

# UNRAVELING THE CRISIS

*- weaving futures -*

Impacts of COVID-19 on the lives and struggles  
of Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders



# CONTENTS

<b>1</b>   When Coronavirus arrived in Mesoamerica...	3
<b>2</b>   Why a mapping of women human rights defenders?	7
<b>3</b>   Political subjects who defy objectification	8
<b>4</b>   Defending rights in times of confinement and authoritarianism	11
<b>5</b>   Life and survival in times of syndemic	19
<b>6</b>   And, despite everything, continue being defenders	22
<b>7</b>   In conclusion	25
<b>8</b>   Credits	26

# WHEN CORONAVIRUS ARRIVED IN MESOAMERICA...

**THE CRISIS WAS ALREADY HERE:** The severity of the COVID-19 pandemic is not only a result of the virus, its behavior and lethality. It is also due to inequality and the lack of institutional capacity to confront the virus ensuring people's health and well-being. The health emergency has unmasked the structural crisis on which patriarchal and racist capitalism feeds, leaving women, peoples, and communities on the edge of survival. The collapse of public services and social security is the result of decades of neoliberal policies that have plundered, weakened, and privatized the public sphere.



On 29 April, nurses and healthcare workers at Roosevelt National Hospital denounced that they work without the necessary protective medical equipment and without access to COVID-19 testing, despite the fact that the hospital has seen COVID-19 cases – including among healthcare workers. According to workers' reports, the hospital has not provided masks, eye shields, or other items needed to ensure their protection during the pandemic. [30/04/2020 – Alerta Urgente Guatemala](#). [Own translation]



The firing of healthcare staff in response to their complaints about the lack of protective measures, materials, and conditions to conduct their work during the COVID-19 global health emergency have been denounced since 9 June. [10/06/2020 – Alerta Urgente Nicaragua](#). [Own translation]

For the majority of the region's population, being forced, recommended, or directed into confinement to protect themselves from contagion without any guarantees for basic rights could only lead to more violence, more poverty, and more exploitation. According to the [Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean estimates](#), the COVID-19 crisis will mean a “15-year regression in poverty (231 million people) and a 30-year regression in extreme poverty (96 million people)” for the region. [Own translation] Once again, women are paying for the crisis – they especially suffer all of the above-mentioned conditions, and have experienced an alarming increase in their domestic and care workload.

The confinement has also [exacerbated domestic violence against women](#) and children, and has hidden the fact that more [women are dying from feminicidal violence than from COVID-19](#). In [El Salvador](#), complaints regarding [violence against women in 2020 increased by 70 percent](#). At least 83 feminicides and more than 18,000 cases of domestic violence were documented in Honduras. In Mexico, victims of feminicide increased by 9.2 percent, with 489 feminicides documents between January and June 2020, in comparison to 448 feminicides documented during the same period in 2019.

That is why the concept of “*syndemic*” is more helpful than “pandemic” for describing and understanding the current situation.

## SYNDEMIC

*“... the adverse interaction of two or more diseases that cause more harm than the sum of both diseases... The impact of this interaction is facilitated by social and environmental factors that make the population more vulnerable to its impacts...”*

| BBC: [Covid-19: qué es una sindemia y por qué hay científicos que proponen llamar así a la crisis del coronavirus](#)

[Own translation]

***The COVID-19 crisis in most Mesoamerican countries has become the perfect excuse to continue weakening democracy, increasing authoritarianism, and reinforcing militarization.***

The government in **Honduras** decreed the suspension of constitutional rights and guarantees, while at the same time driving the increase in violence and harassment of communities in resistance.



Defender Iris Argentina Álvarez was killed today, April 2, by private security agents of the La Grecia Sugar Mill. Her murder took place during a violent, illegal eviction in the Los Chanchos section of Marcovia, Choluteca. Community witnesses report that National Police officers were in the area when the aggressors opened fire against several families with many children. They affirm that the police did absolutely nothing to stop the violence that ended the life of the defender and left two other people wounded, including an underage child.

[02/04/2020 – WHRD Alert Honduras](#)

Martial law was declared in **Guatemala** in communities that are particularly active in the struggle against extractivism.



Men and women of Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan were repressed by the Civil National Police during their road-block action to denounce the entrance of Nahuala residents in their territory accompanied by the army to plant crops on the El Alto farm, a territory in dispute between the two municipalities. This has happened in the context of the Martial Law decreed by the government in the area on 29 May. [11/06/2020 – Alerta Urgente Guatemala](#) *[Own translation]*

While the Federal Government in **Mexico** has not taken a repressive approach, local authorities have enacted measures that harass activists and violate the right to protest,



On Friday, June 5, defender Claudia Hernández was arbitrarily arrested by state police agents of San Luís Potosí while she was participating in a demonstration to protest the extrajudicial execution of Giovanni López. Claudia went to the demonstration as a member of the #YoSoy132 collective to engage in observation and mediation during the march. [08/06/2020 – WHRD Alert Mexico](#)

**Political persecution** is increasing in **Nicaragua**, and the government has repressed those who contradict the official version of the syndemic's impact in the country.



