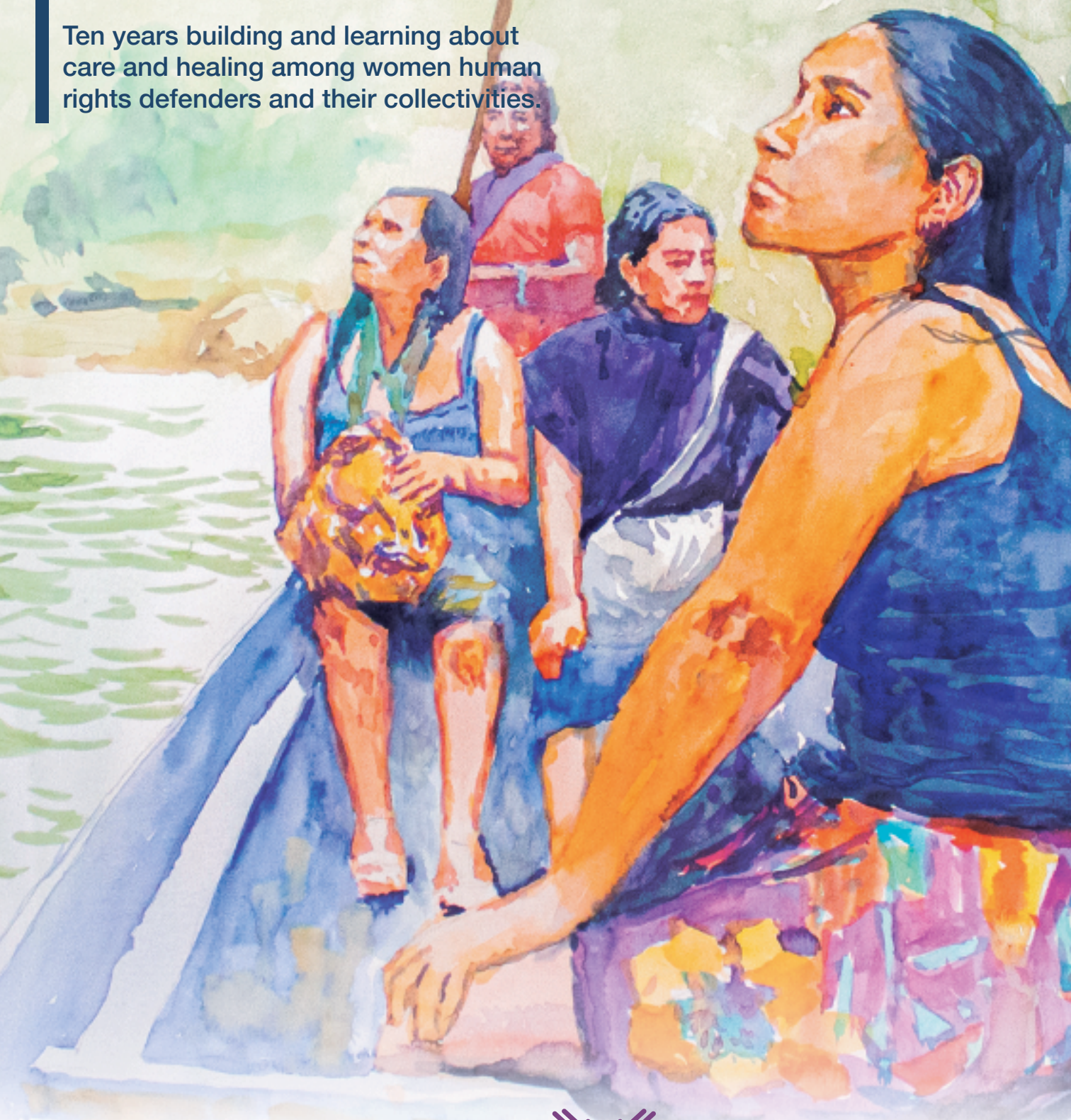


# Between fresh water and the tides

Ten years building and learning about care and healing among women human rights defenders and their collectivities.



IM-DEFENSORAS





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Ten years building and learning about care and healing  
among women human rights defenders and their collectivities.



**IM-DEFENSORAS**

La IM-Defensoras está conformada por:



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## Threshold

This publication indicates a pause on the journey that the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras) embarked on over a decade ago, seeking to safeguard not only the defense of human rights but also the dignity of women human rights defenders (hereafter, women defenders or WHRDs) who contribute every day to the construction of more just worlds.

Without a clear map from the start, our intention served as a compass, guiding our footsteps so that we could meet, hug, smile, or cry with other women who – like us – experienced pain, sadness, anger, helplessness, as well as hope in their human rights work. We succeeded in touching each other from the heart. We reached those who lost a friend or family member in a context of violence where women defenders face persecution, criminalization, femicide, or disappearance. We became intertwined with those who defend land, wind and its spirits, mountains and their strength, water and life, the heart of the sky and of the land, the history that the ancestors bequeathed us.

A handful of activists gathered in 2010, pained by the increasing violence against women human rights defenders in the region. There, in the space that gave rise to IM-Defensoras, we gathered strength and hope, a breadth of political intelligence, many women, experienced leaders and young rebels as well.

For us, the assessment at that meeting was clear: States and de facto powers are uncomfortable with us because we denounce, claim rights, demand justice; because we nurture and lead movements in resistance to impunity, greed, racism, neoliberalism, capitalism, sexism, and patriarchy.

These predatory models have always attempted to strip us of our ancestral peoples' wisdoms, of care, of the Web of Life. However, we at IM-Defensoras realized early on the vital importance of giving new meaning to self-care, collective care, and healing as a legacy and a necessary transgressive practice to strengthen our movements. We understood the need to question the dynamics of an activism that, as a consequence of the hostile context in which we live, has become very demanding and – in the case of women – regularly continues to reproduce the gender mandates of “living for others”. We know that we can strengthen our collective wellbeing just by challenging this inside the social movements we nurture. We learned that healing ourselves is an act of justice, a righteous rebelliousness.

Throughout these years, we have been able to share not only our actions, but also our emotions and affections. To this end, IM-Defensoras has promoted various strategies and activities documented in this report. These include assessments to understand how we are doing; funds to address health, wellness, and security needs; *Casa La Serena* and *Casa La Siguata* healing houses for women defenders to rest and heal; workshops to explore the topic and provide tools for care; spaces for collective and individual care where we can see and embrace each other; and virtual dialogues and publications that capture our reflections and our ways of healing together.

IM-Defensoras has consolidated Feminist Holistic Protection as a political proposal with a heart at the center: caring so as never to lose sight of the importance of women defenders in ensuring that the threads of life and resistance remain possible, that the social movements in which we participate become stronger every day. This is why we work to create, give new meaning to, and practice collective care and healing processes in each country, in an open and diverse manner, each one with its own stamp.

Healing is a living, continuous, and collective process that reclaims all ancestral wisdoms and all possible therapeutic approaches for a state of wellbeing. *“Between Fresh Water and the Tides”* tells the story how IM-Defensoras’ care strategy has evolved over the last ten years, while also describing how each national network in Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, and Nicaragua has constructed care processes based on their unique ways of intertwining resources and bringing care to life in each of these territories.

When we say that *“Between Fresh Water and the Tides”* is a pause on the journey, it is because we want to share and celebrate what we have walked, to open our eyes to the landscapes ahead. We want to reclaim the voices of many women who have been a key part of this woven network of care over these ten years. This exercise allows us to rethink the paths we will follow during these dark times, because their words are torches that shine a light on our collective journey.

Here is the long account of our work, not without fatigue, not without contradictions, not without conflicts, but with much respect, admiration, commitment, and love for all those women who have made our first decade possible and, with them, with those who are here and with those who will come, we wish to continue imagining and building a horizon of hope.

» *Ana María Hernández Cárdenas*

» *Nallely Guadalupe Tello Méndez*

**Regional Commission on Self-care, Collective Care, and Healing IM-Defensoras**

Between fresh water and the tides

## Methodological Note

This collective systematization was developed using a Feminist Popular Education approach and carried out as part of the process to systematize the experience of the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras) one decade after its founding. The systematization of the strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing contributes to understanding the process of building one of the key elements of the Feminist Holistic Protection approach, a central component of IM-Defensoras' praxis.

The systematization of the strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing, which also included the experience of *Casa La Serena*, involved a broad group of women defenders from the national networks and coordination spaces that make up IM-Defensoras in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua. These women defenders contributed their experience and wisdoms through two types of activities: individual and collective interviews, and reflection groups to share and analyze the experience. We also included inputs from the network of therapists that contribute to *Casa La Serena*, through individual interviews. The process was designed and coordinated by Ana María Hernández Cárdenas (Coordinator of the strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing) and Marusia López Cruz (Coordinator of the systematization strategy); Nallely Tello Méndez (Member of the regional commission on self-care, collective care, and healing); Itzel Guzmán Reséndiz (Operational Coordinator for *La Serena*); Estela López Deloya (Systematization Assistant); with the accompaniment of Teresa Boedo Blanco from IM-Defensoras' Co-direction.





# The Source

**The emergence of the regional strategy for  
self-care, collective care, and healing**

01

# *The art of navigating*





# The regional strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing within the Feminist Holistic Protection framework

## § 1.1 What does the strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing address?

At the First Mesoamerican Gathering of Women Human Rights Defenders (which took place in Oaxaca, Mexico in 2010 and where we decided to create IM-Defensoras), we identified physical and emotional exhaustion as a problem affecting the majority of women defenders.

During the initial years of IM-Defensoras, our shared concern about the consequences of this situation for each of our lives, and its effects on our organizations and movements, led to a broad reflection on the causes. *From this reflection, we articulated the following factors affecting our wellbeing:*

- ◆ The structural violence that we experience in the region's countries: war zones, coups d'états, criminalization of social protest, increase in feminicides, disappearances, among others.
- ◆ Threats and attacks against women human rights defenders.
- ◆ Women human rights defenders who do not recognize themselves as defenders, increasing their isolation and the risks they face.
- ◆ Many women defenders began their work without access to basic tools that would prepare them emotionally to listen, see, and address everything that entails defending other women defenders.
- ◆ The severity of the violence present in women defenders' lives and social context makes countering this violence excessively difficult, leading us to overstretch our capacities.
- ◆ The pervasiveness of a culture of social activism that values sacrifice and unbalanced dedication as ethical values, rendering psycho-emotional impacts invisible and reducing their attention to the individual sphere.

From a feminist perspective, we also identified other factors related to the patriarchal culture and that strongly affect our vulnerability as women defenders:

- ♦ The violence we experience as women: We suffer domestic violence, violence or sexual harassment in the public sphere, and even sexist attacks within our own organizations. These attacks, generally under-recognized, tend to have a strong impact on self-esteem and can limit other women defenders' continuity of work.
- ♦ Gender discrimination affects our ability to recognize risk – since society teaches women to normalize violence. It also restricts the ability to make decisions about our own safety; reduces the possibilities of accessing support networks; imposes a higher demand on household and care tasks; and results in the exclusion of violence against women defenders within the private sphere from State responsibility or protection schemes.
- ♦ The precarious self-care measures that exist in organizations and movements end up subjugated to a style of activism that reproduces the role imposed by the patriarchal culture: “mothers to all but orphans of ourselves”.

Faced with this reality, we posed a key question: **“What can we do to make our struggles sustainable without sacrificing our own lives?”** The answer clearly pointed to the development of a self-care strategy. However, the “how-to” needed to be built collectively. We will discuss this construction process throughout this report.

## § 1.2 How are we building our vision of self-care, collective care, and healing?

Building a regional vision that guides the strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing – as with all IM-Defensoras' strategies – has been, and continues to be, a process of permanent construction, reformulation, and learning at the personal and collective level. Going from the “self-care strategy” to the current name is itself an expression of the path we have walked and the deepening complexity of our understanding and our practice.

We embark on this reflection journey guided by Ana María Hernández Cárdenas of Consorcio Oaxaca, who coordinates the regional strategy, and along with many *compañeras*<sup>1</sup> [sister defenders] from the national networks who have contributed to developing this vision. We navigate through the history and the key moments of this construction, not necessarily in chronological order but instead tracing the evolution of our vision.

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<sup>1</sup> | *Translator's Note:* We have left the word *compañera* in Spanish, as it does not have an equivalent in English that fully conveys the meaning. A *compañera* is a sister in struggle, a comrade, a fellow member of a group or movement. As women defenders, we are together in struggle; and so we refer to another women defender not as the “other” but as a *compañera*.

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## First Phase: Why speak of Self-care?

From our inception as IM-Defensoras, we felt the need to give value to our experiences and self-care needs as women defenders who live and act within a context of structural violence. We were unsure how to name it, nor were we clear on what it meant, but the political reflections, intuitions, and feelings articulated at the First Gathering of Women Human Rights Defenders in Oaxaca in 2010 paved the way:

[ We want to remember along with those who have walked with us in the day-to-day; share a part of this history with compañeras who are our allies and with the new generation of women defenders – how we journeyed from an original concern to the strategy we have today.

We emerged in 2010, in a gathering of women defenders that took place in Oaxaca, which later gave birth to the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders. We came together at this gathering to understand what was happening, how structural and patriarchal violence was imprisoning women defenders. We opened a space of trust in order to analyze how we were feeling, how we were perceiving reality, how it affected us.

We shared that women defenders were sad and angry; that we were exhausted. A part of us was silenced, perhaps a bit forgotten about ourselves and it only took turning on the tap as they say – the water tap – to begin somehow to let out the pain, the sadness, the helplessness that the attacks on women defenders were producing in us. Also the increasingly evident advance of authoritarian States, governments, and de facto powers.

At this gathering, we realized the need to develop actions that would unite us, strengthen us, that would leverage all our capacities, because we are clear that pain and trauma are not the identity of women defenders, they are transitory processes that have to be transformed through the strength and power that being together gives us. And so, the Initiative emerges and we begin to work in each country, each one at their rhythm, to explore and strengthen our capacity for alliance and, in that sense, the importance of working on self-care.<sup>2</sup> ]

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<sup>2</sup> | Strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing. Notes from the Reflection Group on the Strategy. September 2020. Internal document. [Own translation.]

During the first exchanges, we found it difficult to name what we felt, to recognize what we needed. We felt guilty for having a space to breathe, a moment to think among ourselves and not in our communities and our causes. Some of us even saw it as something unnecessary, selfish, and that took time away from “important matters”. However, each time we would open the issue in a country or in a regional space, we were very interested and we felt the need to speak, share, cry, and recognize our pains, our histories in activism, and the impact of the multiple forms of violence that affect us. Thus, slowly, we began to build our own idea of what self-care means:

Through assessment workshops in each country, we began to explore how our compañera defenders perceived their own care and then, the issue of self-care began to take on a space of reflection and legitimacy.

I think an important moment was the Mesoamerican Gathering of Women Defenders that we had in El Salvador, organized and led by our compañeras from the Colectiva Feminista para el Desarrollo Rural [Feminist Collective for Local Development]. It took place in Suchitoto and the issue of care was a crucial theme for reflection and action in terms of it being both a challenge and a characteristic that was beginning to be constructed and to contribute to the Initiative.

Up until then, we spoke above all about self-care – that is, how to make visible that need to change habits on one hand, reflecting how our activism was intertwined with our gender role, with the mandate to live for others. While this is advantageous because it allows us to have a big commitment, it also exhausts us to the limit, empties us of our own power, and makes us invisible. It was then at this gathering, along with Luz Stella Ospina of FAU-AL [Urgent Action Fund - Latin America], that we created a space for reflection about the relationship between self-care and activism.

Along the way, between 2012 and 2014, the national networks of women defenders began creating self-care groups in the different countries, and we began to document how we were each working on the issue of self-care. This led to several things: we organized a virtual dialogue with compañeras from different countries about the meaning of self-care for women defenders, a process organized by JASS’s Escuela Alquimia Feminista [Feminist Alchemy School] and coordinated with Consorcio Oaxaca and IM-Defensoras. The space resulted in a publication that has been crucial, because in it we bring a feminist vision and reflect on the importance of centering the personal as political. At that moment, we had an important discussion on whether or not it was possible to foster self-care actions while being in organizations whose logic does not encourage self-care and where it is seen as a privilege.<sup>3</sup>

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3 | Strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing. Notes from the Reflection Group on the Strategy. September 2020. Internal document. [Own translation.]

An important advance in our way of understanding the strategy was the need to dismantle the patriarchal mandate of “*living for others*” in which women defenders have been socialized. We began to question activism’s culture of sacrifice, exhaustion, and giving one’s life for the struggle; and thinking about self-care as a feminist practice that challenges the current system, including practices within our movements.

[ The idea of feeling better, including adopting new habits, does not seek to add to the patriarchal mandates of what women ‘ought to be’. Instead, it contributes to the sustainability of women defenders and their social movements by reclaiming joy and pleasure, in many cases renewing and redefining relationships among themselves, with their loved ones, and with mother earth.<sup>4</sup> ]

We slowly began to realize that self-care directly touched our bodies and our lives; that it relates to our personal and collective history as well as to our territories.

» *For me, self-care is like a reflection that women have been making about care and respect of our first territory that is our body*, which has been so dishonored by the patriarchal system. For me, it has been like finding that justice that I have been seeking and integrating it in my territory.«<sup>5</sup>

[ Many women human rights defenders and activists have come closer to self-care after experiencing personal or collective vulnerability. We have shared this vulnerability, noticing that many of us suffer from similar things. We share our ways of dealing with these situations, and this has enriched not only our movements, but also our personal reflections and practices.<sup>6</sup> ]

We recognized that if we were not well and if we did not give importance to our needs, then we could not contribute and care for others and for our communities.

» *For me, self-care is taking care of myself in order to care for others. Within self-care is my spiritual, physical, and mental self-care.*«<sup>7</sup>

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4 | IM-Defensoras (2013): “¿Qué significa el autocuidado para las defensoras de derechos humanos? Diálogos entre nosotras”, p. 9, <https://im-defensoras.org/2014/01/que-significa-el-autocuidado-para-las-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos-dialogos-entre-nosotras/> [“What does Self-Care Mean to Women Human Rights Defenders? Dialogues among Ourselves”. Own translation.]

5 | Interview (10) Woman Defender from Honduras. El Salvador, 2 July 2019. Internal document. [Own translation.]

6 | IM-Defensoras (2013): “¿Qué significa el autocuidado para las defensoras de derechos humanos? Diálogos entre nosotras”, p. 20, <https://im-defensoras.org/2014/01/que-significa-el-autocuidado-para-las-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos-dialogos-entre-nosotras/> [Own translation.]

7 | Interview (11) Woman Defender from Guatemala. El Salvador, 2 July 2019. Internal document. [Own translation.]

» *...for me, self-care is an essential piece of balance – meaning congruency and health* – because you cannot continue providing accompaniment, continue supporting someone else when you are not in balance, because then it becomes a burden. So for me, that is self-care: the ability to discern, the ability to set boundaries, the ability to create protection mechanisms, the ability to place yourself as a priority and always give yourself your space.«<sup>8</sup>

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## Second Phase: From Self-Care to Collective Care

We were clear from the outset that our way of understanding self-care focused on transforming our political practice and our organizations, with the goal of making our struggles sustainable. We understood this as a matter of political congruency based on exercising, in our own bodies and lives, the rights for which we fight. However, this vision was built slowly and steadily through our practice. Initially, we were concerned with seeing each other and recognizing our needs, on creating wellness spaces, on responding to immediate – and often urgent – health or emotional support needs.

On the way, we noticed the challenges that come from certain ways of understanding self-care from an individualist perspective – as a specific and isolated moment that does not transform our practice, or as a privilege for those who have resources and time. The notion of collective care was developed through the national networks' daily practice, through the close accompaniment of different *compañeras*, communities, and organizations.

[ IM-Defensoras launched regional funds for self-care and security, meaning we allocated money for this, and I think this opened up a very diverse range not only of self-care proposals but also collective care actions, how to strengthen our organizations. Along with this, we made an effort in each of the countries to begin systematizing the ways in which we were working on self-care and collective care actions, community care actions in Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico, and Honduras. Collective efforts were made by the self-care groups and we published the book “Travesías para pensar y actuar: acciones de autocuidado en Mesoamérica” [Journeys to Think and Act: Self-care actions in Mesoamerica].

We also began to learn tools for self-care and collective care with Capacitar International and to reclaim the wisdoms of our Indigenous Peoples. I think that these actions have marked us regionally even today.

I think there is no specific moment of going from the idea of self-care to collective care. Rather, it was a process as we began to open and legitimize self-care as a set of habits, transformations, reflections in relation to our work. We began to see that we also wanted to develop a proposal for Feminist Holistic Protection that would differentiate itself from the “trendy” care culture and from neoliberalism, this predatory way that brings up self-care in order to remain functional to the system.

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<sup>8</sup> | Interview (8) member of the Nicaraguan Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders. El Salvador, 2 July 2019. Internal document. [Own translation.]



This difference places us in a critical stance in relation to this neoliberalism, to this individualist culture, and there was a whole reflection about this in the countries: Self-care is not possible if we cannot contextualize it and construct it to strengthen our collectives, movements, and protection networks.

I think in the end, this is still a challenge. We are updating the assessment we conducted in 2012, and the challenge of collective care continues to be appear as a key issue. Today, conflict inside organizations has increased, also as a result of pressure from these contexts, and we think this is an important subject.<sup>9</sup>

The impacts of the daily political and patriarchal violence that women defenders face in our work, as well as the impacts of an activist culture that values sacrifice and risk, produce physical and emotional harms in our lives that restrict our power, leadership, and political action. They weaken our collective processes and can seriously deteriorate our health, even to the point of ending life. This exhaustion and illness affects us and it affects our close relationships, with sisters and brothers in our cause, thereby weakening our movements and organizations.

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<sup>9</sup> | IM-Defensoras (2014): “Travesías para pensar y actuar. Experiencias de autocuidado para defensoras de derechos humanos en Mesoamérica”, <http://IM-Defensorasdefensoras.org/2014/05/travesias-para-pensar-y-actuar-experiencias-de-autocuidado-de-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos-en-mesoamerica/> [“Journeys to Think and Act: Self-care actions in Mesoamerica.” Own translation.]

And collective care refers to our family, but importantly to our spaces of collective organization and movement. ...the way we relate to each other in our work; how we can take care of ourselves to share the burdens but also share power. Taking care of ourselves entails challenging power, the power relations among us, strengthening leadership, acting in solidarity, seeking mechanisms in our organizations to resolve conflicts in a constructive manner, collectively taking care of ourselves in the face of risk, talking about our emotions, having the opportunity to begin destroying judgement, guilt... We must find ways to strengthen even our work benefits, to receive a fair salary for what we do, to be recognized as organizations and defenders. All of this is part of the collective care package and it all goes together.<sup>10</sup>

### Third Phase: Weaving together security with self-care, collective care, and healing into a vision of Feminist Holistic Protection

Initially, we conducted the self-care work as separate from security. However, we soon realized that we could not address these issues in a disconnected manner. The following examples reflect our learning through practice:

- ◆ When one is facing a situation of violence that requires a protection strategy, especially when we are talking about imminent risk, the level of fatigue, stress, anguish, pressure, etc. means that the minimum necessary conditions to make decisions about one's own protection do not exist. Through our experience of accompaniment, we understood that a first step in the process of protection is being able to create the minimum conditions of wellbeing in order to make decisions: to rest, to be in a safe place, to address psycho-emotional impacts, to feel accompanied, to take care of family, etc.
- ◆ A *compañera*, organization, or community that is at risk or facing violence due to her activism experiences a set of physical, emotional, spiritual, and energy impacts that affect her personal and collective life, and that can create wounds and traumas that must be addressed as part of the process of protection.
- ◆ Normalizing violence, fatigue, and continued exhaustion created by activism and the double and triple shifts that women must take on; discriminatory practices and praise for sacrifice within organizational spaces; the impacts of sexist violence; and other situations that undermine the life and integrity of women activists make us more vulnerable to, and reduce our ability to face risk.

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<sup>10</sup> | IM-Defensoras: Notes from the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena, p.37. July 2019. Internal document. [Own translation.]



***That is why IM-Defensoras' Feminist Holistic Protection:***

...intertwines security and self-care to provide women defenders with new and more effective tools to address situations of risk, strengthen their empowerment, and prevent and give early attention to the consequences of contexts of gender discrimination and violence in which they conduct their work.<sup>11</sup>

This linkage has entailed many things, such as integrating self-care indicators into risk analysis; tightening coordination between *compañeras* who accompany situations of imminent risk and those who develop self-care, collective care, and healing processes; and promoting capacity-strengthening spaces.

**Connecting security with self-care, collective care, and healing favors processes of protection that:**

- ◆ Create basic conditions of wellbeing and care to address a situation of violence and to make necessary decisions about protection.
- ◆ Prevent violence and promote the sustainability of our movements, improving the wellbeing of those who are part of them.
- ◆ Foster women's collective power and the contributions we make through our struggles.
- ◆ Develop resilience, resistance, and healing in response to attacks that seek to weaken social movements and organizations.
- ◆ Build collective processes and organizations that are consistent with the rights and principles we defend and the type of society we want to build.
- ◆ Promote an individual and collective feminist ethic that creates support networks and tools to request help when necessary, and that strengthens the collective power of women.

Notwithstanding all our progress towards this integration, we still face challenges. The processes of self-care, collective care, and healing are slow and take time, while the situations of imminent risk and the need to have protection plans often demand emergency action without the necessary conditions. Additionally, we are talking about diverse resources and knowledge and, therefore, about participation and coordination among diverse *compañeras* who act from different visions, which we need to combine in the accompaniment process, and this is not simple. Finally, we continue to come across – in some instances – a vision of security based on “hard” measures, or only centered on certain aspects of risk, which makes it difficult us to face and act on the complex types of violence and the impacts they have on us.

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<sup>11</sup> | IM-Defensoras (2014): “Travesías para pensar y actuar. Experiencias de autocuidado para defensoras de derechos humanos en Mesoamérica”, p. 9, <http://IM-Defensorasefensoras.org/2014/05/travesias-para-pensar-y-actuar-experiencias-de-autocuidado-de-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos-en-mesoamerica/> [Own translation.]

We are facing these challenges with an increasing awareness of our right to wellness, to repair the wounds that violence and patriarchy are inflicting on our lives and our collectivities, to healing as a process of rebelliousness and power. This consciousness emerges from, and is nurtured by our experiences of accompaniment with women defenders, when we exchange diverse wisdoms about healing and – from a holistic perspective – take on the search for healing practices that can be best adapted to each woman defender, to each collective.

We do this by reclaiming our peoples' ancestral knowledge and that of other age-old cultures; by cultivating spirituality, connection, and rootedness with life and nature. We repair life and we strengthen ourselves by integrating creation, art, literature, and active listening of our *compañeras'* life testimonies, through a process where each woman defender always reflects herself in the others.

### **Fourth Phase: Creating spaces of respite and nurturing our strategy with ancestral wisdoms about Healing**

Learning alongside the women defenders who we have accompanied during these 10 years, we have been creating spaces to breathe, renew energies, and heal. It began with the construction of *Casa La Serena* in Mexico, and has expanded to other countries: the beach house that the *compañeras* rent in Nicaragua, and the recently inaugurated *Casa La Siguate*, a healing house for women defenders in Honduras. On this path, we have been integrating healing as an indispensable component of our strategy. It is also the reason why women's shelters such as *La Marianela* in El Salvador and *El Abrazo* in Mexico have also taken up self-care and healing practices.

[ We had focus groups in the countries to guide the proposals for creating Casa La Serena. This is why I can say that it is a space created by all the voices of the women in the Mesoamerican Initiative, and I think it was important to have these groups because it was there that we started talking not only about self-care and collective care but also about healing processes as a right.

We created Casa La Serena in 2016 as a space for women defenders' self-care, collective care, wellness, and healing. Along the way, the wisdoms of Indigenous Peoples and the accompaniment alongside women from indigenous communities in various countries gripped us; they inspired us to get close to, and to return value to spirituality, to ancestral wisdoms. ...and I think over the years this has marked the Mesoamerican Initiative's healing proposal with a great wealth and recognition of these processes in each of the spaces in the countries and in Casa La Serena.



