About Aluna

Aluna Psychosocial Accompaniment was established in 2013, building on the 27 years of experience of its founder, Clemencia Correa, in providing psychosocial support to HRDs and journalists working in contexts of political violence in Colombia and Mexico. It gathers a group of professionals in mental health and human rights.

Currently, in Mexico, human rights organizations face an environment of risk and latent threat, which has increased due to the strategy of security against drug trafficking. Political subjects, which is how we refer to the persons who constitute organizations and social movements, often lack the perspective that a psychosocial focus allows regarding context analysis and designing political strategies. This entails lack of awareness and understanding of the goals of sociopolitical violence and the impacts for organizations, people and the bonds with their close surroundings.

This kind of damage has a very high socio-emotional and human cost in members of groups, which leads them to confusion and losing their sense of purpose, questioning their political and life projects, it wears down personal relationships and causes inner divisions. Furthermore, it decreases the ability to implement protection measures that could contribute to overcome the effects of the damage. Implementing a psychosocial focus in their perspective and political action would make it possible to create and empower their confrontation and resistance mechanisms with a lower cost in social relationships, and would make their human rights defense projects sustainable.

Sociopolitical violence in Mexico

A series of structural reforms and economical agreements are being implemented in Mexico, which has caused a process of privatization of public services and lands for the purpose of exploiting natural resources, to the benefit of transnational companies and global commerce. In this context, it has been documented that the State, along with economical agents (multinationals, drug cartels, paramilitaries) have performed a series of tactics to impose their private interests over the people
that inhabit and defend these lands, which has led to grievous human rights violations towards large groups of the population.

The so-called war on drug traffic (2006), framed within the security agreements signed with the government of the United States, has accelerated the situation of sociopolitical violence in a large part of the national territory. The implemented strategy is mainly supported in the militarization of the country through the following means:

- Military control of high command positions within public security institutions.
- Joint operations between federal police, local police and the military, through which certain territories become occupied by the military.
- Legitimation of the military through the mass media.

Paramilitarization and the establishment of civilian armed groups controlling the territory have developed in three ways:

- The drug cartels are made up from former militaries who have defected, with the Zetas cartel being a prime example. Furthermore, it is evident that many of the cartels have employed the military to train their armies of hitmen.
- Creation of self-defense armies integrated by armed civilians, originally established to defend themselves from organized crime, and which are sometimes associated with the State or the army. Although some of these self-defense expressions have a legitimate origin and were created in response to the exhaustion of communities that choose self-protection due to the State’s inability to warrant public safety; in other cases they are grenadiers or local businessmen sponsored by companies or the government itself, like the Michoacán self-defense groups.
- Paramilitary groups that work under the name of civilian and popular associations, belonging in many cases to the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) as is the case in Chiapas.

The process of militarizing public security, drug traffic and the paramilitarization are different strategies to occupy territories and exercise control over the population, employing terror as a social control mechanism through: arbitrary arrests, disappearances, tortures and extrajudicial executions. Two examples of the above:

- In July 2014, the military executed 22 persons in Tlatlaya, Estado de México.
- In September, the same year, in Iguala, Guerrero, municipal police aided by armed civilians attacked students of the rural teacher training college in Ayotzinapa, murdering 5 people, three students among them, one of
them named Julio Cesar Mondragón who was tortured to the extreme in the scene of the attack. 43 of the students disappeared and their whereabouts are yet unknown.

In spite of the pressure from international organizations and human rights defense associations like the UN, the IACHR and Amnesty International demanding justice for these two cases, and the accusations that bring light to the gravity of the human rights situation in this country due to corruption and impunity, the Mexican government ignores these versions.

After recovering the presidency and the majority in the parliaments, the right-wing party Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) has become the hegemonic political power. Its alliances with the main political parties which produced the Pacto por México show the homogeneity and alliances that the political class has over the economic and political interests of this country. Some of the features of authoritarianism are:

- Incorporating public officials who are accused of corruption, enrichment and heavy violations of human rights to the Cabinet, and whom remain in complete impunity.
- Alliances with the main television and mass-media companies to manipulate public information.
- Attacks against alternative media and voices that criticize the government.
- Adjusting legal frames to restrict civil and political rights of freedom of press, expression, information, freedom to demonstrate.
- Centralizing intelligence and public security labors in the Ministry of Internal Affairs.
- The ever-present militarization and the appearance of paramilitarization through self-defense armies.
- Political repression against human rights defenders and journalists, as well as massive demonstrations.
- Using social services as propaganda and as means of political co-opting.
- Impunity and the lack of real opposition have allowed the current administration to complete a reform to privatize energy. Which is considered a national heritage and a strategic resource for the national sovereignty and development.
- Complete absence of a real commitment to respect human rights.

