



**Brot**  
für die Welt

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YEARS

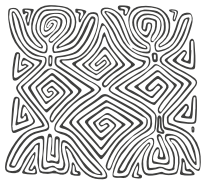
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Civil Peace Service

COPING WITH SOCIOPOLITICAL AND PATRIARCHAL VIOLENCE:  
EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN MEXICO

IF NOT US AS  
WOMEN, WHO?  
IF NOT NOW,  
WHEN?

| ALUNA |  
ACOMPANAMIENTO PSICOSOCIAL

IF NOT US AS  
WOMEN, WHO?  
IF NOT NOW,  
WHEN?



**ALUNA**  
ACOMPANAMIENTO PSICOSOCIAL

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# I. INTRODUCTION

The sociopolitical violence that is currently being experienced in Mexico, legitimized since 2006 by the so-called war on narcotrafficking, has spread throughout the country. It is violence that is characterized by enforced disappearances, the systematic practice of torture, arbitrary detention, extrajudicial killing, massacres, forced displacement of persons, and findings of clandestine graves. There are 40,180 official cases of disappeared persons in the country and 36,708 unidentified deceased persons.<sup>1</sup> Between 2007 and 2016, 2,024 bodies were found in 1,075 graves.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in 2017, Mexico was ranked fourth in the Global Impunity Index.<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 ADN Político (2019). *Al inicio de 2019, México registra a 40,180 personas desaparecidas* [At the beginning of 2019, Mexico registers 40,180 disappeared persons]. February 18, 2019. ADN Político. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Kg4UqA>
  - 2 González Núñez, D. & Chávez Vargas, L.G. (coords.) (2017). *Violencia y Terror. Hallazgo sobre fosas clandestinas en México* [Violence and Terror. Findings on clandestine graves in Mexico]. Mexico: UIA/CMDPDH. Available at: <https://bit.ly/375k8ID>
  - 3 Data from the University of the Americas of Puebla. More information available at: Le Clercq Ortega, J. & Rodríguez Sánchez Lara, G. (coord.) (2018). *La impunidad subnacional en México y sus dimensiones IGI-MEX 2018* [Subnational Impunity in Mexico and Its Dimensions. Global Impunity Index Mexico (IGI-MEX for its Spanish acronym) 2018]. Mexico: UDLAP/CECIJ. Available at: <https://bit.ly/32lXBye>

In 2018, the last year of Peña Nieto's presidency, the highest level of violence in two decades was recorded.<sup>4</sup> According to official figures, 34,202 people were killed; 861 were women who were victims of femicide.<sup>5</sup> These data—even though they respond to an effort to classify crimes—continue to be very far from reflecting the reality of the misogynist violence in the country.

From 2006 to the present, 228 human rights defenders have been killed to put an end to their work.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, according to the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (*IM-Defensoras*), between 2015 and 2016, 862 attacks against women defenders were perpetrated in the country.<sup>7</sup> Women defenders of territory and natural assets have been abused the most.

Sociopolitical violence, upheld within a capitalist and patriarchal system, exacerbates forms of gender violence that are directed in different ways at women, men, and members of the population with gender and sexual preferences that are different than the heteronormativity (LGBTIQ).

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- 4 Ángel, A. (2018). *México atraviesa el año más violento del que haya registro con casi 16 mil asesinatos en 2018* [Mexico goes through the most violent year on record, with nearly 16,000 murders in 2018]. February 8, 2019. Animal Político. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2CJOYuu>
  - 5 Ángel, A. (2018). 2018, *El año más violento con más de 34 mil homicidios; en diciembre aumentaron 9%* [2018, the most violent year with more than 34,000 homicides; by December they increased 9%]. February 8, 2019. Animal Político. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Qh6MmY>
  - 6 Urgent Action for Human Rights Defenders (Acción Urgente para Defensores de Derechos Humanos, A.C., ACUDDEH) (2018). *Defender los derechos humanos en México: El sexenio de la impunidad. Informe junio de 2017 a mayo de 2018* [Defending Human Rights in Mexico: The Six-Year Term of Impunity. Report from June 2017 to May 2018]. Mexico: ACUDDEH. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2kqSAtW>. On the situation of human rights defenders in Mexico, see also: United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Forst, M. (2018). "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders on his mission to Mexico." February, 19 2019, from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Mexico. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2ohCQeE>
  - 7 Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (2017). *Cuerpos, territorios y movimientos en resistencia en Mesoamérica. Informe de agresiones a defensoras 2015-2016* [Bodies, Territories, and Resistance Movements in Mesoamerica. Report on aggressions against women human rights defenders 2015-2016]. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2rCrz6i>. On the situation of women human rights defenders in Mexico, see also: National Network of Women Human Rights Defenders in Mexico (Red Nacional de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos México, RNDDHM) (2017). *Agresiones contra defensoras de derechos humanos en México. Diagnóstico Nacional* [Aggression Against Women Human Rights Defenders in Mexico. National Diagnostic Report]. Mexico City. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2On0KyD>



Furthermore, this violence has been supported by the use of private media to create government propaganda and inspire fear in the population and stigma towards men and women human rights defenders. Critical journalists and independent media suffer attacks, calumnies, murders, and disappearances. According to Reporters Without Borders, Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries in the world for working in this profession.<sup>8</sup> The organization Article 19 has documented the murder of 122 journalists (9 women and 113 men) from 2000 to January 2019, nine of them in the last year of Enrique Peña Nieto's administration.<sup>9</sup>

As this document is being edited, a change in government of great relevance is taking place in Mexico with the departure of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (*PRI*) and the assumption of the presidency by Andrés Manuel López Obrador, of the National Regeneration Movement (*Morena*), whose repercussions can still not be evaluated. There are positive expectations, although some decisions—like the creation of the National Guard (mainly comprised of members of the military who will carry out public security duties) and the planning of megaprojects that have been criticized by civil society organizations—have strewn alert. Within the framework of the accompaniment<sup>10</sup> work that we carry out at Aluna,<sup>11</sup> we have seen how sociopolitical violence impacts both women and men defenders. While the gravity and magnitude of this

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- 8 Reporters Without Borders Spanish Section (2019). *ANNUAL REPORT 2018 | Reporteros Sin Fronteras alerta sobre la expansión generalizada del odio al periodista [Reporters Without Borders Alert on the Widespread Hatred Towards Journalists]*. February 28, 2019. Reporters Without Borders. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2IXTI8Q>
- 9 Article 19 (2019). *Periodistas asesinados en México, en relación con su labor informativa [Journalists Murdered in Mexico in Connection with Their Reporting Work]*. February 28, 2019. Article 19. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2XdB0Za>
- 10 Translator's Note (TN): The term "accompaniment" is used throughout this document to refer to the pedagogical action that Aluna carries out together with political subjects to strengthen their coping mechanisms when facing impacts suffered due to violence. The term "accompanists" is also used in reference to those who propose and facilitate the accompaniment process along with the term "accompanied," which refers to the political subjects during their participation in this process.
- 11 *Aluna Acompañamiento Psicosocial* (Aluna Psychosocial Accompaniment) (Aluna) is a Mexican civil association that was founded in 2015 whose objective is to offer tools to organizations and communities that have been victims of human rights violations so they can cope with the effects of sociopolitical violence and have the conditions that allow them to develop their work. Website: [www.alunapsicosocial.org](http://www.alunapsicosocial.org)



violence affects them all, differentiating elements present themselves that are not always taken into account. Over the last several years, we have had some questions surface that are related to the specific implications of the violence that women defenders experience in Mexico. They are questions that have motivated us to conduct this research by integrating the psychosocial approach, which we developed, and the feminist perspective in their methodological and analytical aspects.

The aim of this research is to make the women defenders' situation visible and to approach the elements that allow for gaining familiarity with their analysis of the violence against them, its causes, its psychosocial impacts, and the coping strategies—both individual and collective—that they develop to transform these impacts. We believe that it can be a mirror in which other women see themselves reflected, identify with each other, and differentiate themselves from each other, but, above all, in which they find references about what it means for a woman to assume a role in human rights defense in Mexico.

We gathered their interpretations of the context, of the impacts of sociopolitical violence, of the repression they experience for being women defenders, of the oppression for being women, and of the ways they cope with this violence. Being a defender means challenging the ideological, economic, political-military, and psychological strategy that has been laid out by the Mexican State and by factual powers—both legal (companies) and illegal (organized crime)—, a strategy through which violence and repression against dissident groups and social movements are exercised and the regulatory framework is employed and modified to legitimize dispossession and legalize attacks against civil society.

Moreover, being a woman defender involves challenging the norms, politics, and cultural stereotypes; overcoming conditions of inequality that entail a lack of social recognition for their work; balancing activism with the burden of domestic and caregiving work; and surviving the discrimination and violence, among other factors, that violate their freedom and inhibit their participation in public life.

Other intersecting aspects like ethnic identity, age, sexual preference, one's family role, and social class, among others, are added to the complexities that both women and men defenders deal with and share to develop their work as well as the patriarchal violence that the women confront and cope with. It is in this setting where women defenders foster their individual and collective coping mechanisms from a place of dignity and to protect their lives and those of their families.



Latin American organizations have generated information on this issue from complementary methodologies and approaches. We recall, among others, the efforts made by IM-Defensoras to document and systematize the attacks on women defenders in several Central American countries and to make them visible.<sup>12</sup> The extensive work that has been done at JASS (Just Associates) Mesoamerica to drive the debate on the challenges of protecting human rights defenders should be mentioned as well.<sup>13</sup> Consortium for Parliamentary Dialogue and Equity Oaxaca has also made a fundamental contribution to the wellbeing and the struggle of women defenders, placing their stakes on self-care and collective care as a political strategy.<sup>14</sup>

This research has also been developed with contributions from the National Network of Women Human Rights Defenders in Mexico (*RNDDHM*, for its *Spanish acronym*),<sup>15</sup> which has been instrumental in enriching the feminist perspective of the research by making the analysis complex and nourishing and complementing the psychosocial perspective.

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- 12 The IM-Defensoras reports are available at: <https://im-defensoras.org/categoria/actions/publications/>
  - 13 Among others, we would like to point out the following publications: López M. & Bradley A. (2017). *Making Change Happen. Rethinking protection, power, and movements. Lessons from women human rights defenders in Mesoamerica*. JASS (Just Associates) Mesoamerica. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2O7NEoA> and Martín Quintana, M. (2016). *El enfoque de género en la protección a defensoras de derechos humanos: las experiencias de México y Honduras [Gender Perspective in the Protection of Women Human Rights Defenders: The experiences of Mexico and Honduras]*. Honduras, Mexico: JASS (Just Associates) / Center for Justice and International Law (CEJIL) / Protection International (PI). Available at: <https://bit.ly/33VkrKR>
  - 14 The publications by Consortium for Parliamentary Dialogue and Equity Oaxaca on self-care are available (in Spanish) at <http://consorciooaxaca.org.mx/proteccion-a-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos/autocuidado/>
  - 15 The National Network of Women Human Rights Defenders in Mexico (*RNDDHM*) came about it 2010 to respond in a coordinated and solidary way to the attacks that women human rights defenders were denouncing. It is promoted by the organizations Consortium for Parliamentary Dialogue and Equity Oaxaca; Women's Network of Ciudad Juárez, and JASS (Just Associates) Mesoamerica and comprised of 172 women human rights defenders and women journalists from 97 different civil society organizations that are located in 21 states and Mexico City. Website: <https://im-defensoras.org/red-nacional-de-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos-en-mexico/>

It is work that has been inspired by Participatory Action Research (PAR), a process of collective critical reflection that gathers the voices, experiences, and analysis of 17 women human rights defenders. They are fellow women defenders from 11 of the country's states that face interaction with sociopolitical and patriarchal violence from the standpoint of different struggles. Their voices are the protagonists of this research; their experiences are the heart.



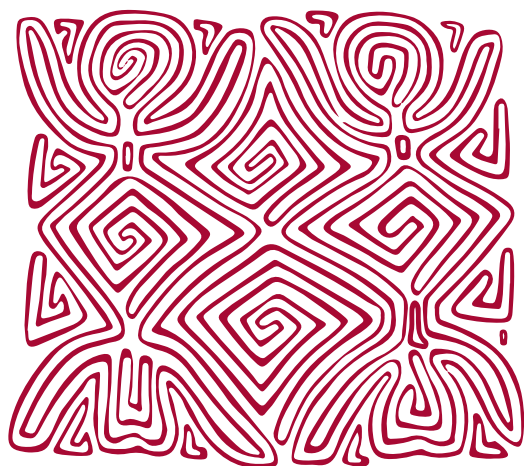


# II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Chapter II.  
**Theoretical  
Framework and  
Methodology**

*This is not merely an exercise in inquiry, rather it has political significance: it ties the research to the praxis and it places the stakes on changing the status quo, moving toward a project that has an emancipatory and transformative effect of society.*

Aluna's greatest challenge in this research has involved positioning the psychosocial approach and feminist perspective in dialogue, considering that our organization's experience is based on the psychosocial approach, which is characterized by an interpretive framework and analysis tools that are upheld by Liberation Social Psychology. Including the feminist perspective in our gaze and practices is a political stake and a challenge, and we still have a long way to go.



## The psychosocial approach: the legacy of Martín-Baró and Aluna's experience

At Aluna, we develop our work in mental health and human rights from a psychosocial approach. We understand the psychosocial approach as a critical perspective from which it is possible to explain the relations between sociopolitical oppression and violence in societies: their causes, their effects, and how they are implemented. This approach came about in Latin America in the 1980s and, since then, it has been used to approach and work on contexts of sociopolitical violence with serious human rights violations, as in cases of accompanying victims and survivors of the civic-military dictatorships in Chile and Argentina and domestic armed conflict in Colombia, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

This focus is upheld by Liberation Social Psychology, a discipline that emerged in the 1980s thanks to the work of Ignacio Martín-Baró, a Spanish psychologist and Jesuit priest who analyzed the psychosocial impacts of the civil war on the people of El Salvador as well as their ways of coping with them. In this search, Baró considered the social psychology of the United States to be inadequate and insufficient for providing an account of the daily reality of people living in conditions of poverty and violence in El Salvador.<sup>16</sup> As a result of his Marxist education and his intimate understanding of Liberation Theology, he developed the theoretical and political stance of Liberation Social Psychology in the service of emancipating people from their conditions of oppression.

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<sup>16</sup> Among the Jesuit priest's criticism of U.S. social psychology are: its adaptive and dominant character and the reductionism of its group focus, which based its conclusions on the perceptions, attitudes, tensions, and conducts of people in the face of banal tasks and in fabricated scenarios that removed them from their historic, political, social, and economic context.

While Martín-Baró left a historic mark that contributes to constructing the psychosocial approach, other authors, like Elizabeth Lira<sup>17</sup> and Carlos Martín Beristain,<sup>18</sup> have also reinforced matters of ‘how to work out’ the repercussions of sociopolitical violence from the human rights and mental health approach. At Aluna, we revisit these references along with others to strengthen our vision of the psychosocial approach as a way of interpreting and understanding the personal, collective, and social damage that is made evident in contexts of sociopolitical violence. It is an understanding that allows us to define objectives and create methods for approaching this damage through psycho-emotional, organizational strengthening, security, and political tools.

It is worth stressing that this understanding is based on a political stance. The psychosocial approach is characterized by not being neutral: it is positioned on the side of the political subjects that fight for social transformation. It is upheld by critical thinking and materialized in a praxis that involves reflecting and acting in their concrete reality, by recognizing their perceptions and

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- 17 A psychologist and family therapist, she has a master’s degree in developmental sciences from *Instituto ILADES*. She has worked as a professional and educator at different institutions and has been recognized nationally and internationally for her work treating victims of political repression during the Chilean military dictatorship. Part of her extensive research has centered on the psychological effects of political threat and human rights violation in relation to historic memory and the recognition of victims of human rights violations, the historic comprehension of political violence, and the Truth Commissions in Chile, and also in the questioning and reflection of reparation policies in Chile. She has been a member of the Political Imprisonment and Torture Commission (2003–2005) and a member of the Presidential Advisory Commission for the Qualification of Disappeared Detainees, Persons Executed for Political Reasons and Victims of Political Imprisonment and Torture (2010–2011).
- 18 A Basque psychiatrist who has worked in comprehensive care for victims of human rights violations and their family members for 25 years. He coordinated the report ‘Guatemala: Never Again’: was part of the Truth Commissions in Peru, Paraguay, and Ecuador, and currently in Colombia. He worked in the Sahara with victims and family members of disappeared persons. He has experience in care for victims and survivors of violence, communities and human rights organizations, and technical studies for psychosocial evaluation and research about reparation. He was part of the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI, for its Spanish acronym) that wrote the *Ayotzinapa Report: research and initial conclusions of the disappearances and homicides of the normalistas from Ayotzinapa*. See the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes) (2017). *Informe Ayotzinapa: Investigación y primeras conclusiones de la desaparición y homicidios de los normalistas de Ayotzinapa* [Ayotzinapa Report: Investigation and first conclusions of the disappearance and homicides of the normalists of Ayotzinapa]. Mexico: GIEI. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2XaYiz7>



knowledge, their vision of the world, their decisions, their resources, their challenges, and their capacity to create projects and alternatives to build toward a future of autonomy and liberty. From this approach, there is an evaluation of if the process is advancing toward exposure and liberation or rather toward concealment and domination.

It is also characterized for being a comprehensive approach that contemplates all the aspects of the experience, including the analysis of the sociopolitical context where the violence originates; of the concrete events that are suffered; of the different ways, manifestations, and levels on which the damage is expressed; and of the victims' own resources for facing it and strengthening themselves. While the psychosocial approach draws from elements of clinical psychology, it is not psychotherapy work, as, in addition to minimizing the impacts, it seeks to put them into context—not to isolate them—, and to strengthen the political analysis of organizational strategies.