Also in 2016, at the same time that we were accompanying healing processes, we had a key opportunity to strengthen collective care and the debate. It was a virtual dialogue co-organized with Defenred [Support Network for Human Rights Defenders] in order to reflect on different dimensions: self-care as a political strategy within organizations; reclaiming feminist experiences in accompaniment; the challenges that these pose for collectives; and a political reflection on accompaniment of women defenders. This dialogue, which is one of the most important ones we have had, involved more than 600 participants. We produced a publication along with Defenred, an allied organization in the Spanish State.<sup>12</sup>

In a different manner and as part of this experience, we have been placing the theme of healing as a living and empowering process that defies the logic of staying in the role of victim, and that gives women back our power when we act collectively. Healing as repair, as preservation; healing as a battle for life, to locate ourselves in an energy of life. We have also reflected on healing as a process to reclaim the teachings and wisdoms of our peoples.

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12 | IM-Defensoras and Defenred (2017): "Diálogo virtual de autocuidado. Una estrategia política en la defensa de los derechos humanos", <http://IM-DefensorasDefensoras.org/2017/09/dialogo-virtual-de-autocuidado-una-estrategia-politica-en-la-defensa-de-los-derechos-humanos/> ["Virtual Dialogue on Self-care. A political strategy in human rights defense." Own translation.]

This is a process to recover the practical ideas and the cosmovisions that we are part of a whole, that we are in harmony with the planet, with the wealth of Mother Earth, her symbols; healing as a living process towards justice, towards the transformation of these harms and attacks.

The IM-Defensoras Steering Group adjusted the four-year project as described in the Initiative's 2018-2021 Strategic Plan to refer specifically to self-care, collective care, and healing. Previously, the strategy was called the self-care strategy and in these four years, we have moved towards integrating actions in these three dimensions. The fact that today we have healers as allies also speaks to how we have broadened our relationships and listened to the wisdoms of many *compañeras* who are healers, so much so that we are currently preparing the Latin American Gathering of Women Healers.<sup>13</sup>

Integrating the notion of healing has been a learning process of questioning and rethinking our practice in light of the wisdoms that come to us from the cosmovisions of our Mesoamerican peoples, from our women ancestors, and from the historical healing processes experienced by women defenders who belong to Indigenous Peoples. We have also enriched our healing practices and knowledge with other non-hegemonic wisdoms, such as “alternative” or complementary therapies, the wisdom of archetypes, oracles, massages, Ayurvedic medicines, feminist rituals, energy work, psychotherapy, among other valuable concepts and practices.

**In every region, there are healers from whom we have learned**, like the *compañeras* in Guatemala who have had a special presence accompanying regional processes and women defenders from different countries; or the Garifuna *compañeras* who strengthen their resistance and autonomy by sharing their wisdoms. Below, we share a few of their voices regarding the meaning of healing:

### ▫ **Lolita Chávez - Maya Quiché - Guatemala**

- » We understand healing as a cosmic-political path that links ancestry, communality, and spirituality. It is a process that honors, strengthens, and recovers the peoples' ancestral memory.
- » It is based on the Tzk'at principle, which means “web” in the Quiché language, the Web of Life in reciprocity and in body-territory unity.
- » It is a profound critical process where women have played a crucial role questioning the aspects of ancestry that have harmed and exploited women, the ancestral “machismos” [sexist behaviors].
- » It is a process of wisdoms fighting the colonial logic and the “supremacy of humans”, wherever it comes from. It is experience as a process of gratitude.
- » It seeks to restore the Web of Life, healing the violence that has harmed it.

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<sup>13</sup> | Strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing. Notes from the Reflection Group on the Strategy. September 2020. Internal document. [Own translation.]

### ▫ Flor Álvarez - Guatemala

- » Healing comes from the ability of all beings to regenerate themselves.
- » What is life actually? Waiting around for death?
- » To help others, one needs to be well, each one on her own terms, taking up her own power and acknowledging our limitations. Recognizing the historical burden of “loyalties” to structures that prevent us from recognizing our own power.
- » Healing is a process of collective co-responsibility, of gratitude for life and all that it entails.
- » It entails taking responsibility for ourselves, being a victim is not an identity; we are beings in a process of transformation.

### ▫ Yolanda Aguilar- Q'anil Center - Guatemala

- » Naming the wounds, recognizing ourselves as Mayan women. This is something we have learned from the *compañeras* and their process after the war.
- » Healing seeks to rebuild the social fabric damaged by war, bring out the pain as part of the political process of transformation.
- » It involves questioning ourselves, transforming ourselves and our collectivities from within.
- » Honoring our body and sexuality like sacred territories.

Faced with individual and collective impacts of violence, we seek to create spaces, processes, and tools for healing to repair personal and collective harm and contribute to developing resilience.

[ *Healing is like a vessel, compañeras, we hold a vessel in our soul, a container that cannot spill. It is like being in a constant circuit of repairing the impacts and effects. And, as far as possible, for this to work best, the healing processes must also take place earlier and not once we are collapsing. Above all, healing processes are collective. Each one experiences it individually, with the resources at hand, but also collectively because it affects organizations as well as society. This is why we need healing processes that are collective and dynamic.*<sup>14</sup> ]

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<sup>14</sup> | IM-Defensoras: Notes from the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena, p.37. July 2019. Internal document. [Own translation.]

In sum, self-care, collective care, and healing are three processes and dimensions dynamically woven together to open spaces of hope that the worlds we want to build, centering care, are possible.

*It is essential that we know how we have built it, from our vision. Self-care does not come separate from, or at a different moment than collective care or healing processes. They are three dimensions that are constantly intertwined... they are processes that, in the case of women defenders, mark a political position of transgression, meaning that we are opposing a patriarchal and neoliberal mandate. This neoliberal system pushes for uniformity, but also individualism. I heal alone, I take care of myself alone, I don't need anyone, and they are eroding and dividing us. As women defenders, we are collective beings, (while) we do not lose our individuality nor our individual rights, we are part of a collective transformation. Thus, we talk about three areas but they are intimately woven like a braid, that surges from a single head of hair but is split into three parts and intertwined.<sup>15</sup>*

### § 1.3 *The Ethic of Care that supports the strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing*

The following ethical principles that support our work on Holistic Feminist Protection come from the strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing, and from our recognition of the cultural diversity that characterizes the women of IM-Defensoras.

- △ *Care is a right.*
- △ *Care is an act of justice that reconnects us with the web of life, good living, and individual and collective wellbeing.*
- △ *Care is a transgressive act that challenges the neoliberal, capitalist, racist, patriarchal, and misogynist models and that builds a political practice of the world we want to live. it leads us to decolonize our relationships, emotions, and practices.*
- △ *Care is a form of resistance in a context of constant oppression and violence against our bodies and minds.*

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<sup>15</sup> | IM-Defensoras: Notes from the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena, p.36. July 2019. Internal document. [Own translation.]

♦ *We think and practice care based on:*

- △ *The awareness* that it is a dynamic process of permanent learning.
- △ *Recovering and recognizing our diverse wisdoms and practices*, learning from others, exploring new proposals and reclaiming ancestral wisdoms, opening new spaces for sharing tools, reflections, and knowledge.
- △ *Work in the physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and energy dimensions*, starting with the body as the first territory, understanding and addressing our pains, transforming beliefs, seeking other ways of relating to the world and to nature, continuing to gather and grow our spirit.
- △ *Integrating our families, organizations and collectives into the self-care, collective care, and healing processes*. From experience, we know that if our process does not include our loved ones, our children, we cannot achieve rest or healing.
- △ *Seeking balance between the individual and the collective*. This comes from each person's experience, flexibility, autonomy, and respect for personal process and decisions. It counts on networks to resist and accompany each other in a predatory context. It is based on trust, on circularity, and on networks of women in all their diversity; on collective power; on respect for the actions and healing of others along the path; on treating each other well, valuing the other; on the use words for assertive communication. Weaving loving practices, for the long run, at the individual, organizational, and collective level.

**This is the framework we use when we refer to sustaining struggles with a commitment to collective transformation.<sup>16</sup>**

## § 1.4 *Political perspective of self-care, collective care, and healing*

IM-Defensoras' reflections on self-care, collective care, and healing over these ten years are condensed into a political perspective with the following principles:

### △ 1 – **The personal is political**

This maxim leads us to see ourselves as political subjects that practice for ourselves what we desire for other people. It entails a personal review and a collective reflection about the sacrificial style of activism and the asymmetric relationships between *compañeras* themselves. We must recognize the political causes of what affects us in the private sphere (illnesses, family problems, insecurity, physical attacks, etc.).

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<sup>16</sup> | IM-Defensoras: Collective Reflections on the Ethic of Care. 2018. Internal document. [Own translation.]

We understand our body as a political territory, what takes place on our territory affects our bodies and what happens in our bodies affects the territory. We understand our body as that which sustains life but also as an entity that accompanies others and that receives accompaniment.

## **△ 2 – What’s the point of revolution if we can’t dance?**

With this phrase, we reclaim women defenders’ right to joy, pleasure, and enjoyment of our own bodies, the right to strengthen creativity and forge significant human bonds within the movements in which we participate. These rights make up the world that we for which fight. We contribute more from a place of joy and life than from a place of exhaustion or death.

## **△ 3 – Spaces for activism and defending human rights are our strength, but they are not idyllic**

Recognizing this point entails a constant review of how patriarchal domination, discrimination, and sexism are reproduced – even without being fully aware of this – in our own organizations and movements.

## **△ 4 – Human rights and justice activism is not a sacrifice**

This principle invites us to reflect on whether, really, the task we need to do is so important or urgent that it cannot wait until we eat, sleep, rest, or enjoy for a while; on whether praising the notion of “giving one’s life for...” as a value is strategic for our struggles. No matter how big our effort, and even if we spent our entire lives on it, the reality we face goes beyond us individually and it is only through collective work and caring among ourselves that we will succeed at advancing our dreams. We must mention that doing a lot and reproducing the logic of productivity does not mean that what we are doing is more effective or creative, nor that it will achieve the impact we need. In our eagerness to do more, women defenders often end up physically and mentally exhausted, which inhibits our capacity for response and attention.

## **△ 5 – Wellbeing is not a privilege; it is a right**

For many women defenders, thinking about moments of rest, distraction, and relaxation is a luxury that they cannot afford or that they think they do not deserve. Experience has shown that when women defenders are affected by stress, sadness, rage, or fear, the security risks to ourselves, our families, and our organizations increase, since this reduces our capacity to be alert and to identify threats against our integrity in a timely manner decreases. This also increases conflicts inside groups and organizations.





### **o 6 – Neither money nor time is a limitation**

IM-Defensoras promotes a type of self-care that leverages wisdoms and resources that are accessible because they do not require significant amounts of money; instead, they require willingness and time to dedicate to oneself, individually and collectively. This does not take away the responsibility of organizations, the State, and foundations to create the necessary conditions for the women defenders' wellbeing, to the extent that they are each concerned. Nor does it mean that we do not recognize the double and triple shifts that many women defenders must take on, but we aim to dismantle all structures of oppression that exhaust us and place our wellbeing at risk.

### **△ 7 – Each person and collective knows what they need**

It is impossible to standardize what each woman defender, collective, or organization needs to achieve their wellbeing. This is why we promote reflection, dialogue, exchanges of wisdoms and experiences, so that each one can establish what they require based on an honest assessment of their own needs.

### **△ 8 – Self-care is personal and collective**

In order for the personal care of each woman defender to transform into a lifestyle, the groups in which we interact (family, organization, community) must reach agreements and implement measures that encourage care: fair distribution of care work, respect for working days and hours, set compensation for time, rest periods, and develop mechanisms for peaceful conflict resolution, among others. Changing these group practices is essential in order to strengthen our movements based on the wellbeing of their participants and to promote a healthy and joyful activism.

### **△ 9 – Healing is a living process that repairs life**

Reclaiming our Mesoamerican peoples' healing knowledge, cultivating spirituality, connection, and rootedness with life and nature – these are all transformative acts in response to violent predatory models. Seeking the healing practices that best adapt to daily life on the personal and collective levels is part of repairing the damage caused by this structural and patriarchal violence. Women defenders do not need to be on the edge of burnout or illness to take action; rather, we need to “empty and clean out the vessel” for energy to move towards transforming pain into strength.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> | IM-Defensoras and Consorcio Oaxaca (2019): “Casa La Serena. Guía de Acompañamiento”, p. 6-10 <https://im-defensoras.org/2019/04/guia-de-acompanamiento-casa-la-serena/>. [“Casa La Serena. Accompaniment Guide.” Own translation.] Original source of this approach: Hernández Cárdenas, A., & Tello Méndez, N. (2017): Self-Care as a Political Strategy. *Sur - International Journal on Human Rights*, 14 (26), 171-180. Accessed on 23 August 2021, <https://sur.conectas.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/sur-26-ingles-ana-maria-hernandez-cardenas-nallely-guadalupe-tello-mendez.pdf>



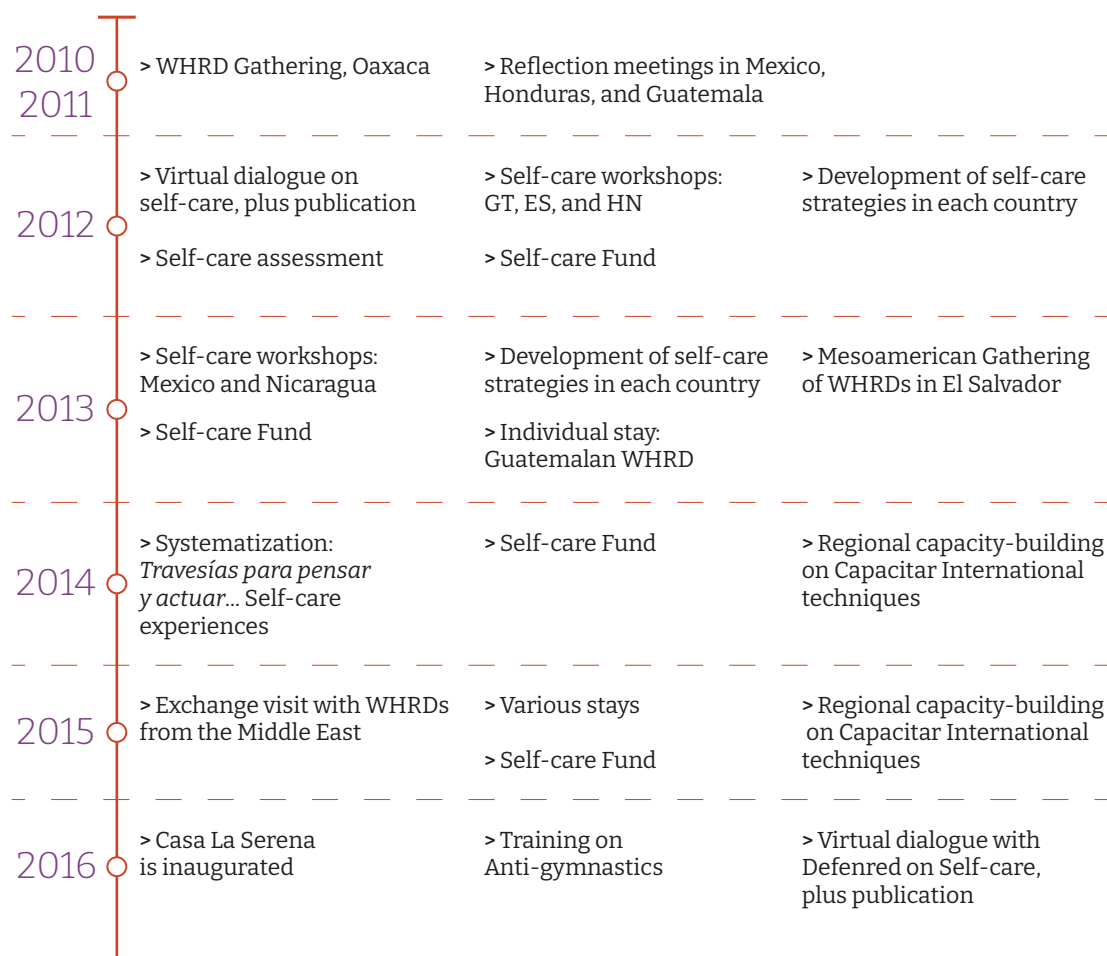
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*Navigation chart*



## The process of building the regional strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing

A few months after convening IM-Defensoras in 2010, the Steering Group of the Initiative began to work on self-care, promoting spaces for exchange, action, and collective construction among women defenders in the region. The most significant phases and moments in building the strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing are shown in the following timeline:





## § 2.1 First Phase: Agreement to develop strategy (2010-2011)

During the preparatory process for the First Mesoamerican Gathering of Women Human Rights Defenders (Oaxaca, 2010), we were able to conduct an initial documentation of the situation of women defenders, and we realized that there was very little reflected in human rights reports. The entire chain of violence that we experienced was made visible when we arrived at the Gathering and began to share our stories. We questioned the reasons why, even as empowered activists in democratic movements, these serious situations that we experienced were so invisible. **We understood that caring for our lives is indispensable for our activism**, that it is a political action that could be fostered through a regional convergence based on protection, solidarity, and mutual support.

A key agreement at the Gathering was to bring that reflection back to our countries. Thus, towards the end of 2010 and throughout 2011, we gave ourselves the task of organizing meetings in each country with other *compañeras* and activists to further reflections on the situations that affect us, recognizing ourselves as women defenders and confirming self-care as a shared need. Here began the process that has led us to think collectively about what self-care means to women defenders. An immediate result was the creation of spaces and moments for self-care and wellbeing, still as isolated events – we were only beginning to perceive the depth of the importance and implications that self-care has in protecting women defenders and their collectivities.

## § 2.2 *Second Phase: Accompaniment, resources, and strengthening capacities to promote self-care work in each country through the national networks (2012-2015)*

The majority of resources and efforts in this phase focused on supporting, promoting, and strengthening work in each country as part of **our political vision of a regional articulation that would respond to the needs, realities, and wisdoms of women defenders in the territory**. At the same time, we continued advancing towards building a shared understanding of what self-care means, learning various tools, and documenting defenders' main needs through the first assessment conducted in 2012. Through the practice of accompaniment, we identified the need for women defenders to have longer periods of rest, renewing energy, and attending to the impacts of violence. That is how the stays for women defenders began, as a precursor to *Casa La Serena*. Significant moments in this phase included:

### **Virtual dialogue on self-care (2012)**

The feminist virtual dialogue on self-care for women defenders was convened by IM-Defensoras, Consorcio para el Diálogo Parlamentario y la Equidad Oaxaca AC (Consorcio Oaxaca), and Just Associates (JASS) through their Feminist Alchemy Popular Education School. The objective of the dialogue was to “promote an exchange of ideas, experiences, and feelings in order to reflect on self-care as a political tool that allows us to sustain activism as the engine for social transformation, but also to sustain the life and physical, mental, and emotional health of the women who participate in activism. The purpose was to position self-care as a deeply transgressive element disconnected from, and in opposition to marketing purposes.”<sup>18</sup>

Alda Facio and Ana María Hernández facilitated the dialogue, with the participation of thirty women defenders<sup>19</sup> who shared their experiences and reflections during the period of February to April 2012.

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<sup>18</sup> | IM-Defensoras (2013): “¿Qué significa el autocuidado para las defensoras de derechos humanos? Diálogos entre nosotras”, p.9, <https://im-defensoras.org/2014/01/que-significa-el-autocuidado-para-las-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos-dialogos-entre-nosotras/>

<sup>19</sup> | Ángela Fuentes, Zayda Treminio, Patricia Orozco, Dora Ávila, Damaris Ruiz, Magda García, Ana Silvia Monzón, Cecilia De Trinidad, Analía Penchaszadeh, Yamileth Molina, Zoila Madrid, Fátima Najarro, Luz Stella Ospina Murillo, Ángeles López, Lucía Lagunes, Hedme Castro, Adelay Carias, Shi Alarcón, Daysi Flores, Malena de Montis, Roxana Arroyo, Gilda Rivera, Patricia Ardón, Verónica Corchado, Marusia López Cruz, Martha Figueroa, Gabriela Arguedas, Mariela Arce, Karla Lara, María Teresa Zúñiga.

The result of this rich dialogue was captured in the 2013 report [¿Qué significa el autocuidado para las defensoras de derechos humanos? Diálogos entre nosotras](#) ["What does Self-Care Mean to Women Human Rights Defenders? Dialogues among Ourselves"].<sup>20</sup> This was an initial effort to make the vision of self-care explicit, emerging both from feminist theory and from the experience of human rights activism, constructed collectively by women defenders themselves in order to guide strategic actions on the matter.

### **Self-care workshops in the region (2012-2013)**

In an effort to open up the dialogue on self-care among women defenders and bring it closer to the territory, we promoted a series of workshops on self-care throughout 2012 and 2013; first in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras (2012) and later in Mexico and Nicaragua (2013). We published a broad call to convene the workshops. The workshops included the participation of women defenders who were not a part of IM-Defensoras but who conducted actions on the topic or had expressed specific self-care needs. The objective of the workshops was to learn about self-care conditions and practices in each country. From that point, we began to receive requests to deepen on specific topics such as grief and loss. In each country, we looked for funds and organized ourselves to replicate the workshop in order to reach other women defenders.<sup>21</sup>

### **Development of self-care strategies in each country (2012-2013)**

The activities conducted by the networks in each country, the self-care workshops, and the national and regional gatherings of women defenders all led us to create a first strategy for self-care in each of the national networks that existed at that time: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico.

### **Self-care assessment (2012)**

We conducted a survey in 2012 to explore the perceptions, practices, and conditions that women defenders identified in relation to self-care. The questionnaire had 77 questions and was conducted among 58 women defenders in the five countries where IM-Defensoras had a presence at that time: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua. The assessment<sup>22</sup> explored the "degree of importance that women defenders place on self-care at a personal level and in the collectives and organizations in which they participate, the strategies they use, the obstacles they face, the conditions in which they conduct their work, and the needs they identify to improve their wellbeing." [Own translation.]

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<sup>20</sup> | IM-Defensoras (2013): "¿Qué significa el autocuidado para las defensoras de derechos humanos? Diálogos entre nosotras", p. 9, <https://im-defensoras.org/2014/01/que-significa-el-autocuidado-para-las-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos-dialogos-entre-nosotras/>

<sup>21</sup> | IM-Defensoras (2014): "Travesías para pensar y actuar. Experiencias de autocuidado para defensoras de derechos humanos en Mesoamérica", p. 86, <http://IM-Defensorasdefensoras.org/2014/05/travesias-para-pensar-y-actuar-experiencias-de-autocuidado-de-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos-en-mesoamerica/>

<sup>22</sup> | The survey and the report "Diagnóstico: El Autocuidado de las Defensoras de Derechos Humanos en Mesoamérica" ["Assessment: Self-care of Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders"] are included in our publication "Travesías para pensar y actuar. Experiencias de Autocuidado de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos en Mesoamérica". <https://IM-Defensorasdefensoras.org/2014/05/travesias-para-pensar-y-actuar-experiencias-de-autocuidado-de-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos-en-mesoamerica/>



### **| Self-care Fund (2012-2014)**

From 2012 to 2014, we had a regional fund to address women defenders individual and collective self-care needs in the five countries. We sought to cover needs for prevention, early attention, and emergencies. The types of support provided included:

- ◆ Psychological support for women defenders that accompany cases.
- ◆ Psychological support for women defenders who experience violence in the family environment, in the work environment, or in other spaces.
- ◆ Psychological or financial support for women defenders who experience burnout.
- ◆ Support for important healthcare interventions for women defenders without health coverage.
- ◆ Support for external interventions to resolve conflicts in groups or with leadership within women defenders' organizations.
- ◆ Support for respite activities, to make “pauses on the path” for collectives of women defenders subjected to excessive workloads or high-stress dynamics.
- ◆ Support for workshops, dialogues, or reflection meetings within collectives of women defenders, directed at developing self-care policies.
- ◆ Support for concrete actions directed a self-care and improving women defenders' security: health exams, self-defense training, alternative therapies, healing rituals, among others.
- ◆ Support for events or capacity-building activities on self-care for women defenders or their collectives, with the commitment to replicate them in their organizations or work teams.

A total of 228 women defenders benefited through 31 requests for individual support and 13 for organizational support.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> | IM-Defensoras (2014): “Travesías para pensar y actuar. Experiencias de autocuidado para defensoras de derechos humanos en Mesoamérica”, p. 19, <http://IM-Defensorasdefensoras.org/2014/05/travesias-para-pensar-y-actuar-experiencias-de-autocuidado-de-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos-en-mesoamerica/>



The support provided to organizations “was primarily allocated to developing internal self-care proposals and measures, to counter stress and fear, addressing burnout, and gynecological health exams, as well as for emotional support/support in relation to attacks.”<sup>24</sup>

### ***Second Mesoamerican Gathering of Women Defenders in El Salvador (2013)***

We organized the Second Mesoamerican Gathering of Women Human Rights Defenders in September 2013, in Suchitoto, El Salvador. Participants included 187 women defenders from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Panama, and Colombia, as well as special guests from other countries, organizations, and networks such as Amnesty International, CEJIL, Front Line Defenders, and the Urgent Action Fund. Among the important outcomes of the gathering, we advanced on the “taking ownership of self-care as a key strategy for human rights defense and for the sustainability of our movements, as well as women defenders’ wellbeing and safety as a right that must be respected by the entire society.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> | IM-Defensoras: Final report: Dutch Postcode Lottery-Mama Cash (2012-2014). Internal document. [Own translation.]

<sup>25</sup> | IM-Defensoras: Final report: Dutch Postcode Lottery-Mama Cash (2012-2014). Internal document. [Own translation.]

### **Individual stay: Woman defender from Guatemala (2013)<sup>26</sup>**

We conducted the first healing experience through an individual stay in August 2013, hosting a Guatemalan compañera, an Indigenous Mayan leader who was in a state of extreme exhaustion brought about by the State persecuting her due to her work as a defender.

### **Publishing the collective book: “Travesías para pensar y actuar” (2014)**

The book describes the work experiences and methodologies that the self-care groups in Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador use to promote the well-being of Mesoamerican women defenders and to address their trauma, harm, and suffering.<sup>27</sup>

### **Self-care Fund (2015)**

Based on the experience from previous years, we re-activated the self-care and collective care fund – coordinated by FCAM [Central American Women’s Fund] and Consorcio Oaxaca – with the objective of diversifying and increasing individual and collective self-care actions by women defenders’ organizations, whether it be for prevention, early attention, or emergency.<sup>28</sup>

### **Regional capacity-building – Capacitar International (2014 and 2015)**

Capacitar is an international network of empowerment and solidarity. A broad group of women defenders from Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico participated in a Capacitar training on self-care and Wellness practices for women defenders, which are very effective for activists and organized groups. We learned theory, practices, and methods for healing through a popular education model in order to replicate it in our communities.

### **Various stays (2015)**

Throughout 2015, we hosted three self-care and healing stays for women defenders. The first stay, with two women defenders, tested a package of methodologies and therapies developed by Consorcio Oaxaca, obtaining good results. The second, with three women defenders, tested the 10-day temporary stay model for the first time. The third stay tested a family stay model.

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<sup>26</sup> | The process of La Serena began with experiences of stays starting in 2013, which developed and tested the model of attention. The accumulated lessons and the capacity to respond to women defenders’ needs for self-care, collective care, and healing led us to the decision in 2016 to create our own space for the stays, and we inaugurated Casa La Serena.

<sup>27</sup> | IM-Defensoras (2014): “Travesías para pensar y actuar. Experiencias de autocuidado para defensoras de derechos humanos en Mesoamérica”, p. 9, <http://IM-Defensorasdefensoras.org/2014/05/travesias-para-pensar-y-actuar-experiencias-de-autocuidado-de-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos-en-mesoamerica/>

<sup>28</sup> | IM-Defensoras: Fund for self-care actions for women human rights defenders, their organizations and collectives. 2015. Internal document.

