



**DATA THAT  
HURT US,  
NETWORKS  
THAT SAVE US**

Brasília - Brasil  
10+ YEARS  
OF ATTACKS  
AGAINST WOMEN  
HUMAN RIGHTS  
DEFENDERS IN  
MESOMERICA

**2012  
2023**



**IM-DEFENSORAS**



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**IM-DEFENSORAS**

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This report is the result of the collective knowledge and work of many women defenders, networks, and organizations that converge in IM-Defensoras. It is based on everyone's rigor, commitment, and generosity to shed light on a situation that was for too long silenced, ignored, or minimized in its severity. But above all, on the willingness and trust of thousands of women defenders who contributed their words and analysis regarding the violence and human rights violations that they suffered because of their dignified and necessary mission to defend the lives and rights of all the beings who live in Mesoamerica. They are the protagonists of these pages and deserve all our gratitude.

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## MESOAMERICA, JUNE 2024





ABORTO LEGAL  
SALUD  
DE LAS NIÑAS

LA SALUD Y LA VIDA  
DE LAS MUJERES Y NIÑAS  
NO ES UN JUEGO



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10+ YEARS  
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**(2012-2023)**

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**FOREWORD**

Josefa  
MARCALA

# WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A WOMAN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER IN CENTRAL AMERICA?

**Claudia Paz y Paz**  
Regional Director, former Attorney General of  
Guatemala and woman human rights defender

The report **“Data that Hurt Us, Networks that Save Us: 10+ Years of Attacks against Women Human Rights Defenders in Mesoamerica”** is, without doubt, an invaluable contribution to human rights defense in the region. This is due to the rigorous work of gathering data and systematizing the information, making it a unique document that brings a feminist perspective to analyzing attacks suffered by women defenders. As important is that the documentation of attacks also describes the forms of resistance and the networks that we have been weaving to confront the different types of violence that cut across our bodies and our lives; it amplifies our voices in defense of human rights, of dignity, and of other worlds of justice that we know are possible.

It is a huge privilege for me to be invited to write this prologue. I have huge admiration and respect for the work of the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders; I also have deep gratitude, not only for their work in this region but also for the personal accompaniment that they offered me as a woman defender when I faced stigmatization campaigns and criminalization. Their committed, rigorous, and sensitive work made me feel protected and safe even in difficult times.

The registry that informs this report was created in 2012 as a political decision to document attacks against women human rights defenders, in response to the lack of indicators that would reveal the forms of violence and their specificities. Of course, we suffered violence as women defenders before 2012, but it was not registered systematically; the attacks were rendered invisible and were normalized, as generally happens in relation to gender violence. The absence of data also made it difficult to identify effective strategies to address the attacks.

The value of the registry and the systematization is not just the result that is condensed in this report, it is the way of working: the national networks of women defenders are the ones responsible for documenting attacks. Meaning, it is not an external entity but rather the women defenders themselves, in a collective effort, who document, register, systematize, reflect, and define strategies. It is a way of narrating their own pain, but also their stories of struggle in their own voice, in first person. Because they, better than anyone, know the risks they face.



And so, what is it like to be a woman human rights defender in Central America? The numbers gathered in this report reveal an especially dire situation in the region. Without doubt, we are experiencing a resurgence of authoritarianism in Mesoamerica, and women defenders suffer the resistance against these regressive trends in their bodies and in their lives. One number is particularly worrisome: 200 killings of women defenders and 228 attempted killings between 2012 and 2023 in Mexico and Central America. It is also alarming that of the 58 killings of women defenders documented between 2020 and 2022, 40% of those killed were trans women defenders (23 transfemicides).<sup>1</sup>

According to IM-Defensoras' numbers, 23% of attacks were connected to the defense of the right to truth, justice, and reparations. This should not be surprising in a region that suffered – and continues to suffer – extremely serious systematic human rights violations; where mothers continue to search for their sons and daughters, claiming justice; where impunity tends to be the norm. The searching mothers of Mexico and the Mothers of April in Nicaragua are powerful examples of these efforts.

Women defenders and organizations that defend land, territory, and natural resources suffered 15.6% of the documented attacks. These are Indigenous and Afro-descendent women and communities that denounce and resist voracious extractivism. Honduras reflects the most alarming numbers that have grown since the assassination of Berta Caceres in 2016. Freedom of expression is the third right whose defense has led to the most attacks, with 14.1% of documented attacks. This corresponds to attacks on freedom of expression, the closure or exile of independent communications media, and is expressed in the spying on and criminalization of journalists and communications workers.

IM-Defensoras' report also analyzes who is behind these attacks. Thus, we learn that 45% of perpetrators are State actors, and among them 22.9% are police agents. States not only fail by not taking necessary measures to protect us, they also pursue, criminalize, and attack us.

Although the registry of actors linked to organized crime is relatively small, we cannot ignore the way in which this actor has co-opted the security institutions, and that these often respond to its interests. This also happens with extractive corporations that seek to impose their interests in the region at all costs.

It is also important to note that, according to the report, 43% of attacks are repeated incidents, meaning, these are not isolated events; many women defenders have suffered more than one attack. This is why the registry's change from the attack to the woman defender, her organization or collective, is laudable.

The report concludes with an important reflection. It maintains that attacks on women defenders and the impunity that enables them, are not “a consequence of failed States, they are connected to historical forms of oppression and structures that use the system to sustain oppression.” Meaning, it is not that States and justice systems don't work, they do work, but do so to silence dissident voices, create terror, and demobilize resistance.

Thus, the proposal from IM-Defensoras is crucial: build and strengthen networks and alliances to sustain movements; create strategies that disrupt the multiple systems of oppression and counter the effects of violence; care for lives in freedom and dignity. As a Central American woman defender who has sought to forge the path of justice in the region, I give all my recognition, my embodied support, and my gratitude to the networks that generously offer this contribution. The production of this report allows us to continue on our journey.

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<sup>1</sup> In Spanish, the report uses both *transfemicidio* and *transfeminicidio* in recognition of the different legal frameworks in each country. We have left it as “transfemicide” in English.

# KNOWING THAT WE ARE NOT ALONE...

**Berta Zúñiga Cáceres**  
**Coordinator of the Civic Council of Popular and**  
**Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH)**

For women who struggle for a life with dignity alongside our communities, it is now common to experience different types of assaults that try to stop our work, which is our resistance. To humanity's sorrow, as the predatory capitalist system becomes further entrenched, with increasingly patriarchal attacks and expressions of contempt for the communities that come from the bowels of the earth, different expressions of systematic violence have also become more frequent.

Women human rights defenders have worked to use wisdom and collectivity to confront a reality shared throughout the territories of Abya Yala and the southern parts of the world in which we live under constant attack. Knowing that we are not alone gives us strength to not let go of our struggle. This collective dynamic of registering incidents, classifying and analyzing them, has become a tool increasingly taken up in the day-to-day decision-making that allows us to respond to a context that is increasingly anti-democratic and domesticated.

For those of us who live in the mountains, we now have a common practice of using cards to write down the incidents that we suffer, analyze the actors who attack us, analyze the aims of these attacks, and think of actions that we can take in the community or organization to confront them. With a cup of coffee and a tortilla, we gather in pleasant moments of sharing among compañeras<sup>2</sup> and try to dismantle patriarchal violence.

Although the attacks often rob us of the strength to continue moving forward (and we also know we have the right to take a break without feeling guilty), we are always strengthened by the burning hearts of those compañeras who do not waver one second in knowing the path we must follow, and the great reasons for which we continue moving forward. As long as the drums beat, the copal smoke flies, and a solidarity embrace does not abandon us, there will be hope for humanity.

IM-Defensoras has been an allied organization in the protection of many Mesoamerican women defenders, trying to recognize the autonomy and wisdoms of each territory. For COPINH, the National Network of Women Defenders in Honduras has been a close ally, a sister in care and struggle.

We have many seeds that give fruit, and we are no longer alone, silenced, and invisible. From the mountains to the coasts, we know we are one voice for a diversity of struggles to advance fearlessly and with tools to face the enemies of the peoples in the journey for a free and just life that makes us continue with the memory of those who are no longer with us and those who suffer.

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<sup>2</sup> The word *compañera* can be translated as “female companion, comrade, or friend.” However, for us, this word carries a deeper and broader meaning, which is why we choose not to translate it. A *compañera* is a woman or a person of diverse identity who plays a significant role in our close or extended network, working alongside us to sustain life. They are not just someone we can rely on from a distance; they are an ally, a sister, an accomplice in the fight against the destructive forces of capitalism and patriarchy.

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# INTRODUCTION

*Defending human rights in Mesoamerica is an urgent collective task that women defenders take up every day with the conviction of the importance of building alternatives for a life with dignity. Unfortunately, our work as women defenders often involves confronting different and multiple forms of violence that have specific expressions against us because we are women or sex-gender dissidences.*





Over more than 10 years, the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras) – through the jointly coordinated work of women defender networks in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, and in solidarity with Nicaragua – has documented the broad diversity of attacks that we face for defending rights. The Registry of Attacks is one of our Feminist Holistic Protection (FHP)<sup>3</sup> strategies, which – starting with identifying realities and patterns of attacks against women defenders – contributes to denouncing and making visible the relevance and challenges of our work, and to setting up measures for protection, self-care, and collective care in order to confront the violence we experience.

In this report, we present our analysis and reflections on the data and patterns of attacks that we registered between 2012 and 2022, as well as an annex with preliminary data from 2023. It is the result of a collective effort not only to document our reality as women defenders but also to develop collective reflections about our regional contexts, about the patterns that have been sustained and changed with time, about the de facto powers and interests that are protected by attacking us, about the structural causes of the violence that we receive, and about the capitalist, racist, and patriarchal system that our struggles confront.

The first part of the report focuses on methodological matters. We describe our registry system, its basis, structure, and evolution, as well as the challenges that we continue to face. Then, we describe the women defenders who have received attacks, who they are, their identities and diversity. We continue by analyzing the features of the political, social, and economic system that seeks to sustain itself through violence against our bodies, territories, and collectives. After this comes an overview of the main rights being defended for which we are attacked, and a description of the perpetrators of these attacks along with their links to the State and to non-State actors, including institutional mechanisms and de facto powers that perpetuate impunity.

We continue with an analysis of the key patterns and events that shed light on the different forms of attack: personal attacks, including those against our family members and close circle; attacks during collective actions; and attacks against our organizations and groups. We use specific cases to highlight and illustrate some of the main documented forms of attack: physical, psychological, and verbal violence; sexual violence; harassment; threats; surveillance; smear campaigns; criminalization; and femicides<sup>4</sup>. Finally, we analyze how patriarchy manifests in the violence that women defenders experience as women and sex-gender dissidences, and the impact of this violence on our lives, our surroundings, and our struggles.

We conclude by sharing our reflections about the data presented in this report and detailing our urgent recommendations for society as a whole, for States, and for international human rights bodies. Additionally, we complement the 2012-2022 historical analysis with a section that summarizes the preliminary data on attacks on women defenders in 2023, which were not included in the historical report due to time constraints but that – even when viewed in isolation – contribute to discerning the line of continuity that allows us to understand the situation experienced by Mesoamerican women defenders.

With this report, we hope to provoke questions, reflections, and debate. Above all, we hope to inspire hope and commitment by validating and giving visibility to the fact that – despite evidence from more than a decade of violence against us, confronting those who seek to impose their policies of death – Mesoamerican women defenders continue to resist and persist united and strengthened, defiant and unstoppable, placing our bodies on the line, raising our voices, and fighting on the side of life.

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<sup>3</sup> IM-Defensoras: *The Pact to Care among Ourselves. 2010-2021: IM-Defensoras' Approach to Feminist Holistic Protection in Mesoamerica. 2022.*

<sup>4</sup> In Spanish, the report uses both *femicidio* and *feminicidio* in recognition of the different legal frameworks in each country. We have left it as “femicide” in English.



EL PATRIARCADO  
SE VA A  
ACABAR EN  
LAS ESCUELAS CON  
EDUCACIÓN SEXUAL

SOMOS  
VISIBLES.  
SOMOS  
INVENCIBLES

NO MAS  
VIOLENCIA  
CONTRA  
LA NATURALEZA

OUR MESOAMERICAN REGISTRY  
**OF ATTACKS  
AGAINST WOMEN  
DEFENDERS**



In our conversations and analysis during the First Gathering on Violence against Women Defenders<sup>5</sup> in 2010, we were surprised by the lack of gender indicators in most available reports regarding attacks on those of us who defend human rights. Generally, we identified a lack of recognition about the specific situation that women defenders were facing. This lack of visibility was itself a risk factor for our activism, because it limited the creation of protection measures to address our specific needs. It also exposed the low social recognition of our contributions, and of the situation of discrimination in which we conducted our work.<sup>6</sup>

We created the Mesoamerican Registry of Attacks against Women Defenders in 2012 as one of the strategies of IM-Defensoras in order to understand and analyze the expressions and causes of the violence that women defenders experience, to protect ourselves better, and to address the lack of reports that disaggregated data and provided a gender analysis of attacks against Mesoamerican rights defenders. In the midst of growing violence and repression against social movements, the Registry was developed by team members of the women defenders networks to “quantify the scale and types of violence against [women defenders in the region and their organizations], as well as to describe the characteristics of these attacks, including potential gender dimensions.”<sup>7</sup> The Registry is a pioneering strategy – both in the Mesoamerican region and globally – that has allowed us to identify the specific forms of violence that women human rights defenders face, and in this way strengthen our protection processes.

**“We register to care for ourselves, we register to make decisions, we register to care for our life, our surroundings, our processes. The registry and analysis of the data has allowed us to get ahead of situations, to effectively care for our lives, to preserve our life, preserve our freedom, preserve our political projects and our collectives. In the midst of a policy of death, the Registry is life... In spite of it being terribly exhausting because every day we are effectively in touch with sadness, every day we are in contact with situations that are very, very difficult for our compañeras, for ourselves, even with this, it is life and we can preserve life and hope...” Nicaraguan woman defender.<sup>8</sup>**

## **REVEALING REALITY TO GUIDE FEMINIST HOLISTIC PROTECTION**

Documenting attacks against women defenders as part of the work for Feminist Holistic Protection (FHP)<sup>9</sup> has involved different moments, including the collective construction of concepts based on the human rights framework that helped to fill the vacuum in existing documentation. A fundamental part of this process was the construction of a broad definition of the concept of “woman defender”, which included not only reclaiming the role of women and sex-gender dissidences in defending diverse rights, but also recognizing the specificity of attacks due to the patriarchal context and its intersection with other structures of oppression, and – therefore – the need to understand and confront these human rights violations, as well as to develop specific forms of protection.<sup>10</sup>

This conceptualization recognizes the role of so many diverse women who sustain life from very different spaces and realities, including journalists who defend the right to free expression; women in communities who accompany other women who are victims of patriarchal violence; midwives who ensure and safeguard reproductive rights; family members of political prisoners who sustain those who face unjust criminalization; sex-gender dissidences who day after day challenge the heteronormative system; and those who search – primarily women – for family members who are disappeared.

5 This event had the participation of more than 50 women defenders from different countries in the region – El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua – and from different social movements.

6 IM-Defensoras: *Violence Against Women Human Rights Defenders in Mesoamerica. 2012 Assessment Report. August 2013.*

7 IM-Defensoras: *Violence Against Women Human Rights Defenders in Mesoamerica. 2012 - 2014 Report. 2015.*


8 Workshop to analyze the experience of the regional registry strategy. Testimony of a Nicaraguan woman defender, 17 November 2022. Internal document. [Own translation.]


9 IM-Defensoras: *The Pact to Care among Ourselves. 2010-2021: IM-Defensoras' Approach to Feminist Holistic Protection in Mesoamerica. 2022.*

10 IM-Defensoras: *Violence Against Women Human Rights Defenders in Mesoamerica. 2012 - 2014 Report. 2015.*




At IM-Defensoras, we conceived of the registry of attacks not as an exercise in documenting and quantifying data, but as a strategy that – through its interaction with the other FHP strategies – ensures the protection of women defenders by identifying the concrete realities that we face, both individually and collectively. This enables us, among other things, to:

 Systematically report, with qualitative and quantitative data, on attacks against women human rights defenders in Mesoamerica (Mexico and Central America). This includes attacks not only in the public sphere but also in the sphere considered private due to patriarchal concepts (intimacy, family, and community circle), which is particularly relevant not only because women defenders are also attacked in these spaces, but because not documenting these attacks can contribute to a biased view of the risks we face.


 Generate validated information about the attacks faced by women defenders, our organizations and collectives, which allows us to substantiate our processes to advocate, denounce, seek justice, and reclaim memory.


 Identify patterns of attack and the systematic repression that we experience in each country and at the regional level, contributing to the articulation and construction of national and regional collective protection strategies.


 Inform and coordinate with those who accompany women defenders and organizations at risk, to ensure their protection and security. The Registry is often the first contact with personal or organizational situations of risk, which is why coordination with the accompaniment strategy is vital to follow-up processes that can facilitate security and care.



As an FHP strategy, the Registry has required the development of ethical and methodological frameworks that avoid an extractive dynamic in the collection of information. This means that:

 The task of registering is conducted by women human rights defenders trained in FHP processes and who are part of the national networks and articulations of women defenders. This allows us to build close relationships among equals, which is important as this may often be the first contact with women defenders at risk. The networks have established referral mechanisms from the Registry to other strategies (accompaniment, self-care, communications, and advocacy, among others) that will ensure the care for and protection of the women defenders whose attacks have been registered.

 The documentation of attacks goes hand in hand with collective analyses that determine the focus and narratives to understand the different contexts in their complexity. These narratives foster an analysis of the registered data with a perspective of the structural causes of the violence that women defenders experience, and not only through its most visible expressions. Additionally, the narratives make it possible for the database to respond to each country's specific information needs, and for us to be able to understand the specific realities in each of the countries with a regional perspective, using common categories and concepts.

 The collective care, self-care, and protection measures are set up both for the women defenders whose attacks we document and for the Registry team members. Collectively, we identified and promoted actions to care for the teams that – because of their role registering attacks – are directly or indirectly exposed to testimonies of violence against women defenders on a daily basis. These actions include, among others, establishing times of rest, psycho-social support therapies, and setting up other measures to prevent the impact of secondary violence on their bodies and their lives.



## HOW DOES OUR REGISTRY OF ATTACKS WORK?

Since its launch in 2012, our Registry of Attacks against women defenders is implemented by the national networks,<sup>11</sup> which have teams responsible for identifying and gathering information about attacks in El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua.<sup>12</sup> In the case of Guatemala, the information registered from 2020 onwards is adapted annually based on information sent from the registry of attacks operated by the Unit for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders in Guatemala (UDEFEQUA).

The national teams and the regional team responsible for the strategy make up the Regional Registry Commission, a space for collective decision-making regarding the system's technical matters, and where collective context analysis is conducted based on the registered data in order to identify trends and the impacts on women defenders' lives.

The national teams systematize the information in files that are automatically entered into the regional database.<sup>13</sup> The files classify the information into three broad types of attacks: 1) attacks against women defenders on an individual or personal level, 2) attacks against organizations or groups, and 3) attacks during collective actions or against groups and collectives. From the beginning of the registry, the persons in the national networks who document attacks developed and validated these tools, with advice from allied organizations and people with experience on the theoretical and technical aspects as well as on the diverse realities that we experience in the region.

The files include categories and variables that facilitate an understanding of the realities and the profiles of women defenders who are attacked. This includes the rights they defend; the types of violence and threats that they face; the actors and perpetrators of the violence; formal complaints filed about the attacks and the outcomes of these complaints; and whether or not the woman defenders had been granted protection measures prior to the attack. It also includes variables related to attacks or threats against women defenders' family members or other persons close to them in their organization or community.

The verification and validation of the data is a fundamental process of our registry that allows us to ensure the quality and reliability of the information. This process involves two key moments: first, the registry teams validate the events documented with the women defenders, their organizations, and other key actors. Second, verification and validation is conducted through dialogues between IM-Defensoras' regional team and the networks' teams. These dialogues serve to validate the information and ensure that it is complete, including reliable verification mechanisms. The dialogues also raise reflections and questions that – depending on the case – can be resolved with the team in each network, or can be taken to the Regional Registry Commission for a broader conversation and collective decision-making.

In 2020, we updated our database with the goal of automating processes and fostering greater agility, autonomy, and quality in processing the information within the networks and at the regional level. This complex process entailed permanent consultations to ensure that the database and the reports generated met the expectations and specific needs of the networks and the women defenders who they accompany.

One of the most important changes was the transition from registering attacks to placing women defenders at the center of the Registry – establishing women defenders and organizations or groups as the unit of analysis. Starting at this benchmark moment, we have an individual record of attacks against women defenders and organizations, and see their evolution over time; this has strengthened individual processes of protection, advocacy, and access to justice.

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11 National Network of Women Human Rights Defenders in Mexico, National Network of Women Human Rights Defenders in El Salvador, National Network of Women Human Rights Defenders in Honduras, and the Nicaraguan Initiative of Women Defenders. Due to security concerns, the Nicaraguan Initiative of Women Defenders stopped operating in the country in 2023; however, organized women defenders in Nicaragua continue to promote FHP strategies.

12 The registry of attacks against women defenders in Nicaragua was launched in 2015.

13 In 2020, we began a process of automation that enabled the automatic centralization of information in a common database and access to automatic decentralized reports for each network.



### **Our current registry system allows for:**

-  Automated data entry by the national network teams into the central database.
-  Greater data security, which ensures the protection of the information registered and of the persons responsible for entering it in the system.
-  Automatic generation of preliminary and annual reports at the country and regional levels.
-  Automated verification and validation processes conducted timely and simultaneously across the national registry teams and the regional team.
-  Our database currently includes 300 variables – all of which have been agreed to by consensus – that allow us to understand the reality of women defenders in the region and to establish trends over the last 12 years.



## THE CHALLENGE OF UNDER-RECORDING

**Recognizing the unique features of the information captured in our registry system, we must note that we continue to face challenges in gathering and analyzing that must be taken into account when interpreting the data gathered, and that may point to an under-recording of data. These challenges include:**



The lack of official registries regarding attacks against women human rights defenders.



The representativeness of the diversity of attacks and of women defenders attacked, determined by structural limitations to reach them, especially in regions where the women defenders' networks have less territorial presence.



Incomplete personal information about the women defenders attacked, such as age, ethnic identity, sexual orientation, especially when the attacks are registered based on secondary sources.



The different mechanisms and ways of filing complaints creates a challenge in identifying who issued a complaint and where it was filed, as well as what responses to the complaint were received. This prevents us from making a deeper analysis of the reality faced in seeking justice by and for those who were victims of attacks.



The different levels of knowledge that different groups of women defenders have regarding the registry process.



The risks involved in documenting attacks against women defenders who have been forced to take their work underground in contexts of increasing authoritarianism, persecution, organized crime, and systematic repression and control.



Patriarchal violence is deeply normalized, and this leads to a normalization or minimization of the gender component of many attacks, meaning that these are not always perceived or recognized as attacks and, therefore, not registered.



Attacks in the digital sphere present a big challenge due to their novelty and complexity. Registering these attacks requires understanding how they function in the different contexts in which women defenders and our organizations live and work. Importantly, it also challenges us to consolidate our own narrative that goes beyond the technical and colonial language imposed by new technologies and the hegemonic system of power that is represented there.

**All of these challenges are aggravated in countries and communities where repression and violence create high risks and vulnerabilities for conducting our work as women defenders, and in situations where we are silenced or we self-censure due to fear.**

## UPDATING AND HARMONIZING THE DATABASES – A CONSTANT CHALLENGE

From the start, our registry system was conceived as a process in permanent improvement that involves collective analysis and reflection to understand the realities that women defenders experience. Throughout these more than ten years, we have strengthened capacities in the teams and networks, and we have regularly optimized the systems, criteria, and processes for registering and validating attacks. These internal transformations in the registry system have influenced the data that we present in this report. As such, for example, it reflects an analysis of the evolution in time of each type of attack (personal, during collective actions, or against organizations and groups).

Beginning in 2020, we changed the formula for counting collective attacks, aiming to calibrate more closely the scope of this type of attack and thus come closer to understanding the nature of attacks that take place during collective actions in defense of human rights. This is important to take into account in relation to the information about collective attacks gathered before 2020, which do not include this level of detail and, as such, may imply an under-recording of the number of attacks registered up until that year.

Starting in 2020, we also fine-tuned our ability to understand the number of women defenders and organizations attacked, specifying repeat attacks. This enables us to have information that is more precise, without repetitions, regarding the profiles of the women defenders attacked.

Additionally, beginning in 2020, the database allows us to generate broader and more specific analyses about certain variables based on the type of attack. For example, since that year, we can differentiate if an attack is personal, if it took place during a collective action, or if it targets organizations or collectives – whereas in previous years we were only able to analyze the total number of attacks. This is why we have placed special narrative emphasis on 2020 in certain sections of the report.

### REGISTERING A GENDER PERSPECTIVE


The Mesoamerican Registry of Attacks allows us to show how gender stereotypes and discrimination are reinforced when it comes to women human rights defenders. The feminist approach in our registry system includes women in all their diversity, including sexual dissidences as well as defenders of sexual and reproductive rights and of sexual diversity. Additionally, this perspective does not minimize any attack, analyzing both the public and private sphere, gender and sexual violence, and giving visibility to the structural factors in the discrimination that women defenders face. It also recognizes that it is possible to identify partners, family members, and persons in the community and/or in the organization or social movement among the perpetrators.

**“Each attack seeks to stop women defenders, so being there and documenting, registering, contributes to not limiting her work, because when one feels alone, it is easier to abandon our work. That is why for me, the registry helps me see how women defenders exist and resist, and it recognizes their importance, countering discourses that delegitimize them.” Woman defender from El Salvador<sup>14</sup>**

As part of the analysis, our registry system also identifies gender components that facilitate an understanding of the particularities of the violence that women defenders experience, as well as its impact on us. Our collective experience and consensus led us to create a series of indicators that guide our identification of gender components in attacks. These are as follows:

 Attacks for defending the rights of women and LGBTTTIQ+ people.


 Hate speech based on our sexuality, sex-gender identity, or other identities (racial, ethnic, age, etc.).

 Attacks that seek to preserve a specific order in society or in the community. For example, the definition of family, or what a man or a woman should be (stay at home, be a good mother, how to dress, who owns the land, among others).


 Disbelief or doubting situations experienced by women defenders who were attacked.

 Delegitimizing our work, leadership, and/or achievements (infantilization, questioning our capacity or leadership).


<sup>14</sup> Testimony from interview with woman defender from El Salvador, Flor de Maria Melendez, 24 February 2022. IM-Defensoras Internal document. [Own translation.]

 Sexual violence, sexual abuse, touching, rape, harassment, smear campaigns based on our sexuality, use of fetishes, manipulation of underwear, or sexualized drawings.

 Violence exercised by intimate partners, ex-partners, or family members.

 Threats to harm third persons close to us (children or other persons with whom we have an emotional bond), including sexual threats and threats of kidnapping, physical attacks, other.

 Attacks with misogynist expressions.

 Manipulating or misrepresenting public information about legal complaints filed against women defenders who were victims of attacks.

## **METHODOLOGICAL NOTES: REPORT ON 10 YEARS OF REGISTERING ATTACKS AGAINST WOMEN DEFENDERS**

To develop this report, we selected the main variables in our registry system. We took historical data from the 2012-2022 period, as well as preliminary data for 2023 about rights defended and the rights-defense activities that women defenders were conducting when they were attacked. We also used demographic information from 2020 to 2022, which allows us to have a closer understanding of the profiles of women defenders who face attacks: age, ethnic/cultural identity, sexual orientation, sex-gender identity.

Additionally we dug deeper into the phenomenon of attacks against women defenders based on the number and type of attacks against them and against persons in their close circles, such as family members or people from their organizations or communities. We included variables that allow us to identify direct perpetrators of violence and those suspected of being behind the attacks, as well as the prevalence of complaints filed with authorities or national or international human rights bodies regarding the attacks, and the existence of protection measures granted to women defenders who were attacked.

We also analyzed the main regional data regarding the impacts of attacks on women defenders' lives and the identification of gender discrimination present in the attacks.

Constructing this report has engaged the national networks and the different regional strategies of IM-Defensoras in a process of collective reflection and analysis of the quantitative historical data. In this process, each network analyzed its historical data, which allowed us to understand the evolution of the repressive contexts in which women defenders live in each country and at the regional level.

Key inputs for the report included regional and country-level context analyses conducted with the national networks and the regional strategies throughout these years, as well as testimonies and narratives gathered in internal documents like the systematization of strategies, among others. This provided insights to help us understand and interpret the numbers from our own work and experience accompanying women defenders. We also brought in perspectives voiced in publications from previous years. These included reports on attacks produced by the networks or at the regional level;<sup>15</sup> reports that analyzed impacts in the context of the syndemic<sup>16</sup> due to COVID;<sup>17,18</sup> thematic research like the publications

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15 IM-Defensoras: [Publications list](#).

16 Throughout the report, we use the term “syndemic” to refer to the crisis that was deepened by COVID-19. This term describes how a health situation can have a bigger impact due to its interaction with social and environmental conditions that increase people's vulnerability.

17 IM-Defensoras: [The crisis was already here: Mesoamerican WHRDs and COVID-19 | IM-Defensoras, June 2020](#).

18 IM-Defensoras: [Unraveling the Crisis, Weaving Futures. Impacts of COVID-19 on the lives and struggles of Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders. Unraveling the crisis – weaving futures. Impacts of COVID-19 on the lives and struggles of Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders, July 2021](#).





on transfemicides<sup>19</sup> and criminalization of women defenders in Nicaragua,<sup>20</sup> Mexico, and Honduras;<sup>21</sup> and WHRD Alerts and Urgent Alerts posted in our social media channels and website throughout the period.<sup>22</sup>

All together, “Data that Hurt Us, Networks that Save Us. 10+ Years of Registering Attacks against Women Human Rights Defenders in Mesoamerica” is not only an analysis of the numerical data gathered between 2012 and 2022, but also a compilation of our analysis and reflections, a result of the collective wisdom that has guided our work and our pact to care among ourselves as IM-Defensoras.



19 IM-Defensoras: *TRANScending Hatred and Syndemics: Transfemicides of women defenders and the struggle for justice in Mesoamerica between 2020 and 2022*. 2022.

20 IM-Defensoras: *Persecuted for defending and resisting: Criminalization of Women Human Rights Defenders in Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua Chapter on Nicaragua* (In Spanish). 2022.

21 *Perseguidas por defender y resistir. Criminalización de mujeres defensoras de derechos humanos en Honduras, Nicaragua y México*, Honduras Chapter. <https://im-defensoras.org/es/2024/09/perseguidas-por-defender-y-resistir-capitulo-honduras/>. At the time of publication of this report, the chapter on the criminalization of women human rights defenders in Mexico had not yet been published.

22 WHRD Alerts and Urgent Alerts are a mechanism to publicly denounce violations of women defenders’ human rights. These alerts are disseminated through social media and our website, and are sometimes shared directly with human rights organizations and international mechanisms such as the office of the Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders. All alerts published are approved by the women defenders or organizations involved.



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**WHO ARE WOMEN  
HUMAN RIGHTS  
DEFENDERS?**





Women defenders are searching mothers or family members of victims who defend our right to truth, justice, and reparations; Indigenous and Afro-descendent women who defend our territories from the imposition of extractivist mega-projects; feminists who work underground to accompany women, girls, and adolescents to be able to have an abortion or because they were victims of violence in their homes; we are members of LGBTTTIQ+ communities who confront religious and right-wing fundamentalisms on a daily basis; we are activists who fight against corruption or for equality in economic, social, and cultural rights; journalists who denounce violence, its perpetrators and their accomplices.

Since 2020, our registry system allows us to identify the characteristics of the women defenders who suffer attacks in Mesoamerica. Based on this information, we can confirm our diversity and make it visible. The following data corresponds to the characteristics of women defenders between 2020 and 2022.<sup>23</sup>

### OUR COSMOVISIONS AND ETHNIC IDENTITIES

Mesoamerican women defenders are:

<b>Mestiza [mixed heritage]</b>	<b>(76.8%)</b>
<b>Indigenous</b>	<b>(19.6%)</b>
<b>Garifuna</b>	<b>(1.3%)</b>
<b>Afro-descendent</b>	<b>(0.6%)</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>(0.3%)</b>

In Honduras and Guatemala, more than 40% of women defenders are Indigenous. In Honduras, 13% are Garifuna women defenders. Based on our 2021 mapping of Mesoamerican women defenders,<sup>24</sup> we know that some of the ethnic groups to which we belong are: Binni Zaa (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, and Xinca.

### OUR AGES

Based on age, Mesoamerican women defenders are:

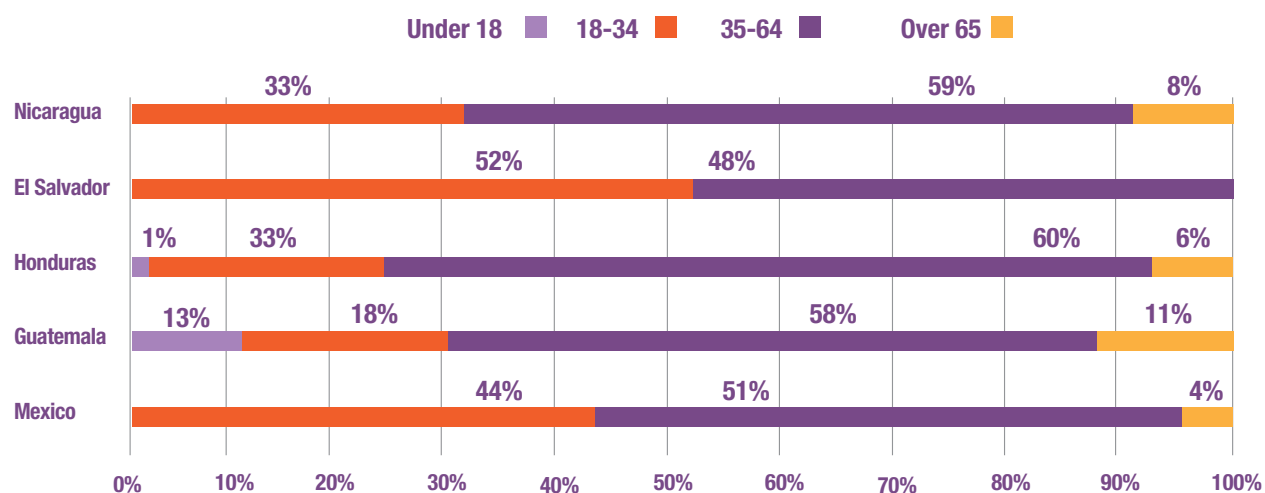
<b>young women under 18 years of age</b>	<b>(0.9%)</b>
<b>young adult women between 18 and 34</b>	<b>(38.7%)</b>
<b>adult women between 35 and 64</b>	<b>(54.6%)</b>
<b>older women over 65</b>	<b>(5.7%)</b>

In El Salvador, more than half the women defenders attacked are below 35; in Guatemala, one in ten women defenders targeted by attacks is younger than 18 or older than 65.