Even though the current administration sustains that violence has decreased, the situation is still grievous. The complete figure of homicide in the first nine months of the year 2014 was of 24,746 versus 26,001 in the same period of 2013. Sociopolitical violence targets the population at large, but one of the problems is
that there are no reliable figures to comprehend the magnitude of the damages. Calculations made by human right defense organizations and international organs give global figures between 60,000 and 100,000 murdered people, as well as 25,000 to 40,000 missing people and hundreds of thousands of displaced people. In this context of sociopolitical violence, harassment and attacks towards human rights defenders and journalists have increased while they performed their work. According to the OHCHR, at least 98% of the attacks and assaults against human rights defenders and journalists have gone unpunished.

**Impacts of sociopolitical violence**

Human rights violations (which are performed by the State along other actors such as organized crime, paramilitary organizations and businesses) in situations of sociopolitical violence generate traumatic events because they are carried out in a context of absolute absence of defenses for the victims, who experience pain, fear and impotence from the assault they suffered because their life is at stake. These are experiences of extreme stress that entail a threat to physical, psychologic and ideological integrity.

We call the set of damages caused by human rights violations, psychosocial trauma¹, because they entail traumatic experiences that cause fractures in the continuity of the affected persons’ lives. The damage is often long-term and in many cases, permanent, its impacts don’t just affect the direct persons and groups, but society at large. This is because the impacts of repression tend to generate an expansive effect, which extends and establishes a dialectic relationship between the personal, familiar, collective and social spheres. In spite of that, it is important to say that the people, groups and communities face these situations depending on the magnitude of the event, the degree of exposure to it, their history and available support and sustenance systems.

**Impunity**

Refusing to punish the perpetrators and denying the realization of justice that victims and organizations demand, causes a process of frustration, impotence and hopelessness; thus the victims occasionally have a feeling like there is nothing that can be done but accept the reality that the perpetrator has imposed. This is part of the traumatic process which those responsible of the situation of violence pretend to propitiate, which empowers the victimizer and allows them to continue violating human rights; meanwhile society and the organizations are cornered into

¹ “[...in speaking of psychosocial trauma, we also want to emphasize two other aspects which are often forgotten: (a) the wound that affects people has been socially produced, which is to say its roots are not in the individual but in its society, and (b) that its nature itself feeds and sustains itself from the relationship between the individual and society through various collective and individual institutional mediation. Which has obvious and important consequences when determining what should be done to overcome these trauma.” (Martín-Baró, Ignacio, “La violencia política y la guerra como causas del trauma psicosocial en el salvador”, Revista de Psicología de El Salvador, 1990, Vol. IX, No. 35, p.89-108).
questioning and abandoning their fight for defense and demand. Finally, impunity leads to normalization, acceptance, and therefore cooperation so that it can prevail. The Mexican government has maintained impunity for decades about events that constitute grievous human rights violations: such is the case of the student massacre of 1968, the crimes of the dirty war in Guerrero and the forced disappearance of 43 teachers’ training college students in Ayotzinapa. In all these cases, injustice has prevailed.

The social polarization of the population is a result of the fracture of trust bonds within society itself in its different social classes, sectors and between the former and the government. There are no real spaces for political participation that may lead to a true influence in public policies, which causes a process of sectioning and violent confrontation. There is a process of social weariness which leads to radicalization in protests; exhaustion of pacifist means to achieve any vindication, which legitimizes violence to resolve the demands.

The imposition of neoliberal economic policies with the impoverishment of the majorities the privatization of public services, the dispossession of lands and natural resources, the sociopolitical violence and insecurity, the regression in matters of human rights and social security, corruption as a symbol of making politics, abuses in power are some of the situations that are currently among the consequences of the preservation of impunity by the Mexican State.

**Fear**

The majority of the population, particularly people of low and middle class, are under a constant feeling of threat and risk, be it due to their economical shortcomings, sociopolitical violence, or both situations. These risk factors have increased exponentially for human rights defenders, who at the start of their labors must not only confront the State, they also face private actors (organized crime, paramilitaries, businesses) that carry on outside the margins of legality, often with the complicity of the authorities. These circumstances increase risks and minimize protection and safety schemes.

Repression and criminalization of social activists and human rights defenders, and the visibility of these exemplary violent actions in the media are tactics to spread terror. Such is the case with the repression exercised against the Ayotzinapa teachers’ training college students, which had an echo of horror that spread all over the country and internationally.