## § 2.3 Third Phase: Creating safe spaces, sharing our wisdoms (2016-2020)

The experiences with the stays led to a regional agreement, promoted by Consorcio Oaxaca, to build a space for healing and rest – *Casa La Serena* [The Serene House]. **This allowed us to deepen and broaden the strategy’s conceptual reach**, as well as the support to women defenders. At the same time, we continued strengthening the self-care work in each country, sharing lessons in different spaces and consolidating the strategy as a reference point in the region and at the international level. Significant moments in this phase included:

### **Inauguration of Casa La Serena and training on Neuromuscular Balance (2016)**

In August 2016, we fulfilled our dream as IM-Defensoras of having our own space to host self-care and healing stays, allowing us to implement a work program increasingly focused on the needs of women defenders in Mesoamerica. At *Casa La Serena*, we also began the task of strengthening organizations and collectives that hope to integrate self-care practices into their institutional culture, through workshops and stays.<sup>29</sup>

From 30 July to 10 August, Casa La Serena receives its first visitors – women defenders from the [national network’s] self-care group and organizations from various states in the country, all members of the National Network of Women Defenders in Mexico – for a training on Neuromuscular Balance facilitated by defender Graciela Ramos. These first guests contribute work to finish installing Casa La Serena and fill the space with good energy.<sup>30</sup>

### **Virtual Dialogue on Self-Care as a Political Strategy (2016)**

Between November and December 2016, IM-Defensoras and Defenred organized a virtual dialogue aimed at deepening self-care and collective care as an essential political strategy for human rights defenders, their organizations and movements. The dialogue was a space for exchanging experiences, approaches, and analysis in order to enrich our understanding and practice of prevention and attention to women defenders at risk. The depth of the reflections were captured in a report: “[Diálogo virtual de Autocuidado: Una estrategia política en la defensa de los derechos humanos](#)”<sup>31</sup> and were disseminated in the New Tactics in Human Rights platform<sup>32</sup> where the complete dialogues can also be seen [in Spanish].

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29 | See brochure [in Spanish]: <https://consorciooaxaca.org/proteccion-a-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos/autocuidado/>

30 | Consorcio Oaxaca: “Línea de tiempo Casa la Serena”, <https://consorciooaxaca.org/linea-de-tiempo-casa-la-serena/> [Casa La Serena time-line. Own translation.]

31 | IM-Defensoras and Defenred (2017): “Diálogo virtual de autocuidado. Una estrategia política en la defensa de los derechos humanos”, <http://IM-DefensorasDefensoras.org/2017/09/dialogo-virtual-de-autocuidado-una-estrategia-politica-en-la-defensa-de-los-derechos-humanos/>

32 | Link to the dialogue [in Spanish]: <https://www.newtactics.org/conversation/autocuidado-una-estrategia-politica-en-la-defensa-de-los-derechos-humanos>

### ***Broadening the Regional Commission on Self-care (2017)***

With the aim of strengthening the regional work of the strategy for self, two *compañeras* from the network in El Salvador (María Rosa Cruz and Alejandra Burgos) joined the regional commission, and the collaboration with Nallely Tello as a member of the commission was formalized. One year later, one of the Co-Executive Directors of IM-Defensoras (Teresa Boedo) also joined the commission.

### ***Self-care Funds allocated by country (2017)***

The regional fund for self-care actions was distributed directly to each country so that the networks would have earmarked resources for collective care and support for women defenders.

### ***14th Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Encounter (2017)***

As part of the 14th Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Encounter in 2017, IM-Defensoras along with FAU-AL and Cfemea [Center for Feminist Studies and Advisory Services] from Brazil coordinated work on self-care. During two days, 230 feminists participated in this area and IM-Defensoras was recognized for our contribution.

### ***Meeting with ambassadors and UN Women (2017)***

In June 2017, [several worldwide, the representative of UN Women in Mexico, and a number of women human rights defenders held a meeting in Casa La Serena](#). The ambassadors of Norway, Austria, Ireland, Sweden, and Thailand participated in the exchange and they broadcast audio recordings recognizing the work of *Casa La Serena* in the protection of women defenders.

### ***The strategy changes name (2018)***

The strategy for self-care began adopting the concepts of collective care and healing through the permanent reflection that took place during the accompaniment of women defenders, in focus groups to realize the dream of creating *Casa La Serena*, and in IM-Defensoras' evaluation (2016) and the development of the 2018-2021 Strategic Plan. Changing the strategy's name helped to better express the three key elements of care as a practice and a political tool for Feminist Holistic Protection.

### ***Regional meeting of national self-care groups (2018)***

In 2018, we convened a meeting of women defenders responsible for implementing the strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing in the five countries where we were coordinated as IM-Defensoras. The objectives of the meeting were to exchange experiences; deepen the Ethic of Care and the notion of self-care as a political tool that ensures the sustainability of our struggles; reflect on the model of *Casa La Serena* with the idea of opening another house in another country in Central America; and exchange tools for managing emotions.

### **| Advising Brazilian feminists (2018)**

In 2018, a group of Brazilian feminists invited us to advise them on the creation and operation of a healing house for women defenders.

### **| IM-Defensoras stays at La Serena (2019)**

The stays at *Casa La Serena* during 2017 and 2018 were organized with one defender from each national network. Starting in 2019, we decided to change the approach and we began to organize stays by country to improve collective follow-up of the self-care plans. This was a consensus decision among the networks. The stays included one experience for each national network (Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Mexico) with five *compañeras* each. Two women defenders from Brazil joined the last stay. We also hosted seven members of the IM-Defensoras Regional Registry Commission, which was very enriching for the *Casa La Serena* model. The experience helped us strengthen the perspective of institutional care within IM-Defensoras, since we identified specific needs from women defenders who work in this area and we were able to outline a collective plan to respond to the needs of the Registry Strategy.

### **| Stays by Women Defenders of Land and Territory (2019)**

In response to an initiative of the Global Fund for Women, we convened three stays with women defenders of “land and territory” from various organizations throughout the region: Centro de Derechos de las Mujeres [Women’s Rights Center] from Honduras; Movimiento de Santo Tomás from El Salvador; Intercambios and the Nicaraguan Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders from Nicaragua; UDEFEGUA [Human Rights Defenders Protection Unit in Guatemala] and Resistencia La Puya from Guatemala; Comité de Mujeres de la Asamblea de Pueblos Indígenas del Istmo en Defensa de la Tierra y Territorio [Women’s Committee of the Assembly of Indigenous Peoples of the Isthmus in Defense of Land and Territory] and Consorcio Oaxaca from Mexico, and JASS Mesoamerica at the regional level. The stays lasted five days, with the participation of 18 women defenders.

### **| Mesoamerican Self-care Assessment (2019)**

Seven years after conducting the first Mesoamerican Assessment of Self-care Practices (2012), and advancing on the understanding, politicization, and practice of self-care, collective care, and healing, we decided to update the study. In 2019, after reviewing and improving the methodology used in the first assessment, we conducted another exercise along with the national networks, which succeeded in reaching a broad diversity of women defenders participating in IM-Defensoras. That year, we gathered information through the survey from 25 women defenders in each national network as well as members of our Steering Group.

### **First mid-level training: Module 1 - Neuromuscular Balance (2019)**

From 12 to 29 September 2019, we had a significant experience in regional capacity-building: the first module of the first mid-level training on Neuromuscular Balance, facilitated by Graciela Ramos and Hilda Itandehui, members of the self-care group of the national network of women defenders in Mexico. Twenty women defenders gathered in San Lucas Tolimán, Guatemala, energized by Atitlán Lake. We were four women from Guatemala, five from El Salvador, four from Honduras, five from Nicaragua, and two from Mexico. The workshop was organized in 12 sessions. Each session focused on one part of the body, but from a holistic perspective. We learned the theoretical and practical basis of this therapy. Neuromuscular Balance consists of body movements that liberate chronic and deep tension in muscles, tendons, ligaments and organs lodged from the moment of our fertilization, altering our body structure and affecting the various functions of our organs and systems, which then becomes various diseases, limitations and/or alterations in the body and mind. Participants left the training with the necessary tools to be first-level therapists in Neuromuscular Balance, and they now practice in their countries.

### **Systematizing the experience at Casa La Serena (2019)**

The systematization of *Casa La Serena's* model of care received a boost through our collaboration in the systematization of IM-Defensoras' 10-year trajectory. As part of the regional strategy for self-care, this systematization included a reflection group organized in El Salvador (1-3 July 2019) with the participation of 14 women defenders who had passed through La Serena at different times.



### **Sharing wisdoms with African Women Human Rights Defenders (2019)**

We hosted a group of women defenders from North Africa who are promoting the creation of a network – Feminist Republic – and we shared with them our strategic approach to self-care, collective care, and healing.

### **Barcelona Conference (2019)**

In November 2019, Calala Women’s Fund invited us to attend a human rights conference in Barcelona (Catalonia, Spanish State), where we conducted workshops, plenary presentations, and other activities to share the contributions of our strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing as a key component of protection for women defenders.

## **§ 2.4 Fourth Phase: Facing a pandemic (2020)**

The emergence of COVID-19 exacerbated the crisis we were already experiencing and altered our lives and the processes we had underway. From the strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing, we activated numerous responses based on the strategies and experiences in dealing with an uncertain situation, with creativity and flexibility in the face of new challenges.

- ♦ In response to limited access to, and the collapse and deficiency of healthcare services, we provided support through the networks in the form of resources, medicines, health insurance, and processing safe-passage letters that allowed women defenders to address their health needs and those of their families. We provided special assistance to women defenders in Nicaragua who were currently or formerly imprisoned and who have various health problems that were not being attended to. We also facilitated medical consultations in response to the lack of governmental policy and the refusal of authorities to recognize and act upon the syndemic.
- ♦ Fear, worry, uncertainty, grief, and fatigue due to working online, often without appropriate conditions and with the added burden of care work, has affected our lives and our struggles. In response, in these times of deepening capitalism and health crisis, 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, about our identities and our bodies, and about the grief that we are experiencing.
- ♦ We placed special emphasis on honoring wisdoms built and sharing different resources that we have developed at IM-Defensoras and allied organizations and communities. These resources recognize the impacts of this situation on our bodies and our lives, and encourage us to take moments of respite and activate our healing power. We distributed the “Compendio de herramientas de Autocuidado y Sanación” [“Compendium of Self-Care and Healing Tools”] compiled by Consorcio Oaxaca and IM-Defensoras’ regional strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing; and the manual [“Medicina ancestral](#)



[Garífuna – Alternativas para combatir el coronavirus](#) [“Garifuna Ancestral Medicine - Alternatives to combat coronavirus”] produced by the Fraternal Black Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH) and published with the national network of women defenders in Honduras. The national network of women defenders in Mexico convened a series of conversations – “Working with our emotions in the context of #COVID-19” – to help network members strengthen their tools for psychosocial accompaniment, self-care, and healing.

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## Art was also part of our care processes during the health emergency

We opened several artistic spaces and languages so women defenders could express what was happening and what we were feeling at that time. Through the call for “Voces Rebeldes” [“Rebellious Voices”] or the distribution of poems “Para curarse el encierro” [“To heal from confinement”], we used poetic and creative language to express ourselves and connect among ourselves. Additionally, because being able to connect with laughter and happiness is also part of healing and resistance, we organized a “Zoom Cabaret” along with the feminist cabaret Las Reinas Chulas and other allies.

***Significant moments in this phase included:***

### **#AnteLaCrisis campaign (2020)**

In response to the multiple situations that affected us within the context of the syndemic triggered by COVID-19, we launched the [#Antelacrisis](#) [In Response to the Crisis] campaign. As part of this campaign, we produced the above-mentioned [Compendio de Herramientas para el Autocuidado y la Sanación](#).<sup>33</sup> Our hope was to share diverse wisdoms for emotional, energy, mental, and spiritual management; preventing insomnia by caring for the body and, in particular, the organs most related to emotions; and the use of herbal medicine as a healing resource for many ailments that we suffered due to confinement, increased violence, and workloads. We also produced podcasts and videos with different tools and reflections to strengthen self-care and collective care in our networks and organizations.

### **Webinar on self-care (2020)**

At the very start of the health emergency and the confinement of many of us, IM-Defensoras, Consorcio Oaxaca, and Calala jointly organized a webinar [“Autocuidado y cuidado colectivo para defensoras de derechos humanos ante la crisis de la COVID-19”](#) [Self-care and collective care for women human rights defenders in response to the COVID-19 crisis]. The session brought together 220 women defenders from Mesoamerica and the Spanish State and strengthened solidarity among women defenders.

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<sup>33</sup> | IM-Defensoras (2020): “Compendio de herramientas de autocuidado y sanación”, <http://IM-Defensoras.org/2020/05/compendio-de-herramientas-de-autocuidado-y-sanacion/> [“Compendium of Self-Care and Healing Tools”]

### ***Workshops on grief (2020)***

To address losses primarily due to the syndemic, we convened three regional workshops on grief, with the participation of approximately 90 women defenders.

### ***Online session on Neuromuscular Balance (2020)***

We held an online session on Neuromuscular Balance, focusing on follow-up to the 2019 workshop and clarifying issues that came up for women defenders who are practicing what they learned.

### ***Assessment on self-care, collective care, and healing (2020)***

After compiling the questionnaires gathered in 2019, we proceeded to process the information, compare it to the results obtained in the initial assessment (2012), and analyze the new situation. We can observe how deepening inequality in the region affects our wellbeing and the possibilities for self-care, and we can better understand why the health emergency exacerbated the violence, precariousness, and vulnerability that we were already experiencing.

### ***Advising “Casa La Siguata” (2020)***

In 2020, we followed up on the process started in 2019 to create a new healing house in Honduras. We did this through an ad-hoc commission with the participation of Teresa Boedo, Nallely Tello, Ana María Hernández, Orfe Castillo, and Yami Molina. While the house was not inaugurated according to schedule – due to the difficulties stemming from the syndemic and exacerbated by increasing repression and the impact of Eta and Lota storms in Honduras – we continue to support and accompany the process with the aim of opening the house in June 2021.

### ***Care for the teams and the women defenders inside the Initiative (2020)***

We deepened the attention to self-care, collective care, and healing within IM-Defensoras’ working groups. That is, we not only think about the “women defenders” who make up IM-Defensoras, but we dedicated a large part of our calls and efforts in those who make up the different teams, strategies, and commissions within the Initiative, to support them in conducting care practices. We also accompanied women defenders at an individual level.

### ***Preparations for the Latin American Gathering of Healers (2020)***

We succeeded in bringing together an alliance of healers and proposing a Latina American Gathering of Healers. Here, we agreed on the creation of a collective space with healers in the region that will jointly design the path towards the gathering. This space has been rich in the exchange of ideas, collective care practices, political reflection, and the experience of a healing circle among the Convening Group.



**03**

*An Oasis under the sun*



## Accomplishments and challenges in our journey of the regional strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing

### § 3.1 Main accomplishments<sup>34</sup>

#### Internal capacity

♦ Self-care, collective care, and healing are reaching a much higher level of legitimacy inside IM-Defensoras. We see increasing support for coordinating the strategy and we feel strengthened. We succeeded in organizing two regional gatherings with women defenders. One was with the national networks' groups on self-care, collective care, and healing, and the other was with women defenders who had stayed at Casa La Serena. This allowed us to collectivize the narratives, share work experiences, and outline a common understanding for some conceptual and strategic matters. We have produced many more reflections, materials, and dialogues on the topics.

#### Stays for healing

- ♦ Up to March 2020, when the health emergency exploded, we had conducted 14 collective stays with women defenders from the national networks in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Mexico, as well as one stay with women defenders from Colombia and a stay with two women defenders from Brazil.
- ♦ 2019 was the first year with stays organized by country, which helped to improve the collective follow-up to the care plans.
- ♦ We also hosted the first regional strategy for a stay – the Registry team. Through this experience, we strengthened the perspective of institutional care within IM-Defensoras, since we identified specific needs of women defenders who work in this area, and the Registry strategy was able to outline a collective plan to respond to the team's needs.
- ♦ We had to suspend the stays at Casa La Serena during the health emergency, and we focused on promoting “mini-stays” in each country for women defenders to make a pause in this demanding context of COVID-19.

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<sup>34</sup> | Based on the mid-term review of IM-Defensoras' 2018-2021 Strategic Plan.

- ◆ Knowledge production and capacity strengthening
- ◆ We conducted a first systematization of Casa La Serena's model of care when we drafted the earlier-mentioned [accompaniment guide](#) and [the compendium of tools](#), which we use at the house and have made available to all women defenders.
- ◆ We shared the collectively produced knowledge by distributing approximately 500 kits on Feminist Holistic Protection, sharing information about various tools used by IM-Defensoras' national networks.
- ◆ Our learning and knowledge have attracted the attention of the academic world: the model of Casa La Serena and the work of the IM-Defensoras in the area of care have served as inspiration, reflection, and analysis for some doctoral theses, case studies in university research, and press articles.
- ◆ We launched a training process and developed women defenders' capacities. We organized the first medium-level training for 20 women defenders from IM-Defensoras' networks, several of whom now offer neuromuscular therapy to women defenders in their countries.<sup>35</sup>
- ◆ We strengthened our identity and deepened our practice: We convened the first regional meeting of self-care groups from the five national networks, where we developed a joint annual plan for the strategy and we reflected on the ethic of care and self-care as a political practice.
- ◆ Through a process that involved 125 participants, we updated the regional assessment on the situation and practice of self-care among Mesoamerican women defenders.

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### Consolidating alliances within Casa La Serena

- ◆ We hosted stays with allied organizations from Colombia and Brazil.
- ◆ The space is open for other types of gatherings and meetings: IM-Defensoras Steering Group, the national network in Mexico's Groups on Security and on Self-care; sessions on care; and exchanges and organizational strengthening visits. We hosted the emerging North African network – Feminist Republic – and shared our strategic approach.
- ◆ We maintain a collaboration with Defenred, and their house in Madrid (Spanish State) can receive women defenders from IM-Defensoras. In 2018 and 2019, two women defenders who are members of our Steering Group were there with their children, which we value highly.
- ◆ In 2019, we provided care for 147 women defenders at La Serena.

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<sup>35</sup> | Healing techniques for therapists and healers: Module 1, Neuromuscular Balance or Anti-gymnastics (20 participants).

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## Opening a new healing house in the region

IM-Defensoras has made a political commitment for each national network that is part of the Initiative to have a healing house similar to La Serena in their own country. Taking into account that we cannot open every house at the same time, we decided to launch an open call to all the networks. The Regional Commission on Self-Care, Collective Care, and Healing has taken care of, and accompanied this process. This included:

- ◆ Permanent accompaniment and *acuerpamiento* [embodied support]<sup>36</sup> in the process of opening the house and developing the plan to accompany the National Network of Women Defenders in Honduras.
- ◆ Improved coordination with the other strategies: communication, systematization, accompaniment, network strengthening, and internal strengthening.
- ◆ Improved coordination between the networks, fostering regional exchanges of healers/therapists and wisdoms.
- ◆ We convened three focus groups to provide content and guide the opening of the healing house in Honduras.

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## Latin American Gathering of Healers

- ◆ As IM-Defensoras, we succeeded in convening an alliance of healers. We proposed a Latin American Gathering of Healers, and we agreed on the creation of a collective space with healers in the region who will jointly design the path towards the gathering: a space for exchanging ideas, collective care, political reflection, and healing circle.

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## More attention to the processes of care for IM-Defensoras' teams: Regional teams and national networks

- ◆ We strengthened therapeutic accompaniment and monitoring. We opened spaces for collective care within the teams. With the crisis in Nicaragua that began in April 2018, the regional strategy accompanied and coordinated support for more than a dozen Nicaraguan women defenders as well as for their team that accompanies cases. In August 2019, a member of the regional strategy was invited to advise the strengthening of the commission that supports cases in the country. We continue to accompany the Nicaraguan Initiative and in July 2020, we participated in a training for women defenders of territory that convened by the commission that supports cases in Nicaragua.

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<sup>36</sup> | Translator's Note: The word *acuerpamiento* in Spanish does not have an equivalent in English that fully conveys its meaning in the context of embodied support and accompaniment among women defenders in Mesoamerica. *Acuerpar* brings forth the image of using our bodies to support someone, an up-close accompaniment that comes with an embrace that provides physical and emotional protection. In Feminist Holistic Protection, women defenders embody their support for each other in a collective manner to surround each other (and especially those at risk) with love, affection, and protection. Throughout the text, we use an approximation of "embracing with embodied support".

- ♦ Every network has access to specific funds for self-care allocated on an annual basis.
- ♦ We made progress on the mapping of self-care resources. We completed the mapping was conducted in Mexico, and then hired Jelena Djorjovic to facilitate the mapping of the rest of the countries.

### § 3.2 Main challenges

- ♦ We are experiencing a demand to receive women defenders at Casa La Serena that is above our capacity, and the team is in a situation of “controlled” fatigue.
- ♦ We need to diversify the ways we share tools and knowledge on self-care, collective care, and healing.
- ♦ The growth of the national networks and the complexity of the contexts within which we conduct our actions forces us to continually face fatigue and exhaustion, both among women defenders and the teams that provide embodied support and care.
- ♦ *Given the health emergency, we are facing:*
  - » An increase in demand.
  - » The urgent need to address grief and fear.
  - » The impossibility to stop, the expectation to be always available. Strenuous workdays.
  - » All of which exacerbates fatigue and exhaustion within the teams.
  - » Scarcity of dedicated self-care funding (outside what is available through IM-Defensoras/ FAU-AL/ FCAM) and healing resources/spaces for women defenders.

### § 3.4 Needs for strengthening

- ♦ Self-care, collective care, and healing must continue to drive protection and must deeply root itself inside our work. It continues to be something “we can set aside”, and this weakens our actions and our organizations and movements.
- ♦ Continue to leverage the wealth of everything we have built up to now as IM-Defensoras within the self-care strategy, and identify and address areas that need strengthening.
- ♦ Strengthen the commissions on self-care, collective care, and healing in each of the national networks and coordination spaces.



- ♦ Foster awareness-raising for prevention and early attention to impacts, before they worsen.
- ♦ Create gathering spaces for women healers at the regional/ Latin American level, and recover the practice of ancestral knowledge to improve women defenders' health and support the Web of Life.
- ♦ Facilitate access for women defenders in different countries to physical spaces and guidelines for attention in the areas of self-care, collective care, and healing.
- ♦ Promote access to dedicated funding for self-care, collective care, and healing processes, legitimizing the topic among agencies and authorities as a significant strategy within IM-Defensoras' Feminist Holistic Protection.
- ♦ Promote exchanges of tools for self-care, collective care, and healing that are emerging in each of the countries where IM-Defensoras is present.
- ♦ Strengthen dialogues about diverse views on self-care, collective care, and healing used differently in each of the networks (for example, what is Terapia de Reencuentro [Reencounter Therapy] and why is it used in a specific country? What are the similarities and differences between self-care and a psychosocial approach?)



04

*Streams that meet  
and embrace*



## Building the strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing in each country

### § 4.1 El Salvador

#### Self-care, collective care, and healing as a political practice of protection

Women defenders in El Salvador affirm that “ignoring the political causes” of what, due to our human rights defense, affects us in the private sphere (illnesses, family problems, insecurity, physical attacks, etc.) leads us to silence and isolation, and increases the risks we face. Therefore, self-care and collective care contribute to preventing these risks, since it enables us to find ways to solve many of the situations that we used to face alone and in silence.

In a way, we can summarize the way we understand self-care as: ‘self-care is caring for ourselves, in order to care for others and care for each other. Care for what we eat, the information we share, the conditions in which we conduct our work.’<sup>37</sup>

#### Self-care, collective care, and healing in the Network’s practice

The network in El Salvador initiated its strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing in 2012, when María Rosa was assigned the responsibility of promoting it. We began conducting self-care workshops with women defenders from the Feminist Collective, facilitated by Ana María Hernández (Suchitoto, 2012, and La Libertad, 2013). We conducted a mini-workshop on self-care with women defenders from the Feminist Collective and the Metropolitan Network, facilitated by Patricia Grassals, which included embodiment, graphic expression, self-massage, and ancestral recipes. We also convened workshops on protection, security, and self-care with women defenders from the Eastern Network and the Western Network. Later, we have the Belly Dancing workshops with women defenders from the Feminist Collective in San Salvador.

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<sup>37</sup> | IM-Defensoras (2014): “Travesías para pensar y actuar. Experiencias de autocuidado para defensoras de derechos humanos en Mesoamérica”, p. 41, <http://IM-DefensorasDefensoras.org/2014/05/travesias-para-pensar-y-actuar-experiencias-de-autocuidado-de-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos-en-mesoamerica/> [Own translation.]

Finally, in this initial phase, we had workshops on psychological support for members of the Feminist Collective. All of the information we received in these initial years helped us with the difficult situations we were facing – for example, the accompaniment of Beatriz, a compañera defender who was jailed for aborting.

With these tools, and with María Rosa's accompaniment, we began to develop our own self-care proposals in each territory. **Self-care actions were a “key element for articulation”, that is, for the development of the territorial networks.**<sup>38</sup>

In 2015, we strengthened our strategy by participating in regional actions like the process with Capacitar International and the focus groups to develop the vision for *Casa La Serena*. 2016 was an important year for promoting the self-care work, since we had a process to strengthen technical capacities for the psychologists who support the accompaniment of women defenders at risk. We conducted a sexual and reproductive health assessment among women defenders and an internal assessment of the territorial groups in order to integrate self-care practices.

[ We realized that each person wanted something different. Many requested individual, psychological, medical support. Also other types of physical, collective activities – dance, yoga, aerobics. Others set aside a day to go out and have some fresh air. In our experience, what works is to keep your finger on the pulse; this is what guides our actions.<sup>39</sup> ]

Since 2017, with the consolidation of the territorial networks supported by a new structure with reference points who come together in the national team of reference points, **we have taken steps in each network to create a self-care commission, create a work-plan, and develop it further.** The plan includes self-care actions as well as training and capacity-building actions. Various testimonies speak to the diversity of self-care actions that we are taking in the territorial networks.

» *The Western Network developed a proposal of artistic techniques for care.* The territorial networks have been meeting more often, and they are demanding this type of work. Each team finds the way, the form. Some networks have worked more at the level of internal teams (self-defense, guilt, etc.). The Metro Network has been conducting a reflection and reconceptualization of care. It has not been easy; we have complex and demanding dynamics. We have not succeeded in setting up these practices at the national level; each territorial team prioritizes actions at their level.«

» We meet up every two months with the Metro Network but beyond that, we have small committees – communications, self-care, etc. – that gather in other spaces, and what I like is that when we have a self-care session, we are the ones who decide what we will do. We prepare it with our reference point, in this case, María Rosa, and we make a proposal for what we want to do at that self-care session.

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<sup>38</sup> | IM-Defensoras: Notes from the meeting and regional workshop on the Strategy for Self-care, Collective Care, and Healing. (November 2018). Internal document.

<sup>39</sup> | IM-Defensoras: Notes from the meeting and regional workshop on the Strategy for Self-care, Collective Care, and Healing. (November 2018). Internal document. [Own translation.]

Then –with her knowledge, she’s the same as us, right? – we sit together and we prepare it. It’s not that she decides but we all decide together. *It’s a space where we practice what we learned, since we went to La Serena and brought back a lot of information that we made available to the compañeras...* We convened at least eight self-care sessions and we’ve done it with women who have no connection to the association, women who are totally new. So, it’s a way of involving them, when they engage in these sessions, they engage in the organization. For us, it’s a win because we give them the tools, we give them capacity-building, we provide literacy courses because some of them don’t know how to read, so we also take up this part so they receive holistic care, but self-care is what most attracts them and that’s why they stay, and that is a win for us.«<sup>40</sup>

» First we focused on the strategy, this is our framework for planning and determining the actions we will take. Among them are the self-care sessions where we try to advance and learn the contents, the conceptualization of Feminist Holistic Protection, while at the same time conducting practical exercises such as, for example, how we connect with spirituality, how we learn to breathe, the techniques we have picked up from the Mesoamerican Initiative. We also take the knowledge of our compañeras who are part of the self-care commission. We complement what the strategy is telling us with the knowledge of the compañeras... *We are conducting an analysis of the context, of the current situation, to identify really how is the situation and context affecting us as women defenders, and based on what we identify, what we experience, how we can measure what we are doing.* Another thing is that we are gathering and identifying the incidents from compañeras and that is a basis for what they need, what we need as women defenders, and this framework tells us what to do... At the moment, we are reflecting on motherhood, because we think women defenders conduct work that is very similar to the role of mothers. We think it is important to reflect on where and how we take care of others, that we cannot be aid workers, be the mothers that compañeras never had, or the motherhood where we were told means to sacrifice everything, no, we are on this issue. And another thing is that we are connecting with oils, essences, aromatherapy, massage, and there are groups that take this up based on the compañera’s needs. The Self-care Commission meets with the affected compañera and there is a dialogue, but sometimes there are spaces where we all put a limit, I say – how far can we accompany and when is it too far...«<sup>41</sup>



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<sup>40</sup> | Interview (5) with woman defender from El Salvador. El Salvador, 2 July 2019. Internal document. [Own translation.]

<sup>41</sup> | Interview (13) with woman defender from El Salvador. El Salvador, 2 July 2019. Internal document. [Own translation.]