23 As noted in the methodology section, it is not always possible to document the ethnic identity, age, gender identity, or sexual orientation of women defenders who have been attacked, because of limitations in the information we are able to access about them. The percentages stated in this section come from the total number of women defenders attacked between 2020 and 2022 about whom we had information. In this period, we were able to gather information about ethnic identities in 76% of the cases, 61% in relation to age, and 56% in relation to sexual orientation.

24 IM-Defensoras: *Unraveling the Crisis, Weaving Futures. Impacts of COVID-19 on the lives and struggles of Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders.* July 2021.

**Figure 5**  
Age range of women defenders attacked in Mesoamerica 2020-2022



### OUR SEX-GENDER IDENTITIES AND PREFERENCES

Women defenders attacked are:

<b>cisgender women</b>	<b>(97.4%)</b>
<b>transgender</b>	<b>(2.3%)</b>
<b>queer</b>	<b>(0.1%)</b>
<b>non-binary</b>	<b>(0.1%)</b>

Regarding our sexual orientation, we are:

<b>heterosexual</b>	<b>(87.6%)</b>
<b>lesbian / homosexual</b>	<b>(7.4%)</b>
<b>bisexual</b>	<b>(4.3%)</b>
<b>pansexual</b>	<b>(0.5%)</b>
<b>asexual</b>	<b>(0.2%)</b>

### OUR TERRITORIAL SPHERES OF STRUGGLE

The places where we conduct our actions are diverse; however, we identified a pattern of attacks particularly against women defenders who are confronting power-holders closest to their territories. The work of women defenders attacked between 2020 and 2022 takes place and converges in different arenas:

<b>departmental / state</b>	<b>(25.3%)</b>
<b>national / federal</b>	<b>(20.1%)</b>
<b>municipal</b>	<b>(16.5%)</b>
<b>community, rural, or local</b>	<b>(25.2%)</b>
<b>urban</b>	<b>(8.0%)</b>

Only 2.6% of women defenders attacked work in the international arena and 1.7% at the regional level.

## OUR ACTIVITIES

The actions we promote as part of our struggles are varied, and they inform the type of violence and the levels of risk we experience. Between 2020 and 2022, we identified that among the women defenders attacked:

- 19.3%** conduct grassroots work
- 15.8%** work in journalism or communications
- 14.2%** promote or facilitate actions seeking justice as a victim, family member of a victim, or professional who accompanies victims
- 13.4%** provide legal support as an attorney or legal promoter

The following table shows the top three activities conducted by Mesoamerican women defenders who were attacked between 2020 and 2022, disaggregated by country. Of particular note is the high percentage of attacks against those who provide legal support in Guatemala, conduct journalism and communications activities in Mexico and El Salvador, and work at the grassroots level in Nicaragua and Honduras.

**Table 1**  
Main activities of Mesoamerican women defenders attacked by country, 2020-2022

Mexico	Guatemala	Honduras	El Salvador	Nicaragua
<b>41.60%</b> Journalism and communications	<b>46.10%</b> Legal support	<b>20.50%</b> Grassroots work	<b>28.50%</b> Journalism and communications	<b>27%</b> Grassroots work
<b>14.20%</b> Grassroots work	<b>14.70%</b> Journalism and communications	<b>17.30%</b> Works in an organization	<b>11.30%</b> Grassroots work	<b>20.30%</b> Demands justice (victim, family member, accompaniment)
<b>12.60%</b> Demands justice (victim, family member, accompaniment)	<b>12.10%</b> Documentation/ research	<b>15.10%</b> Demands justice (victim, family member, accompaniment)	<b>10.80%</b> Legal support	<b>11.30%</b> Political advocacy

## OUR WORKING CONDITIONS<sup>25</sup>

One commonality among women defenders (94.7%) is that we are organized in collectives, organizations, groups, and communities to defend human rights. We dedicate many hours in the day and many years of our lives to this work. Forty percent have a trajectory of between 6 and 19 years in activism, and approximately half of us dedicate between 9 and 12 hours each day to this work. As many other women, we also take on double or triple shifts; 8% of women defenders are responsible for children or other family members, and 81% dedicate between 1 and 6 hours each day to care work.

Reflecting the structural inequalities characteristic of our region, many Mesoamerican women defenders conduct our work in adverse conditions. More than 50% of us lack sufficient resources – this is more problematic for women

<sup>25</sup> IM-Defensoras: *Unraveling the Crisis, Weaving Futures. Impacts of COVID-19 on the lives and struggles of Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders.* July 2021.



defenders who live in rural areas (75%) than for those living in urban areas (51%). On top of this, 43% have pre-existing health conditions, and 39% lack access to healthcare services, primarily affecting those in rural areas. Our living conditions are sometimes restricted by access to basic rights like water, to which 5% of us lack access and 34% regularly face difficulties accessing. Furthermore, although our communications and access to the digital tools essential for our work takes place through mobile phones, not all of us have the necessary equipment, connectivity, and credit balance to do so effectively.



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# WHY DO THEY ATTACK US?





In Mesoamerica, we live under an economic, political, and cultural model that is a colonial legacy, which manifests in structural forms of oppression and a historical continuity of patriarchal, capitalist, and racist violence on women's bodies and territories. Deeply wounded by armed and military conflicts, the region went through peace processes and agreements and democratic openings that failed to bring about structural transformations. This is because the strictly formal nature of democracy promoted and its institutions have been primarily used as instruments to legitimize national and transnational oligarchies, and to continue to reproduce the model of capital accumulation and concentration of power.

We defend human rights in a region where economic inequalities are exacerbated, and where our communities are at the limit of their ability to survive, overwhelmed by violence and poverty, and with no perspective for a life with dignity on the horizon. This model has led us to the ecological and climate crisis, to the depletion of fossil fuels and vital biodiversity. Moreover, in a context of increasingly restrictive border controls and migration policies imposed by governments in the Global North, tens of thousands of people in the region continue to escape violence, hunger, and the impacts of climate change. All of this brings us to a crisis of civilization that risks the continuity of life in all its diversity and makes it difficult for us to envision other possible futures.

Over the last decade, and from their respective particularities, the situations in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua have been characterized by the intensification of poverty, authoritarianism, corruption, the closing of spaces for social and political participation, militarization, extractivism, and the penetration or expansion of the presence of organized crime. Even in countries that have experienced progressive-leaning electoral changes, structural inequalities and violence have not been overcome.

In this context, and confronted by this system of death, women human rights defenders – alongside our peoples, communities, and organizations – are organized in different territories to resist violence and defend life in all its expressions. No right has been granted to us without struggle, no justice has come without a demand, no territory has been able to confront dispossession without resistance.

**“The memory of our ancestral resistances and struggles; the construction of collective power and communities of care; the transgression of capitalist, racist and patriarchal mandates; and the capacity to dream and make other worlds possible are a legacy that is present even in the most acute moments of repression and control, eroding and opening cracks in the system.”**

**IM-Defensoras. The Pact to Care among Ourselves.<sup>26</sup>**

Our political practices reflect our commitment to dignity; to the rights of every person; to the defense of land, territory, and our body-territory; to the construction of horizontal empathetic relationships; to work that is in close contact with the experience of our communities and respectful of ancestral knowledge. Women, like Indigenous Peoples and other social groups, are political subjects who resist dispossession and oppression, and – through our struggles – create alternatives for life with dignity, winning recognition of human rights, transforming legal and institutional frameworks, and – above all – confirming the certainty that other worlds are possible.

Our sole existence as political subjects challenges the patriarchal mandates that seek to silence the power of women and sex-gender dissidences. Our leadership and daily work challenges unequal power structures based on gender biases, while at the same time denounces the dangers of continuing to sustain the capitalist system. The world that we struggle for is diametrically opposed to the one they intend to impose on us, and, therefore, our work places the interests of the powerful at risk. This is why we face a violent context that threatens our life, our integrity, and – in general – the invaluable

<sup>26</sup> IM-Defensoras: *The Pact to Care among Ourselves*. 2010-2021: IM-Defensoras' Approach to Feminist Holistic Protection in Mesoamerica. 2022.

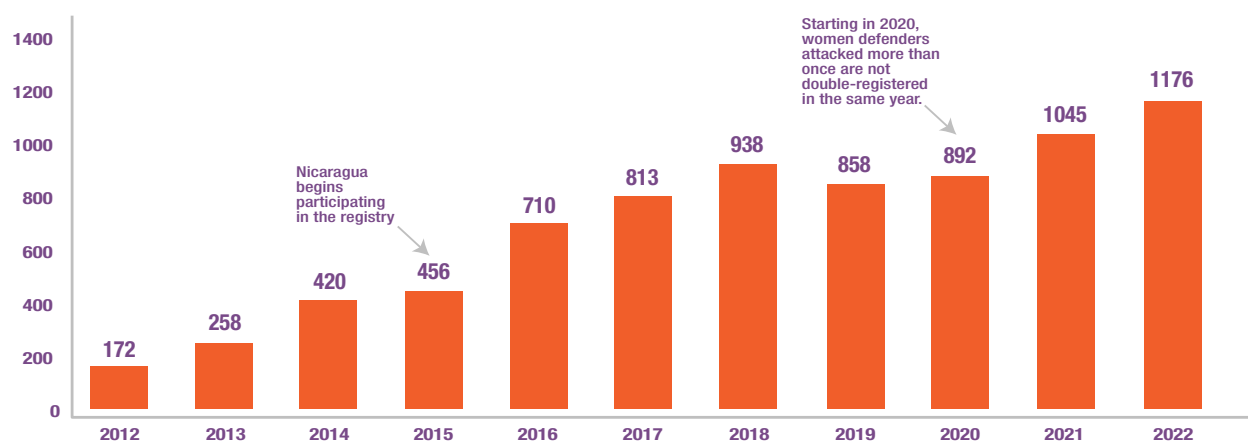


work that we conduct for the achievement and enforcement of human rights. The privileged power-holders in this system see attacks and the use of force as the only way of containing our collective power.

**Between 2012 and 2023, we documented 35,077 attacks against 8,926 women defenders.<sup>27</sup> Of these, 32,483 were perpetrated individually against a woman defender or during collective actions in defense of human rights. In the same period, we registered 2,594 attacks against 953 organizations that work to defend women’s rights in Mesoamerica.**

Since we began working on the registry in 2012, we have witnessed a continued increase in the number of documented attacks. This can be explained by the strengthening of our registry system, but also by the escalation of violence, authoritarianism, militarization, and criminalization faced by women human rights defenders throughout the region.

**Figure 6**  
**Number of women defenders attacked in Mesoamerica 2012 - 2023**



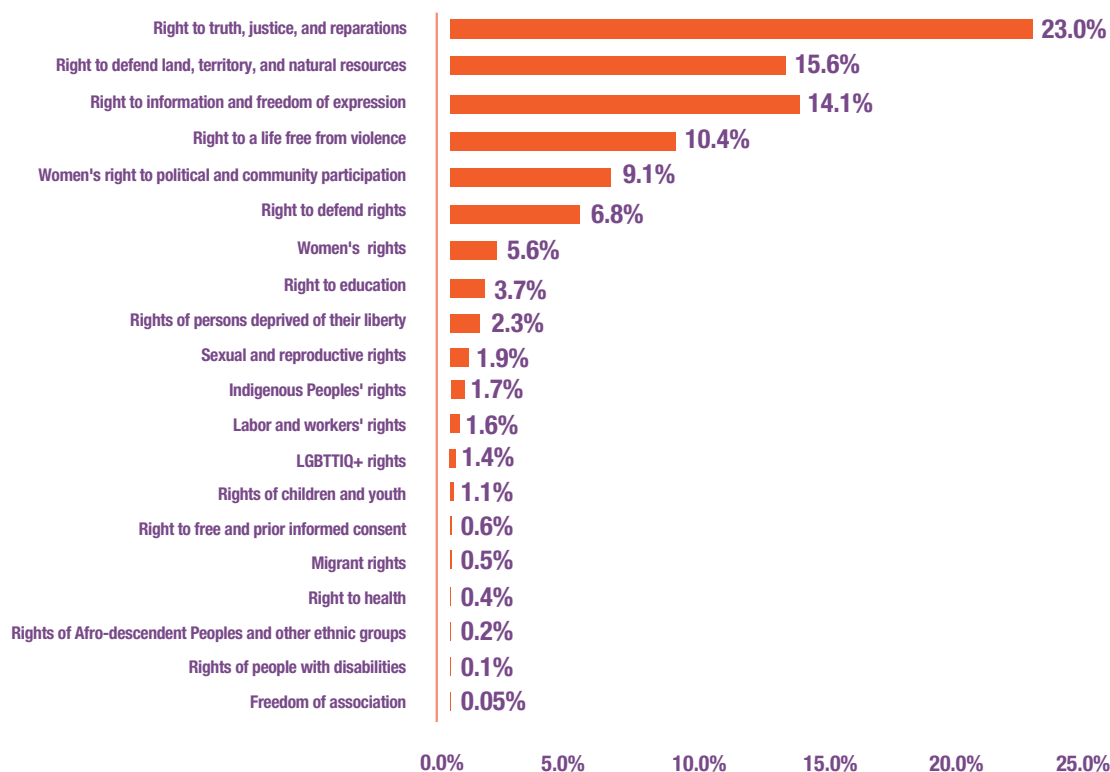
These attacks are experienced very differently depending on the diversity of struggles, territories, identities, and contexts. The structures of power overlap, creating specific experiences of struggle, but also specific expressions of violence on our bodies, communities, and political projects.

### **THEY ATTACK US BECAUSE WE DEFEND FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS AGAINST POWERFUL INTERESTS**

As protectors of life, women defenders defend a broad diversity of rights simultaneously or in parallel. Since the beginning of our registry in 2012, each case file has documented the main action in defense of human rights that the women defenders were involved in when they were attacked (Figure 7 and Table 2). Based on the analysis of the historical evolution of attacks against women defenders of these rights, we can begin to understand the regional context and the struggles in each country.

<sup>27</sup> The data from 2023 does not include information from Guatemala. It is also important to note that in the years prior to the 2020 changes in the registry system’s database, the annual sum of women defenders attacked may have double-counted those who were attacked repeatedly during that same year. This also happens with the organizations that were attacked repeatedly in the same year, prior to 2020.

**Figure 7**  
Rights defended at the time of the attack against women defenders in Mesoamerica 2012-2022



**Table 2**  
Main rights defended by Mesoamerican women defenders at the time of attack by country (2012 - 2022)

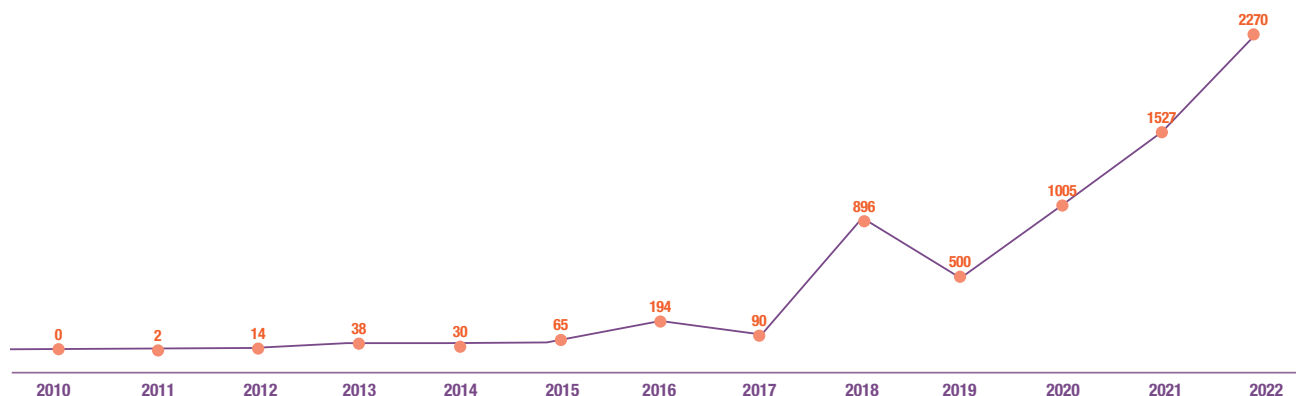
Mexico	Guatemala	Honduras	El Salvador	Nicaragua
<b>29.9%</b> Right to information and freedom of expression	<b>41.1%</b> Right to truth, justice, and reparations	<b>45.9%</b> Right to defend land, territory, and natural resources	<b>28.70%</b> Women's rights	<b>36.3%</b> Right to truth, justice, and reparations
<b>21.3%</b> Right to a life free from violence (femicide) 1	<b>14.1%</b> Women's right to political and community participation	<b>11.7%</b> Right to defend rights	<b>15%</b> Women's right to political and community participation	<b>16.9%</b> Women's right to political and community participation
<b>12.8%</b> Right to defend land, territory, and natural resources	<b>12.3%</b> Right to defend land, territory, and natural resources	<b>11.3%</b> Right to truth, justice, and reparations	<b>13.6%</b> Right to information and freedom of expression	<b>9.4%</b> Right to defend rights

## WOMEN DEFENDERS OF TRUTH, JUSTICE, AND REPARATIONS

Many women human rights defenders are dedicated to searching for disappeared persons – “the searchers”, as we call ourselves in Mexico; to demanding justice for our family members who are criminalized; to accompanying victims of human rights violations; to documenting cases of femicidal violence and other types of abuse; to promoting measures that will enable truth and memory, accountability, reparations for crimes committed in the present or past, and guarantees of no repetition in the future. Together we organize, we embody support, we heal, and we struggle against sexist justice systems so that human rights violations do not remain in impunity.

Between 2012 and 2022, we registered 6,629 attacks against women defenders who exercised or demanded the right to truth, justice, and reparations in Mesoamerica. Three out of every four of these attacks were registered from 2020 onwards. Figure 8 shows the constant and alarming increase in attacks against women who defend these rights. This is a reflection both of the historic leading role of women in the struggle for justice, and of the consolidation of the role of victims and family members of victims as political subjects that confront powerful State and non-State actors that coordinate together to preserve a system of impunity

**Figure 8**  
**Attacks on women for defending the right to truth, justice, and reparations in Mesoamerica 2012-2022**



In Nicaragua, we began to document attacks on women defenders of this right starting with the beginning of the socio-political crisis in 2018. They account for 36.3% of all attacks documented in this country between 2015 and 2022. Among these attacks, we registered stalking, surveillance of homes, systematic harassment, infringement of the right to free movement, arbitrary detentions, and judicialization aimed at women human rights defenders, members of organizations of victims or of family members of victims of State repression.

For example, we registered 192 attacks against the Mothers of April Association (AMA) between 2020 and 2022.<sup>28</sup> AMA is a key entity that emerged in the context of the socio-political crisis that the country is going through, when mothers and family members of persons killed during the April 2018 protests organized themselves to demand justice,

<sup>28</sup> IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] NICARAGUA / Desde el 15 de abril madres y familiares de personas asesinadas durante protestas de 2018 están siendo sometidas a hostigamiento policial en todo el país. 21 April 2020.

IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] NICARAGUA / Policías rodean a madres de víctimas de abril de 2018, las hostigan y les decomisan libros conmemorativos de sus hijos asesinados. 20 April 2021.

IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] NICARAGUA / Policías agreden, retienen arbitrariamente y sustraen pertenencias y materiales de difusión a integrantes de AMA que conmemoraban el 3er aniversario de la masacre del Día de las Madres. 31 May 2021.





truth, and reparations for the crimes against humanity primarily committed by police and parapolice forces aligned with the government. Most of the documented attacks occurred on commemorative dates, when members of the organization were prevented from carrying out activities to mourn and honor their family members.

In Mexico, since the December 2010 assassination of Marisela Escobedo<sup>29</sup> in the state of Chihuahua, which occurred while she was protesting the impunity in the femicide of her daughter Rubi Frayre Escobedo, we have registered hundreds of attacks against those who, in their search for justice, confront sexist courts that often collude with organized crime. Similarly, the collectives that search for disappeared persons, made up mostly of women (mothers, sisters, etc.) face a serious reality of attacks due to their role and their increasingly organized strength demanding justice, searching for their family members, demanding their return alive, and demanding that the State comply with its duty to search for the disappeared.

Mexico is the country with the highest number of disappeared persons in the Americas. According to the National Registry of Disappeared Persons, 110,042 persons were officially registered as disappeared and unaccounted for as of 15 June 2023.<sup>30</sup> The collectives of people searching for family members suffer attacks such as surveillance, death threats, physical attacks, disappearance,<sup>31</sup> and femicide. They are at serious risk due to the lack of State diligence in the investigation of these crimes since, as a result, the searchers themselves take up responsibility for investigating and providing evidence in violent territories often controlled by organized crime.

29 IM-Defensoras: [Letter from mesoamerican women defenders to Marisela Escobedo](#), 16 December 2020.

30 National Registry of Disappeared and Unaccounted for Persons (RNPDO): [Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda](#)

31 IM-Defensoras: [\[WHRD Alert\] MEXICO / Defender Angélica Armentera Quintero disappeared since March 10th after searching for her son](#), 21 March 2022



In the last three years, we have observed an increase in the number and gravity of attacks against women searching for relatives of disappeared persons. Just in 2022, we registered 406 attacks against women defenders of the right to truth and justice. That same year, we registered the killings of five women defenders who were searchers: Ana Luisa Guarduño of the Ana Karen Vive collective and the Morelos State Victims' Front;<sup>32</sup> Brenda Jazmin Beltran Jaime, collective member of Women Warrior Searchers in Cajeme, Sonora;<sup>33</sup> Rosario Lilian Rodriguez Barraza, member of the Hearts without Justice collective in Sinaloa;<sup>34</sup> Esmeralda Gallardo of the Voice of the Disappeared collective in Puebla;<sup>35</sup> and Maria Carmela Vazquez Ramirez of the Disappeared Persons in Penjamo collective (Guanajuato).<sup>36</sup>

In Guatemala, attacks on women defenders of justice, truth, and reparations registered by UDEFEGUA account for 41.9% of all attacks documented between 2012 and 2022. Just this past year, 1,400 attacks were registered against women defenders of these rights. Standing out are the attacks against the women defenders who organized to seek justice for the girls killed in the 8 March 2017 massacre at the Virgen de la Asuncion children's home in Guatemala, when 41 girls and adolescents were killed and another 15 were left with permanent injuries while they were under the protection of the State.<sup>37</sup> Family members of the victims, along with the 56 Hurt Us collective and the 8 Tijax collective, have lead the filing of complaints in the courts. A legal proceeding is still underway against several public officials allegedly responsible for the crimes of culpable homicide, abuse of authority, breach of duty, and mistreatment of minors. As a result, the

32 IM-Defensoras. [WHRD Alert] MEXICO / Human rights defender Ana Luisa Garduño killed in Temixco, Morelos. 1 February 2022.

33 IM-Defensoras. [WHRD Alert] MEXICO / Assailants Kill Defender Brenda Jazmin Beltran of Women Warrior Searchers in Cajeme, Sonora. 25 July 2022.

34 IM-Defensoras. [WHRD Alert] MEXICO / In Sinaloa assailants kill defender Rosario Lilian Rodriguez, a searching mother of the 'Hearts without Justice' collective. 22 September 2022.

35 IM-Defensoras. [Alerta Defensoras] MÉXICO / Asesinan en Puebla a Esmeralda Gallardo, defensora buscadora del Colectivo Voz de los Desaparecidos. 7 October 2022.

36 IM-Defensoras. [WHRD Alert] MEXICO / Assailants in Guanajuato shoot and kill defender and searching mother Carmela Vázquez, of the Disappeared Persons in Pénjamo Collective. 10 November 2022.

37 IM-Defensoras. #WHRDAlert GUATEMALA / Mistreatment, Sexual exploitation, Extrajudicial execution and femicide against The Interns of the Virgin of the Assumption Safe Home. 11 March 2017.



women defenders who are part of these proceedings have been persecuted, intimidated,<sup>38</sup> and threatened with death.<sup>39</sup> Two of the mothers who demanded justice for their daughters' deaths were violently killed by unknown assailants. Gloria Perez y Perez, along with her 13-year-old daughter, Nury Leon Perez, in 2018,<sup>40</sup> and Maria Elizabeth Ramirez in 2021.

Strategies used against women defenders of the right to truth and justice in Guatemala are also linked to a series of attacks that include smear campaigns, defamation, criminalization, and persecution. In recent years, these actions have targeted the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and its members,<sup>41</sup> as well as justice system personnel who have fought against corruption and impunity.

In relation to Honduras, we observed that collective attacks for defending the right to truth and justice are intertwined with other struggles. For example, they are connected to the defense of the right to a life free from violence in the femicide of Keyla Martinez after she was arbitrarily detained by the national police,<sup>42</sup> and the subsequent systematic attacks<sup>43</sup> and repression using bullets and tear gas<sup>44</sup> against her family and other sister defenders in their demand for justice. They also intersect with the defense of land and territory in the case of the fire at the Berta Vive feminist camp set by members and supporters of the Partido Nacional.<sup>45</sup> The camp was organized by the National Network of Women Human Rights Defenders in Honduras, COPINH, the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH), and various organizations and communities in struggle to demand justice for the assassination of Berta Caceres.

## **WOMEN DEFENDERS OF LAND, TERRITORY, AND COMMON RESOURCES**

Women defenders of land and territory defend both our right to remain or to reclaim our territories and our right to safeguard the network of life – protecting and defending the rights of nature and ensuring the protection of water, forests, and animals. Defending life also entails defending our means of reproducing life and our cosmologies, which – far from capitalist accumulation and exploitation – establish other connections and ways of relating with the territory and nature. We also defend a way of understanding territory not as a geographic place or for human exploitation, but as a place where our ancestors rest and where we find our identities and our roots.

The majority of women defenders of land and territory who were attacked are Indigenous and Afro-descendent women who live in rural areas; we work at the grassroots, and we have been excluded from property and decisions about the future of our territories.<sup>46</sup> Faced with nation-states that perpetuate colonial policies to annihilate the cosmologies, cultures, and languages of Indigenous Peoples and other communities, Indigenous and Afro-descendent women defenders protect our wisdoms, our right to autonomy and cultural identity, our territories, and natural resources. Women defenders of land and territory collectively resist and denounce the consequences of the dispossession and death brought about by the extractivist capitalist system, because we are convinced that this is crucial in order to protect and sustain life in all its expressions.

Our tireless struggles have yielded concrete results, such as the world's first law banning metal mining, approved in El

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38 IM-Defensoras: [\[WHRD ALERT\] GUATEMALA / Persecution, threats, and theft of work equipment belonging to defender and communicator María Laura González following her coverage of the Case of Our Lady of the Assumption Orphanage](#). 20 January 2023.

39 IM-Defensoras: [\[WHRD Alert\] GUATEMALA / Violent home break-in, threats, and attacks against children of Elsa Siquín, mother of one of the 56 victims of Virgin of the Assumption Safe Home Massacre](#). 23 March 2021.

40 Prensa Libre. [Condenan el asesinato de la familia de una niña víctima del incendio en Hogar Seguro](#). 9 July 2018.

41 IM-Defensoras: [#UrgentAlert GUATEMALA / Government announces immediate rescission of accord signed with UN to create CICIG](#). 8 January 2019.

42 IM-Defensoras: [\[PRONUNCIAMIENTO\] Red Nacional de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos en Honduras: Sobre lo que está pasando en el juicio a Juan Orlando Hernández](#). 8 February 2021.

43 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] HONDURAS / Agresiones sistemáticas contra la familia de Keyla Martínez](#). 18 April 2021.

44 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] Policía Nacional reprime con balas y gas lacrimógeno a manifestantes por femicidio de Keyla Patricia Martínez](#). 8 February 2021.

45 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] HONDURAS / Miembros y simpatizantes del Partido Nacional prenden fuego al Campamento Feminista Viva Berta](#). 17 March 2022.

46 United Nations General Assembly Human Rights Council: *Situation of women human rights defenders. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders*. 2019.



Salvador in 2017.<sup>47</sup> Another example is the 2022 repeal of the death and dispossession project represented by the Employment and Economic Development Zones (ZEDEs) in Honduras, as a response to demands voiced by a strong popular and feminist social movement.<sup>48</sup> Also inspiring is the 2022 cancellation of the Gunaa Sicaru wind park mega-project in Mexico, thanks to the collective struggle of the Zapotec community of Unión Hidalgo that, among other strategies, included transnational litigation in civil courts in Paris (France) against the company Electricité de France (EDF).<sup>49</sup> However, confronting the economic interests behind the destruction and grabbing of our lands and territories have also meant experiencing multiple forms of very painful violence.

**Between 2012 and 2022, we registered 4,504 attacks against women defenders and organizations that defend land, territory, and natural resources in Mesoamerica, accounting for 15.6% of all attacks at the regional level documented in the period.** In Honduras, 45.9% of all attacks registered during that period were against women defenders of land and territory (2,488), making it the type of right defended with the most documented attacks in the country. Attacks against women defenders of land and territory registered in Mexico and Guatemala during those years account for 12.8% and 12% of attacks documented in the respective countries.

**Between 2012 and 2022, we also documented 558 attacks linked to actions in defense of the rights of Indigenous and Afro-descendent Peoples and other ethnic groups** in the region, whose struggles at times intersect with the defense of land and territory.

**“In every territory where there are Indigenous and Afro-descendent people with the planet’s last resources, women defenders receive direct attacks for defending land and territory... This is to do with an extermination because to advance the extractive model, they have to remove those who care and protect it.” Woman Defender from Honduras.<sup>50</sup>**

The 2023 Global Witness report notes that Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua are among the 10 countries worldwide with the highest number of killings for defending land and the environment.<sup>51</sup> The State of the Region affirmed that 80.2% of the socio-environmental conflicts in Central America registered in the 1990-2020 period were connected to the extraction of minerals and materials used in construction; conflicts over land use related to activities such as agriculture, fisheries, livestock, and forestry; water management, fossil fuel use; and climate/energy justice.<sup>52</sup> The Global Atlas of Environmental Justice documented 211 cases of environmental conflicts in Mexico, 31 in Guatemala, 24 in Honduras, 12 in Nicaragua, and 7 in El Salvador.<sup>53</sup> A large percentage of the Mesoamerican territory is under concession for mining exploitation: 1.6% in Honduras, 4.84% in Guatemala,<sup>54</sup> 11% in Mexico<sup>55</sup> and 23% in Nicaragua.<sup>56</sup>

Given this context, our region stands out for attacks perpetrated during collective actions organized by women defenders and communities who maintain their struggles alive in the face of extractivism’s advance on agribusiness, mining, and

47 IM-Defensoras: SORORIDAD / #LeyAprobada #ElSalvadorLibreDeMineríaMetálica

48 IM-Defensoras: [PRONUNCIAMIENTO] Red Nacional de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos en Honduras ante extradición de JOH y derogación de las ZEDES.

49 ProDESC: Set back to EDF in Mexico! The Zapotec community of Unión Hidalgo and ProDESC achieve the definitive cancellation of the wind park megaproject “Gunaa Sicaru”. 2 June 2022.

50 Testimony of a woman defender from the National Network of Women Human Rights Defenders in Honduras, Melissa Cardoza. [Own translation.]

51 Global Witness: Standing firm: The Land and Environmental Defenders on the frontlines of the climate crisis. September 2023.

52 Estado de la región: Conflictividad ambiental: una aproximación para el análisis de las presiones sobre los ecosistemas y sus recursos. 2021. ERCA-2021-Cap-7-Conflictividad-socioambiental.pdf (naglobalnetwork.org)

53 EJAtlas – Global Atlas of Environmental Justice. <https://ejatlas.org/>

54 Martínez Espinoza, M.I., 2017. El extractivismo minero en América Latina: planteamientos, paralelismos y presunciones desde el caso de Guatemala. In *Perfiles Latinoamericanos*, 27 (53).

55 La Jornada: “Concesionado a mineras, 11% del país hasta por 100 años”. 20 May 2021.

56 Fundación del Río: Nicaragua y su oro perverso. 14 July 2022.



logging. The collective character of these attacks relates to the fact that defending land and the commons cannot be individualized,<sup>57</sup> because it is impossible to defend territory without community and collectivity. Thus, many of the attacks that we register – such as the militarization of territories and evictions – involve generalized violence against the community as a whole, including against minors and elders, among other vulnerable groups.