Within the psychosocial approach, some key concepts stand out that have guided us in the design and development of this research as well as the analysis and interpretation of the results. Understanding them will allow us to take a critical approach to the issue stated in the introduction.

The underlying concept for our understanding of the context is sociopolitical violence, which—as Aluna's Psychosocial Accompaniment Model defines—is something the State uses, subtly or openly, intending to control the population to impose political-military, economic, or ideological interests.<sup>19</sup> Sociopolitical violence is practiced by state agents through action, omission, or acquiescence and by non-state actors that serve power groups on a structural and economic level. Regardless of which actors execute this violence, the State is the actor that is responsible for putting an end to its upholding and reproduction.

This concept allows us to have a critical understanding of the power relations that present themselves in contexts of violence and, from this understanding, to identify the underlying interests and causes in acts of repression and terror strategies.

This sociopolitical violence creates what Martín Baró named “psychosocial trauma,” a wound that is deeply entrenched in groups and communities and, on a macro level, in the social and

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19 Aluna Psychosocial Accompaniment (Aluna Acompañamiento Psicosocial, A.C.) (2017). *Modelo de acompañamiento psicosocial Aluna*. [Aluna Psychosocial Accompaniment Model] Mexico: Aluna. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2jT8yN4>

institutional framework. This trauma is manifested in impacts,<sup>20</sup> and it is fundamental to approach them from an intersectional analysis, taking the feminist, ethical, political-ideological, spiritual, cultural, and intergenerational perspective into account.<sup>21</sup>

Insofar as the impacts are recognized as normal responses to sociopolitical violence, it will be possible to gain awareness, recognize and activate coping mechanisms, and favor the reconstruction of bonds and the social fabric. In the same way that painful impacts are observed, mechanisms that allow people to face sociopolitical violence are also observed: psychosocial impacts and ways for coping with violence come about simultaneously.

Chapter II.

**Theoretical  
Framework and  
Methodology**

## Braiding the psychosocial approach with the feminist perspective

This work has been inspired by the Participatory Action Research model, considering Aluna's psychosocial approach with contributions from the feminist perspective. Using these three components, we have woven our methodology like a braid that is strengthened by certain similarities that we have found among the components and that allow us to string together each one's visions, proposals, and stakes in an experimental way.

We have already seen what Aluna's psychosocial approach entails. Below, we provide a brief and simple outline of the methodology that the feminist perspective contributes as well as that of the Participatory Action Research model, including certain elements that characterize them which we have emphasized here to provide an account of how we went about braiding them together in an effort to expand our horizons and enrich ourselves with new gazes.



- 20 With this concept, we refer to the collection of tensions, losses, changes, and harm that present themselves in people who are the object of attacks, threats, etc. The psychosocial impacts manifest themselves on different levels (personal, family, organizational, community, and social) and areas (emotions, thoughts, knowledge, actions, symbolism, and even in the body).
- 21 Aluna Psychosocial Accompaniment (Aluna Acompañamiento Psicosocial, A.C.) (2016). *Keys Toward Psychosocial Accompaniment. Main Booklet*. Mexico: Aluna. Available at: <https://bit.ly/344GGXT>



The feminist methodology—in the scientific field—came about as a result of feminist movements and the in-depth questioning of the production of knowledge that had historically been considered the ‘monopoly’ of men. Women’s knowledge was excluded along with that of all identities that were different from the white, adult, heterosexual, bourgeois male who did not have disabilities, and the masculine subject was universalized as a model of humanity. Traditional science had the intention of being objective, neutral, and impartial, as if the cognoscente *subject* and the cognitive *object* were abstractions with universal faculties, without influences from the context, and free of sensations.

Feminist epistemology has questioned and revealed the androcentric hierarchy’s validation and reproduction mechanisms and pointed out the partial, historic, and non-universal nature of knowledge. It has broken the traditional barrier between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge, between the self and the other, to undertake a dialogic and intersubjective path from situated political positions, and it has rescued life experiences and emotive responses as valid in scientific work.<sup>22</sup>

From this epistemology, a research model is developed—qualitative and quantitative, descriptive, critical, and interpretive—that, in general, can be defined as “contextual, experiential, multimethodological, non-replicable, and committed.”<sup>23</sup> The feminist methodology, in all its aspects, poses questions about the substantive problems that women experience, like domination processes, and analyzes the different levels that they present themselves on: individual, family, and social in local, national, and international contexts. It responds to a political position and seeks to strengthen autonomy, deconstruct the stereotypes that limit women’s freedom and self-determination, and transform power relations.

The other thread of our braid is Participatory Action Research, which was also born out of questioning the traditional positivist paradigm and its research and knowledge production methods. Having emerged from the works of Orlando Fals Borda,<sup>24</sup> this method found inspi-

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22 Richardson, L. (November 1993). *Poetics, Dramatics, and Transgressive Validity: The Case of the Skipped Line*. The Sociological Quarterly, 34-4, 695-710. Available at: <https://bit.ly/33MJVTU>

23 Goldsmith, M. (2002). “*Feminismo e investigación social. Nadando en aguas revueltas*” [*Feminism and social research. Swimming in troubled waters*]. In Bartra, Eli (comp.). *Debates en torno a una metodología feminista* [Debates on a Feminist Methodology]. 2nd edition. Mexico: PUEG-UAM. González, 45.

ration in Paulo Freire's popular education<sup>25</sup> and became interconnected with disciplines like community psychology, community development, sociology, political economics, feminist studies, and critical psychology, among others.

The Participatory Action Research model is characterized as being a critical, reflexive, collective, participated, and emancipating process. Through a dialectic perspective, the subjects become protagonists of the research upon questioning and analyzing issues that are of interest to them, thus seeking a critical reflection about the reality and self-criticism surrounding their own practices. Its purpose is not to merely produce knowledge but rather it aims to act in the face of social realities, transforming them from the protagonist role of the actors;<sup>26</sup> it is based on the participation and collaboration of all the parts as a process of learning that is geared toward improving our praxis toward social transformation, which represents a strong and innovative political stake.

Integrating the feminist perspective with the psychosocial approach has not been free of tensions, but there have been more convergences than disagreements, as can be read in the conclusion. The three mentioned approaches have offered us interconnections that are open to dialoguing with each other. We want to highlight some of the most relevant points of agreement for presenting and carrying out this research.

Chapter II.

## Theoretical Framework and Methodology

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- 24 Orlando Fals Borda (Colombia, 1925–2008) was a Colombian researcher and sociologist. In 1959, together with Camilo Torres Restrepo, he founded one of the first Faculties of Sociology of Latin America at the National University of Colombia, at the Bogotá campus, becoming its first dean, a role that he served until 1966. He was one of the first founders and one of the most prominent representatives of Participatory Action Research (PAR), a qualitative research method that aims to not only become familiar with the social needs of a community but also to group together efforts to transform the reality based on social needs.
- 25 Paulo Reglus Neves Freire (Brazil 1921–1997) was an educator and one of the most influential educational theorist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Working mainly among the poor who did not know how to read or write, Freire began to adopt an unorthodox method that can be considered a variation of Liberation Theology. In 1967, he published his first book *Educação como Prática da Liberdade* [Education as a Practice of Freedom]. The book was well-received, and he was offered the position of guest professor at Harvard University in 1969. The previous year, he had written his famous book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which was published in English and Spanish in 1970.
- 26 Moreno Pestaña J. & Espadas Alcázar M (2009). *Diccionario crítico de ciencias sociales. Terminología Científico Social* [Critical social science dictionary. Social Scientific Terminology]. 3rd edition (digital). Madrid: Editorial Plaza y Valdes. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2OdeBT2>



This research aims to be *with, by, and for women*; it aims to be *situated* from the female researchers' psychosocial approach, from being women and defenders, and from our ways of life and the actions we take in modern-day Mexico; it aims to be constructed *collectively from the bottom up*, nourishing itself with the experiences of those who participate in it; it aims to approach the substantive issues that women human rights defenders experience in a context of sociopolitical violence in Mexico by *questioning and analyzing them*.

It aims to be *critical* and to unveil the power structures and relations that they have historically experienced, placed in the here and now and on different scales: personal, family, organizational, community, and social; it aims to be *self-critical* about our practices, contributing to unleashing a *process of raising awareness* with a strong political stake, one of improving our practices, putting what it means to be a woman defender in Mexico on record, and, along with this, contributing—although modestly—to the denunciation of this reality but also to strengthening the work of women defenders and to the recognition of their knowledge.



## How did we conduct this research?

To carry out this project, we created three focus groups designed to be dynamic, participative, and dialectic in which women defenders from different states from throughout the country participated (Chihuahua, Coahuila, the State of Mexico, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Jalisco, Michoacán, Nuevo León, Oaxaca, Puebla, and Tamaulipas). They were held in Mexico City (with six women defender participants), Guadalajara (with five women defender participants), and Chihuahua (with six women defender participants), and each one lasted for a day and a half.

The women defender participants belong to different contexts, come from different careers, work with varied issues, and have shared a wide range of situations that allow them to offer a vast and inclusive view of what being a women defender in Mexico means and involves. Some of the elements and dynamics that intersect the experience of each defender differently and that we document in this research have been summarized in the **Annex.**

Each focus group's first session was centered on interpreting the framework of sociopolitical and patriarchal violence, both structural violence and the violence they suffer directly and indirectly and that impacts them in a more local and specific dimension. Afterward, the participants situated themselves, as women and as women defenders, each one drawing from her story, experiences, the conditions that she faces, and the motivations that mark her path.

On the second day, the coping mechanisms and strategies—both personal and collective (individual, family, organizational, and community)—that they create to face this violence were worked on.

The dialogue was organized around different activities: questions geared toward the group, dialogue among subgroups, the use of individual questionnaires, and creative expression through drawings. The meetings ended with a collective reflection on what they had built, what they would take with them, and what they would like to communicate to other women defenders.

The focus groups were conceived as spaces of shared retreat and trust in which women defenders could disconnect from their daily routines and share moments of reflection, relaxation, and leisure with the other participants. The framework of the research, its objectives, its characteristics, and the working methodology were explained to each group; the criteria for using and

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**Theoretical  
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handling the information as well as the next steps of the process were shared, and agreements were made about confidentiality and authorship.<sup>27</sup>

Once the focus groups were concluded, the systematizing of the information was carried out, there was an initial internal analysis of the results that had been produced, and a document was developed with the main keys for debating it within the setting of an analysis group formed by experts that work in civil society and academia<sup>28</sup> in different areas: context analysis, feminism, work with women defenders, the psychosocial approach, and self-care. For a day and a half, we debated the key ideas that were generated in the focus groups, we went into depth and we contrasted them through our perspectives and experiences, opening ourselves up to new gazes on the processes of women defenders and collectively and constructively enriching the analysis.

Finally, an initial version of this document was developed that was checked by the participants, both those from the focus groups and those from the analysis group, so they would contribute with their comments and observations, which have been incorporated in the text to bring about the final product that we present here.

It is worth highlighting the fundamental role that the National Network of Women Human Rights Defenders in Mexico had in this research. Its contribution to the development of the research proposal, to strengthening the feminist perspective, to the feedback on the methodology for the focus groups and the analysis group, to contacting women defenders who belong to the network and getting their input on the interpretation of the results has been especially relevant.

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27 The same information was revisited during the closing sessions of the focus groups.

28 Alejandra González Marín, feminist psychologist, consultant, certified expert in the psychosocial approach; Ana María Hernández Cárdenas, director of Consortium for Parliamentary Dialogue and Equity Oaxaca, expert in feminism and self-care; Clemencia Correa, director of Aluna and expert in the psychosocial approach—whose participation in this setting was as an additional expert and not as a research facilitator—; Dolores González Saravia, coordinator of positive conflict transformation processes at Services and Advising for Peace (*SERAPAZ*), expert in context analysis; Morna MacLeod, Social Sciences academic, professor, and researcher at *UAEM*, expert in cultural, decolonial, and intersectional studies and frameworks of violence; Orfe Castillo, coordinator in Mexico of JASS (Just Associates) Mesoamerica, feminist expert.

## Some keys for reading

The structure of the publication follows the order in which the issues were approached during the focus groups. The testimonies are presented in italics, maintaining the anonymity of the transcribed expressions at all times, and they are accompanied by the contextualization and interpretation that was done by the women defenders themselves, the analysis group, and the Aluna team.

Lastly, many of the considerations and results that we presented qualitatively reflect the tendencies and data that have been put forth in reports on human rights defenders and, in particular, on women defenders, written by several different organizations that have compiled quantitative data. For Aluna, this coherence with a general framework reinforces the importance of providing a qualitative outlook and analysis in order to go further into depth, to unravel prejudices and stereotypes, to present evidence of nuances and show that, much more than being victims, these women defenders are tireless fighters who, despite the blows, push forward with firmness, passion, and joy. *"How long will the Mexican people stay asleep? How long will we have to wait for there to be justice? It is time for the awakening of the people."*

**How long will the Mexican people stay asleep? How long will we have to wait for there to be justice? It is time for the awakening of the people**







*Drawing by the women defenders who participated in the focus group in Chihuahua.*



# III. BEING A WOMAN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER IN MEXICO

Chapter III.

Being a woman  
human rights  
defender in Mexico

*At the request of the women defenders, we dedicate this section to the memory of Guadalupe Campanur Tapia, Lupita, a woman defender from Cherán (Michoacán) who was the victim of an extrajudicial killing while we were conducting this research, increasing the figures of femicides. Her life and memory provide an undeniable reference.*



As mentioned, the women defenders who were the protagonists of this research have distinctive characteristics, conditions, lives, and opinions. They come from diverse settings, both rural and urban, and from different states with distinctive issues; they are indigenous and of mixed race. They have had to fight to push forward in unfavorable financial conditions and to free themselves of stereotypes that are embedded in their family and social environments. They search for their disappeared. They defend their land, territory, and natural assets in order to have a dignified life. They fight for women's sexual and reproductive rights, for the right to health and for a life free of gender violence; for non-discriminatory treatment; for the release of family members and peers who have been held as prisoners for defending rights; for dignified work; for labor rights. They are young women and elderly women; some have daughters and sons or other family members that they care for. They have varying levels of purchasing power, different levels of study, and very disparate experiences of involvement in activism. Some consider themselves feminists and others do not, or they do not state it specifically.

The focus groups have been a cross-generational, cross-subject, cross-contextual, cross-class, and cross-ethnic dialogue—an interaction of diverse representations in each woman defender, a complex oneness linked by common denominators: being a woman and being a woman defender. Moreover, recognizing each other as antagonistic subjects with similar financial and political interests involved a sense of identification among the women defenders. The shared conclusion of the three focus groups is that their struggles are different and similar at the same time.

The women who have participated in this research became women human rights defenders for different reasons. Some decided to seek justice and truth in response to human rights violations against them or against their loved ones, and, on some occasions, sociopolitical and patriarchal violence have co-existed as part of these violations. Others are women who have studied human rights defense and, because of their education and empathy, have become solid accompanists. And others decided to fight for their communities when facing the threat of losing their territories. They have all walked paths and gone through spaces that have been unknown to them.

*"There's been a struggle since we were little girls, but it's not easy to identify; they're stages in your life. You don't identify it until you position yourself at a specific point or until life puts you there [...]. A time comes when we realize that we're defending the rights of third parties, and not ours anymore."*

*"Rebellion is what comes to mind when I think of myself as a woman defender. My defense and my incongruity. I defend the rights of women, of the land, and my rights [...]. The empowerment of women starts with me, with believing in myself."*

In each participant's personal story, one common characteristic stood out: unconformity in the face of injustices, which takes on a particular direction and form as it grows, but it is always channeled toward the defense of human rights and toward assuming their role as women defenders.

*"It starts to emerge. It's like taking off bandages and starting to identify any type of injustice. You start to bring other people together, even though these women and their struggles are different, you find solidarity in other struggles."*

*"Injustice against other people, against people who don't have a voice, really motivates me, and social inequality motivates me."*

*"Injustice against any human being offends me. It really hurts me."*

*"I noticed that I always went against the flow and that it didn't let me [...]. I used to call myself a promoter, but after the threats, I called myself a human rights defender."*

← **Injustice against any human being offends me. It really hurts me**

While this deep sense of justice and indignation in the face of social inequality motivates them to set out on a path of defending human rights, as we have mentioned, in many cases the struggle begins with incidents and events that they experienced, either directly or indirectly, as girls, as very young women, or as adults—traumatic events such as a rape or the murder or disappearance of a loved one, which are perpetrated in a context where the framework of violence (as we will call it here) is coordinated.

Violence and injustice, experienced first-hand or suffered by third persons, awaken 'anger', 'rage', and 'indignation' in them as well as feelings of 'not being able to take it anymore'. With these words, the women defenders depict their feelings as women who become fighters as they gauge the extent of the injustice, as they assume the will to put an end to it, to keep others from harm. They are women who have been able to channel their pain into transformative energy, into feelings of love and caring:

*"[...] I never perceived myself as a woman defender. I simply fought so the right to health would be respected, so that they wouldn't discriminate against us for being trans people, so they wouldn't stigmatize us. I also started a struggle for sex work to be recognized as work, so that the gender identity of trans people would be recognized."*

**I wasn't going to let them walk all over me anymore, let them abuse other women. Every case of abuse would enrage me and would turn into action.** →

*"I wasn't going to let them walk all over me anymore, let them abuse other women. Every case of abuse would enrage me and would turn into action."*

*"[...] people turn to you, they ask you for support, and it's impossible for you to say no. When you know what that terror, uncertainty, and fear is like, it's impossible not to accompany them."*

*"[...] we already forgave the murderers, but what we want is for this not to happen to other women, that no other person has to go through this again; we don't want this, what we're experiencing, to happen to others. This is why we go with them to the General Attorney's Office, to decipher the paperwork, to tell them that it's not going to be fast, but that they're not alone."*

*"The seeds are my children [alluding to the drawing that she did during the focus group], one disappeared. Because of this, the tree grows sadly. I miss happiness. One day I was a mom and now... now we're not victims anymore, but defenders."*

The negative impacts, resulting from a context of aggression and violations, are transformed into energy of solidarity and commitment that renews humanity; they transcend and turn into positive action for the future.

