

# FEMINIST HOLISTIC PROTECTION

*to Transform the Crisis  
in Times of COVID-19*

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# TODAY MORE THAN EVER, WE NEED FEMINIST HOLISTIC PROTECTION

## **Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders know about “crisis”.**

We inherited centuries of colonization, inequality, dispossession, and violence on our bodies and territories. We have resisted violence and repression imposed by capitalism, patriarchy, and racism, and we have opened paths of rebelliousness, justice, and life with dignity for ourselves and our communities.

**We also know about caring.** We learned to care for and preserve life, although most times in situations of exploitation and without the deserved recognition. We learned from our peoples that no one survives without the daily protection of those who feed us, hold us, heal us. We work to also safeguard what sustains us – water, crops, forests. We know that all beings are vulnerable and we all need collective care in order to survive.

As women human rights defenders (WHRDs), transgressing the gender mandates that force us to attend to the needs of others above our lives and our rights, we have used this wisdom of caring to protect each other, weaving networks of solidarity and healing that make our emancipation path possible and protect the legacy and continuity of our diverse struggles for social transformation. We save ourselves together, and together we keep ourselves safe from the multiple sources of violence that hound us.

**This energy that makes us sisters and connects us with our ancestors and the historical struggles of our peoples is what inspired the creation of the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras) in 2010.** It is from this coordinated space that we promote Feminist Holistic Protection strategies, connecting with more than 2.000 WHRDs who participate in the Initiative in different countries in the region. Feminist Holistic Protection strategies place caring for our lives and our struggles at the center of political action, and makes protection a collective act that strengthens the wisdom and resources that we already have, giving authority, legitimacy, and justice to women, their needs, and their dreams.

Everything that was constructed over these past 10 years – the result of the feminist vision and experience of defenders and organizations in diverse social movements in Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador – has been essential to together face the health crisis created by COVID-19. As we stated in *“The Crisis Was Already Here”*, the current situation deepens structural inequality, racism, and misogyny, and forces us, in a context of growing authoritarianism, to make huge efforts to continue our work as defenders, at the same time that we build organization, resistance, and attend to the urgent needs of our communities.

**To address COVID-19, IM-Defensoras has activated Feminist Holistic Protection strategies, through each national space and regionally, to strengthen our communities of care. We seek to enable women defenders to face this crisis together and in safety, addressing our basic needs, healing the impact in our bodies and our lives, supporting our communities and continuing our struggles.**

It has not been easy. Like all defenders and women in the region, our lives and our struggles are affected by this adverse and uncertain context; we feel anxious and afraid for what is happening and some of us have lost loved ones or have become ill ourselves. At the same time, we take care of ourselves collectively, building alternatives and sharing doubts, knowledge, resources, feelings, and hopes. We embrace at a distance; we have cried, healed, and laughed together.

This article synthesizes the main strategies that IM-Defensoras has activated to face the current situation. We want to celebrate what we have done together and honor those who make it possible. Because each action contributes so that physical isolation is not equated with social distancing and political confinement; because knowing that we are together and the conviction of collective care gives us strength, creativity, and rebelliousness to continue.

# NETWORKS SAVE LIVES

**Once more, we confirmed that the WHRD networks that we built in the different Mesoamerican countries are our primary strength to face this crisis.** These are spaces that we have spent more than a decade building and strengthening in order to protect each other and overcome numerous challenges.

**The networks are organized nationally and locally because we know that the most effective protection is activated in the territory and the nearest surroundings.**

The networks involve lawyers, defenders of territory and the environment, gender-sex diversity activists, feminist organizations and collectives, students, youth, journalists, healers, accompaniment providers, spiritual guides, shamans, domestic workers, academics, indigenous and afro-descendent peoples' leaders, trans people, sex workers, home-makers, among others.

**Each network has a team that coordinates activities and accompanies defenders at risk, their families, organizations, and communities.** This team is made up of defenders who know the reality in each territory and develop protection strategies side-by-side with sister defenders at risk, based on the context and concrete needs of each defender. We come together in the IM-Defensoras regional space, where we mobilize resources; activate urgent alert and campaigns to denounce, express solidarity and support; strengthen capacities; and connect with other networks and organizations globally.

This organizational architecture has been crucial for timely activation of all the accompaniment, resources, strategies and support, which has multiplied since the arrival of the health crisis in our region. Above all, it was constituted as a community of care, of closeness and permanent contact.

# DOCUMENTING IMPACT, RECOGNIZING HOW WE ARE DOING

Since the beginning, IM-Defensoras has had a mechanism to register the violence we experience as women defenders and has created safe spaces to share and jointly build our reflections, fears, and proposals for protection. As soon as the governments in our countries began dictating measures to address the health emergency, **the teams responsible for the registry, security and self-care, collective care, and healing in each national network reached out to the WHRDs who we accompany and with whom we coordinate in different territories to learn about their needs.**

Later, we began a series of virtual analysis meetings and a diagnostic exercise of needs and impacts through a tool directed at 500 defenders in Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, the results of which we are currently analyzing.