With the COVID-19 health emergency in 2020, we mobilized our strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing to deal with one of the most harmful effects – the mental and physical deterioration of women defenders. In order to do this, the reference points in each territory launched self-care spaces, actively involving our *compañeras*. We organized self-care and collective care activities, visualizing our body as the primary territory for conquest:

We worked women defenders' emotional dimensions through actions like checking in over the phone, where we provided advice and emotional support, and in online sessions. We also fostered spaces for relaxation with music and laughter therapy. We disseminated IM-Defensoras' self-care campaign with videos that promote emotional support through physical exercises that are easy and practical. There is constant communication with the network in El Salvador through social media, chats, and bilateral calls, face-to-face visits when personal attention is needed, close coordination when accompanying cases that require support on legal matters, psychological and physical health.<sup>42</sup>

## How we are organized

There is a general coordinator for self-care and collective care (psychologist), another psychologist (responsible for the registry strategy) who supports the accompaniment processes, and a nurse who supports the training processes for the four territorial networks. They are part of the Ad-Hoc Team.

Each of the four territorial networks (Metropolitan, West, East, Cuscatlán and Cabañas) has a self-care commission made up of three women defenders.

The strategy's main actions: emotional accompaniment and support during emergencies and psycho-emotional accompaniment during burnout; self-care and collective care workshops; campaigns; and exchange of information for self-care.

<sup>42</sup> | Experiences of IM-Defensoras and the national networks of women defenders in the implementation of Feminist Holistic Protection through self-care actions. Notes from online meeting. 17 July 2020. [Own translation.]

## § 4.2 Guatemala

### Self-care, collective care, and healing as a practice that is daily, conscious, spiritual, individual, and collective.

The network of women defenders in Guatemala organized a self-care gathering<sup>43</sup> where a profound exchange took place among women defenders, based on our wisdoms and experiences about what we understand as self-care.

Caring for my body, for my life, and defending our rights. It means to feel good, healthy, and in harmony; physical, mental, and spiritual balance. It is each person's self-esteem, the care that each of us must do – or have – for oneself, conducting one or various activities that allow me to take care of myself, protect myself, exercise, liberate myself from stress and bad energies, defend my life and the lives of other Guatemalan women. It is a political position in relation to myself, one of dignity, affirmation of my rights to wellbeing, to pleasure, to emotional and physical health. It is giving myself the opportunity to feel human, deserving of care, respect, and love, to live fully. It is a responsibility to myself, of listening to myself, giving myself time, seeking my own wellbeing both physical and spiritual, in harmony with the cosmos.<sup>44</sup>

We affirm that self-care is a “political, individual, and collective practice. A conscious practice experienced day-by-day, which requires discipline and consistency. It benefits family and the organization. It means to work for my/our holistic wellbeing, locating myself in the circle of life. It is preventative as well as healing.”<sup>45</sup>

**An important emphasis that Guatemalan women defenders bring to the strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing is our reflection on spirituality as a dimension of the holistic nature of a person.** From our cultural diversity within the Mayan matrix, we affirm that:

*“The lack of understanding about spirituality generates a rejection, among those who see it as part of the structure of domination in churches or religions. Spirituality is confused with religion.”*

<sup>43</sup> | The gathering took place on 3-4 July, 2018 in San Lucas Sacatepéquez.

<sup>44</sup> | Network of women defenders in Guatemala (July 2018): Systematization of the Guatemalan women defenders' network Gathering on Self-care. Internal document. [Own translation]

<sup>45</sup> | Network of women defenders in Guatemala (July 2018): Systematization of the Guatemalan women defenders' network Gathering on Self-care. Internal document. [Own translation.]



**For the Women's Sector**, spirituality is a holistic perspective or bond that understands that human beings are part of the universe that contains life, a universe that feels, a universe that expresses and enables the energy connection between each other and with nature. The spiritual realm relates to balance and harmony – internal, with nature, with other beings, and with the universe; when balance or harmony is broken, people get sick.

**From the Mayan Cosmovision**, the spirit is an energy that each person carries from their birth, from the time they are in their mother's womb. It is also a connection with the surroundings.

**From the Xinka Cosmovision**, the spirit comes from conception; it gathers all of the energies and all that surrounds it. Independent from the practice, there is spirituality in church and in the Xinka ceremony; the belief is always in the same supreme God, the one who gives life.

**In the Kaq'la Cosmovision**, spirituality is the dimension of human life that connects us to the rest of the universe. It is an invisible energy that connects us with all plants, animals, and all other beings in the universe. Therefore, spirituality is a way of life, it is practiced from the moment we wake up until we go to sleep, it goes beyond ceremonies and rituals.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> | Network of women defenders in Guatemala (2019): Guía para fortalecer el autocuidado de las defensoras en Guatemala. [Guide to strengthen self-care among women defenders in Guatemala. Internal document. Own translation].



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## Self-care, collective care, and healing in the Network's practice

In 2010, when IM-Defensoras and the Network of Women Human Rights Defenders in Guatemala were just beginning, women defenders had a big need to gain knowledge on self-care. For this, **we took as a starting point what the feminist movement and Indigenous women had already advanced on the theme of care for the Web of Life and healing.** At that point, we had already affirmed the importance of taking care of ourselves, but the priority was on physical and digital security.

*Between 2011 and 2013, the Guatemalan Network was nourished from the following actions:*

- ♦ Psychotherapeutic accompaniment for women defenders who experienced violence; in many cases also for their children and families.
- ♦ Therapeutic treatment with Elena Arnaiz – Reiki practitioner and chiropractor who worked from the perspective of “the body as a space for healing” – for women defenders with a high level of accumulated stress due to their work as defenders, and for women defenders who were very affected by high impacting processes, like the case of Genocide of the Ixil Peoples.
- ♦ Training processes with community organizations of women defenders: workshops to raise awareness of the issue as political and security tool; workshops for psychosocial accompaniment; the care and security process with Xinca defenders (6 months long); the process of community collective self-care with women defenders from La Puya that included their sons and daughters (8 months long).
- ♦ Workshop series on healing-training for women defenders on Reencounter Therapy coordinated by Centro Q'anil and led by Yolanda Aguilar (12 months long).
- ♦ Self-care gatherings that convened up to 400 women defenders from different regions of the country.

One of the women defenders who was active in these experiences shares her reflection about what these activities meant to Guatemalan women defenders:

» ... *I think that it is the best thing that a woman defender could have in a context of constant violence – turn around and find a space where they see you and they treat you with a different perspective.* I don't know, to see compañeras who had never had a medical exam in their entire lives, for example, and who were in the most distant community here in Guatemala. Women who participated in a workshop on a technique that helped them feel healthier, and that makes her question that she must stop and rethink what kind of activism she wants to do, and turn to look at the reasons that motivated her to defend rights, wow! To see women defenders at the gatherings was magical, and it wasn't the political debate, no, it was the practice, meaning, who responded to her, that is what we did in the network, turn around and look at the humanity of women defenders...«<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> | Interview with an independent woman defender from Guatemala. Guatemala City, 15 July 2019. [Own translation.]

A series of changes within UDEFEGUA, the coordinating organization with the most weight in the network, as well as differences among the feminist and women's organizations with the most visible presence in the network about how to promote self-care, contributed to the dissolution of the process in the 2014-2016 period.

In 2017, we began a process to restructure the national convergence. We positioned self-care as a protection strategy. At that point, UDEFEGUA transfers the network and other coordinating organizations take up the work: 14 departments around the country, 120 organizations, more than 200 women defenders. We created the commission on self-care and care for the Web of Life. Nevertheless, the commission faced difficulties to function properly and much of the work to convene and organize activities fell on the national coordination.

In 2018, with the goal of promoting the creation of a network in each department, we organized capacity-building workshops on security and risk assessment, and we promoted the creation of a self-care commission. At the end of the year, all the women defenders who were involved in this strategy gathered in a self-care workshop/gathering. The most relevant part of this national gathering – with the participation of two women defenders from each department – was the reflection that we brought from our diverse experiences about the meaning of self-care, collective care, and healing. We shared various therapies and tools for self-care and healing.<sup>48</sup>

Currently, after a long dialogue, the Guatemalan network of women defenders has stopped coordinating with IM-Defensoras. However, we maintain a link with the network and we have a relationship and joint work with three collective organizations / healing centers and two healers.

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<sup>48</sup> | IM-Defensoras: Notes from the meeting and regional workshop on the Strategy for Self-care, Collective Care, and Healing. November 2018. Internal document, p. 5.

## § 4.3 Honduras

### Self-care, collective care, and healing from a feminist, grassroots, spiritual, and ancestral perspective.

For the Honduran women defenders with whom we work, self-care is a set of actions aimed at directing attention towards their bodies, energies, and emotions. These include: eating properly, resting, sharing, feeling, learning to know oneself, reflecting, exploring, giving oneself time, taking breaks, learning to say NO or YES, unlearning, speaking, expressing oneself, building alternatives, power, sleeping without tight clothes on, enjoying sexuality, pleasure, health, leisure, getting to know our fears and sorrows. Women defenders in Honduras already perform actions for their care – not often and not big actions – such as exercising, drinking water, etc. Which, in the majority of cases, is not enough.<sup>49</sup>

**We see our body as a political territory**, this is essential in our feminist vision, and **we do so from the spirituality of our eight Indigenous Peoples**. Art and magic in the construction of hope and struggle are essential, in harmony with nature, from an ancestral and popular grassroots perspective. Reclaiming wisdoms, knowledge, and experiences is crucial in these processes.<sup>50</sup>

Self-care, collective care, and healing is at the heart of protection, and we are all there together – *compañeras*, healers, therapists, wise women. We embrace each other with embodied support. We function as a self-care circle where we talk about how we feel during accompaniments, and these talking spaces have become vital.

We have also achieved a very respectful dialogue with the tools and practices of Indigenous Peoples, of the Garifuna Peoples. The opening and incentive given to artistic work as a healing proposal is very valuable (campaigns, posters, songs, radio spots). It is a huge concept that has been constructed empirically, but that has worked for us.<sup>51</sup>

### Self-care, collective care, and healing in the Network's practice

Our self-care trajectory begins in 2010 with the network, emerging from our work on protection, solidarity, and self-care. These were very difficult times because women defenders **were carrying the impacts of the 2009 coup d'état on our lives and our bodies**. We started meeting together to reflect on the need for protection and self-care, and giving a political dimension to this reflection.

49 | IM-Defensoras (2014): "Travesías para pensar y actuar. Experiencias de autocuidado para defensoras de derechos humanos en Mesoamérica", p. 50, <http://IM-Defensorasdefensoras.org/2014/05/travesias-para-pensar-y-actuar-experiencias-de-autocuidado-de-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos-en-mesoamerica/>

50 | Experiences of IM-Defensoras and the national networks of women defenders in the implementation of Feminist Holistic Protection through self-care actions. Notes from online meeting. 17 July 2020.

51 | IM-Defensoras: Notes from the meeting and regional workshop on the Strategy for Self-care, Collective Care, and Healing. November 2018. Internal document, p. 4. [Own translation.]

Between 2010 and 2011, we had several gatherings and workshops where we met to breathe and reflect on the meaning of self-care from a perspective of holistic accompaniment to women defenders. Later, **in 2012, we created the commission on solidarity and self-care** with *compañeras* like Lorena Zelaya, Karla Lara, and Griselda. That year we also conducted the assessment of the situation of women defenders in Honduras and we began to offer self-care workshops for activists, self-care sessions at assemblies, which continued throughout 2013.

Self-care is a practice that is integrated into the different organizations that make up the network.

» ... *just like we began training women on their rights* – we pretended we were making crafts, that we embroidered, cooked, women would bring food to their husbands, we invited them to celebrate their birthdays, the men were thrilled, they allowed their wives to attend the training. And that is when we were able to provide information about their rights; we began talking about sexual reproductive health. We won over a few teachers so they would give us space in some of the schools; we began training young men and young women. We would look for strategies, every 2 months or so we would say we needed to find new ways...And so we are addressing self-care as something we need to make attractive, we will start with a process to make natural medicine, make soaps, but first we will provide training, we will find a hook. We already tried it with some women; some of them already have a small soap business, but we have prepared them and they answer the call. We will soon start with another group of 10, we are working on self-care and massage, because each of the 10 has to train another 10, and that is how we want to multiply but through small processes among ourselves. We will not rush, because there is no need to rush...«<sup>52</sup>

**Once we had the national-level assessment on the situation of women defenders, we went around almost the entire country to see how our *compañeras* were doing.** Here we met many of the *compañeras* who are now part of the Steering Group for the network. We identified illnesses linked to activism (aches, insomnia, depression, stomach problems, etc.) and we became conscious of the importance of self-care to make our struggles sustainable.

It was also in 2013 that IM-Defensoras received a large support from the Dutch lottery, which allowed us – among other things – to create a fund to promote self-care actions. We launched a call to learn the needs of women defenders, and many things came up – and very diverse – linked primarily to health, such as dental problems, eyesight, medical treatment (mammograms, pap smears). All of this allowed us to better understand the reality of women defenders in Honduras and set the ground for us to start strengthening our presence in the territories in 2014. We identified some *compañeras* who were burned out or tired from their work, and we organized several individual and collective accompaniments.

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<sup>52</sup> | Interview with woman defender from Honduras. El Salvador, 2 July 2019. Internal document. [Own translation.]

The year 2015 was a very important year, because we began a process that lasted until 2018. It was the year that three *compañeras* received self-care training through the regional process with Capacitar International. The self-care commission was strengthened and **we began implementing the Reencounter Therapy. This therapy is a healing and justice process for women defenders** that reaches the deepest wounds in our lives. Each cycle lasts 10 months; we work with Yolanda Aguilar, the women defenders' network, Tejedoras de Sueños [Dream Weavers], Mala-Hierba, and Q'anil Center. The therapy consists of 10 workshops, lasting a day and half. Seventy-eight women defenders have participated in the 4 cycles of Reencounter Therapy that we have conducted so far. In 2015, we also organized a workshop with Pat Cane, with the participation of *compañeras* from IM-Defensoras. That same year, Katherine Cruz joined the network's team, which allowed us to strengthen follow-up to the self-care processes.

I think the network's actions, its proposals and the approach to building relationships has helped to rethink feminism in the country. I would say, I am not a woman defender, I am a feminist. But in Honduras, feminism had an elitist character that excluded women in the territories. This was not the case with the network's proposal. All of the constructions of ego and power, we learn to challenge them in the Reencounter Therapy (we have moved from the ego, the saint, the self-demand). Now we can build political projects that are more emancipatory, build new ways of relating among ourselves, listen more to the body, release, let go. All of this is thanks to a process of emotional decolonization, which we would not have reached if we had not built this type of relationships in the network.<sup>53</sup>

In 2016, we had the national gathering on self-care. We had a roundtable to share and recover ancestral knowledge and various self-care practices and visions. Here we got the ideas for the campaign we launched in 2017 to publicly position self-care: **"Defender para vivir y vivir bien" [Defend to live and live well]**. We developed materials, a radio campaign, and we disseminated it through social media. We created the stories of La Secia and La Taconuda, women's stories to reclaim justice. We edited a book, "[Marta La De La López](#)". We organized the launches for these products and had a party and dance to celebrate. This was significant, because we shared the [song](#) composed for the network as part of this campaign.

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<sup>53</sup> | IM-Defensoras: Notes from the meeting and regional workshop on the Strategy for Self-care, Collective Care, and Healing, p.4. November 2018. Internal document. [Own translation.]



The years 2016 and 2017 were difficult years for women defenders. The year 2016 because...

[ ... it marks a time of huge collective grief due to the assassination of our compañera *Berta Cáceres*, and this also has a strong impact on relationships. The incident is very painful for compañeras, because we were very close. So we also had collective healing processes in the construction of Berta's memory through a public forum known as *Justicia para Berta* [Justice for Berta]. We made reference to Berta's words and memory, but the political construction was tightly woven and full of feeling, which allowed us to grieve within the women defenders' network and within the network of compañeras who were very close to her.<sup>54</sup> ]

**In 2017, there was electoral fraud and intensified repression against the people,** against those who protested. And the need for a collective approach to self-care became clearer. That is why we received the [Feminist Solidarity Mission "The Embrace"](#) in 2019, where...

[ we outlined a plan to make that approach with the compañeras and to create that International Embrace of embodied support, bringing our bodies to the territories, and well, the compañeras told us that many left the space feeling embraced.

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<sup>54</sup> | Strategy for Self-care, Collective Care, and Healing. Notes from the Reflection Group on the Strategy, September 2020. Internal document. [Own translation.]

The space marked a real milestone, because we were able to weave closeness to share and give new meaning to the stories of compañeras in the territories, their spirituality, their struggles, and also the solidarity that is woven beyond borders.<sup>55</sup>

In 2018 and 2019, we also offered a space in the network's office for massage, meditation, medicinal plants. Also, five *compañeras* from the network participated in stays at *Casa La Serena* and attended the *Sonidos de Caracola* [Sounds of the Shell] gatherings organized by FAU-AL. The Self-care commission was not sustained and it stopped functioning. What we did manage to do is that, when women defenders think of self-care, their reference point is always the network. We also promoted other spaces with CENIDH [Nicaraguan Human Rights Center]; Lorena continues conducting workshops around the country with *La Via Campesina* [peasants' movement] and CODIMCA [Council for the Comprehensive Development of Peasant Women].<sup>56</sup>

**The sessions on self-care, collective care, and healing organized from 2019 onwards follow a set methodology.**

### Psychosocial Learning Communities

#### "Discovering together the force of life"

Calendar of Sessions on Self-care, Collective Care, and Healing.

#### Dates for Group 1: *Indigenous and Peasant WHRDs from La Via Campesina's Women's Articulation*

First Self-Care Session:	Second Self-Care Session:	Third Self-Care Session:
<i>"Self-care, we stop to feel"</i>	<i>"Name the fear of death, to come closer to life"</i>	<i>"Our internal power, connecting with pleasure"</i>
28 August 2020 9:00 am – 1:00 pm Facilitator: Nelly Del Cid	4 September 2020 9:00 am – 1:00 pm Facilitator: Nelly Del Cid	25 September 2020 1:00 am – 4:00 pm Facilitator: Nelly Del Cid

<sup>55</sup> | Strategy for Self-care, Collective Care, and Healing. Notes from the Reflection Group on the Strategy, September 2020. Internal document. [Own translation.]

<sup>56</sup> | IM-Defensoras: Notes from the meeting and regional workshop on the Strategy for Self-care, Collective Care, and Healing, p.3-4. November 2018. Internal document.

We were able to design this approach for self-care, collective care, and healing in collective spaces, starting from a survey of *compañeras* and an interview to identify the physical, emotional, and energy impacts in their lives. From there, **we develop self-care proposals that we implement with them, made up of three moments:**

- ♦ Stop to notice how we feel: look at ourselves to become aware of how we are, with compassion and love for ourselves.
- ♦ Name the fear of death to come closer to life: recognize that fear is there to be able to connect and come closer, to transcend fear, to transit beyond it.
- ♦ Connect with our internal strength in order to connect with pleasure.<sup>57</sup>

Another significant thing that happened in 2019 was the strengthening of the network's team. We grew in number and we created a broader strategy to promote the main elements of Feminist Holistic Protection. This strengthening came just in time to face 2020 and the capitalist pandemic. In this context, we saw that **it was time to form a network of healers, guides, therapists, and accompaniment-providers.**

This entire path has enabled us to learn from our experiences, broaden our vision of self-care, and clarify the perspectives that nourish it – ancestral and popular grassroots – as well as our political and pedagogical conceptualization of self-care. Alternative therapies are coming closer to the *compañeras*' cosmovisions, very near to the physical, the body territory, and knowing ourselves as a planet. We have advanced in building a methodology for self-care to become a reality in organizations, an internal political proposal built from within:

[ ...to make it real in the concrete, to help it come to life. And here is where the self-care plans come in, with all the dimensions. Along with the political construction and the *compañeras*' plans, the protocols and follow-up carried out very closely, because we do believe that the personal is political, and it is essential to pay attention to the details in everything we do with the *compañeras* and among ourselves.<sup>58</sup> ]

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<sup>57</sup> | Strategy for Self-care, Collective Care, and Healing. Notes from the Reflection Group on the Strategy, September 2020. Internal document. [Own translation.]

<sup>58</sup> | Strategy for Self-care, Collective Care, and Healing. Notes from the Reflection Group on the Strategy, September 2020. Internal document. [Own translation.]



## How we are organized

- The network has a coordinator for self-care who is part of the national coordination.
- Alongside the national coordination team, the coordinator fulfills the following roles: determine and implement internal and external self-care strategies aiming at sustainable activism; conduct workshops and self-care actions; and participate in the individual and collective accompaniment processes with women defenders at risk.
- She has the support of the network of therapists and healers called *Nosostras nos cuidamos* [We care for ourselves] (12 members).
- The women defenders who work on self-care, collective care, and healing come together in *acuerpamiento* through a self-care circle that serves as a space for learning, reflection, and talking about how they feel about accompaniments.

## § 4.4 Mexico

### Self-care, collective care, and healing as a permanent process.

The Mexican women defenders who are part of IM-Defensoras emphasize that our political activism is part of the self-care experience.

...in the sense that we love what we do, it motivates us, nourishes us, gives us joy. The challenge is how to set boundaries for ourselves, because no matter how big our effort is, and even if we spent our entire lives on it, the reality we face goes beyond us individually and it is only through collective work and caring among ourselves that we will succeed at advancing our dreams... Self-care is seen as a holistic process in the sense that it includes caring for body, mind, and spirit.<sup>59</sup>

And this experience must always be lived both in the individual and the collective dimension:

It is a principle, an individual practice that, nevertheless, in its form as a political tool for the sustainability of our movements, cannot be understood without it also being a collective strategy. This duality makes it dynamic, since each woman defender knows what she needs, what is good for her, what she would like. From these self-awareness practices, in dialogue and agreement with the others, we can build collective care strategies... At the same time, it is an act of empowerment of women defenders towards themselves, which can be a public or private act, and that emerges from becoming conscious and respectful of our own limitations and needs. That is why self-care cannot in any way be imposed on our compañeras, but must emerge from the reflection of each one and in alliance with others.<sup>60</sup>

We understand care as a strategy for Feminist Holistic Protection because **once we have become conscious that it is our right, that it is vital and essential for our struggles, it becomes a permanent process:**

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<sup>59</sup> | IM-Defensoras (2014): "Travesías para pensar y actuar. Experiencias de autocuidado para defensoras de derechos humanos en Mesoamérica", p.57, <http://IM-DefensorasDefensoras.org/2014/05/travesias-para-pensar-y-actuar-experiencias-de-autocuidado-de-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos-en-mesoamerica/>  
[Own translation.]

<sup>60</sup> | IM-Defensoras (2014): "Travesías para pensar y actuar. Experiencias de autocuidado para defensoras de derechos humanos en Mesoamérica", p.57, <http://IM-DefensorasDefensoras.org/2014/05/travesias-para-pensar-y-actuar-experiencias-de-autocuidado-de-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos-en-mesoamerica/>  
[Own translation.]



...it is a daily practice that leads us, day-by-day, to look at ourselves, listen, recognize, pay attention. Right there is where we believe its political dimension lies, because it breaks with the political mandate to live for others and it allows us to see ourselves and do what is best for our physical, mental, and spiritual health. Because we see ourselves as valuable, and we are certain that we contribute more from a place of joy and life than from a place of exhaustion or death.<sup>61</sup>

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### Self-care, collective care, and healing in the Network's practice

The history of our self-care practices precedes the creation of the IM-Defensoras and the national network of women defenders in Mexico, through the experience of some of our *compañeras* and their organizations. We made the decision to promote the strategy as part of our political goals in the context of the First Mesoamerican Gathering of Women Human Rights Defenders in Oaxaca in 2010 and the First National Gathering of Women Human Rights Defenders in Mexico that we organized later that year.

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<sup>61</sup> | IM-Defensoras (2014): "Travesías para pensar y actuar. Experiencias de autocuidado para defensoras de derechos humanos en Mesoamérica", p.62, <http://IM-DefensorasDefensoras.org/2014/05/travesias-para-pensar-y-actuar-experiencias-de-autocuidado-de-defensoras-de-derechos-humanos-en-mesoamerica/> [Own translation.]

Almost immediately, in 2011, the network's steering group met to organize the working groups that would embody the work on protection: the Security and Urgent Action Group, the Self-care Group, and the Communications Group. **At the second national gathering, which took place in Tlaxcala, we formalized our Self-care Group**, coordinated by Silvia, and we took up the task of participating in the Mesoamerican Self-care Assessment.

Nallely joined in 2013 to coordinate the self-care group and we organized self-care workshops and gatherings in various territories nationwide. We also produced a directory of therapists to see who was available in the different states. We continued the work on the Mesoamerican Self-care Assessment and we participated in the reflections and exchanges captured in "[Travesías para pensar y actuar](#)". Additionally, we created a blog on self-care to promote dialogue among women defenders and we provided individual accompaniment of cases, building up the experience that eventually fed into *Casa La Serena*.

In 2014 and 2015, we continued with the individual accompaniments and we organized a second stay for women defenders who were seriously exhausted due to the attacks against them. These were also years of intense capacity-building, both received (Pat Cane, Capacitar International) and shared (SIPAM, Red Mesa de Ciudad Juárez, network of shelters, the caravan of Central American mothers). We broadened the self-care group with the participation of additional *compañeras*, reaching a membership of 12.

We will always remember 2016 for the participatory consultation process in the creation of La Serena, the training on Neuromuscular Balance, and the campaign to present the national report on the situation of women defenders simultaneously in several states in the country. By then, the self-care group was meeting twice a year. We conducted a self-training workshop and exchanged experiences about the different therapies we were using for self-care, collective care, and healing.

From 2017, we remember with special emotion some **experiences that enriched our understanding and practice of self-care, collective care, and healing**. These included the mission to the Yaqui tribe and the self-care accompaniment with Tere Guardián from the autonomous community of Cherán, as well as the support to the *compañeras* of Jamut Boo'O – **processes in which we exchanged and learned from ancestral wisdoms**. Also the workshops with ALUNA, an organization that works on psychosocial accompaniment, as well as the research that resulted in publishing the book "[Si nos somos nosotras, quienes](#)" ["If not us as women, who?"] and the self-care workshop with Emma Reyes-Resonace in Xalapa.

The years that followed have been dedicated to building experience on the connection between the working group on security and urgent action and the self-care group, both when supporting cases and with training processes in various territories through workshops supported by Calala (Yucatán, Guerrero, Michoacán, and Veracruz). This joint work has enabled us to advance in the practice of holistic protection for women defenders at risk and their organizations.

At the beginning of 2020, we experienced the transition in the coordination of the self-care group within a broader process to strengthen the network. We decided that Nallely Tello would dedicate more time to the regional strategy, and that Paty Yllescas would take on coordinating the working group on self-care, collective care, and healing.

A few months later, Carolina Ramírez also joined the coordination of the self-care group. In the context of the pandemic, we have been innovating ways of attending to individual cases and strengthening our capacities to accompany specific situations such as grief, crisis, and risk analysis.

**The methodology we use for attending to cases during the pandemic has required us to make some adjustments. Below is the attention route that we are following:**

» **Receiving the request**

The self-care group does not receive direct requests. The agreed process is for a woman defender who requires support from the network to first contact one of the Co-Executive Directors or be referred by a woman defender within the network. The request is reviewed first by the technical secretaries of the group on security and urgent action, who make the decision of accepting the case for accompaniment. If they decide that an intervention from the group on self-care, collective care, and healing is needed, the request is sent to one of the group's coordinators.

» **Analysis and Assessment**

Once the request is received, the case is analyzed jointly by one of the Co-Executive Directors, the technical secretaries of the group on security and urgent action, and the coordinators of the group on self-care, collective care, and healing. The meetings take place through a safe online platform created for this purpose.

[ ...the case is analyzed and the technical secretary opens a file. We outline the first set of actions, that is, when a woman defender is being attacked, we take action in the areas of communications, advocacy, security, and self-care. Then, we make the assessment and in the cases that are already marked as needing emotional accompaniment – because we also explore whether the compañera is part of an organization that has that capacity and then we leave it for local action – when that possibility does not exist, she is referred to the self-care group.<sup>62</sup> ]

» **Attention or referral**

If the situation requires accompaniment from the group on self-care, collective care, and healing, our coordinators identify if any of the group members have the capacity to provide attention, or if she can be referred to one of the specialists in the Women Defenders' Self-Care Resource Directory. If no specialist is available, the coordinator seeks information about resources that may be available nearby, for face-to-face or online accompaniment. The request for the specialist includes the First Contact file, which already has the attention route for the woman defender.