Caring for others is one of the elements that gives meaning to the path that has been taken—it activates transformative power. Another important element is the collective dimension: some defenders belong to the group whose rights they defend and others are external individuals who accompany. In both cases, a sustained closeness stands out in the empathy toward individuals and collectives that defend and accompany: women, disappeared people and their family members, assembly workers, sex workers, vendors, communities that defend their territories, and others.

Collectivity offers them strength, identity, and meaning, and it validates their choices in life, the paths they have chosen or that have chosen them as women defenders—as they say—despite being arduous and taxing.

**Being in social struggle with the communities, with the people, gives me validation, it validates my life project** →

*"Being in social struggle with the communities, with the people, gives me validation, it validates my life project. It motivates me; it makes me feel alive."*

*"We believe in the organization—it's given us values: caring for the environment, a dignified, healthy, and sustainable life, taking care of our culture, our way of life. That's so nice for us. I love the cooperative, the collective struggle [...]. This way of life is a struggle, it's ours. We always think that a different world is possible."*

*"We have an honest way of living; with my children, all of them are street vendors, we support each other, we do everything as a collective. The little apples are part of the same effort [alluding to the drawing of a tree she made in the focus group], we all have to fight for a better life."*

*"What made me see myself as a woman defender was my rebellion against the isolation that they submit communities to, fighting for the injustice to be recognized. We already had a process. You realize everything that happens—the isolation these communities experience, the attempt to dispossess them of their territory and natural assets."*

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Los sueños  
no se crean  
ni se destruyen

Sólo se  
transforman





Drawing by the women defenders who participated in the focus group in Guadalajara.



# IV. CONTEXTUALIZING THE VIOLENCE

*"We are living through a low-intensity war with an economic undercurrent. They are handing over our financial resources, and they commit serious human rights violations, which are increasingly more frequent. They are making us, the whole population, grow accustomed to the violence so they can normalize what happens. The terror that paramilitary groups, narcotrafficking, and organized crime create has been used to instill terror in the population and create social control, and the State washes its hands."*

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## Framework of violence

The life experiences that the women defenders shared as part of this research allow us to identify three levels of violence. This division is forced, as they are not sharply-defined and autonomous types of violence but rather they interact with each other: sociopolitical violence, repression for being women human rights defenders—part of sociopolitical violence that requires a specific interpretation—, and patriarchal violence.

In chapter II, we provide a definition of sociopolitical violence: a type of violence that appears on a more repressing and intentional level when directed toward human rights defenders and other subjects who are antagonistic to political-military, economic, and ideological interests of the State and factual powers, for investigating and making responsibilities visible, for seeking justice and truth, for denouncing, complaining, and for making demands.

Transversely, patriarchal violence acts against women because they are women, against individuals with non-heteronormative identities or dissident individuals, and against any other expression of gender that subverts the established binary<sup>29</sup> order. It is characterized, among other forms of oppression, by imbalance in power relations, stigmatization of diversity, control over bodies, sexual violence and torture, the confinement of women in private settings, their invisibilization, existing and being present for others at their own cost, and for the social recognition associated with a woman's role in relation to a man: *his* daughter, *his* wife, *his* mother.

These levels of violence are not separate from each other and they cannot be organized into a hierarchy: they are asperities that we somehow categorize in order to name them, and they allow us to explain and analyze the reality that we see and experience. They have the same origin: a patriarchal, heteronormative, capitalist, colonial, neoliberal, and repressing system; and they point in the same direction: the colonization and consolidation of power through the

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29 Gender binarism is a social construct that sets forth the existence of only two sexes, male and female, and two dichotomous genders, masculine and feminine. Bodies, social roles, emotions, and other dimensions of life are categorized and interpreted based on this rigid construction. Binarism is one of the fundamental tools for perpetuating the patriarchy.

appropriation of territories<sup>30</sup> and bodies, which are also understood as territories to be colonized. The lines between them all begin to blur as we go from that which is theoretical and abstract to that which is practical and experienced.

In the analysis group, there was a debate about the connection between sociopolitical violence and patriarchal violence. Some of the feminist participants attribute sociopolitical violence



- 30 We do not only understand territory as a physical space (the land) but also as the cosmovision, culture, and lifestyle that are associated with it. Accordingly, the diverse bodies are linked to the territories. “We see the body as our first territory and we recognize the territory in our bodies: when violence is used against the places that we inhabit, it affects our bodies; when our bodies are affected, there is violence used against the places we inhabit. Fellow women defenders from many parts of Latin America, mostly from the rural and indigenous world, taught us these lessons.” (Critical Views of the Territory from Feminism Collective (Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo) (2017). *Mapeando el cuerpo-territorio. Guía metodológica para mujeres que defienden sus territorios* [Mapping the Body-Territory. Methodological guide for women who defend their territories]. Ecuador: IM-Defensoras/IEETM/CLACSO. Available at: <https://bit.ly/33MMiWS>)





**They don't only  
attack you for your  
struggle in favor of  
human rights, but  
also because, with  
your activism, you  
are subverting the  
patriarchal logic**

to the patriarchy, as the framework that encompasses the different ramifications that impact the lives of women defenders. Others believe that the entire framework of violence cannot be approached from the patriarchy. There is a concern that feminist approaches can exclude the repercussions of violence in the lives of (heteronormative) men from the analysis, but there is also concern that the psychosocial approach's interpretation of the context does not include the feminist perspective, its impacts, and its ways of coping. These tensions or questions are underlying in this research.

The need to develop an analysis of the context that allows for understanding the expression of patriarchal violence was addressed: “[...] it obeys a strategy of social control to maintain power and impose interests. In terms of the women defenders, it is about disqualifying their work, punishing them, discrediting them for having dared to go outside of a constrained role: they don't only attack you for your struggle in favor of human rights, but also because, with your activism, you are subverting the patriarchal logic.”

In this chapter, we will try to assemble the interpretation of violence that the women defenders create through these threads.

## Unraveling the context

Questioning and analyzing the context of Mexico, drawing from the reading material and the experience of each woman defender—indigenous women, an attorney, small-holder farmers, a mother of a special-needs child, a woman with HIV, mothers and daughters of a disappeared persons, a 60-year old, a woman with a bodyguard, the wife of a political prisoner, a street vendor, a sex worker, women of mixed-races, and more—has brought us to a joint canvas on which we will draw in outstanding shades.

The majority of the women defenders share common ways of analyzing despite coming from different local contexts. Each one, in her way and with different nuances, has contributed to defining a frame within the context in which they could all see themselves reflected. The women defenders have a critical view of the phenomena and processes, and they share similar concerns about dispossession strategies and mechanisms of repression and oppression.

*"For me, it is an economic and political matter in which there is no interest in social issues because there is no interest in human well-being. It's related to international economic interests. The creation of whole territories where there are toxic enclosures, wind farms, and mining and energy industry, which are not controlled by the Mexican state but from abroad—that's where the fear comes from. The State creates violence. I don't see a young Zeta gang member, I see a creation of the State. Next, I would speak of Felipe Calderón's strategy and the multiplication of the cartels in the territory, which have gone from five to thirty."*

All the women identified structural violence that acts far and wide throughout the country. Their interpretations specifically coincide in two aspects: the forms and types of violence—their increase, both quantitatively and qualitatively, an increase in cruelty and brutality; the identification of forms of paramilitarism; the increase of power gained by organized crime and its ties of collusion to the State. There are different ways that women defenders are naming violence, which include calling it a low-intensity war, classifying violence as a State policy, and considering Mexico to be a narco-State.<sup>31</sup>

*"We are in a phase of savage capitalism: destruction, dehumanization. Now it's normal for a child to see a person dismembered [...]. Since 2007, things have been getting complicated for the legal and political defense of communities because of Felipe Calderón's declaration [of the "war on narcotrafficking"]:<sup>32</sup> they're located in the 'Golden Triangle of Narcos' in the Sierra [Tarahumara]. Armed groups with ample paramilitary training have begun to appear—the communities call them hired assassins. With the defense of the territory, economic and political interests get disrupted. With the hired assassins, it becomes more complicated because the counterparts in the courts are colluding."*

*"What we're talking about, the creation of fear, the disappearances and murders, people don't want this. Because it didn't arrive with Felipe Calderón. It heightened with Calderón. It*

← **It is an economic and political matter in which there is no interest in social issues because there is no interest in human well-being**

Chapter IV.

**Contextualizing the violence**

- 31 In one of the focus groups, reference was made to the Final Sentence of the Mexico Chapter of the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal (2011–2014) on *Free Trade, Violence, Impunity, and Peoples' Rights* in which the genealogy of the criminal economy and drug trafficking in Mexico is addressed. (2016). Permanent Peoples' Tribunal. (2016). *Ruling on the Mexican State for structural violence caused by free trade. Final hearing on the Mexico Chapter of the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal: Free trade, violence, impunity, and people's rights*. (November 12–15, 2014). Available at: <https://bit.ly/2pZ8Sgx>
- 32 Felipe Calderón's presidency was marked by the beginning of what was called the "war on narcotrafficking," which began almost immediately after he took office and resulted in the country's militarization and a sharp increase of human rights violations in the country.



*came from years ago. The first phase of the regionalization of paramilitarism is the creation of terror. The second is when everything gets uncovered, when it comes out in mass media. While before there were still some states that were more dangerous than others, now it's dangerous everywhere, with all the strategies that we're all living through."*

*"There has always been drug production and trafficking. Always. What the question should be is why is it that now the activities that revolve around drugs are creating violence."*

Even though there are different ways of naming it, all the women coincided in that this structural violence is happening on different levels, through policies that violate human rights, which have systematic and widespread implementation and are perpetuated thanks to a system of corruption and impunity that maintains the *status quo*.

*"When analyzed from a temporal perspective, there are warnings of the widespread growth of attacks on the civil population, drawing from territorial repression and control by organized crime since 2009. The increase in crimes like homicides and drug activity has been made visible [...]."*

The violence complies with a strategy of social control to maintain power and impose economic, political, and military interests, which are centered on instilling terror through threats, criminalization, harassment, arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, torture, killings, femicides, territorial dispossession, and forced displacement, as well as through structural reforms in the service of neoliberal interests.

*"Human rights violations always involve the arbitrary use of power for money or its capacity of extermination [...]. In my town, they take away people in groups. My brother hasn't gone outside for two weeks because he's afraid."*

*"I consider it to be a context that begins on a regional level, where violence is increasing: there are abuses from authorities, illicit acquisition of wealth, a rise in organized crime, murders, rapes, assaults, disappearances. I believe they're forms of intimidation that face a fierce struggle for the defense of the territory, that face reactions to keep extractivist companies from achieving their objectives with the false argument of bringing about development through mineral extraction by installing mini-hydroelectric and petroleum plants."*

This interpretation of the context is not new; it is gathered from different texts and analyses that, over the years, have been documenting the profound human rights crisis that Mexico is experiencing.<sup>33</sup> Yet, what we want to highlight is the vision of the women defenders who pose questions and challenges within the setting of reflection spaces.

The perpetrators of these identified types of violence are mainly the State, organized crime, and national and transnational companies. The women defenders stress an increase in collusion between these actors. The State acts—whether through commission, through its institutions or law enforcement, or by omission—when it does not punish the guilty parties or when it allows violence or acquiescence in complicity with private actors or paramilitary groups.

*“Organized crime disrupts the population [...]. These are the aggressors’ strategies. Regardless of what field your struggle is in, they have parastatal agents to harm you, and also police forces; they can do it simultaneously or along different timelines.”*

*“We realized that the actors from the health sector, the public ministry, and the judicial branch use the same strategies, complicities, and macabre maneuvers in different contexts.”*

- 33 In addition to the reports that have already been cited in this document, it is worth pointing out the documentation and denouncement work carried out by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Mexico, the Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center (*ProDH*), Services and Advising for Peace (*SERAPAZ*), Fundar Center for Analysis and Research, the Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights, and Peace Brigades International–Mexico Project, among others.

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## Contextualizing the violence





*"The Secretariat of Health negotiates with organized crime for payments. The secretariat charges people who practice sex work 200 pesos per week for registration, according to them it's to give you check-ups (you as a person have the right to health, but they charge you) and, in addition, crime groups charge 500 pesos per week as dues for using the territory. Both (the secretariat and the crime groups) manage everything."*

One of the participants shared the impacts that defending water has had on her life and the territory. Coca-Cola's interests in the territory have been identified. *"The actors that attack us are riot police, paramilitary groups, people who are infiltrated [...]"* They point out that they use strategies that go from food provision programs so that people do not protest, to the use of resources to divide people, to direct violence: *"gassing via land or air, slandering our peers, false claims, deaths [...]"*.

**The actors that act in this context are from the dominant class: criminals, police, and members of the military; the neo-caciques; the new military, political, and economic class; they're against the people** →

*"The actors that act in this context are from the dominant class: criminals, police, and members of the military; the neo-caciques;<sup>34</sup> the new military, political, and economic class; they're against the people. The people are the servants of this power. Everything that happens to us has come about simply because we defend ourselves: disappearance, murders, and other types of violence. The government is the servant of this power, a puppet. It props itself on everything to convince the people—on elections, on television, even on the church. It is one sole enemy, and we face it from its different sides."*

One of the debates that came up in the analysis group regarding the women defenders' interpretation of the context was the weight of private actors' responsibility as perpetrators of violence. Some participants felt that a greater emphasis on the role of companies in this context was lacking in the approach:

*"It's not only the State that exercises violence. The power of the transnational corporations is greater than the State's. It's about a framework of violence that benefits the companies."*

Others, without denying the presence of large national and international companies among the perpetrators, believe that the ultimate responsibility continues to be in the hands of the State and that this is where the focus should be placed.

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34 TN: In colonial times, *cacique* was a term used throughout Latin America and Spain to refer to local bosses whose rule was typically of a tyrannical nature. *Neocacique* is used today in reference to local leaders who appeal to similar abuses of power, especially political tactics of clientelism.

*"The State continues to have the central role from the human rights perspective due to action, collusion, or omission. How do the perpetrators operate? It is the State itself that operates, executing in the name of organized crime. There's collusion: the State has a dual function: military and paramilitary. Habitually, according to the interests that are at play, companies, organized crime, and the State act in collusion."*

*"In these timelines, the actor that never disappears, the actor that is always there, is the State: by action or by omission."*

As part of the interpretation of the increase in violence, the Internal Security Law was also addressed, an initiative that was proceeding in the legislative system during the research period and that was ultimately declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation. In each focus group, the women defenders provided evidence of the risks that its approval would have entailed and they expressed their concern for the matter.

For the women defenders, the enforcement of this law would have meant a very likely increase in human rights violations and fierce repression without consequences—with greater impunity, if possible—at the hands of security forces. With this, arbitrary detentions would have also swelled, thus increasing the risk of sexual torture against women.

The existence of a guarantee-based legal framework in Mexico was also addressed, especially with the 2011 reform that grants a constitutional rank to the international treaties that Mexico is part of; it recognizes the universality, interdependence, indivisibility, and progressiveness of human rights and establishes the pro person principle, by which the judicial, legislative, and executive powers should enforce the regulation and its interpretation as is most favorable for the person.

The women defenders are very aware that the lack of a real implementation of this regulatory framework for guaranteeing human rights in Mexico is part of the same strategy of sociopolitical violence. It allows for there to be an external image that does not correspond to the real possibility for people to enjoy the rights they hold, and it contributes to invisibilizing the high levels of impunity of human rights violations in Mexico.

*"The dead-letter of these novel laws for human rights promotion and protection goes against the population in a general way."*

*"We are in a context of informal, undeclared war—femicides, killings, disappearances, sexual violence—while paradoxically facing the advancement of formality in human rights matters—access to rights, equality, protection of defenders. The reality is light-years away."*

← **The actor that never disappears, the actor that is always there, is the State: by action or by omission**

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Sociopolitical violence does not only manifest in forms of bloody repression and commissioning of serious human rights violations, but it is also perpetuated through a justice system that guarantees impunity<sup>35</sup> and exhausts those who try to exercise their legitimate right to justice, truth, and reparation. All these expressions of violence that happen in Mexico take place without consequences for those who execute them, whether they are crimes or serious human rights violations.

*"It has been a struggle in many ways; one, in matters of justice, because it took us five years to reach a sentence and we've received a great deal of abuse from authorities: revictimization, lack of knowledge, having to work with terms that we don't work with, understanding what a femicide means [...] and that justice in this country is designed to make you tired so that you have to be really strong, so that you have to resist and resist."*

*"Corruption, injustice, and impunity are the origin of this whole cocktail of violence."*

Yet, in the Mexican State's strategy of sociopolitical violence, the justice system is not limited to merely maintaining impunity, it also contributes to the criminalization of women and men defenders. Through criminalization, the fiction of justice is upheld—by identifying false responsible and guilty parties—and the social struggle is dismantled. When demanding their rights, people face revictimization that is carried out through strategies that range from media slandering to extrajudicial killings, passing through institutional violence—which can be executed through gender violence even to the extreme of sexual torture—and imprisonment.