**Prioritizing, from the beginning, the recognition of and how we are affected and what our needs are, but also the different ways that defenders are analyzing and living the pandemic, has been very important in order to make the Feminist Holistic Protection strategies concrete** in response to the multiple needs in this context. This entails recognizing how the measures adopted by governments affect our lives and our political action; what the most immediate needs are; what new forms of attacks we are facing; and how States and powerful groups are weakening the already fragile democracy and increasing authoritarianism.

# SUSTAIN WHAT IS BASIC FOR LIFE, REMAIN IN COMMUNICATION

One of the first needs we identified at the start of the health crisis was that sister defenders in all of the countries where we work were quickly losing access to basic services and resources. Added to the restrictions that everyone has, WHRDs face harassment by authorities when restrictions of movement increase, or social support is deliberately denied due to our work denouncing human rights violations.

**The networks have been mobilizing resources so defenders can purchase food and basic necessities for themselves and their families.**

From solidarity pantries and community food distribution, to direct resource allocation. The National Network of WHRDs in Honduras has also been working with various local organizations to support diverse alternatives for food sovereignty and security: community gardens, community kitchens, and other actions that strengthen the sense of community in response to the individualistic logic they try to impose on us.

**With confinement measures, communication has become a particularly important and basic need in this crisis.** Limitations in this sphere considerably increase risks faced by defenders, and make the possibility of continuing their political action more difficult. **This is why one of the most common types of support in all of the countries has been related to communications: phone-recharging, purchase of credit and cell phone equipment.**

# STRENGTHENING OUR HEALTH, HEALING TOGETHER

With the limited access to, and the collapse and deficiency of health services affected by decades of neoliberal policies, **we provide support through the networks in the form of resources, medicines, health insurance, or processing safe-passage letters that allow defenders to attend to their health needs and those of their families.** In Nicaragua, special assistance has been given to WHRDs who are in prison or have been released, who have diverse health problems and are not being treated. Medical consultations have also been made available, in response to the lack of governmental policy and the refusal of authorities to recognize and act upon the pandemic.

Fear, worry, uncertainty, grief, and exhaustion from virtual work, often without appropriate conditions and with the added burden of care work, has affected our lives and our struggles. In response, **we have strengthened alliances with networks and organizations of healers, accompaniment providers, guides, and therapists to jointly take care of ourselves and reflect on self-care, collective care, and healing in these times of deepening of capitalism and the health crisis, about our identities and our bodies, about the grief that we are experiencing.**

We have put a special emphasis on **honoring wisdoms built and sharing different resources that we have developed at IM-Defensoras and allied organizations and communities with whom we collaborate.** Resources to recognize the impacts of this situation on our bodies and our lives, to have moments to breathe and activate our healing power. Within this framework, we share the “Compendium of Self-Care and Healing Tools” (“*Compendio de herramientas de Autocuidado y Sanación*”) developed by Consorcio Oaxaca and the IM-Defensoras regional strategy for Self-Care, Collective Care, and Healing; and the manual “Garifuna Ancestral Medicine - Alternatives to combat coronavirus” (“*Medicina ancestral Garífuna – Alternativas para combatir el coronavirus*”) developed by OFRANEH and published with the National Network of WHRDs in Honduras.

The National Network of WHRDs in Mexico convened a series of conversations – “Working with our emotions in the context of COVID-19” – directed at network members to strengthen their tools for psychosocial accompaniment, self-care, and healing.

**Art is also part of our care processes.**

Therefore, we are opening several artistic spaces and languages so that defenders can express what is happening and what we are feeling at this time. Through the “Rebellious Voices” (“*Voces Rebeldes*”) or the distribution of poems “To heal from confinement” (“Para curarse el encierro”), we use poetic and creative language to express ourselves and connect among ourselves. Because being able to connect with laughter and happiness is also part of healing and resistance, we are organizing a “Zoom Cabaret” along with the feminist cabaret Las Reinas Chulas and other allies.

## SECURITY FOR WHRDS IN TIMES OF CONFINEMENT

The responses of governments and power groups to the pandemic have led to new attacks on WHRDs that add to and exacerbate the already existing attacks. In these months, we have documented assassinations, arbitrary arrests, raids, smear campaigns, harassment, online violence, as well as violations of various rights of imprisoned women defenders and their families.

**We have also worked on capacity strengthening through exchanges, accompaniment, and workshops on Feminist Holistic Protection in Mexico, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras.**

**The security and urgent action teams in each network conduct online monitoring and risk analysis for WHRDs at risk**, with the aim of ensuring that confinement and social control measures will not affect their protection processes. Using secure online communication channels, we continue accompanying WHRDs on security issues and we have developed a specific methodology for online risk analysis. Faced with movement restrictions, we have developed different actions so that **defenders can travel safely across territories. In Mexico, the network has developed protocols for safe movement and relocation** for WHRDs at risk.