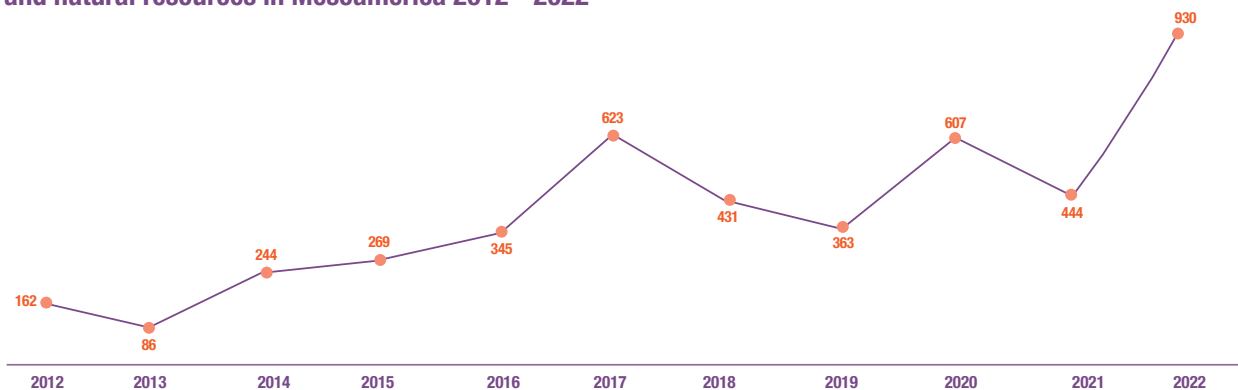
Figure 9 shows the evolution of attacks against women defenders of land and territory between 2012 and 2022. The year 2017 stands out for the significant increase in attacks against women defenders in Honduras who opposed mega-projects and demanded justice for the assassination of our sister Berta Cáceres, a Lenca Indigenous community leader who resisted against the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam project and worked to protect the Gualcarque River.<sup>58</sup> The assassination of Berta Cáceres marked a turning point in Honduras and the rest of the region, giving visibility both to the leadership exercised by Indigenous women against capitalist extractivism, and to the different expressions of violence and impunity they face. Since then, through our registry system, we saw in the messages conveyed by the attacks against women defenders of land and territory the trends and patterns that seek – without success – to extinguish their struggles.<sup>59</sup> From the assassination of Berta Cáceres in 2016 until December 2022, 22 women defenders of land and territory were killed in Mesoamerica: 5 in Mexico, 4 in Guatemala, 2 in El Salvador, 9 in Honduras, and 2 in Nicaragua.

57 Vázquez, E. 2019. ¿Defensoras o comunidades en resistencia? Los procesos colectivos de defensa territorial frente a la individualización del “defensor/a ambiental”. In Informe de la Ruta por la verdad y la justicia para la naturaleza y los pueblos. Acción Ecológica.

58 IM-Defensoras: #WHRDA!ert HONDURAS / MURDERED Berta Cáceres. 3 March 2016.

59 IM-Defensoras: Trends on Women Defenders of Land, Territory, and Justice. 2021.

**Figure 9**  
**Attacks on women for defending land, territory,  
 and natural resources in Mesoamerica 2012 - 2022**



Later, with the start of the COVID-19 syndemic in 2020, we noted a worrying increase in attacks against women defenders of land and territory in every country in the region. Although with different nuances in each country, this reflected the context of growing authoritarian policies that used the health emergency as a pretext to impose repressive measures, restrict rights, and deepen militarization processes. Thus, movement restrictions for human rights defenders enabled the advance of dispossession policies against women's bodies and territories.

In 2022, we identified a new regional surge in attacks against women defenders of land and territory; this time, collective attacks played an important role. From the 492 attacks registered in 2022, 399 occurred in Honduras, accounting for 82% of all attacks registered in the region, and more than twice the number of attacks that Honduras registered the year before (2021). The attacks against the Garifuna Peoples are emblematic. The Garifuna Peoples have faced killings, forced disappearances,<sup>60</sup> arson in their ancestral healing centers, arbitrary detentions, institutionalized racism, and attacks on their spirituality,<sup>61</sup> among others – as part of the attempted grabbing of their ancestral lands.

### **WOMEN DEFENDERS OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION**

According to the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, freedom of expression “is a fundamental and inalienable right of all individuals. Additionally, it is an indispensable requirement for the very existence of a democratic society.”<sup>62</sup> Women who defend the right to information and freedom of expression work day after day to ensure that people have access to truthful, diverse, and relevant information, and to safeguard the ability to express opinions, ideas, and thoughts freely and without discrimination. This includes participating and expressing opinions in public debates, both in face-to-face and online spaces, as well as demanding respect for the right to search for, receive, and disseminate information – a right that women journalists and communications workers exercise and defend on a daily basis. Women defenders of these rights play a crucial role in preserving critical public debate that can help identify patterns, those responsible for human rights violations and their accomplices. They also make an essential contribution to holding governments and corporations accountable. In a region where attempts are made to silence all forms of resistance, the work of defending freedom of expression contributes to creating an environment where we can listen to diverse voices located at the margins of hegemonic narratives.

According to Reporters Without Borders, Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador are dangerous

60 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] HONDURAS / Criminalizan a defensoras garifunas tras detenerlas en violento e ilegal desalojo de la comunidad de Punta Gorda, Roatán. 9 November 2022.

61 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] HONDURAS / Racismo institucionalizado contra defensoras y defensores de la tierra ancestral de Punta Gorda. 25 November 2022.

62 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR): Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression. 20 October 2000. \_

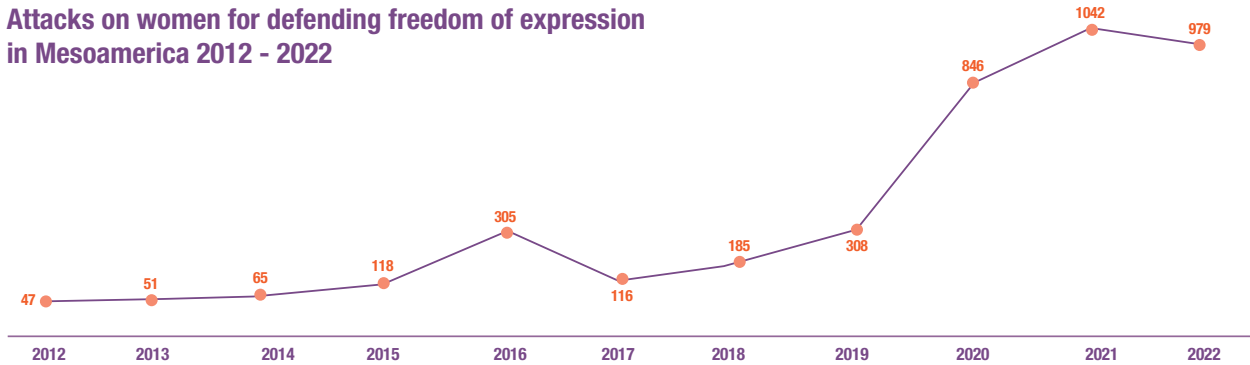




countries for practicing journalism in Latin America.<sup>63</sup> Their ranking shows that Honduras, since the 2009 coup d'état, became the most dangerous country for journalists in the Americas. In Nicaragua, the closure and criminalization of communications media has forced journalists and communications workers not aligned with the government to work underground or from exile. In Mexico, freedom of expression faces media concentration and collusion between authorities from different levels of government and organized crime. Security for journalism in Guatemala has degraded in recent years, with particular concern for criminal persecution and censure of journalists and media that investigate corruption and human rights violations.<sup>64</sup> In El Salvador, since Nayib Bukele became president in 2019, journalism that does not toe the party line has suffered harassment, and press coverage that is critical of public security forces and gangs has been criminalized.

**Between 2012 and 2022, we documented 4,062 attacks for defending the right to freedom of expression in the region, accounting for 14.1% of attacks registered in Mesoamerica during the period.** Figure 10 shows the evolution of registered attacks against women defenders of freedom of expression.

**Figure 10**  
**Attacks on women for defending freedom of expression**  
**in Mesoamerica 2012 - 2022**



63 Reporters Without Borders: Global Score.

64 The most emblematic case is that of Jose Ruben Zamora, founder of *El Periódico*, who has been imprisoned since mid-2022.

In Mexico, **attacks against women defenders of freedom of expression account for 29.9% of all attacks documented in this country between 2012 and 2022.** We were able to document these figures thanks to our alliance with the Mexican civil society organization Women's Communication and Information (CIMAC),<sup>65</sup> which contributes information to our registry of attacks. The figure above is consistent with the fact that 41.2% of the women defenders attacked between 2020 and 2022 in Mexico were engaged in journalism and communications activities (Table 1). During these three years, we identified 1,871 attacks against women defenders of the right to information and freedom of expression in this country. Standing out were attacks against women journalists who cover political matters, denounce corruption, and expose political actors linked to or in collusion with organized crime, especially at the local and community level where everyone knows each other and attacks are more direct. Journalists covering the mass feminist marches for women's right to a life free from violence were also attacked. Additionally, we registered cases of women journalists who are threatened and accused of having links to organized crime.

Starting in 2020 with the global health crisis, we registered much higher numbers of attacks against women defenders of freedom of expression, hitting its highest mark in 2021, when we registered the highest-ever number of attacks against women defenders of this right in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. We identified a pattern that explains this: the approval and implementation of laws that criminalize the work of journalists and communications workers, such as the cyber-crimes laws in Nicaragua and El Salvador and the Wiretap Law in the latter country. Furthermore, in El Salvador, the Legislative Assembly controlled by President Bukele adopted a law on rewards to combat impunity for acts of terrorism, as well as regulatory reforms to the Criminal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure, and the Special Law against Acts of Terrorism, which enable the criminalization of human rights defenders, journalists, and media outlets that reproduce messages and communications that originate or are presumed to originate from gangs.

### **WOMEN DEFENDERS OF WOMEN'S RIGHT TO A LIFE FREE FROM VIOLENCE**

Women who defend women's right to a life free from violence work non-stop to prevent, combat, provide medical and psychological care, support, denounce, and accompany the search of justice regarding all expressions of gender-based violence against women, girls, and adolescents. The Convention of Belem do Para defines violence against women as "any act or conduct, based on gender, which causes death or physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, whether in the public or the private sphere."<sup>66</sup> Thus, defending this right is not limited to physical or sexual violence but also includes less visible forms of violence, such as psychological, emotional, spiritual, and economic.

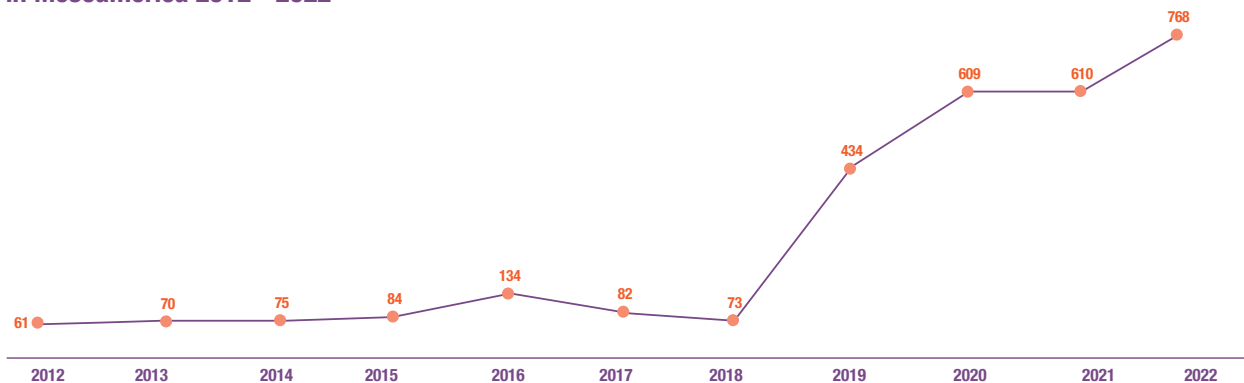
All of these forms of violence are expressions of gender-biased power inequalities structurally and historically perpetrated by the patriarchal system. Thus, these women defenders confront both the risks arising from the assailants of the victims they defend, as well as risks from State and non-State actors that seek to protect these assailants and maintain the patriarchal system's order and all the privileges that it sustains.

In total, **we registered 3,000 attacks against women defenders and organizations that defend women's right to a life free from violence. This number accounts for 10.4% of all documented attacks in the region during the same period.**

<sup>65</sup> Comunicación e Información de la Mujer A.C. (CIMAC): [CIMAC Webpage](#) [Facebook profile](#) and [X profile](#).

<sup>66</sup> OAS: [Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women, Convention of Belem do Para. 1994.](#)

**Figure 11**  
**Attacks on women for defending a life free from violence**  
**in Mesoamerica 2012 - 2022**



The numbers for femicides and violence against women, girls, and adolescents in our region are alarming. In 2022, Honduras reported 309 femicides, which is the highest rate in all of Latin America (6 for every 100,000 women).<sup>67</sup> That same year, Guatemala and El Salvador registered 91 and 53 femicides respectively.<sup>68</sup> In Mexico, official records identified 976 femicides and indicated that states with a strong presence of organized crime are the ones with the highest increase in femicides. In Nicaragua, although official records only identified 19 femicides in 2022, Catholics for the Right to Decide (CDD)<sup>69</sup> has been documenting and denouncing the increase in the number of women killed since the beginning of the socio-political crisis in 2018: 61 femicides in 2018, 63 in 2019, 71 in 2020, 71 in 2021, 68 in 2022, and 50 just in the first half of 2023.

Anger and indignation at the atrocious cases of femicide in Latin America in recent years has led to the participation of thousands of women defenders in mass mobilizations to demand justice, organized by the feminist movement under the slogan 'Ni una menos' [Not one less]. Related to this, we documented collective attacks during feminist mobilizations against femicides and gender-based violence.<sup>70</sup>

**In Mexico, attacks against women who defend the right to a life free from violence are particularly critical, accounting for 21.3% of all attacks documented in this country between 2012 and 2022. Just in 2022, we registered 519 attacks in Mexico against these women defenders, most of which were collective attacks in the context of mobilizations organized by the feminist movement in different states of the Republic.**

Some of these collective attacks took place during feminist protests that were repressed by the municipal police, such as the shots fired in the air and repression against those who demanded justice in the femicide of Bianca Alejandrina Lorenzana Alvarado in Benito Juarez, Cancun.<sup>71</sup> Another example is the events documented during the 8 March 2022 demonstration in Morelia, Michoacan, when the municipal police used excessive force attacking women and girls, resulting in at least 30 journalists and demonstrators injured and at least 13 women arbitrarily detained, 5 of whom were minors.<sup>72</sup>

67 Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean

68 Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean

69 *Católicas por el derecho a decidir*, Nicaragua

70 IM-Defensoras: *March: the most dangerous month for women defenders*, 4 May 2021.

71 IM-Defensoras: *[Alerta Defensoras] MÉXICO / Policía municipal de Cancún reprime con armas de fuego protesta feminista que exigía justicia por el feminicidio de la joven Bianca Alejandrina Lorenzana Alvarado y a periodistas que cubrían el acto*, 10 November 2020

72 IM-Defensoras: *[WHRD Alert] MÉXICO / Local and state police forces repress women and girls during the 8M march in Morelia, Michoacán*, 10 March 2022.



## WOMEN DEFENDERS OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

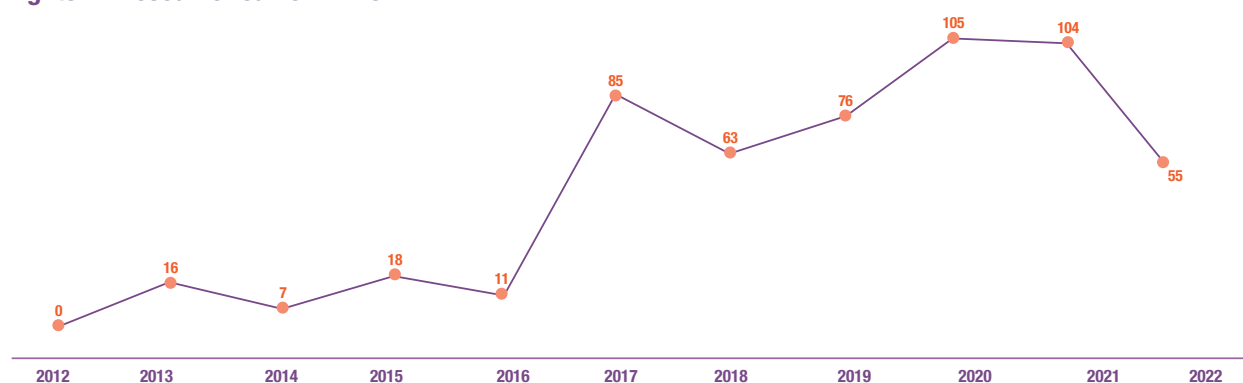
Women defenders of sexual and reproductive rights promote and accompany women and LGBTTTIQ+ persons to guarantee access to their rights to sexuality and free and informed autonomy over their bodies without discrimination, coercion, or barriers due to their socio-economic condition, age, sex-gender identity, or ethnicity. Sexual and reproductive rights are connected to several dimensions of the right to health: access to care with dignity, comprehensive sexual education, the struggle against obstetric violence, planning, and access to voluntary termination of pregnancy.

The legal restrictions to and criminalization of abortion access in the region places our health and our lives at risk. Three of the six countries worldwide where abortion is totally penalized are in Mesoamerica: Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Therapeutic abortion is available in Guatemala, but anti-rights groups have been promoting the “Law to Protect Life and Family” since 2017, which seeks to tighten controls and increase penalties for abortion. Hand in hand with the advance of conservative discourses and the interference of religious hierarchies in public affairs, political party representatives with different ideological leanings in every country of the region have promoted policies to “protect family values” that affect the ability of women, girls, and adolescents to fully exercise their sexual and reproductive rights.

We face contexts in which this type of rights are not yet recognized as human rights; and where various groups are openly seeking to restrict them – such as fundamentalist and traditionalist churches and ultraconservative groups, behind which corporations and economic powers often hide. These actors seek to advance their agendas by increasing their influence in political power and by promoting violence against us and against our organizations, attacking our lives and the social groups with whom we challenge the sexist patriarchal structures that are still in force in our countries.

**Between 2012 and 2022, we documented 540 attacks for defending sexual and reproductive rights. The following Figure (12) shows its evolution in time.**

**Figure 12**  
**Attacks on women for defending sexual and reproductive rights in Mesoamerica 2012 - 2022**



Emblematic attacks against organizations and women who defend reproductive rights include smear and stigmatization campaigns involving slander, hate speech, and incitement to violence promoted at the local and international levels by anti-rights organizations that are part of the “40 Days for Life” campaign in Mexico<sup>73</sup> and El Salvador.<sup>74</sup> In 2018, Mexican woman defender Sandra Peniche suffered an attempted homicide when an assailant attacked her with a knife. This attack took place four days after Sandra denounced harassment by municipal police officers following a complaint filed

73 IM-Defensoras: [CARTA PÚBLICA / Red Nacional de Defensoras de DDHH en México solicita intervención del gobierno de Yucatán ante expresiones fundamentalistas contra defensoras de derechos sexuales y reproductivos](#). 14 February 2018.

74 IM-Defensoras: [\[EL SALVADOR\] Pronunciamiento de la Red de Defensoras ante agresiones contra defensoras de derechos humanos](#). 19 October 2020.

by conservative groups who, as part of the aforementioned campaign, gathered with a hostile attitude to “pray” for the life of the unborn in front of the Humanitarian Services in Sexual and Reproductive Health Clinic, which Sandra presided over.<sup>75</sup> In later years, even with protection measures granted starting in 2018 by the National Mechanism to Protect Human Rights Defenders and Journalists, Sandra Peniche suffered repeated acts of harassment and intimidation, perpetrated by private individuals and by Yucatan municipal and state authorities.<sup>76</sup> Sadly, our compañera died due to health problems on 14 December 2022, without having her right to justice guaranteed through a judicial process that would address all actors who were materially and intellectually responsible for her attacks.<sup>77</sup>

In 2014, we sounded the alarm about attacks and incitement to violence against the Feminist Collective for Local Development and the Citizen Association for the Decriminalization of Therapeutic Abortion in El Salvador. These attacks took place in the context of their “Liberty for the 17” campaign, which called for clemency for the 17 imprisoned Salvadoran women who had abortions due to obstetric complications that put their lives and health at serious risk – some of these women faced prison sentences of up to 40 years.<sup>78</sup>

Other attacks on women defenders of sexual and reproductive rights in El Salvador occurred in the context of the demand for justice and the landmark judgment by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights condemning the State of El Salvador for the detention, conviction, and subsequent death of “Manuela”, a woman who was sentenced to 30 years in prison on charges of homicide after suffering an obstetric emergency, and who died of lymphatic cancer while deprived of her liberty. In 2020, one day before the “10 Years Without Manuela” online forum, we registered digital attacks on the web site of the Citizen Association for the Decriminalization of Therapeutic Abortion, which experienced more than 13,000 sabotage attempts seeking to make the page crash.<sup>79</sup> In 2021, in the context of the public hearing on the “Manuela Case” at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the anti-rights organization Fundacion Vida SV published various messages perpetuating stigmatization, re-victimization, and criminalization – both of Manuela and of those who litigated and accompanied the case.<sup>80</sup> All those attacks aim to discredit women defenders and organizations for their work and commitment to defending the rights of impoverished women in El Salvador. Due to the absolute criminalization of abortion in this country, these women face unjust prison sentences for cases related to their reproductive health or other obstetric problems.

## **WOMEN DEFENDERS OF THE RIGHTS OF LGBTTTIQ+ PEOPLE**

Women who defend the rights of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transvestite, transgender, transsexual, intersexual, queer, and other dissidences from patriarchal heteronormativity (LGBTTTIQ+) struggle to guarantee equal rights and treatment for people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions outside the heterosexual and cisgender hegemony. This includes those of us who advocate and mobilize for the recognition of our rights through anti-discrimination laws, marriage equality laws, and gender identity laws that protect and recognize trans persons. It also includes those of us who fight for visibility and fair positive representation of sexual diversity in communications media and decision-making spaces; those of us who carry out community actions against discrimination, stigmatization, and exclusion; and those of us who offer support and protection services to LGBTTTIQ+ persons and their families.

Honduras and Guatemala have the highest homicide rates of LGBTTTIQ+ persons in relation to their population size.<sup>81</sup>

75 IM-Defensoras: [#AlertaDefensoras MÉXICO / Intento de homicidio contra Sandra Peniche, defensora de los #DSR en Yucatán](#). 13 March 2018.

76 IM-Defensoras: [\[WHRDAlert\] MÉXICO / Yucatan authorities and police harass feminist defender Dr. Sandra Peniche Quintal](#). 26 April 2020.

77 IM-Defensoras: [\[CARTA PÚBLICA\] MÉXICO / Preocupación e indignación por la forma en que se condujo el proceso judicial que sigue nuestra compañera Sandra Peniche, víctima de tentativa de homicidio en 2018](#). 31 October 2019.

78 IM-Defensoras: [#WHRDAlert EL SALVADOR / Feminist Collective for Local Development and Citizen Association for the Decriminalization of Therapeutic Abortion, Ethics and Eugenics](#). 2 October 2015.

79 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras SV\] La página web de la Agrupación Ciudadana por la Despenalización del Aborto El Salvador, tuvo más de 13,000 intentos de sabotaje para dar de baja al sitio](#). 4 May 2020.

80 IM-Defensoras: [\[WHRD Alert\] EL SALVADOR / Anti-rights groups intensify stigmatization and hate speech campaigns against feminists and women defenders accompanying the “Manuela” case](#). 19 April 2021.

81 Sin Violencia LGBTI: Report 2022: Being LGBTI+ in the most violent region in the world. August 2023

Mexico is the only country in the region that recognizes marriage equality, which is recognized in every state since October 2022. Likewise, several Mexican states recognize the right to gender identity and allow the change of gender in official documents. In contrast, there are no specific national anti-discrimination laws regarding sexual orientation and gender identity in any Central American country.

To defend these rights is to confront the huge challenge of growing conservative, fundamentalist, and trans-excluding discourses in the region. In 2022, Guatemala was declared the “Ibero-American capital of life and family”, and Congress approved an ultraconservative bill that, in addition to imposing tougher penalties for abortion, labeled LGBTTTIQ+ persons as sick and sought to ban marriage equality and sexual diversity education in schools. Days after its approval, the president was forced to veto the law due to pressure from social movements and the international community. Meanwhile in El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele made it clear that the Legislative Assembly will not be discussing any proposal related to LGBTTTIQ+ rights.

**Between 2012 and 2022, we documented 404 attacks against persons and organizations that defend the rights of LGBTTTIQ+ people. We also registered 219 attacks against 49 transgender defenders in the region between 2020 and 2022.** For over a decade, we have documented multiple types of violence against women defenders of sexual diversity rights: smear campaigns, online hate, death threats,<sup>82</sup> physical violence,<sup>83</sup> arbitrary detentions,<sup>84</sup> and killings. **The situation of risk for trans defenders is particularly alarming: 40% of the killings we registered in the region between 2020 and 2022 were transfemicides.**

### **WOMEN DEFENDERS OF WOMEN’S POLITICAL AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION**

Women who defend women’s political and community participation defend and promote the right to recognize and guarantee equality for women to engage in and influence political, social, and community decision-making at all levels of society – including electoral processes, policy-making and implementation, as well as conducting activities and taking up roles in our local communities.<sup>85</sup> We are women defenders of political participation because this is a right in itself, and because it is a means for our struggles for other rights.

The struggle to ensure that women’s voices, demands, and perspectives be taken into account confronts barriers set by patriarchal mandates. These mandates state that family and home are spaces with less social value and that these are women’s “natural” place; meanwhile, they overvalue public spaces and designate them as a sphere of male control. We see this division and hierarchy between the public and the private as a false social construction. Thus, women defenders defend women’s right to political participation in our homes, our communities, and in local and national decision-making spaces.

In our struggle for the right to political participation, we face different forms of violence that are specific because we are women defenders, such as attacks with sexual connotations or challenging our credibility. We are even attacked by persons close to us, by our comrades in our social movements or our communities.

**Between 2012 and 2022, we were able to document 2,614 attacks against women who defend women’s political and community participation in Mesoamerica.** Of these attacks, 2,198 were registered in the last three years, which reflects the worrying situation in the region, where we can observe that while the structural conditions of inequality and violence are maintained, new forms of aggression and limitations to political rights are being consolidated by governments that impose authoritarian policies.

<sup>82</sup> IM-Defensoras [Alerta Defensoras] EL SALVADOR / Organizaciones y colectivos trans denuncian amenazas de muerte e incitación a crímenes de odio contra mujeres trans. 14 August 2021.

<sup>83</sup> IM-Defensoras: #WHRDAIert HONDURAS / Hate crime and brutal physical attack against Alejandra Vega, LGBT rights defender in San Pedro Sula. 19 November 2019.

<sup>84</sup> IM-Defensoras: [ALERTA URGENTE] NICARAGUA / La policía detiene de manera arbitraria a la joven activista transgénero Celia Cruz, de la isla de Ometepe. 22 April 2020.

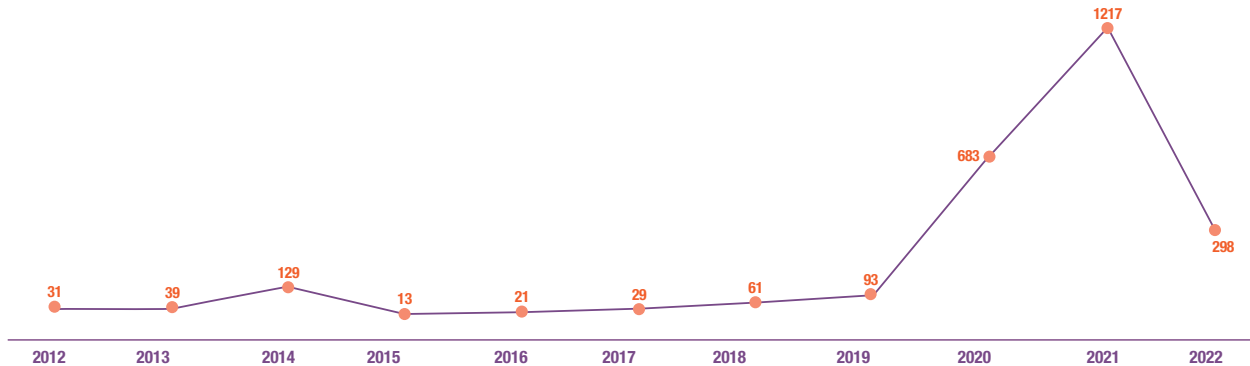
<sup>85</sup> Our Registry of Attacks does not document attacks against candidates or public officials, but against women defenders (who may or may not belong to political parties) who promote women’s right to participate in social and political decision-making at the local and/or national level.



More than half the attacks against women defenders of the right to political and community participation in the region were registered in Nicaragua (1,475). These attacks were particularly felt with the beginning of the socio-political crisis of 2018, and then further intensified as of 2020, during the false electoral processes for president in 2021 and for municipal governments in 2022. The strategies of repression by the the totalitarian State led by Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo<sup>86</sup> against any attempt of political participation not aligned with their interests has focused on harassment, surveillance, migratory repression, arbitrary detentions, short-term forced disappearances, and criminalization for the crimes of conspiracy to undermine national integrity and spreading fake news. We see that the prolonged political crisis in Nicaragua that began in 2018 has now become a process of consolidating a totalitarian State. Just between 2020 and 2022, we documented 607 attacks for defending the right of people deprived of their liberty in Nicaragua, specifically of women defenders who are political prisoners. Women political prisoners in Nicaragua – many of whom defend women's right to political participation – have faced psychological torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment including isolation; restrictions to visits from their family members, including their children; withholding of food or food lacking in nutrients; lack of adequate care for chronic illnesses; sensory disturbances and lack of warm clothing; among other violations of their rights.<sup>87</sup>

Meanwhile in El Salvador, in 2021, we registered 185 attacks against women defenders who defend women's right to political participation, marking it as the year with the greatest number of attacks on women defenders of this right in the country. In that year, we registered police surveillance and intimidation, attempted arrests with the use of violence, and the deployment of the army during the 8 March demonstration,<sup>88</sup> as well as smear campaigns, stigmatization, and death threats on social media in the context of the September demonstrations against President Nayib Bukele's authoritarian drift.<sup>89</sup>

**Figure 13**  
**Attacks on women for defending the right to political and community participation in Mesoamerica 2012 - 2022**



86 In 2023, the repression strategies added the tactic of banishment, stripping of the nationality of 222 people, among them 33 women, and the subsequent accusation, stripping of nationality and confiscation of assets of 94 people – including 23 women human rights defenders, journalists, and activists.

87 IM-Defensoras. [WHRD Alert] NICARAGUA / Feminist political prisoners face torture and abuse. 16 December 2021.

88 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] EL SALVADOR / Organizaciones feministas enfrentan el 8M en un contexto de hostigamiento y difamación. 7 March 2021.

89 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] EL SALVADOR / Acoso, estigmatización, descalificativos y amenazas de muerte en redes sociales por protestar contra el autoritarismo presidencial. 7 September 2021.

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# WHO ATTACKS US?

Le dije que  
**NO**

quería  
y  
Siguió  
¡VIOLADOR!

In this chapter, we take a deeper look at the actors that directly and indirectly attack us in order to protect their privileges and sustain the current system of death. The following table provides a breakdown by country of the actors identified as our main assailants between 2012 and 2022.

**Table 3**  
**Main perpetrators of attacks against women defenders by country, 2012-2022**

Mexico	Guatemala	Honduras	El Salvador	Nicaragua
<b>37.1%</b> Unknown	<b>29.6%</b> Unknown	<b>26.9%</b> Police	<b>22.4%</b> Public authorities	<b>38.0%</b> Police
<b>18.5%</b> Public authorities	<b>19.6%</b> Public authorities	<b>15.5%</b> Military	<b>17.6%</b> Unknown	<b>18.7%</b> Public authorities
<b>16.4%</b> Police	<b>9%</b> Corporations/ businesses	<b>11.9%</b> Public authorities	<b>8.7%</b> Persons close to the woman defender	<b>17.7%</b> Paramilitary / parapolice groups
<b>5.8%</b> Organized crime	<b>7.5%</b> Members of extremist or fundamentalist religious groups	<b>11.6%</b> Corporations/ businesses	<b>7.4%</b> Police	<b>10.8%</b> Political parties, their followers or members
<b>5.8%</b> Persons close to the woman defender	<b>6.1%</b> Police	<b>10.8%</b> Unknown	<b>6.7%</b> Organized crime	<b>9.3%</b> Unknown

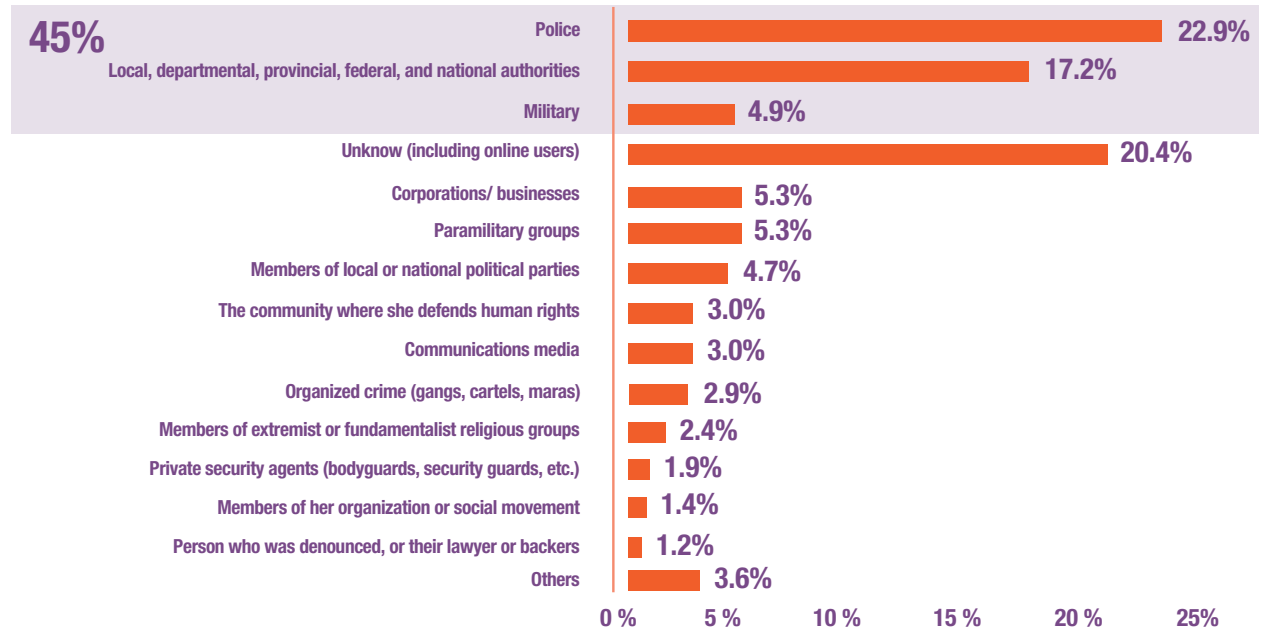
### THE STATE IN ALLIANCE WITH DE FACTO POWERS

States have the obligation to promote, respect, protect, and guarantee human rights. However, seeking to protect the political and economic interests of those who govern as well as other de facto powers, States are actually the main actors directly responsible for the violence that women defenders face. **In Mesoamerica, almost half (45%) of the perpetrators of attacks against women human rights defenders between 2012 and 2022 were actors linked to the State.** This includes law enforcement authorities (22.9%); municipal, departmental, provincial, state, national, or federal public authorities (17.2%); and military forces (4.9%). State responsibility for attacks in Honduras and Nicaragua is particularly prevalent, rising above 50% of the perpetrators identified in our registry system.