*"The victim, the family of the victim, the people's movement, and the youth are criminalized."*

*"They make laws to make us afraid, for example, the Law on Human Trafficking [a law that has been employed to criminalize women for their work defending sexual rights] creates fear in us. Now, simply handing out condoms is a matter of trafficking. We have*

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35 According to data from Mexico's National Statistics and Geography Institute (INEGI) published by *Animal Político*, of the 154,557 murders committed in Mexico between 2010 and 2016, 94.8% remained unpunished. *Animal Político* (2019). *ESCLARECER UN HOMICIDIO EN MÉXICO ES UNA EXCEPCIÓN Y NO LA REGLA: tomaría 124 años resolver los casos impunes. [SOLVING A HOMICIDE IN MEXICO IS THE EXCEPTION, NOT THE RULE: it would take 124 years to solve all the murder cases.]* February 19, 2019. *Animal Político*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/33KVvz5>

*people in prison for doing prevention. By law, working in prevention makes you deserving of accusations of trafficking."*

From the different places they address and narrate it from, the outstanding characteristic that women defenders point out in this context is violence. A type of violence that attacks people and communities and—whether by normalization or by fear, by stigmatization, division, or co-optation—causes a deep rupture of the social fabric, of the ties of solidarity and mutual support.

*"The State targets anything that smells like a community or collective fabric in order to destroy it. They want us to be divided; they want communities to kill each other with paramilitary acts."*

*"This would not be possible if there were a more community-based culture, if the social fabric weren't so damaged. There's a certain tendency that's very Western, very individualistic: you, your family, your studies. We're in a context of the depoliticization of the people. It is important to recover the original peoples' sense of community. It's a new conquest. It's different. We continue to be colonized. Our thinking is colonized."*

In this context, in which the acts of a variety of actors have been pointed out—like the State, organized crime, and companies, with their different implications—at the same time, subjects that try to counteract violence, promote peace and respect, and guarantee life and human rights are identified. The movements, organizations, and human rights defenders must also name themselves as part of this context, as active resistance, and as agents that recover the collective in favor of social transformation.

In the group analysis, the need to situate the role of women defenders was also addressed in this interpretation of the context:

*"When we analyze the context, do we only analyze the adverse characteristics? Where are the strengths, the expressions of strength? What do we have so we can keep moving forward? Should we also characterize this in the context? Some expressions are windows of opportunity. The work of women defenders is also part of the context."*

The other element that gained prominence during the focus groups is the role that the patriarchy performs in the context of sociopolitical violence, an interpretation that has been incorporated, in particular, by the women defenders who consider themselves feminists. Feminism is central to their discourse, and it offers them categories of analysis and tools for interpretation that allow them to add complexity to the interpretation.

← **The State targets anything that smells like a community or collective fabric in order to destroy it**

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They emphasize the violence practiced against women's bodies in a context marked by dispossession and brutality, in the type of violence that is being practiced, and in the meaning that aggressors confer in this violence. The interpretation of women's bodies as territory stands out among the different explanations. Control of the body and territory as a project of expansion and conquest of the predatory neoliberal system was specified.

*"The dispute for territory passes through the control of women's bodies. As women, we are repositories of memory and reconstructors of the social fabric. A type of territorial dispossession passes through women. This is why the struggle is now happening in our bodies."*

This patriarchal violence aims to attack women's strength as holders of memory and weavers of community ties and, with this, the continuity of the historical, community, social, and territorial unity. Another complementary interpretation remits to a context of war in which the body of a woman was a trophy, the plunder of war, in a concept of expansion and conquest that was more political than territorial.

In the analysis group, the concern for the growing role of evangelical churches that take on a battle against feminism was also shared, which has been named 'gender ideology.' Its power has grown and it has had an enormous influence on the political processes of countries like Costa Rica, Colombia, and Brazil, among others.

There is also a concern in Mexico about the pre-election pact between Andrés Manuel López Obrador's party (Morena) and the Social Encounter Party, comprised of evangelicals of different dominations who defend the 'family institution,' opposing women's right to decide on matters related to their bodies as well as marriage between same-sex couples.

*"The church—the most orthodox, conservative, reactionary, and fundamentalist tendencies—have demonized women's sexual and reproductive rights through the use of guilt."*

This orthodox tendency, which manipulates and censures debates on sexual rights and reproductive rights, has gained strength before progressive groups from the Catholic church that carry out pro-human rights work in connection to social movements in Mexico.

All the elements that we have tackled up until this point define a very hostile context in which violence is practiced sometimes subtly, but in most cases with brutality. The perpetrators—even when they are numerous—act according to the same logic, which remits to terror as a political strategy to create fear and paralyze the population. A strategy to disincentivize resistance and to

gain power in the dispossession of resources and territories, which are understood as physical spaces, land, bodies, and labor, but also as social and cultural spaces.

*“When the world starts to realize that Mexico does exploit, when it starts to question the country, Mexico doesn’t know how to react and it hides; it minimizes the real situation that is being experienced. The entire context that politics is creating in this environment of violence is with the aim of controlling. We can speak of an overwhelming majority. It depends on the geographic regions; there are different ways of combatting, of attacking, but there’s a sweeping instilment of terror in the population to submit, regardless of whether they are indigenous peoples or an urban population. How does politics instill terror? One way is narcotrafficking, another is gender violence.”*

← **There are different ways of combatting, of attacking, but there’s a sweeping instilment of terror in the population to submit**

## Patriarchal violence

Within the context that is being shaped, women face additional forms of violence specifically for the simple fact that they are women. Here, we are getting into the second level of the framework of violence in a more concrete way, separating it, not because it is particular and disassociated, but to provide evidence of it through the words and experiences of women defenders and return it to structural violence. New actors come into play here, in addition to those mentioned in the framework of sociopolitical violence, such as partners, family, community, or even fellow members of the struggle.

*“Among many situations, I associate all of this with a situation of social disadvantage for gender-based reasons [...], it’s not a concrete event that causes harm, but rather a structural situation that causes individualized, daily harm.”*

Violence against non-heteronormative women is also increasing. The group’s transgender participant experienced this because of her identity—*“In 2005, in Tamaulipas, they detained you just for wearing makeup”*—for being a sex worker, for having HIV, and also for starting to defend the rights of other women that she works with.

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**It was violence  
disguised as  
protection →**

Most of the women defenders suffered gender violence in their childhood and adolescence—made evident during the focus groups—as a result of this gender discrimination and before becoming defenders.

The women defenders who come from rural contexts, where there are conditions of poverty, have suffered anywhere from subtler forms of discrimination to sexual violence, sometimes from a very early age. The perpetrators of this violence are mainly from their families, but they are also *caciques*<sup>36</sup> and employers. What is found at play in this gender violence is the abusive exercising of power.

The women defenders who come from an urban context or families with better financial conditions experience other situations of gender violence, which are different from those mentioned above, but they have also shared abusive situations. They have been expressed as demands to fulfill the traditional mandate of ‘marrying the first boyfriend’ they have, hampering or not facilitating their access to education, being treated differently than their brothers and characterized by restrictions and responsibilities that were only imposed on them as girls or women.

*“I remember that my dad’s family talked down to my mom. They told her, ‘Why do you want the girls to keep studying if they’re just going to get married? Why don’t they just get a job already.’ Fortunately, my sister didn’t pay attention to them. She faced all the criticism. Studying and working was the rule.”*

*“I had a very privileged situation, far away from violence. I was very protected by my family for being a woman, but there was also a lot that I wasn’t allowed to do, like not being able to go out alone at night. I felt the differences in how my brother and I were treated; that’s why I fought: it was violence disguised as protection.”*

*“We were a traditional and conservative family. It wasn’t considered correct for us to go out. My dad would say: ‘you can’t have boyfriends until it’s the one you’re going to marry.’ So we all married our first boyfriend. And they also brought us up with many values—union, respect.*

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36 TN: In colonial times, *cacique* was a term used throughout Latin America and Spain to refer to local bosses whose rule was typically of a tyrannical nature. The term *neocacique* (or sometimes still simply *cacique*) is used today in reference to local leaders who appeal to similar abuses of power, especially political tactics of clientelism.

*But there was a type of violence that I hadn't realized until now, which was very normalized, of raising us with beatings. They made us normalize the beatings, relate them to love."*

The women defenders, those who belong to less chauvinistic families as well as those who were educated in more patriarchal environments, grew up with first-hand experiences of the repercussions of this misogynistic system. Women live out daily attacks of different natures: some so introjected in society that they are deeply normalized and others that tear at them until death.

*"We live in a misogynistic system, in which, as women, we're like merchandise. Poverty affects everyone, it doesn't recognize gender, but violence presents itself differently: trafficking, harassment, targeted sexual harassment. Perhaps we have different lenses for being women defenders, we see more."*

*"My collective wants justice, dignity for women, labor rights with a gender perspective. We wanted to do something about the situation of femicides in Ciudad Juárez, but we didn't know what. Why is this happening? What's its root cause? Why is it always the double shifts, the harassment, the slandering, the attacks against women? We're not doing anything bad. We just want to live a better life, like what it says in the constitution. What enrages me most is that that violence is still used against us every day. This really makes me angry."*

*"The way of seeing others changes: others don't matter anymore. Women's lives don't matter. This hate, this violence toward women, children, and youth isn't an aim, it's a means for something else, for fear. It's a way of creating terror. It's not just sexual violence, it's how violence presents itself, the way of killing. In some cases, it seems like they enjoy it, not only the hired assassins but also the State."*

The analysis group alluded to the role that impunity plays in how patriarchal violence is perpetuated in the country.

*"For the past three years, the National Observatory on Violence has been indicating how the way women are killed has changed—there's been an increase in brutality. In Oaxaca, we document all the murders of women. Over the past three years, there have been more murders with firearms. One of every two murdered women has died by firearm. Having arms is prohibited. Who distributes them? Before being murdered, 80% have had signs of torture or rape. A number of them were dismembered. This is the way the narco-State expresses itself in the places where it has the most presence. How do we deal with this issue?"*



**The State allows the use of arms, the dismemberment. It is utterly without consequences. We are seeing it materialize: whatever they do with our bodies, whatever they feel like doing, doesn't have consequences**

→ *"The State allows the use of arms, the dismemberment. It is utterly without consequences. We are seeing it materialize: whatever they do with our bodies, whatever they feel like doing, doesn't have consequences."*

As one of the women defenders also shared in the focus groups: *"In Michoacán, violence against women has intensified horribly. The municipality where I live is the dump for girls' bodies. There's a lot of sexual aggression against underage girls, lots of safe houses. I can't stand this hate toward women."*

The patriarchy also impacts how sociopolitical violence is practiced. Although sociopolitical violence is geared toward women and men defenders, it is expressed differently when perpetrated against women: power is exercised through the control of bodies, and it is characterized by manifesting on the sexual level as a form of dominance and supremacy. We are witnessing a sexualization of violence that seeks to control, degrade, and humiliate whoever suffers it. This aspect manifests in many forms. In the focus groups, women's vulnerability while suffering sexual torture as part of arbitrary detention and the control over their bodies that they suffer for prison visits were also discussed.

*"On May 3, they detained me arbitrarily, keeping me in solitary confinement. I thought they were going to disappear me. Inside the facilities, you realize that the way they treat the men is different than the way they treat women [...]. They undressed me. They looked me over. They took off all my clothes. They made me do squats naked. It's a shock; it's a horrible thing. You don't know how you're going to react [...]. It's like they criminalize you within the institution for the fact that you're a woman, right? Being a woman has other overtones. When the police get hold of you, they're not cruel like they are with the men. With women, it's more sexual, because they know that's where they're going to hurt you. Because I felt very degraded. I couldn't talk about the subject."*

*"In my case, at first, they didn't let me go in [the penitentiary]. Then it was undressing me: 'Take off your clothes. Do squats.' They were looking over every part of my body to confirm that I wasn't carrying drugs. That was the justification."*

The particular conditions of each woman defender also revealed elements of vulnerability that intersect in the context. Living in a rural environment, belonging to an indigenous community, and having access to financial resources (more or fewer) are elements that influence when gaining access to the support and mechanisms of justice. Cases of violence against indigenous women in rural contexts do not tend to have the same repercussions, attention, or support as those that other women defenders suffer. In an urban context, there are more contacts due to a greater presence of human rights organizations that can accompany processes; the resonan-

ce and repercussions of violence tend to be greater when the victim or survivor has a higher socioeconomic condition, especially if her profile is socially recognized.

Most of the women defenders' interpretations of these elements intersect with patriarchal violence:

*"There are women, like us, who have other privileges, and we don't experience the same violence. Women from indigenous communities, poor women, lesbians, laborers, small-holder farmers, women without an academic education—they experience more violence and they experience it differently. They are women who challenge the rules, they challenge the State; they're transgressive women. They transgress what supposedly ought to be the ideal for women in society. That's why they're the enemy."*

## Attacks and risks for being women defenders

The risks that human rights defense work in Mexico entails are added to the context's sociopolitical and patriarchal violence. There is a malign combination of levels of violence that intensify when women perform this labor.

The following are the types of attacks that the women defenders have made known in meeting spaces:<sup>37</sup> most of them suffer from false accusations, judicial persecution through orders of apprehension and fabrication of false crimes—towards them, family members, or peers—, slandering, discrediting, smear campaigns surrounding their intimate life and criminalization; this is followed by death threats against them or their daughters and sons, many by means of intimidating calls; untargeted and targeted harassment; forced displacement; the murder of female peers or family members; raids of homes or offices; and physical attacks. To a lesser

← **There are women who experience more violence and they experience it differently. They are women who challenge the rules, they challenge the State; they're transgressive women**

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37 An in-depth inquiry on this aspect has not been carried out within the framework of this research, which is why the gathered description does not necessarily reflect the real quantity and quality of the attacks suffered by the women defenders.



degree, there was mention of the violation of privacy, telephone espionage, murder and disappearance attempts, their imprisonment or the imprisonment of peers, political persecution, and sexual torture.

The characterization of the actors is a very relevant element when addressing the risks that human rights defense work subsumes: collusion between different actors makes it very difficult to identify whom they are dealing with, what the reach of their aggressive power is, what the risks are, and what actions to take to minimize them.

In a context in which attacks against human rights defenders are continuously growing and are executed in different ways, adopting security measures is a central strategy for many of them. They are necessary measures, but, as many have shared with us, they often put constraints on having a pleasurable life. They are measures geared toward not only preventing physical attacks—not going out at night, not going to predictable meeting places, going with someone—but also inhibiting public appearances and forms of criminalization—not drinking alcohol or limiting consumption, for example. The women defenders are aware that in their case the risk increases or becomes more complex because the attempts to slander them may be associated with stereotypes and attacks characterized by gender discrimination. If all defenders have to deal with the social burden tied to their image, for women, a kind of ‘moral’ burden is added that obliges them to take preventative measures surrounding the way they dress, their attitude with men, how they raise their children, and their affective-sexual relationships.

*“Being careful about our love lives, not opening the door so they can use excuses of a ‘crime of passion’ to murder us. Preparing ourselves, not allowing our emotions to direct our movements.”*

*“As a safety measure, we don’t drink alcohol and we don’t put ourselves at risk at night either, because any kind of situation can happen. You open the door to the State itself, for them to say ‘the thing is that she was walking alone on the street at night.’”*

The reference of women as subjects who are responsible for the home and caregiving is often used to attack women defenders. In the social perception, caring for children is still primarily a job for women. Women defenders continue to perform this work and their supposed absence from the family setting is very negatively perceived, as they are accused of being ‘bad mothers,’ and this is a reoccurring argument that is used against them to discredit them.

It is worth stressing that these attacks do not only come from the State, but that there are social structures, both in the family and in the social circle as well as within the movements, that va-

validate them and reinforce them, and the closer the person who endorses them is, the stronger the sequelae. For women defenders, the awareness of these risks involves self-limitation when enjoying moments of fun as well as closing themselves up in their private lives.

*"A time comes when you're just at home watching movies. You don't have leisure time."*

*"I don't trust people so openly and I don't go out late at night. I learned to change up my route, to not take the same street. My husband stays alert when I go out. The mind feels the shadows behind you and it's not free."*

Moreover, being a woman human rights defender within a misogynistic context entails other challenges marked by discrimination and the lack of recognition. In this vein, we want to stress some of the elements that were shared during the focus groups about relationships between women and men in organizational or collective settings or surrounding social struggles.

In the case of women defenders who fight from women's organizations—for sexual rights, reproductive rights, or a life free of violence—the relationship with men presents itself more with actors who are antagonistic toward the values that they promote rather than with those who are allies. The women defenders who work in this setting highlighted the prevalence of verbal attacks using labels like 'murderers,' 'terrorists,' or 'enemies of the family.'

The women defenders who fight from organizations with both women and men members—land and territory, labor rights, and enforced disappearance—coincide in stressing, on the one hand, the importance of fighting shoulder to shoulder with men and, on the other hand, the difficulty of doing so with true equality. They speak of how male members fail to recognize women's leadership, lack trust toward their leadership—questioning their decisions—, and have difficulty accepting that women hold positions of power that have always been filled by men.