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<sup>62</sup> | Strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing. Notes from the Reflection Group on the Strategy, September 2020. Internal document. [Own translation.]

The attention that we offer includes a holistic scheme with the five dimensions of self-care: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and energy.

...self-care actions through breathing, physical activation, hydration, and sleep are all basic components and elements of the physical dimension, of course a healthy diet. We promote the issue of what to do with free time, to have pleasurable activities; a family connection or relationships with support networks friends or with the organizations. We promote spiritual spaces based on the compañera's development. We follow her psychosocial accompaniment if she is receiving it with an external expert or with us; and we promote activities related to healing. We explore how situations of emotional crisis are addressed in her family, or through which cultural tradition, and here we promote a few other artistic or cultural expressions, work with pets, we are promoting that now and we have a few compañeras who dedicate a bit of time to interacting with their pet, playing, exercising with the pet present.<sup>63</sup>

#### » *Follow-up and closure*

Whether the attention is provided directly or indirectly, we keep track of the process and results, as well as new needs that may emerge for the woman defender. Normally, this type of attention lasts five sessions, although sometimes we must extend the support for a longer period. We conduct this follow-up jointly with the technical secretary of the security and urgent action group, the woman defender, and the specialist that is dealing with the case.

The process comes to a close when the specialist notifies us that the work has concluded, and we have verified the condition of the compañera, how she feels, if the intervention helped her, or what her expectations are, how is her overall health, and then we complete a form to conclude the care process. Also, I forgot to tell you that part of the process involves access to economic support in case more specialized attention is needed that may require medicine, so that kind of support is also provided.<sup>64</sup>

In relation to documentation and control, the coordinator of the group on self-care, collective care, and healing has a database where she notes all the information regarding the types of attention provided. She then shares this over email every three months with all of the group members so that we can all analyze the processes, learn from them, and improve them.

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<sup>63</sup> | Strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing. Notes from the Reflection Group on the Strategy, September 2020. Internal document. [Own translation.]

<sup>64</sup> | Strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing. Notes from the Reflection Group on the Strategy, September 2020. Internal document. [Own translation.]

## How we are organized

○ The network has a self-care group that is part of the Operative-Executive Team.

○ The self-care group is made up of two coordinators and 11 women defenders who are specialists in various healing techniques, spread across 7 states and connected to 8 organizations.

○ The group's main areas of work are: support in emergency situations (in collaboration with the group on security and urgent action); attention to situations of chronic exhaustion; conducting workshops on self-care, collective care, and healing.

○ The group has access to self-care specialists who are referred by the women defenders themselves in order to broaden support provided throughout the national territory.

## § 4.5 Nicaragua

### Self-care, collective care, and healing from a psychosocial, systemic, and intersectional perspective.

Nicaraguan women defenders know that self-care and collective care is one of the three essential components of Feminist Holistic Protection, along with physical security and digital security. We approach self-care from a psychosocial, systemic, intersectional perspective on violence, emphasizing its importance for the political sustainability of our activism and human rights defense.<sup>65</sup>

#### Self-care

##### \* Security

##### \* Protection

##### \* Life

##### \* Vulnerabilities

##### >> Expectations:

\_ ¿What to do? / protocol

- Clarity about security measures
- I have no expectations
- Tools for self-regulation
- Personal connection, connecting with the group

\_ Support, security, discipline in action

##### >> Risks:

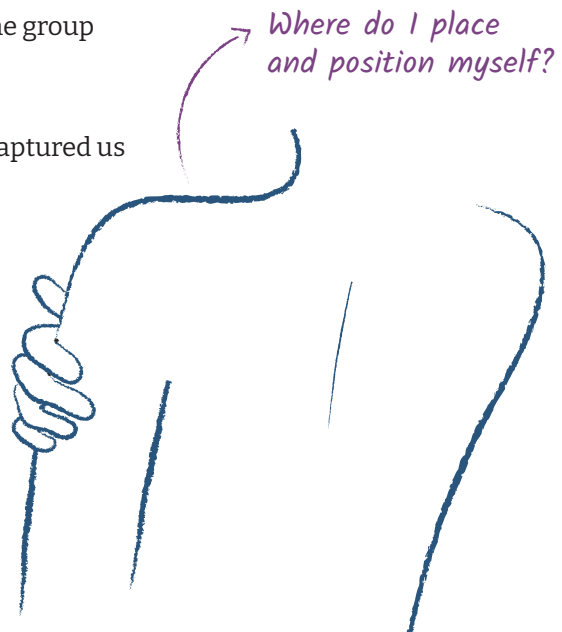
\_ What happened? / They followed us and captured us

- Rape
- Disappearance
- Torture

##### >> Threats:

\_ Incidents

- What happened?
- When?
- Where?
- Who?



<sup>65</sup> | Experiences of IM-Defensoras and the national networks of women defenders in the implementation of Feminist Holistic Protection through self-care actions. Notes from online meeting. 17 July 2020. [Own translation.]



## Self-care

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### \* Context — Politics of fear

#### >> Family:

- \_ Values
- \_ Discipline
- \_ Coherence
- \_ How does it affect the family?
- \_ Family Relationships
- \_ Networks
- . Assaults on children

#### >> Team – community:

- \_ BWe lowered the use of protection and security measures
- \_ Conviction / motivation  
“Need to make Resistance visible”
- \_ Overly confident in security and protection
- \_ I don’t take measures when traveling
- \_ We didn’t think about the consequences
- \_ NETWORKS protocol:
- \_ The security team comes first
- Recognize that we need help
- Re-think the set of tools:  
. What measures will we take?
- No notice / for follow-up
- Who will we call? Which network?
- I feel cared for
- Security measures at home

#### >> Social:

- \_ Learnings:
  - Reaffirm that I am still involved as an activist on the streets
  - I feel responsible for doing it / representation
  - Recognize fear / without becoming paralyzed
  - I didn’t see the risk – consider the context
  - Where to prioritize
  - Thinking that security is individual
  - Wanting to take on a lot
  - “We lowered the level of alert”
  - Don’t let resilience drop
  - . What can we do to motivate others to lose their fear?

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## Strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing

As the Nicaraguan Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders, our experience with the strategy for the self-care, collective care, and healing can be divided in three periods. The first period goes from the birth of our national convergence in 2011 to the political crisis that exploded in April 2018; the second comprises the peak years of the crisis (2018-2019); the third begins in March 2020, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 syndrome and the deepening of political violence that has not ceased.

**During the first period, our efforts focused on sharing and broadening our wisdoms about self-care** through gatherings, workshops, and activities to which we invited women defenders from diverse territories. We also participated in the regional strategy's actions, like the 2013 Assessment on the Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders, or a few stays at La Serena for *compañeras* who were really exhausted. The importance of this strategy as part of security and protection became clear to the women defenders who participated in the actions; however, we were unable to raise consciousness about the topic across all organizations.

This situation changed with the impact of the sociopolitical crisis in April 2018. The seriousness of the violence that the State unleashed against students, activists, and human rights defenders demanded a lot of effort from the Nicaraguan initiative of women defenders, and other networks in the country, in order to address a situation where we had little experience.

...and we analyzed many scenarios of how we were seeing this crisis unfold. The first step was understanding that faced with the crisis, we must respond with emotional support / containment. It was important to understand that we needed to be embraced, literally a collective embrace that would make us feel that embodied support. We came together in the middle of this crisis. For example in May, with collectives like FAU-AL, Alibel, with Capacitar International and other Nicaraguan *compañeras* who took up the work and offered what they had, for example Meli who offered work through Bio-dance. And so, we managed to see that in this crisis we could find alternatives that would give us space to breathe, a bit of light, reduce that huge emotional burden, and we organized territorial workshops where we could move. We began to meet each other, to integrate and place 'the body' at the center. We reclaimed this, our body as that which sustains life but also that which accompanies others and that receives.<sup>66</sup>

» *Now, within the Initiative, we have worked a lot on the issue of recognizing bodies, our own emotions, connecting with oneself, taking women almost to the consciousness of caring for themselves. It's not like a master key that opens a door and all is fine; rather it is simply a path if you want to reclaim your resources, meaning, we take women to their own resources.*

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<sup>66</sup> | Strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing. Notes from the Reflection Group on the Strategy, September 2020. Internal document. [Own translation.]

So, what I learned is that sometimes we limit ourselves because we think we need economic resources, but actually we need emotional resources, the ability to identify our own strengths in order to get better. I learned to have more empathy with women's situations, women's rhythms.«<sup>67</sup>

In 2019, we prioritized creating a space to accompany women defenders, both on issues linked to Feminist Holistic Protection and self-care processes, as well as strengthening the capacities of women defenders who accompany and assist other defenders or activists. We did this with the support of allied *compañeras* in the region who are part of IM-Defensoras, promoting methodologies like somatic experience, Pranic Healing, and bodywork. We incorporated these tools with their experience in accompaniment: Bach Flowers, Ayurvedic massage, lymph massage, relaxants, and other specialized therapies that also depended on each of the *compañeras* and the resources at the time.

[ We set up the treatment room and the massage and therapy room. We created spaces emphasizing collective care in response to political repression with groups of women who were released from prison. This has been very important because the consequences of incarceration are palpable in this group, how it destroys life plans. Being able to incorporate self-care as a cross-cutting strategy in their recovery process has been very important, we've been doing it for a year and a half.<sup>68</sup> ]

In relation to healing processes, we feel we have to develop this strategy further. However, we implemented an alternative that has given good results: a resting place for women defenders and activists who experience high risk in their life and have been subjected to high levels of stress. It's a seaside house, where they can go with their family.

[ ...there is no guide, no methodology, the idea is for the person to rest and above all to be close to her family, because one of the limitations that women defenders have is that if you don't make a plan that includes her children, there is no rest, no disconnection, it's very difficult for them. If you tell them that their children are included, then they are more receptive to the space and this is essential because the Nicaraguan context has really created mistrust and sometimes there are very few support networks that can accompany a woman defender, depending on the territory where she is.<sup>69</sup> ]

Another thing that helped a lot was having La Serena and integrating Bio-dance as a body movement that helps us reconnect holistically with ourselves.

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<sup>67</sup> | Interview (8) with member of the Nicaraguan Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders. El Salvador, 3 July 2019. Internal document. [Own translation.]

<sup>68</sup> | Strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing. Notes from the Reflection Group on the Strategy, September 2020. Internal document. [Own translation.]

<sup>69</sup> | Strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing. Notes from the Reflection Group on the Strategy, September 2020. Internal document. [Own translation.]

**Although we are happy with our progress, we identified some challenges:**

- ◆ Taking on self-care as a process that cuts across our daily life, without disconnecting it from our political action.
- ◆ Acting from the place of prevention and fostering tools for sustainability in situations of high risk.
- ◆ Monitoring self-care and collective care processes.
- ◆ Fostering self-care, not only when you are affected, but as an “art of life”.
- ◆ Improving the articulation between self-care strategies and other actions as well as the territory.
- ◆ Intersectionality of protection and self-care, Feminist Holistic Protection.<sup>70</sup>

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## How we are organized

○ The Nicaraguan Initiative has two women defenders who are responsible for the strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing, who are part of the security and protection team.

○ They work with the support of a network of psychologists and therapists (RAP for its acronym in Spanish) to respond to the accompaniment processes. (approximately 15 members)

○ Their main actions are: developing and monitoring self-care, security, and protection plans with women defenders in the territory and with the teams; workshops on self-care and related themes; collective healing spaces.

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<sup>70</sup> | Strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing. Notes from the Reflection Group on the Strategy, September 2020. Internal document. [Own translation.]



05

# *Crystalline waters*



## Lessons and challenges of the regional strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing

### Becoming conscious, beginning the journey

- ♦ At the 2010 Mesoamerican Gathering of Women Human Rights Defender in Oaxaca, we were not yet aware about protection for women defenders, much less about self-care, collective care, and healing. However, we had the intuition that we needed a safe space of trust where we could talk about ourselves, our fears in a context that was placing the lives of our compañeras and our communities at risk. We were sad, angry, tired, pained over the compañeras who we lost along the way, silenced, but above all, we had forgotten ourselves. In this space, sharing the rivers of our lives, we opened a faucet that allowed our feelings to flow and we began our path of self-recognition and collective recognition that led us towards Feminist Holistic Protection.
- ♦ One of the most significant contributions of this strategy has been the possibility to spark personal and collective processes that enable consciousness-raising over the importance of self-care, collective care, and healing for political action and for our own lives. Just this element has been actually the most important and the most challenging. We need this in order to begin a path of transformation that creates wellbeing and a life with dignity for those who organize themselves to defend their rights.
- ♦ From our experience, we affirm that **this consciousness-raising process is one of the most challenging**. The sacrificial culture of activism; the gender mandates (and the guilt of taking care of ourselves or feeling that we can only do so when we reach the limits of our strength); individualist capitalist culture; the constant emergencies; sexist and discriminatory practices within our families, organizations, communities, and the many resistances that these entail – these are some of the reasons behind this challenge. Other factors include victimhood as an identity and the complex process of recognizing that, although there are situations that victimize us, we have the collective ability to heal ourselves and accompany others in their healing process.

- ♦ Building this consciousness depends of the moment in one's life, the woman defender's personal and collective experiences and circumstances. However, what stands out in most regional actions and networks are spaces that enable – similar to feminist self-awareness spaces – diverse women to see each other, dialogue together, and recognize themselves in the other. *Some examples of these spaces include:*
  - » Workshops in the different countries and territories
  - » Gatherings among diverse women defenders
  - » Spaces within organizations that are facilitated by the networks or the regional team
  - » Stays at Casa La Serena. It is worthwhile mentioning that, due to the depth and the amount of time that a stay at Casa La Serena entails, it has been recognized as one of the most significant spaces for building deep consciousness about the importance of self-care, collective care, and healing.
  
- ♦ In the 10 years of IM-Defensoras' history, we can see how this process of self-awareness and collective consciousness has been strengthening and expanding, to the point that **we can hardly speak about protection today without recognizing the importance of self-care, collective care, and healing.** Increasingly, we see women defenders and their organizations opening space, implementing various tools, changing certain practices, and seeking support both within and outside the network.
  
- ♦ Even more challenging than achieving self-awareness is **achieving collective consciousness that transforms organizational and community practices.** One of the biggest challenges in the accompaniment processes is how to transmit the accomplishments and transformations experienced by women defenders who are accompanied in order to have a bigger and permanent impact on their collectivities.

### **Learning from each territory how self-care, collective care, and healing is practiced and re-created**

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- ♦ Like all Feminist Holistic Protection processes, self-care, collective care, and healing is built from the wisdoms and experiences of women defenders, our networks, and our woven relationships and the fabric of our peoples that we continue to weave.
  
- ♦ In IM-Defensoras' history, there is as much learning as there are compañeras, organizations, and communities that we have accompanied and embraced with embodied support. They all contributed their inputs and wisdoms:



- » **From El Salvador**, we learned – through the experience of accompanying our compañera Beatriz<sup>71</sup> – that self-care, collective care, and healing means strengthening women’s political identity as defenders, encouraging dialogues on controversial issues such as abortion, and linking women from different movements.
- » **From Honduras**, we learned – through the embodied support of the Guapinol community – that self-care, collective care, and healing strengthen resistance and give relief and hope in order to face barbarous injustices, thereby becoming a strategy that renews the strength of movements in order to continue the struggles.
- » **From Mexico**, we learned – through Casa La Serena – how to create a space of healing and rest that organically integrates a broad diversity of contributions and cosmovisions that come together towards a profound reparation in women defenders, allowing them to strengthen their lives, the fabrics that connect them, and their transformative hope.
- » **From Nicaragua**, we learned that self-care, collective care, and healing are especially necessary in moments of crisis and political and social emergency. Precisely in order to continue the struggle, we must stop and breathe whenever possible. We also learned about the strength of groups of women defenders who together heal horrible situations of violence, such as those that affect our compañeras who were released from prison.
- » **From Guatemala**, we learned the importance of reclaiming the wisdom of Indigenous Peoples and connecting with our ancestors, with the energy of the land, spirituality, and the universe.

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## The integration of security with self-care, collective care, and healing as intertwined elements of the Feminist Holistic Protection strategy

- ♦ Weaving together self-care, collective care, and healing with security has been one of the most complex and enriching processes in IM-Defensoras’ experience. The process entailed changes, questioning, challenges, and inputs that have contested and made traditional conceptions of protection more complex.
- ♦ From our first accompaniment experiences, we identified a key element in determining a security plan and even in carrying out a risk analysis: we needed basic conditions of wellness and calm without which it was very difficult to face the situation.

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<sup>71</sup> | The National Network of Women Human Rights Defenders in El Salvador defended this case in 2013. Along with other civil society organizations, they demanded that the Inter-American Human Rights Commission urge the State of El Salvador to adopt the necessary measures to protect the life of Beatriz. Beatriz was a young mother who had requested authorization from the Supreme Court for a therapeutic abortion as her life and that of the fetus diagnosed with a fatal malformation were in danger. The State of El Salvador had denied the abortion and imprisoned Beatriz.

- ♦ Recognizing and addressing fears, resting, having a moment of respite and a secure and friendly space, attending to possible crises created by a situation of violence, connecting with ancestral energies, recovering internal strength, are all elements that foster the necessary conditions to face a situation of risk.
- ♦ Nevertheless, we cannot begin a process of self-care, collective care, and healing if we are facing an imminent risk where the life and integrity of a compañera or her collective are in danger.
- ♦ One of the strategies that contributed to this integration was the **definition of “heightened risk”**, meaning, identifying indicators in the risk analysis process that reflected not only threats and attacks but also the conditions of wellness – exhaustion; tension; emotional, psychosocial, energy impacts; etc. – that women defenders experience. In this way, the protection plan can take a more holistic approach to women defenders’ needs.
- ♦ However, we still have a long way to go for self-care, collective care, and healing to be taken up by our collectivities as a political goal. Sometimes it is still a “bandage” of sorts, a moment in our spaces rather than a process or a political direction to our protection approach.

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### The other as a mirror of ourselves.

- ♦ Another significant contribution of the work on self-care, collective care, and healing is the importance of an up-close accompaniment of the personal and collective process to begin to transform ourselves and transform our habits, political practices, and relationships in order to achieve a higher level of wellbeing and congruency within our activism. We speak amongst ourselves as equals; we learn together, we recognize ourselves in the others because in our path as women defenders we have gone through similar experiences. The women defenders who facilitate workshops, create spaces for coming together, and provide daily accompaniment to compañeras who need it, are those of us who have been learning diverse approaches, who have ancestral knowledge, or who have had prior experience with this type of process.
- ♦ However, this embodied support among and for women defenders brings to light the tensions, inequalities, and discriminatory dynamics that we may exercise between ourselves. It exposes the power relations that we need to challenge and transform, both among ourselves and in the organizational spaces in which we participate.
- ♦ **Seeing ourselves in the mirror that the other holds up facilitates our healing and allows us to collectively transform the activist practices that place us at risk, turning it into a gratifying exercise.** In this sense, we must still give more visibility to the empowering and emancipatory dimension, which builds the meaningful and loving relationships, life projects, and social transformation that we seek in our activism. What is the history of women defenders’ resilience? How do we leverage that memory of healing that allowed us to arrive here?

## The wide array of diverse experiences become threads that we weave together as elements shared in the accompaniment path.

♦ While each self-care, collective care, and healing process is unique based on the different contexts in which it takes place, an analysis of the various experiences and allow us to see that **the accompaniment paths have certain common elements.**

♦ *Assessment/interview/space to identify needs.* The recognition of needs is a key moment in every country and at the regional level. This takes place in different formats: an individual or collective interview, a session on reflection, etc. The aim is to recognize the foremost needs in order to draft a plan and outline a path for accompaniment. Several networks and regional experiences concur that in these spaces, becoming conscious on one's own situation also entails becoming conscious of our political identity as women who have the right to defend rights and the right to have our political action respected. Claiming our identity as women defenders, regardless of whether we name ourselves as such, means recognizing the rights we have and the legitimacy of our action.

♦ *Channeling.* Once we create the plan, we mobilize the existing network of tools and resources. In some circumstances, the regional team or the teams in the networks facilitate the tools, but for the most part the task is to facilitate linkages and organize access to the tools, based on the plan. This process entails a lot of work organizing and managing resources, which is not always recognized. To this, we add the process of building networks of therapists, healers, accompaniment providers, who for the most part bring a human rights and/or feminist perspective.

♦ *Accompaniment/embodied support.* It is the act of maintaining the relationship, listening, affection, solidarity, political backing, and/or facilitating tools and resources to enable the self-care, collective care, and healing process though daily follow-up provided to the woman defender, her organization or community, as well as building relationships of care, complicity, and alliance. Accompaniment is at the heart of this strategy, and it poses one of its main challenges: the power dynamics and tensions between those who accompany and those who are accompanied. Among the challenges is the importance of setting boundaries based on capacity, resources, and strengths.

♦ *Strengthening capacities.* In almost every situation, we hope that the process strengthens personal and collective capacities for self-care, collective care, and healing. This is achieved either by reflecting on one's own experience of accompaniment and becoming aware of the decisions and resources that women defenders themselves have brought into play, or by facilitating workshops or accompanying the development of organizational measures and taking ownership of tools to improve our own lives in the physical, emotional, mental, spiritual and energy dimensions.



♦ *Promoting mutual care and collective action.* Achieving sustainability in defense work and creating a culture of activism conducted with joy and wellbeing requires commitment not only at the personal level but also within collectivities. In every country and at the regional level, we have seen that self-care, collective care, and healing is a daily process sustained and strengthened by the collective, meaning, through agreements with and among networked women defenders, learning from each other, building new ways of working and solidarity.

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### **We heal together and with those who are close to us**

- ♦ One of the contributions of the strategy has been **to bring compañeras from the organization or collective, families, those who are close, and even communities into the process.**
- ♦ Families, especially children and intimate partners, are particularly important for women defenders during their self-care, collective care, and healing process.

- ♦ Although we try to ensure that the process includes spaces to be on our own or with our sisters in struggle, having loved ones and children nearby and addressing the impacts that the violence affecting us has on them has been a constant practice in the plans of women defenders who we accompany.
- ♦ Bringing in these groups is not easy, it requires more resources and it makes the process more complicated, but we cannot understand Feminist Holistic Protection without the presence of these close relationships.

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## The tools are as many and as diverse as the women defenders themselves

- ♦ The breadth and diversity of the tools used in self-care, collective care, and healing processes reflect the number and diversity of women defenders involved. This confirms a basic principle of Feminist Holistic Protection, which tells us that when we speak of protection, there are no recipes, each experience and each compañera has a unique set of needs.
- ♦ Given this diversity of needs, the compañeras who facilitate the strategy – both at the national and regional levels – have been compiling a broad range of possibilities that are complementary within a holistic lens. Some of the ones regularly mentioned include:
  - » **Safe spaces** to become conscious of our own needs, to share and develop empathy and mutual support, to unload and take time for our own care.
  - » Therapies, collective spaces, and **healing processes to address loss and grief** in these pandemic times.
  - » **Tools to strengthen overall health:** herbology, Bach Flowers, medical consultations and analysis, nutrition, hydration, rest, healing massage, bio-respiration, bio-dance, etc.
  - » **Tools for emotional and psychosocial support:** individual therapy, group therapy, emotional accompaniment, support and attention in crisis situations.
  - » Spaces and moments for **healing with the ancestral knowledge of Indigenous Peoples.**
  - » **Spaces to strengthen creativity** and connection with spiritualities: clay, poetry, dance, cleansings, *Temazcal* steam baths, etc.
- ♦ This diversity of tools requires building relationships with compañeras who have the necessary knowledge about each of the alternatives mentioned. **One of the historic contributions of the strategy has been the development of alliances with a large number of organizations and people who have offered their knowledge at the service of the women defenders who need it.** These alliances have resulted in collective synergies with therapists from different wisdoms and territories, compiled in directories that allow us to view the resources that are available, where they are

located, what type of processes and cases they can accompany, what resources they need, etc. Additionally, some countries have created networks of therapists specialized in supporting women defenders or networks of healers.

- ♦ **Making this diversity of tools possible poses various challenges.** One of them is the time and dedication needed for the persons and organizations providing support to gain the necessary knowledge to accompany women defenders who have specific needs due to their political identity that require specific attention. Finding people and organizations is not enough; we must build with them the necessary capacities to address the needs of women defenders. Another challenge is capacity-building and recognizing existing wisdoms and resources in each territory so that women defenders in need can access diverse alternatives near where they live, and so would not need to turn to people or organizations who are far away or who do not understand their specific context. Each territory faces a different reality, and so we need to work on strengthening their own capacities and tools. This entails time and processes that are not always possible to push from outside.

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### The role of the respite houses

- ♦ The national networks of women defenders have been developing spaces for respite and/or healing in every country. La Marianela in El Salvador, La Serena in Mexico, and the recently-opened La Siguata in Honduras.
- ♦ Having access to these spaces – available both for compañeras in the country and for women defenders from other parts of the region and even the world – has fostered processes of self-care, collective care, and healing that address the deep causes, develop better conditions to integrate various tools, and promote certain changes that enable a type of activism that is more sustainable, more joyful, and/or more secure.
- ♦ La Serena contributes a set of experiences, paths, strategies, and tools that reflect the type of processes we want to promote through the strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing. Between 2016 and 2020, Casa La Serena received 250 women defenders for individual and group stays. The majority of testimonies gathered describe a highly significant experience that transformed women defenders' lives, gave them new energy, and renewed their hope and desire to continue in the struggle.

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### Towards Healing...

- ♦ Our strategy has been transforming from self-care towards a more complex formulation that brings together self-care, collective care, and healing. Self-care was a way of recognizing that we had the right to name our needs and to take care of ourselves, that exhaustion and sacrifice do not strengthen our political processes but instead they deteriorate our lives and our relationships. Collective care distanced us from individualist and neoliberal perspectives of self-care promoted by capitalism

to remain functional to the system by not challenging the structures that deteriorate our living conditions and our political action. Along the way, we have been building methodologies, actions, and processes for strengthening the community fabric, which enriches the possibility of intertwining the personal with the political. We strongly believe that one is not possible without the other.

- ♦ With healing, it was not simply about integrating one more element – we re-formulated the strategy. It is still under construction, given how complex it is to become aware of this vision and integrate it. It involves not only deconstructing the sacrifice practices or the gender mandates, which we were already addressing, but also questioning our Cosmovision and the colonial logic that has marked our lives.
- ♦ Integrating healing means, in the first place, learning from the women and the peoples that have been resisting, persisting, and creating new realities from the Cosmovision of Indigenous Peoples – from the processes of healing the wounds of war, genocide, and armed conflict in our region. It means taking a long view connected with our ancestors. Thus the significance of having spaces to come together and open our network fabric to compañeras who have these wisdoms throughout our region, and particularly those in Guatemala and Mexico who have very important historical experiences.
- ♦ “Healing is a living process that repairs life: Reclaiming our Mesoamerican peoples’ knowledge about healing; cultivating spirituality, connection, and rootedness with life and nature – these are all transformative acts in response to the violent predatory models. Identifying the healing practices that best adapt to daily life on the personal and collective levels is part of repairing the damage caused by this structural and patriarchal violence. We do not need to be on the edge of burnout or illness to do something; rather, we need to ‘empty and clean out the vessel’ for the energy to move towards transforming pain into strength.”<sup>72</sup>
- ♦ We still face various challenges on our path: developing a deep understanding of what it means to reclaim and honor ancestry; opposing the use of these wisdoms in an instrumentalist and “extractivist” manner; recognizing that it is not a homogeneous wisdom but rather diverse perspectives in dialogue with each other and that there may exist differences between them; integrating not only the practices but also the compañeras and communities that make them possible.

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### **Caring for our network fabric and for the compañeras who maintain it**

- ♦ A challenge that became particularly clear in the crisis exacerbated by COVID-19 and the Eta and Lota storms of 2020 that primarily affected Central America, was the level of fatigue and exhaustion reached by the teams and the compañeras who accompany the Feminist Holistic Protection processes, including the work on self-care, collective care, and healing. Many of our compañeras reached their limit.

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<sup>72</sup> | Words from Ana María Hernández in IM-Defensoras: Notes from the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena. July 2019. Internal document. [Own translation.]