On 22 June, Nora Newball, Dolene Miller, Jennifer Brown and Kalua Salazar – WHRDs from the Nicaraguan Caribbean coast – denounced police harassment and siege of their homes by the national police. The activists and journalists denounce that more than 20 police officers with patrol cars were placed in front of their homes. They state that the harassment has increased after they denounced deaths from COVID-19 and demanded preventive actions in the territory. [22/06/2020 – Alerta Urgente Nicaragua](#) *[Own translation]*

**States have used COVID-19 to restrict liberties and deny human rights as an essential activity.** Meanwhile, they have permitted the continuation of extractive activities, taking advantage of the limitations imposed on communities and organizations that defend territory. Extractivism has not been confined; on the contrary, States have tried to legitimize it as a way out from the current crisis.



«...while states of emergency were declared and mandatory social isolation was imposed, mining, agribusiness, or tree-felling were declared ‘essential activities’ for the economy and society, meaning these could function without restrictions... Maintaining these activities operational has forced workers to risk COVID-19 contagion...»

¶ OCMAL: [Coordenadas del extractivismo en la pandemia en América Latina](#). [Own translation]



« Within this context, territorial invasions, and armed and lethal attacks against communities defending their territories have continued in Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Guatemala. In addition, although in the midst of a pandemic and the onset of a health crisis within penitentiary centers in Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras, land rights defenders continue to be illegally deprived of their freedom. »

¶ Various organizations: [Defending Rights in Times of COVID: A regional review of the conditions for defending human rights and freedom of expression in Mexico and Central America](#)

The message was clear: placing human rights at the center of the response to the crisis was absolutely not the priority, despite this being the only way of safeguarding health and dignity for the majority of the population. As a result, defenders and communicators lacked access to special measures and conditions to safely carry out activities such as organizing community food and health resources, accompaniment to vulnerable groups and victims of violence, social protest against injustices and human rights violations, monitoring and lodging complaints on human rights violations, or investigative journalism work.

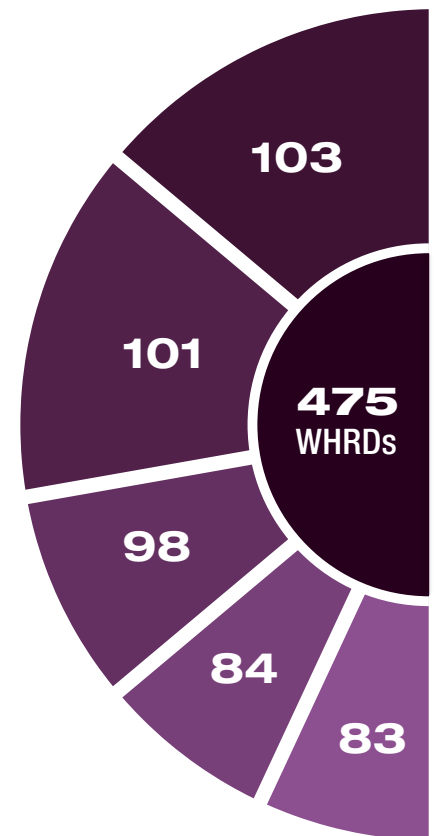
***Experience shows that we are living through an unprecedented crisis of political action that violates the rights of the majority of the population and intensifies inequalities and authoritarianism.***

# WHY A MAPPING OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

The facts and reflections presented below are a result of a mapping conducted by IM-Defensoras along with the networks and coordination spaces that make up the Initiative. The survey was conducted between 29 May and 4 July 2020, with the participation of 475 WHRDs located in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua. The aim of the research is to understand the impacts of COVID-19, and the responses by governments and other power-holders, on our lives, our political action, and our work in defense of human rights.

We complemented the analysis – particularly regarding pre-existing conditions that WHRDs were facing when the syndemic was triggered – with information from our internal report “Assessment of WHRD’s Practices for Self-Care, Collective Care, and Healing – 2019 Update.”

The mapping filled a gap in accessing detailed information on the impacts on WHRDs in Mesoamerica, regarding our health, economic situation, human rights promotion and defense, access to communication, threats received, and risks faced, among other indicators. The information we gathered has enabled us to strengthen our [Feminist Holistic Protection](#) responses at the local, national, and regional level at a time of uncertainty, increased restrictions, and new violations of our rights.