*"The same man who fights with us against dispossession doesn't want to give us decision-making power, because he says that we don't think right or because we couldn't go to university. [...] Within the social movement, this is very prominent: we are on even ground in the demonstration, but in the dialogue with the State, there have been times when my male peers have silenced me. The men will tell us what actions to take, even though one of our women has a better vision. When the male members were imprisoned, we women had to take action and make decisions. But if we made mistakes, we were judged twice. If I had an idea, they would tell me: we have to ask a man to see if he agrees. A woman doesn't have to check the same idea when it's said by a man. On the other hand, caring for children is always a constant. We live with a dual burden. It's a context that is twice as violent."*

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← **The same man  
who fights with us  
against dispossession  
doesn't want to give  
us decision-making  
power**



*"I've suffered social attacks from my peers who attack my professional serenity, my professional ability, my credibility, or my technical competence because I take feminist and human rights approaches to my work."*

Patriarchal paradigms continue to be reproduced within human rights defense organizations, movements, and collectives. An example is the concept of strength, which is understood and expressed as being thick-skinned, not crying, not showing emotions. Accordingly, the patriarchal stereotype of associating crying and emotionality with weakness is the vector, which is often invisible and that conditions the expression of one's emotions. The patriarchal paradigm understands the expression of crying as a symptom of weakness and the collective imaginary of the ever-strong leader is promoted within it. Some women defenders have expressed that they prefer to swallow their emotions instead of crying, to not show weakness in front of those whom they represent and accompany.

Some of the women have inhibited their reaction of crying to such an extent that they are afraid of opening themselves up to it and overflowing. It is in inhibition that imposes itself in both the setting of the struggle—showing that they are strong to be leaders—and in the family setting—to not cause pity and avoid their families' suffering.

*"They're emotions that we have inside us and that we can't get out. Not allowing yourself to seem weak before those you are guiding; you have to show yourself as strong. There are many emotions that I've swallowed [...]. If I let emotions defeat me, I'm going to crumble. I'm not going to be able to have the same strength that I've demonstrated to push forward. I feel like I'm going to get weak. I don't know what's going to happen. I won't even be able to get up then [...]. Here, we understand each other, but with the family, with our kids and husbands, we can't, because they're not going to understand what I feel because all of us have experienced this as women. Here, as women, we understand each other, we get it, that's why we did it here, but with the family it's different. For me, it's different [...]. Leadership is not just anything: leadership is showing that you're going forward, you have to show that you're strong by example, and that's why you have to swallow your emotions."*

A large concern for this subject was shared in the analysis group. Some of the participants pointed out that the consequences of the patriarch within human rights organizations and movements had not been evaluated enough in the focus groups.

*"The way chauvinism is treated within the movement has been very pallid. This is one of the contributions that feminism has made. In gender matters, you come across fear and guilt a*

*lot; they're really exacerbated when you're a mom and a defender. But there's another very present emotion that still hasn't been evaluated, that's related to these types of chauvinism within the movement: anger [...]. Experience tells us that chauvinist violence within the movements weakens women defenders and pushes them to a limit more so than the State and the factual powers. Bertha Cáceres said this. A lot of women decide to abandon the struggle, to submit to their sentimental partners. They don't have as many tools for facing these types of violence as they have when they face the State."*

*"Men are socialized to use violence. And this is present in some way in the gender role of male activists. We must see how gender is at play in men's activism [...]. We are starting to unveil how these misogynistic practices, these roles within social movements, affect both men and women. We're missing a thorough dialogue on how to deeply incorporate the gender perspective into human rights. In general, there is an effect on the movement. Our responses, interpretations, and resources fall short if we do not incorporate the way women defenders are being affected. We were at a meeting about women in the territory: the women defenders told the social leaders that they faced gender violence in the same way that the men faced companies and States [...]. I don't understand how someone wants to change the world but not change their personal habits."*

The dominating paradigm in patriarchal society also creates stereotypes of what it means to 'be a woman defender.' The neoliberal capitalist system and the patriarchal system act as a hinge that drives those who practice human rights defense to include themselves in the logic of working more, producing more, 'demonstrating' more, always being available, and, at the same time, being present for others, taking care of their partners and families.

*"In our case, it has been taken to the extreme: responding immediately, being available 24 hours a day, not making much money. There's a demand for us to have extraordinary organic families, to be multi-orgasmic partners, to have master's degrees, to have the biggest protest signs, to speak four languages. We've bought the idea and all that comes with it [...]. We live in a patriarchal version of human rights defense."*

It is an onerous package that is often not perceived and that is self-demanded. However, those who become aware of this conditioning start to develop a posture of rejection:

*"I'm not a savior and I don't want to be a martyr. There are many contradictions among our male peers. It is not true that a woman social activist has to put herself at risk to not become part of the bourgeois. Inside the movement, they expect things of women defenders; the men*

← **We live in a patriarchal version of human rights defense**



**The government  
gives out resources  
and it tells us ‘fight →  
amongst yourselves,  
divide yourselves’**

*point it out if you don't fit this stereotype—it goes as far as how you have to dress [...]. Who says a woman defender can't indulge in putting on makeup, wearing pretty shoes, in resting?"*

*"It's a double fight, a double battle: it's the State, and sometimes it's your own male peers."*

These are practices and roles that have a relationship not only with the forms of violence and their impacts but also with the coping mechanisms that women and men have, where they are limited because of this mandate of masculinity that does not allow them to attend to their emotions or their bodies.

The intersection of the patriarchal paradigm and the logic of the capitalist system allows the State to also employ strategies to foster competition, not only among people but also among organizations. This creates a dynamic that some women defenders have named 'competition for the best cases.' It indicates organizations' financial suffocation and, together with other factors, it causes division in the movement to weaken it. The competition paradigm, at the expense of collaboration, puts the practice of human rights defense at risk, it leads cases to be organized into hierarchies and causes uncertainty about organizations' sustainability.

*"Not long ago, at a congress, we talked about how we used to fight for our rights; ever since the government started distributing resources to civil society organizations, activism has ended, we've kept quiet [...]. The government gives out resources and it tells us 'fight amongst yourselves, divide yourselves.'"*





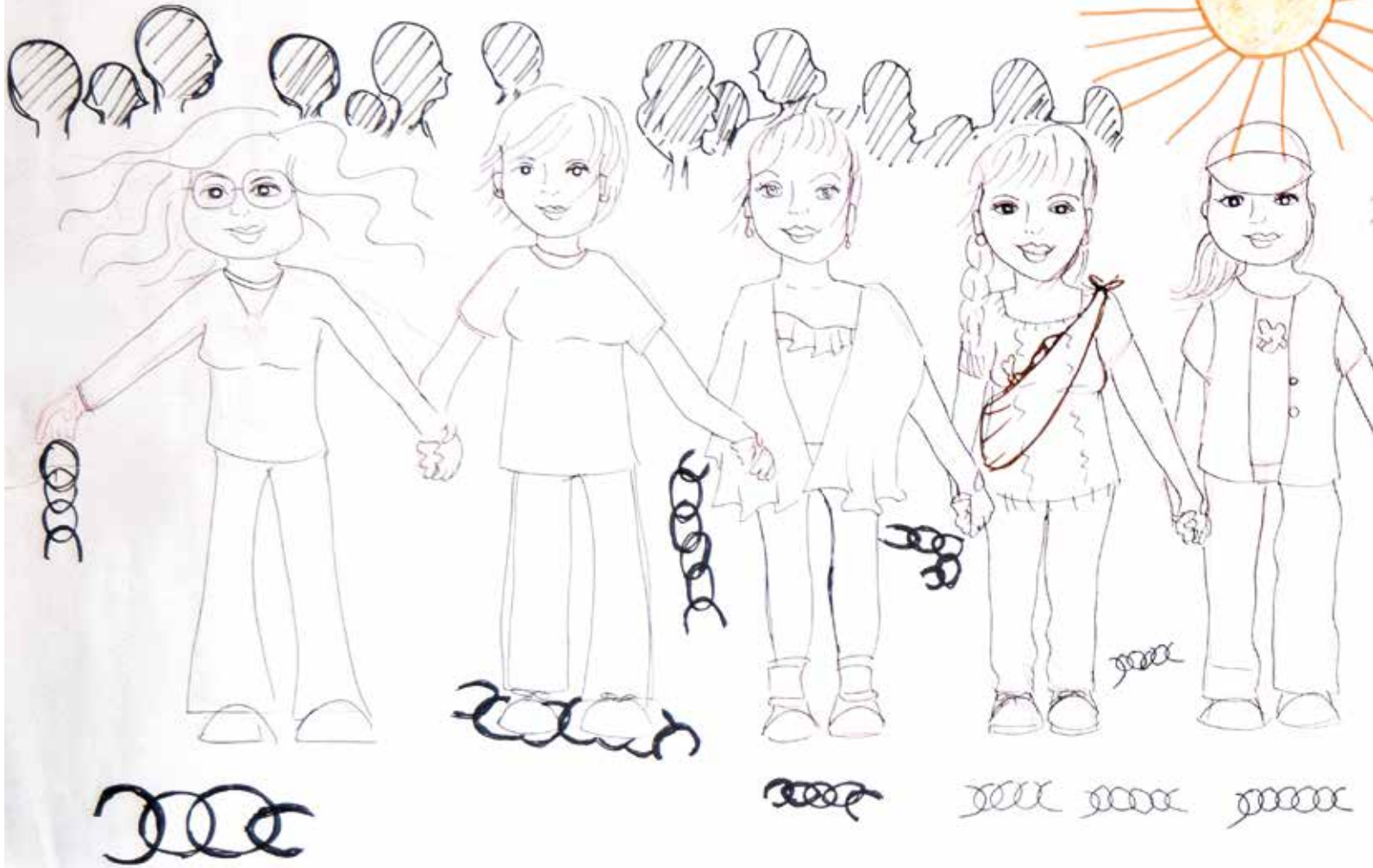
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# AFRONTAMOS

# Y



# RESISTIMOS

El coraje es la gasolina

Pero

El amor es el motor



*Drawing by the women defenders who participated in the focus group in Mexico City.*



# V. COPING WITH THE IMPACTS

*"I have to decide if I'm going to use fear to be immobilized or to push forward."* ← **I have to decide if I'm going to use fear to be immobilized or to push forward**

Being a human rights defender in present-day Mexico is a job that has many implications. Both the setting of sociopolitical and patriarchal violence as well as the attacks and threats that are suffered are forms of violence that have strong impacts on defenders.

These impacts were made evident throughout the entire process. Within this framework, we are going to stress those that—despite differing contexts, involved actors, and women defenders' profiles—have either coincided or had common elements. We also want to create visibility around the coping mechanisms that defenders consciously or unconsciously construct to strengthen themselves when facing these contexts of violence, despite the difficulties and the pain that has been experienced.

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The impacts are followed by coping mechanisms: different responses, including emotional, behavioral, political, and spiritual, different ways of being able to express oneself, sharing or looking for ways to face these situations. There are personal ways of coping, which reinforce individual matters, and collective ways of coping, which are interwoven to have more integrative responses.

The experience of the impacts and ways of coping depend on many factors and conditions: obviously gender, but also on sexual preference, cultural roots, belonging to a rural or urban environment, socioeconomic conditions, one's networks of solidarity, the people who are in charge, and one's family's degree of attachment and health, as well as access to education, among others. Although the defenders share coping mechanisms that they repeat in different contexts—like politicization, which has allowed many of them to cope with individual harm through social commitment—, it is not about standard recipes or solutions. They are personal processes for facing shared contexts.

The impacts are produced in the short, mid, and long-term; they remain over time. Sometimes they can be transformed; other times, the women defenders learn to live with them. Among the common impacts, we mainly find those created by the country's experience of sociopolitical violence. Massacres, disappearances, and killings as well as acts of brutality carried out against people—against their lives and their bodies—are heard of daily. Some of the women defenders have shared their view of dehumanization, as these incredibly impactful attacks unveil the horror that aggressors are acting with. They believe these events are producing processes of normalization of violence and even indifference. The difficulty of verifying these levels of dehumanization creates anger, rage, powerlessness, frustration, and fear.

Impunity provokes one of the most forceful effects that we have observed in this type of dehumanization and in the way the State acts as a perpetrator and accomplice of other actors.<sup>38</sup> In the women defenders' reflections, they state how one of the ways the State acts before society is by

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38 "It is important to understand impunity beyond the absence of punishment; on the one hand, it represents a violation of the general obligation that states have to investigate, judge, and condemn those who are guilty of serious and systematic human rights violations. On the other hand, as Portillo says, impunity is also 'every objective situation of tolerating the structures and attitudes that have made such crimes possible and leaving them intact as well as evading an elemental responsibility for the future, that of safeguarding the basic values of civilized coexistence.' (Portillo 1996)." (Quoted text translated for use in this publication.) In Correa, C. (2009). *"La impunidad y sus efectos en la sociedad"* [Impunity and its effects on society]. *Revuelta*. Year 7, no. 15. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2NNCTcl>

denying murders, disappearances, tortures, and rapes; attributing responsibility to organized crime or even to society and denying their role as a perpetrator or their obligation to guarantee justice. Impunity is also presented as a problem of the corruption of some state officials.

Most of the women defenders express the immense powerlessness that this situation creates for them, as it means exposing themselves to a justice system that is at the service of the State's strategy of sociopolitical violence.

*"The strategies are the deficient, slow, and corrupt justice administration that creates stigmas [...]; the creation of crimes; the creation of fear and terror within communities. Guilt is also a strategy of these actors. They make you feel guilty about what is happening. They blame the victims.*

By not punishing those who are responsible, the State aims to create a process of frustration, to provoke the sensation that there is really nothing else to do before the reality that the aggressor has imposed and that there is no way out other than 'giving up.' Impunity engenders powerlessness and despair. Moreover, when defenders endure in the pursuit of justice, they are harassed, threatened, and even criminalized.

The defenders also suffer revictimization by having to face legal denunciation processes due to mistreatment by officials when dealing with the Public Ministry and, in some cases, when they appeal to the Mechanism to Protect Human Rights Defenders and Journalists. These processes bring about distrust and uncertainty, as they are under the auspices of the State, whose role is questioned for its responsibility in the attacks, due to omission or collusion with the perpetrators. However, the women defenders demonstrate that pursuing the truth about what has happened is necessary despite it involving physical and emotional fatigue. It is where they find the meaning of their struggle, even by examining the numerous ways of confronting justice.

For those who have begun the path of social struggle after a victimizing event, activism—politicization, which we will speak of later on—is one of the essential coping mechanisms that carves out their transition from victims to defenders. The concept of a victim has been a matter of debate in the analysis group:

*"Being a victim is not a permanent condition. It is not an identity. It's a transitory state, or that's what we ought to be seeking. One of the resources that we have seen among women defenders is that they stop considering themselves as victims. Sometimes a dual role remains: victim and defender."*

**Being a victim is not a permanent condition. It is not an identity. It's a transitory state, or that's what we ought to be seeking**



The analysis group participants asked themselves at what point a woman defender stops being a victim and what the role of accompaniment is in this transition.

*“From the psychosocial perspective, responding to violence or a traumatic event is the first reaction [...]. It’s a response without rational or any elaboration, but if an accompaniment is carried out that favors coping, it turns into a process of rationalizing and becoming aware of these tools.”*

*“In feminism, there’s a debate about victimizing approaches and others that are liberating. No person is only a victim; however, it worries me that the documented reality is that most women have been victims of a crime. We’re in a position of subordination with fewer resources.”*

For some of the participants, the circumstances of being a victim are not over until they can receive compensation for the victimizing event.

*“Victim is a legal category, and you must own this in order to claim the rights you are entitled to. You position yourself. You take it. In a situation like enforced disappearance, you must remain in this category until the disappeared person is found.”*

At Aluna, our notion of a victim of human rights violations is that of the concept employed by Ximena Antillón and Paulina Vega:<sup>39</sup> it is not about people who passively live out the consequences of the victimizing events but rather about survivors who are actively involved in the fight for truth, justice, and reparation, thus assuming the role of political subjects.

By sharing experiences and questioning and analyzing the impacts, two emotions come to the forefront: fear and guilt. Both have different nuances and consequences in the lives of women defenders; we will try to provide evidence of the most significant ones here.

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39 “When we refer to the victims of serious human rights violations and crimes, we are not thinking of people who passively live out the consequences of the victimizing events but rather of those who actively confront them, each one to a different degree, taking part in the investigations, organizing themselves in the fight for truth, justice, and reparation, and even driving transformations in the State and in society in general. We recognize that the victims are also survivors and political subjects of change as well as subjects of rights.” (The quoted text was translated for use in this publication.) Aluna Psychosocial Accompaniment (Aluna Acompañamiento Psicosocial, A.C.) (2017). *Modelo de acompañamiento psicosocial Aluna. [Aluna Psychosocial Accompaniment Model]* Op. Cit., 25.