**Figure 14**

**Perpetrators of attacks against women defenders in Mesoamerica 2012-2022**





The State-perpetrated attacks that we documented generally fall within three realms: acts by police and military agents that use force to protect landowners and national and transnational corporations in their capitalist dispossession projects; the use of legislation and public institutions to prevent and judicialize human rights defense; and direct attacks committed by public officials from different levels of government through smear campaigns and stigmatization targeting women defenders. All of these attacks reveal how public resources and institutions are placed at the service of State repression to benefit the interests of other *de facto* powers (corporations, organized crime, religious hierarchies, communications oligopolies, etc.). That is why, when we speak of State responsibility for attacks, we refer to the nation-state understood as a space in dispute – where institutions of power are penetrated and co-opted; where the logics of power, corruption, authoritarianism, privilege, capital accumulation, and dispossession are structural; where these powers prevail over people's sovereignty and transcend the government in office.

The 2009 coup d'état in Honduras marked a turning point for the fragile democracy-building processes in the region, launching a new cycle of authoritarian advance. Mesoamerica is witnessing a convergence of governments that are totalitarian – such as Nicaragua – or facing serious authoritarian tendencies – like El Salvador – with progressive-leaning governments borne out of popular struggles in Honduras, Mexico, and more recently – in 2023 – in Guatemala. These latter governments have internal contradictions and reveal a lack of correlation of forces to confront co-optation by *de facto* powers and to undertake the necessary structural transformations. Of particular concern in recent years is how openly conservative and neoliberal governments have deepened and broadened the scope of their authoritarian policies, undermining the separation of State powers and criminalizing social protest and the freedom of expression and association. The challenges are of no lesser magnitude in countries with progressive-oriented governments, where internal contradictions and the power wielded by *de facto* power groups have led to continued repressive policies and practices, especially at the local level.


In view of the proven inability of liberal democracy – instrumentalized by capitalism – to address social problems, authoritarianism and even dictatorship are legitimized as a way to guarantee security and respond to people's demands.





According to Latinobarometro,<sup>90</sup> in 2023, more than half (54%) of people in Latin America agreed with the statement “I would not care if an undemocratic government came to power if it solved problems.” In Honduras, this opinion is shared by 70% of people, in Guatemala by 66%, in El Salvador by 63%, and in Mexico by 56%. It is relevant to note that the study did not include Nicaragua; it was the first time in 28 years that a country was excluded from the study due to the lack of security for gathering information given the current context in the country.<sup>91</sup> The democratic simulation that liberal democracies play and the legitimization of authoritarianism – which in both cases also affect gender inequality – create significant risks that impede our ability to conduct our human rights defense work in a safe environment. Additionally, this situation fosters impunity for attacks conducted by State and non-State actors.

In relation to our assailants, some of the patterns we identified in each country include:

 **In Nicaragua, 57% of attacks against women defenders documented between 2015 and 2022 were perpetrated by police, military, or public authorities.** Taking into account that the structures of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) answer to the orders of the Ortega-Murillo family, the percentage of attacks against women human rights defenders who identify the regime led by Daniel Ortega and his wife and vice-president Rosario Murillo as perpetrators during this period amounts to 85.4%. As of the socio-political and human rights crisis that began in April 2018, the situation has worsened to the point of consolidating a totalitarian government under which atrocious crimes<sup>92</sup> – considered crimes against humanity<sup>93</sup> – have been committed with impunity, with the aim of repressing and preventing any expression of popular organization and participation and the defense of human rights.

<sup>90</sup> Latinobarómetro Corporation: 2023 Report: Democratic Recession in Latin America.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua *Detailed findings of the Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua*. Human Rights Council. 2023.

<sup>93</sup> Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI): Report on the violent events that took place between April 18th and May 30th, 2018. 2018.





**In Honduras, the State accounts for 54% of all perpetrators of attacks against women defenders registered between 2012 and 2022. Honduras is the country in the region where the role of military forces in violence against women defenders carries the greatest weight.**

The army has been identified as the second most frequent assailant of our sisters in Honduras (15.5%). For its part, the National Police has played a leading role in one out of every four attacks in the country (26.9%), with members of this public security force standing out as the main perpetrators of repression against communities defending land and territory. After the 2009 coup and the subsequent installing of an authoritarian narco-government<sup>94</sup> that committed serious human rights violations, the current progressive-leaning government has not been able to fulfill its electoral promises. This has resulted in the continued militarization and configurations of power in territories. The granting of power, presence, and budget to the police and army has continued – reaching its maximum expression with the militarization of prisons, which has greatly increased the vulnerability of people deprived of their liberty. The imposition of a state of emergency at the end of 2022 as a way of rolling back the grave security crisis created by earlier governments not only has been ineffective but it has been implemented in a racist and classist manner.



**In El Salvador, attacks linked to the State were identified in 36% of attacks against women defenders documented between 2012 and 2022.**

President Nayib Bukele's control over the Supreme Court of Justice and the Legislative Assembly has allowed him to approve laws that enable the restriction of protest, criminalization of social leaders, and – since February 2022 – the constant renewal of a state of emergency,<sup>95</sup> thus creating a context for deepening authoritarianism and multiple infringements of human rights. The violence deployed by the Armed Forces and the National Civil Police during the first year of the state of emergency resulted in 4,723 human rights violations, 5,082 affected persons, and 102 deaths while in State custody.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, since 2019 and, above all, starting in 2020, President Bukele has championed smear and stigmatization campaigns against the feminist movement, constructing a false and dangerous imaginary that links women defenders with political parties and gangs.<sup>97</sup>



**In Mexico, 35.7% of attacks against women defenders documented between 2012 and 2022 were perpetrated by State actors including the military (0.9%), police forces (16.4%) and public authorities at the municipal, state, or federal level (18.5%).**

Historically, in the attacks where the Mexican State – including its different levels of government and institutions – has been identified as the perpetrator, a fundamental role has been its commitment to a model of security policies that serve the interests of powerful groups and their dynamics of control over territories and strategic resources. This is the case of the so-called “war against drug trafficking” that during the governments of Felipe Calderon and Enrique Peña Nieto involved the massive deployment of the Armed Forces for public security tasks in the country's territories and communities. This deployment provoked one of the most serious crises of violence and human rights violations in recent decades, with profound impacts on the economy, politics, and the social fabric that are very difficult to reverse in the short term. In response to this crisis, the current government created the National Guard, replacing the Federal Police in order to have a security force under greater control. However, the decision to make this new corps completely dependent on the National Defense Secretary (SEDENA) has generated much concern, as the

94 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] HONDURAS / JOH: Tres veces culpable. 8 March 2024.

95 IM-Defensoras: EL SALVADOR / Más de 6 mil denuncias de abusos y vulneración a derechos humanos durante el régimen de excepción reportan organizaciones de sociedad civil y de periodistas. 14 July 2023.

96 Informe anual sobre violaciones a DDHH durante el estado de excepción en El Salvador. March 2023. Azul Originario, Centro de Estudios de la Diversidad Sexual y Genérica (AMATE), Cristosal, Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho (FESPAD), Instituto de Derechos Humanos de la UCA (Idhuca), Red Salvadoreña de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos (RSDDH), Servicio Social Pasionista (SSPAS).

97 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] EL SALVADOR / Amenazas, difamación, menosprecio y estigmatización contra organizaciones de la sociedad civil e intento de deslegitimar a la CICIES por parte del Presidente Bukele y políticos allegados a su gobierno. 10 April 2021.

evidence of the Army's past involvement in serious human rights violations still lingers in the collective memory. In this context, we observe that attacks such as surveillance, threats, harassment, detentions, and physical violence are mainly committed at the local and departmental levels in the various states of the republic. At the federal level, most of the attacks documented in recent years have been campaigns to discredit, challenge, or cast doubt on the credibility of journalists and women defenders of land and territory.

 **State officials and public authorities from different levels, the police, and the army together make up 27% of the perpetrators of attacks against women human rights defenders in Guatemala between 2012 and 2022.** The context for this was the gradual militarization of the country and the constant imposition of states of emergency in areas that have experienced territorial conflicts since 2010.<sup>98</sup> No less concerning is the instrumentalization of the Interior Ministry to criminalize and judicially harass women defenders and human rights organizations.

As noted earlier, although the direct perpetrators of attacks are identified as governments at different levels and their security forces, the interests they protect transcend their political goals and respond to alliances with national and transnational economic elites and/or State co-optation by de facto powers.

### **THE (IN)JUSTICE SYSTEM**

States have the obligation to maintain justice systems that guarantee human rights and combat all human rights violations. However, the current cultural, political, and economic model is sustained by an injustice system where judiciary powers are used both to guarantee the impunity of perpetrators and to attack those who oppose this model, thus ensuring that de facto power groups can continue to exercise control.

On one hand, the justice system is used to criminalize and judicialize the defense of human rights and to strip communities of their resources and territories. Despite the various changes in government that have taken place in the region during the last 11 years and the different nuances in each context, the legal scaffolding, the co-opting of judges and prosecutors, and the mechanisms for criminalizing and persecuting women defenders persist and have become stronger. Proof of this is the approval of new legal frameworks in recent years to enable the criminalization of journalists, social organizations, and women defenders of land and territory in order to silence leaders and social movements. On the other hand, when women defenders suffer an attack and denounce it, this same judicial system is used to obstruct our access to justice, guaranteeing impunity for those who attack us, sustaining the power of the military and police forces, and protecting para-State actors, private companies, and organized crime.

In this context, it is to be expected that women defenders distrust the institutional justice system. Our main reason for frequently refraining from filing complaints about the attacks we suffer is that, as mentioned above, the same institutions and public authorities are our main assailants, or they maintain alliances with other perpetrators in the private sphere, such as corporations, organized crime, and drug traffickers. Furthermore, given the high levels of impunity, women defenders are afraid that filing a complaint may lead to new attacks against our personal integrity or that of our families. We also recognize other causes that limit us from formally denouncing attacks: a lack of awareness and support networks for filing complaints, the minimization or normalization of the attacks received, less motivation to file a complaint due to emotional exhaustion, and re-victimization from previous experiences that exposed the difficulties of accessing justice.-

Instead of turning to the State bodies that should guarantee the application of justice, women defenders often prefer to turn to human rights organizations created by society itself, to organize ourselves in communities or collectives to defend and advise each other, or to make public complaints through social media and communications media.

98 IM-Defensoras. [PRONUNCIAMIENTO] Rechazo al estado de sitio en tres municipios de Sololá, Guatemala. 1 July 2020.

In our search for security, women defenders also turn to national, regional, and international protection mechanisms. However, these measures are often ineffective: 19.2% of attacks documented in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua between 2012 and 2022 were against women defenders who had been previously granted protection measures. Furthermore, 349 attacks during this same period specifically related to the failure to comply with precautionary measures. These findings reveal that while justice systems are agile in protecting the interests of de facto powers, they are incapable of guaranteeing justice for women defenders and enforcing the agreements and protection mechanisms built to institutionalize human rights at the national and regional levels.

**“As women defenders, we face judicial systems that present a great paradox, full of contradictions. We must engage in spaces that we know are against us, but at the same time these judicial systems are porous, they have gaps through which we can enter and advance our struggles.” Woman Defender from Honduras<sup>99</sup>**

### **ECONOMIC POWER**

Behind the mask of liberal democracy, Mesoamerica faces world powers, transnational corporations, industry and financial lobbies, fundamentalist religious groups, drug cartels, and other mafia organizations that control and/or significantly influence public opinion, elections, the political party system, and the decisions of governments, parliaments, and justice systems. Since they act with the support and complicity of States, it is not easy to identify the direct responsibility of these actors for attacks against women defenders. Thus, our registry has only been able to document **that corporations account for 5.3% of direct perpetrators at the regional level during the period between 2012 and 2022.**

Their attacks seek to stop our actions and those of our organizations and communities, since our work exposes the human rights violations and abuses committed as part of their capital accumulation projects. **However, we observed that economic power groups, especially transnational extractivist corporations, are often suspected of being behind attacks directly perpetrated by the State, unknown assailants, and private security agents.** Likewise, we have seen how private security companies regularly function as the “private army” of extractive corporations, with guaranteed impunity, primarily attacking women defenders of land and territory.

Corporate extractivism and its colonial logic of dispossession is imposed in our countries with the complicity of the State, regardless of which political group is in power. Extractivist corporations destroy the territory, the communities that live there, and nature, generating greater precariousness and contributing to exclusion. It is important to note that in Honduras and Guatemala, corporations and businesses make up a significant percentage of perpetrators of attacks against women defenders (11.6% and 8.9% respectively).

### **UNKNOWN ASSAILANTS**

**We were unable to identify the material perpetrators of attacks against women defenders in 20.4% of the cases registered regionally between 2012 and 2022.** Unknown assailants include those who hide behind anonymity both online and in-person. These assailants are often hired to carry out attacks. Thus, in these cases, we identify likely intellectual actors by conducting a context analysis of the attacks, which enables us to find the actors opposed to the human rights defense work conducted by the women defenders.

In our region, **Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador are the countries with the highest percentage of unknown assailants, according to our historical data from 2012 to 2022. This percentage reaches 37.2%** in Mexico, with public authorities (municipal, state, and federal) and organized crime as the main suspects identified. Other relevant suspected actors identified in the country are corporations and those who are responsible for

<sup>99</sup> Testimony of woman defender from the National Network of Women Human Rights Defenders in Honduras, Melissa Cardoza. [Own translation.]



extractive corporations; political parties and their members; and assailants previously denounced by women defenders, their collectives, and organizations.

**In Guatemala, the percentage of unknown assailants between 2012 and 2022 is 29.6%.** In recent years, attacks perpetrated by unknown online users stand out, accounting for more than half the attacks registered between 2020 and 2022. Meanwhile in **El Salvador, 17% of assailants between 2012 and 2022 are unknown.**

It is important to highlight that the anonymity afforded by social media has made it a preferred vehicle for attacks such as smear campaigns, hate speech, incitement to violence, threats, intimidation, and psychological harassment. Due to the increase in digital attacks, in 2020 we began to specifically document cases in which the perpetrators are unknown online users. **Between 2020 and 2022, we registered 888 attacks committed by unknown online users, accounting for 17.3% of assailants in all attacks against women defenders regionally during these 3 years. This percentage varies significantly between countries: it reaches 55.1% in Guatemala and 20.2% in El Salvador, while it is lower than 4% in Nicaragua and Honduras.** We frequently identified religious and fundamentalist groups, members of conservative political parties, and the media as suspects behind these attacks.

### **ORGANIZED CRIME**

Many of the attacks against women defenders in the region are perpetrated by organized crime, understood as illegal and clandestine groups (gangs, cartels, maras, etc.) that profit from illicit businesses such as drug trafficking and others, as well as from criminal activities such as human trafficking, kidnapping, robbery, extortion, etc., and which often have women, migrants, and particularly vulnerable social groups as their main victims. Furthermore, these groups use violence to exert an iron grip on the territories and communities in which they are established.

Due to the nature of their actions, relying on anonymity, their deadliness and influence that extend beyond national borders, and the high risk involved in reporting them, it is very difficult to document with certainty when attacks are perpetrated by these groups. **Between 2012 and 2022, we were able to register their direct responsibility in 2.9% of attacks against women defenders in the region.** However, they are regular suspects in a high percentage of attacks perpetrated by unknown actors.

These complex organized forms of crime are coordinated through national and transnational political and economic networks that often operate with the protection and acquiescence of States. The criminal groups that use violence have access to professional militarized mechanisms; they fight for control of illicit markets and are part of an illegal economy that, nevertheless, ends up reverberating in the dynamics of legal capital accumulation through complex money laundering and fiscal schemes that involve corporations and State actors. The presence and dynamics of criminal armed groups is constantly changing, creating fragmentations, apparent dissolutions, and reconfigurations through pacts and negotiations with other illegal or State actors.

Attacks perpetrated by organized crime are particularly lethal, thus their involvement in attacks against human rights defenders further increases the fear that the consequence of continuing with our human rights defense work will be that they kill us – us or our loved ones. When we examine the situation of women defenders in relation to organized crime, we see that those who face the greatest attacks are those whose work touches the spaces of power most clearly disputed by these de facto power groups: women defenders of territory and women defenders of the right to truth and justice. In this sense, we identified that the security policies and presence of organized crime in Mexico have a direct connection to the increase in femicides.<sup>100</sup> Our registry points to actors linked to organized crime as suspects in transfemicides and in the killings of women defenders who search for their disappeared family members.

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<sup>100</sup> Loaiza, L: [How Mexico's Rising Femicides Relate to Organized Crime](#). *In InSight Crime*. 11 July 2023.

## FUNDAMENTALIST AND ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS

**According to our registry, fundamentalist and anti-rights groups directly perpetrated 2.4% of the attacks against women human rights defenders registered in Mesoamerica between 2012 and 2022. When focusing on the last portion of the period – between 2020 and 2022 – we see that these groups accounted for 20% of the direct assailants of women defenders of sexual and reproductive rights. Additionally, these actors are frequently identified as the main suspects behind campaigns promoted anonymously or by unknown online users.**

In a global context of far-right and fascist advances, anti-rights actors and movements have grown stronger in the region, and are taking their dangerous fundamentalist agendas to the public and private spheres where they have the power to influence. Through struggle, the feminist movement has achieved recognition of the existence of gender inequality and succeeded in ensuring that women's human rights be included in international agreements, national laws, and public policies. In response to these advances, anti-rights groups seek to counter equality and human rights narratives with arguments that use religion, culture, and tradition to sustain social, political, and economic patriarchy.

The increasing influence of anti-rights groups in Latin America is due to two factors. First, the construction of broad transnational alliances with churches,<sup>101</sup> far-right political parties, and shadowy funding networks. Second, their strategy of gaining legitimacy and mobilizing followers by co-opting social justice language and the organizational forms of social movements. We have witnessed the rise of ultraconservative leaders who, under the discourse of "God, Homeland, Liberty, and Family", seek to preserve the gender social order and the economic system that it benefits. These leaders have openly racist, xenophobic, and misogynist positions, and they are succeeding in expanding the anti-rights agenda through their influence on public opinion and their ability to instrumentalize the State in order to weaken progressive public policies and women's rights.

This whole context has limited advances, and even led to setbacks, in progressive agendas related to women's rights, sexual and reproductive rights, and the rights of LGBTTTIQ+ people. To ensure the control and subjugation of women and all sex-gender dissidences to the established order, anti-rights groups have constructed a narrative and social imaginary of the common enemy through the conceptualization of what they call "gender ideology". This narrative holds the victories of feminism and the foundations of human rights responsible for destroying the family as an institution and attacking creation's divine order and "natural laws". We have observed how the resurgence of these conservative discourses – "family-ists", anti-abortion, and anti-feminists – has resulted in an increase in the number and severity of attacks against women defenders and feminist organizations in recent years.

Examples of this include smear campaigns led by some anti-rights groups against feminist organizations demanding the decriminalization of therapeutic abortion in El Salvador<sup>102</sup> and against women defenders who accompanied the public hearing on the "Manuela Case" at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights,<sup>103</sup> which we mentioned earlier in the section on attacks against women defenders of sexual and reproductive rights. These campaigns include hate messages that stigmatize women defenders and incite the exacerbation of violence against them.

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101 The region has seen a growth in the presence of evangelical churches that, according to a 2022 Pew Research Center survey, reach 22% of the faithful population in Latin America. Central America has seen the greatest growth in evangelism: they make up more than 40% of the faithful population in Honduras and Guatemala; while in Nicaragua and El Salvador, they reach 36% and 30% respectively. Meanwhile, the Catholic Church has also maintained significant influence in preserving conservative and anti-rights positions in the region, particularly against the right to abortion, access to sex education, and recognition of LGBTTTIQ+ rights. Catholicism is the religion of more than 40% of the population in all Mesoamerican countries; in Mexico, this percentage rises to 82%. Redacción Zenit: [Análisis: la nueva composición religiosa de Latinoamérica al iniciar el 2022](#). 15 January 2022.

102 IM-Defensoras: [#WHRDAlert EL SALVADOR / Feminist Collective for Local Development and Citizen Association for the Decriminalization of Therapeutic Abortion, Ethics and Eugenics](#). 2 October 2015.

103 IM-Defensoras. [\[WHRD Alert\] EL SALVADOR / Anti-rights groups intensify stigmatization and hate speech campaigns against feminists and women defenders accompanying the "Manuela" case](#). 16 April 2021.



### PERSONS IN OUR CLOSE CIRCLES

In addition to facing powerful external actors, women defenders are also attacked in the private sphere that should be a refuge of security and protection – in our own community, our social movements and organizations, and even within our own families. Thus, our registry shows that people close to us also attack us: our partners and ex-partners, family members, comrades in our own organization or movement, and members of the community where we conduct our human rights defense work. Together, **attacks perpetrated by people in our close circle account for more than 5.1% of all attacks registered in the region between 2012 and 2022. This percentage reaches 8.7% in El Salvador and 8% in Honduras.**

Being attacked by persons who have been part of our networks and emotional relationships is especially painful for us. These attacks are an expression of patriarchal resistance to women's social and political participation and involvement; they also reflect a regional context of extractivist advance as strategies that lead to the deterioration of the community social fabric. Additionally, some forms of attack, like smear campaigns and stigmatization, weaken the support networks developed by our movements and communities, increasing the violence we experience in our close circles. The attacks we suffer in our spaces of struggle also reveal the challenges we face within these spaces, whether it be in building activist environments free from violence against women or in articulating the struggle for women's rights and equality as a central thread in the human rights defense work conducted by our movements.



**HOW  
DO THEY  
ATTACK US?**

# Ejido de Atenco

REINTEGRACIÓN DE TIERRAS  
*Atenco, Estado de México, 30 de junio de 2023*



Attacks against women and organizations or groups who defend human rights span a wide range of spheres and forms of violence, and go from one-off attacks to repeated situations of violence. All attacks seek to disarticulate the expressions of collective power and silence the voices of women and sex-gender dissidences who, from diverse movements and territories, defend human rights and promote processes of social transformation.

### REPEATED ATTACKS

Almost half (46.3%) of the attacks against women defenders registered between 2012 and 2022 were part of a series of violent events experienced earlier. This percentage varies from country to country in the region, ranging from 31.6% in El Salvador to 58% in Honduras. The systematic nature of the attacks reveals that these acts of violence are not one-off or isolated, but actually reflect a continuous strategy that tends to escalate in terms of the severity and the type of attacks in order to exhaust us and stop our struggles.

### SPHERES OF ATTACK

**Table 4**

**Total attacks against women defenders in Mesoamerica by country and type of attack 2012-2022**

	Mexico	Guatemala	Honduras	El Salvador	Nicaragua*	TOTAL
<b>Personal</b>	<b>3.738</b>	<b>2.325</b>	<b>1.646</b>	<b>524</b>	<b>4.995</b>	<b>13.228</b>
<b>Collective</b>	<b>4.328</b>	<b>2.191</b>	<b>3.461</b>	<b>850</b>	<b>2.510</b>	<b>13.340</b>
<b>Institutional</b>	<b>471</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>318</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>1.226</b>	<b>2.295</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>8.537</b>	<b>4.631</b>	<b>5.425</b>	<b>1.539</b>	<b>8.731</b>	<b>28.863</b>

\*The registry of attacks in Nicaragua started in 2015

Our registry distinguishes between three spheres of attacks, depending on whether the attack was personal against a woman defender, against groups of women defenders or in the context of collective actions to defend human rights, or against the organizations or groups in which we organize ourselves. These three spheres are related to the different strategies of struggle and resistance that we use to organize our defense work. Based on this, we were able to identify, for example, how collective attacks increase during key moments of mass mobilization, and how this is often followed by identification, criminalization, and attacks against women defenders who have a more public leadership, thus seeking to intimidate them, silence their voices, and weaken their movements. Table 4 shows the number of attacks registered between 2012 and 2022, disaggregated based on the sphere in which they occurred and by country.

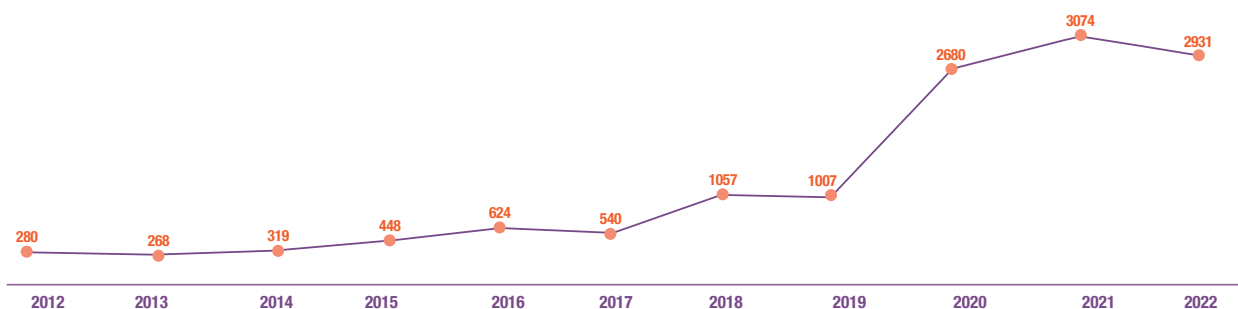
### PERSONAL ATTACKS: SILENCE LEADERS' VOICES AND SEND A MESSAGE TO ALL WOMEN

We call personal attacks those inflicted against a woman defender as an individual. However, personal attacks also have a collective impact, since, in addition to seeking to silence the voices of specific leaders, they also serve as an example to dissuade other sister defenders in an organization or community from defending human rights.

**Between 2012 and 2022, we registered 13,228 personal attacks.** Figure 15 shows the significant increase in attacks registered starting in 2020. We can observe that personal attacks registered in the last three years of the period (2020-2022) account for 65.7% of all personal attacks documented throughout the entire period (2012-2022). This

increase is linked with restrictions and criminalization of human rights defense actions in the context of the health crisis triggered by COVID-19, and with the increase in digital attacks; but it also reflects the continued strengthening of our registry system.

**Figure 15**  
**Evolution of personal attacks against women defenders**  
**in Mesoamerica by year 2012-2022**



**Among the 8,685 personal attacks registered between 2020 and 2022, standing out are those that violated the right to personal integrity (31.9%) and the right to reputation, public image, and private and family life (23.7%).** Based on the most frequent types of attacks during this period, one pattern we identified is that individual attacks tend to begin with countless violent incidents such as harassment (19.9%); smear campaigns, spreading fake news, or casting doubt on a woman defender’s credibility, leadership, morality, or professionalism (15.2%); threats (7.1%); and surveillance, monitoring, or stalking of everyday life (8.4%). However, these types of violence escalate and show their most brutal expressions through killings, forced disappearances, and sexual violence and torture.

Some of the most severe types of personal attacks documented are forced displacement and exile, as well as the stripping of citizenship or residence permit. In Guatemala, we documented these types of attacks during 2018 and 2019, in the context of the government’s campaign against the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), with illegal and arbitrary actions like the expulsion of 11 of its members from the country.<sup>104</sup>

In Nicaragua, starting in 2018 – but massively between 2020 and 2022, we identified a new pattern of personal attacks within a set of “migratory repression”<sup>105</sup> strategies implemented by the State against human rights defenders. This type of attack takes three forms: banishment, illegal and arbitrary denial of entry into the territory, and the stripping of Nicaraguan nationality; migratory detentions, which involve a prohibition to leave the country, and the seizure or cancellation of passports; and migratory harassment, which may include long interrogations at border posts, denial or unjustified delays in the renewal of identification documents, and ordering a person to periodically appear at the Migration Office, among others. Many sister defenders have suffered these attacks and today conduct their defense work from exile.<sup>106</sup>

104 IM-Defensoras: [#UrgentAlert GUATEMALA / GOVERNMENT DECREES ILLEGAL EXPULSION OF 11 CICIG MEMBERS FROM COUNTRY](#). 19 December 2018.

105 IM-Defensoras: [Migratory repression and banishment for defending rights in Nicaragua](#). 14 October 2022.

106 IM-Defensoras: [\[WHRD Alert\] NICARAGUA / Miskita defender Anixa Alfred Cunningham denied entry into her own country, Nicaragua](#). 4 October 2022.



**Figure 16**  
**Rights violated during personal attacks against women defenders in Mesoamerica 2020-2022**



### ATTACKS AGAINST PEOPLE IN OUR CLOSE CIRCLE

The different forms of violence that we face not seek to attack us individually but also to control us, silence our voices, and inhibit our struggles through messages that create angst and fear in our immediate circle – our families, organizations, and communities.

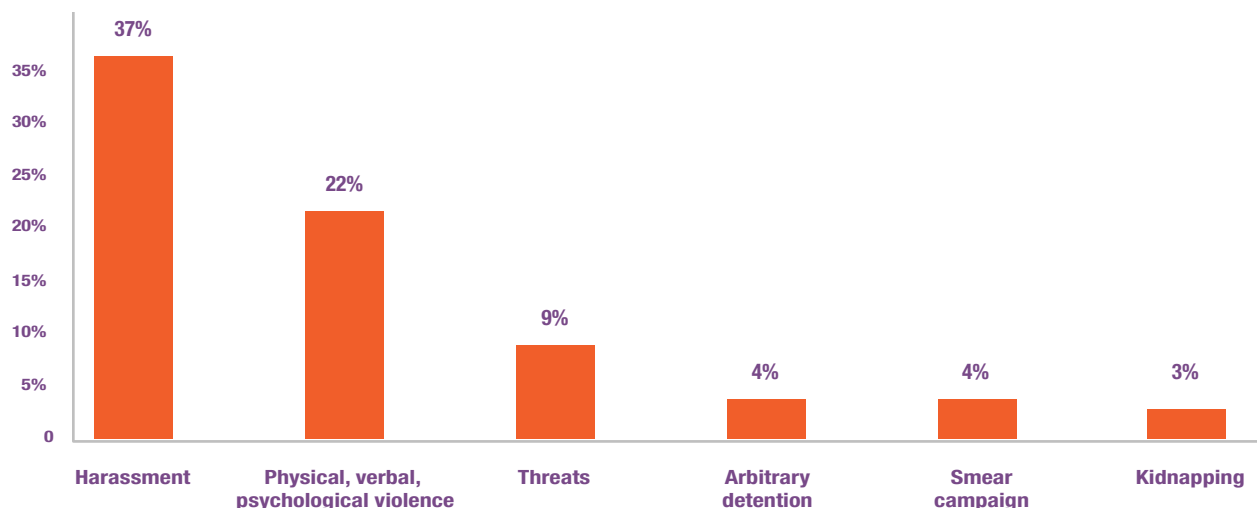
39.5% of personal attacks registered between 2020 and 2022 were accompanied by attacks against people close to the women defenders. This percentage varies from 11% in Guatemala to more than 50% in Nicaragua and Honduras (56% and 54%, respectively).

Documented attacks on those closest to us take place primarily against our children; against members of our organization or movement; and against immediate family members, such as our mothers, fathers, and partners. This violence seeks to affect our family ties and support networks in order to cause emotional impact and paralyze us. In this sense, it is a type of threat or reprisal that aims to intimidate and restrict our human rights defense work.

Figure 17 shows the most frequent types of attacks against people close to us registered between 2020 and 2022. In this same period, we also documented other serious attacks against people in our close circles, such as forced disappearances (6); cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment (7); sexual abuse and harassment (12); attempted killings (9); and killings (10).



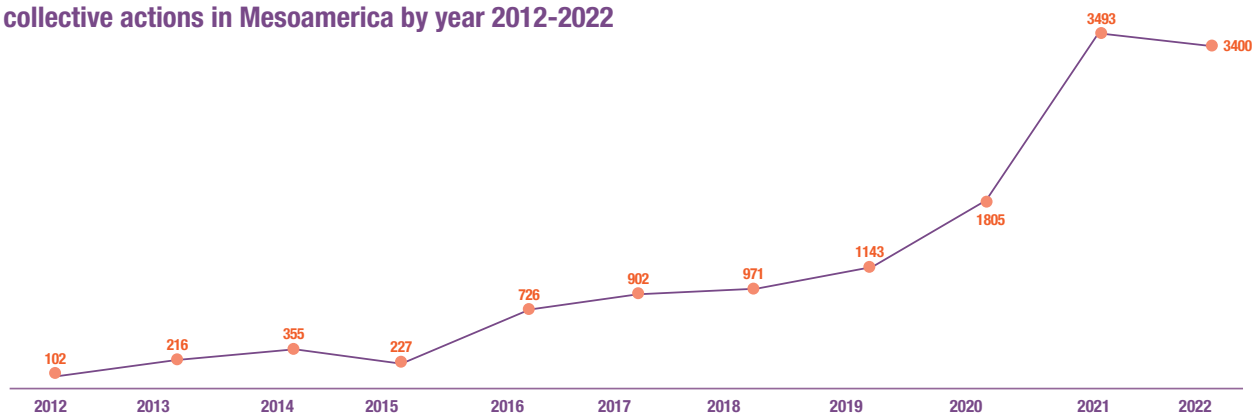
**Figure 17**  
**Most frequent types of attacks against people close to women defenders in Mesoamerica 2020-2022**



**ATTACKS DURING COLLECTIVE ACTIONS: DISARTICULATING SOCIAL PROTEST**


IM-Defensoras calls “attacks during collective actions” those attacks directed simultaneously against different members of the same organization or movement. These attacks often take place during public actions and other collective expressions of protest (marches, demonstrations, blockades, etc.). **Between 2012 and 2022, we documented 13,340 collective attacks,<sup>107</sup>** whose evolution over time (Figure 18) reflects emblematic public protests and governments’ repressive response in the region. We interpret this type of attack as a reaction from political and economic power-holders to criminalize protests and attempt to disarticulate and shut down the strength of popular mobilizations.