Psychosocial trauma due to terror and threats leads to the following impacts on human rights defense organizations:

- The limits of reality are distorted, which creates confusion between reality and fantasy, what is possible or impossible, what is allowed and what isn’t. This causes human rights defenders to fall into dangerous extremes; on one hand complete denial of risks, exposing themselves to attacks that may compromise
their physical and mental integrity; on the other extreme, over-protection and political immobility, which could lead them to abandon the fight to defend and demand their rights.

- Power abuse and violence can become increasingly worse without eliciting a reaction of social indignation or communal protection, given that the threshold of alarm created by fear to react is altered, and the conditions of abuse and violence are gradually accepted or minimized.

- Actions to demand and defend human rights, social protest and political participation are inhibited among the population. Actions of solidarity for these causes or the people defending human rights are decreased. There are extreme cases in which social stigma is created, isolating human rights defenders from social support and turning them into targets to be attacked by the population itself, or to accept that they are attacked. This is the case of numerous social protests and guilds that fight to vindicate human rights, such as teachers or relatives of those who have disappeared.

- Moving human right defenders into safer cities given the circumstances of risks and threats present in their local regions, which can be temporary or definitive.

- Human rights defenders look for stronger organizations to shelter them, since the ones that exist in their regions are weak or share a similar risk.

**Breaking of bonds**

- One of sociopolitical violence’s transversal impacts is changes and affectations in human relations, from the most personal to the most collective ones. If anything is broken it’s the bonds with loved ones, with projects, spaces as a consequence of the destructuring and deconfiguring of references that have been created on a personal, collective and social levels. In the words of Martín Baró, this is “an undermining of social relationships, -which are the building blocks over which we configure ourselves historically as persons and as a human community-... that such deterioration of social coexistence is taking place is in itself a severe social disorder, worsening our collective capability to work and love, to reaffirm our particular identity, of having our own personal say in the history of the peoples.”

- Social polarization is one of the damages that political repression seeks to elicit in social relations; such phenomenon entails that, beginning with the repression incidents, groups, collectives and communities that had generated a process of project cohesion and construction, end up divided in smaller groups and even see each other as enemies. Baró explains that polarization involves a process of extremization and resignification of existing attitudes that distance one group from the others. One of the clearer impacts is “mutual distrust, social relations

---

2Martín-Baró, Ignacio, *Impacto psicológico del conflicto social*, Summary of the lectura in the Seminar-Workshop imparted by Dr. Ignacio Martín-Baró on october 4th and 5th 1985 in en Costa Rica, San José: Liberación.
become extremely difficult, exchanges are often limited to an individual’s inner circle or remain in superficial, stereotypical forms towards strangers, diminishing the reach and depth of social life.”

- From our position in the work we undertake we have witnessed how human rights defenders’ various bonds are affected. Firstly, relationships in the family sphere are affected, since not all family members understand their relative’s endeavor of activism or human rights defense and which incurs attacks or repression. Human rights defenders live the effects of violence in their family sphere because siblings, aunts, uncles, parents and children can react by stigmatizing them, blaming them or even treating them with indifference and isolation; which leads to a reconfiguration of internal relationships for or against them. Such fissures also appear within their organizations when they receive threats or become victims of repression. These affect the process of what to do or of reacting to these situations. These entail a painful process of internal confrontation for political subjects.

- The reaction or confrontation process itself constitutes challenges that incur costs for the members of the organizations and which don’t always possess the resources that could help them resolve them. Likewise, relationships amongst organizations are constantly changing, groups and alliances are reconfigured, bonds of trust and solidarity are broken, there’s an increase in rivalries and competitiveness for visibility, representation of their causes, financing, media coverage, among others.

- Another impact is difficulty in constituting support networks. The vast amount of cases and situations causes that activists or solidary people can’t cope, since they are the same persons and organizations that conform different spaces of solidarity and synergy. Although it is also important to mention that it is increasingly common to find networks and collectives made up of victims who decide to get together and create links with each other, thus creating new bonds and collective subjects.

**Stress and weariness**

- If all the above wasn’t enough, most times civilian organizations are submitted to highly stressful work schedules due to the amount of emergencies they must tend to in supporting victims. Therefore, there is a very small amount of time that can be invested in personal and collective strengthening as well as planning strategies. The high work demand does not match the weariness, stress and risks they might be suffering.

- Organizations working in conflict-ridden areas have more difficulties in warranting internal care of their teams in the face of risks, for they find

---

Ibidem.
themselves engulfed in situations that do not allow them to remove themselves from the context to perform an analysis, or the distance that would allow them to design tactics to confront the problems in a planned, rather than reactive, manner.