The smear campaigns, attacks and threats through social media have increased considerably, and they come from the highest levels of power. In response, we have **reinforced digital security measures and training**. In El Salvador, a needs mapping was conducted regarding communication and secure communication, and a workshop was offered regarding fake news and digital security, with the support of the regional Registry and Communications Team.

Like many other people, WHRD network members were stranded or are still in the process of seeking refuge in other countries. **IM-Defensoras provides resources so that defenders who were away from the homes could live through the confinement period** without economic restrictions until a safe return to their home country is possible.

# ANTE LA CRISIS IN THIS CRISIS, WE DENOUNCE, TAKE CARE OF OURSELVES, AND RECOGNIZE OUR WISDOMS

During these months when denouncing human rights violations and attacks on WHRDs easily become invisible, we have intensified our communications and advocacy work to denounce abuses and violence committed in this moment and have contributed to developing a narrative of the pandemic from the perspective of peoples and women defenders. **From 8 March to November, IM-Defensoras has issued 136 alerts, 36 of which are directly related to attacks in the context of implementing COVID-19 measures.** We published “The Crisis Was Already Here” (*“La crisis ya estaba aquí. Defensoras mesoamericanas ante COVID-19”*) that shows the escalation of violence and human rights violations against women human rights defenders throughout the region. We presented the report as part of the *webinar series of the Mexican organization Luchadoras “Live-Home”*.

We have conducted advocacy at the IAHRC, the UNOHCHR, and with various international mechanisms and national authorities regarding the threats, harassment and defamation on social media against WHRDs in El Salvador; the increase in violence in Lenca and Garifuna communities organized through COPINH and OFRANEH; the attacks on WHRDs in different parts of the region; and the situation of imprisoned WHRDs in Nicaragua. Hundreds of organizations have joined our calls – both those launched by us and jointly with other sister organizations – denouncing violence against WHRDs and their communities in *Honduras, Guatemala* and *El Salvador*.

The network in Honduras published two newsletters about the situation of WHRDs titled “Women Defenders in Honduras Facing COVID-19” (*“Mujeres Defensoras de Honduras ante el COVID-19”*); the network in Mexico disseminated the results of its monitoring of attacks on WHRDs during the period January-April 2020; and we have sustained our support for the #QueLasLiberen regional campaign that denounces the conditions of WHRDs in Nicaragua who are in prison and those who have been released.

To counter the hate speech, misinformation and discrimination that the pandemic has exacerbated, we have promoted campaigns that allow us to change narratives and recognize alternatives for health and dignified life promoted by women defenders and their communities. The network in Honduras launched the campaign “In the face of coronavirus, solidarity and care” (*“Ante el Coronavirus Solidaridad y Cuido”*) to promote a non-discriminatory feminist view, and the network in El Salvador disseminates information and analysis about the current context and the responses of WHRDs through its radio program #DefensorasyDiversasSomosTodas. We promoted the campaign *“#SusVidasSonNuestrasVidas”* alongside OFRANEH and COPINH to denounce the increase in attacks on the Garifuna and Lenca peoples in Honduras, but importantly also to recognize the response that they have given to the crisis from a logic that is counter to social distancing and rights violations.

To learn how WHRDs are responding to the crisis from other cosmovisions and strategies, we promoted learning spaces like the webinars “Let’s talk about life: Defenders of territory and common goods contribute wisdoms and alternatives to address the crisis” (*“Hablemos de vida: las defensoras del territorio y los bienes comunes aportan saberes y alternativas frente a la crisis”*) and “Reflections and practices in self-care and collective care” (*“Reflexiones y prácticas de autocuidado y cuidado colectivo”*) (both co-convened with Fondo Calala), and “Women defenders and the right to defend human rights in times of pandemic” (*“Mujeres defensoras y el derecho a defender derechos humanos en tiempos de pandemia”*) (co-organized with CEJIL and other organizations). More than one thousand people and organizations participated in these spaces.

**Against this system of death that wants us confined and silenced, women defenders continue raising our voice, centering care for life, and making the principle that Networks Save Lives a reality.**

None of what we have built and accompanied in these uncertain and challenging months would have been possible without the generosity, alliances, and synergies among the WHRDs and organizations that form IM-Defensoras, the organizations, struggle communities, and allied networks in each country, at the regional level, and internationally. **With all of us together, we sustain ourselves.**

Because we do not  
give up hope,

**TODAY MORE THAN EVER**

**THE FEMINIST HOLISTIC PROTECTION**

**EXPERIENCE GIVES US STRENGTH SO THAT**

**THE DEEP CHANGES THAT OUR WORLD**

**NEEDS CONTINUE TO BE POSSIBLE.**