**Figure 18**  
**Evolution of attacks against women defenders during collective actions in Mesoamerica by year 2012-2022**





Women defenders’ collective actions through different organizations and communities is a historical force made highly visible in the last decade. Despite the climate of violence and constant criminalization, the right to protest continues to be exercised and defended in Mesoamerica. Some highlights of collective mobilization that have made an impact in our registry of collective attacks in recent years include:


<sup>107</sup> As we pointed out in the methodology, with the change in the registry system, a new weighting for the calculation of collective attacks in each country was applied starting in 2020.

 Since 2015, throughout the region and with special strength in Mexico, women defenders have participated in feminist mobilizations against sexist violence in general and femicides in particular, united by the cry “Ni una menos” [Not one less] that has resonated throughout the continent. Emblematic dates like 8 March (International Women’s Day), 28 September (Global Day of Action for Access to Safe and Legal Abortion), and 25 November (International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women) have convened women defenders of all ages on the streets. In these moments, we have experienced excessive use of force, criminalization of protest, and arbitrary detentions.

 In Mexico, we also identified two moments of increased attacks linked to collective resistance related to the defense of the right to education. In 2016, we documented attacks against women defenders and journalists during the mobilization of members of the National Coordination of Education Workers (CNTE) in response to the federal and state governments’ imposition of the so-called Education Reform. After that, the number of attacks during collective actions have continued to rise, reaching 1,564 attacks registered in 2022, although the weight of the federal government’s role in these attacks has been decreasing. A few of the emblematic cases included the repression and shots fired in the air during a protest demanding justice for the femicide of Bianca Lorenzana,<sup>108</sup> and the massive arbitrary detentions and violent acts against young people who participated in a student mobilization for the right to education in Chiapas in 2021.<sup>109</sup>

 In Guatemala, we reported attacks against women defenders and journalists during several mass mobilizations: the 2015 mass demonstrations against Otto Perez Molina’s corrupt government, which led to his resignation; the 2020 protests against budget cuts to education and healthcare; and the 2022 protests demanding the resignation of President Alejandro Giammattei because of corruption and high costs of living. We also identified different types of violence and arbitrary detentions in areas with territorial conflicts where the Guatemalan State has imposed a “state of emergency”. An emblematic case in this regard took place in El Estor municipality,<sup>110</sup> Izabal department, where the National Civil Police and the Army brutally repressed Q’eqchi’ people who are peacefully opposing the illegal operations of the Swiss and Russian-backed Solway mining company.

 In El Salvador, we registered a significant increase in collective attacks in 2021, reaching 675 attacks. This was the year that President Nayib Bukele confronted the first mass mobilization against his authoritarian drift and his policy of co-opting powers. This same year, we also perceived a context of greater hostility and collective attacks against human rights defenders and journalists. For example, we documented online harassment, stigmatization, discrediting, and death threats against members of the Amoraes collective and against people who protested presidential authoritarianism.<sup>111</sup>

 After the assassination of Berta Caceres, there was an increase in collective resistance and demands for justice in Honduras, which also led to a significant increase in our registry of attacks. We documented four times more collective attacks in 2016 than in the previous year, reaching its highest peak in 2017, when we registered

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108 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] MÉXICO / Policía municipal de Cancún reprime con armas de fuego protesta feminista que exigía justicia por el feminicidio de la joven Bianca Alejandrina Lorenzana Alvarado y a periodistas que cubrían el acto.](#) 10 November 2020.


109 IM-Defensoras: [\[WHRD Alert\] MEXICO / 74 young women students, mainly indigenous, were attacked, detained for five days, and criminalized for defending the right to education in Chiapas.](#) 24 May 2021.

110 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] GUATEMALA / Gobierno impone estado de sitio en El Estor tras reprimir a población que protesta pacíficamente contra la operación ilegal de minera.](#) 25 October 2021.

111 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] EL SALVADOR / Acoso, estigmatización, descalificativos y amenazas de muerte en redes sociales por protestar contra el autoritarismo presidencial.](#) 7 September 2021.



607 of this type of attacks. After the fraudulent election of Juan Orlando Hernandez in November 2017,<sup>112</sup> mass protests took place that went on through 2018 and 2019, demanding his resignation for electoral fraud, for the neoliberal reforms to the healthcare system and education, and for his links to drug trafficking and corruption. Women defenders in Honduras were at the forefront of this wave of protests and, therefore, suffered the repressive response of the State and other de facto powers. Later, in 2020, with restrictions to collective action imposed in the context of the health emergency, we saw a considerable increase in collective attacks that continued into 2021 and 2022, reaching 797 registered cases. Of particular concern are the evictions of communities that defend their right to land and territory. We also documented attacks against collective actions demanding justice for the assassination of Berta Caceres<sup>113</sup> and for the 2021 femicide of Keyla Martinez while in police custody<sup>114</sup>

 Of particular importance in Nicaragua are the protests and processes of popular organization that detonated in 2018 in reaction to the mismanagement of the fire at the Indio Maiz Biological Reserve and the neoliberal reforms of the social security system, which in turn led to a wave of State repression culminating in a socio-political crisis that continues to this day. These popular struggles extend to the present day with the demand for justice and democracy. In 2018, 522 collective attacks were registered in the context of the violence exercised by police forces and parapolic groups repressing mass mobilizations. In 2021, the number of documented collective attacks reached 1,024, which is five times as many attacks as registered in 2020. This increase is explained both by the continuous improvements in our registry strategies,<sup>115</sup> and by the escalation of repression by Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo's government, which deployed various strategies during the 2021 presidential elections process to block the exercise of freedom of assembly and association.

**Between 2020 and 2022, we registered 8,702 attacks during collective actions, 14.8% of which were harassment; 14% physical, psychological, or verbal violence; and 13.2% were smear campaigns or questioning the credibility of victims of collective actions.** Among these acts of violence exercised simultaneously against several women defenders, we identified during the 2020 to 2022 period a worrying recurrence of arbitrary detentions (325); torture, cruel, inhuman, and/or degrading treatment (336); and the launching of criminal or administrative cases or trials on false grounds that do not correspond to the reality of the facts (339).

Collective attacks primarily violate the right to personal integrity of the people who participate in collective actions; our freedom of association, assembly and expression; our right to public image and to private and family life; and our right to access justice and to personal liberty and security (Figure 19).

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112 IM-Defensoras: [COMUNICADO IM-DEFENSORAS / ¡REESTABLECIMIENTO DE GARANTÍAS CONSTITUCIONALES EN HONDURAS YA! ¡ALTO INMEDIATO A REPRESIÓN, DEMOCRACIA Y RESPETO AL VOTO!](#) 2 December 2017.

113 IM-Defensoras: [#UrgentAlert HONDURAS / Attack against COPINH Intibucá members demanding #JusticeForBerta outside the courthouse where David Castillo is on trial.](#) 10 October 2019.

114 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] Policía Nacional reprime con balas y gas lacrimógeno a manifestantes por femicidio de Keyla Patricia Martínez.](#) 8 February 2021.

115 The network in Nicaragua identified 2021 as a key year for strengthening women's recognition as defenders, becoming aware that they are the object of attacks, and developing strategies to report harassment in a context of systematic repression and control.

**Figure 19**  
**Rights violated during attacks against women defenders during collective actions in Mesoamerica 2020-2022**

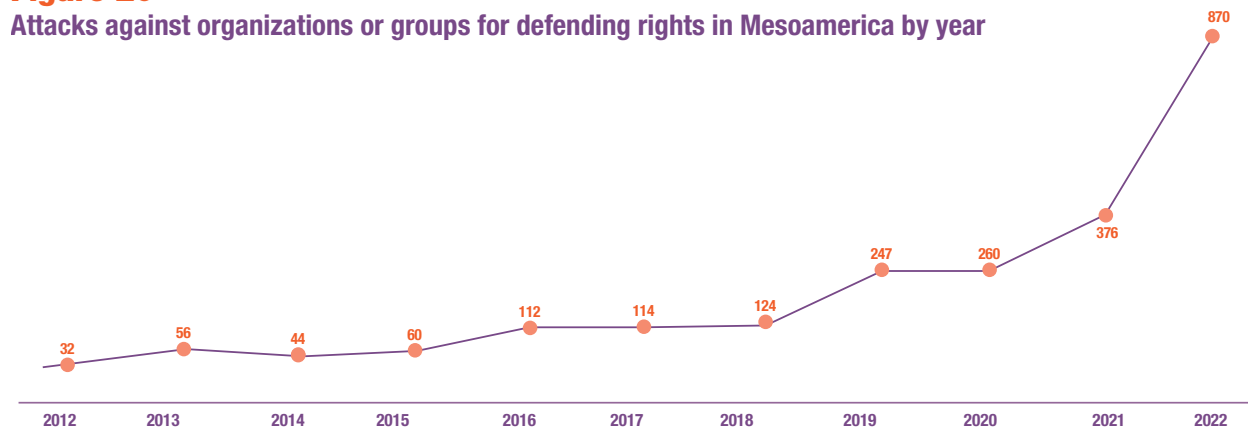


### ATTACKS AGAINST ORGANIZATIONS AND GROUPS

Attacks targeting women defenders' collectives and social organizations are another strategy to disarticulate social struggles in Mesoamerica. Our organizations and groups are attacked in an attempt to destroy the collective organizational processes that we have built to defend human rights.

Between 2012 and 2022, we documented 2,295 attacks against **895<sup>116</sup> organizations or groups that defend women's rights**. Figure 20 shows how this type of attack began to increase in 2014, reaching 870 attacks registered in 2022. It is important to highlight that 86% of institutional attacks registered in 2022 in the region took place in Nicaragua, where the government maintains a clear totalitarian strategy of destroying popular organization, including collectives and entities that work to defend women's rights.

**Figure 20**  
**Attacks against organizations or groups for defending rights in Mesoamerica by year**

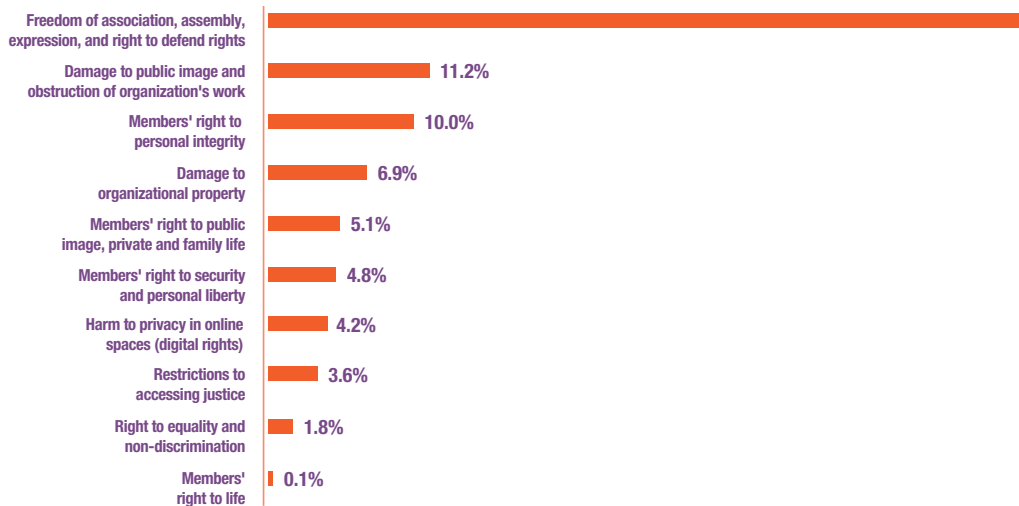


We identified that more than half of the 1,506 attacks against organizations or groups registered between 2020 and 2022 limited the right to the freedom of association, of assembly, and of expression (Figure 21). Regionally, the main forms of attack against organizations and groups during this period involved using legislation and fiscal and administrative processes to limit the ability of organizations function, to either impede or obstruct their legal status (15.7%), their freedom of association (15.3%), or their access to and use of


116 In the years prior to the 2020 adjustment in the registry system's database, the sum of organizations attacked each year may include organizations that were attacked repeatedly in the same year.


financial resources (12.6%). As such, these attacks expose the strategies of using political power, in complicity or alliance with other de facto powers, to create regulatory frameworks that institutionalize the criminalization of social organizations.

**Figure 21**  
**Rights violated during attacks against organizations or groups in Mesoamerica 2020-2022**



Among the main patterns of attacks against organizations and groups, we identified:

 In Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega's totalitarian government developed various strategies to close all spaces for popular participation, among them organizations that defend the broad diversity of human rights and communications media that do not toe the party line. The majority of attacks relate to the mass revoking of legal status, closure, raiding, and seizure of assets of organizations as a consequence of the Foreign Agents Law. Between 2018 and December 2022, 233 organizations that worked on the rights of women, girls, and youth were shut down.<sup>117</sup> The closure of organizations that have been spaces for gathering and for personal and political development of our work as women defenders has a very strong symbolic impact for communities, and it undermines the ties woven between organized women. These and other repressive laws in effect in Nicaragua serve as a negative example for other countries in the region.<sup>118</sup>

 Attacks against social organizations in El Salvador have significantly increased since 2021. Using the law against money laundering and asset laundering, the Financial Investigation Unit (UIF) has implemented greater financial controls over organizations, leading to more requirements and an increase in penalties – including criminal penalties – for non-compliance. The government and actors aligned to it have also spread narratives linking criminal groups with social movements and organizations that oppose the restrictive measures that the Nayib Bukele government has adopted. Thus, organizations that defend human rights have been discredited, smeared, raided, and criminalized<sup>119</sup> for their work.

117 IM-Defensoras. [WHRD Alert] NICARAGUA / Daniel Ortega cancels 29 more feminist and women's rights organizations, with a total of 176 since 2018. 11 October 2022.

118 For example, President Bukele in El Salvador tried to have a Foreign Agents Law approved in 2021, which would charge 40% taxes on funds coming from international sources. According to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and its Special Rapporteurship for Freedom of Expression, "this initiative could restrict the legitimate operations and activities of individuals and civil society organizations active in the defense of human rights and independent journalism, who sometimes receive international aid to assist their development."

119 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] EL SALVADOR / Unidad Especializada de Delitos de Corrupción de la Fiscalía General de la República allana oficinas de 7 organizaciones, entre ellas varias organizaciones de mujeres y feministas. 22 November 2021.




TAD PARA  
Y MÁS




LIBERTAD PARA  
LAS 17  
Y MÁS

LIBERTAD PARA  
LAS 17  
Y MÁS

LIBERTAD PARA LAS 17 Y MÁS

 In Mexico, we documented 113 attacks against organizations in 2020, double the number of attacks registered the year before. Some of the documented attacks stigmatized organizations opposed to the Maya Train project and placed them at risk.<sup>120</sup> In 2022, information was leaked about surveillance and monitoring conducted by the National Defense Secretary against various feminist groups and collectives, as well as other social organizations and activists that are part of the National Network of Women Human Rights Defenders in Mexico.

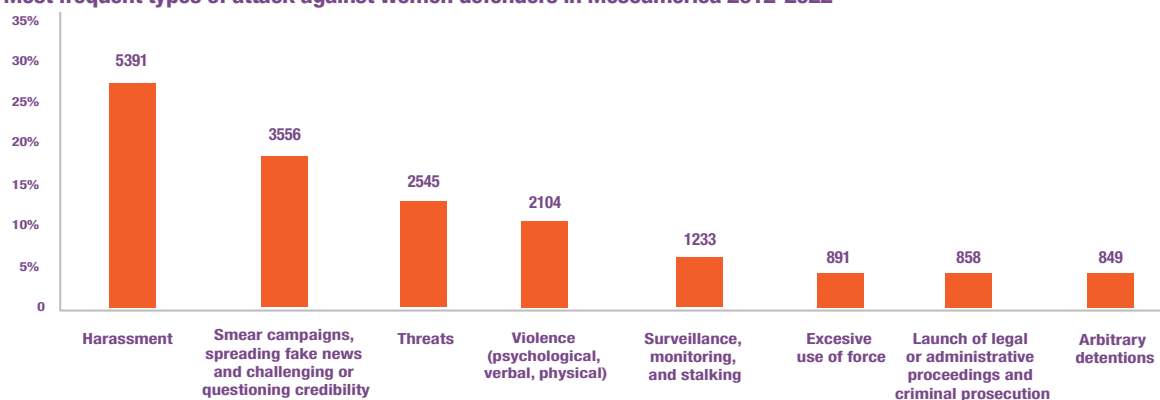
 In Honduras, we see a pattern of attacks and criminalization against compañeras of the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH) and the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH), who have been surveilled, harassed,<sup>121</sup> threatened,<sup>122</sup> illegally detained,<sup>123</sup> and judicialized.<sup>124</sup> Between 2020 and 2022, we documented 52 institutional, personal, and collective attacks against OFRANEH and 41 against COPINH.

 In Guatemala, we identified an intimidating environment in which fundamentalist groups harass human rights organizations, claiming that our work is communist and/or terrorist. Of particular note are the institutional attacks against the International Commission against Impunity (CICIG).<sup>125</sup>

## THE MULTIPLE FORMS OF VIOLENCE THAT WE FACE

Among the 28,863 attacks that we registered against women defenders and organizations or groups of women defenders in Mesoamerica between 2012 and 2022, the types that stand out due to their frequency are: harassment; smear campaigns; threats; physical, verbal, and psychological violence;<sup>126</sup> surveillance of women defenders' everyday practices;<sup>127</sup> and use of force (Figure 22). Within contexts of impunity or with weak protection mechanisms for our work, all of these forms of violence can appear in our lives simultaneously; they often escalate in severity and in the most serious cases, they can end our lives.

**Figure 22**  
Most frequent types of attack against women defenders in Mesoamerica 2012-2022



120 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Urgente] MÉXICO / Declaraciones del Presidente de la República, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, estigmatizan y ponen en riesgo a organizaciones y personas defensoras de derechos humanos. 2 September 2020.

121 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] HONDURAS / Policía Nacional hostiga a la defensora Melissa Martínez, integrante de la OFRANEH. 11 April 2022.

122 IM-Defensoras [Alerta Defensoras] HONDURAS / Agentes de la Policía Nacional, vigilan, hostigan y amenazan a compañeras del COPINH y de la Red Nacional de Defensoras. 21 June 2022.

123 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] HONDURAS / Criminalizan y detienen ilegalmente a integrantes del COPINH por la defensa y recuperación de sus territorios. 27 October 2020.

124 IM-Defensoras: [WHRD Alert] HONDURAS / Persecution, harassment and criminalization of Miriam Miranda, OFRANEH member and human rights defender, after protest at Public Prosecutor's Office on August 9, 2022. 30 August 2022.

125 IM-Defensoras: #WHRDAlert GUATEMALA / Campaign of disparagement, defamation and accusations against defenders and journalists who support the CICIG. 7 January 2019. IM-Defensoras: #UrgentAlert GUATEMALA / Government announces immediate rescission of accord signed with UN to create CICIG. 8 January 2019.

126 We began to document these types of attacks in 2020, thus the number of attacks corresponds to those registered between 2020 and 2022.


127 Ibid.




## PHYSICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND VERBAL VIOLENCE

**Between 2020 and 2022, we documented 2,104 attacks that included physical, psychological, or verbal violence against Mesoamerican women defenders.** Of these attacks, 814 (39%) relate to physical violence – that is, acts that deliberately seek to cause harm, injury, or suffering to our bodies by means of bodily force or a weapon. We also registered 784 cases of psychological violence (37%). This type of violence is related to various behaviors that send messages of control and intimidation with the aim of causing harm to our mental or emotional health. Some of the actions that we identified as psychological violence include intimidation, restrictions on movement and contact with support networks, humiliation, and threats to harm people in our close circle. Additionally, we identified 506 cases of verbal violence (24%). Acts of verbal violence are verbal expressions or discourses against us that are offensive, humiliating, discriminatory, and sexist – in the public and private sphere. These expressions can also entail psychological violence, especially when they are reiterated.

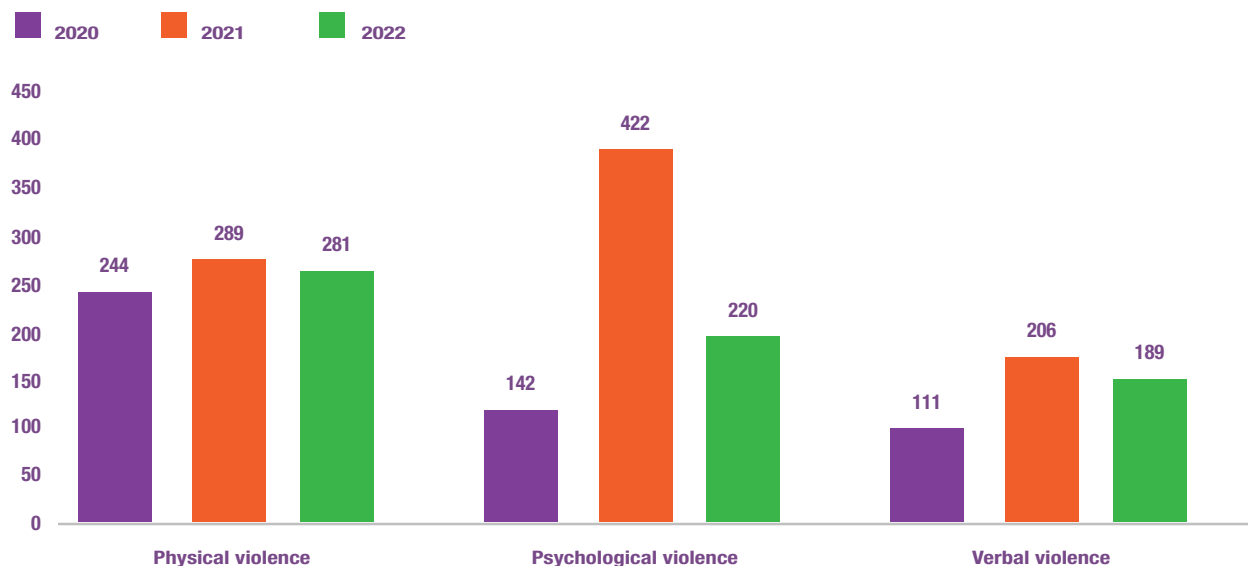
Figure 23 shows the number of cases registered for each of these types of violence by year. In this group of attacks, we noted:

 In Mexico and Guatemala, physical violence is the most prevalent (65% and 43%, respectively). Since 2020, we have registered a greater number of this type of attack in Mexico each year compared to the previous year.

 In Nicaragua and Honduras, psychological violence is the type of violence most documented (77% and 41% respectively). The year 2021 stands out as the year with the greatest registry of psychological violence against women defenders in Nicaragua (351).

 In El Salvador, 65% of violent attacks against women defenders involve verbal violence.

**Figure 23**  
Totals for physical, psychological, and verbal violence in Mesoamerica, by year

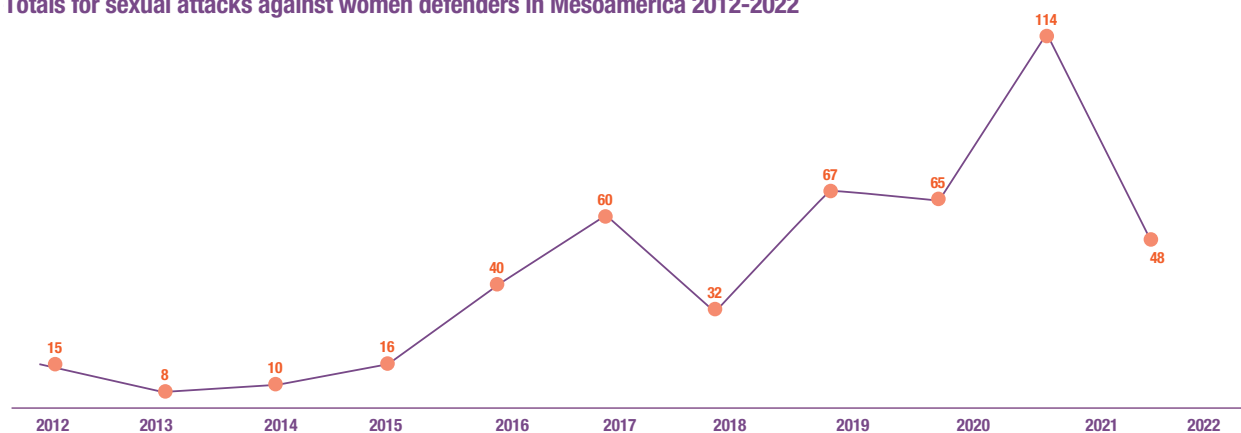




## SEXUAL VIOLENCE

One of the clearest expressions of patriarchy in the attacks we face is the use of sexual violence to exert control and power over our bodies, turning these actions into messages that transcend our collective bodies. **Between 2012 and 2022, we registered 475 sexual attacks** (Figure 24). We also documented other attacks that had sexual components, such as rape threats against us or against our family members, and smear campaigns that refer to our sexuality.

**Figure 24**  
**Totals for sexual attacks against women defenders in Mesoamerica 2012-2022**



**In 2020, we began registering three types of sexual violence separately: rape, sexual harassment, and sexual abuse.**<sup>128</sup> Just between 2020 and 2022, we registered 12 cases of rape, 60 cases of sexual harassment, and 155 cases of sexual abuse. We classify sexual harassment as attacks involving non-consensual or coercive verbal or physical contact with sexual connotations – whether in person or online, such as insinuations, comments, and unwanted explicit images. The cases of sexual abuse that we documented refer, for example, to non-consensual behaviors such as touching genitals or forced undressing.

Some of these instances of sexual violence were perpetrated by public authorities against women defenders who were victims of arbitrary detention and/or political prison, or against their family members. In Mexico in 2021, we identified a significant increase in our registry of sexual abuse, linked to the attacks that took place during the arbitrary detention of 95 students of the Mactumactza Rural School in Chiapas,<sup>129</sup> among whom were 74 women, primarily Indigenous of the Tsotsil, Tseltal, and Chol Peoples. During this detention, the compañeras were touched in their private areas and some were forced to get naked and do squats.

In Nicaragua, State agents and paramilitary forces committed systematic acts of sexual violence against the population, including women human rights defenders, which was documented as one of the specific crimes against humanity perpetrated in the context of the socio-political crisis.<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, in 2022 we registered degrading treatment and violations of children's rights that took place in some instances when political prisoners were allowed family visits, including forced undressing and inappropriate touching.<sup>131</sup>

<sup>128</sup> Registering these three types of sexual attacks separately began in 2020. They were previously registered as “sexual violence” and “sexual abuse”.

<sup>129</sup> IM-Defensoras. [WHRD Alert] MEXICO / 74 young women students, mainly indigenous, were attacked, detained for five days, and criminalized for defending the right to education in Chiapas. 24 May 2021.

<sup>130</sup> Tribunal of Conscience. Bernabeu et al., 2020.

<sup>131</sup> IM-Defensoras: “What would you do to hug your daughter?” Campaign launched in solidarity with Tamara Dávila, who may be on a hunger strike demanding to see her daughter. 19 August 2022.



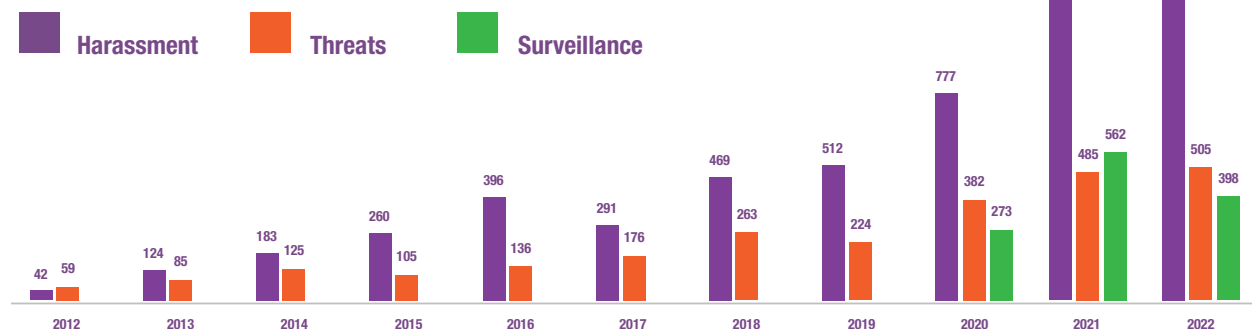
It is important to note that under-recording of this type of attack is frequent, due to the persistence of a patriarchal socio-cultural context full of beliefs, norms, and practices that normalize or minimize the severity of sexual violence. Moreover, sometimes people stay silent because they are ashamed, because they fear the assailant, or because they want to avoid stigmatization or re-victimization.

### HARASSMENT, SURVEILLANCE, AND THREATS

Figure 25 illustrates the historical evolution of our documentation of harassment, threats, and surveillance<sup>132</sup> of women defenders between 2012 and 2022. Although each type of attack involves specific means and ends, they frequently occur simultaneously in order to dissuade us from continuing our human rights defense work. Additional commonalities between these three types of attack are their low public visibility and that they are usually the first expressions of violence faced by women defenders before this escalates to other manifestations such as criminalization or femicide.

**Figure 25**

**Totals for harassment, threats, and surveillance of Mesoamerican women defenders 2012-2022**



Harassment is the most documented type of attack in all the countries in the region. We call “harassment” specific actions that occur in public, private, work, and digital spaces that create constant, systematic, or continued harassment of women defenders. These actions can manifest in different ways, like surveillance, warnings, intimidation, and persecution, among other forms of exerting control and power over our lives. **Between 2012 and 2022, we documented 5,391 harassments, which account for two of every ten attacks registered historically in the region.**

Starting in 2020, we began to separate the registration of surveillance, monitoring, and stalking of women defenders’ day-to-day lives. **In three years (2020-2022), we identified 1,233 acts of surveillance**, characterized as public and physical observation, investigation, or illegal interference in our privacy by actors linked to public security agencies, State investigation and intelligence bodies, parapolice agents, or private individuals.

For example, in Nicaragua during 2021, we registered an escalation of harassment, surveillance, and territorial control

<sup>132</sup> We began to register this type of attack in 2020.

against women activists, journalists, and human rights defenders on emblematic dates like the anniversary of the April 2018 social uprising<sup>133</sup> and during the false electoral process that took place in November.<sup>134</sup> Police harassment of Nicaraguan women defenders has intensified and become systematic, and it is accompanied by restrictions on the freedom of movement and by surveillance, persecution, and illegal home retentions.

**Regionally, we documented 2,545 threats between 2012 and 2022.** Threats are warnings that harm will be caused to our physical, psychological, or moral integrity, to our reputation, or to our property; they may be directed at us, at our family, or at people close to us. Their aim is to generate fear, silence our voices, and stop our human rights defense work.

In recent years in Mexico, we have documented threats of forced disappearances made by police agents (“the same thing will happen to you as with the 43”) and death threats made by unknown persons. For example, unidentified people wrote, “you’re next” on the walls of woman defender Greace Lugo’s home, using the blood of her pet that was found dead.<sup>135</sup> Unidentified persons also left bags with pieces of animal meat and the message “next time it’s yours” at the offices of our sisters from Consorcio Oaxaca in Mexico.<sup>136</sup> In Honduras, we registered intimidation and threats of collective evictions made by the police during demonstrations,<sup>137</sup> and by heavily armed personnel from private security companies against women defenders and their families who were carrying out a legitimate process of reclaiming territory.<sup>138</sup> We also documented online threats, like the distribution of “lists of feminists to attack” in social media in Mexico,<sup>139</sup> and social media messages in El Salvador targeting various members of feminist collectives where they were warned that they would be “hunted down one by one.”<sup>140</sup>

## **SMEAR CAMPAIGNS**

**Since the beginning of our registry in 2012 until 2022, we documented 3,556 smear campaigns against Mesoamerican women defenders.** This type of attack deals with strategies that use social media and communications media to delegitimize our work defending human rights through actions that erode our public image, reputation, and dignity. They include, for example, defamation, spreading fake or manipulated information, and disseminating rumors or narratives to discredit our work. These campaigns are sometimes linked to other attacks, like expressions of hate on social media and open public incitement to violence against us.

Figure 26 shows the evolution of our registration of smear campaigns throughout time. We added new variables in 2020 that allow us to identify the specific manifestations of these campaigns, such as questioning or challenging our credibility, leadership, morality, or professionalism; and the dissemination of fake news or false information or data like images, videos, or documents related to our private life (sexual, family, or personal).

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133 IM-Defensoras: [WHRD Alert] NICARAGUA / Nicaraguan women activists, journalists and human rights defenders experience prolonged situation of police harassment, surveillance and illegal home retentions. 29 April 2021.

134 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] NICARAGUA / Comunidad internacional debe mantenerse vigilante ante la escalada represiva contra las defensoras de derechos humanos en el contexto de la farsa electoral de este 7 de noviembre. 6 November 2021.