- 
- El Salvador – 83
Guatemala – 84
Honduras – 101
- Mexico – 103
Nicaragua – 98

***\*38 of them live in a situation of forced displacement, primarily from Nicaragua (17) and Mexico (7)***

# POLITICAL SUBJECTS WHO DEFY OBJECTIFICATION

The group of women human rights defenders who participated in the mapping are a good representative sample of IM-Defensoras' diversity. However, one of the conclusions that became clear during the process is that **it is not possible to pigeonhole, label, or objectify us within rigid criteria or categories.**

## I WE ARE DIVERSE

We live in urban (69.9%) and rural (30.1%) areas. These percentages coincide with the rural-urban population density in our countries due to urbanization and rural exodus. However, the larger number of women respondents from urban areas is also due to the timing of the research during the period of confinement, which created a barrier to conducting the survey among WHRDs who live in rural areas.

We are adult women (35-64 years old, 53.5%) and young women (19-35 years old, 32%). The network in El Salvador has the largest number of young women as members (41% of total), followed by the network in Honduras (33% of total). Meanwhile, the networks in Mexico and Nicaragua have more adult and older members (30% respectively).

**Twenty-eight percent identify ourselves as Indigenous and/or Afro-Descendent:** Binni Z'aa (zapoteca), Chorotega, Creole, Garifuna, Ixil, Lenca, Maya, Maya Achi, Maya Chorti, Maya Kekchí, Maya K'iche, Maya K'iche Kaqchikel, Maya Mam, Maya poqomam, Maya tzutujil, Maya-Kaqchikel, Mazahua, Mephaa, Misquita, Na savi (mixteca), Náhuatl, Pech, Pipil, Pocomam, Poqomchi', P'urhépecha, Xinca.

## I WE ARE CAREGIVERS

**Seventy-eight percent have children or other family members in our care.** Most of us are mothers (280), with a higher percentage in rural areas (66%) than in urban areas (56%). Our children economically depend on us 49% of the time, with a higher percentage in rural areas (57%) than in urban areas (45%).



**In Honduras and El Salvador**, the percentage of WHRDs who are mothers is more than 60%. On the other hand, 93 WHRDs are not mothers but do have other family members in their care; most of these live in urban areas (52%, versus 47% who live in rural areas).

**Eighty-one percent spend between 1 and 6 hours each day on care-work.** However, 6 in 10 WHRDs do not feel satisfied with the amount of time we spend with our families.

## **I WE ARE ORGANIZED**

The large majority of WHRDs are **organized** (94.7%); 51% in rural areas and 49% in urban areas.

**Forty percent have a track record of between 6 and 19 years** in activism, and approximately half of us dedicate between 9 and 12 hours each day to human rights defense work.

**The main rights we defend** are: women's rights; the right to defend rights; defense of territory, natural resources, and environment; and sexual and reproductive rights.

The majority (71.4%) are members of one of the national WHRD networks and articulations that make up IM-Defensoras.

## **I WE LIVE IN ADVERSE CONDITIONS AND ARE CONSTANTLY SEARCHING FOR ALTERNATIVES**

Although there are differences and inequalities between us, many WHRDs face adverse living conditions.

- More than half **lack sufficient resources (58%)**. This situation affects WHRDs living in rural areas (75%) more than those living in urban areas (51%).
- Nearly half (43%) have **pre-existing health conditions**.
- **Thirty-nine percent lack access to health services**; this affects WHRDs living in rural areas (45%) more than WHRDs living in urban areas (37%).

▸ **Five percent lack access to water and 34% lack regular access to water.** The complete lack of access to drinking water affects WHRDs who live in urban areas more (27%); this is also the case for those who lack regular access to water (45% among urban defenders versus 34% among rural defenders). Without doubt, this speaks to the models of urbanization prevalent in our region, which are characterized by environmental devastation, over-population, and unequal access to basic services in working class neighborhoods.

▸ **Communication and online access is mainly through cell phones (456 WHRDs)** and not all of us have the necessary equipment, connectivity and credit.

**These conditions are expressed differently in each country and territory,** as can be seen in the following table:

<b>We live in adverse conditions</b>	<b>Regional</b>	ES	GT	HN	MX	NI
Lacks sufficient income	<b>58%</b>	77%	51%	63%	52%	69%
Lacks access to health services	<b>39%</b>	43%	42%	40%	21%	52%
Lacks permanent access to water	<b>34%</b>	22%	24%	54%	17%	29%

ES: El Salvador. GT: Guatemala. HN: Honduras. MX: Mexico NI: Nicaragua.