- ♦ We see a permanent confrontation between being congruent with the political practices we want for ourselves and our movements, and the reality of continuous emergencies and structural violence that allow for no rest. Becoming conscious of this reality has led to a process of transformation and the creation of specific spaces to address the situation. However, the turmoil of the day-to-day makes changing the dynamic difficult, and some compañeras have not been able to continue.
- ♦ We identified a concrete need to develop a broader network of compañeras trained in the various strategies, therapies, and perspectives that our Strategy has been integrating into our practice. A broader network with a greater presence in the territories that would prevent over-burdening the current teams and would build capacities among increasing numbers of compañeras. This entails, among other things, strengthening spaces and tools for training and education about the Strategy in the Feminist Holistic Protection framework.

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### Healing loss, living grief

- ♦ Along the way, we have lost comrades in struggle, compañeras who were our sisters and our political reference points. This experience has marked us deeply.
- ♦ The loss of loved ones due to COVID-19 and losing personal belongings, our homes, and living areas due to the storms, as well as the loss of freedom due to confinement and restrictions on our lives and our struggles have multiplied the grief and our health problems.
- ♦ In response, we opened spaces and requested help from compañeras who have accompanied these types of processes. However, we are still looking for ways to face these losses without losing hope. A challenge in this sense is to achieve resilient transformation among women defenders and their movements, giving ourselves time to examine the lessons that the syndemic is providing, and the changes we need to make in order to feel energy and joy so that we can continue our work.

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### Challenges in the collective sphere

- ♦ The increase in violence and attacks against women defenders and the reach of this violence within growing collectives and entire communities means that case-by-case attention, or one compañera at a time, is increasingly insufficient.
- ♦ Although we are clear that protection should lead to collective transformations and collective embraces of accompaniment that can safeguard our integrity and the continuity of our struggles, one of the main challenges that persists in our practice is collectivization and having a collective impact with our endeavors.





♦ In relation to the strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing, this challenge involves strengthening the collective impact of all the inputs and benefits from the accompaniment processes, workshops, and various supports that the women defenders receive. This is not easy. It entails changing systemic practices and logics embedded in social and organizational dynamics, it also entails more capacity to provide follow-up on the processes we accompany.

♦ **The alternatives to address these challenges identified during the systematization included:**

- » Strengthening and multiplying processes of accompaniment to organizations and communities as a way to create a bigger collective impact.
- » Supporting follow-up actions that women defenders identified to take what they learned to their collective spaces after having participated in Casa La Serena or another self-care and healing experience. We have not always been able to achieve greater involvement and responsibility from women defenders' organizations and communities for integrating self-care, collective care, and healing measures into their dynamics and struggles. Women defenders often face multiple resistances that sometimes lead to demotivation and frustration. However, if they are not alone in this process, it may be easier to promote the collective changes they need in their organizations and communities.

- » Conducting a specific mapping that reflects the diversity of movements and contexts in which women defenders are inserted, in order to recognize how to promote changes in those contexts. For example, how to support compañeras who defend human rights in territories ravaged by organized crime, forced displacement, or other problems that create a level of exhaustion, risk, and suffering whose impacts are not easy to address.
- » Collectivize wisdoms; nurture a culture of self-care, collective care, and healing that does not only depend on “experts”.
- » However, collectivization also means humility regarding the reach of our actions, learning and supporting wisdoms and collectives that other organizations and communities are promoting, and acting within our own collectivities.

### **Towards a political commitment and pedagogy to enable self-care, collective care, and healing.**

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- ♦ Enabling self-care, collective care, and healing entails deep transformations in our lives and our collectivities. Deconstructing the patriarchal mandates, questioning privileges, and dismantling discriminatory and violent practices between us and our collective spaces; healing grief and the continuum of violence that affects us; working on guilt, ego, unequal and competitive power relations between us, the logic of sacrifice; addressing the deficits in recognizing ourselves and giving ourselves – and each other – authority. Looking at our struggles as historical processes that do not end in a lifetime or a generation, whose continuity requires us to resist and not die in the effort, whose broad expansion demands that they also be pleasurable and enable the minimum conditions for a dignified life that allow us to continue struggling.
- ♦ Self-care, collective care, and healing touches our vulnerabilities, we become more human, with the ability to connect from a deep consciousness that we need each other, that we are interdependent. We are strengthened by this recognition; we build autonomy and enable the sustainability of our struggles.
- ♦ Governments, repressive policies, and de facto powers aim and work to exhaust us, to increase fear, hopelessness, burnout, division and rupture of our care networks; this way they can more easily dominate and impose their interests. Today, faced with a system that profits from death, we must urgently strengthen self-care, collective care, and healing, like an underground river that heals, weaves together, addresses conflicts and ruptures, provides respite and relief.

*In order to make all of this possible, we need a political pedagogy of self-care, collective care, and healing that allows us to integrate it into our strategies for struggle and our daily practices. To this end, the experience that surges from these 10 years of reflection, work, and construction from this perspective – fed by other experiences and paths that are much older and even ancestral – gives us precious elements for these new practices.*







# Wellspring

**Casa La Serena, a key project within  
the regional strategy for self-care,  
collective care, and healing**

## 01

# Waters that heal

## What is Casa La Serena?

*Casa La Serena* is a house set up by IM-Defensoras for temporary stays to foster self-care, care and wellness for Mesoamerican women defenders, coordinated by *compañeras* from Consorcio Oaxaca. We created it for “the healing, recovery, rest, and reflection of women defenders and their collectivities who are experiencing extreme fatigue, emotional or physical exhaustion, personal crises, grief, losses, or other impacts due to the context of violence and patriarchal culture that create difficulties and obstacles in their defense work.”<sup>73</sup>



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<sup>73</sup> | IM-Defensoras and Consorcio Oaxaca (2019): “Casa La Serena. Guía de Acompañamiento” <http://im-defensoras.org/2019/04/guia-de-acompanamiento-casa-la-serena/> [Own translation.]

*For us, Mesoamerican women defenders, Casa La Serena is...*

[ “A space to address the needs of women defenders, deconstructing the way we live our activism.”

“A response to the way in which patriarchal culture imposed an experience that was killing us.”

“A visionary project to recover our ancestral wisdom for our wellbeing.”

“My space for shelter, care, accompaniment, and listening; that connects me with spirituality because many of us are far from this; it reconnects me with my body, physically, emotionally, and mentally. I recognize that I was very disconnected, I had no consciousness of the state of my physical body, the state of my spirituality, my mental state...”

“A space of faith and hope, where we recognize our right to exist.”<sup>74</sup> ]

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<sup>74</sup> | Notes from the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena. July 2019. Internal document. [Own translation.]

## 02

# Tributaries of life

## Origin and development of La Serena<sup>75</sup>

Our *Casa La Serena* gathers the rich experience from reflections, dialogues, accompaniment processes, and training among women defenders involved in IM-Defensoras regarding self-care, collective care, and healing as a political tool for Feminist Holistic Protection.

The work conducted there to support women defenders who suffer from deep physical and emotional exhaustion, and – depending on the situation – their families and/or collectivities, begins with an intensive 10-day stay during which women defenders live in the house and develop a plan for self-care, collective care, and healing, based on their needs.



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<sup>75</sup> | For more detail [in Spanish] on the history of Casa La Serena, please see “Línea de tiempo de Casa La Serena” at <https://consorciooaxaca.org/linea-de-tiempo-casa-la-serena/>



**The first stay organized at La Serena took place in 2013, when we received a Guatemalan Mayan defender and her immediate family.** This experience gave us key lessons for how to develop a culturally sensitive model of attention that recognizes the ancestral wisdoms of our Peoples and of Mesoamerican women. Since then, La Serena has been conducting individual, family, and group stays with women defenders from the five countries where IM-Defensoras weaves networks. This has helped us develop the model of attention.

In order to respond to the diverse needs that women defenders identify during the stays, Consorcio Oaxaca took up the task of creating a network of therapists who have been learning how to work with women human rights defenders and adapting their contributions to our Feminist Holistic Protection approach.

Prior to the existence of *Casa La Serena*, the stays took place in rented spaces, that is, it was an itinerant project. However, in 2016 we began setting up our own house to host the stays, as part of a broader and more complex project to enable our work on self-care, collective care, and healing. In order to think collectively about the characteristics and needs of the space that would become *Casa La Serena*, we organized focus groups with women defenders from the national networks and members of IM-Defensoras' Steering Group.

[ And then the issue came up: water, green, it should be far away, it should be nearby, it should have internet because if you take us somewhere far away and we can't answer emails then we will be more anxious, so we can be relaxed. At that point, several interesting debates came up. And there was something that the compañeras from Honduras said, which gave origin to the murals: women defenders are so used to giving, so if we go to a space where we are only going to receive, then we won't be comfortable. There has to be something where we also feel we are giving to the house. It has to be a space that when I arrive, there should be something from my country, so that I don't feel like I entered a totally foreign context. And so, there are the murals, the gardens, and something from your countries that you each bring...<sup>76</sup> ]

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<sup>76</sup> | IM-Defensoras (Notes from the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena, p.5. July 2019. Internal document. [Own translation.]

Having gathered the suggestions offered in the focus groups, we decided to set up *Casa La Serena* in Oaxaca, under the coordination of Consorcio Oaxaca – a member of our Steering Group that is located in an ideal place and had an experienced team and a network of therapists who could support the endeavor. The *compañeras* found and rented the house with the ideal conditions to set up La Serena. A team was created to coordinate the space and the healing project, made up of Ana María Hernández Cárdenas as general coordinator and Itzel Guadalupe Guzmán Reséndiz as logistics coordinator. **We inaugurated La Serena in August 2016.** The first activity held there was a training on “Neuromuscular Balance” for the self-care group of the national network in Mexico. In November of that same year, the team at *Casa La Serena* hosted IM-Defensoras’ first self-care stay, which lasted 10 days.

Since then, the team has organized stays for IM-Defensoras, receiving 78 *compañeras* from every country where the Initiative works, as well as *compañeras* from Brazil and Colombia. In 2019, we began testing a new model: **stays by country**, with the participation of five women defenders who are members of the same national network or initiative.

[ In April 2019, we began the stays by country, five women defenders per country. We began with *compañeras* from Nicaragua. Additionally, this experience had a mix of stay and accompaniment, because one *compañera* arrived with the others from Nicaragua for the 10-day stay; she would stay an additional two months, and in this process we were asking ourselves – what are we going to do with her? And we decided to reconstruct her life experience, which was turned into a coloring book where you can learn more about Petrona. It turned out to be an interesting exercise in reflection and accompaniment that went beyond the ten days of the usual stay.<sup>77</sup> ]

Based on the experience accumulated, *Casa La Serena* has continued to develop models for the stays in order to have a more collective approach and better respond to the situations that women defenders are living. Throughout its trajectory, *Casa La Serena* has hosted eight types of stays: individual; family; organizational; IM-Defensoras (prior to our own house); IM-Defensoras collective (one woman defender per country); IM-Defensoras collective (five women defenders from the same country); IM-Defensoras collective (members of a regional commission); and women defenders from other countries (Colombia, Brazil).

From the beginning, we ensured that women defenders could have individual spaces (something that several of them had never given themselves). We also created family stays because this is a key condition for many of them to be able to participate but, importantly, also because being with family in a healing space creates the opportunity to address family situations that may be increasing risk and exhaustion.

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77 | Ibid. p. 7 [Own translation.]

We also promoted stays that gathered different members of the same organization, or the same country, in addition to opening the space for women defenders from other organizations.<sup>78</sup>

Up to now, we had seven stays from IM-Defensoras, three from the Mexico network, and we also had, late last year, the Registry Commission of IM-Defensoras, which was very important, because sometimes we don't notice the exhaustion that our compañeras from the Registry team may have, and it's terrible because they are documenting the attacks in each country. So, there's an IM-Defensoras team with 7 compañeras. This year we will have three stays with Global Fund for Women, a foundation that requested of women defenders and organizations that they support could also have a stay at Casa La Serena. This is a shorter stay, five days, but we think the foundation's proposal is very interesting and it may break some of the prejudices we may have that foundations don't support self-care. They support it so much, that they now request stays for the organizations with whom they work. We also had a visit from UN people and ambassadors from several countries to learn about the experience, and now the visit has resulted in a request for women defenders from Colombia to also be able to come to La Serena.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> | As of 2020, we received 172 women defenders who are not part of IM-Defensoras: journalists and accompaniment to collectives and organizations.

<sup>79</sup> | IM-Defensoras (July 2019): Notes from the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena, p.6. July 2019. Internal document. [Own translation.]

03

*Sources of wisdom*



## Casa La Serena's model of attention and approaches it uses

The model of attention at *Casa La Serena* is based on the political approach to self-care, collective care, and healing described earlier in this document.



***Principles of the Political Approach to Self-care, Collective Care, and Healing (IM-Defensoras' Feminist Holistic Protection)***

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## Therefore...

- ◆ a) Casa La Serena centers its value on political collective work; on the power built when women defenders support each other and engage in the group; when they open dialogues, exchanges, and joint learning; when active listening and “the other’s” testimony enriches and nourishes the experience of each participating woman defender.
- ◆ b) Casa La Serena combines collective work with personal needs and conditions, so each woman defender will have her own space to address her issues and a program of activities that include collective actions as well as specific actions for herself.
- ◆ c) Casa La Serena reclaims alternative therapies and the traditional medicines of ancestral peoples’ as part of its holistic health model. It brings in creativity and art, literature, and narrative therapy as part of the healing processes. Thus, it has access to a diverse group of specialists during the two weeks of the women defenders’ temporary stay, and they are treated within a scheme set in a personalized program, with collective spaces and free time.
- ◆ d) Casa La Serena views self-care and healing as a political action and a part of holistic protection, and so, if necessary, the temporary stay may include a risk analysis and developing a security plan as components of the woman defender’s experience.
- ◆ e) Casa La Serena seeks to strengthen the benefit of the stay through a follow-up self-care plan developed by, and agreed with the woman defender during her two-week stay at the house. The facilitating team will accompany the implementation of this plan, strengthened by the networks in each country.

Staying at *Casa La Serena* entails very intense personal work, as all the therapies, activities, and workshops focus on looking at ourselves and others. Without doubt, it is a process simultaneously joyful and painful, because it involves “realizing” and imagining other ways of being and relating.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> | IM-Defensoras and Consorcio Oaxaca (2019): “Casa La Serena. Guía de Acompañamiento”, p. 13 [Own translation.] <http://im-defensoras.org/2019/04/guia-de-acompanamiento-casa-la-serena/>.

**The model of attention at Casa La Serena is holistic**, it is based on a holistic understanding of the person, which means attending to the five dimensions: physical, emotional, energy, mental, and spiritual.

- ◆ **Physical dimension:** Focuses on women defenders developing the capacity to pay attention to their bodies, listen to signals or symptoms to address their needs in a healthy manner: food, sleep, rest, healing, and medical attention.
- ◆ **Emotional dimension:** Encourages women defenders to develop their capacity to recognize and express their emotions; to learn to unload and manage pain, rage, sadness, helplessness, and other emotions, in a positive manner so that they do not accumulate and create harms to the person and to those who live and work with her.
- ◆ **Energy dimension:** Opens women defenders to cleansing and healing energy blockages created by the constant exposure to violence and loss they experience in conducting their work, which also makes them feel anxious, fearful, or distrustful without apparent reason.
- ◆ **Mental dimension:** Focuses on women defenders being able to deconstruct ideas, beliefs, and prejudices imposed by the patriarchal culture and that lead to exhaustion, suffering, and hopelessness, affecting their mental health and making their work more difficult. Becoming conscious of this situation helps women defenders to reclaim their power and value.
- ◆ **Spiritual dimension:** Focuses on recognizing the benefit of all those practices, symbols, and rituals that women defenders conduct in order to feel more connected with life, nature, the greatness of a collective transformative power.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> | IM-Defensoras and Consorcio Oaxaca (2019): "Casa La Serena. Guía de Acompañamiento", p. 14 [Own translation.]

## 04

# Navigating underground rivers

## Casa La Serena's attention route

The process of attending to *compañeras* from IM-Defensoras who arrive at *Casa La Serena* is divided into three phases: prior to the stay, during the stay, and after the stay. As we will see, each of these phases has different moments.

› Phase 1: *Prior to the stay*

Call for nominations, selection, administrative preparation, pre-stay interview

› Phase 2: *The stay*

Reception, welcome, integration, framing

self-assessment, assessment, and crisis

Realizing, broadening the map, building consciousness

Recovering strengths, focusing priorities, developing the self-care plan

Phase 3: *After the stay*

Dedicated individual follow-up and report to the national network for follow-up support to the woman defender.



## § 4.1 Phase 1: Actions prior to the stay

The first phase entails the following activities: publishing a call for nominations, selecting participants, administrative preparation, and pre-stay interview.

### » The Call

The coordination of the regional commission on self-care, collective care, and healing sends the call to IM-Defensoras' national networks and articulations so that they can begin the process of selecting women defenders who will be nominated for the collective stay. Each national space conducts this process based on their own decision-making processes, but based on the following criteria:

- ♦ The woman defender must be a member of the Network.
- ♦ The woman defender must be experiencing situations such as exhaustion, grief or unresolved loss, burnout.
- ♦ The woman defender must not be under serious threat or risk.
- ♦ The woman defender must be willing to spend the 10 days without children, unless it is a family stay.

### » Selection

Once each national network has selected the women defenders nominated for the stay, they contact the coordination of Casa La Serena and send all the information they believe relevant to explain the situation that the woman defender faces, a copy of her passport and visa if available, and an assessment form with the following elements:

- ♦ General information about the woman defender.
- ♦ History of her participation in the organization or movement, and the risks she faces due to her activism.
- ♦ Physical, emotional, energy, mental, and spiritual assessment of the situation that the woman defender is currently experiencing.
- ♦ General summary of the health situation that the woman defender is currently experiencing.
- ♦ Brief summary of the woman defender's life and work, emphasizing any situations of risk, exhaustion, or other relevant situations over the last year.

All of this information helps the team at La Serena understand the reasons for selecting each of the women defenders and begin to explore their needs for individual and collective attention.

» **Administrative preparation**

The logistics coordination at *Casa La Serena* supports the women defenders with all administrative tasks involving requesting visas and any political negotiation with the embassies that may be required. All of this is done while taking into account the socio-political violence that they may be facing, with the aim of ensuring that they can travel and arrive in Oaxaca.

» **Pre-stay interview**

The pre-stay interview is a deeper conversation with each woman defender to expand on the information presented in the assessment form about her situation and needs. From this understanding about the group of women defenders who will participate in the stay, the team at La Serena prepares the program.

## § 4.2 Phase 2: The stay

The women defenders experience the following moments during the stay at *Casa La Serena*:

- › Reception, welcome, integration . . . . . (day 0 - arrival)
- › Self-assessment, assessment, and crisis . . . . . (days 1 - 4)
- › Realizing, broadening the map, building consciousness . . . . . (day 5 - 7)
- › Recovering strengths, focusing priorities, developing . . . . . (days 8 - 10)  
the self-care plan

It is in this second phase of the stay that **the personal and collective experience takes place, laying the groundwork for the healing process**. To this end, the *Casa La Serena* model combines three types of activities that for a holistic response to the women defenders' needs:



- ♦ **Healing therapies:** A set of practices and approaches gathered from different Cosmovisions that – depending on the defender and her circumstances – are woven together to guide the healing process. This includes group and individual psychotherapy, thanatology, Hatha and restorative yoga, Neuromuscular Balance, energy management and chakra alignment, breathing techniques, neuromuscular massage, individual Ayurvedic consultations, nutritional program, Bach Flowers therapy, reflexology, herbology, cleansing and Temazcal, holistic massage, bio-energy assessment, Tibetan medicine, Bio-dance, dance movement therapy, healing sounds, sharing our story, discovering our goddesses, healing of the uterus and the lunar woman, altar of gratitude, medical and gynecological care with allopathy, homeopathy and Chinese medicine.
- ♦ **Activities for reflection and living together:** Various activities developed from different perspectives conducted collectively to strengthen exchange, sorority, and building mutual care relationships (workshop on Ayurvedic nutrition, bio-energy exercises, belly dance, African dance, herbology, outdoor walks, shared meals, conversations about their work as defenders, holistic protection, and healthy activism).
- ♦ **Creativity workshops:** Activities that use different artistic languages to develop creativity and other ways of understanding and facing reality (clay, ceramics, embroidery, making medicinal soaps, printmaking, narrative therapy, and gardening). This type of activities help the healing process from non-narrative dimensions.

*In the following section, we will look at the implementation of this phase, the meaning of each of these moments, and the way the three types of activities are used to foster their ownership by women defenders as tools for self-care and empowerment.*

### » **1. Reception, welcome, integration, and framing**

The team at *Casa La Serena* warmly receives the women defenders upon their arrival at the airport and fosters getting to know each other (among the women defenders and with the team). As part of the reception, women defenders get a tour of the house and are given an overview of what the stay will be like. **At the beginning of the first day, the following activities take place:** Welcome Ritual, energy cleansing, presentation with Cartas del Alma [Soul Cards] and Body Mapping, the relationship between organs and emotions, and the Framing. In this way, the women defenders and the team that accompanies them introduce themselves and meet the team of therapists; they share the reasons for their presence and there is an explanation of what the stay will consist of (framing), and the way the activities program is organized. The energy cleansing encourages women defenders to open themselves to initiating the healing process and sets the tone for the self-assessment. This is an important ritual because, in addition to helping to get the energy flowing, it supports the reencounter with themselves, the ancestors, and the inherited wisdom.

## » 2. Self-assessment, assessment, and crisis

An essential element in the healing experience promoted by *Casa La Serena* relates to the self-assessment and assessment that women defenders experience during the first part of our stay. This process is quite similar to a risk analysis directed at, or emphasizing, the current experience of the women defenders, both in relation to **the impacts of political and social violence, as well as the strengths they have to overcome those impacts or traumas.**<sup>82</sup>

The self-assessment begins with two activities. The first is the Body Mapping, which is a “guided meditation exercise and a drawing to connect with, and recognize the body’s pains and strengths. The map becomes a navigation tool during the woman defender’s stay.” The second is the Cartas del Alma, through which “Women defenders share significant experiences from their childhood-youth, their current moment, and the connection with their defense work. It allows the group to meaningfully and intimately get to know each woman defender.” Through these and other similar activities, the women defenders begin recognizing their situation in its physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions.

The therapists’ intervention complements the self-assessment and delves deeper into the issues. Through individual and collective sessions, these therapists help the women defenders to **recognize their situation in the different dimensions: physical, emotional, energy, mental, and spiritual.**

### | Therapies used

- ♦ **Holistic massage:** A massage that comforts the body, emotions, and energy, depending on the need. It can be complemented with foot reflexology or Reiki.
- ♦ **Neuromuscular massage:** A massage that relieves pain in the body’s soft tissues and allows some women to improve the range of motion lost due to trauma. This massage is combined with Emotion Release Therapy that accompanies the woman defender in getting to know how her body holds painful emotions and how to release them.
- ♦ **Bio-energy assessment:** The bio-energy assessment is a technique that allows us to identify our energy level, identify what the body has and what it needs. If the cause is a pathogenic agent, traditional and natural medicine is used; if the cause is emotional, the recommendation is for Bach Flowers, craniosacral massage, acupressure with seeds, among others.
- ♦ **Group psychotherapy:** Collective therapy where the women defenders are accompanied by a facilitator with a systemic humanist approach, focused on specific issues that the women defenders themselves name regarding their lives and their defense work.

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<sup>82</sup> | Coordination team for Casa La Serena (4 June 2020): Notes from the online meeting as part of the systematization process of Casa La Serena. Internal document.

- ♦ **Individual psychotherapy:** A personal space that facilitates closure to the group psychotherapy spaces and helps to detail the areas of work that the woman defender identifies in order to continue working towards her care after the stay.
- ♦ **Ayurvedic consultations:** Based on the ailments and the type of personality they have (from Ayurvedic Medicine) the women defenders are accompanied to find “her own” balance through awareness of her diet, the breaths that reconnect her with her spirituality and essence.
- ♦ **Temazcal:** In the Náhuatl language, it means “bathing house”, part of ancestral traditional medicine that seeks healing through detoxification, medicinal herbs, and microcosmic manifestation.<sup>83</sup>

The depth of these assessment activities leads the women defenders to processes of catharsis that enable them not only to recognize their oldest pains but also to begin releasing. **It is common that during this phase, the women defenders recall situations or events in their personal history of which they were no longer aware;** they may feel in crisis, cry a lot, sleep a lot, or both. This is why we also have relaxation and creativity activities such as walks, workshops to make medicinal soaps, bio-energy exercises, and creating an herb garden. The goal of all these activities is to serve as tools for women defenders’ daily self-care.

### » **3. Realizing, broadening the map, building consciousness**

On the fifth day, we have a **mid-journey meeting**, and we begin the next phase of stopping to look at what is happening to ourselves, share, give new meaning to pain. “They look at each other with compassion, recognizing themselves as deserving of attention, affection, and care.”<sup>84</sup> The clay workshop takes place during this phase. The women defenders make a self-portrait and mold figures that re-affirm that, although there may be pain inside, the person is much more than just this pain. In this phase, we again offer therapies and tools for self-care and healing, such as:

- ♦ **Restorative yoga:** We work through deep breathing and movements that seek to heal chronic pain, as well as finding a balance between mind and body through breathing.
- ♦ **Ayurvedic nutrition workshop:** We explain the Doshas (aspects of Ayurvedic medicine) and we make new recipes with nutritional ingredients that help balance their energies and decrease their food-related discomforts.
- ♦ **Bio-energy:** Exercises to facilitate the release of accumulated emotions. A routine that is accessible, easy, and can be practiced in any context; it helps heal emotional pain, reduce anxiety, provide support to people in crisis, and offers other emotional-energy tools.

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<sup>83</sup> | IM-Defensoras and Consorcio Oaxaca (2019): “Casa La Serena. Guía de Acompañamiento”, p. 27-28 <http://im-defensoras.org/2019/04/guia-de-acompanamiento-casa-la-serena/>. [Own translation.]

<sup>84</sup> | IM-Defensoras and Consorcio Oaxaca (2019): “Casa La Serena. Guía de Acompañamiento”, p. 21 <http://im-defensoras.org/2019/04/guia-de-acompanamiento-casa-la-serena/>. [Own translation.]

- ◆ **Embroidery:** Used as a form of meditation in which women defenders create images through embroidery to reconnect with themselves and share the spoken stories of women, what happens to them, and how they have overcome.
- ◆ **Reading circle:** Proposals for readings and reflections about literary books written by feminists and women poets; writing exercises conducted with the women defenders.
- ◆ **Printmaking and painting workshop:** Recognizing art as an act of healing and a space for self-knowledge and self-expression, seeking to connect with calm, concentration, and pleasure.

**We captured the experience of the Coordination Team of La Serena** to provide more detail on this phase:

When we conduct the pre-stay interview, we decide whether or not to add the Uterus Workshop, many compañeras who have come to La Serena also had difficult memories of abuse, of heavy situations that exist there as deep wounds. This makes it a super powerful tool; it's a process of self-recognition and healing. In the Healing the Uterus Workshop, we realize that it is the place in our bodies where we hold many of our emotions and sometimes we are not in dialogue with it. It is a way of giving thanks to it, looking at it, connecting it also to a theme of land. We are carried by the moon's phases. It comes from awareness, and it has a huge impact when I am conducting my activities.



We also accompany with different types of Oracles for self-discovery. The Goddesses' Oracle helps a lot from the spiritual place (how are we, what are we doing, what do we need), among other places. Not only from reason, because at some point we were told we are too rational and this helps to understand a different point of view, without prejudices, to take what works for me at this time. For example, Anisha tells me I am fire, and coincidentally a Goddess appears that is fire and that is sometimes linked to anger, and so it all makes sense and I start to be aware of how my body is speaking to me, how magic speaks to me, how the medical issue speaks to me, how reason also speaks to me, and so we begin linking the five spheres.

Then, we also link up the printmaking and painting workshop, everyone has made a print, painted the mural, or planted the garden, and it's a way of leaving her seed at La Serena. The conscious part knows what we want to leave behind, and here we also place embroidery, because we also think that the issue of healing is related to pleasure and joy, not only eating well, there is also embroidery, the clay workshop, and the walks are also pleasurable. All of this is part of self-care, and it takes place precisely at the middle of the journey.<sup>85</sup>

#### » 4. Recovering strengths, focusing priorities, developing the self-care plan

The healing experience sparked at the stay in La Serena requires continuity through a short- and medium-term process to help the *compañeras* who experienced the stay to **integrate into their daily lives the changes they identified** as necessary to continue strengthening their personal, family, and community life, as well as their work as defenders.

Therefore, the women defenders dedicate time during the last days of their stay to developing their **self-care plan**, documenting what they have discovered about themselves over the previous phases of the stay (vulnerabilities, needs, strengths, capacities, new tools and their benefits).