# Fear

Fear<sup>40</sup> largely takes shape as fear of death or harm to personal physical integrity or that of loved ones:<sup>41</sup> *“I was so afraid that I felt like they were going to kill me in the street and I would be turning and looking all around me. At night, I felt like my heart was suffocating.”* As the same woman defender told us, this is a fear that increases greatly when the risk is extended to one’s children: *“I was afraid before, but it was anger, rage. Now, with my son, I’m afraid that something will happen to him [...] I’m always carrying this fear that they’re going to kidnap him.”*

Different reactions to fear are produced depending on which actors are identified as the possible perpetrators: when women defenders identify the State as a perpetrator, they find they can take a certain degree of political action. But, despite having a greater degree of response in cases of other aggressors, the fear continues to be very present. One of the women defenders expresses it this way: *“Seeing police and military forces close to the community has caused dread among the children. It makes us vulnerable because they have already been victims of their attacks.”*

When the perpetrator is organized crime or when its collusion with the State is identified, the uncertainty when facing the perpetrator and its *modus operandi*, as well as the sensation of lacking protection and being in extreme vulnerability, has a challenging effect of control, as the possible attack escapes the known criteria: *“The profile of the aggressor seems so huge to me, and it seems impossible for me to act.”*

**The profile of the aggressor seems so huge to me, and it seems impossible for me to act**

40 To study the impacts that fear has on women defenders in greater depth, see: Correa, C. & Facio, A. (coords.) (2018). *As Women HDRs, how do we face fear in the current context?* Mexico City: Aluna Psychosocial Accompaniment, JASS (Just Associates) Mesoamerica. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2rCDXH6>

41 “Fear, anguish, anxiety, dread, terror, panic, fright, and horror are words that refer to experiences that are set in motion by the perception of a certain or imprecise danger, present or probable in the future, that comes from the subject’s internal world or surrounding world. The objectification of the danger can lead the subject to configure it as a risk or a vital threat. The certainty or high probability that this threat will happen transforms the insecurity into fear.” (Quoted text translated for use in this publication.) In Lira, E. (1987). *Psicología del miedo y conducta colectiva en Chile [The psychology of fear and collective behavior in Chile]*. AVESPO Newsletter (Venezuelan Association of Social Psychology), 12, 46-68.



One of the most important tools for countering fear is analyzing the violence: identifying and understanding who the involved actors are and what their interests are. Identifying the State as a perpetrator allows them to start to build different actions of protection that minimize risk, and, as a result, they gain and feel greater control over the situation. Raising or lowering one's public profile, one's activity, is one of the tools that the women defenders cite for coping with risk when it is the State that is practicing violence so that the political cost of an attack will be taken into consideration.

In the face of organized crime, advocacy tools are reduced because there is not a direct political cost that affects this perpetrator and the State tends to be collusive, which is why fear increases.

Fear is a feeling that is both personal—the dread all the women have of being detained or disappeared—and collective, that of the community and the society. One of the aggressors' most prominent strategies is to create terror in order to produce an effect of control in the population and rupture the social fabric, creating anguish that hampers connectedness.

Fear has forced some of the women defenders to drastically or temporarily change their life projects. Acting alone, without a collective behind them, or having particular personal circumstances—like a serious illness or being responsible for dependents—makes it even more difficult to take on the dedication and risk that human rights work entails.

The risk involved in being part of a struggle leads to a distancing from family and social circles, for fear that loved ones will be harmed, which causes some women defenders to be silent, to not share situations, to distance themselves physically so they will not be identified or because they can no longer enjoy their lives as before. The risk entails a change in how daily life is handled; for example, not going out at night and having to be careful about their schedules and the routes they take.

Fear can paralyze, it can block the ability to respond: *"Fear has paralyzed me in my case, it has created anxiety, depression, physical illnesses and illnesses of the soul,"* but it also becomes a preventative mechanism and an alert mechanism that allows for activating emotional, security, political, behavioral, and relational tools, which allows for reacting in a transformative way to cope with risk. Some human rights defenders express how a time comes when courage wins over, and so fear turns into a mobilizer, into a drive to push forward: *"When you face fear, you can act, you engage. Courage is a tool for reacting, for not giving up—it's the pride of not wanting to submit."*

**When you face fear,  
you can act, you  
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to submit** →

The adoption of protective measures is a mechanism for coping with fear. Adopting security measures allows one to not only feel more protected when facing possible attacks but to also feel that s/he is practicing a form of control, even in the face of the imponderable and unknown.

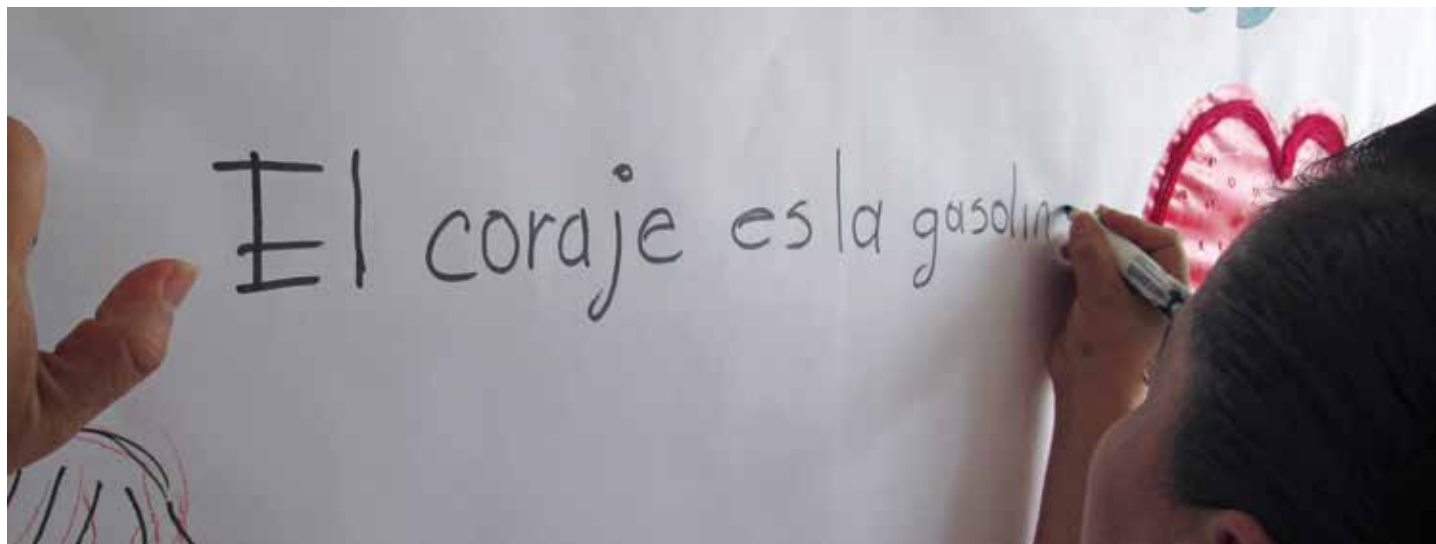
In addition to matters related to political pressure and managing the aforementioned profile as well as measures for maximizing prudence and discretion when handling private life and leisure—especially in sexual-affective relationships and in nightlife—, the women defenders adopt other tools to face fear and security risks. These tools range from the starting point of analysis to taking precautions for emergencies, which go through the promotion of collective work.

Some of the women defenders use risk evaluation mechanisms in their work to plan for adverse consequences that could come about or to decide if they will have safety conditions when accepting certain cases. Foreseeing and defining what to do if they are detained or disappeared; identifying what and who can be allies in emergency situations; identifying related media and journalists and being in constant communication; seeking funds to cope with risks; and evaluating whether or not to accept protective measures are some of the tools that were mentioned in the focus groups. Confidentiality in activism and private life is another resource for preventing information from being used against them.

Thinking and acting as a collective—that they appear coordinated, joined together in community—also diminishes fear. It is a way of coping that can help to lessen different impacts and which we will examine further.

*"I see the possible in the impossible. This strength comes with me along the path of life, in this collective fight, because I have also learned that the mind of the Masehual people is collective, they always seek collective well-being, and this motivates me every day."*

**I see the possible  
in the impossible.  
This strength comes  
with me along the  
path of life, in this  
collective fight**





# Guilt

Guilt is an emotion that produces a constant sensation of doing things wrong, that there are many things to improve or do, the sensation that what one does is not enough. In most cases, it affects self-esteem and puts personal and collective identity into question.

The feeling of guilt appears among women defenders for different reasons: for not risking one's life, for needing to protect oneself for a time due to a high-risk situation, for having to limit certain activities, for not being able to respond to everything in a highly demanding context—which also entails a feeling of powerlessness—, for taking away time from one's family and social circles, for the risk of the perpetrators acting against their family, especially against their children: *"In the threats, they often refer to them: 'we're going to kill your son, you're going to find him in the garbage.'"*

Yet, they also share testimonies that help overcome this dread: *"I would feel guilty because my son is in the same state, he's a mess, but he has to gain awareness. It's the life that was given to him. He has to be aware."*

The sense of guilt also arises from feeling tired, wishing to rest, wanting to stop for a moment and think about oneself, about one's own health, about something pleasant. Guilt is associated with both the wish to fulfill the previously-described mandate of 'being a woman defender' and the responsibilities that the role of a leader or accompanist entail. *"Guilt is related to a social burden."* It is worth stressing that, on a psychological level, aggressors handle guilt as a mechanism of repression and control.



The experience of traumatic events is another factor that creates a strong feeling of guilt, as individuals tend to make themselves responsible for what happened, for not having been able to avoid it, and they go into a spiral of self-criticism that has a bearing on their self-esteem. If this spiral is not detained—by putting responsibility where it belongs—it grows, and guilt can become chronic.

*“When you see the whole panorama, you realize it’s not a personal matter, and that gives you strength. They manipulate you with guilt. There are people who have suffered from femicides who come to us and the first thing we do is get rid of the guilt, that burden: ‘it was her fault, she was doing that, you didn’t take care of her.’ Seeing that it’s about an entire context gives them strength, calm, and hope. When they understand what is happening and why it’s happening, a change is also noticed in the demands made to authorities.”*

If guilt is a difficult emotion to identify and, therefore, complex to counteract, when women defenders find the sense and meaning of their experience, of the violence and repression, they feel better, they overcome the confusion, and they stop blaming themselves. Putting the responsibility of what has happened to them onto the aggressors and not on their own lives is a fundamental way of resignifying the traumatic event and coping with it. Becoming aware of one’s limits also helps to cope with the impacts.

As summarized in the analysis group: *“The political significance of ‘I do what I can with what I have’ is recognizing my limits. It is not a conformist phrase; it’s a phrase that helps you locate your limits and remain in this struggle. From these limits, I relate with others. I see it as a way of coping.”*

Some of the defenders speak of how they have taken on, or at least aim to take on, this extremely complex challenge of ‘turning limits into reachable horizons’ and recognizing what can be done and what has already been achieved, of ‘feeling satisfaction for what has, indeed, been done.’ Creativity for facing the challenges and self-knowledge of how much one knows and how much one can do, and also what they cannot do, appear when speaking of limits and how to face them without guilt: *“One of my strengths is recognizing my abilities, qualities, and limits, knowing up to what point I can participate, and also asking for help when I need it.”*

In the analysis group, the question of limits was also approached from the gender perspective. There was discussion on how we have been brought up to think we have to sacrifice as women and on the challenge that we are presented within a patriarchal model that forces us to ‘be up to par,’ to not get anything wrong, to not make mistakes. *“How do we work on modifying these harmful beliefs? A positive form of coping is to accept how far I can go.”*

**When you see the whole panorama, you realize it’s not a personal matter, and that gives you strength. They manipulate you with guilt**

**The political significance of ‘I do what I can with what I have’ is recognizing my limits**

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## Life project and self-care

Another common aspect that is shared by the women defenders is the feeling of a great deal of responsibility that weighs down on them because of the work they do. They express that it brings about physical and emotional fatigue. It involves “*giving it your all, to the projects and your family.*” In several cases, they express how they have had to change their life projects to start a path of social struggle or abandon it because of the risks, which means having to adapt to the events and try to include their family, combining their work with personal needs. Finding a balance between these aspects is especially complex in societies where caregiving continues to almost exclusively be assigned to women; feelings of frustration and powerlessness come about when this is not accomplished, making guilt appear again and causing stress, frustration, distress, low self-esteem, fatigue, and, in some cases, disease.

Leadership also has implications that can affect women defenders. It is an accomplishment to be an empowered woman, but it means taking on a great deal of responsibility in a hostile environment, which adds to the double or triple workload. It can sometimes represent a weight that affects physical and emotional health, but it has stood out in the groups as a source of motivation and an element that validates them in their struggle:

*“There’s a commitment behind all the trust that people place in you. It motivates you. You can live with feeling worn out and tired, angry, but people’s trust is also there behind you, that of the majority who trust you, who trust your leadership style [...]. We already have this ability to lead inside us as women, but we discover it through a process and then we go about educating ourselves along life’s way, making experience our school.”*

As a consequence of the impacts that have been described, the women defenders experience effects on their physical and emotional health. Without going further into depth in the specific experiences of each one, the expression of violence on their bodies is shared by all of them, and all of them have been able to see these impacts reflected.<sup>42</sup> They are impacts that affect the spirit and leave their mark on the body.

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<sup>42</sup> The following are among the most common diseases: gastrointestinal disease even cancer in the digestive tract, hormonal disorders (thyroid conditions), operations on the uterus and cancer, neurological conditions, migraines, epilepsy, muscular pain, and dermatological conditions.

The concept of somatization was questioned in the analysis group, and one of the participants presented her reluctance toward its use:

*“Somatization, from my point of view, is not being able to cope favorably, and the impact transforms into an ailment. I’m not in favor of speaking of somatization. For me, it’s how these effects are reflected in your body [...]. Our bodies are like a mirror of this violence. As women defenders, we have patterns of effects: we often find ourselves with problems of contractions, severe concentration problems, numerous mental burdens that are difficult to bring to a conclusion, effects on our knees, our intestines. According to some health therapies, these symptoms are linked to emotions.”*

Self-care is one of the coping mechanisms for attempting to reduce risks and ease effects; yet, the majority of women defenders feel that, while it is necessary to care for themselves, sometimes it is very difficult due to a lack of time or for financial reasons. They also express that, for many of their male peers, self-care is a bourgeois and elitist matter, which has occasionally led them to not put energy into taking care of themselves to avoid negative judgments being made about them.

In the book *Travesías para pensar y actuar. Experiencias de autocuidado de defensoras de derechos humanos en Mesoamérica* [Journeys for Thinking and Acting. Self-care experiences of women human rights defenders in Mesoamerica], IM-Defensoras shares this way:

*“The process of appropriating self-care as part of comprehensive protection has not been easy. There has been resistance and personal and collective questioning, but, undoubtedly, the need to live in balance is clear, to prevent harm and heal wounds from the patriarchal society that we live in and from the impacts that our countries’ contexts of violence create within us as women and defenders.”<sup>43</sup>*

The women defenders define taking care of themselves as a valuable act that transgresses gender mandates, that allows for differentiating between being in a state of weakness and being weak

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43 Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (2014). *Travesías para pensar y actuar. Experiencias de autocuidado de defensoras de derechos humanos en Mesoamérica* [Journeys for Thinking and Acting. Self-care experiences of women human rights defenders in Mesoamerica]. Available at: <https://bit.ly/32JnTQI>

**If I wanted to be a woman defender, I would have to take care of my psychological and physical issues to be able to take care of other people. I understood how valuable taking care of yourself is** →

**You have to get in touch with yourself. To be alone, but not lonely** →

by creating a plan of action for them to re-establish contact with their own emotions and needs, to recognize themselves as beings who are capable, active, and reactive in the face of adversity.

*"If I wanted to be a woman defender, I would have to take care of my psychological and physical issues to be able to take care of other people. I understood how valuable taking care of yourself is. Now, I work a lot on my emotions. I've become very sensitive."*

The tools they use for self-care range from accessible approaches that do not need much time or income—although sometimes they cannot be carried out because the impacts are so strong that they do not allow for it—to approaches that are not equally accessible for all women defenders.

They cite creative, manual, and handicraft work: weaving, embroidering, painting, contact with nature (taking care of animals, planting a garden). *"Feeling myself free and in touch with the land, with the sun, with the wind, with the water helps me to find myself and have introspection that puts me in a good mood."* They also mention leisure and free time: readings that help them reflect, setting aside a specific time to spend with family, taking up their social lives again, and spending time in different spaces with people who are not involved in human rights defense. They reference humor as a tool as well: *"Being laid back and making ironic and cynical comments, laughing at myself and making other people laugh with me also helps me overcome complicated times that harden my heart, my muscles, and my will to fight."*

Moreover, they share additional resources that are related to caring for their bodies and spirits from other areas of life: spoiling themselves, attending to themselves, pampering themselves, walking, dancing, practicing yoga, relaxing, using alternative medicine, praying, meditating, and breathing. *"You have to get in touch with yourself. To be alone, but not lonely."* They also talk about stopping: *"Saying when we can't anymore,"* changing activities, getting away, taking a break, changing one's role in life for a certain time.

They also state the right to cry, which, as mentioned in the section on the implications of being a woman defender, it is not always approved of in the patriarchal logic that continues to govern activism: crying as a strength that helps express anger and ease the pain.

They speak of creating self-control mechanisms, analyzing what has made them feel bad at any given time in order to know how to push forward, developing a minimal protocol for personal and family self-care as well as one for self-care within collectives, and turning to continence therapy when the impacts intensify.

*"Self-care is a political tool of resistance; to care for ourselves is to love the struggle. Knowing that we are important in this game but not indispensable helps us strengthen ourselves [...]. Making ourselves aware of our emotions helps us ease the pains in our bodies; naming those emotions, feeling them, and letting them pass helps them not to stay in our bodies and cause pain."*

← **Self-care is a political tool of resistance; to care for ourselves is to love the struggle.**

## Specific impacts

In the focus groups, different variables stand out that play an important role in the types of effects. We will mention some very broadly and merely to offer examples.

The women defenders who are looking for their disappeared family members suffer from the uncertainty of their whereabouts and of the conditions they may be in—not knowing what has happened, where their family member is, or if the person is alive or dead. In these situations, the uncertainty and the anguish start to grow as the options for locating the family member are ruled out. The possibility of death alternates with the possibility of survival, going back and forth between one and the other brings great physical and psychological fatigue. The lack of sleep and a proper diet, anguish, and the constant alert that tend to present themselves start to lead to physical and psychological discomfort that can eventually form chronic disease patterns.