*“The situation is more severe in some territories than in others... not only because of the pandemic but also due violence and the impact of climate change (strong rains, overflowing rivers), making the situation more difficult in certain territories.”*  
 – WHRD from Nicaragua.

**I AND, DESPITE ALL, WE ARE DEFIANT AND WE PERSIST IN THE SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVES**

Despite everything noted above, part of our identity is marked by not remaining passive in the face of the situations that affect our lives and our political action:

- We value the importance of support networks to take care of ourselves (56%)
- We seek ways to strengthen our well-being (84%).

# DEFENDING RIGHTS IN TIMES OF CONFINEMENT AND AUTHORITARISM

## I MORE LIMITATIONS, MORE DEFENSELESSNESS

**The majority (81%) of WHRDs who participated in the mapping were in confinement or quarantine when responding to the survey.** In 22% of the cases, the local, state, or national authorities did not allow us to leave our homes. A curfew was declared in 28% of our territories, especially affecting defenders who live in rural areas (31% of them were in communities with a curfew; 27% for defenders in urban areas).

This had a significant impact on actions to promote and defend human rights, community organization, public mobilization and denouncing. All the work we usually carry out daily was restricted to the fullest; we had to cancel numerous activities and we could not accompany our communities in the same way as before, nor could we respond with the same capacity to their situation of defenselessness.

To mobilize support for our families as well as people and communities most in need, accompany victims, and organize community health actions, many WHRDs were forced to request documentation to allow us to leave the house, and some of us were even detained and harassed by police officers.



On 13 April, Ana Cristina Barahona of the Network of Mesoamerican Women in Resistance [Red de Mujeres Mesoamericanas en Resistencia] was detained by the national civil police in El Salvador when she was on her way to get medicine for her 3-year-old son who was in the hospital. Even though she had a justification for being on the street, she was taken to a detention center where there were other women detained. The conditions at the center were unsanitary; they did not provide her with a facemask, disinfectant gel, nor access to medicine for her diabetes. She was set free more than one month later. [13/04/2020 – Alerta Urgente El Salvador](#) [Own translation]



«The Canaan, el Hatillo, and Tamara communities in Honduras were repressed by the National Police with tear gas and armored trucks, because they organized a peaceful occupation demanding food and water in order to live through the quarantine. Many of the demonstrators were women. The organizations COPINH and OFRANEH have denounced that the Government is blocking the health measures that their communities have successfully put in place to protect themselves from COVID-19 and is allowing violence from criminal groups.»

¶ [The Crisis Was Already Here: Mesoamerican WHRDs and COVID-19](#)

## I MORE RISKS, MORE VIOLENCE

More than half of WHRDs (66%) believe the risks we face for defending human rights has increased within the COVID-19 context. This perception is more evident among WHRDs who live in rural areas (73%). The facts confirm this perception: **Alerts issued by IM-Defensoras between March and November 2020 increased by 123% in comparison to the previous year (2020: 136, 2019: 61).**

## **Among the attacks registered and denounced, the following stand out:**

### ***Arbitrary detention of WHRDs who left their homes to conduct human rights work and support vulnerable communities.***



On 2 July at 6:30pm, lawyer and WHRD Astrid Ramos was harassed and arbitrarily detained by agents from the National Police in the Department of Comayagua. While was providing legal accompaniment to a person who had been detained without any explanation, the WHRD was herself deprived of liberty by police agents who ignored her role as a lawyer and human rights defender and – without uttering a word and using excessive force – subdued and imprisoned her along with her client. The police alleged a violation of the decree that, with the excuse of the health crisis, restricts multiple constitutional guarantees of the Honduran population. The WHRD was retained for four and a half hours in the police station, where she was denied her the right to make telephone calls, and was verbally abused and threatened by agents of the public forces.

[03/07/2020 – Alerta Defensoras Honduras](#) [Own translation]

### ***Misogynist threats and defamation campaigns through social media orchestrated at the highest levels of government.***



On March 13, 2020, defender Montserrat Arévalo posted a denunciation in Facebook that has been shared more than four thousand times regarding overcrowding and the lack of hygiene for persons held in quarantine during the pandemic provoked by COVID-19. As a result, the defender has received commentaries marked by mockery, rejection and hatred in the same network. She has also received private messages containing hate speech, intimidation and threats, including misogynous insults and derision of her feminist activism. Most of the messages include references to President Nayib Bukele, suggesting or demanding that the defender observe silence and refrain from questioning the measures implemented by the government.