The team at La Serena supports the drafting of the plan and provides a tool (self-care plan template) that helps each woman defender to:

- ♦ **Gather the needs she identified** and recognized during the first days of the stay, in the self-assessment and assessment phase. Specifically, they are encouraged to choose those they feel capable of committing to addressing, in each dimension of self-care:
  - » **Physical:** those they recognized in their Body Mapping, in attending to their body through massage, and in the bio-energy diagnosis.
  - » **Psychological or Emotional:** those that relate to the feelings and emotions that are most present in their lives (sadness, joy, anger, grief, acknowledging lack of boundaries).

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85 | IM-Defensoras: Notes from the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena, p.41. July 2019. Internal document. [Own translation.]

- » **Mental:** those that relate to overwhelming thoughts or ideas that need shifting.
- » **Energy:** those that relate to regulating or balancing their energy.
- » **Spiritual:** those that strengthen their connection to life, nature, ancestry, transcendence, etc.

- ♦ **Identify the measures they will take to address** each of the prioritized needs, keeping in mind that they should be able to implement these measures in their circumstances. These measures should be concrete actions, activities that they can integrate into daily life for them to become habits.
- ♦ **Identify what kind of external support they need** to address these needs. For example, more information, referrals to therapists, help from other women defenders or their support networks, medication, etc.
- ♦ **State a time-period** within which they commit themselves to implementing this action, setting a start date and a deadline for conclusion, unless – for some special reason – they see the action as permanent.

To complete the plan, the team at La Serena continues sharing self-care and healing tools, pointing out the ones they experienced during the stay and reinforcing them with new tools.

...Neuromuscular Balance,<sup>86</sup> herbology, and yoga (the issue of breathing), bio-energy exercises, reflexology that is a tool or collective foot massages and in the end it's like something practical. Belly dancing<sup>87</sup> is left until the end, a bit to close the stay, embroidery continues. The reading circle is also a way to reclaim pleasure; we realized that compañeras no longer read because of time, it's difficult to stop and sit and read. Soap-making and food workshops. These are tools for you to think about, based on your needs. And at the end of the stay, we review the self-care plans, simple things, basic, that can be put in practice upon arrival in their home countries.<sup>88</sup>

The women defenders receive **feedback on their self-care plan** before ending their stay at La Serena.

The stay is closes with a healing activity called “the Altar”: I am deserving, I am worthy, I thank myself. Each woman defender creates an altar for themselves to foster their love, care, and deserving. This powerful work takes several days and on the last day of the stay, the women defenders share each of their altars. We have a tour where each one gives thanks for everything they have done and allowed themselves, not only at *Casa La Serena* but also prior to the experience. **This activity reinforces women defenders' self-confidence and trust in the tools they acquired.**

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<sup>86</sup> | Method based on small movements that are gentle and extremely precise, which respond to the physiology of each muscle that makes up our body, to eliminate pain and stiffness that crush and block. It is conducted on the floor with balls of different sizes that serve as acupressure points.

<sup>87</sup> | With music, rhythm, and movement, we foster a space of collective pleasure from the body and sensuality.

<sup>88</sup> | IM-Defensoras: Notes from the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena, p.41. July 2019. Internal document. [Own translation.]



At the end of the stay, the women defenders evaluate the different aspects of the experience: logistics and organization, functioning of the team at *Casa La Serena*, the atmosphere and how they were treated, the relevance of the therapies and the methodology.

### § 4.3 Phase 3: Actions after the stay

Once the women defenders return to their home countries, the coordination team of Casa La Serena makes a report that they share with the self-care teams in each national network, to assist with collective and individual follow-up to the processes resulting from the stays. The team at La Serena uses secure communication for dedicated follow-up and communicates with each national network to ensure they are supporting the follow-up with the women defenders. The goal is to know how much of the self-care plan they have implemented, what difficulties they have encountered, and what kinds of support they need.

...individual follow-up is done through secure communications and we add them to the large WhatsApp group where we share articles, reflections on self-care, collective care, and healing. The idea is that we spend six months on dedicated individual follow-up. When they return to their countries, we send a report with the self-care plans in order to highlight them, for each Network to give follow-up.

The team at *Casa La Serena* acknowledges that **this phase in the attention route has the most challenges** to implement each woman defender's self-care plan, and to influence the collective care practices inside our organizations.

## 05

# Immersing ourselves and re-emerging

## Contributing to women defenders' lives and organizations

From our experience, we see that the stays at La Serena can be a key component of women defenders' Feminist Holistic Protection process. **The stays are effective in halting and reversing the process of exhaustion and illness**, supporting women defenders to recover our vitality and confidence in our own strengths, and encouraging us to develop new capacities for a positive transformation of our activism experience. They return us to our bodies with consciousness. We return to our family, organizational, and political circles with more connection, more wisdom, and conviction for **a hopeful and joyful struggle**.

### | My experience since La Serena:



» Going to La Serena helped me identify the weak points and learn about the strengths, how things are. For me, there is a before and after the experience at La Serena. Obviously, you don't leave with your entire life solved, but yes with many tools that really help you... I'm now clear that I need boundaries, I want to set aside time for myself, and I also brought with me so many things that it's like a giant toolkit, like a whole spectrum of alternatives that are out there and I took some – therapy, regular massage, reflexology, and so on. Later on, I had two recent experiences, well, last year, right? One this year and one last year, and I'm clear that if I had not gone to La Serena, I would not have known how to deal with them and overcome them...<sup>89</sup>

» When I arrived at La Serena, I realized they checked me from the top of my head all the way to the tips of my toes, and then I saw it feels so, so good, because these things do not happen to us, because we are always living for others, but we don't live for ourselves.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> | Interview (10) with Mexican journalist (6). 2 July 2019. Internal document. [Own translation.]

<sup>90</sup> | Testimony from woman defender from Honduras (10) in the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena. El Salvador. 2 July 2019. [Own translation.]

» For me, La Serena was a school and university of reality and practical living, I learned to love myself, I learned to respect myself and give myself time to myself, and to look calmly at the problems. Today, my compañeras look at me and ask, 'and what happened to you? You used to be so aggressive...'«<sup>91</sup>

» ...after my stay at La Serena, I haven't felt bad again, nor have I had an emotional dip or whatever. I think it's because I have the tools to catch myself. Also, being at La Serena allows you to be, like, woven into a network that says to you, 'listen, take care of yourself'... There are changes, setbacks, but it's like you have the tools to face it and look at it from a different place.«<sup>92</sup>



These are just a few of the testimonies among many that reflect the shared recognition of the contribution that *Casa La Serena* has been making to the lives of women defenders in the region. For those who experienced the stay, and for the persons and networks that accompany them, La Serena is a watershed moment in understanding the role of self-care, collective care, and healing in the sustainability of our struggles.

## § 5.1 What is the situation of women defenders who arrive at Casa La Serena?

We already mentioned that the women defenders who come to *Casa La Serena* are referred by the national networks that come together in IM-Defensoras. This means they are **compañeras who are recognized within their own movements**, who exercise leadership in their collectives and communities; who have been able to weave networks, to face different power-holders, and to rebel against the patriarchal mandates that keep us oppressed and confine us to the private sphere. They are *compañeras* who have found meaning in the struggle to defend rights. Each one has a rich history of experiences facing different types of violence, collectively building life alternatives, expressing solidarity with their communities and sorority with their *compañeras*.

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<sup>91</sup> | Testimony from woman defender from Honduras (1) in the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena. El Salvador. 2 July 2019. [Own translation.]

<sup>92</sup> | Testimony from woman defender from Mexico (7) in the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena. El Salvador. 2 July 2019. [Own translation.]

However, for various reasons – living in a context of permanent and increasing violence, trauma from an attack or loss, excessive workload and tension, or because they had to face exile or seek refuge to save their lives – **they are living through a difficult moment of fatigue**, or even physical, mental and emotional exhaustion known as burnout. The main signs of this syndrome are feelings of hopelessness and despair, irritability, memory loss, excessive fatigue, a sense of omnipotence (for example, heroic but reckless behavior, neglecting one's own security and physical needs), inability to concentrate and somatic symptoms (headache, gastrointestinal disorders), fear or terrors.

According to the experience of the coordination team at *Casa La Serena* and its team of therapists, **the women defenders who participate in the stays regularly show the following:**

- ♦ **Rational-emotional-body disconnection** or excessive rationalization as a defense mechanism to deal with the pain, attacks, and harms that come from the violations of our rights.
- ♦ **Feelings of indignation, frustration, rage and helplessness** as a reaction to situations where the huge burden of violence, injustice and impunity leads us to over-extend ourselves in endless work without rest; or it is reflected in a lower ability to trust and delegate responsibility to our compañeras.



- ♦ **Generalized pain throughout the body:** head, back, hip, joints, and muscles, as well as stiffness in the muscles due to high stress and loads that we accumulate not only from our activism but also from family responsibilities, burdens from work, etc.
- ♦ **The organs in our bodies that are most often affected** are: skin, colon, liver, lung, kidney, bladder, uterus, thyroid gland, and (suprarenal) adrenal glands.
- ♦ We are assessed as **energetically blocked or closed**; we also have blockages in experiencing our spirituality.
- ♦ We also arrive with **disruptions in our habits** in terms of food, sleep, rest, and recreation.

The stay at *Casa La Serena* becomes an experience that allows women defenders to recognize our own vulnerability and value our needs. It enables us to regain our vitality and return strengthened to our struggles with a vision that questions the style of activism that leads us to embody our being and our work as defenders, while in practice it denies us the right to enjoy the rights we defend, which then leads us to neglect ourselves and put ourselves at risk. The process at *Casa La Serena* enables women defenders:

[ ...to become aware of what they are going through, or to see that they are stuck or blocked in certain dynamics. Part of this relates to approaching activism from a vision of sacrifice, another part is to do with accumulated and differentiated types of violence, due to being a woman, due to being a mother, often in her role as defender, as a partner, and a combination of interconnected violence. The way it is approached at the stay, all of this somehow begins to emerge or to be visible... This awareness-raising is followed by acceptance of these vulnerabilities that the women defenders have and, with it, the recognition of where their strengths are, how to strengthen their leadership, where are their support networks, where are the opportunities they have in their movements, and how their activism, the political action, can very visibly become a strength. Practically, I can assure you that none of the women who have passed through La Serena leave considering their withdrawal from political action, but rather how to strengthen political action from another place.<sup>93</sup> ]

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<sup>93</sup> | Coordination team for Casa La Serena (4 June 2020): Notes from the online meeting as part of the systematization process of Casa La Serena. Internal document. [Own translation.]

## § 5.2 Key factors in the healing process

The stay at *Casa La Serena* is a **“stop on the journey” that women defenders facing exhaustion and crisis make to save ourselves**. It’s an experience that allows us to feel cared by other women defenders (the team at La Serena and the other women defenders who share their process in the house). It is a process that allows us to “look at ourselves” with the support of therapists, and to rethink our experience of activism through exchanges with *compañeras* in the stay. These elements are the base for each one of us to begin a healing process. Through the testimonies of those who participated in the Reflection Group on *Casa La Serena*, we were able to identify certain “key factors” that spark and grow the healing process. Below we share a set of testimonies that describe this and help identify other key factors. The experience is rich and offers more than we can highlight here.

### » ***Becoming conscious of my right to wellbeing, recognizing that my body is the first territory to defend, and taking ownership of tools for this objective***

“...it was only when I found myself at La Serena that I identified my body as ill, tired, exhausted, and I began to question myself as a feminist – what am I doing to this territory? Ah! Here I am defending the forest, defending environmental struggles, mother earth; but I don’t defend my first territory. Or – how do I care for it?... And yes, it was at La Serena that I understood why I have diabetes. I was diagnosed in 2012 but it’s only now that I understood it was because I did not set boundaries, because no one in my maternal or my paternal family line has diabetes. So, I got it from stress, anxiety, overload at work. And I could have avoided this disease, I could have done so, but I did not have the consciousness yet. It was only at La Serena that I see my body has suffered the consequences of working for human rights without first working for myself. That is when I adopt two tools: self-care and spirituality, which for me have been the strongest tools that have helped me fully to transcend from individuality to collectivity, to believe that other *compañeras* can also do it, to delegate tasks, to believe that they will do it well, to unburden myself from work. At the same time, they are developing capacities or gaining experience in what one does. Yes, La Serena marked a before and after in self-care: I succeeded in learning how to listen to my body, I succeeded in stopping, I succeeded in saying, no, look, I’m tired, I can’t, I don’t want to. I succeeded in saying, can you give me this? Because before, I found it difficult to ask, because what will they say...”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> | Interview (13) Woman defender from El Salvador. El Salvador. 2 July 2019. [Own translation.]

» ***The active role of each woman defender throughout the entire process: from self-assessment to developing and implementing the self-care plan***

“I always said with each thing that was going through my body, my mind, my spirit; with every therapy, workshop, activity; I felt like I was born again, that is how I experienced it, as a rebirth. I also felt stronger in my consciousness, my vital body, my need to take up caring for myself with these new acquisitions, these new offers that La Serena offered me and all the *compañeras*. I felt loved, I felt heard, I felt cared for... The entire process as it is designed at La Serena these first days, in which I think the team is highly professional, cautious, ethical... But also our part, that if one is willing to receive and is willing to take advantage of those ten days to be there, the assessment is so much from the *compañeras* who are assessing you and giving you insights and telling you how you are. And you are checking and that was the first change: realizing how I had abandoned myself.”<sup>95</sup>

» ***Healing for recognition and carrying out one's own capacities and wisdoms***

“...healing applied from within at the moment of being with Anisha. She tells me who are you, you are a healer, you can heal yourself, you don't need to be here with me. And I am surprised and she says: what would you do to heal someone who comes to you and tells you what you have right now? Well, I would do this. Well, go ahead and do it for yourself, you've done it, right? And that experience was so, so incredible because then I said, Yes! It's true!”<sup>96</sup>

“I think it's key that these stays begin from self-recognition as a way of reclaiming our wisdoms, that it passes through the strengths that we each have. I think this is one of the wisdoms they have robbed from us. So, how to start reclaiming it or gaining concrete tools that we can keep.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> | Testimony from woman defender from Nicaragua in the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena, El Salvador, 2 July 2019. [Own translation.]

<sup>96</sup> | Testimony from woman defender from Guatemala in the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena, El Salvador, 2 July 2019. [Own translation.]

<sup>97</sup> | Testimony from woman defender from Mexico in the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena, El Salvador, 2 July 2019. [Own translation.]

» ***Awareness that our wellbeing depends on listening attentively, actively, and lovingly to our being. Taking into account that this is multi-dimensional: physical, emotional, energy, mental, and spiritual; and that all dimensions must be attended to, they are connected and in equilibrium; we must also respect the time that each one needs***

“And so right then, facing the therapists and meeting all the *compañeras*, it clicked, meaning, my whole life story, the whole analysis of what was happening to me... I didn’t know that health problems could be linked to this burden I carried, I hadn’t made that connection and that was my big discovery during the stay... Now I am very conscious that when I have a lot of pain, it means I reached a limit and I have to treat it, I also know that for me, stress manifests like this, for example. So I am becoming more aware of how I am, and even if there’s a crisis, I have more tools to manage it...”<sup>98</sup>

» ***The vital need to set boundaries faced with demands from a type of activism that instrumentalizes us***

“Among the significant changes that I was able to identify within me, it’s that I can say no, I don’t want to, I can’t. Because before – for example – there would be a meeting and there I’d go tired, busy, without eating; sometimes I didn’t have money for transport but then I would borrow it. Now I say no, I don’t want to, I can’t, I don’t have money for the fare... And so I learned to do this at home, in my organization, in the spaces where I am organizing, I am contributing. I take care of the time for myself and for my family, for the organization. I managed to divide the time periods and give myself time for myself, time for my family, time for the organization, and not mix this.”<sup>99</sup>

» ***Recognizing the importance of sharing and collectivizing responsibilities, struggles, and causes. Taking distance from an activism based on individual heroics in order to move towards a collective construction***

“I feel more secure, embraced by embodied support, supported; like I am not alone if something were to happen to me... I’ve been besieged and watched in the courts, I have experienced intimidation by the authorities. I used to work on feminicides, but me alone with my tools as a lawyer. Now I feel like I’m stronger, that I take care of myself, it was my decision. I tried to implement what I learned at La Serena regarding food, relaxation, placing boundaries at work; this helped me and also engaging with women, because I tell them that now they have to take care of themselves, that they can continue contributing to the cause but taking care of themselves and paying attention to themselves...”

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<sup>98</sup> | Testimony from woman defender from Mexico in the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena. El Salvador. 2 July 2019. [Own translation.]

<sup>99</sup> | Testimony from woman defender from El Salvador in the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena. El Salvador. 2 July 2019. [Own translation.]



Now I take better care of myself and I learned to share the load. I have a colleague who's a lawyer and I delegate some things to her, some operational issues and then I feel like that anguish, that desperation I felt to get the work done, well it's decreased."<sup>100</sup>

» ***Acquiring new tools for self-care and healing, which each woman defender integrates into her self-care plan based on her needs and possibilities***

"Now I have awareness of myself, of healthy eating, of personal care, of freeing myself from guilt. Because I was feeling very guilty with myself since I had solved so many other people's problems, but I neglected my home, my two children... Because everyone I would consult would say: well, if you go, you go, you leave for so long and your children are left alone. And so that guilt was so strong, well I liberated myself of that guilt... I liberated myself from sadness, and well, now I feel happy, confident, I regained my spirituality, and with even more strength I am healing myself with motivation, motivation, very motivated."<sup>101</sup>

» ***Awakening the capacity that many of us have to heal ourselves because we heal others***

"During the energy cleansing with Andrés, well I almost feel like all the spiritual traumas I was carrying were uninstalled. And I even had the experience in La Serena specifically of conducting a cleansing for someone and then the next day I felt maybe because I was feeling confident in that gift that I have, well I can't remove it by myself, meaning, the problem was in me, so right there the space of friendship with the *compañeras* was created."<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> | Interview (12) member of the Nicaraguan Initiative of women defenders, El Salvador, 3 July 2019 (internal document).

<sup>101</sup> | Testimony from woman defender from Guatemala in the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena. El Salvador. 2 July 2019. [Own translation.]

<sup>102</sup> | Testimony from woman defender from Guatemala in the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena. El Salvador. 2 July 2019. [Own translation.]

» ***Feeling that we are cared for, attended to, embraced by embodied support, loved. It's an experience of "receiving" that renews sorority. Breaking with the patriarchal mandate to live for others, denying our own needs for care***

"What happened in my life is a before and after, because in my 58 years, I had never had a space for self-care, healing, having dedicated my whole life to caring for others, professionally, I had never given myself the chance of having such a structured plan with such loving people among us... I want to lift up that the plan is a very valuable contribution, because it organizes the things you can do and the majority of things are to take care of ourselves, and this is a primary responsibility, it's a help, because follow up is important... Infinite gratitude to La Serena."<sup>103</sup>

» ***Discovering ailments, capacities, links we had not identified in our own lives and that broaden the resources each of us has to renew***

"For me, the stay was very difficult, confronting, full of many challenges because I went with my 2 sons and it was not easy to listen to what my sons had to say to me... I had a lot of time to get to know my children again and well, to laugh, laugh a lot with them, because this was something I didn't do for so long. So yes, there were changes, many changes in my life because first of all, I realized that I have two amazing men at my side and that I dedicated very little time to them. We made a pact, let's say as part of the stay at La Serena, and it was to answer the phone, really because I did it so rarely, because of that practice that we enter the meeting and they take away our phone, and since I go to a lot of meetings... So one of the pacts was that I would answer the phone when my sons call me. They had killed a friend, so my sons were very afraid that the same thing would happen to me... I realized that in addition to always having many *compañeras* around me, I also had the two of them, and that I had done a good job let's say in raising them and that they wanted to accompany me."<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> | Testimony from woman defender from Nicaragua in the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena. El Salvador. 2 July 2019. [Own translation.]

<sup>104</sup> | Testimony from woman defender from Honduras in the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena. El Salvador. 2 July 2019. [Own translation.]



» ***Reviewing one's own history in relation to the pain and illness each of us experiences in the present, which gives us valuable information to get to know ourselves better and prevent exhaustion***

"I will also tell a dream I had at La Serena, I wrote a book with the women defenders. But it's not easy to write a book; we would need to look for funding and the negrita said, let's look for it. She searched and we made the promise of making the book. I wrote the book and Ana María came to the presentation of the book. She wrote something so beautiful for me, the book is around there somewhere, and another thing I said, how is it, at La Serena I discovered that I like poetry and I like writing and there is a lot of poetry in that book."<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> | Testimony from woman defender from Honduras in the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena. El Salvador. 2 July 2019. [Own translation.]

» ***Taking deep ownership of the right to take care of ourselves, to have time for personal and family life. Appreciating vital needs and the importance of addressing them in order to achieve sustainable activism.***

“My stay at Serena helped me to change my lifestyle, also with my family I have a different way of resolving conflicts with them more calmly. Because if I get agitated, I will get sick because adrenaline and all the chemicals we have in our body will get altered. So let’s calm down and look for another solution, because anger and desperation will not get us anywhere.”<sup>106</sup>

» ***The group is a metaphorical body that holds and accompanies our stories and crises that come up during the stays***

“...with the *compañeras*, with Ana María, I felt so safe telling my things, sharing what I had lived through, the traumas I carried and that I had not told to anyone because of the insecurity that I had experienced – that insecurity inside me in Honduras and all of this since 2009, and which had become bigger. I felt confident in talking about it, trusting my *compañeras* who were there at La Serena, and so I would speak...Sometimes I would almost laugh so as not to cry, but there were also times that I cried and everything. And I felt the safety so strongly, I felt loved, I felt cared for, no one had ever given me that type of attention. An embrace like the one I felt when Ana María embraced me, the embraces I received from the sisters at La Serena, I had never felt that before, almost no one had told me that they loved me, that they admired me for my work, and for me it’s like that lifted my self-esteem...”<sup>107</sup>

» ***Recognizing and respecting everyone’s diversity and wisdoms help to heal individual and collective wounds***

“...freely sharing some things that are very much of oneself, and that sometimes we can’t share just like that, but we were in a space of trust where we can be ourselves. For me, something that I find very difficult due to stereotypes and patriarchy that was ingrained so much in our peoples, we already come from a mixed ancestry but since we grow in an oppressive system with sexism, so even the *Tatas* [elders], because I belong to the Consejo de Guías Espirituales [Council of Spiritual Guides] in my community and I also belong to the *Círculos de Abuelos Sagrados Sabios* [Circles of Wise Sacred Grandparents] of the planet, but anyway they are very sexist. So perhaps because of the heat, I wanted to wear a skirt, a blouse, but no, because I have to have my suit. Also, I can’t go to the disco, imagine just to dance and enjoy because that is also not allowed by the Sacred Circle.

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<sup>106</sup> | Interview (12) member of the Nicaraguan Initiative of women defenders. El Salvador. 3 July 2019. Internal document. [Own translation.]

<sup>107</sup> | Testimony from woman defender from Honduras in the Reflection group for the Systematization of Casa La Serena, El Salvador, 2 July 2019. [Own translation.]

And so, at La Serena I was in the group, I dressed sexy and let my hair down, and I really enjoyed that moment of dancing, because well, we created a bubble and I think I still carry that bubble because since then I still have it. And I have in my space all of nature, my spirituality, the things I want and I have it here and I carry it because I feel like I am in my bubble, where I am very happy.”<sup>108</sup>

### § 5.3 Assessing the different therapies and elements

When reflecting and documenting our experience of the stays at La Serena, we were able to identify the tools and elements that proved most meaningful in the healing process. In the following section, we list these elements and discuss why we identified them as significant.<sup>109</sup>

♦ Those of us who participated in stays at Casa La Serena noted that **the environment created by the team – the attention, professionalism, and the way we were treated – are key elements in the model, and they are key factors for women defenders to be inclined towards active participation in the process.**

» “It was the warmth and affection of the entire team, from the compañeras who helped us in the kitchen with our food to all the professionals who treated us, which made me feel that the stay was very good.”

» “For me, the most important was the accompaniment or follow-up that I experienced beginning with the invitation. Otherwise, really, I would not have come.”

» “It was very important to feel free to speak about issues we had never shared with anyone, or that are difficult for us to do so.”

» “The therapists were very attentive to our needs, from how we arrived and what they could offer to improve our physical, mental, and emotional health.”

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<sup>108</sup> | Testimony from woman defender from Guatemala in the Reflection group for the Systematization of Casa La Serena, El Salvador, 2 July 2019. [Own translation.]

<sup>109</sup> | IM-Defensoras: Notes from the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena, pp.42-49. July 2019. Internal document.

♦ **The therapies and the method at Casa La Serena** were also noted as very significant:

» “I noted that alternative therapies are a ‘plus’ in this proposal. The support from the therapists is idyllic, for me it’s the best because they find our pains, our points of sadness. No Western doctor would tell us, there is your pain from childhood. For me this is important for healing and caring for ourselves.”

» “I appreciate that there were varied therapies. So that you can have different perspectives or elements to add to your assessment, and they are experienced collectively and at the same time there are individual spaces. Dance as well, because through dance we move into a different dimension, a different space where we are alone and we can be ourselves.”

» “For me, a very significant part of my experience was neuromuscular massage, individual and group psychotherapy, yoga, and the self-care plan – this is where we can synthesize the entire experience and take the responsibility that belongs to us. Also, Temazcal, the rituals, the cleansings.”

» “For me, the Body Mapping was very important, because that is how I was able to identify the pains I was ignoring or had never seen, holistic massage, neuromuscular massage, healing of the uterus.”

» “For me, storytelling was very significant because many years ago, my grandmother told me a story and now I understood the importance of remembering our ancestors’ stories.”

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### **Aportes de algunas terapéuticas de Casa La Serena al proceso de sanación de las defensoras**

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**María Angélica Jiménez Nevares** – *Systemic therapy, family constellations or systemic configurations*

**Therapies**

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#### ***Contribution to the self-assessment, assessment, and healing process***

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For women defenders to review their present situation in relation to their own story, in order to identify what motivates them and gives them meaning, but also what pushes them to take on an exhausting activism. To strengthen their ability to know how to stop, how to say, this case is as far as it goes, I can’t do more than this or I delegate it... The constellation therapy says, “The eyes remain the same but what changes is how they see”, they see different because there is a change in how you look.

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**Anisha Aiyappa** – *Ayurvedic medicine: meditation and eating.*

**Therapies**

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***Contribution to the self-assessment, assessment, and healing process***

For women defenders to review their present situation in relation to their own story, in order to identify what motivates them and gives them meaning, but also what pushes them to take on an exhausting activism. To strengthen their ability to know how to stop, how to say, this case is as far as it goes, I can't do more than this or I delegate it... The constellation therapy says, "The eyes remain the same but what changes is how they see", they see different because there is a change in how you look.

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**Lidia Élide López Cornejo** – *Hatha Yoga, reflexology, healing Sounds*

**Therapies**

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***Contribution to the self-assessment, assessment, and healing process***

For women defenders to practice and learn a discipline that helps them harmonize their polarities: feminine and masculine; to improve their physical state, harmonize the body, because without it being a heavy or rough exercise, one can achieve great things at the physical level. One can improve the organs and digestion, sleep better, be more flexible, strengthen one's body, learn to breathe because when this is not done correctly, the oxygen does not flow towards all the cells and this causes physical and emotional disruptions. Hatha Yoga helps them recover this equilibrium and tranquility in order to make better decisions. They also learn some postures that they can practice especially in difficult moments, when they feel they are not centered, and in that way regain control.

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**Elizabeth Olivella** – *Neuromuscular massage*

**Therapies**

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***Contribution to the self-assessment, assessment, and healing process***

Through neuromuscular massage, for women defenders to be free from the pain caused by pent-up emotions and the toxins produced and accumulated in the body's soft tissues: muscles, nerves, ligaments, tendons, and the lymphatic system. Like the therapist states, "If a woman defender comes and says, I couldn't move my arm, I can't lift it and it hurts a lot, I immediately use techniques to open, release, and give movement to the arm, but at the same time, I search and the conversation is about when did this happen, how was it, what is the story behind this. In a conversation and a dialogue with the body, I see the other things they have to work on. Then, what do I do and how do I work on it with La Serena? I think it is intuitive work and every person asks for something different, each body has a unique history... Lymphatic drainage and all the work I do on the adrenals and thyroid glands is super important...