135 IM-Defensoras: [WHRD Alert] MEXICO / Death threats, harassment, and intimidation against Greace Lugo. 18 January 2022.

136 IM-Defensoras: [Urgent Alert] MEXICO / Explicit death threat left at door of Consorcio Oaxaca office. 15 June 2020.

137 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] HONDURAS / Agentes de la Policía Nacional, vigilan, hostigan y amenazan a compañeras del COPINH y de la Red Nacional de Defensoras. 21 June 2022.

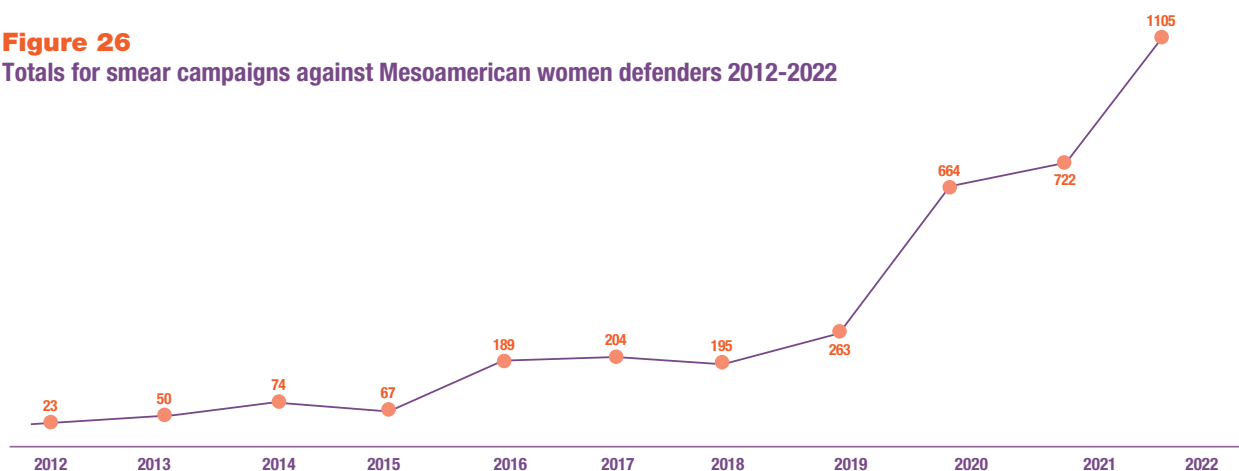
138 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] HONDURAS / Hombres con armas de alto calibre mantienen bajo zozobra a más de 60 defensoras. 26 May 2022.

139 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] MÉXICO / Persecución, amenazas, agresiones físicas, virtuales y patrimoniales contra activistas feministas del Estado de Sonora. 16 November 2020.

140 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] EL SALVADOR / Integrantes de la “Colectiva Amorales” y “Majes Emputadas” reciben amenazas de muerte, violencia sexual, asalto a sus viviendas y centros de reunión mediante mensajes a grupos de WhatsApp que han sido hackeados. 15 March 2022.



**Figure 26**  
**Totals for smear campaigns against Mesoamerican women defenders 2012-2022**



In Guatemala, for example, the smear campaigns documented against women defenders included the dissemination of defamatory information through social media against various women defenders who publicly positioned themselves in support of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and denounced abuses against the commission.<sup>141</sup> We also registered smear campaigns and threats on social media against Guatemalan human rights defenders and journalists who work to raise the visibility of violence against women.<sup>142</sup> In El Salvador, an example of this type of violence is the stigmatization with misogynist insults and hate speech against women defenders perpetrated by officials close to President Nayib Bukele.<sup>143</sup>

## DIGITAL ATTACKS

In recent years, and especially after the start of the syndemic, we have noted with worry the consolidation of digital space as a scenario of attacks where anonymity facilitates impunity in acts of violence and misogyny against us. Digital attacks present a significant challenge due to their novelty and complexity as a form of attack. Registering them requires understanding how they function in the different contexts in which women defenders and our organizations live and work. Importantly, the situation also challenges us to develop and strengthen our own narratives that go beyond the technical and colonial language imposed by the new technologies and the dominant power system represented therein.

**Between 2020 and 2022, we documented 6,048 digital attacks at the regional level (Table 5).**

We use the term digital attacks for all the forms of violence that women defenders and our organizations and collectives face electronically (telephones, online platforms, computers), virtually (social media, electronic mail, web pages, or virtual storage spaces), and in communications media (television, radio, or online) – all with the aim of attacking us, intimidating us, disarticulating us, or threatening us. Of the total number of such attacks documented at the regional level, the vast majority were perpetrated through social media. These corporate-controlled virtual platforms saturate, manipulate, misinform, and they promote polarization, hate culture, and political demobilization.

141 IM-Defensoras: #WHRDAAlert GUATEMALA / Campaign of disparagement, defamation and accusations against defenders and journalists who support the CICIG. 7 January 2019. IM-Defensoras: #UrgentAlert GUATEMALA / Government announces immediate rescission of accord signed with UN to create CICIG. 8 January 2019.

142 IM-Defensoras: [WHRD Alert] GUATEMALA / Smear campaign, threats and harassment in social networks against journalists who make violence against women visible. 18 September 2020.

143 IM-Defensoras: #WHRDAAlert EL SALVADOR / Government backers launch smear campaign against women's rights defender. 22 February 2020.




**Table 5**  
Total number of digital attacks against Mesoamerican women defenders by year and by country 2020-2022

	Mexico	Guatemala	Honduras	El Salvador	Nicaragua	TOTAL
<b>2020</b>	<b>563</b>	<b>450</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>1429</b>
<b>2021</b>	<b>486</b>	<b>426</b>	<b>745</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>453</b>	<b>2219</b>
<b>2022</b>	<b>594</b>	<b>1500</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>2400</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1643</b>	<b>2376</b>	<b>919</b>	<b>391</b>	<b>719</b>	<b>6048</b>

The most common types of digital attacks regionally are harassment, smear campaigns, disseminating false information, threats, and cyberbullying.<sup>144</sup> Additionally, for women who defend a life free from violence, women’s rights, sexual and reproductive rights, and LGBTTTIQ+ rights, we saw a specific pattern of attacks, such as disseminating intimate images, doxing,<sup>145</sup> viral hate, and questioning their morality, credibility, or leadership.


Digital attacks are primarily perpetrated by unknown online users, members of religious or fundamental groups, and – in the case of Nicaragua and El Salvador – by members of political parties. We noted that attacks perpetrated through phone calls or messages to cellular phones (although not exclusively; we also saw this in attacks on social media) often include sexually explicit messages, such as rape threats against us or our family members, and/or misogynist expressions that make reference to our sexual orientation or gender identity, our age, or our appearance.


 In Mexico, we documented online attacks primarily against women journalists, women defenders of the right to information and freedom of expression, and women defenders of the right to a life free from violence. In addition to social media channels, assailants in this country use phone calls and communications media to threaten and disseminate smear campaigns or false information against women defenders and journalists.<sup>146</sup>


144 Generally understood as “sending intimidating or threatening messages” with an offensive tone, either through private messages or comments in public sharing platforms or social media. UN Women. *Types of violence against women and girls*.


145 “Investigating and disseminating information that allows the identification of a person without their consent, often with the intention of gaining access or contact with the person for harassment or other harmful purposes.” TEDIC. *La violencia digital es real. Types of gender violence facilitated by technology*.

146 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] MÉXICO / Campaña de descrédito, difamación y hostigamiento en redes sociales contra Lidia y Yizni Granados Corral. 2 October 2019.

 Through the documentation of attacks conducted by UDEFEGUA in Guatemala, we identified a large number of personal online harassments in 2022, perpetrated foremost by unknown online users and members of conservative and fundamentalist religious groups. This is the case for online attacks (smear and stigmatization campaigns, hate speech, and incitement to violence) perpetrated by Ricardo Mendez Ruiz and Raul Falla, directors of the Foundation Against Terrorism, an organization that protects military personnel accused of corruption and human rights violations, which “has become a legal and political arm of judicial harassment to the operators of Justice.”<sup>147,148</sup>

 In El Salvador, we documented an increase in personal attacks in 2021. The majority of these were online violence and cyberbullying against human rights defenders and activists. For example, feminists and women defenders belonging to the Amoraes collective and Majes Emputadas received death threats and threats of sexual violence and assaults on their homes and meeting centers through messages in WhatsApp groups that had been hacked.<sup>149</sup> Women defenders in El Salvador affirm that online violence in the country is State violence,<sup>150</sup> since the majority of these attacks are committed by authorities and public servants. The attackers include important authorities in the Executive Branch and the Legislative Assembly who single out, stigmatize, and target women defenders, taking advantage of their public role and even using their official social media accounts. Another worrisome trend is the instrumentalization of regulations that legitimize online harassment and surveillance against journalists and human rights defenders, such as the inclusion of the concept of a “digital undercover agent” in the Criminal Procedures Code.<sup>151</sup>

 In Honduras, women defenders of land, territory, and natural resources receive the most number of digital attacks. In this context, the main suspects behind these attacks are corporations and executives of extractivist corporations. We also identified that, in addition to attacks through social media, women defenders are often threatened through telephone calls. This is possibly due to difficulties accessing the internet in rural territories.

 In Nicaragua, we documented smear campaigns and digital attacks such as hacking<sup>152</sup> and doxing<sup>153</sup> of women defenders opposed to the government. While these attacks are perpetrated by unknown persons, we identified as suspects public authorities, political parties, and – recently – online users aligned with fundamentalist or conservative groups that particularly target women defenders who are openly feminist. Some of the women defenders attacked are former political prisoners like Nelly Roque, a woman defender who, in a context of rising attacks against her (including threats, publication of personal information, and the use of degrading language) had her social media accounts (Facebook and Instagram) hacked in June 2020.<sup>154</sup>

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147 [Attacks and criminalization of justice operators in Guatemala as part of the strategy to dismantle the fight against corruption and impunity. Contribution to the Fourth Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review of the United Nations Human Rights Council 42nd Session on Guatemala, July 2022.](#)

148 IM-Defensoras: [\[WHRD Alert\] GUATEMALA / Congressmen and anti-rights groups file criminal complaint against Incidejoven and other social networking sites for sharing information about safe abortions on September 28th, 30 September 2020](#)

149 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] EL SALVADOR / Integrantes de la “Colectiva Amoraes” y “Majes Emputadas” reciben amenazas de muerte, violencia sexual, asalto a sus viviendas y centros de reunión mediante mensajes a grupos de WhatsApp que han sido hackeados.](#) 15 March 2022.

150 IM-Defensoras: [\[VIDEO STATEMENT\] In El Salvador, digital violence is State violence.](#) 26 October 2022.

151 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] EL SALVADOR / Inclusión de la figura del “agente encubierto digital” en el Código Procesal Penal supone grave amenaza para las defensoras de derechos humanos.](#) 8 February 2022

152 Unauthorized access to women defenders’ email accounts, social media accounts, or web sites.

153 [“Investigating and disseminating information that allows the identification of a person without their consent, often with the intention of gaining access or contact with the person for harassment or other harmful purposes.”](#) TEDIC. La violencia digital es real. Types of gender violence facilitated by technology.

154 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] NICARAGUA / Campaña de desprestigio contra la activista política y excarcelada política Nelly Roque.](#) 29 June 2020.

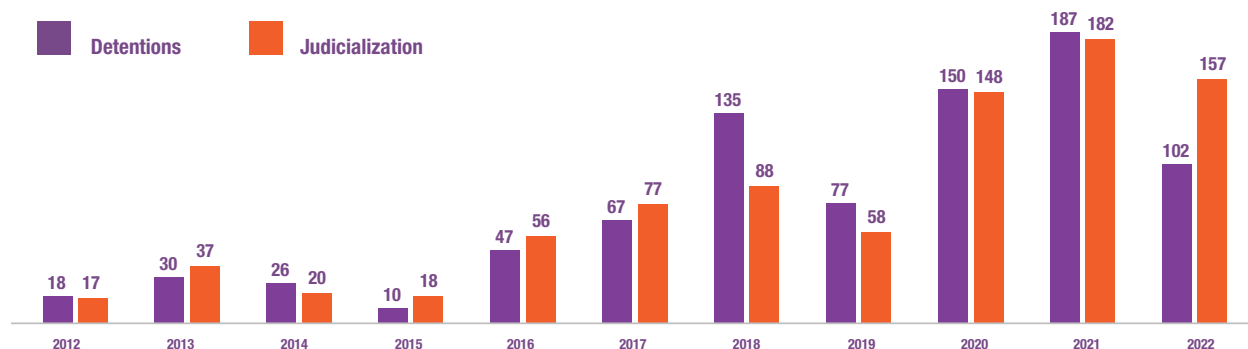


## CRIMINALIZATION

Many of the attacks we experience are part of broader processes of criminalization of human rights defense work. **Between 2012 and 2022, we registered 849 arbitrary arrests and 858 launches of criminal, fiscal, or administrative investigations or trials in which the charges are not supported by reality or are clearly false** (Figure 27). Considering the testimony and perspectives of sister defenders who have been criminalized, IM-Defensoras affirms that “while a legal component exists, criminalization goes beyond the legal sphere and encompasses an entire process that begins with incidents of stigmatization, harassment, and violence, followed by judicialization and, on many occasions, the excessive and unjustified prolongation thereof ... up to the enforcement of sentences that in some cases involve criminal prosecution.”<sup>155</sup>

**Figure 27**

**Totals for detentions and judicialization of Mesoamerican women defenders in Mesoamerica, by year 2012-2022**



As a systematic process, criminalization seeks not only to silence leaders that challenge powerful private and State actors, but also to delegitimize the work of defending human rights in the eyes of the community and society as a whole.<sup>156</sup> In addition, we have noted how criminalization processes depict the work of defending human rights as a crime that is punished differently when it is “committed” by rural, Indigenous, or Afro-descendent women.

**Table 6**

**Total detentions and criminalization of Mesoamerican women defenders by country 2012-2022**

Country	Detention	Judicialization
Mexico	351	317
Guatemala	88	189
El Salvador	15	19
Honduras	129	212
Nicaragua	266	121
Mesoamerica	771	858

<sup>155</sup> IM-Defensoras: *Persecuted for defending and resisting: Criminalization of Women Human Rights Defenders in Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua*. Chapter on Nicaragua. P. 16. 2022.

<sup>156</sup> IM-Defensoras: Internal document on Criminalization in Mexico. 2023.

With concern, we highlight the criminalization of Kenia Hernandez in Mexico<sup>157</sup> – a feminist lawyer and Amuzga Indigenous woman defender, participant in various struggles and social movements in the state of Guerrero, member of the Movement for the Freedom of Political Prisoners, and leader of the Libertarian Collective Zapata Vive. Kenia has been deprived of her liberty since October 2020 and is currently facing 11 legal proceedings against her in retaliation for her work,<sup>158</sup> all marked by irregularities such as the denial of her right to participate in hearings in person and her right to interpretation into the Amuzgo language. Additionally, her family has been prevented from visiting her on several occasions.

The documented case affecting the largest number of people in Mexico concerns the massive arbitrary detention in Chiapas of the Indigenous young women from the Mactumactza Rural School who were defending the right to education.<sup>159</sup> Other cases of criminalization in the country include those of sister defenders who defend women's right to a life free from violence, especially in reprisal for their participation in feminist demonstrations, and those of women journalists who defend the right to information and freedom of expression. In relation to the women journalists, in recent years we noted the illegitimate use of the legal term “gender-based political violence against women” and of the law to ensure Women’s Access to a Life Free from Violence to file charges against journalists who publish articles critical of women public officials and women candidates in elections. These charges often include threats of jail time and economic fines for journalists.

In Honduras, Garifuna and Indigenous women defenders are particularly criminalized during collective actions resisting illegal and/or illegitimate evictions from their ancestral territories.<sup>160</sup> In recent years, legal proceedings have been launched against members of the Lenca Indigenous communities Tierras del Padre<sup>161,162</sup> and El Achotal, both organized by the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH).<sup>163</sup> Women defenders of Garifuna ancestral territories in the communities of San Juan<sup>164</sup> and Punta Gorda also face legal charges<sup>165</sup> as part of the constant attacks and persecution of the Garifuna Peoples organized within the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH).

In Nicaragua, as part of the totalitarian turn the government of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo took since April 2018, criminalization has been one of the main tools to pursue dissidents and women human rights defenders.<sup>166</sup> The arbitrary use of criminal statutes and the application of laws passed since 2020 for the purpose of repression<sup>167</sup> have expanded the list of people imprisoned for political motives, including feminists, women defenders, and opposition leaders.<sup>168</sup> These people have been subjected to criminal proceedings marked by irregularities, lack of due process, violation of the right to a defense, and long periods of deprivation of liberty – in pretrial detention or serving a sentence – during which mistreatment and torture remain constant.<sup>169</sup>

157 IM-Defensoras: Internal document on Criminalization in Mexico. 2023.

158 IM-Defensoras: [Mexico: Three years after her arbitrary detention, we demand the release of Kenia Hernández](#). 23 October 2023.

159 IM-Defensoras: [\[WHRD Alert\] MEXICO / 74 young women students, mainly indigenous, were attacked, detained for five days, and criminalized for defending the right to education in Chiapas](#). 24 May 2021.

160 IM-Defensoras: Internal document on Criminalization in Honduras. 2023.

161 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] HONDURAS / Juzgados de Tegucigalpa ordenan desalojo contra la Comunidad Indígena Lenca Tierras del Padre.](#), 10 November 2021.

162 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] HONDURAS / Juzgados de Tegucigalpa reactivan orden de desalojo contra la Comunidad Indígena Lenca Tierras del Padre](#). 8 February 2022.

163 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] HONDURAS / Criminalizan y detienen ilegalmente a integrantes del COPINH por la defensa y recuperación de sus territorios](#). 27 October 2020.

164 Red Nacional de Defensoras de DDHH de Honduras: [Persecución judicial contra comunidad garífuna San Juan Durugübuti – Red Nacional de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos en Honduras](#). 7 April 2022.

165 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] HONDURAS / Criminalizan a defensoras garífunas tras detenerlas en violento e ilegal desalojo de la comunidad de Punta Gorda, Roatán](#). 9 November 2022.

166 IM-Defensoras: [Persecuted for defending and resisting: Criminalization of Women Human Rights Defenders in Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua](#). Chapter on Nicaragua. P. 16. 2022.

167 The laws approved since October 2020 and used to criminalize people in the opposition include the Foreign Agents Regulation Law; the Special Law on Cybercrimes; and the Law for the Defense of the People’s Rights to Independence, Sovereignty, and Self-determination for Peace.

168 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] NICARAGUA / \[Alerta Defensoras\] NICARAGUA / Policía nacional detiene a la defensora feminista Tamara Dávila y allanan ilegalmente su casa](#). 13 June 2021.

169 IM-Defensoras: [\[WHRD Alert\] NICARAGUA / Feminist political prisoners face torture and abuse](#). 16 December 2021.

In Guatemala, we registered several cases of criminalization in 2020 against women who defend freedom of expression. One example is the Mayan K'iche communicator Anastasia Mejia, who was detained and accused of sedition, assault with specific aggravating circumstances, and aggravated arson and robbery – all due to her journalistic coverage of protests against the corruption of the mayor of the Joyabaj municipality.<sup>170</sup> We also highlight the systematic plan of persecuting human rights defenders, which has intensified in the country since 2019 with the goal of criminalizing those who struggle against impunity and corruption. On 8 June 2022, the National Office for the Prevention of Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment filed a complaint against woman defender and former Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz, accusing her of “crimes of abuse of authority, torture, and usurpation of powers.”<sup>171</sup> This accusation came after a series of attacks against Claudia Paz y Paz, which we started registering in 2014, including harassment, smear campaigns, dissemination of false information, and hate speech.

It is important to note that laws were adopted in recent years throughout the region aimed at criminalizing human rights defense. Laws criminalizing the work of journalists and communications workers were approved, such as the cyber-crimes laws in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and the wiretap law in El Salvador. Regulations have also been enacted that use narratives of “security” and “economic development” to institutionalize the persecution and criminalization of land and territory defenders. In Honduras, the 2021 criminal justice reform used the fight against organized crime as an excuse to toughen penalties for the crimes of usurpation and forced displacement, both of which are being used to criminalize the defense of land and territory. In Guatemala, we raised alarm about the arbitrary detention of Maya Q'eqchi' woman defender Maria Magdalena Cuc Choc in 2018 and her subsequent sentencing for aggravated usurpation in 2022,<sup>172</sup> exposing how the judicial system privileges extractive corporations that steal the lands of Q'eqchi communities in the Izabal region of the country. In practice, these laws are tools for States to protect the interests of oligarchies and foreign extractive corporations, to the detriment of their communities' wellbeing.

## **KILLINGS AND ATTEMPTED KILLINGS**

Being killed is the last and most serious attack that women defenders in Mesoamerica suffer. These are not isolated events, but rather the culmination of a series of previous attacks that went unpunished, and which often include harassment, surveillance, and threats by persons who are close to us or unknown perpetrators, in the community or in the digital sphere. Women human rights defenders protect a broad range of rights in our territories; being killed is an irreplaceable loss for our communities.

**Between 2012 and 2023, 200 sister human rights defenders were killed in Mesoamerica. During this same period, we documented 228 attempted killings**, which means that if the perpetrators' intentions had succeeded, we would actually speak of 428 sister defenders annihilated for fighting for a better world.

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170 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Urgente\] GUATEMALA / Vulnerando el debido proceso suspenden audiencia judicial de la comunicadora maya K'iche Anastasia Mejia, quien seguirá en prisión preventiva al menos 20 días más.](#) | IM-Defensoras. 8 October 2020.

171 IM-Defensoras: [\[WHRD Alert\] GUATEMALA / Defender Claudia Paz criminalized for investigating grave human rights violations and struggling against corruption as Guatemala's Attorney General.](#) 15 June 2022.

172 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] GUATEMALA / Condenan a 2 años de cárcel conmutables a la defensora maya Q'eqchi María Choc.](#) 30 June 2022.



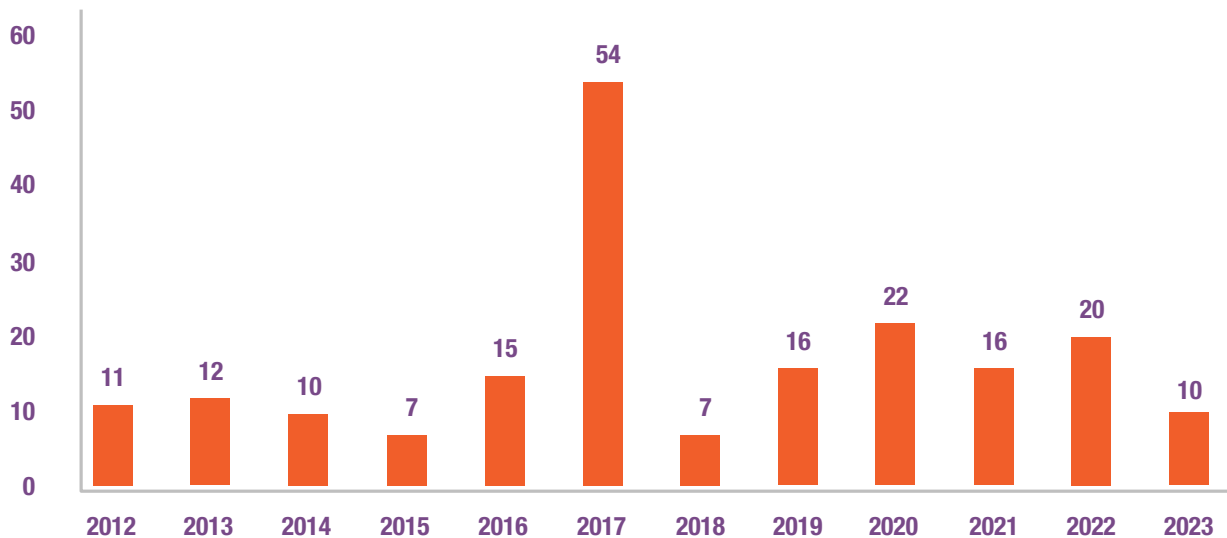
**Table 7**  
Killings and attempted killings of women defenders in Mesoamerica 2012-2023

Country	Total killings	Total attempted killings
Guatemala*	76	32
Mexico	73	63
Honduras	36	119
El Salvador	10	3
Nicaragua	5	11
Mesoamerica	200	228
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>428</b>	

\*We do not have data from Guatemala for 2023

The biggest number of killings were registered in 2017, reaching 57 women defenders who lost their lives (Figure 28). This is connected to the negligence of the Guatemalan State authorities that caused who were demanding their rights and denouncing serious violence at the Virgen de la Asuncion children's home where they were housed.<sup>173</sup>

**Figure 28**  
Total killings of women defenders in Mesoamerica, by year 2012-2023\*



\*We do not have data from Guatemala for 2023

**Between 2020 and 2022, we registered the killing of 11 women defenders of land and territory (five in Mexico, four in Honduras, and two in Guatemala), and 8 women defenders of truth, justice, and reparations**

173 IM-Defensoras. #WHRDAIAlert GUATEMALA / Mistreatment, Sexual exploitation, Extrajudicial execution and femicide against The Interns of the Virgin of the Assumption Safe Home. 11 March 2017.

(seven in Mexico and one in Guatemala). In Honduras, many of these killings took place during evictions of Indigenous communities from their ancestral lands and in contexts of struggle against extractive corporations. In Mexico, several of these killings were confirmed after the woman defender was disappeared for several days.

**Four out of every ten (40%) killings documented during the last three years of the period covered by this report – between 2020 and 2022 – were against trans women defenders. During this period, we identified 23 transfemicides in the region,** characterized by the torture and viciousness committed by the perpetrators: stoning, dragging by horses, beating them to death, stripping them naked, and with signs of sexual violence, among others. We also identified the re-victimization of the women defenders who were killed as authorities and communications media failed to recognize their gender identity, and due to investigations that were tainted by the assumption and stigma that they were sex workers or having ties to gangs or drug trafficking.<sup>174</sup> A pattern in these crimes was the prior assaults or threats – including death threats – that were regularly reported to the authorities without the latter following established procedures to investigate the incidents and protect the complainants.

Transfemicides are patriarchal hate crimes. They are the final manifestation of a chain of incidents of structural violence against those who subvert the binary, heteronormative, cisnormative sex-gender mandates.

The killings of women defenders in all their diversity, the viciousness with which they are perpetrated, and the impunity in which they remain have direct repercussions on women defenders' families, communities, organizations, and territories in resistance. The objective is not only to shut down leaders but also to set an example for other women defenders in order to weaken and eliminate the power of social movements. We have documented that killings and attempted killings are at times perpetrated inside the woman defender's home or nearby, in the presence of her family members – including minors – and other persons close to her, creating a profound emotional impact on those who remain, in addition to the impact of the loss.

Femicides and transfemicides of women defenders are sometimes committed by their partners, ex-partners, or persons close to them, which shows the intersection of human rights defense conducted in the public sphere with sexist violence that takes place in the so-called private sphere. The climate of impunity in the region regarding attacks in general and, in particular, the failure to solve the killings of women defenders, conveys a message from the State of permissiveness, approval, and complicity towards the perpetrators, generating defenselessness and anguish among women defenders, our families and communities, and the population as a whole.



174 IM-Defensoras: TRANSCENDING HATRED AND SYNDemics. Transfemicides of women defenders and the struggle for justice in Mesoamerica between 2020 and 2022. 2022.





### **THE SYNDOMIC DUE TO COVID: A TURNING POINT IN THE SITUATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN DEFENDERS**

The syndemic due to COVID-19 revealed the structural crisis that already existed in our region and our countries' vulnerability during a health emergency that took place in a context of neoliberal privatization and weakening of all public systems. The coronavirus exposed inequality, overcrowding, and precariousness in the living conditions of the vast majority of the population; the collapse of basic public services such as access to water and healthcare; dependence on informal labor; violence against women, girls, and adolescents in the home; and abuses of power by governments in the region.



## WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS KILLED 2012-2023

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### EL SALVADOR

Tania Vásquez  
Francela Méndez Rodríguez  
Angélica Miriam Quintanilla Hernández  
Reina Vidal  
Dina Yaseni Puente  
Jade Camila Díaz  
María Antonia Sánchez  
Zashy Zuley del Cid  
Bernarda Elizabeth  
De León de Chávez  
Marleni del Carmen Reyes

### GUATEMALA

Feliciana Raymundo Matom  
Feliciana Ceto Matom  
Petrona Moran  
Sandra Saquil Nájera  
Blanca Rosa Gonzalez Munguía  
Kira Zuleta Enríquez Mena  
Santa Alvarado  
Lea Marie De León Marroquín  
Patricia Samayoa  
Marilyn Topacio Reynoso  
Evelyn Robles  
Helen Esmeralda Kawai López  
Lindaura Aceituno  
Blanca Estela Asturias  
Brenda Marleni Estrada Tambito  
Ana Nohemí Morales Galindo  
Ana Roselia Pérez Junay  
Ana Rubidia Chocooj Chutá  
Ashely Gabriela Méndez Ramírez  
Ashley Angelie Rodríguez Hernández  
Candelaria Melendrez Hernández  
Celia María López Aranda  
Daria Dalila López Meda  
Daylin Analí Domingo Martínez  
Estefany Sucely Véliz Pablo  
Grindy Jazmín Carías López  
Grisna Yamileth Cu Ulán  
Indira Jarisa Pelicó Orellana  
Iris Yodenis León Pérez  
Jaqueline Paola Catinac López  
Jilma Sucely Carías López  
Josselyn Marisela García Flores  
Keila Rebeca López Salguero  
Kimberly Mishel Palencia Ortíz  
Lilian Andrea Gómez Arceno  
Luisa Fernanda Toj González  
Madelyn Patricia Hernández Hernández  
Mari Carmen Ramírez Melgar  
Mayra Haydeé Chután Urías  
Melani Yanira De León Palencia  
Milenie Eloisa Rac Hernández

Mirza Rosmery López Tojil  
Nancy Paola Vela García  
Rosa Julia Espino Tobar  
Rosalina Victoria Ramírez Pérez  
Sara Nohemí Lima Ascón  
Sarvia Isel Barrientos Reyes  
Silvia Milexi Rivera Sánchez  
Siona Hernández García  
Skarlet Yajaira Pérez Jiménez  
Wendy Anahí Vividor Ramírez  
Yemmi Aracely Ramírez Siquín  
Yohana Desiré Cuy Urizar  
Yosbeli Jubitza Merari Maquín Gómez  
Yoselín Beatriz Ventura Pérez  
Yoselin Yamilet Barahona Beltrán  
Laura Leonor Vásquez Pineda  
Candelaria May Cuc  
Francisca Aguilar Carrillo  
Brenda Dominguez  
Ana Greisy López  
Juana Ramírez Santiago  
Juana Raimundo  
Paulina Cruz  
Diana Isabel Hernández Juárez  
Dominga Ramos Soloj  
Wicha Sandoval  
María Fernanda Pérez  
María Ramírez  
Cecy Caricia Ixpatá  
Andrea González  
Jennifer Meléndez  
Samantha Argueta  
Avigail Morales  
Octavila Sánchez Vásquez  
Nesly Consuegra Monterroso

### HONDURAS

María Enriqueta Matute  
Mireya Mendoza  
Margarita Murillo  
Alma Janeth Díaz Ortega  
Uva Herlinda Castellanos  
Marlene Banegas  
Patricia Eufragio Banegas  
Angy Ferreira Midence  
Gloria Carolina Hernández Vásquez  
Elkin Amador  
Lesbia Yaneth Urquía  
Berta Isabel Cáceres Flores  
Paola Barraza  
Sherly Montoya  
María Digna Montero  
Belkis García  
Mirna Suazo  
Maricruz Tolvez  
Bessy Ferrera

## WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS KILLED 2012-2023

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Santi de la Galaxia  
Stefani Yolani López  
Karla Ignacia Piota Martínez  
Iris Argentina Álvarez Chávez  
Luz Clarita Zúniga  
Laura Carolina Valentín Dolmo  
Scarlett Campbell  
Mía Colluchi  
Cristal López  
Francisca Aracaely Zavala  
Alejandra Ortiz  
Valery Pereira  
Celenia Bonilla  
Thalia Rodriguez  
Juana María Martínez  
Soraya Álvarez  
Mónica Alondra Santos Munguía

### MÉXICO


Agnes Torres Hernández  
Regina Martínez  
Mary Edy - Fabiola Osorio Bernáldez  
Durvin Ramírez Díaz  
Juventina Villa Mojica  
Renata Espinoza Reyes  
Rocío Mesino Mesino  
Irma Ascencio Arenas  
Ana Lilia Gatica  
María Concepción Martínez Medina  
Gari Gómez Bastida  
Sandra Luz Hernández  
Marlén Valdez García  
María del Rosario Fuentes  
Nelva Edilia Sánchez López  
Norma Angélica Bruno Román  
Marjorie Xolio Meléndez  
Nadia Dominique Vera Pérez  
Alessa Flores  
Tania Nadshiely Verónica Luna  
Zamira Esther Bautista Luna  
Cornelia San Juan Guevara Guerrero  
Anabel Flores Salazar  
Jennifer López  
Metztli Omixóchitl Sarabia Reyna  
Miriam Elizabeth Rodríguez Martínez  
Emma Gabriela Molina  
Miroslava Breach Velducea  
María Guadalupe Hernández Flores  
Guadalupe Campanur Tapia  
Leslie Pamela Montenegro del Real  
Estelina López Gómez  
Eulodia Lilia Díaz Ortíz  
Norma Sarabia Garduza  
María Cristina Vázquez Chavarría  
Zenaida Pulido Lombera  
Raquel Padilla Ramos


Isabel Cabanillas  
Paulina Gómez  
Karla Valentina Camarena del Castillo  
María Elena Ferral  
María Elizabeth Montañó Fernández  
Jeanine Huerta López  
Mireya Rodríguez Lemus  
Carmen Vázquez Bueno  
Rosario Zavala Aguilar  
María de Jesús Gómez Vega  
Aranza Ramos Gurrola  
Aline Sánchez  
Marisol Cuadras  
Lourdes Maldonado  
Ana Luisa Garduño Juárez  
Véronica Guerrero  
Patricia Susana Rivera Reyes  
Yesenia Mollinedo  
Sheila Johana García  
Cecilia Monzón  
Camila Bolocco  
Luz Raquel Padilla Gutiérrez  
Brenda Jazmín Beltrán Jaime  
Rosario Lilian Rodríguez  
Jasibhe Natalie Díaz Morales  
Blanca Esmeralda Gallardo  
María Carmela Vázquez Ramírez  
Karen Sánchez Álvarez  
Grisell Pérez Rivera  
Ivanna Pantoja  
Teresa Mayaguel Ramírez  
Zulema Guadalupe Ramíre  
Esthela Guadalupe Estrada Ávila  
Melissa Abigail Rodríguez Durán  
Maria Fernanda Rejón Molina

### NICARAGUA

Celedonia Zalazar Point  
Bernicia Dixon Peralta  
Anahis Contrera  
Cheilyng Rachelly Munguía Sovalvarro  
Britney Olivas Herrera


As we detailed in our report “The Crisis Was Already Here: Mesoamerican WHRDS and COVID-19”,<sup>175</sup> **the syndemic provided the perfect excuse to continue weakening our countries’ already fragile democratic institutions, and to strengthen authoritarian policies.** Through feminist sorority networks and Indigenous Peoples’ wisdom to safeguard health, women human rights defenders played a fundamental role during 2020 and 2021 in confronting the crisis and supporting the most vulnerable collectives. However, our voices and experiences were not included in decision-making about the strategies to respond to the health crisis. On the contrary, public authorities took advantage of the context to restrict and limit human rights defense actions and mobilizations. The measures that led to an increase in our registry of attacks during the syndemic included:

 The “State of calamity” imposed in Guatemala, which entailed the “total closure” of the country, a curfew, prohibition of meetings, and restriction of interdepartmental mobility, leaving thousands of communities isolated.