The families of disappeared persons live every day with the anguish of 'not knowing.'<sup>44</sup> One woman who participated in the research study expressed that what hurt her the most was not knowing where her son was, the powerlessness after searching for so many years. Sharing her experience in the focus group contributed to her being able to resignify it, thus gaining awareness that she was, like the rest of the participants, a woman human rights defender. This achieved a resignification that provided evidence of her potential to cope with the pain. This is an experience that other women defenders have had whose activism is born out of victimizing situations.

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44 Aluna Psychosocial Accompaniment (Aluna Acompañamiento Psicosocial, A.C.) (2016). *Keys Toward Psychosocial Accompaniment. Forced Disappearance*. Mexico: Aluna. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2QEPDDI>



For those who are involved in the search for their disappeared family members—as addressed in the analysis group—*“it’s related to taking ownership of the search process. If they’re not doing something, they spiral downwards, when they’re in action, they hold themselves up. Being a victim activates the process.”*

Another situation is that of the women defenders that have been victims of forced displacement. Most of the time they have to leave their territory because they are being threatened by actors with economic interests in the region or because of the work they do, in particular, because they make what is happening visible and because they accompany communities that defend their territory, as is the case of one of the woman defenders who participated in the research study.

When they abandon their territory, life projects are ruptured; the spaces and bonds with their land are lost, which presents a destructuring of personal, collective, and social referents;<sup>45</sup> the pain of leaving their territory, their project—as one of them expressed it—and their affective relationships creates a great deal of powerlessness, sadness, and rage: they experience an uprooting of their lives.

*“It is not easy, I confess. They left me without a house, forcing me to displace myself from my community, to separate myself from my family. My son got sick. I lost my house and family in a blink of the eye, and at times I felt they were ripping away my will to live.”*

What has kept her stable, as this woman defender shared, is remembering everything she learned with the communities and having conserved the bond with them. Being able to tell her story has also strengthened her because it contributes to maintaining this bond. In fact, this participant shared photos of the territory in the workshops to be able to show it to the group and make it known.

Another complex situation is the case of women defenders who have experienced sexual torture, in which the weight of chauvinism and the brutality against women is expressed. One of the women defenders who participated in the research was a victim of sexual torture in the setting of arbitrary detention. Being able to share it in the focus group was not easy for her at all, despite the trust that had been built. Until recently, this defender could not talk about what had happened to her because she was terribly ashamed and felt very vulnerable. Support from

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45 Aluna Psychosocial Accompaniment (Aluna Acompañamiento Psicosocial, A.C.) (2016). *Keys Toward Psychosocial Accompaniment. Forced Displacement*. Mexico: Aluna. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2p5ckps>

her family and the people who are close to her have allowed her to move forward and gradually realize everything that this traumatic experience has meant.

One of the most significant impacts of sexual torture is the feeling of shame and powerlessness. The intensity of the horror and the confusion that takes precedence during the torture are such that it is very difficult to put the experience into words. In events of sexual torture, survivors turn to silence because of the shame and humiliation they live with. What's more, it is not uncommon for women who have been objects of sexual violence to be blamed or stigmatized by their family members, members of their organization or community, and authorities.<sup>46</sup>

## Intersectionality

As mentioned earlier, among women defenders, some conditions and factors also influence the effects and coping; they interweave with each other and make each situation particular, not generalizable. These are some of them: socioeconomic conditions, belonging to an urban or rural environment, ethnic identity, age, being responsible for dependents, and education level. The family, organizational, and social environment, the level of cohesion of the social fabric in which they develop their struggles, access to healthcare centers and legal and protective mechanisms, and being part of networks also have an influence.

The socio-economic conditions of each woman defender have a considerable influence on the impacts and also have repercussions on the tools one can access to cope with them. Many of them have to seek out financial resources to make a living in addition to working in rights defense. Fighting for human rights is not a profitable activity: work that generates financial income is neglected, it forces defenders to choose whether to do one thing or another, and there are ramifications on family and personal well-being. At the same time, having to distance oneself from defense work because of risks, when this represents a source of income, jeopardizes the woman defender's financial stability and that of her family.

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46 Aluna Psychosocial Accompaniment (Aluna Acompañamiento Psicosocial, A.C.) (2016). *Keys Toward Psychosocial Accompaniment. Torture and Sexual Torture*. Mexico: Aluna. Available at: <https://bit.ly/32PdUtY>



## We think about others, and what about ourselves?

*"Sometimes I've had to choose between my financial income and activism activities. I don't like doing this because I believe they shouldn't compete, but that's how it's gone, and this has affected my son and me financially."*

*"We think about others, and what about ourselves? We don't even have benefits. What are we going to do when we're old and forgotten? We don't have salaries, social security, retirement. We don't have anything."*

For some, a coping mechanism would be putting a retirement plan together: *"Thinking about a savings fund to live simply when I can't work anymore so that I don't have to depend on other people."* But in the context of precariousness and lack of labor rights that defenders face, added to the discrimination that the women suffer for gender-related reasons, daily survival hinders long-term financial planning.

The financial factor also determines if certain safety measures should be integrated, such as installing cameras, having a car, putting bars on the doors and windows, and also leaving the region or the country, measures that entail substantial expenses. In the second case, for example, belonging to a network that can accompany and be in charge of the process allows for them to face the imminent risk, but not to find a solution for the financial loss of having to abandon a source of subsistence and face the feeling of being uprooted.

Another factor that cannot be underestimated is being responsible for dependents: many women defenders have children or take care of their parents. This means that they not only have financial burdens and constant responsibility but also have to confront what is entailed in being a woman defender and having someone to protect. It means working twice as much on their safety plan and sometimes changing one's life plan. A woman defender shared with the group that the father of her son had threatened to take away her custody rights because of the work she does. *"I'm afraid that, if I face a patriarchal judge, they'll take my son away from me."*

Belonging to a group of native peoples means facing other types of discrimination in addition to those of gender and social class. Among the situations that were shared during the research, this was mentioned: when they have suffered violence, especially sexual violence, they can be stigmatized and rejected by their own community. This is a stigma that does not only affect indigenous women, as the patriarchal system has historically placed the stigma and criminalization of sexual violence on those who suffer it and not on those who perpetrate it. When they must leave their community and be displaced for financial reasons or risks to their lives or

integrity, they suffer discrimination in the places where they are forced to move, and they also suffer serious discrimination in the access and practice of justice when they need to appeal to it.

In spite of this, for indigenous women defenders and for those who are connected to these communities through a common struggle, the community's cosmovision and values are a substantive element of strength, support in the struggle. This aspect provides evidence of the social fabric's importance in maintaining a steady project of social struggle. The indigenous women defenders express that, even though the discrimination is very painful for them, what gives them strength is their community and feeling backed up by their peers when they come together in solidarity; although they point out that most of the time, it is them, the women, who support each other. Thinking about their origin and identity gives them strength because it reminds them of who they are.

In the focus groups, there was also sharing about how assuming a sexual identity different than the one assigned at birth leads to discrimination.<sup>47</sup> Finding one's identity in the face of heteropatriarchal gender mandates is a process that can last many years. Social rejection and, in some cases, rejection from loved ones is confronted along this path. One of the women defenders, a transgender participant, shared the devastating effects that being denied access to a medicine that is fundamental for her survival has had on her physical health in addition to the emotional impacts that this refusal caused: rage, frustration, and powerlessness. The accompaniment of her partner, who has always supported her in all the work she does, and being able to travel and share her situation and that of other peers have allowed her to give meaning to her life and the choice that she has made.

Age is another condition that affects the way women defenders experience the impacts that they suffer because of their work as well as their coping mechanisms. How does it have an impact? The women defenders who are over 50 live with more uncertainty about the future after having dedicated themselves to working full-time without knowing how long it would last—due to the financial precariousness of the organizations and other factors that we have mentioned—or how long they can stay strong in this role and everything it entails.



47 When speaking about the sexual identity that is different than that which was assigned, we refer to when the identity that a person assumes does not coincide with what society attributes to their body; that is, when a person identifies as a woman and has sexual organs and physical features that are considered to be masculine or vice versa.



*"I ask myself what will become of my life when I'm 60, my social security. I'm going to have to be responsible for the old woman that I'm going to be." They also think about what alternatives they have to being women defenders: "What do I know how to do? Only defense work. We get focused on one issue without knowing what other skills we have to survive."*

The relationship they have with their families, with their social circle, with the organization, and with the community is a factor that influences both the way the attacks and the effects of the context impact them and the capacity to cope with them. A family that demonstrates approval of the labor that the woman defender performs and supports her in the face of adversity without intending for her to abandon her role is an element that contributes to consolidating coping mechanisms: *"When your daughter tells you, 'You're my example. I want to be like you because you fight and persevere; you're adamant, and you make things happen.'"* The same thing happens if your social, organizational, and community circle gives you a safe haven and backs you up. Coping becomes more difficult when controversial or tense relationships come about in women defender's places of trust.



## Cross-sectional coping

Although all the coping mechanisms that we are threading together are interrelated and connected, they are not independent and they can emerge from different impacts. Up until now, we have aimed to recover the ways of coping that specifically come about from the most recurring impacts, such as fear and guilt, with their effects on the safety, health, and well-being of the women defenders, their families, and their loved ones. There are also other ways of coping that women defenders value as a support for facing the adversity they experience along the way which have allowed them to have the strength to carry on. These are shared elements that strengthen them integrally, both personally and in their collectives.

We will call them ‘cross-sectional ways of coping’ because they can respond to any of the impacts mentioned in this section and throughout the document. They deal with the processes that do not arise as an immediate response; they are emotional and behavioral devices that, on occasion, allow for developing long-term strategies.

It is worth reiterating that not all women defenders face the impacts of sociopolitical and patriarchal violence in the same way and that not all the responses that they manage to give are constructive. As addressed in the analysis group, reacting is not the same as coping. In their strategy, perpetrators seek to cancel out the latter possibility.

Politicization: In the focus groups, the women defenders shared keys that have allowed them to make these moves. After suffering sociopolitical violence, responding to a painful experience through its implications within social struggle—moving from an individual response to collective human rights defense work—is a pillar among the ways of coping that allows people to resignify a victimizing experience and turn it into a driving force for social transformation. “*I don’t do it because of what happened. I do it so that it doesn’t happen again.*”

For those who did not turn to activism as a result of direct impacts but who have been able to experience other processes of social participation, politicization is also a coping mechanism that they get further involved with to the extent that they equip themselves with new tools as well as a better understanding of the strategies that perpetrators employ and strengthen their skills and actions within the struggle for social change.

**I don’t do it because of what happened. I do it so that it doesn’t happen again**

Chapter V.

**Coping with the impacts**



**I've felt insecure and afraid because I didn't know who could be trusted. This changed when I had company and when I had a broader interpretation of why the attacks happen** →

Realizing what their reality is and what they do not want anymore, knowing the rights they are entitled to, and analyzing the problems as well as the contexts in which these problems are produced are steps that channel political work:

*"I wasn't aware of the strength I had, the resistance. I started to build it little by little with my peers. You're not prepared. You start to prepare and discover little by little."*

*"I've felt insecure and afraid because I didn't know who could be trusted. This changed when I had company and when I had a broader interpretation of why the attacks happen."*

Analyzing the context of who acts and why allows them to put responsibility where it belongs, thus getting rid of guilt. Evaluating risks and monitoring the rates of violence gives them knowledge of what may happen to them and how far it may reach and allows them to evaluate the individual and collective actions that let them make decisions in the interest of protecting and reducing danger for other members of the organization. These evaluations help establish strategies for protection, action, and representation to achieve the objectives with the lowest possibility of negative consequences. It also helps establish rules and guidelines for action and participation.

When facing the impacts, the organizational guidelines of the movement or community are an important factor. Sharing the same objectives, defining the goal, framing and esteeming the principles and values and making them visible in any circumstance, and understanding the organization as a force of social struggle for the defense and resolution of their demands are some of the tools they mention. They also speak of collective therapy to heal the interpersonal conflicts that are inherent in teamwork as well as *"closing ranks with female peers."*

*"Remembering happy times together with my peers in the community strengthens me in moments of despair. Remembering our long talks about building a collective dream of our life project and collective community strengthens me."*

When facing slandering, they believe they must strengthen themselves with other organizations to re-establish their legitimacy and credibility and fend off the attacks with legal arguments and support. Documenting what has happened to them and their collectives is another political tool. They also share mechanisms that have been useful for them in their grassroots work: assemblies allow for making collective decisions, and efforts to raise public awareness in neighboring areas facilitates an understanding of the impacts that are made on the community and makes the struggles known. They are tools with which they have carved, are carving, or want to carve out paths to build collective strategies and prioritize them, thus creating a political project.

*"If we want to achieve our goals, we have to go out and act with our own resources, but we will have to aspire to more, even though we don't have more of our own resources. By valuing solidarity and being capable of building collective thinking and reducing individual thinking, being aware of our role becomes 'political' even if we don't like the word or if it reminds us of bad experiences. It's political, not electoral."*

Within the processes of politicization, feminism is another path that some of the participants mention and that has also been useful for them to resignify their experiences and the violence they encounter within the context as well as to strengthen their autonomy. *"With feminism, I found answers. I could give a name to that discomfort that I was living with, even with my privileges."*

Feminism allows for another understanding of sociopolitical violence in which the intersection of the patriarch is identified, but it also allows for creating new coping mechanisms.

*"Being a woman is an act of resistance in this patriarchal and chauvinist world. Sorority, accompaniment, and the support among us women is a transgressive act. Believing in ourselves is a strength. Working with other women is a life lesson. Organizing ourselves, sharing knowledge and experiences, opens up the possibility for us to build other alternative histories."*

Working in a network is combined with other tools and strategies, as was seen earlier, and, while distinct, it has a relationship with joining together, which we address below, and so we will not get into its analysis here, but it is worth mentioning explicitly because it is a highly relevant tool.

We have already mentioned the importance of having partner organizations in social struggle, in politicization processes, and in building strategies and political projects as well as the role of networks at times when risk increases or when perpetrators aim to criminalize women defenders or their collectives. The women defenders also mentioned the relevance of asking accompanists from other external organizations for help, forming bonds, having a support network at times of group or personal crisis, and being in touch with people who demonstrate that change is possible and that there are organized struggles behind them. *"I understand that it's easier for them to destroy you with repression if you're alone and isolated than it is for them to do so if you're united and organized with your family, your collective, and other organizations."*

Those who carry out their work from a collective where they can shine and receive support turn to this added strength. Belonging to networks, the *RNDDHM* in particular, is mentioned at different times as being an important coping mechanism that has allowed numerous women defenders to protect themselves at critical moments.

**With feminism, I found answers. I could give a name to that discomfort that I was living with, even with my privileges**

**← Being a woman is an act of resistance in this patriarchal and chauvinist world. Sorority, accompaniment, and the support among us women is a transgressive act**

Chapter V. ←

**Coping with the impacts**



Training is another one of the tools that women defenders have found useful for strengthening and politicizing themselves and for facing the impacts that their work involves. Training has different aspects: one dimension is related to informing and educating oneself—from a knowledge of one's rights to explicit education in feminisms—another is related to recovering one's own knowledge and experiences as well as those of others. Having access to other life stories, recommendations from other organizations that have developed forms of resistance and self-care, meetings with female peers to learn about their organizational experiences, and searching for people who have experienced similar situations and been able to cope with them are some of the tools that were mentioned in the focus groups.

*"Preparing oneself, studying what is needed. Practicing to see if it's right: practice-theory-practice. Seeing mistakes as a learning experience, not as something fatal."*

The meaning of life, reinforcing their beliefs, and keeping their options open are mechanisms that are also repeated among the women defenders. Being a woman defender involves strengthening both political and spiritual beliefs. All the women, aside from their religious beliefs and regardless of being believers or agnostic, underline the importance of spirituality in their lives and how it helps them in social struggle. For some, political convictions play this role, allowing them to reinforce their goals and not lose their way.

Spirituality, among those who come from native communities and those who practice the Christian religion, is a tool that helps them move forward. "[...] praying for myself to the fire... as indigenous peoples, we have customs for protection."

*"Recognizing myself as a woman of faith also puts me on a spiritual plane where there's a force that drives me to work for my sisters and brothers, who I can support from the responsibility for my family and body and for the pleasure of knowing that there's an essence of the Lord Jesus in each person [...]".*

Ideals, values, and convictions also work in the same way. Families conveying positive values, a sense of justice, faith in the possibility of another kind of world, the pursuit of a better world for the generations to come, for their daughters and sons, hope for a different life, for a dignified life, doing something for other people, being faithful to themselves, "loving," and "forgiving" are also mechanisms that have spiritual roots, a link with convictions and personal values.

As mentioned in the analysis group, "spirituality has not been legitimized in this patriarchal world. There's symbology in each one of the murals [in reference to the focus group activities]. This is part of coping, it's changing the intangible because the tangible is difficult. We need to give a large value

to spirituality in the organizations that we accompany.” Consequently, some participants criticized that some of the feminists in the focus groups do not address spirituality because they associate it with religious matters. For others, this dimension makes it lose rationality, although rationality without spirituality is considered a patriarchal inheritance, where reasoning is organized into a hierarchy, which is historically associated with ‘masculinity,’ compared to spirituality, which is historically associated with ‘femininity.’