- In this scenario, building long-term prevention proposals is very difficult for human rights defense organizations. It’s hard to find the time and space to carry out a labor about the psycho-emotional impact, which is left behind in favor of other necessities or legal and political interests. These organizations are submitted to a very strong pressure, which entails difficulty in the trust relationships and in the articulation of more solidary and horizontal relationships.

- All of the above entails that relationships with organizations over the course of accompaniment processes are very diverse and unstable, so the psychosocial accompaniment processes are also affected by these dynamics and difficulties.

**Mourning**

- Political subjects who are victims of sociopolitical violence can suffer processes of multiple losses: their life project, their loved ones, their sources of income, their way of living, the place where they grew up if they are displaced, etc. In many cases this may overturn references and beliefs, which causes a loss of the sense of fighting or of their cause.

- Facing losses entails a process that must go through different phases in order to heal or be compensated, this will also depend on what is lost and the circumstances that the people and organizations have to live through the mourning process.

- In cases of human rights violations, it is common that these mourning processes are altered, be it either due to the pressure and harassment coming one after the other, the type of human rights violation or the situations that organizations must face to survive that keep them from carrying on the rituals that would help them complete the mourning process.

- In most of the cases in which we’ve provided accompaniment, there are multiple mourning processes that last an extended period of time, so it takes longer for human rights defenders to resolve them, which causes them to go back to states of depression, hopelessness and discouragement on multiple occasions.

- Our duties in psychosocial accompaniment on cases of human rights violations during mourning processes attempt to make the development of its different phases viable; however, it is very difficult to sustain a process that makes it possible in every sphere.
Stigmatization and social guilt

- Human rights violations create a social stigma on the victims which adds to the traumatic event. This social stigma entails the victim’s isolation and a sort of brand that questions their dignity and honor, thus the victim lives through a process that legitimizes the violence against them. Furthermore, such violations cause a loss of status, since the individuals often lose their life projects, economical resources, and occasionally they even find themselves in the need to travel and isolate themselves as a means of protection.

- Another frequent response to these situations, which is directly related to the stigma, is guilt, which entails psychological suffering associated with thoughts and feelings of self-accusation. This reaction takes place in victims of human rights violations and it is a way to give an explanation and meaning to an extreme situation that goes beyond their usual limits, even if this leads to negative effects on the individual.

- Guilt is often socially induced, in other words, the victims themselves or their families are criminalized or accused of being responsible of provoking their own situation. Thus, guilt itself becomes an instrument of social control, a justification of the atrocities committed, and a way to maintain the impunity of the perpetrators. In many countries, lack of sensibility in regards to the suffering of human rights violations victims is a dehumanizing element which contributes to the scenario that makes it possible for the sociopolitical violence to continue.

- It is also possible to find social guilt, which happens when members of a community or society blame victims and organizations that demand justice, fearing that their lives will be at risk if there has been a report. In such cases, fear, rage and the risk of what may happen is not blamed on the victimizer, on the contrary, in many occasions responsibility is laid on the victims’ themselves; they are blamed, pointed at and thus sometimes they are even asked to stay silent so their scandal won’t affect others.

- The feeling of guilt may be reactivated in extreme situations and under great violence. These situations can be exemplified with the cases of missing relatives, whose families may share the feeling that they didn’t or aren’t doing enough to find their loved one. Although there are types of guilt that are experienced at an individual level, they can also be reproduced in collectives or organizations, for it isn’t present only on the direct victim, it is also projected into their various bonds. For instance, in cases of women who have been raped, their husbands may feel guilty about not doing enough to prevent the rape, even if they didn’t have the chance to do any more than they did, and therefore they are labeled as a useless man.
• Thus, the feeling of guilt entails the load of a moral debt: what is yet to be paid, what we were unable to do, what we should’ve done but didn’t. It means living in debt: fearing death and life equally.

• In Mexico, the government working in complicity with the groups in power has created discourse that attempts to shape social imaginary about events of human rights violations to avoid their responsibility and place the blame or responsibility on the victims or those who defend them. The State has tried to create social stigmas, trying to delegitimize social activists by linking them with the drug cartels, criminal or subversive groups. It has also tried to create messages that hold society at large responsible, blaming them for the situation of violence.

**Aluna and psychosocial accompaniment**

*Our mission:* We are a Civil Society organization that contributes to strengthening individuals and organizations that are affected by sociopolitical violence, from a psychosocial perspective, so that they can continue their work in defense of human rights in Mexico.