In Emotional Release Therapy, which is part of what I work on, sometimes when the body has taken on fear and trauma, all of a sudden it comes out in the process and they start shaking uncontrollably. This happens because it is trapped inside and the mask has not allowed it to come out, and so when they finally release, they release all of it and they can't control it."

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**Hilda Itandehui Santiago Galicia** – *Neuromuscular Balance*

**Therapies**

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***Contribution to the self-assessment, assessment, and healing process***

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For women defenders to learn to listen to their body and free it from tension, pain, trauma, through gentle exercises: "The nice thing about Neuromuscular Balance is that they don't need to cry, they don't need to release like the body will explode, but rather through Neuromuscular Balance, they begin to release quietly, softly, almost without noticing, and that is what is nice, in the end, what they release, the majority comes out happy."

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**Juan Carlos Acuña García** – *Psychotherapy: Gestalt, family constellations, meditation, Mindfulness, Pathwork, which is a psycho-spiritual path, and some bodywork.*

**Therapies**

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***Contribution to the self-assessment, assessment, and healing process***

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For women defenders to have a therapy space that helps them integrate all that has been moving with the different activities during the stay. To allow them to be open to talk about certain situations that they have not dared to talk about with another person. It's a space that facilitates reflection about what they are feeling, thinking, discovering; to facilitate decision-making for those who are at a cross-roads or to come out of a crisis; to find more clarity about the path they want to follow.

This therapy space also helps women defenders identify how they have mistreated or abandoned themselves, why it's difficult for them to set boundaries; to identify the types of violence they experience in their family and work relationships as well as the ways that they may be reproducing situations of violence.

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**María Soledad y Lourdes Rendón López** – *Bio-energy, craniosacral auricular therapy, Bach Flowers*

**Therapies**

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***Contribution to the self-assessment, assessment, and healing process***

For women defenders to have a bio-energy assessment to improve their physical and emotional health. To prevent illnesses that could be manifesting through symptoms that they do not recognize. To offer a treatment alternative to Western medicine with Craniosacral therapy, Auricular therapy, Bach Flowers, tinctures, and micro-dosing. This way, we can treat both the symptoms and the physical and emotional causes of some of the discomforts and illnesses with which the women defenders arrive.

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**Yesenia Renero Fernández** – *Holistic therapeutic massage, Bach Flowers, Reiki, aromatherapy*

**Therapies**

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***Contribution to the self-assessment, assessment, and healing process***

For women defenders to experience liberation of superficial and deep pains through therapeutic massage: “...while massaging them, you are helping them to remember why this pain. Of course, as a therapist you know the pain may be due to the liver, may be due to the kidney, maybe... And at the same time, the organs carry emotions, so while speaking with them they begin to release, to remember.”

Therapeutic massage awakens the defenders’ consciousness about the body’s language, the deep pains and about emotional situations that then need to face and resolve: “that which you can’t see in the body, and is so deep, almost in the bones. So then, you go to the skull, that is where all the memories are stored, and the skull is to awaken the internal doctor, meaning, that’s when your deep healing begins, over what you don’t want to face... Craniosacral therapy works deeply, not only the skull. You begin at the feet, same as a massage, because that is when you begin to uncover the blockages, accompanying your body at its rhythm, feel the body’s rhythm. Of course, you have to know about anatomy, how the fluids go, how it works to open or close each part of the body... That is how you identify energy blockages, they are life stories that you help to consciously uncover, all those traumas that have remained there.”

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**Source:** Interviews with therapists. Evaluation-systematization of *Casa La Serena*. IM-Defensoras, 2019. [Own translation.]

## § 5.4 Achievements and difficulties in implementing self-care plans

The women defenders who participated in the Reflection Group on La Serena shared our experience about the successes and difficulties we encountered when implementing our self-care plans when we returned to our home countries. The following section synthesizes these achievements and difficulties, organized in relation to our empowerment and the construction of sustainable activism.<sup>110</sup>

### » **Control over our time**

An important achievement to highlight is the effort we made to distribute our time between family, organization-movement, and ourselves, to attend to our needs for rest, health, recreation, and development. We noted that it has been difficult to maintain these agreements with our families, our organizations, and even with ourselves; we are constantly experiencing tension from emergencies that come up very regularly. The solution has been to be flexible during difficult times, but always trying not to lose control over how we use our time.

- ◆ Rest, yes. I hold Thursday for myself.
- ◆ I sleep more.
- ◆ The agreement with my sons that I would always answer the phone even if I am in a meeting.
- ◆ That I would come home early.
- ◆ I distribute the housework because I leave on Sunday.
- ◆ Time for myself, my family, and my organization. I experience it like that, even with my daughters who are activists.

### » **Ability to set boundaries**

We shared that, when we returned to our contexts, our families and our *compañeras* have noted our improvement. This visible change has been a motivation to foster reflections in the spaces where we live and where we conduct our activism regarding the need to change certain routines and habits, to benefit everyone in our circle. In this way, we have been able to explain and justify the need to set boundaries in the work dynamics both at home and in the organization.

- ◆ I only respond to what I decide is urgent.
- ◆ I delegate and trust my *compañeras*.
- ◆ I set boundaries in my family.
- ◆ I spend more time with my family.
- ◆ I learned to take pauses, to withdraw from spaces I no longer want to be in.

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<sup>110</sup> | IM-Defensoras: Notes from the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena, pp.27-30. July 2019. Internal document.

- ♦ I accompany compañeras without taking on loads that I shouldn't.
- ♦ I made a commitment to giving myself spaces for recreation, and to getting to know my country.
- ♦ I begin to release and let go, to distance myself from people that cause me harm.

» ***Caring for our physical and mental health***

Another important success that we shared is that we have addressed some of the main health needs that we diagnosed during our stay at La Serena. The awareness we gained that we were neglecting our body has promoted this self-care effort. However, we recognize that the economic factor is a challenge in accessing regular and timely attention. Additionally, some *compañeras* have difficulties accessing certain therapeutic services, for example lymphatic drainage massage.

- ♦ I always go for my medical check-up.
- ♦ I exercise.
- ♦ I remain in therapy.
- ♦ I do reflexology.
- ♦ I lost weight, I drink a lot of water, I eat healthy.
- ♦ I take care of a liver illness.
- ♦ I let go of a lot of medications that I no longer take (and no longer need?)
- ♦ I take my baths, I make my tea.
- ♦ I pay attention to what I eat, and that's important because I am diabetic.
- ♦ I go for my medical check-up.
- ♦ I learned to breathe and I do my exercises.
- ♦ I am in contact with nature and I give myself massage every two months.

» ***Developing new capacities***

One of the experiences that gave us the most strength during the stay at La Serena is that we discovered capacities that we had not put in practice, or we re-affirmed our right to enjoy other capacities that we had set aside. A shared achievement was that, on our return, we continued making space in our lives to practice these activities or use the learning during the stay, improving our lives and influencing our immediate surroundings. These capacities contribute to our resources for self-care and healing.

- ♦ I learned not to get caught up by the context.
- ♦ We are sharing our knowledge with love and respect.
- ♦ I wrote a book, I discovered I like writing poems.
- ♦ I learned yoga.
- ♦ I learned about nutrition and natural medicines.
- ♦ I discovered that all my actions were determined by reason, and I didn't know the other dimensions of my being.
- ♦ I know how the signs that you are at risk manifest themselves.
- ♦ I discovered that I have creative hands, hips in movement.
- ♦ I discovered the origin of some fears that came from my childhood.
- ♦ I recognized what I could do, and what I was worth.
- ♦ I opened my own business.
- ♦ I reconnected with my ancestors.
- ♦ I am coordinating the network's communications strategy.
- ♦ I recognized what I knew and what I could do as a healer.
- ♦ I learned to listen to my body and that fear is useful for protection but it should not paralyze me.
- ♦ I learned to recognize myself as a woman defender.

» ***Strengthening changes that transform lives***

We were satisfied to share certain changes in our attitudes that promote a life with less pain, tension, demands, and disconnections. We discussed our efforts to remind ourselves of the experience and continue to keep it in mind in day-to-day life.

- ♦ I am much more flexible and accepting of change.
- ♦ Today, I am free, full of color.
- ♦ I was able to accept new challenges.
- ♦ I reconnected with my spiritual, mental, and physical body.
- ♦ I allow myself to be embraced and I am open to loving again.
- ♦ I realized that self-care is a choice.
- ♦ I am aware of myself and I have freed myself of guilt over neglecting my children.

- ♦ I regained my spirituality with more strength.
- ♦ I found a solution to what was tormenting me.
- ♦ I acknowledged that I needed someone to take care of me.
- ♦ I live with a lot of light and wanting to help my compañeras.
- ♦ I live without fear of death.
- ♦ I realized how wonderful my children are.

## § 5.5 Influence on our surroundings and strengthening our organizations

*“We signed an agreement with the University for the psychologists to work with communities on self-care, trained by us. We a similar agreement with lawyers.”<sup>111</sup>*

The Reflection Group on *Casa La Serena* shared how everything we experienced and learned during our stay has influenced our family circles and how it contributes to strengthening our organizations. The dialogue about this experience enabled us to identify **shared learnings or wisdoms as well as concrete measures that we have promoted towards collective care**. The following section synthesizes our inputs.<sup>112</sup>

### » *How we shared our learnings*

The way we transmitted our experience at *Casa La Serena* upon our return has fostered dialogue in our organizations or networks regarding the following wisdoms:

- ♦ If women defenders are well, this strengthens our struggle and we can continue offering our communities the best of ourselves. Self-care and collective care brings us together, it strengthens sorority and complicity.
- ♦ Centering care contributes to a sense of being together, to thinking about our work. We help each other stop, to recognize our strengths and accomplishments, to feel valued and complete in collectivity, to believe in our practices and the way we relate from a place of honesty and humility. To sustain and embrace each other with embodied support, and to not feel helpless when we can't give anymore. To transform activism and oppressive realities.

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<sup>111</sup> | Interview (3) member of the Women's Network Against Violence. El Salvador. 3 July 2019. [Own translation.]

<sup>112</sup> | IM-Defensoras: Notes from the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena, pp.30-31. July 2019. Internal document.

- ♦ Giving political weight to care is important. Thinking of self-care as a strategy for resistance and a component of Feminist Holistic Protection.
- ♦ Self-care, collective care, and healing help us to have a holistic approach and a systemic psychosocial perspective for protecting women defenders.
- ♦ Affirming care and healing as a human right, as an act of justice.
- ♦ We must identify and take collective and individual responsibility for what we need to do to make care and healing possible.

We were able to share with our organizations, in a structured manner, the knowledge about self-care, collective care, and healing that we gained during the stay. Through our testimonies, we were able to identify different levels of implementation. Some of us have shared our experience through workshops to discuss the importance of self-care in sustaining the defenders' work; others by including the topic in training and education processes; others in accompaniment processes, reinforcing protection measures that we already had in the organization, or as support in emergencies.

» *I tried to teach them to love ourselves, because when we neglect ourselves, it means we don't love ourselves.* Another thing is the collective plan, that the suffering of each one is also my suffering. Take advantage of the natural resources we have to stay healthy, for example drinking fruit water instead of soda, use what is ours, what we produce, we harvest it as a collective plan. Another thing is that, due to Free Trade Agreements, we have seen the entry of genetically modified products, abandonment of lands, which are already limited for us Indigenous Peoples, but if we can grow 100 maize plants and not have to buy it, if we can produce in winter – that is a collective plan. Using local indigenous seeds to avoid genetically modified crops and ensure eating well, we also grow medicinal plants, although in Honduras this is not allowed since if you offer an infusion you are called a witch.«<sup>113</sup>

» *...in fact, I've been in other mixed spaces, where they see me and ask me to add a self-care session and to conduct it.* Because I haven't seen it in other spaces, I haven't seen the topic. So I try to add it in the spaces where I participate, so these people can also see that there is something to be done. Because I work with environmentalists, and so I took the issue, in fact this shirt is about that topic: Women defenders of Mother Earth. So, in school I brought in self-care, I added some sessions there.«<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> | Interview (1) Lenca woman defender from Honduras. El Salvador. 1 July 2019. [Own translation.]

<sup>114</sup> | Interview (5) woman defender from El Salvador. El Salvador. 2 July 2019. [Own translation.]



To transmit information about self-care, collective care, and healing, we also shared the tools we gained or strengthened during our stay at *Casa La Serena*:

- ◆ Medicinal plants.
- ◆ Making soaps and oils.
- ◆ Breathing exercises, emotional release.
- ◆ Healthy eating.
- ◆ Bio-dance, floral essence, massage.
- ◆ Spirituality and ancestral wisdoms.

» **Collective care actions or measures to strengthen organizations**

...for me, self-care is a tool that we managed to take up in the organization, in my local organization but also in the Network in El Salvador where we belong. Self-care, collective care, and healing, it is like the cross-cutting theme in all the actions we take as a Network and well, I try to raise it in every space I go to.<sup>115</sup>

One of the observations that has deeply penetrated the consciousness of those of us who have passed through La Serena is that in order to make our self-care possible, we also need our collectives, organizations, movements, and networks to become aware that care is a fundamental element for the protection and sustainability of our struggles. **This awareness must be reflected in changes to our activist and organizational cultures:** how and how much we work; how we distribute workloads and responsibilities; how we recognize our contributions and make them visible; how we manage our own leadership and leaderships in the organization; which wellness conditions do we create in the areas of work, relationships, and security. It has not been easy to overcome the resistance that exists in our collective spaces, but the positive results that are noticeable in ourselves having gone through the experience at La Serena certainly contribute to opening spaces of dialogue and legitimacy. *Below, we share the progress we have made in collective care practices on our return from La Serena.*

- ◆ We have recognized time as an essential factor in order to implement care and place boundaries on work.
- ◆ Using the self-care tools, we have launched individual and collective initiatives to improve our income through actions that promote wellness (oils, soaps).
- ◆ We have energized the rebuilding of a local network (of journalists) with the perspective of collective care.
- ◆ We have more tools for training on self-care, collective care, and healing.
- ◆ We have used the experience gained at La Serena to improve attention for victims of violence.
- ◆ We have applied various tools acquired at Casa La Serena to reduce stress, irritability; we address misunderstandings or at least we dare to speak more about them.
- ◆ We have invited other compañeras to take a pause on the road to think about ourselves, how we are doing.
- ◆ We strengthened self-care, psychological support, the use of medicinal plants and massages in our organization.
- ◆ We give more importance to collective care of our health.
- ◆ We are more open to delegating actions or commitments in our organization.

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<sup>115</sup> | IM-Defensoras: Notes from the Reflection Group on Casa La Serena, p.24. July 2019. Internal document.



- ♦ It helps to have a monthly dialogue and tell each other what we need and ask if someone needs help.
- ♦ We are more willing to treat each other with care and closeness; we strengthened mutual trust.
- ♦ We sharpened the capacity to see exhaustion within the group.
- ♦ Some organizations have implemented accompaniment with spiritual guides.
- ♦ There is more openness within organizations and among women defenders to set pauses or seek therapies when needed.
- ♦ On the issue of care, we established contact with other groups and actors (academics, lawyers, former prisoners, psychologists, medical doctors, family members, journalists.)
- ♦ Care is the priority, even in complex contexts.

### » **Obstacles faced**

We face diverse obstacles when seeking to place care at the center of our protection, both at the personal and collective level. The experience gained at *Casa La Serena* makes it easier for us to identify these obstacles to achieving security, wellbeing, and the sustainability of our struggles.

*When we shared our experiences within the Reflection Group for systematization, we identified internal and external obstacles. Among the ones that relate to our organizations and movements, including our ability to act collectively, we highlight the following:*

- ♦ We need to gather as women defenders who have been at La Serena in each country, to share experiences and think about what we can do to promote self-care and collective care. We need to keep in mind that we do not have the same perspectives on self-care, that we need to take ownership of what we learned in order to digest self-care, that there is a high demand among our own compañeras who always want more attention, and that the national networks cannot conduct follow-up the same way it is done at La Serena.
- ♦ We come up against **sexist visions and patriarchal leadership styles** that devalue care as a protection strategy and that resist change, especially in mixed organizations and in the movements in which we participate.

**We identified the following external obstacles:**

- ♦ **Cooptation of leaders** by certain governmental programs or foreign organizations like USAID. They spend so much money in the communities, giving and giving, taking leaders away from their communities.
- ♦ We see a limitation in some territories due to **the absence of therapists who offer alternative therapies**, or who can be our allies from a place of knowing and understanding the situations that women defenders face, our rhythms and dynamics.
- ♦ We also find that the **economic resources** to access certain types of therapies are scarce. Also, we don't have **safe spaces** to treat women defenders at risk.

» **Questions**

As we started sharing through the dialogue we opened to capture our experience in *Casa La Serena*, some questions emerged, made visible primarily in the daily practice of self-care, collective care, and healing that we conduct in our organizations and national networks. Here we present the most important questions that came up:

- ♦ What does self-management mean in terms of self-care and collective care? The consciousness of what we have built in this aspect among our people and communities.
- ♦ What are the limits of self-care when addressing emergencies?
- ♦ “Wellbeing doesn't require so much...” However, given the poverty in our communities... How can it be achieved in each place with the resources they have? Does it entail rethinking priorities in our political action?

***How far should we accompany women defenders in their self-care and healing processes?***



06

## *Other wellsprings*



## Criteria for opening new healing houses in the region

The experience at La Serena is rich – from the collective process of imagining how a healing house for Mesoamerican women defenders should be, going through the construction, conception and implementation of the proposal, evaluating and re-creating the work model. It includes building the team with the Therapists' Network, and responding to the changing needs of the women defenders, and many other elements. The team at *Casa La Serena* and the commission on self-care, collective care, and healing, have taken this experience and created essential knowledge to identify the main criteria to take into account in order to open other healing houses in the region.

*These criteria are:*<sup>116</sup>

- ◆ **Institutional organizational backing** for fiscal, legal, and logistics support with the capacity to address the challenges involved in the functioning of such a space.
- ◆ Ensure **basic security** in the surroundings (area) where the house will be located and within the space.
- ◆ Create and lean on **a network/alliance with different therapists** who can treat women defenders when they come to the House. Strengthen the understanding inside the therapists' network about the nature of the work that women defenders conduct, our conceptualization of Feminist Holistic Protection.
- ◆ In relation to the space: **a space that is pretty, spacious**, that offers the richness of nature and symbols, that has a range of big and small spaces to offer comfortable stays, both personally and collectively.
- ◆ **Have a group/team** of at least four women defenders who will dedicate their time and work during the defenders' stay.
- ◆ **Provide training for the team and the backing organization** in the Casa La Serena model and the Feminist Holistic Protection framework.
- ◆ Promote the consolidation of **the self-care group in the country**.

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<sup>116</sup> | IM-Defensoras: Notes from the meeting and regional workshop on the Strategy for Self-care, Collective Care, and Healing, p.23. November 2018. Internal document. [Own translation.]

## 07

# Reaching safe harbor

## What have we learned from the Casa La Serena experience?

The learnings we present below were systematized within the strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing, but they are also relevant for the experience of *Casa La Serena*. From these learnings, we captured other learnings that deepen the *Casa La Serena* experience and allow us to identify its specific contribution to the broader experience.

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### What it means to have a house like La Serena

*Casa La Serena* was born out of a regional dialogue among women defenders from different countries and from the political agreement within IM-Defensoras to embrace embodied support and to mobilize the necessary resources to create safe spaces for women defenders. It was possible because an organization within the Steering Group – Consorcio Oaxaca – took the responsibility of facilitating the process, coordinating and enabling the existence of the house in all its dimensions. Thus, it emerges as a response to a need, but also as a shared vision, which has made it possible for the space to be greater than a physical space or a service and become a visionary project of which we all feel a part. This creates belonging, affection, and commitment for it to continue.

We conducted a participatory process to define the identity, physical conditions, processes and tools that make up La Serena. This is reflected in the numerous details that make the house a safe space where we can express our vulnerabilities without risk; a comfortable healing space for women defenders (connected to nature, where we feel cared for, near to our cultural practices and cosmovisions, that does not isolate us, where we can go with our families.) Above all, it is reflected in the experience that, in all cases, the stays and activities have strengthened women defenders' political action, renewing their hope and encouraging an activism that is safer and more sustainable.

In addition to the physical conditions, the house would not be possible without the team that came together, expressing the IM-Defensoras' vision of Feminist Holistic Protection. Starting with the women defenders' wisdoms and needs, we have fostered a permanent search for approaches, therapies, and tools that have resulted in a very broad and diverse range of possibilities uniquely coming together to respond to the diversity of women defenders, needs, and healing processes.

The team at La Serena and the network of therapists and healers understand the specific identity and complexities of women defenders in all of their diversity, because they are also defenders or because they have experience accompanying women defenders. This marks the accompaniment process, fosters relationships of increased equality and complicity, and enables an experience based on the conviction that – beyond each person’s role in the process – we are comrades in struggle who meet to accompany each other on the journey and contribute to social transformation. However, the relationship developed in the accompaniment process is not exempt from complexities and challenges, because there are power relationships and practices that can create tensions. We cannot forget that, although we are all in a process of transformation and critical questioning of the patriarchal and discriminatory culture in which we were raised, this does not mean that we do not at times reproduce this type of practices, and we must therefore be alert to recognize this and address it together. Thus, the team at La Serena is permanently analyzing and learning from its own experience and addresses any tension and conflict that may arise.

**The path that each stay at La Serena follows is a central element in understanding how to bring together the great diversity of approaches and tools** that the team puts in place every time a process begins. Seen separately it may be difficult to understand the congruency between them. However, we can examine how they are practiced and how they come together on the attention route to understand that, in order to manifest the principle that each woman defender and each process is unique, we need to have a diversity and breadth of options that are in constant search and exploration to address the complexities that healing processes entail.

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## The deep meaning of Healing

The experience of the *compañeras* who have participated in a stay at *Casa La Serena* allows us to understand the relevance and the deep meaning of healing within Feminist Holistic Protection.

Through **self-knowledge and collective knowledge** as promoted during the stays, we can ask ourselves vital questions for our lives and political processes: How much can our bodies endure in a context of structural violence? How much can our collectivity and our organizations endure? Questions that lead us to the certainty that it is not humanly possible to continue living in these contexts and that the struggle against those who oppress us and benefit from this unsustainable situation is a struggle for life.

The depth of the process at La Serena is evident in the crisis that every woman defender experiences in the first phases of the stay. **This crisis is part of the steps in the attention route**; the team that works in the house is prepared to accompany the woman defender in that moment, hold her, embrace her with embodied support, and enable her to experience it in a context of care so that it may become a seed for profound transformation. Many of the *compañeras* who have passed through La Serena give testimony to this point.



Healing connects us to ancestry; to the roots that make the Web of Life possible; to personal and collective struggles that have given us meaning, dignity, and hope. **To heal is to re-connect with the Web of Life, give voice to the body, connect with our ancestors; it is an awakening and a connection with spirituality,** beyond the tangible and pure reason. It is energy that allows us to connect with life itself, joy, mother earth, the wisdom of her elements, all of which teaches us to heal the body-spirit intuitively.

Understanding the deep meaning of healing is also recognizing vulnerability as a vital fact from which we build personal and collective strength to achieve a dignified life as well as the care and the communities we need.

La Serena enables us to understand one's own story and one's own body, **the political meaning of healing to be able to face the violence** brought on as a response to our defense of our political vision and our struggle against oppression. This process transforms our political practices and relationships to achieve a higher level of wellbeing and congruency in our activism.

The experience enables us to understand that **healing is a process, a visionary political project, a basic principle of protection**, thereby avoiding any banal or folkloric perspective of this vital practice.

Healing is also a basic principle of Feminist Holistic Protection, as a response to an emergency, to deep exhaustion or trauma, or as a process of transforming one's political practice and one's life to prevent risk. Living through a healing process fosters better conditions to facilitate hopeful struggle.



## Collectivizing the experience, transforming our movements: strengths and weaknesses

The report presents several insights on the strategic importance of collectivizing the experience at La Serena, from which we highlight:

- ♦ “If women defenders are well, this strengthens our struggle and we can continue offering our communities the best of ourselves. Self-care and collective care brings us together, it strengthens sorority and complicity.
- ♦ Centering care contributes to a sense of being together, to thinking about our work. We help each other stop, to recognize our strengths and accomplishments, to feel valued and complete in collectivity, to believe in our practices and the way we relate from a place of honesty and humility. To sustain and embrace each other with embodied support, and to not feel helpless when we can’t give anymore. To transform activism and oppressive realities.
- ♦ Giving political weight to care is important. Thinking of self-care as a strategy for resistance.”

Women defenders who participate in the stays develop a stronger conviction of the need to **transform the political-organizational dynamics in which they are involved** in order to make their struggles more congruent and sustainable. This is a hopeful potential of the *Casa La Serena* experience. However, it has not been easy to collectivize such a deep experience that is difficult to transmit if you have not lived it directly. Nevertheless, each person who has participated in La Serena has sought ways to at least share the experience and, wherever possible, motivate and foster changes in their organizational processes and close circles.

Collectivizing the experience is also possible because **we recognize, strengthen, and leverage the personal and collective wisdoms that each compañera** that participates in a stay already has. They are recognized for the healers that they are, and they recognize the legacy of the care processes and actions that they have been building in their collectivities, as well as the knowledge of peoples and their struggles. This conviction allows us to promote the necessary transformations in collective struggles, based on their own wisdoms and conditions, without depending on experts, while recognizing the external supports that they may need. There is still the challenge of making these wisdoms and resources more visible during the stay and in the follow-up plan, as well as systematizing them in order to better share and use them.

The women defenders who have participated in the stays are linked through the experience regardless of whether they were there at the same time; **they feel part of a collective of women who have lived through a process of deep transformation** and they remain connected through an online communications channel. This group of *compañeras* can be strengthened to become a Mesoamerican healing space of solidarity and embodied support that can contribute to the follow-up plans and the efforts to collectivize the experience.

## Healing as a reflection of the political vision of the world we want to live

What each woman defender and each group of defenders lives in La Serena **reflects the type of society for which we fight**. It reminds us of the “why” of our struggles:

- ♦ By sowing, caring for the land, and nourishing ourselves from its fruits, we will learn to honor the Web of Life. In a capitalist context that denies us and distances us daily from what is essential for life, at La Serena, we reconnect with the vital need we have for nature and the fruits that feed us. The clarity of caring for the land that feeds us is also a way of healing ourselves, because its fruits, herbs, and foods are essential. Just like the land and its fruits, the other living beings of the Web of Life are also indispensable: water, other animal species, mountains, etc. This web is also woven with our ancestors, with our life stories, with the short time and the long time that human existence draws, and its connection in the universe. All of this must be regenerated after centuries of destruction and dispossession.
- ♦ By giving ourselves a space for personal and collective healing and rest, we place care at the center of our lives and our struggles, and we understand the importance of opposing a system that prioritizes capital’s interests and the exploitation of women’s bodies and lives, because this is the only possibility for life, dignity, and personal and collective wellbeing.
- ♦ By dismantling the patriarchal mandates, we advance on the path to dismantling oppression.
- ♦ Being together and building community, we understand the importance of building the common and the community sphere, mutual support, sorority, and learning to be and walk together. Faced with the solitude to which this system condemns us, we come out stronger in our vision of an alternative geopolitical project based on the construction of communities of care.
- ♦ Laughing, dancing, enjoying, we transform our activism from sacrifice to joy, for art and pleasure to be recognized as tools against domination.

***This experience gives practical meaning to the importance of working towards a world without capitalism, without patriarchy, and without racism.***



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## References on self-care, collective care, and healing

This annex gathers much of the knowledge produced and shared by IM-Defensoras with the women defenders who have built the strategy for self-care, collective care, and healing, of which *Casa La Serena* is a part. Reviewing it is another way of enjoying this collective construction and going further in depth regarding the importance of placing care at the center of protection for women defenders and their organized collectivities.

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## References

This publication indicates a pause on the journey that the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras) embarked on over a decade ago, seeking to safeguard not only the defense of human rights but also the dignity of women human rights defenders (hereafter, women defenders or WHRDs) who contribute every day to the construction of more just worlds.

Without a clear map from the start, our intention served as a compass, guiding our footsteps so that we could meet, hug, smile, or cry with other women who – like us – experienced pain, sadness, anger, helplessness, as well as hope in their human rights work. We succeeded in touching each other from the heart. We reached those who lost a friend or family member in a context of violence where women defenders face persecution, criminalization, femicide, or disappearance. We became intertwined with those who defend land, wind and its spirits, mountains and their strength, water and life, the heart of the sky and of the land, the history that the ancestors bequeathed us.



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