Finally, the relevance that “being joined together”<sup>48</sup> has for the women defenders is worth stressing: relating with other women and acting together has marked one of the most important bases of their struggle. Building loving bonds of solidarity and protection turns into support for their projects. Being joined together is constructed and reinforced as a way of life: the strength they have when they are with other women stands out, and they consider it to be one of the most powerful tools. They point out the importance of close circles among women defenders, the possibility of a more adjoining presence, of contact that is also characterized by neighborliness and trust. *“Coinciding in ideals, dreams, and feelings has allowed for the struggle to be more bearable, for the construction of a different world to be possible.”*

The coping that is done together with others reinforces the meaning of life, political options, and the development of projects that allow for seeing options for the future. The women defenders, above all those who are involved in territorial defense, underpinned the relevance of collective identity. They gain strength from union with other people and from feeling part of something, being joined together, in addition to experiencing added security when facing risks: *“We always think about the collective, and, that way, the enemy is also going to think that you’re not alone.”*

As was shared in the analysis group, *“seeking well-being in the midst of our country’s tragedy and promoting collective spaces is a strategy to face what we are living through. Perceiving ourselves as being accompanied, the perception that I am not alone in the midst of all of this, is a substantive strategy.”*

← **Coinciding in ideals, dreams, and feelings has allowed for the struggle to be more bearable, for the construction of a different world to be possible**

Chapter V. ←

**Coping with the impacts**

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48 TN: In the original Spanish text, the word *acuerparse* is used in this context along with its variants *acuerpadas* and *acuerpamiento*, whose root word is *cuerpo*, which means “body” and provides added meaning. These terms can sometimes be used in specific reference to collective action against injustices towards people’s bodies and the political energy generated by bodies coming together; they are especially used in community feminist discourse in reference to collective action against patriarchal, colonialist, racist, and capitalist oppression.

**Women join together  
and they feel  
powerful, giving  
each other strength,  
having the right to  
happiness** →

Being at the front of a movement also involves a strong sense of community. We observe how, in certain cases, some women defenders carry out the referentiality of their own emotions from the collective: the we, the community, the cooperative, the organization. Individuality is subsumed in the collective discourse, and focusing attention on personal matters represents a challenge.

*"It's a very long-term process, women join together and they feel powerful, giving each other strength, having the right to happiness. In all the images [alluding to the murals made in the focus groups] there's a symbol that appears of being together, interwoven."*

It could be interpreted that referring to themselves like this leads them to deny themselves as individuals, where one ends and the other begins is not perceived, their cosmovision or political vision is a form of conceiving themselves as part of a single body. But for the women territorial defenders, in particular for the indigenous women defenders, the community represents their origin, and the line between the personal and the collective is blurred. The cosmovision conveyed by their people takes on tangible importance.

This characteristic is also demonstrated in urban environments in cases of women defenders who are part of labor groups. Women defenders who work in collective spaces have internalized a sense of collectiveness, and this unity strengthens them; it offers them a support that can be perceived.

This identity is individual and collective at the same time, as it is related to seeing the place held in collective construction with recognition and legitimacy: *"I belong to," "I am part of."* At the same time, public recognition of their role in the struggle allows women defenders to go outside their private setting and position themselves as leaders, being a reference for other people.

Being a woman defender means facing expressions of violence and injustice and their respective personal, family, and collective consequences on a daily basis. However, all the women defenders claim the right to happiness: *"The right to be happy, to demand justice, to have rights: we're going to achieve it, we have the ability to overcome our fears, to be able to perceive what's on the horizon."*

**Anger is the fuel, but  
love is the engine** →

It is a struggle from an emotional and political posture: *"Anger is the fuel, but love is the engine."*





# VI. CONCLUSION

We began this research with some certainties and many challenges. We wanted to tell a story about the sociopolitical and patriarchal violence that women human rights defenders experience in Mexico, and we wanted to develop it with them, with fellow women defenders from different places who are involved in different struggles throughout the country.

When the research and development of this document were finished, we looked back to recover the lessons and conclusions that help us strengthen our commitments from other political and methodological approaches.





The first challenge has been to take the ‘three voices’ of the people with whom we have developed this document and engage them in dialogue: the voice of the women defenders from their political and life experiences that were shared in the focus groups; the voice of the other women participants in the analysis group who, afterwards, complemented the stories of the women defenders from different approaches; and the voice of Aluna itself. Our priority has been to listen to the experiences and interpretations of the women defenders, which has entailed opening ourselves to other ways of interpreting the violence, thus enriching our theoretical and experiential bases that have been formed by years of accompaniment and research.

Applying the Participatory Action Research model—one of Aluna’s political stakes—has represented a challenge of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction. This has been a dialogue that did not culminate in the focus and analysis groups but rather was maintained as this document was written. It has been a diligent and complex construction, but it has also been very enriching. We believe these methodological stakes have also contributed to the women defenders’ appropriation of the research.

Integrating different aspects that condition their lives and work into this interpretation has been complex. Belonging to a group of native peoples, non-heteronormative gender identities, age, financial status, family structure, and belonging to a rural or urban environment have positioned themselves as essential elements when addressing the experience of being a woman human rights defender in Mexico. While these aspects have been considered in deciding to call together participants with very different profiles, deciding the methods of work and participation, and in the way the issues were addressed, it was not always possible to do so with the depth that they deserve.

There is still a long way to go to reach a better understanding of the repercussions that these aspects have on the experience of being women defenders. Yet, we continue to confirm, from the psychosocial approach, how the way the impacts of violence and their coping mechanisms are experienced and expressed change, greatly, according to these aspects. The experience of forced displacement does not have the same impact on an indigenous community as it does on an urban environment, it is not experienced in the same way by a woman with children as it is by a woman without them; it is not coped with in the same way by a young woman as it is by an old woman, by a woman with financial resources as by a woman without them. And the case is the same with sexual torture, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, and other serious human rights violations.

The greatest challenge, however, has been to braid the psychosocial approach—the pillar of Aluna’s work—with the feminist perspective: two gazes that condition the resignification and the conceptualization of the violence, the impacts, and the women defenders’ coping mechanisms. This integration has not been free of tensions, and mainly for this reason: from the feminist positions that have been put forth in the research, the patriarchy would be the umbrella that encompasses other types of violence, including sociopolitical violence, while from Aluna’s psychosocial approach, sociopolitical violence would be a central vector that is traversed by the patriarchy.

Far from representing an obstacle, the tensions between the two gazes have allowed us to identify points of convergence to develop a richer and nuanced analysis that is attuned to reality.

Each one of the women defenders who has participated in building this story, this document, has a different personal history that has marked her path toward the commitment to social justice. There are very few who have been able to approach activism without first having suffered some of the most devastating impacts of sociopolitical and patriarchal violence themselves. Most of them have experienced victimizing situations and transcended their own experiences, situating them in a context characterized by systematic human rights violations. There are some who share a crucial motivation that has led them to become the women defenders who they are today: unconformity with injustice and empathy for the pain of others. Regardless of their personal histories, all of them have resignified this violence, understanding it as a strategy of social and territorial control at the behest of the State or factual powers or both in collusion.

Understanding the underlying power dynamics in sociopolitical violence is one of the fundamental elements of the politicization process that the women defenders have gone through. However, unraveling the underlying power dynamics in patriarchal oppression is not always part of this process of politicization. The participants experienced the inclusion of the feminist perspective differently, but all of them could identify the repercussions of gender violence on their life experiences, on their activities, and on the struggles that they are involved in. The dialogue with the participants has revealed how the analysis of the mechanisms that repress and oppress them becomes more complex insofar as elements of the feminist perspective are integrated and additional tools are created to face their impacts.

Not all the women defenders consider themselves to be feminists; however, they all recognize the specific repercussions that they suffer for being women human rights defenders. They have personally seen perpetrators use control over women’s bodies to impose themselves and the ‘sexualization’ of violence. They also share situations that illustrate a patriarchy that does not end





at the doors of organizations. Within them, in social movements and collectives, expressions of chauvinism that affect power relations are reproduced in the distribution of roles for carrying out activism, the legitimatization of stances and discourses, the analysis of violence, coping mechanisms, and stances on self-care.

From our experience in psychosocial work at Aluna, we have seen how the impacts always go hand in hand with the ways of coping, and, accordingly, we have verified it with this research. It deals with physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual spheres that are set in motion after traumatic experiences. It is the reasoning between the interpretation that each woman defender has of reality, her personal and collective experience of the impacts, and her response in the form of coping. This reasoning configures the way that traumas are elaborated. It is the interpretation of reality where the appropriation of the psychosocial, political, and feminist tools plays a decisive role; it conditions their interpretation of the impacts and their ways of coping with them.

Accordingly, politicization is one of the most empowering coping mechanisms. When it is carried out collectively, when bonds of solidarity are built with others, the possibilities of facing violence in the context grow as each woman defender unfolds. Collectiveness facilitates the development of their experience, equipping it with an ideological meaning and framing it in a strategy of repression by the State and factual powers. Within collectives, women defenders develop new resources to continue their struggles; they identify with each other, they reinforce each other, and they recognize themselves as political subjects.

Processing emotions, mutual support, joining together, and self-care also represent a process of construction with others. By integrating them with political commitment, the women defenders gain an emancipating, creative, and constructive strength that allows them to claim another form of struggle from a place of sorority and the 'right to happiness.'

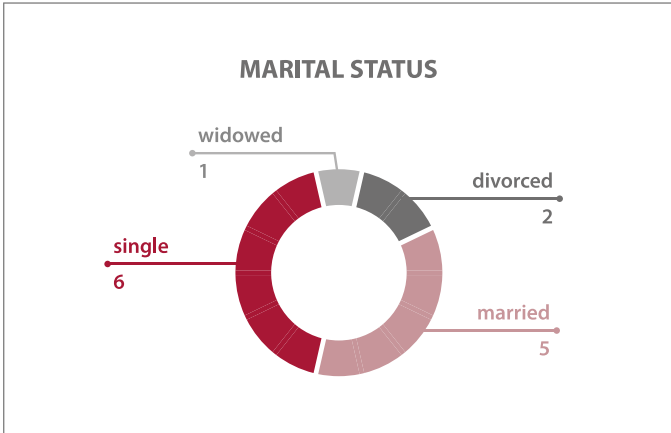
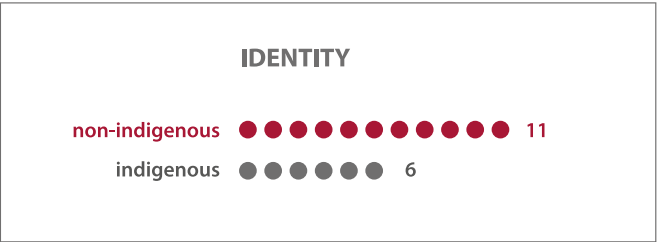
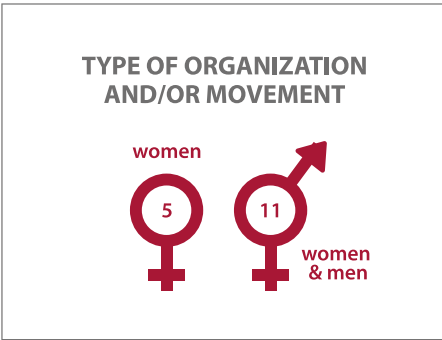
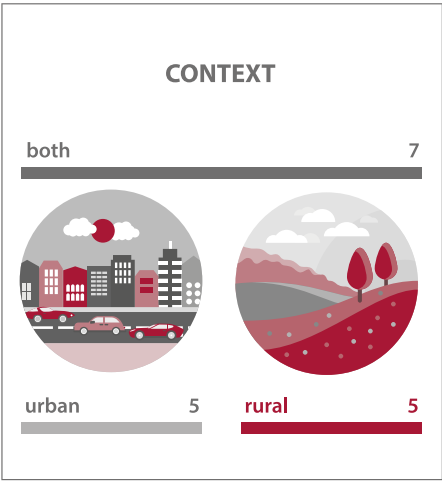
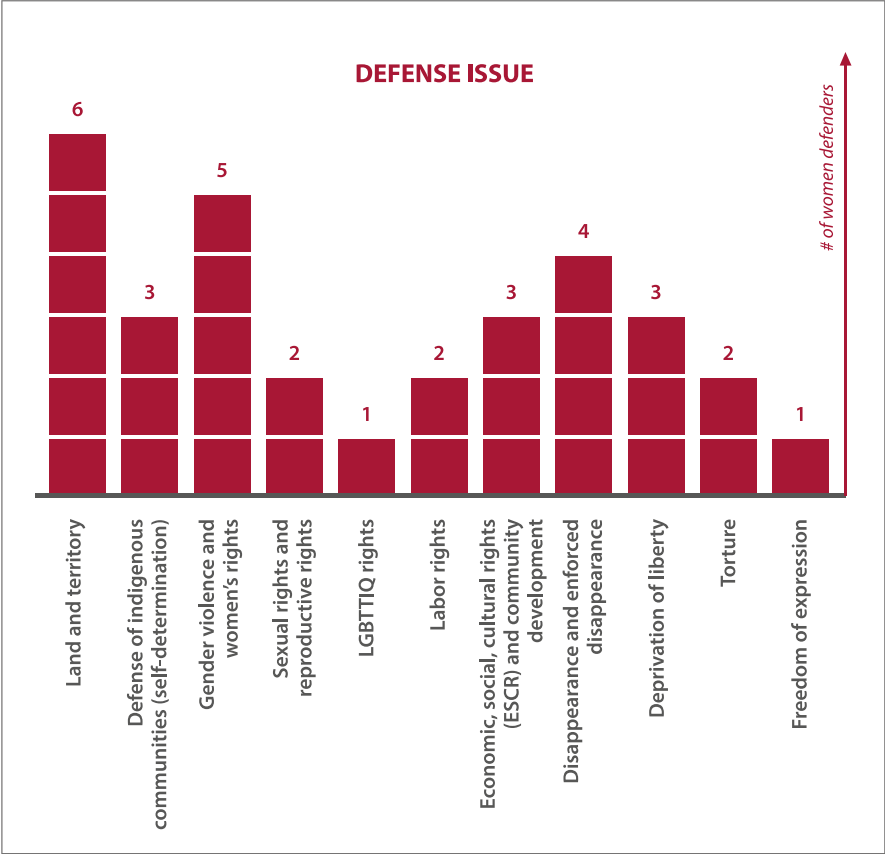
Identifying and naming the impacts and the ways they have been able to cope with them and elaborate on them is a very complex accomplishment that they have all reached. They have lived with and they still live with risk, with fear, and with pain, but their ability to carry on prevails. In their discourse and practice, what they have been able to process and achieve as well as their commitment to human rights takes up more space than the most difficult and disheartening experiences that they have been through.

They are women who have been able to transform the most brutal impacts of violence into 'gasoline' for change, as one of them expressed. They are strong, solidary, committed, and courageous, conscious of their role in creating conditions of dignified living: *"If not us as women,*

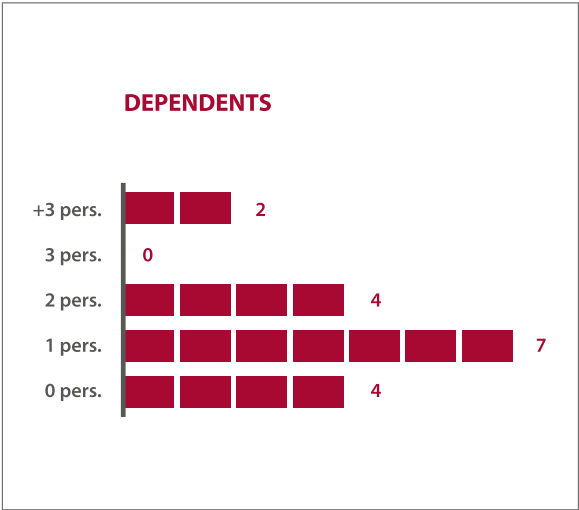
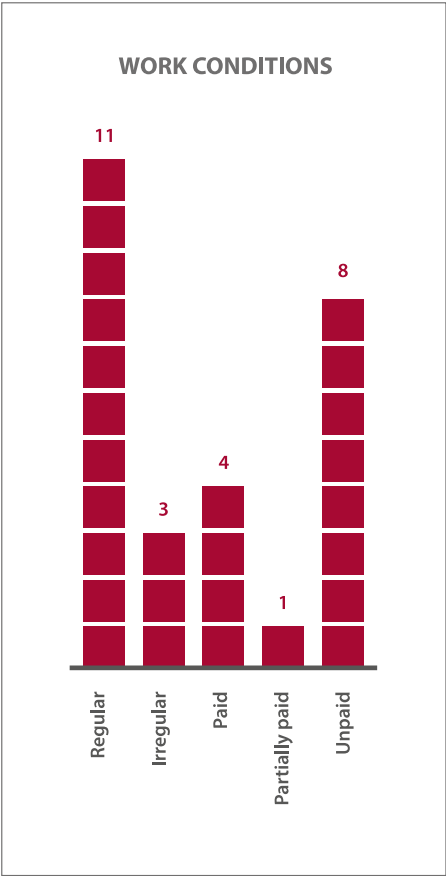
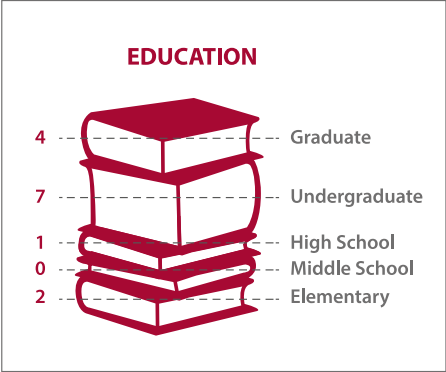
**If not us as women,  
who? If not now,  
when? → *who? If not now, when?"***



# ANNEX



1 Defenders cover more than one defense issue.  
 \* Not all defenders answered this question.



\* Not all defenders answered this question.

2 Not all defenders specified whether they are daughters or sons, partners or parents.

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