[18/03/2020 – WHRD Alert El Salvador](#)

## ***Criminalization, arbitrary detention, and attacks by criminal groups against communities opposed to extractive plundering.***



In the afternoon of 30 May, agents of the military and the national civil police in Guatemala raided the home of k'iche' WHRD Manuela Alejandra Pop Tuy in Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan. They detained her and her husband without any judicial warrant and with an alleged accusation of 'concealment of weapons possession'. The WHRD was liberated on 1 June, as she is not linked to any crime. Manuela Alejandra Pop is a member of the Association for the Development of Alanel Women [Asociación Pro Desarrollo de la Mujer Alanel - Mujer Creadora]. The Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan community has been living in a violent context since 2019 due to their defense of communal lands. This context has become further aggravated in the crisis provoked by COVID-19, with escalated militarization and a curfew imposed by the government last 29 May, along with other municipalities in the area. | [31/05/2020 – Alerta Urgente Guatemala](#)

*[Own translation]*



On the night of Sunday, 5 July, unidentified individuals broke into the property of Nubia Casco, WHRD and member of Ojojona Women's Network [Red de Mujeres de Ojojona]. Their aim was to destroy the physical covering [saran] at the 'Margarita Murillo' plant nursery that was built and worked by the women of this organization to support their families and the community of Camino Blanco, in the municipality of Ojojona in Francisco Morazán. The Women's Network links this event with a set of threats that several of their members received in the days prior to the incident, which makes them think this could be a premeditated attack against the organization.

[07/07/2020 – Alerta Defensoras Honduras](#) *[Own translation]*

Ikoots women and men engaging in the defense of their territory are beset by heightened violence after an armed group opened fire on them last Saturday night, May 2nd. The attack that took place in San Mateo del Mar, Oaxaca, was aimed at the townspeople of the Huazantlán del Río community, who had established a highway checkpoint as a means of public health control to avoid the propagation of Covid-19.



Automobiles and houses were burned, and townspeople, including community authorities, were tortured and held captive during the spate of violence. For 10 years, San Mateo del Mar has resisted the construction of a wind farm in their territory and as a result, the townspeople and community authorities have been subjected to constant aggression.

[05/05/2020 Urgent Alert Mexico](#)

### *Rights violations against women political prisoners.*

On Tuesday, March 24, the activist and political prisoner Maria Esperanza Sánchez suffered an asthma attack and a high blood pressure crisis while being held in the “La Esperanza” women’s prison. The activist has been repeatedly denied the right to receive medicine and medical attention, and is now being denied protective security measures to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic. This is true even though she is a patient at high risk of suffering complications in case of contagion. Thanks to the pressure exerted by other inmates, the activist was examined and diagnosed with bronchitis. | [26/03/2020 – WHRD Alert Nicaragua](#)



## ***Even with confinement and other measures, 15 WHRDs were killed between March and November 2020.***

† ***Paulina Gómez Palacios Escudero***, a peasant farmer from San Luis Potosi, Mexico, was found dead on 22 March. The defender of territories worked with the Wixarika Regional Council, which has been struggling since 2009 to block mining activities in their territory.

† ***Karla Camarena***, also known as Valentina Ferrey, was a well-known LGBTI rights defender. She was assassinated on Sunday 29 March in San Felipe municipality, in the Mexican state of Guanajuato.

† The Mexican journalist ***María Elena Ferral*** died in the hospital as a result of injuries received when she was shot on 30 March in Papantla, in the Mexican state of Veracruz. She was threatened and attacked through social media because of her work denouncing corruption and political crimes.

† ***Iris Argentina Álvarez*** of the peasant collective Cerro Escondido was assassinated in Honduras on 2 April during an illegal eviction carried out by private security agents from the sugar company La Grecia. Police agents who were in the area when the attackers opened fire against several families did nothing to stop the violence.

† ***María Antonia Sánchez***, defender and community leader in Casa de Piedra canton, San Marcos municipality in El Salvador, was killed on 7 April in San Salvador.

† ***Luz Clarita Zúniga***, trans activist in Honduras, was stoned to death on a street in the city of La Ceiba on 1 May 2020. Luz Clarita, who seems to have been living on the streets, participated in activities organized by the Ceibeña Pro-Union Organization [Organización ProUnión Ceibeña – OPROUCE], and had received various threats while conducting sex work at night.



† On 18 June, the body of **Elizabeth Montaña** was found on the side of Mexico - Cuernavaca federal highway, in the Mexican state of Morelos, after having been missing since 8 June. She was a trans woman, doctor, and defender of the right to medical care for LGBTQI+ community members.

† On 28 June at dawn, trans defender **Alejandra Ortiz** was killed by unknown persons in Honduras.