*Our vision:* We want to see Mexico free of sociopolitical violence, where political subjects have contributed to construct truth, justice and dignity.

*Overall goal:* To strengthen political subjects in projects of human rights defense using the psychosocial perspective through the creation of psycho-emotional, political, and safety tools that help them reinforce their collective dynamics so they can continue developing their efforts in a context of sociopolitical violence.

**Aluna’s psychosocial focus**

We work with mental health and human rights from a psychosocial focus:

a) We are permanently situated in reflecting about the context and we assess economic, political and social relations that generate situations of injustice, inequality and repression.

b) From where we stand, psychosocial work is not neutral, we choose to accompany organized social subjects who are victims of human rights violations, who are committed to make demands for truth, justice and reparation of the damages, and to seek for the conditions for a dignified life.

c) Our work method is inspired in the Social Psychology for Liberation by Martín Baró and the Popular Pedagogy by Paulo Freire. Our starting points are the political subject’s needs and their socioeconomic situation; we are trying to contribute in understanding the damages and risks caused by sociopolitical violence and we’re betting on a joint construction of confrontation and resistance
mechanisms in different spheres of their lives that may be affected, including the individual and collective aspects of it.

**Areas of Work**
Aluna’s model of psychosocial accompaniment includes five areas of work:

- **Psychosocial support in crisis situations** to persons or groups whose physical and emotional integrity is at risk due to the nature of their work, the context, and violence they are facing;
- **Psychosocial support to strengthen organizations** so that they can recognize the impact of political violence on them as individuals and as a collective, and together create resistance strategies through their political project, security and emotional well-being practices, and internal processes;
- **Education and Training** for human rights organizations and social movements so that they can integrate a psychosocial perspective and security into their organizational projects, and themselves provide accompaniment to other affected by socio-political violence;
- **Research and analysis** including documentation of the causes and impacts of socio-political violence on HRDs and society in general, in order to increase their visibility and contribute to historical memory;
- **Systematization** of the Psychosocial Accompaniment Model, in order to facilitate its sharing and implementation by other organizations. It is in this context that the *Modelo de Acompañamiento Psicosocial* was published in 2017.

**Importance of Aluna’s psychosocial accompaniment**

- Working from the perspective of Liberation Psychology allows us to take into consideration the context, socioeconomic conditions, internal dynamics inside organizations, and thus adapt to the needs of the subjects we accompany.
- Because our work on the critical analysis of reality allows us to understand the complexity of the context and the intentions of violence, and from the perspective of human rights, the State’s responsibility (by action, omission or acquiescence, for it is politically and legally in charge of seeing for the well-being of its citizens) so that subjects who fight in defense of human rights may generate actions in a more integral manner.
- Because approaching understanding of the damage in all of its dimensions allows subjects to find meaning in the experience and become more active and generate more integral responses.
Because the methodology we use allows us to see beyond the therapeutic angle and looks not only to mitigate the damage, but also to strengthen strategic political processes facing a continuous worsening of the context.

Because the methodology we use allows us to find options and reinforce alternatives that can minimize frustration and impotence in the face of impunity and the institutional responses given by the State.

Because aiding in a joint creation of protective and psycho-emotional tools that allows them to feel safer to keep carrying out their work is a way to face the fear caused by the risk that entails the defense of human rights.

Because formative processes allow subjects to create prevention and strategic reaction processes to diminish the consequences of weariness caused by the job, by aiming them towards the understanding and practical inclusion of the psychosocial perspective.

Challenges

- The environment of sociopolitical violence in our country is not about to stop; quite the contrary, our current conditions let us observe that the gravity of this context will undoubtedly increase. Thus we think it is vital to create psychosocial alternatives with which we’re able to continue developing the accompaniment work towards human rights defenders who are in situations of risk and threat.

- We shall continue our work in documenting and researching the impacts of sociopolitical violence and the confrontation and resistance mechanisms performed by social subjects to contribute to our nation’s historical memory.

- We will continue creating the required conditions to tend to the impacts of the violent situation. Given the State’s lack of political will, a wide articulation and synergy of efforts is necessary, from different sectors in civilian society, organizations, churches, academics, to make the eventual reconstruction of the social tissue possible.

- Aiding in the strengthening and increasing articulations and synergies within various sectors of civilian society which bring organizations, churches and the academia together in the face of the State’s lack of will, that are necessary to tend to the impacts of the situation of sociopolitical violence, which will eventually allow us to rebuild the social tissue.

- To train new generations of subjects who are aware of the magnitude of the situation, which would allow us to build the social and political conditions we need to make truth, justice and the repair of the damages caused by sociopolitical violence by making them viable.