 The suspension of constitutional rights and guarantees in Honduras by decree, including freedom of expression and the right to the inviolability of the home.

 In El Salvador, the government decreed a “State of quarantine”, restricting movement and gatherings. Arbitrary detentions in “containment centers” lasting more than 30 days were documented, which also affected human rights defenders.<sup>176</sup>

 Authorities in the Mexican states of Jalisco, Puebla, Oaxaca, and Yucatan implemented repressive measures that led to attacks against human rights defenders, journalists, and the general public.

 In Nicaragua, the authorities’ denial of COVID-19 led to the absence of measures to combat it and to the infringement of the rights to information and health, with attacks on those who contradicted the official version or on people in the public sector who tried to take preventive measures against the disease.

All these restrictions on women defenders and our communities imposed by the State apparatus were fertile ground for weakening our resistance and expanding dispossession and violence against our bodies and territories at the hands of extractive corporations, organized crime, and individual assailants. **Thus, 2020 and 2021 showed an exacerbated growth in our registry of attacks. In 2020, we documented 4,745 attacks, representing twice as many attacks as those registered in 2019.** In a context of restrictions on collective actions and increasing criminalization, the biggest variance was seen in the registration of personal attacks.

In 2021, we registered 6,943 attacks, 46% more than the previous year. Each country’s reality was different – from total restrictions in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador (where the greatest abuses were committed), to partial restrictions in Mexico (especially by some state and municipal governments). Nevertheless, many of the registered attacks are directly or indirectly linked to authoritarian social control measures implemented by governments at different levels (national/federal, state/departmental, or local/municipal) with the health emergency as an excuse.

Today, the syndemic seems an issue of the past; however, the advance of online and physical control and surveillance measures and restrictions of movement imposed by States – far from being reversed – have been consolidated as the true new normal in the region.

175 IM-Defensoras: [The Crisis Was Already Here: Mesoamerican WHRDS and COVID-19](#). June 2020

176 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Urgente\] EL SALVADOR / En el marco de Covid-19, policía envía a centro de detención a defensora por salir por medicamentos para su hijo hospitalizado](#). 13 April 2020. IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] EL SALVADOR/ Defensora es detenida y llevada a centro de contención, por salir a comprar artículos de primera necesidad para sus hijas menores](#). 15 April 2020





A LAS  
DESAPARECIDAS  
LAS  
SEGUIREMOS  
BUSCANDO  
HASTA  
ENCONTRARLAS

A LAS  
DESAPARECIDAS  
LAS  
SEGUIREMOS  
BUSCANDO  
HASTA  
ENCONTRARLAS

A LAS  
DESAPARECIDAS  
LAS  
SEGUIREMOS  
BUSCANDO  
HASTA  
ENCONTRARLAS

#VivasNosQueremos

YO  
MI CUERPO  
MIS DERECHOS

AMNISTIA

**ATTACKS  
AGAINST WOMEN  
DEFENDERS ARE  
PATRIARCHAL  
VIOLENCE**

Violence against women in all our diversity, racist and xenophobic violence, transphobic violence, among others, are effective instruments for social control, inequality, and destruction of the social fabric. In this sense, the socio-political violence against women defenders that we describe in this report manifests in our bodies as part of a continuum of patriarchal, classist, and racist violence. Our registry seeks to document and analyze the attacks we experience as women defenders from an intersectional feminist perspective that shows how discrimination manifests in the violence we face, and how this violence affects us in specific and differentiated ways.

**“The feminist perspective is a key tool to show the reality of discrimination, violence, and repression that we face as women defenders, our organizations, movements, and struggles; and to understand that all of these socio-political forms of violence are intrinsically patriarchal... A feminist intersectional perspective recognizes that gender discrimination, overlapped with various structures of oppression, restricts the recognition of risk – since society teaches us to normalize violence; it restricts the power for making decisions regarding our own safety; and it reduces the possibility of leaning on support networks.”<sup>177</sup>**

**We identified specific situations of gender-based discrimination in 39% of the attacks documented between 2012 and 2022.** This percentage varies significantly from country to country, at 22.4% in Nicaragua and reaching 76.3% in El Salvador. It is important to note that, although violence against us always has patriarchal components, documenting the gender components in the attacks we experience presents a challenge because sexist violence is often normalized, making it difficult for women defenders to identify elements that reveal the patriarchal influence on violence.

To sustain itself, the patriarchal capitalist system needs the exploitation of women’s reproductive and care work. Our leadership defending human rights and our day-to-day work in the political and social sphere challenge these roles and place them at risk, thus also challenging the structure of gender-based discrimination and inequality. Therefore, violence against women defenders is a mechanism to maintain the “natural order” and to perpetuate the privileges and power that come from subordinating women and sex-gender dissidences. Starting in 2020, we have been able to substantiate how sexist violence and domestic and care work overload – exacerbated during the syndemic – affected and augmented the number and cruelty of attacks against women in general, and against women human rights defenders in particular.

In this sense, we identified smear campaigns, threats, and criminalization against women defenders full of misogyny, gender stereotypes, and discrimination. We are accused of not dedicating ourselves exclusively to taking care of our families; they use insults that allude to our sexuality; they threaten us with sexual violence against us and against our children. These expressions of the patriarchal system often occur simultaneously in the attacks we suffer. For Indigenous and Afro-descendent women defenders of territory, gender is one of several structures of racist and classist oppression that overlap and manifest in attacks that, for example, seek to ridicule their cultural and spiritual practices.<sup>178</sup>


Below are some of the situations we registered that included sexist violence, as well as quantitative data on gender-based discrimination documented in our registry:


<sup>177</sup> IM-Defensoras. [The Pact to Care among Ourselves. 2010-2021: IM-Defensoras' Approach to Feminist Holistic Protection in Mesoamerica. p.57.](#)


<sup>178</sup> IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] HONDURAS / Racismo institucionalizado contra defensoras y defensores de la tierra ancestral de Punta Gorda. 25 November 2022.](#)

 In 19% of cases, the attacks were a direct response to the work of the organization or group that promotes the defense of women's and LGBTTTIQ+ rights.


 18% are misogynist messages that disparage women defenders because they are women. These attacks are often perpetrated by unknown online users and by State actors in the context of repressive use of force or arbitrary detentions.

 We noted that hate messages feature adjectives such as “bitch”, “whore”, “slut”, “fat”, “ugly”, “crazy”, “abortionist”, “baby-killer”, “feminazi”, “lazy”, “vandal”, “terrorist”, “malparida” [bastard bitch], “she is a witch just like Berta”.<sup>179</sup>


 16% of these situations involve the disparagement of the work and/or achievements of the woman defender. We noted that women defenders are regularly disparaged through the spread of false or manipulated information about our private lives, our partners, and our sexual lives. For example, in a woman defender's community, several men said, “she’s at meetings in the municipality and outside the municipality because she likes to be out with men.” We are also attacked with statements that question our leadership abilities. They state, for example, that women are not able to dialogue with governmental authorities.

 In 13% of cases, we identified situations of hate based on sexuality, gender identity, age, ethnic or racial identity, etc. We documented cases of women political prisoners in Nicaragua who were deprived of their liberty in men's wings because of their sexual orientation, as in the case of Dora Maria Tellez,<sup>180</sup> or because of their gender identity, as in the case of transgender activist Celia Cruz.<sup>181</sup> Likewise, several smear campaigns and threats against women defenders questioned their sexual orientation, stating disparagingly that they are lesbian.

**We also documented attacks during which disparaging statements related to the woman defender's age were made, such as: “ridiculous old women”, “stupid old women, stay home”, “you should be ashamed, being so old and being involved in this”.**

 In 9% of cases, we identified attacks with messages related to preserving a specific order in society or in the community; for example, statements about what a family, a man or a woman should be: stay at home, be a good mother, how to dress, who owns the land, among others. These messages seek to discipline and control us, challenging our participation in the social and political sphere. Women who are mothers are also questioned for abandoning our role as caregivers and accused of abandoning our families, of being “bad mothers”.

**Some of the expressions we documented include statements like, “you are getting involved in things you shouldn't be, focus on taking care of your family”,<sup>182</sup> “that is why they are killed, for being troublemakers”, “this happened to you because instead of being at home, you are out gossiping”, “as women, you shouldn't be involved in these things”.**

 We identified sexual violence in 8% of all attacks that included sex discrimination: sexual abuse, rape, harassment, smear campaigns based on the woman defender's sexuality, use of fetishes, manipulation of underwear, and sexualized drawings. Other such attacks feature insults with sexual connotations or threats of rape against the women defenders or against people in their close circle. For example, we reported threats made through text

179 IM-Defensoras: [#AlertaDefensoras HONDURAS / Nuevas amenazas de muerte, intimidación y hostigamiento contra Rosalina Domínguez, del COPINH](#). 1 August 2019.

180 IM-Defensoras: [\[WHRD Alert\] NICARAGUA / Feminist political prisoners face torture and abuse](#). 16 December 2021.


181 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] Amenazan de muerte a presa política transgénero internada en cárcel de hombres](#). 17 July 2020.


182 IM-Defensoras: [\[WHRD Alert\] MEXICO / Death threats, harassment, and intimidation against Greace Lugo](#). 26 January 2022.



messages describing forms of vicious mass femicide.<sup>183</sup> During arbitrary detentions of women defenders, we have documented forced undress and orders to squat, as well as touching, threats of rape, and rape.

**Another expression of sexist violence identified in our registry is the questioning of women defenders' statements or testimonies regarding the attacks suffered (4%). This is especially common in cases denouncing sexist violence committed by men with broad political or social support.**

 Due to our role caring for our families and communities, women defenders are threatened not only with direct attacks, but also with attacks against our family members, particularly our children. Between 2020 and 2022, we registered 368 such cases, where we identified sexual threats, kidnapping, and physical attacks, among others. Since we launched our registry, we have documented multiple threats against people in our close circles, like this one received by a Honduran woman defender in 2015: "Drop the case you are accompanying, otherwise you will wake up covered in maggots, remember that you live alone with your children, and you go out to work every day and they are left alone, if you don't do it, face the consequences."<sup>184</sup>

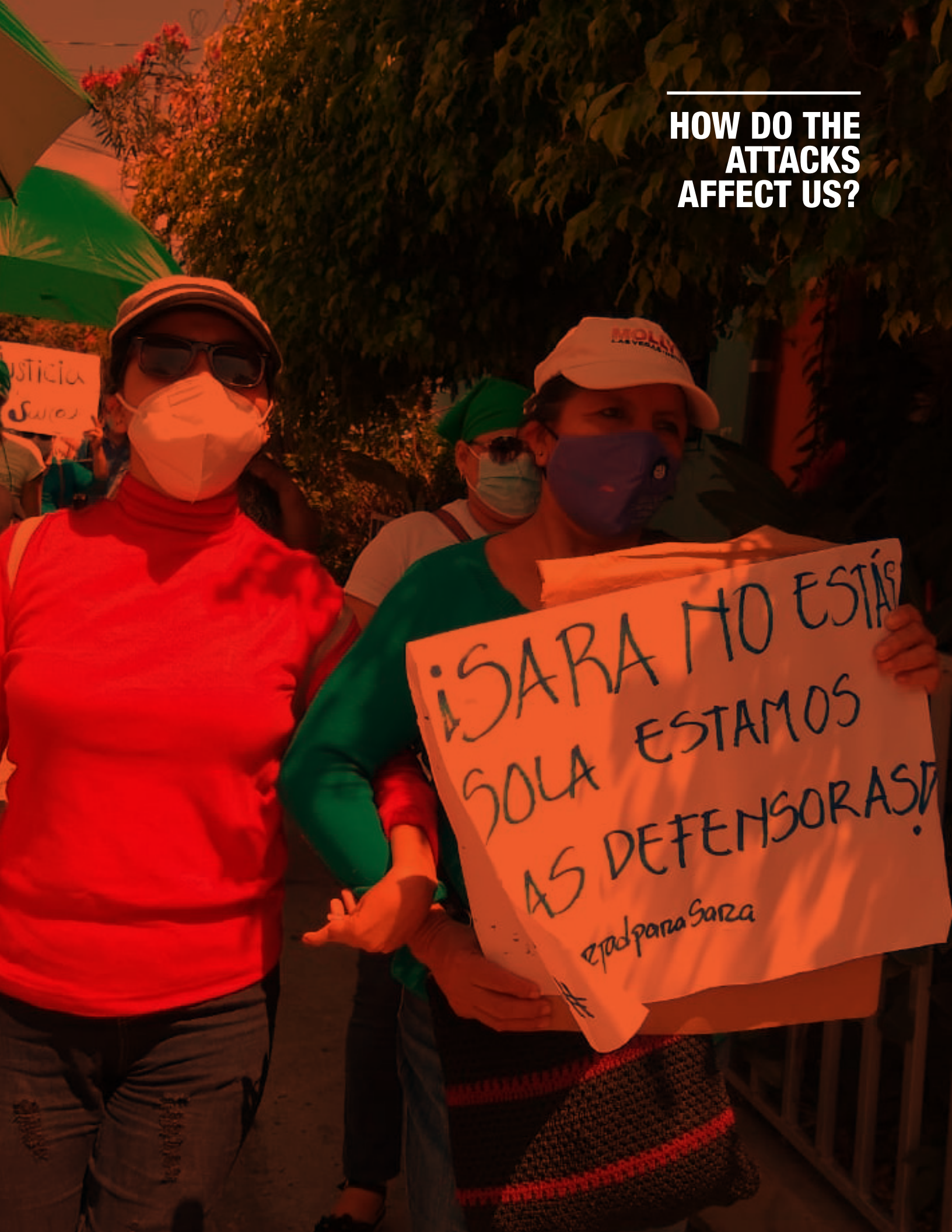
 Between 2020 and 2022, we also identified 68 cases where women defenders were attacked and even killed by their partners or ex-partners. In these cases, being women and defending human rights may have exacerbated the situation or exposed them to greater violence as punishment for subverting the established order.

183 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] EL SALVADOR / Integrantes de la "Colectiva Amorales" y "Majes Emputadas" reciben amenazas de muerte, violencia sexual, asalto a sus viviendas y centros de reunión mediante mensajes a grupos de WhatsApp que han sido hackeados. 15 March 2022.

184 IM-Defensoras: *Bodies, Territories and Movements in Resistance in Mesoamerica. 2015-2016 Report on Attacks Against WHRDs.* May 2018.

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**HOW DO THE  
ATTACKS  
AFFECT US?**



¡SARA NO ESTÁS  
SOLA ESTAMOS  
AS DEFENSORAS!  
estad para Sara





As part of the permanent process of improving our registry system, in 2020 we began to document in more detail the different impacts of attacks on our lives and on our work. We disaggregated the impacts into three categories according to their scope: those experienced on a personal level (Figure 26), those occurring in the context of collective actions in defense of human rights (Figure 27), and those targeting our organizations (Figure 28). Due to our work as women defenders, and due to our roles and commitments that connect us to our families and communities, the attacks we suffer affect our lives, the lives of our families and close circles, and our struggles in defense of human rights. The data we present below speak to this; the numbers represent the regional compilation and cover a three-year period between 2020 (when we began documenting these impacts) and 2022.

### **THE IMPACT OF ATTACKS ON OUR LIVES**

The attacks we experience have many impacts on our lives. **The systematic nature of attacks, their viciousness and violence, affect our physical and emotional well-being. This is recognized in 59.3% of personal attacks; in 66.4% of attacks perpetrated during collective actions; and in 78.5% of attacks against organizations or groups, which directly affect their staff or members.** The (in)justice system described earlier also has an impact on our lives, as it limits and obstructs our ability to denounce attacks and access justice.

**Attacks cause physical harms in 12.6% of personal attacks and in 36.8% of attacks committed during collective actions,** connected to the repressive and always disproportionate use of force by State authorities and other para-State actors seeking to obstruct social mobilizations.

**In 59.5% of personal attacks and 32.7% of collective attacks, one of the impacts identified is the restriction of our freedoms and rights.** Attacks on the defense of rights are already in themselves a restriction of



our right of expression, association, and political participation. We also documented attacks that obstruct and deny other rights, like those related to education and health.

Internal and external forced displacements are another impact of the violence we experience; these are a response to continuous reiterated attacks. Between 2020 and 2022, we documented **466 personal attacks and 327 collective attacks that resulted in the forced displacement of the women defenders attacked**. An extreme case of this type of already severe impact is the stripping of nationality that is taking place in Nicaragua since 2018,<sup>185</sup> and which took on a massive scale starting in 2023.<sup>186</sup>

Although violence may be expressed against only one woman defender, it is always a warning and a threat of what could happen to others if they organize or continue with their human rights defense work. In this way, attacks carry a message of control and power that seeks to propagate terror, undermining current and future support for our struggles. While this is countered with the work, resistance, and support networks of women defenders and their organizations, it is an impact that affects not only our lives and collectives, but also the survival of justice and human rights in our region.

Furthermore, our organizations' political work is affected by the different strategies pursued by States, in clear complicity with other de facto powers, to weaken and eliminate human rights organizations. **The use of legislation and processes of administrative and fiscal control to limit the ability of organizations to act in the region has made accessing financial resources more difficult (10.2%), led to the suspension or permanent revoking of legal status (12.9%), and, finally, caused their temporary or permanent closure (45.2%).**

Our struggles arise from indignation in the face of injustice and, above all, from the conviction that collective transformations are possible. Thus, every attack we experience comes with an intention to silence us by spreading terror and resignation both within ourselves and in our communities and organizations. Regardless of whether the attacks materialize in our individual bodies or in the collective body of the organizations we have built to protect ourselves and strengthen our human rights defense work, socio-political violence always seeks to weaken the power of collective action.

And yet, we continue... We continue defending human rights because our networks and our collective protection strategies embrace and support us, because we have the power and experience to survive the violence and persist in our struggles. This belief in the personal and collective power that women defenders have to defend and protect ourselves is what brought us together more than thirteen years ago, through our "pact to care among ourselves"<sup>187</sup> within the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Defenders. Since then, we have made Feminist Holistic Protection our guide to care for our lives and our struggles.

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185 IM-Defensoras: [COMUNICADO / IM-DEFENSORAS DENUNCIA LA EXPULSIÓN ILEGAL DE NICARAGUA DE LA DEFENSORA Y CIUDADANA NICARAGÜENSE ANA QUIRÓS](#) | IM-Defensoras. 28 November 2018.

186 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] NICARAGUA / Sofía Montenegro, Azahalea Solís y Vilma Nuñez, entre las 94 personas privadas arbitrariamente de su nacionalidad](#). 16 February 2023.

187 IM-Defensoras: [The Pact to Care among Ourselves. 2010-2021: IM-Defensoras' Approach to Feminist Holistic Protection in Mesoamerica. p.57.](#)



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## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**+10 YEARS OF DEMANDS  
FOR PROTECTION FOR  
WOMEN DEFENDERS**

## CONCLUSIONS

### THE VIOLENCE WE FACE HAS NO LIMITS

It is unacceptable that in Mesoamerica, over the course of a decade, at least **200** women human rights defenders were killed, **2,295** attacks were committed against **895** organizations, and **26,568** attacks were committed against **7,738** women and sex-gender dissidents who defend justice, the right to information, peace, nature, equality and everything that allows us to live with dignity and ensuring care for the web of life in our region.

There can be no talk of democracy or development when the legitimate defense of human rights conducted by women, organizations, and historically marginalized communities is repeatedly and systematically silenced, threatened, and attacked to the point of putting our lives at risk. Especially when States, thanks to the historical struggles and victories of the people, are obliged to respect national and international laws and pacts that should guarantee these rights, including the integrity and security of women human rights defenders.

### VIOLENCE IS NOT A RESULT OF FAILED STATES, BUT OF HISTORICAL STRUCTURAL OPPRESSION

Attacks against women defenders are a mechanism to guarantee the preservation of the power groups that have imposed racist and patriarchal capitalism using institutions, legal frameworks, and public resources for their benefit. These power groups see their interests threatened when women, subverting established roles and mandates, raise their voices and organize for the defense of all human rights and the web of life.

This is why public authorities, particularly State security forces, consistently appear as the main perpetrators of the violence we face. We know that they don't act alone; rather, they are instruments that protect, conceal, and safeguard the interests of de facto powers including – foremost – corporations, paramilitary groups, organized crime, and communications media.

States guarantee the protection of these private groups' interests and privileges through impunity, using public resources and institutions, obstructing our ability to identify with certainty who is behind the attack in a significant percentage of cases (20.4%).

Finally, States also use a logic of pretense, permitting attacks on women defenders to whom they themselves have granted protection measures. As documented in our registry, 19.2% of attacks were perpetrated against sister defenders who had been previously granted protection measures.

### THEY ATTACK US FOR CONFRONTING A SYSTEM OF INEQUALITY, INJUSTICE, AND DEATH

It is not by chance that the main groups of women defenders attacked have been practically the same since we started our registry more than ten years ago. Although their struggles have changed over time based on local and regional contexts of resistance, they maintain a constant characteristic of confronting the main forms of oppression in the current system.

Women defenders who are searchers, women defenders who are pursued and criminalized for denouncing human rights violations under totalitarian governments, as well as all those who demand truth and justice reveal the cruelty of necrocapitalism sustained by States that are co-opted by oligarchies and criminal groups using justice institutions to maintain impunity.

Women who defend territories and their communities expose the perversity and the socio-environmental crises caused by extractive capitalism, and propose models of life that are diametrically opposed to the so-called development promoted by global powers and national oligarchies.

Women defenders of freedom of expression and the right to information – whose voices denounce corruption, violence, and impunity – are frequently targeted by totalitarian governments and de facto powers exposed and made uncomfortable by the truth.



Women defenders of sexual and reproductive rights and of sex-gender dissidences denounce the historical control over our bodies to subordinate us, and propose new ways of being and of relating outside cisheteropatriarchy.

**In the attacks we experience, women defenders have identified patterns of repression specifically aimed at silencing women, communities in struggle, and sex-gender dissidences.**

One of the main patterns identified is defamation and smearing, an age-old tool to delegitimize historically oppressed collectives relegated to the category of being the other, less valuable and therefore with less power. In this way, gender, race, class, and sex-gender stereotypes are reinforced in order to diminish and weaken social support and – in many cases – promote and normalize violence against those who are part of these collectives.

Another commonly recurrent form of violence is harassment and surveillance, which speaks to the existence of an infrastructure and resources dedicated to pursuing, harassing, monitoring, and stalking women defenders.

These forms of violence tend to escalate to threats, physical and psychological violence, criminalization, arbitrary detentions, and cruel and inhumane treatment – reflecting how far the perpetrators can go and, foremost, what they are willing to do in their attempts to repress our voices and struggles. These systemic repressive patterns create environments full of terror and seek to set an example, thus having individual impacts on our bodies as well as collective impacts on our territories, organizations, social movements, and activism.

**VIOLENCE IS ALWAYS PATRIARCHAL AND AFFECTS ALL WOMEN**

Throughout the Mesoamerican region, we have observed the progress of women's rights defense and feminist movements in relation to their impact and social support. In recent years, there has been an increase in the strength of and participation in feminist mobilizations and in demonstrations to stop violence against women and sex-gender dissidences. The response from power-holders has been repression and violence expressed in different ways: violating the integrity of demonstrators, restricting freedom of expression, obstructing access to justice, and prohibiting protests, among others.

Sexual violence continues to be a powerful mechanism of terror used by groups in power. Thus, over the last ten years, we have documented rapes, sexual abuse and harassment in different situations of violence perpetrated with the goal of silencing us and stopping our struggles. Touching, undressing, and rape threats are a permanent fixture during arbitrary arrests, and sexual torture has been a regular component of repression against criminalized sister defenders.

This is in addition to other expressions of violence that we continue to document, including sexist insults, gender prejudices held by justice institutions within criminalization processes, and smear campaigns that use the personal and family life of women defenders, among others.

We have also noted a rise in defamation against feminists and their organizations, especially in social media. These actions seek to weaken movements and their support networks, and are part of the processes that sustain the criminalization of women defenders through false narratives aiming to influence the community and social imaginary.

The violence we face also extends to those closest to us (children, partners, and family members) and to our property (land, houses, pets, etc.), with the goal of affecting us – based on gender mandates – in the roles we take on as caregivers. This creates serious impacts on our lives: guilt, family conflicts, lack of support from our close circle, etc.

All of these forms of violence affect not only the women defenders and organizations directly involved; they also send a message to all women and sex-gender dissidences, seeking to demobilize and terrorize women as a whole so that we don't subvert the gender order that is indispensable to perpetuate the current system's power and privileges.

We are concerned that after ten years of experience with the registry, documenting the gender dimension of attacks continues to be a challenge. Although the overall percentage of attacks where a gender component was identified has increased over the years, it only stands at 39% in relation to all attacks registered, which tells us that patriarchal violence continues to be normalized and reveals how difficult it is for us to recognize it in our own lives.

### **VIOLENCE CONTINUES TO ESCALATE, EVEN MORE SINCE THE COVID-19 SYNDemic**

In recent years, we noted with worry that certain forms of violence have escalated, have been normalized, and have been legalized. The most extreme case is Nicaragua, where women defenders and their organizations have faced the revoking of legal status, illegal expropriation, forced disappearances, political prison, and other severe measures like the stripping of nationality, banishment, and refusal of entry into their own country. However, other countries have also seen the normalization of increasingly serious forms of violence: the states of emergency in El Salvador and Honduras; the illegal evictions of women defenders of territory and their communities in Honduras; the killings of women defenders who are searching for loved ones; and the transfemicides perpetrated by criminal groups in Mexico, Honduras, and El Salvador.

The COVID-19 syndemic marked a turning point and had a huge impact on the normalization of new and old forms of violence against us. Between 2020 and 2021, we documented an alarming increase in attacks throughout the region. Alerts issued by IM-Defensoras between March and November 2020 increased by 123% in comparison to the previous year. The syndemic also exposed that, while extractive activities and other businesses continued as usual, women human rights defenders, journalists, and organizations were forced to stop; our work was criminalized, leaving our communities defenseless. This made our governments' priorities quite clear. This context also exposed the restrictions and precariousness in which many women defenders and organizations work, especially in rural areas.

### **IMPACTS AND HARMS**

The violence we experience seeks to create an impact on our political projects and on our work and commitment to human rights. Being a woman human rights defender in Mesoamerica has become a high-risk activity lacking basic security and protection measures, despite the value of our work for our societies and communities.

The sole fact that we are women and sex-gender dissidences who organize ourselves, raise our voices, and defend our rights has impacts on our bodies and on our lives. Without doubt, becoming women defenders is a decision that strengthens our autonomy, allows us to belong and build communities of struggle, of mutual support, and of social justice; it helps us to challenge and transform gender mandates, and to build our own voice and way of transforming the world. However, because we are women that defy stereotypes, being women defenders also subjects us to discrimination in our close circles, to double and sometimes triple work shifts, and to a hostile environment that – despite the advances won through our struggles – continues to minimize women's contributions. It is worth nothing that, after ten years, people within our close circle continue to appear as perpetrators of violence against us.

Then there are the impacts of the systemic violence we experience. The main impact is the restriction of our right to defend human rights. We have also documented effects on our emotional wellbeing and that of our collectives and organizations, as well as physical harms and impacts on our overall health, which go from chronic illnesses to mental health conditions.

Moreover, attacks do not only affect us personally, they also affect our families and people close to us. In 39.5% of attacks that we suffered, a family member or person close to us was also attacked, and in 26%, our family relationships were affected as a consequence. This has a particularly high cost for us, not only because we frequently have family members in our care, but also because of impacts such as guilt, stigma, and social accusations when we do not satisfy society's expectations regarding the patriarchal mandate that assigns us the role of caregivers.


Two in ten (20%) women defenders who experience violence end up demobilizing or limiting their participation. This is a significant figure, as it means those who attack us have fulfilled their main objective. Equally concerning are the women defenders forcefully displaced due to the violence experienced – 5.4% according to our registry. This situation affects their lives and those of their families, but also their organizations and their political projects, thus affecting the communities they accompany, nature and the territories for which they struggle.


## **FEMINIST HOLISTIC PROTECTION AS A RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE<sup>188</sup>**


We formed IM-Defensoras in 2010 in order to confront the systematic attacks that place the lives and struggles of Mesoamerican women human rights defenders at risk. We are a convergence that currently brings together more than 2,000 women defenders from 300 organizations through networks in Mexico, Honduras, and El Salvador, together with allied women defenders in Nicaragua and a regional structure made up of several strategies – all of this with the goal of developing and practicing processes of Feminist Holistic Protection (FHP).


FHP is an approach and practice that emerged from the experiences and wisdoms of women defenders, our organizations and communities, recognizing the specific forms of violence that affect us and constructing our own ways of understanding protection. It is foremost a political pact: the pact of caring among ourselves as women defenders from different social movements, identities, and territories in order to face together the violence that seeks to silence us. FHP allows us to recognize ourselves beyond our individual struggles, we build alliance from our diversity, understanding attacks a strategy of the patriarchal, capitalist, racist, colonial system.

From our concrete practice accompanying each other as women defenders to confront situations of risk, Feminist Holistic Protection currently stands on four main pillars and eight strategies, in permanent review and transformation:


 The first pillar is placing care at the center of our activism. Care is a right, a vital need, and a basic principle of the world we want to build.

 The second pillar is recognizing ourselves in our defiance. Recognizing that women defenders are diverse and transgressive. We are political subjects present in all social movements, and we have our own ways of confronting violence.

 The third pillar is context analysis. We question the system that harms and exploits our bodies and territories, and we analyze risk through this lens. We use a broad understanding of risk that includes gender indicators and allows us to recognize the specific forms of violence that affect us.

 The fourth pillar can be summarized with the phrase “Networks Save Lives!” We understand protection not as an individual matter but as a collective process and capacity. Collective care is what enables the continuity of our struggles.

 We put these pillars into practice through eight strategies:


 **Networks of women defenders.** the National Network of Women Defenders in Honduras, the National Network of Women Defenders in El Salvador, and the National Network of Women Defenders in Mexico are the heart of IM-Defensoras. The networks accompany women defenders and organizations at risk; they register attacks, organize self-care and healing actions; and they promote the articulation of women defenders from different territories and identities, among other actions.


 **Accompaniment in situations of risk and violence.** We accompany women defenders in the

<sup>188</sup> For more information, see [The Pact to Care among Ourselves](#).




development and implementation of their protection plans. We are concerned about security, but also about rest, about fears, about the family and community needs of our sister defenders. This close and daily accompaniment respects women defenders' autonomy and power. **We have two safe houses: El Abrazo and la Marianela.**

 **Regional registry of attacks.** In each country and at the regional level, we use a shared methodology to systematically document and analyze the violence that affects us as women human rights defenders. More than an extractive exercise, the registry allows us to strengthen and focus our protection work.

 **Self-care, Collective Care, and Healing.** We work to create a sustainable activism, one where we do not need to “give our life for the cause”, where we have time and space to heal the violence that affects us personally and that affects our peoples and communities. A sustainable activism that will allow us to rest and pause to be able to continue, embrace our bodies and give them relief when they need it, and celebrate life together. We have two healing houses: La Serena in Mexico and La Siguata in Honduras.

 **Communications and advocacy for protection.** We alert the international community and we call for solidarity to give visibility and support to women defenders at risk and foster recognition of their contributions to human rights.

 **Resource mobilization.** This is an essential strategy to implement the other strategies and our ways of organizing with autonomy.

 **Systematization.** We permanently systematize our experience and our learning because Feminist Holistic Protection is not a recipe or a finished model – we construct it day by day through our wisdoms, practices, and experiences.

 **Digital care.** We created our own digital infrastructure, accompanying and training women defenders in digital security and self-care to address the increasing digitalization of life, reflecting on the policies and alliances developed between large corporations and de facto powers in the digital world.