† **Scarleth Cáceres** was shot to death on 22 July in the neighborhood of La Plazuela, in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. She was a member of the Honduras Rainbow LGBT Association [Asociación LGTB Arcoiris de Honduras], a key organization for the defense of sexual diversity rights in Honduras. In recent years, several members of the organizations were killed and have been victims of hate crimes.

† On 28 July, young trans defender **Cristal López** was in her home in La Ceiba, Honduras, along with her partner and her sister, when unknown persons entered, shot her and her partner, and took her sister away. A few months earlier, unknown persons had broken into her house and had destroyed her belongings. Cristal was a member of the Ceibeña Pro-Union Organization (OPROUCE).

† **Jeanine Huerta** was found killed in her house, in Tijuana, Mexico, on 27 August. Her body showed several stab wounds. She was a well-known activist and defender of the rights of transgender people, transsexuals, transvestites, sex workers, and people with HIV in Baja California.

† On 2 September, **Mireya Rodríguez's** body was found with signs of violence in a house in Aquiles Serdán, in the Mexican state of Chihuahua, after having been missing for several days. She was a recognized defender of the rights of LGBTI communities and sex workers in Chihuahua, founder and president of the association Union and Strength of Trans Women in Chihuahua [Unión y fuerza de Mujeres Trans Chihuahuenses, A.C.].

† **Carmen Vázquez**, known as Karamelo in the cholero [gangster] and lowrider culture world, was a veteran chola leader who stood out for her struggle against drug use and gang violence. According to official reports, she was shot dead on 24 September near her home in the municipality of Guadalupe, in the Mexican state of Zacatecas. Her friends affirm that the crime took place when she was attempting to mediate a conflict. She was helping a group from the chola community that fighting with strangers when armed persons arrived and shot directly at her.

† The trans defender from Honduras **Mía Colluchi** was last seen on 8 November, when she was celebrating her birthday with five men from El Salvador. Her body appeared the next morning near Playa Grande, half-naked and with signs of death by stoning.

† On 24 November, young garífuna defender **Laura Carolina Valentín Dolmo** was found lifeless in the Danto River in the city of La Ceiba in Honduras, with clear signs of having been murdered. She was a member of the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras [Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña – OFRANEH], and her murder is part of a series of homicides, feminicides, and forced disappearances that the garífuna peoples have confronted in the past year.

# LIFE AND SURVIVAL IN TIMES OF SYNDEMIC

**The syndemic triggered by COVID-19 and governments' responses has affected all aspects of our lives as women human rights defenders.**

## **I MORE CHALLENGES TO DECENT HEALTH**

Most of us have encountered health issues resulting from the situation created by the syndemic. Many of us have pre-existing health conditions that we are unable to address adequately, and that increase our vulnerability to the virus.

Additionally, as we mentioned earlier, 4 in 10 WHRDs lack access to health services; most of us (67%) lack resources to pay for the health services that we need; and more than half (54%) face restrictions to access medicines – all of which is further aggravated among WHRDs who live in rural areas.

Moreover, living with persons who are sick with COVID-19, having people close to us dying from the disease, or having the disease ourselves has had a great impact on us.

## **I CONFRONTING THE PRECARIOUSNESS TO WHICH OUR PEOPLES ARE SUBJECTED**

Thirty-seven percent of the territories where we live are experiencing hunger, food shortages and economic crisis.

Four in ten WHRDs (42%) report lacking sufficient economic income to ensure the basic needs for ourselves and for people in our care, due to the crisis intensified by the health emergency. This situation affects 75% of WHRDs who live in rural areas and 51% of those who live in urban territories.

**In the majority of cases, we have seen a drop in our incomes at the same time that both the cost of living and our working hours have increased.**

## I OVERLOADED BY CARE AND HOUSEWORK, AND EXPOSED TO FAMILY VIOLENCE

In the family environment, 60% of the people who depend on us have faced increasing needs during the COVID-19 crisis.

The enormous burden of care and housework that we have taken on is striking. This shows that gender inequality remains a constant, even in the lives of women who defend human rights. To the question, “who is/are taking on the care work (housework, caring for the young, caring for the elderly or sick, etc.) in your home?” – 409 WHRDs responded that they themselves are. **The proportion by country is quite similar, although Honduras and El Salvador stand out:**

	Regional	ES	GT	HN	MX	NI
Have taken on care and housework on their own.	<b>86%</b>	92%	88%	94%	78%	82%

ES: El Salvador. GT: Guatemala. HN: Honduras. MX: Mexico NI: Nicaragua.

