are born into – our parents, siblings, cousins. The family we create – our partners, children, in-laws. And the family that we choose – each other. Our colleagues, our friends – our sisters and brothers in the activist world.

Of course, our family relationships are complicated.

But we need them. We push them away, but we let them in again.

Sometimes we deny them. Sometimes they deny us. For who we are – going against the grain, speaking out at the risk of . . . well, everything. For who we choose to love. How we opt to live.

That denial also can take the form of extraordinary

threats or attacks. Ones that are particularly painful and effective, because they come from the people who are – or once were – closest to our hearts.

Sometimes those threats by family members are subtle – cutting comments, pressure to prioritise domestic responsibilities over work, or just silence and a cold shoulder when you most need reassurance. Other times they are extreme, ranging from complete denial and excommunication to beatings, rape and murder.

Some family members are our rock. They are loving, proud, and often long-suffering. They are a source of strength and solace. They offer unconditional support – in times of crisis, and every day. For many women activists, our family provides an intimate, and priceless, safety network – one that offers compassion, strength and very practical forms of protection.

Many families fall somewhere in between, driving us crazy and then reminding us in an instant of that precious, tenuous connection of the heart. The one that we cannot do without.

And because our families are so precious to us, they are also our Achilles' heel. So often, worries about our family keep us up at night. About how to support our parents as they age. How to give our children enough time and love, food and shelter. How to explain to our

partners that we really do love them but that we just do not have enough time for them right now.

Then there are the worries about how to keep our families safe. Our opponents know that our families are so important, and so vulnerable, and so often they try to get to us through our children, sisters, partners or parents. And for many activists, they are right – a threat against, or an attack on, a family member often is the final straw.

Even if you do not prioritise your own safety, an attack on a loved one frequently is sufficient to shock you into action to protect them.

So, as activists, when we think about our strategies towards our families, we need to ask the following big questions:

- How can we *help them* to stay safe, sane and well?
- How can they *help us* to stay safe and well?
- When family members (including our colleagues and friends) threaten our well-being and safety, how can we *protect ourselves from them*?