We have not stopped demanding that States comply with their obligation to protect us, but we create and implement our own forms of protection and care. We embody support and we care for each other through Feminist Holistic Protection. We are movement and we are a network of life.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The daily accompaniment work that we conduct with women defenders, organizations, and communities at risk, denouncing the violence and injustice that we experience. The learning created through the registry of attacks that allows us to substantiate the need for specific protection measures based on our reality and needs. Above all, our conviction that we have the right to defend rights. All this has allowed us throughout the years to develop a set of urgent demands for the protection of women human rights defenders in Mesoamerica.

We call these “urgent demands” because the integrity of our lives and the continuity of our struggles depend on them. These are demands that we have taken to relevant authorities, to regional and international human rights bodies, to multilateral entities, and to our own organizations, families, and communities. These demands are voiced loudly in demonstrations, used as legal arguments to stop criminalization processes, promoted through national and international campaigns; they are an expression of support in difficult times, and the certainty that we have the right to be protected.

Sadly, in these more than ten years, we have learned that States repeatedly refuse to comply with their obligations to guarantee the protection of those who defend human rights. We have found that de facto powers are willing to do anything to silence our voices when we place their interests at risk. We have witnessed human rights bodies losing strength in relation to powerful interests. We have seen how – even in our communities, organizations, and families – our contribution to social transformation is not truly recognized.

This is why the demands formulated in our first report on attacks continue to be valid ten years later. Given the persistence, growth, and new expressions of violence and authoritarianism in the majority of territories in our region, we have added new demands, as we experience new forms of attack. In this section, we share the main demands made throughout these years, and we affirm that most of them remain unanswered and, therefore, that we will continue raising our voice.

## **LEGITIMACY OF WOMEN DEFENDERS, THEIR CONTRIBUTION, AND THEIR STRUGGLES**

Foremost, we have demanded recognition and visibility of our work and contributions. In a context that continues to question and minimize women’s political participation, recognizing our relevance as political subjects, our contribution to social movements and to advancing human rights is itself a protection measure. Fortunately, we have seen significant progress in these ten years; in 2010, the situation of women human rights defenders was barely visible, and many of us did not identify as defenders nor were we recognized as such. These days, there are campaigns, public recognition, and declarations from different actors. However, we still face significant challenges: social and cultural prejudices persist regarding women who raise our voices and defend our rights; some groups of women defenders are recognized more as victims than as social subjects; and communications campaigns that speak about women defenders are not always created with our voices, our narratives, and the diversity that represents us. Public recognition must be further strengthened in order to align it with protection processes.

We must continue to combat the discrimination that we face and to guarantee timely political backing in response to personal and collective risks. We mean support that does not re-victimize, that does not praise risk as courage, and that emphasizes the importance and strength of our work and our right to conduct it in conditions of protection. Campaigns and actions that recognize us are important in order to reach our territories and local, community, and alternative media that are close to our day-to-day reality, thus strengthening our closest networks.


## **STOP THE PRETENSE! WE DEMAND EFFECTIVE ACTION BY INSTITUTIONS TO STOP PROTECTING PRIVATE INTERESTS AND TO STOP ATTACKING WOMEN DEFENDERS AND OUR ORGANIZATIONS**


Over these more than ten years, we have seen a constant logic of pretense by State authorities in the region. Despite having the obligation to create an enabling environment for women's political action and human rights defense, State authorities fail to do so and, furthermore, continue to be our main assailants.

Official protection mechanisms set up in some countries are of little use if impunity continues to be the norm, if attacks against us are not investigated and are instead denied and rendered invisible. Over the last years, we have been particularly worried about the role of the judicial power in our region, which acts diligently to criminalize women defenders based on a factitious use of the law and on sexist practices and prejudices. Meanwhile, it seems incapable of resolving the thousands of complaints about attacks that women defenders file.

The obligations acquired in treaties and conventions, which are reinforced and made visible by human rights bodies, become meaningless scraps of paper when our struggles come into conflict with the interests of powerful groups or those who make decisions in our territories. Those who order our criminalization, the threats and defamation against us, and our killings are de facto powers that act with the blessing and protection of State institutions. Organized crime, transnational corporations, European and U.S. governments, and local oligarchies care very little about human rights when they know they can silence us without any consequence.

Faced with all this, we demand urgent actions that ratify the willingness of States that claim to be democratic and to uphold human rights, both in our region and those that have business dealings and cooperation with them, in order to guarantee:


 **No more killings.** Not only do they need to stop perpetrating and covering up these horrible events, but they must also comply with their obligation to investigate them diligently when they occur, with the goal of ensuring the identification of the intellectual and material actors, the dispensing of justice, reparations for victims, and guarantees of non-repetition.


 **No more resources, policies, and actions directed at repressing social protest.** The presence of public security forces in demonstrations must be reviewed and limited, respecting international norms on the matter, since their presence is one of the main sources of risk against protesters. Sexual violence and other forms of violence committed by security forces must be prevented and punished.

 **No more smear campaigns, stigmatization, discrediting, and defamation.** This entails not only abstaining from perpetrating these attacks but also punishing officials and other actors – like the communications media – that commit these acts. It also involves repairing the impacts of these attacks since, particularly for women defenders, these actions increase social discrimination, generate family and work-related problems, and may be the prelude to other attacks against them.

 **Guarantee women defenders' digital rights and prevent impunity for digital attacks and surveillance.** Given the alarming increase in digital attacks against women defenders – usually full of misogyny – and their dismissal, specific complaints have been presented to corporate owners of social media and filed with justice systems, particularly when attacks come from government authorities. Furthermore, relevant authorities must take responsibility for acts of surveillance against women defenders, which have been particularly intense in the digital sphere. In these contexts, we need actions to protect and prevent digital violence against women defenders through policies that recognize and legitimize the importance of our voice and participation in online spaces, including effective regulations that oversee private companies' use of surveillance technologies, as well as accountability in the acquisition and use of these technologies by States and their institutions.




 **Freedom for women human rights defenders deprived of their liberty and an end to criminalization processes.** Actions are urgently needed to repair damages, including communications actions to counter sexist and transphobic campaigns linked to criminalization. This includes the repeal of laws that facilitate the criminalization of those who defend human rights; that increasingly restrict social participation, freedom of association, and freedom of expression; and that prevent organizations from operating lawfully or from freely conducting actions that are necessary and useful in the defense of human rights. There is also an urgent need to adopt control and accountability mechanisms for officials who use the justice system to criminalize women defenders. Equally, there is an urgent need to ensure protection for the families and organizational systems of women defenders who are detained, since their efforts in the search for justice often turns them into targets of various attacks such as intimidation, stigmatization, and surveillance.


 **Counter the climate crisis, conflicts created by the economic model, and corporate activities and attacks against women defenders of territory.** States must respect Free Prior and Informed Consent principles and practices in good faith, and disassociate from projects resisted by women defenders and their communities. Corporate extractive activities must be urgently stopped when threats, harassment, assassinations, smear campaigns, or any other form of attack against women defenders and communities are reported. States must also support the development and implementation of national and international legally binding mechanisms to guarantee and audit corporations' environmental, social, and human rights responsibilities.

 **Implement protection programs that work.** Ten years ago, we demanded that States implement official protection programs; currently, most of our countries have such programs as a result of the work of human rights defenders and their organizations. However, we continue to observe with concern that most of these programs have become one more instrument for pretense or, worse, for generating risk. There is a need for mechanisms that ensure the investigation of and accountability for the perpetrators of attacks against women defenders; that do not re-victimize women defenders with unfounded threats to suspend measures; that go beyond individual and urban logics and bring an intercultural and gender perspective. These measures need to move from traditional security-oriented visions of protection that prioritize hard physical security measures (bulletproof vests, securing housing, etc.) to approaches such as Feminist Holistic Protection (FHP) and that include actions to protect against attacks in the digital sphere.

 **Stop the advance of regressive laws that place women defenders and our human rights defense work at risk.** Policies that militarize and privatize public security, and those focused on the fight against terrorism must be eliminated. It is also urgent to repeal laws that legitimize the enforcement of states or regimes of emergency, and we must ensure the secular nature of States.

 **Address situations of exile, displacement, and banishment.** There is an urgent need for specific protection and asylum policies for foreign, denationalized, exiled, banished, or temporarily displaced women human rights defenders. These should include special visas and holistic collective protection programs that support the specific needs of women defenders and their families, and that are coordinated with the protection of their organizations. Additionally, it is important to ensure that temporary relocation programs incorporate shelter arrangements where women defenders can be with our families, dedicate particular attention to the specific violence we face, and provide possibilities for permanent stays and accompaniment for asylum processes. This involves cultural integration programs, access to work and housing, and economic and emotional resources so that women defenders who are temporarily displaced, exiled, or banished have decent living conditions, can resume their lives, and continue their work in defense of human rights.

 **Limit or repeal cooperation or trade relations with States** that repeatedly exercise violence against women human rights defenders and their organizations, and stop financing corporations that promote or encourage attacks against women defenders. This demand is specific to countries that have trade and cooperation relations with States in our region and is underpinned by the principle of coherence with existing policies that are repeatedly ignored or overlooked in bilateral relations in order to benefit private and corporate interests at the expense of human rights.

 **Strong human rights mechanisms that are autonomous** and have the ability to respond to the crisis of States' non-compliance with their human rights obligations, particularly those that affect women human rights defenders.

Undeniably, we have encountered a committed response from many human rights bodies, which respond to our alerts and work hard to ensure that States respect and comply with their mandates in order to contribute to our protection. However, in recent years we have also witnessed how many of these bodies have gradually lost their impact, due both to the lack of political will of States to comply with their obligations, and to the institutional dynamics and limitations of these same bodies. Given this reality, we need that human rights protection bodies:

 Implement stronger measures to ensure that States and non-State actors comply with their recommendations, including imposing ethical and public sanctions on States that perpetrate or tolerate violence against women defenders.

 Create greater ties between entities dedicated to addressing the situation of human rights defenders and those that deal with other issues, such as those related to women's rights.

 Organize specific and meaningful spaces for exchange and dialogue with women human rights defenders as part of their actions with organizations, social movements, and other expressions of popular organization.

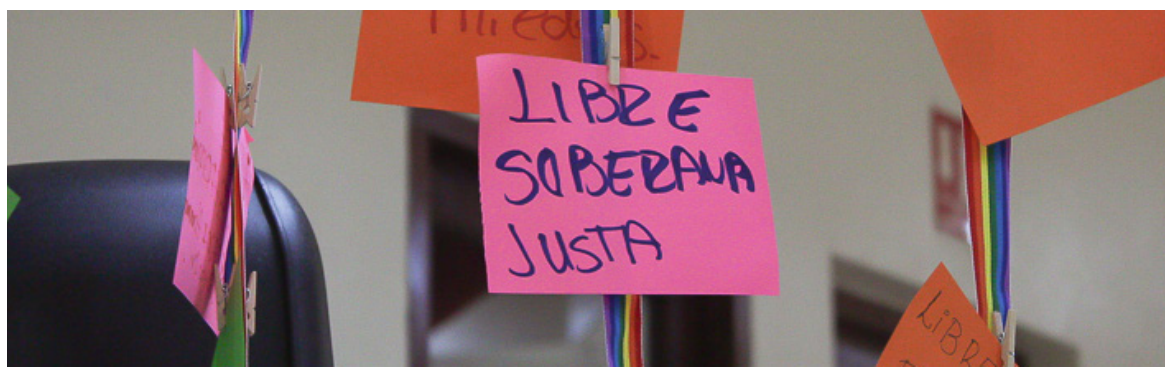
 Have a greater presence in the territories where women defenders' rights are violated.

 Establish agile processes for denouncing and responding to complaints in line with the reality of women defenders; reduce bureaucratic processes and excessive requests for information.


 Integrate Feminist Holistic Protection (FHP) principles, both when analyzing specific situations of women defenders and when determining measures for their accompaniment.


## **SUSTAINED AND FLEXIBLE SUPPORT FOR PROTECTION AND STRENGTHENING PROCESSES LED BY WOMEN DEFENDERS AND OUR NETWORKS**

Although resources for the protection of human rights defenders have grown, given the increasing attacks on the work and integrity of women human rights defenders and their organizations, it is increasingly necessary to strengthen response and protection capacities in order to sustain the invaluable work we conduct. International cooperation/aid and philanthropy must facilitate access to general support resources that include holistic protection strategies as vital in ensuring the sustainability of our movements and struggles. These include:



 Finance holistic protection programs designed alongside women defenders, in order to respond appropriately to our needs and those of our communities and movements.

 Ensure timely and adequate financial resources to support the struggles of women defenders and our organizations and movements. This includes multi-year, flexible core funding to enable them to operate sustainably, as well as support for strategies that strengthen our holistic protection capacities (especially at the territorial and national level), such as resources for psycho-social care and healing, safety and security, protection networks, protection infrastructure (including digital security), and exchanges of experiences and protection tools.

 Strengthen partnerships with women defenders and our organizations to support our struggles effectively and safely, using transparency and accountability mechanisms that reflect our activities and achievements in creative ways without increasing personal and collective risks, and finding alternatives to ensure the flow of financial resources in a context of increasing legal, financial, and fiscal constraints.

 Leverage their resources and influence to advocate against such restrictions and to counter the political persecution, criminalization, and isolation of women defenders in national contexts and at all levels.

## **AN END TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN DEFENDERS WITHIN ORGANIZATIONAL, COMMUNITY, AND FAMILY SPACES, AS WELL AS THE COMMITMENT OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS TO PUT CARE AT THE CENTER OF THEIR POLITICAL ACTION**

Violence within spaces of affection and trust is one of the specific forms of violence that women defenders face. This is why, from the beginning of our work, we have demanded that the organizational spaces in which we organize ourselves actively commit to the eradication of all forms of discrimination, oppression, and violence against us; these spaces include our families, our communities, and the collectives and organizations in which we participate.

We have called on men who participate in organizations and movements to reject and combat all forms of violence against women inside these spaces, and to take action to denounce, accompany, and prevent this serious problem. We have also urged them to challenge the unequal power relations generated by the traditional leadership culture, which relies on male figures who concentrate decision-making and displace women defenders.

We recognize that it has become more frequent for organizational spaces to initiate dialogues to address this situation and develop measures in this regard. However, the silence and tolerance in the face of the violence, oppression, and discrimination we face – as well as its minimization and naturalization, especially when it comes from our male comrades – requires greater attention and means that this demand continues to be relevant.

Furthermore, we need to take care of the sustainability of women defenders' lives and the struggles that we, our organizations, and our movements carry out. This involves placing care at the center of our political action, which entails a critical review of our models of activism and our internal practices to prevent them from generating exhaustion, increasing risk, neglecting the impacts of violence, maintaining our overload of care work, and not recognizing our contribution, among others.

Caring for ourselves and making the sustainability of our struggles possible requires strong and cohesive movements that have protection measures in place and that treat care as an ethical pact.



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**PRELIMINARY  
FIGURES  
2023**







## PRELIMINARY FIGURES 2023<sup>189</sup>


### A LOOK AT THE REGION

In 2023, we registered **6,214 attacks against at least 1,188190 women human rights defenders and 73 organizations or collectives** in El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua.

 **2,087 of these attacks were personal, affecting 397 women defenders.** The most common among these attacks were harassment (14%); psychological, physical, or verbal violence (12%); threats (7%); and surveillance, monitoring, and stalking of woman defenders' day-to-day lives (7%). Importantly, in 10% of the cases, people close to the women defenders were also attacked. Among these people close to women defenders who were attacked, one in three (31%) were their children.



 **3,828 attacks were collective, affecting at least 875 women defenders.** In 2023, attacks committed against more than one woman defender simultaneously, or when they were involved in collective actions to defend rights accounted for 62% of all attacks registered in the region; this percentage varies by country, ranging from 81% in Honduras to 37% in Nicaragua. These attacks frequently involved psychological, physical, or verbal violence (17%); harassment (14%); and threats (8%) towards women attacked.

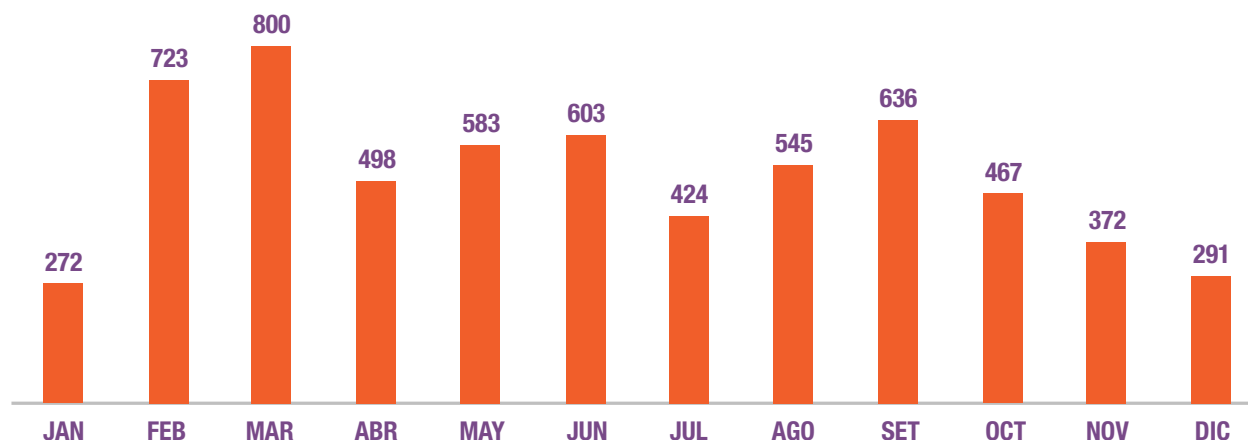
 **299 attacks against 73 organizations or collectives of women human rights defenders.** Among these, the most frequent were smear campaigns against the organization or its members (9%); harassment (9%); and spreading fake news about the organizational team's actions (8%).

<sup>189</sup> All the figures presented in this section are preliminary, gathered in March 2024 prior to the closure of the 2023 data. We are constantly documenting and validating information on new attacks on women defenders, so the figures may shift slightly in the future, once the closure of the year is complete.

<sup>190</sup> Total number of women defenders: To avoid double-counting, the total number of women defenders attacked excludes multiple attacks, counting women defenders who faced both personal and collective attacks only once (84 women defenders were attacked both personally and as part of a collective in 2023). This number also excludes unidentified women defenders who were part of a collective attacked.

**Compared to 2022, we identified a 13% increase in the total number of attacks in 2023.** This is explained by the increase in collective attacks, which increased from 2,683 in 2022 to 3,828 in 2023. The greatest share of this change is found in Honduras, where this type of attack tripled compared to the previous year.

### Number of monthly attacks on women defenders in El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua



### MARCH, THE MOST DANGEROUS MONTH FOR WOMEN DEFENDERS

Following the trend of prior years, in 2023, the majority of attacks were perpetrated against groups of women defenders during collective actions (69%) as part of the mobilizations commemorating 8 March, International Women's Day. In particular, Mexico stands out, where attacks in the month of March account for 24% of all attacks perpetrated in 2023.

### HOW DO THEY ATTACK US?

**They kill us: Ten sister defenders were killed in Mexico, Honduras and El Salvador in 2023.** They defended a diversity of rights, which speaks to the plurality of our struggles: women defenders of Indigenous Peoples, of women's rights and a life free from violence, trans women who defended the right to transgress the gender order, and women defenders who searched for family members in different states across Mexico. **Another 47 sister defenders were the target of assassination attempts,** which, fortunately, were not successful. Femicides and transfemicides against women defenders are generally the last attack, the culmination of a series of repeated acts of violence committed with impunity in order to silence us. We name each one of them, so that their memory and the dignity of their struggles may prevail:


Seeking to exhaust us, make us afraid, and stop our struggles, our attackers systematically use a broad range of attacks. These mainly involve constant harassment (856) and surveillance (364), as well as threats (471) and different expressions of violence such as psychological (398), physical (283), and verbal (213) violence.





## Most frequent attacks on women human rights defenders in El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua Preliminary data 2023



In 2023, we identified three types of attacks that have become particularly relevant, both because of the increase in their frequency and for their impact on the sister defenders targeted and their surroundings.

 **Forced displacement:** In 2023, we documented 240 forced displacements, which is 4 times more than in 2022. The women defenders forcefully displaced are primarily from Honduras (168) and Nicaragua (69). The internal and external displacements were preceded by a series of attacks that forced women defenders to leave their communities. These attacks seek not only to stop their defense work in the territories but also to punish them in an effort to destroy their life projects and weaken their support networks. They also send a message that spreads fear among women and communities, thus inhibiting human rights defense.

 **Criminalization:** Regionally, we registered 130 launches of legal cases and 116 arbitrary detentions. In total, we documented 47 detentions in Mexico, 37 in Honduras, 30 in Nicaragua, and 2 in El Salvador. More than half of the arbitrary detentions in Mexico (24) took place in March, the vast majority within the context of the 8 March demonstrations. In 2023, we also identified attacks aimed at socially discrediting women defenders, as a first step in a long process of criminalization; most striking among these are spreading fake news (238) and smear campaigns (200).

 **Digital violence:** In 2023, we documented 1,222 digital attacks against women defenders and their organizations or groups, accounting for 20% of the total number of registered attacks. Digital attacks are part of the continuum of violence that women defenders experience, and they are generally linked with other attacks in the physical sphere. The majority of these attacks were perpetrated against women defenders individually (61.8%). Standing out among the digital attacks are those linked to spreading fake news or manipulated information that refer to women defenders or organizations in order to socially discredit them (159); attacks involving questioning

or challenging women defenders' leadership, credibility, professionalism, or morality (152); smear campaigns (105); online harassment (102); cyber-stalking or cyber-bullying (90); and threats (72).



## WHO ATTACKS US?

In line with the historical trend in our registry, the State was once again our main assailant in 2023. Almost half of the attacks registered this year (47.8%) were perpetrated by State actors: local, state, and federal/national public authorities (23.5%); police agents (23.1%); and the armed forces (1.2%). However, we know that the authorities often attack us to protect private actors and interests. Additionally, one in four perpetrators (25.4%) were unknown persons – in physical (11.6%) and digital (13.7%) attacks. The following table shows the distribution of perpetrators by country:

## A LOOK AT THE COUNTRIES

<p><b>El Salvador</b></p> <hr/> <p>Unknown virtual users <b>(22%)</b>            Political parties or their members linked to government party <b>(20,3%)</b>            Police <b>(11,9%)</b>            Media close to the governing party <b>(11,9%)</b></p>	<p><b>Mexico</b></p> <hr/> <p>Local public authorities, State or federal public authorities <b>(26%)</b>            Unknown attackers <b>(18%)</b>            Police <b>(18%)</b></p>
<p><b>Honduras</b></p> <hr/> <p>Police <b>(21,5%)</b>            Public authorities <b>(20,7%)</b>            Unknown attackers <b>(16,5%)</b></p>	<p><b>Nicaragua</b></p> <hr/> <p>Police <b>(33%)</b>            Public authorities <b>(27%)</b>            Unknown virtual users <b>(27%)</b></p>

## EL SALVADOR

In 2023, we documented 188 attacks on women defenders and organizations or groups that defend human rights in El Salvador. This year we observed the government's continued authoritarian drift, with the erosion of the independence of State powers, the consolidation of the absence of guarantees for the defense of human rights, and the restriction of fundamental freedoms (freedom of expression, movement, assembly, and association). All of this was the result of the security policies imposed by President Nayib Bukele, who was re-elected in February 2024. The state of emergency installed on March 27, 2022, continues to this day, with the continued militarization of the territory by the army and the police, and the massive detention of people suspected of belonging to or collaborating with gangs, a discourse that has served to cover up the criminalization of people identified as opponents of the government.<sup>191</sup> At the start of 2023, we raised alarm about the instrumentalization of the judiciary to discredit and criminalize community leaders and men and women environmental defenders from Santa Marta,<sup>192</sup> a community that has held strong in the struggle against

191 IM-Defensoras: EL SALVADOR / Más de 6 mil denuncias de abusos y vulneración a derechos humanos durante el régimen de excepción reportan organizaciones de sociedad civil y de periodistas. 14 July 2023.

192 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] EL SALVADOR / Criminalizan a líderes comunitarios y defensores ambientalistas de Santa Marta y les decretan detención preventiva. 23 January 2023.



mineral extractivism and the vindication of historical memory. Later, in May, we also alerted about the arbitrary detention of Vidalina Morales' son,<sup>193</sup> a woman defender who is an environmentalist and leader of the Association for Social and Economic Development (ADES) in Santa Marta.

Women defenders of sexual and reproductive rights in El Salvador were the group of defenders against whom we registered the most attacks (62%), followed by women defenders of the right to information and freedom of expression (12%). Most of these attacks were registered in March (62%), linked to attacks perpetrated by anti-rights groups in the context of the hearing about the Beatriz Case at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which took place on 22 and 23 March 2023.

In a context where the government controls and surveils the digital space, we identified that 78.7% of attacks against women defenders were digital, through social media, electronic mail, web pages, and calls or messages to cell phones. The majority of these attacks seek to stigmatize human rights defense: we registered 38 attacks linked to smear campaigns, 28 instances of spreading fake news or manipulated information regarding women defenders, and 21 instances of questioning or challenging the women defenders' ethics or morality. The perpetrators of these attacks were often unknown online users (22%). However, we also identified among the perpetrators high-level public officials and communications media aligned with the president and the government's party, who are responsible for defaming and criminalizing human rights defense through public speeches and social media.

## **HONDURAS<sup>194</sup>**

In 2023, we documented 2,694 attacks against women defenders and organizations and groups defending human rights in Honduras. The government has maintained a state of emergency since 6 December 2022, justified as a response to an uptick in cases of extortion, contract killings, and kidnappings. In practice, it has become a permanent security policy. This has entailed the suspension of the right to free movement, and created the possibility of detention and searches based solely on suspicion. These measures stigmatize working class sectors, and they dehumanize and result in the loss of rights for any person accused of being a member of, or close to gangs. Meanwhile, the security forces are granted broad powers and impunity to act arbitrarily against those who resist the interests of landowners, companies, extractive projects, and other de facto powers.

In this context, we saw a 125% increase in attacks during 2023 compared to 2022. This is a result of the intensification of land conflicts since the creation of the Commission for Agrarian Security and Access to Land, which has legitimized mass evictions and uses the law to criminalize those who fight for land while favoring oil and sugar companies and landowning sectors. Most of these attacks are collective (81%), perpetrated in disputed territories on the northern coast (66%), and are directed against those who defend land, territory, and natural resources (76%). Importantly, we documented 28 evictions in which women defenders and entire families lost their livelihood projects.

The main attacks documented against women defenders in Honduras are harassment (512); psychological, verbal, and physical violence (426); threats – which tend to be death threats (267); and surveillance, monitoring, and stalking of their day-to-day lives (196). Also alarming is the increase in collective forced displacements, which increased from 19 in 2022 to 169 in 2023. These were internal displacements within the country connected to evictions, such as those

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193 IM-Defensoras: [\[Alerta Defensoras\] EL SALVADOR / Detienen arbitrariamente a Manuel Gámez, hijo de la defensora Vidalina Morales, lideresa de ADES Santa Marta](#). 18 May 2023.

194 National Network of WHRDs in Honduras: [Rebeldes y persistentes. Informe de la realidad de las defensoras en Honduras 2023](#). 2023.

perpetrated against members of Las Galileas peasant women's network<sup>195</sup> and the Agua Blanca Sur peasant group<sup>196</sup>, which have also experienced systematic attacks aimed at criminalizing the defense of their right to land, including harassment, threats, property damage, smear campaigns, spreading fake news, and arbitrary detentions for their alleged crime of usurpation of land.<sup>197</sup>

We noted the continuous nature of the attacks against the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH). We highlight those committed against OFRANEH coordinator Miriam Miranda – spreading fake news and threats against her life<sup>198</sup>,<sup>199</sup> – as well as serious attacks on their communities, such as the fires at their healing houses and their resistance camps.<sup>200</sup>

## MEXICO

In 2023, we documented 1,824 attacks against women human rights defenders and organizations in Mexico. More than half of these attacks (1,011) were collective attacks. We also registered a 45% increase in attacks against organizations or groups, compared to 2022, most of which were perpetrated against collectives of women searching for disappeared persons. The states where the majority of these attacks took place were Yucatan (10%), Puebla (9%), Jalisco (7%), Queretaro (6%), and Michoacan (6%). Given its population size, Mexico City is also one of the places with the highest number of attacks (14%).

In keeping with the previous year's trend, 33% of the attacks were perpetrated against women journalists and defenders of the right to information and freedom of expression (30% in 2022). Attacks against women defenders of truth, justice, and reparations continued to grow, both in percentage and severity (21%). Among these, we must highlight the femicide of three women defenders who searched for disappeared persons; the attempted femicide, the following, threats, and surveillance of three searching mothers;<sup>201</sup> and state police attacks during demonstrations by those who demand that disappeared persons be found alive.<sup>202</sup> Compared with the previous year, there was also a 20% increase in attacks against women defenders of land, territory, and natural resources. We documented 349 attacks against this group of women defenders, accounting for 19% of the total number of women attacked in the country throughout the year. These women defenders often confront the important economic interests behind extractive and infrastructure projects. Some of the recorded attacks took place within the context of resistance to the Mayan train megaproject, the mega-pig farm in Yucatan, the inter-oceanic corridor in Oaxaca, the Bonafont Company's water exploitation in Puebla, and different real estate projects throughout the country.

Meanwhile, the number of digital attacks against women defenders (446) increased by 41% in Mexico in 2023 compared to 2022. The most frequent digital attacks were restrictions and attacks for communicating and/or receiving information (56); challenging or questioning women defenders' leadership, credibility, professionalism, or morality (55); and threats (54). For example, in April 2023, we documented digital attacks committed by anti-rights groups, such as

195 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] HONDURAS / Nuevamente amenazan y expulsan con violencia a integrantes de la Red de Mujeres Campesinas Las Galileas. 29 March 2023.

196 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] HONDURAS / Detienen a la defensora Jency Manzanares: continúa criminalización y hostigamiento a defensoras del grupo campesino Agua Blanca Sur. 5 December 2023.

197 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] HONDURAS / Procesan y dictan prisión a defensora Nolvía Obando; desalojan a integrantes de Red de Mujeres Campesinas Las Galileas. 21 March 2023.

198 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] HONDURAS / Divulgan información falsa sobre sobre agresiones contra la coordinadora de la OFRANEH, Miriam Miranda. 26 October 2023.

199 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] HONDURAS / Asedio y amenazas contra la vida de Miriam Miranda, coordinadora y defensora garífuna de la OFRANEH. 20 September 2023.

200 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] HONDURAS/ Incendian Casa de Salud Ancestral de la OFRANEH en la Comunidad Garífuna de San Juan. 20 April 2023.

201 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] MÉXICO / Madres buscadoras del Colectivo Sabuesos Guerreras son objeto de vigilancia y seguimiento en Culiacán, Sinaloa. 10 May 2023.

202 CódigoQro: Madres buscadoras denuncian agresión afuera de Fiscalía General. 21 August 2023.

the hacking of accounts and threats against communications media that promote women's rights.<sup>203</sup>

## NICARAGUA

In 2023, 1,508 attacks were registered against Nicaraguan women defenders, organizations, and groups that defend human rights. Compared to 2022, we identified a significant decrease in institutional attacks, given that during this year the majority of organizations defending rights were illegally shut down. In a context of absolute closure of all spaces for participation and human rights defense, the attacks in 2023 focused on individuals (58%) and collective attacks (37%) against women defenders who are political prisoners, their family members, and persons who were exiled. The majority of attacks were perpetrated against those who defend women's right to political participation (34%); feminist defenders who defend a broad diversity of women's rights (22%); and victims and family members of victims of people who accompany the search for truth, justice, and reparations in situations of serious human rights violations.

At the beginning of 2023, we documented 49 attacks related to the banishment and stripping of citizenship or residence permit of women defenders. These occurred in the context of the 9 February release of 222 political prisoners and the subsequent accusation, stripping of nationality, and confiscation of assets of another 94 people – including 23 women human rights defenders, journalists, and activists. Starting in May, arbitrary arrests and the absence of legal protection for women defenders continued with arrests without warrants and express trials held via video calls, at night and/or without the accused being transferred to the judicial complex, without the right to select their defense, and on charges of “conspiracy against national integrity and propagation of false news”.

In relation to criminalization processes against women defenders in Nicaragua, we documented the following types of attacks: 30 arbitrary detentions; 28 forced disappearances due to concealment of whereabouts after arbitrary detentions; 44 launches of legal proceedings; and 42 attacks involving lack of legal protection due to arbitrary acts committed by the authorities. Of the women defenders who were detained, 13 remain as political prisoners as of the date of publication of this report. Others were released and forced to remain in their homes and report periodically to the police to sign in, thus finding themselves in a situation of de facto civil death as they are not allowed to work or move freely. In addition, we documented the alarming situation of women political prisoners, who face torture (4 documented cases); cruel, inhuman, and/or degrading treatment (40 documented cases); and the denial of daily access to a courtyard, sunshine, drinking water, and high-quality professional medical assistance. In the last quarter of the year, it was noted that family members expressed concern about physical and emotional exhaustion, as well as the harm caused to the family environment by their deprivation of liberty: deterioration of the economic situation in their households, emotional impacts on their children, and the risk and vulnerability due to being regularly surveilled.

In many situations, Nicaraguan women defenders have been forced to leave the country due to the violence they face, leaving behind their families, communities, and collectives. We registered 69 personal forced displacements in 2023, making it the year with the highest number of displacements of women defenders since the start of the governmental repression in 2018.

Finally, it is relevant to highlight that 33.6% of the attacks registered in Nicaragua in 2023 took place in the digital sphere. We identified an increase in online attacks against feminist women defenders who had participated in the Sandinista revolution during the 1980s. These attacks – perpetrated by online users aligned with the ultra-right – frequently involve spreading fake news and verbal violence with misogynist expressions that mention the women defenders' sexual

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203 IM-Defensoras: [Alerta Defensoras] MEXICO/ El portal feminista SemMéxico es hackeado y recibe amenazas y mensajes intimidatorios. IM-Defensoras. 20 April 2023.