*“The disadvantages for women, being at the head of the family... there is a real practice that women are always taking care of everyone else... This has been an enormous burden in the pandemic; it reveals the atrocious burden of care... It is not only taking care of life, our own, that of the others, of the whole family... This is very strong regarding a paradigm change... Who takes care of us?”*  
 – WHRD from Nicaragua

*“...our daughters and sons were not in school; this situation exacerbated the pressure on defenders, on care work, on livelihoods. Many of our sister defenders are grandmothers. This challenges us in relation to self-care...”*  
 – WHRD from El Salvador

**Although we believe this point is under-reported, 4% of WHRDs affirmed that someone with whom they live could attack them.** Seven percent of WHRDs who live in rural areas and 3% of those living in urban areas recognize this risk.

## I MORE ISOLATED AND DISCONNECTED

During the syndemic, with confinement and social distancing, the majority of us have been unable to work and communicate online safely. WHRDs have often lacked the necessary resources to have credit on our cell phones (53%), a situation heightened for defenders in rural areas (67%) compared to those in urban areas (46%). Only 16% of us have access to Wi-Fi; the majority of WHRDs who lack access to this service and have only their cell phone data to access the internet live in rural areas (57%). The digital security risks are obvious as most of us use unsecured ways to communicate.

In this area, we find significant differences by country:

	Regional	ES	GT	HN	MX	NI
Lack access to Wi-Fi and depend on data to connect	<b>34%</b>	51%	38%	45%	9%	45%
Lack sufficient resources to have cell phone credit	<b>53%</b>	78%	45%	61%	23%	64%

ES: El Salvador. GT: Guatemala. HN: Honduras. MX: Mexico NI: Nicaragua.

# AND, DESPITE EVERYTHING, CONTINUE BEING DEFENDERS

In a context of public delegitimization of the work of women human rights defenders and social movements, this mapping provides valuable information about what it means to be a WHRD in a crisis like the one we are currently experiencing. It speaks to the responses of women human rights defenders, our organizations, and communities that counter the government-imposed measures:

*Resilience,  
Rebelliousness,  
organizational capacity,  
systemic alternatives*

- *Against social distancing: **solidarity and mutual support.***
- *Against suppressing rights and using the pandemic to favor private interests: **denounce and rebel.***
- *Against vertical authoritarian decisions: **active participation and organization by society in building solutions throughout neighborhoods and communities.***

**Seventy-three percent of WHRDs were active both individually and in their close surroundings and communities.** Some examples mentioned in the mapping were:

- Actions to sustain the family economy: family support, loans, sale of some products, self-employment, barter, and others.
- Distribution of the workload in the home.
- Planting food, community gardens.
- Support among neighbors and community members.
- Support in situations of gender violence.
- Neighborhood and community organization.
- Healers and guides offering support and accompaniment.

*“I highlight the spirituality and emotional support of community Guides and community healers who function as therapeutic support from an Indigenous Peoples’ vision, very important in communities, not only with Indigenous women but also with peasant and rural women.”*

*– WHRD from Guatemala*

Our organizations did not stop working; we re-organized, transformed activities and forms of accompaniment to navigate the restrictions and continue defending rights. **Navigating confinement, 63% used online tools to continue our organizations’ work and struggles.** We did this primarily using our cellular phones (98%): to communicate and provide advice (214), to conduct advocacy (237), to contact sister defenders and leaders (370), and remain updated about cases (284).

**Awareness about feminist holistic protection has increased our ability to confront the risks and vulnerabilities created by the syndemic.** Being part of a national coordination of WHRDs was highly valued as an element of protection and support. Since the health emergency arrived in the region, between 91% and 73% of WHRDs interviewed for this mapping was in contact with one of the networks and articulations that constitute IM-Defensoras.

**We confirmed that organizations and communities with strong territorial ties and trajectories in collective protection were able to activate responses more effectively to address new needs and risks created in this moment.** This is true for WHRDs and organizations of Indigenous Peoples, who are offering their ancestral wisdoms and knowledge, and are contributing solutions to prevent and mitigate impacts.

*“...Long-standing organizations and movements that date back to the internal conflict have more established resources, collective protection experiences, and community care that comes from that time...”*

*– WHRD from Guatemala*

***“... Among the Garifuna peoples, we have been able to preserve our ancestral culture and have inherited an enormous ethnobotanical toolbox. Thanks to this and our organizational experience, the strategy has not only safeguarded the health of Garifuna people but also provides an alternative to the responses implemented in most countries of the world that have meant an enormous cost for the population. Today, we have 31 community health centers...”***  
***– WHRD from Honduras.***



# IN CONCLUSION

- ▶ The mapping provides information that reinforces our analysis that the crisis provoked by the COVID-19 syndemic is the result of a structural crisis that presents the need to move towards systemic alternatives as a society; alternatives that WHRDs and our communities have put into practice since the moment the coronavirus entered our territories.
- ▶ The indicators about WHRDs' living conditions are a clear example of the impact of decades of inequality on our lives as defenders, and the motives that have driven us to struggle for social justice and against racist and patriarchal capitalism.
- ▶ The indicators about access to health show how neoliberal policies are destroying public services that are essential for life.
- ▶ The information on the political context speaks to the factious use of the health emergency to deepen authoritarianism in all countries, although with some important differences (for example, in Mexico, there was no repressive approach at the federal level but it did appear around the country at the state level).
- ▶ The situation for WHRDs who live in rural areas is more difficult across most of the indicators analyzed. Nevertheless, it is in rural areas, especially in those areas with strong community organization, where alternatives are developed more strongly – mutual support, food sovereignty, community health, and other ways of confronting the crisis that seem more difficult to enact in urban areas.
- ▶ If we do not build from other paradigms, it will be very difficult to create a safe environment for our political action and social transformation projects for which we struggle. These alternative paradigms to Power, which are present in the resilience, rebelliousness, and justice work of WHRDs during the syndemic, are proving to be much more useful for confronting the health crisis and advancing towards a society with lives worth living.

# CREDITS

## **COORDINATION OF RESEARCH PROCESS, SYSTEMATIZATION, AND DRAFTING**

Lydia Alpizar, Marusia López Cruz y Estela López Deloya (IM-Defensoras).

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

### ***Regional Commission***

Teresa Boedo, Ana María Hernández, Yésica Sánchez, Nallely Tello, Margarita Quintanilla y Consuelo Mora (IM-Defensoras)

### ***El Salvador***

Alejandra Burgos, Flor Meléndez, Zuley Araúz, Isabel Acevedo, Dilcia Marroquín, Mirna Luisa, Cecilia Vega y Claribel Ayala; Leslie Ramírez (Red Salvadoreña de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos)

### ***Guatemala***

Ana Lucía Ramazzini (FLACSO Guatemala); Sandra Xinico Batz (IM-Defensoras); Celeste Mayorga (Centro Q'ánil); Fabiola García Galán (CALDH); Gladys Hernández (CALDH); Quimy León (Revista Ruda); Paula María Martínez Velázquez (Protección Internacional); Pilar Salazar (Centro Q'ánil); Walda Barrios (q.e.p.d) (FLACSO Guatemala); Rosa Chávez (JASS Guatemala); Raquel Vázquez (Madre Tierra); Anabella Sibrián (PI Mesoamérica); Patricia Ardón (JASS Mesoamérica)

### ***Honduras***

Yessica Trinidad, Melissa Cardoza, Kely Núñez, Yenith Amador, Ingrid Aronne, Katherine Cruz Cerrato; Helen Ocampo; Eda Luna; Miriam Suazo (Red Nacional de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos en Honduras)

### ***México***

Gloria Flores, Cecilia Espinoza, Argentina Casanova, Sandra Pastrana, Patricia Yllescas, Adriana Jáuregui, Arianna Bizzoni y Sofía Parra de Moya, Guadalupe Cruz (Red Nacional de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos de México)

### ***Nicaragua***

Enrieth Martínez, Fátima Millón, María Castillo (q.e.p.d), Martha Munguía, Juanita Jiménez, Yamileth Molina, Chepita Rivera, Virginia Meneses, Rosario Flores

## **DATABASE DESIGN AND STATISTICAL DATA PROCESSING**

Técnicas Rudas

## **COORDINATION OF INFORMATION GATHERING**

### ▸ **El Salvador**

Flor Meléndez (Red Salvadoreña de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos)

### ▸ **Guatemala**

Teresa Boedo (IM-Defensoras)

### ▸ **Honduras**

Yesica Trinidad (Red Nacional de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos en Honduras)

### ▸ **México**

Cecilia Espinoza (Red Nacional de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos de México)

### ▸ **Nicaragua**

Enrieth Martínez, Marellyn Somarriba, Margarita Quintanilla

## **INTERVIEWERS**

### ▸ **El Salvador**

Leslie Ramírez

### ▸ **Guatemala**

Sandra Xinico Batz

### ▸ **Honduras**

Kelly Núñez

### ▸ **México**

Yanina Flores Melgar

### ▸ **Nicaragua**

Enrieth Martínez

## **EDITING**

### ▸ **Design and lay-out**

Cristiana C. Blandón

### ▸ **Translation**

Analía Penchaszadeh

### ▸ **Editing and copy-editing**

Communications team IM-Defenders

**More information at:**

[www.im-defensoras.org](http://www.im-defensoras.org)



# UNRAVELING THE CRISIS

*- weaving futures -*

Impacts of COVID-19 on the lives and struggles  
of Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders

