

POLICY AND PRACTICE NOTE

A Feminist Alternative for the Protection, Self-Care, and Safety of Women Human Rights Defenders in Mesoamerica

IM–DEFENSORAS*

Abstract

This policy and practice note outlines the experience and knowledge acquired by the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (referred to in Spanish as IM–Defensoras) during its two years of building solidarity, protection and self-care networks among women human rights defenders (WHRDs) in Mesoamerica. It provides a regional context for the contributions made by WHRDs to the promotion of human and community rights; describes WHRD experiences of violence and rights violations; and outlines the history, characteristics and strategies of IM–Defensoras. The paper concludes by noting key achievements and identifying ongoing challenges for IM–Defensoras, namely the need to develop safe spaces that allow women to defend human rights, develop responses that address the specific protection needs of WHRDs, and redefine existing protection and security strategies within a feminist framework.

Keywords: human rights defenders; protection; Latin America; Mesoamerica; women human rights defenders

1. Introduction

In this policy and practice note we first contextualize the contributions made by women human rights defenders (WHRDs) to the promotion of human and community rights and describe their experiences of violence and rights violations. We then analyse the experience of the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos, IM–Defensoras)¹ and the impact of its main strategies.

* This paper was collaboratively written by the six members of the Steering Group of IM–Defensoras (IMDefensoras@gmail.com). The writing process was coordinated by Analía Penchaszadeh, Anna Turley and Rachael Dempsey, of the Women Human Rights Defenders Program, Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) (whrd@awid.org).

1 IM–Defensoras is led by six organizations: Just Associates (Asociadas por lo Justo) (JASS); Oaxaca Consortium for Parliamentary Dialogue and Equity (Consortio para el Diálogo Parlamentario y la Equidad Oaxaca); the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (la Asociación para los Derechos de la Mujer y el Desarrollo) (AWID); Guatemalan Unit Protecting Men and Women Human Rights Defenders (la Unidad de Protección a Defensoras

We conclude this paper with a reflection on the progress made and the ongoing challenges in the development of spaces that allow for the work of defending human rights, while responding to the specific protection needs of WHRDs, and redefining existing protection and security strategies within a feminist framework.

2. Regional context

The Mesoamerican region, comprised of Mexico and Central America, has experienced an alarming increase in attacks and threats against WHRDs. In addition to suffering from the same kind of attacks all human rights defenders face, we are also targeted specifically due to our gender, especially when challenging patriarchal norms. WHRDs also experience various kinds of gender-based discrimination and rights violations. Human rights violations and impunity are daily occurrences in Mesoamerican society, particularly against women, who have historically faced exclusion and discrimination.

The regional context is characterized by insecurity, widespread militarization, the failure of state institutions and the unravelling of the social fabric. Public institutions have been infiltrated by drug trafficking and states routinely protect those engaged in the trafficking of drugs, people, and other merchandise, as well as the activities of private corporations and paramilitary groups. Entire territories are controlled by these factions, and they commit crimes with complete impunity. The militarization of the Mesoamerican region has been used to protect private interests, repress social protest, and abuse the population.²

This context has resulted in an alarming increase in and intensification of violence against women. Patriarchal violence has been a powerful instrument wielded by the state and criminal factions to control and instil fear among the population. Ever more cruel instances of violence (dismembered women, pregnant women stabbed in the abdomen, sexual torture, and others), a greater than 100 per cent increase in the rate of femicide,³ and a media that justifies violence, have also put at risk the freedoms and rights historically gained by women's struggles. Violence against women, and especially against WHRDs, has become a mechanism of control and terror, as well as a way to undermine progress on human rights.

y Defensores de Derechos Humanos Guatemala) (UDEFEQUA); Feminist Collective for Local Development (la Colectiva Feminista para el Desarrollo Local); and Central American Women's Fund (el Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres) (FCAM).

2 For more information on the Mesoamerican context and the implications for women of militarization and failing state institutions, see [Just Associates \(JASS\) and Nobel Women's Initiative \(NWI\) \(2012: Chapter 4\)](#).

3 For more information on the numbers regarding violence against women in the region, see [JASS and NWI \(2012\)](#).

3. Women human rights defenders in Mesoamerica

As women, we are on the front lines of civil society movements and organizations which actively defend human rights. We are the ones who search for disappeared victims, who bring to light cases of military sexual violence, who mobilize to defend the lands and natural resources of indigenous groups, who support incarcerated women who choose abortion, and who defend women working in sweatshops. We are responsible for fighting impunity and seeking justice for the victims of murder, kidnapping, and sexual violence.

Our contributions, leadership and status as WHRDs are seldom recognized, however, placing us at greater risk and leaving us outside existing protection measures.

Aside from the lack of recognition, we are the targets of specific gender-based forms of violence and discrimination. We face isolation and violence from our own families and communities, who question us for acting outside traditional roles, and we must protect ourselves from violence from within our own organizations or social movements. We work in conditions that lead to exhaustion, and without adequate remuneration. We are vulnerable to sexual violence and smear campaigns and we must often leave our homes to protect ourselves and our families.

Gender-based violence and discrimination are defining factors that compromise our safety and give rise to the challenging conditions under which we carry out our work. Although data on violations targeting WHRDs is limited, the following information from Mexico, Honduras and Guatemala demonstrates the gravity of the situation. At least 35 WHRDs from Mexico, Honduras and Guatemala lost their lives between 2010 and 2012, most of them murdered because they worked to defend human rights.⁴

4 Mexico–2010: Bety Cariño in Oaxaca; Josefina Reyes, Marisela Escobedo and María Isabel Cordero Martínez in Chihuahua; María Elvira Hernández Galeana in Guerrero; and Selene Hernández León in State of Mexico; 2011: María Magdalena Reyes, Luisa Ornelas and Susana Chávez in Chihuahua; Isabel and Reyna Ayala Nava in Guerrero; Carmela Elisarraráz Méndez in Michoacán; Bárbara Lezama in Puebla; Julia Marichal, Ana María Marcela Yarce Viveros and Rocío González in the Federal District; Yolanda Ordaz from Veracruz; and María Elizabeth Macías Castro in Tamaulipas; 2012: Agnes Torres Hernández from Puebla; Regena Martínez from Veracruz; Durven Ramírez Díaz from Tabasco; Manuela Martha Solís Contreras in Chihuahua; Juventena Villa Mojica and Fabiola Osorio Bernáldez from Guerrero; and Renata (René Espinoza Reyes). Honduras–2010: Claudia Brisuela (member of Frente Nacional de Resistencia, FNR); Teresa Flores (from the Coordinating Council of Honduran Rural Workers); Jessica Gálvez (Young Women’s Network, Cruz Roja neighbourhood); Janeth Lourdes Marroquín (active participant in the resistance); Vanessa Zepeda (active participant in the resistance); Neraldys Perdomo and Imperia Gamaniel Parson (members of the LGBTI community and the Pink Unity Collective); 2011: Ilse Ivania Velásquez (FNR, professor); Reina Mejía (agricultural worker from Aguán). Guatemala: Emilia Quan, Evelinda Ramírez and Margarita Chub Che.

In Mexico the National Network of WHRDs compiled the following information about violations against WHRDs in that country ([Mexican Network of WHRDs, 2013](#)):

- Between December 2010 and November 2012 at least 25 WHRDs were murdered (eight of them journalists), most of them natives of the states of Chihuahua and Guerrero.
- Of the 68 individual reported attacks against defenders in 2011, 41 per cent were against women ([Acción Urgente para Defensores de los Derechos Humanos \(ACUDEH\), 2012](#)).
- 76 per cent of Mexican WHRDs identify gender-based characteristics in the types of violence they have faced for doing their work. Among that group, 40 per cent report having been targeted specifically through sexual violence ([IM–Defensoras, 2011](#): 34).
- 12 per cent identify threats against family and children as the main form of violence ([IM–Defensoras, 2011](#): 34).
- Of all the communications issued by the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders related to threats and death threats against WHRDs in the period 2004–2009, Mexico had the second highest number after Colombia ([UN Human Rights Council, 2010](#): 11).

In Guatemala, Guatemalan Unit Protecting Men and Women Human Rights Defenders (UDEFEFUGA) keeps records of human rights violations against human rights defenders (HRDs), including WHRDs. The 2012 UDEFEFUGA report emphasizes concern about ‘the increase in attacks against WHRDs, which includes a high percentage of specifically gender-based violence. Messages and attacks with sexual content, as well as referring to their gender, tells us that the gender barrier continues to be great for WHRDs, since their status as defenders is undervalued and their action to transform society is objectified, which results in them becoming targets of sexual aggression and harassment’ ([UDEFEFUGA, 2013](#): 6). The report further indicates that:

- four WHRDs were murdered between 2010 and 2011;
- 67 cases of attacks against WHRDs were reported and recorded during 2012;
- during 2012 WHRDs protecting land rights, including environmental activists and defenders of indigenous and agricultural workers’ rights, suffered the highest number of attacks.

With regard to Honduras we know that:

- After Mexico, Honduras has the highest number of murdered journalists in Latin America. This includes HRDs. In 2011 the Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared in Honduras (Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras, COFADEH) recorded 58 cases of serious attacks ([COFADEH, 2012](#): 6).

- The Honduran National Network of WHRDs reported 27 attacks and seven murders in the past two years.

This account of attacks against WHRDs in the Mesoamerican region is incomplete, since many attacks go unreported and unrecognized as violations against WHRDs. While the real numbers are surely higher, these data give us an idea of the severity of the situation for WHRDs.

4. The Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM–Defensoras)

Faced with this situation of violence and rights violations against WHRDs in the Mesoamerican context, the organizations that launched IM–Defensoras in 2010 seek to develop alternative strategies of protection, self-care and security in order to respond to the violence faced by WHRDs arising from our work and our gender.

Given the gendered nature of the risks, the categories, concepts, methodologies and propositions of feminism best capture the experience of IM–Defensoras. In terms of protection, a gender perspective entails a process of empowerment for the victims of rights violations, and an understanding of security that incorporates both the subjective and the symbolic, calling into question the patriarchal separation of the public and private spheres. Beyond articulating the situation of women, the approach requires an analysis of the power relations between genders, identifying the situation in which these power relations exist, and defining the actions and concepts to eliminate the power differentials and construct democratic power.

In response to these insights and through this feminist praxis, IM–Defensoras has created a space for dialogue, mutual recognition and solidarity among WHRDs from diverse social movements. Our work is guided by the following principles and assumptions:

- Taking care of ourselves and each other are two feminist principles that we deem necessary for creating a new and improved social fabric.
- Safety, protection, and self-care are crucial elements of our integrity and vital to the continuity and sustainability of our struggles.
- Every process of protection and security must further our personal and collective empowerment as WHRDs, as well as the continuity of our struggle.
- All tools for protection and reporting must be based on an analysis of the risk and the careful measurement of their psychosocial impact.
- We are not trying to ‘reinvent the wheel’, but to articulate our knowledge in a strategic and collective way. This knowledge includes the experience of feminist movements in understanding and responding to violence, historical experiences of action against repression, existing protection strategies for men and women defenders, and strategic alliances with state, media and individual actors.

These principles and assumptions attempt to address the lived realities and needs of WHRDs in an integrated and holistic matter in a way that existing protection mechanisms frequently do not. As WHRDs we understand our security as living without fear of being attacked and as being able to pursue our lives and work in an environment free of violence. A holistic approach to security takes into account the public and the private sphere and includes the need to feel safe at home, at work and in the streets. In terms of personal security, it encompasses support for the physical and psychological well-being of WHRDs and the security of their families and colleagues. Security also means having a well-resourced safe space for WHRDs and their organizations to do their work.

Current protection mechanisms⁵ do not adapt to the different roles that WHRDs play in the workplace, in the family, in their organizations and movements and their communities. Protection mechanisms also often fail to empower WHRDs by involving them in all processes of risk analysis and deciding on the types of protection necessary. In addition, these measures fail to address structural violence and its root causes and thus increase risk by viewing these incidents in isolation rather than as systemic oppression. In addition, these measures tend to narrowly focus on the physical protection of the individual through traditional security measures such as bodyguards and bullet-proof jackets, which in many cases do not address the protection needs of WHRDs. Existing mechanisms are very limited with regard to the investigation of cases of violence against WHRDs and defenders in general, and therefore hinder access to justice, reinforcing impunity that fuels repression and more violence. In the case of WHRDs this lack of access to justice is compounded by the sexism and discrimination that commonly prevails in the justice system.

Both the feminist framework for protection used by IM–Defensoras and its corresponding notion of integrated security have emerged from a broader global collective movement to advocate for security approaches that are gendered, contextualized and integrated with rights-based, feminist self-care approaches. Publications such as *What's the Point of Revolution if We Can't Dance?* (Barry and Dordević, 2008) and *Insiste, Resiste, Persiste, Existe* (Barry and Nainar, 2008), for example, explore the lived reality of WHRDs and alternatives to traditional security, examine how WHRD protection strategies are 'innate, intuitive and woven directly into the fabric of women's activism' (Barry and Nainar, 2008: 81) and articulate the nature and importance

5 While beyond the scope of this policy and practice note to provide a comprehensive review of the strengths and weaknesses of each mechanism, it is important to highlight their limitations at a thematic level. Existing protection mechanisms include the UN Declaration on human rights defenders and the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders, as well as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. In addition, at the state level, Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras have preliminary protection schemes in place.

of integrated security for WHRDs.⁶ Equally, it is important to recognize and acknowledge the work of more traditional security providers, such as Protection International and Front Line Defenders. While their work has not necessarily been grounded in feminism or a gender perspective, the work of these organizations has also contributed to the advancing knowledge and awareness of and security for human rights defenders.

In recognizing the richness of experience and resources we have for the protection of WHRDs and HRDs and critically analysing these experiences within a feminist framework, IM–Defensoras focuses on strategies that complement and contribute to existing protection mechanisms. These strategies include: 1) support for building and strengthening national networks and processes; 2) creating a regional space for communication and urgent action; 3) documentation and analysis of violence against WHRDs; 4) reporting violations and increasing international awareness; and 5) self-care.

4.1 National networks and strategies for women human rights defenders

In *Ten Insights to Strengthen Responses for Women Human Rights Defenders at Risk*, the WHRD International Coalition (WHRD – IC) points out the importance of local support systems when responding to violence: ‘Local networking among WHRDs is crucial for accompanying WHRDs at risk where they live and work, building their own capacity to respond at the local level and for responding quickly to urgent situations’ (Barcia and Penchaszadeh, 2012: 7). IM–Defensoras works with WHRDs from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua to coordinate efforts at a national level. National WHRD networks are composed of WHRDs from various social movements, their role being to develop risk analysis, psycho-social services, self-care, case response, assessment and public reporting strategies. They seek to ensure that the first response to an attack or risk is systematized across countries, which will in turn provide protection for a greater number of WHRDs. Workshops and resources developed and promoted by IM–Defensoras are implemented and disseminated through national networks.

The national networks constitute a feminist alternative because they are spaces of trust where WHRDs feel comfortable expressing the risks we face, where we feel heard and where we can process our worries without fear of being undermined or questioned. These networks respond to the poor recognition and lack of family, community and social support that WHRDs face and the blaming of victims, normalization of violence and justifications for

6 See also *Self-Care and Self-Defense Manual for Feminist Activists* (Bernal et al., 2008), New Tactics organizing conversations with practitioners on self-care and security (<https://www.newtactics.org/conversation/tactics-sustaining-well-being-and-security-defenders>), the work by the Institute of Women’s Empowerment (Hong Kong), and the work by the International Women’s Partnership for Peace and Justice (Thailand) for examples of feminist initiatives that are working on different aspects of WHRD security and well-being.

violent acts that are a part of daily life for WHRDs in the region. And they respond to the difficulty many WHRDs face in mixed spaces expressing the painful experiences for which men who are our colleagues are responsible or which centre upon our body or sexuality.

Among the challenges the networks face are overcoming the lack of recognition of both the work of the WHRDs and the violence we face, analysing the gender dimension of attacks, and generating responses or protective measures in accordance with the different needs of the WHRDs and our families. But, above all, the networks facilitate a process of empowerment and address the fear and discrimination that undermine the personal and collective protection of women human rights defenders.

4.2 *Regional networks of urgent communication and action*

IM–Defensoras maintains a regional communication space for WHRDs from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama, as well as international allies. This regional network for urgent communication and action responds to the need for safe spaces where we can recognize the violence we face as WHRDs and feel supported. Safe spaces refer to spaces of trust where WHRDs may, often for the first time, dare to acknowledge and denounce violence they are experiencing, draw on the network’s resources and experiences, and strengthen individual and collective WHRD identity. We seek to create spaces with accessible resources that help us to act collectively as Mesoamerican WHRDs when a colleague is attacked. To date we have used the communication network to call for protests at embassies, to support demands for protective measures, and to mobilize emergency resources for WHRDs, among other actions.

Urgent actions by the regional network aim to draw attention to violent acts as well as expressions of solidarity. This became evident on the day of action in solidarity with Honduras in October 2012,⁷ when delegations of WHRDs in Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, Colombia, and the United Kingdom, responding to the call from IM–Defensoras and allied networks and organizations, marched to their respective Honduran embassies to denounce the situation of violence against women in that country, thus supporting the mobilization of more than 100 people in Honduras.

We opened a Rapid Response Fund for IM–Defensoras, focusing on the lessons learned through the experience of the Central American Women’s Fund (FCAM), and we also coordinated with the Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights and the Front Line Defenders security grants programme. These resources have contributed to the protection of WHRDs, by allowing them to access the financial means to undertake the necessary

7 ‘We Stand in Solidarity with Honduras’, an international day of action, was held on 11 October 2012. For more information see <http://www.awid.org/eng/Library/We-Stand-in-Solidarity-with-Honduras>.

protection measures. This can include financial support in relocation for the WHRD and their dependants, or covering fees related to accessing specialist emotional support or legal advice. In most of our cases, the financial support is defined from risk analysis conducted with the defenders at risk themselves in coordination with the national WHRDs' networks, and is part of a broader support strategy, which makes the financial assistance that we provide through the funds much more effective.

One of the specific characteristics of these funds is that they support all the WHRDs regardless of the type of violence they are suffering. The fund provides equal support to a WHRD facing violence from the state or criminal groups, as it does to a WHRD who is a victim of family or community violence or violence from inside the social movement of which they are a part.

4.3 Documenting and analysing violence against women human rights defenders

The documentation of attacks against WHRDs in the Mesoamerican region is insufficient. Most official reports do not break down the information by category or utilize gender markers. In order to improve the systematic reporting and documentation of WHRDs' experiences of violence and to support the adoption of the data collection processes designed by WHRDs, IM-Defensoras built the Mesoamerican Registry of Attacks against WHRDs as an instrument for national WHRD networks to document attacks, with compatible categories in order to easily aggregate information at the regional level. Networks in Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala are already using this instrument and we will be publishing an initial report based on the registry later in 2013.

Some of the challenges we have experienced in recording incidents of attacks against WHRDs in the region include:

- As women who defend human rights we do not always identify as WHRDs, nor are we always recognized as such, which results in attacks against us being minimized or dismissed.
- Recognizing gender-based discrimination and the violence associated with it requires a process of critical review of one's own experience because so many expressions of violence and discrimination are legitimized and socially normalized that it is difficult to identify them. For many WHRDs it is not easy to recognize discrimination and violence in our own life experiences.
- The types of violations that it is generally accepted that defenders face do not tend to include those faced by WHRDs in the family or in intimate relationships.
- Many individuals, organizations and institutions are resistant to recognizing the gender inequality that exists in their own institutions

The documentation of attacks against WHRDs from a gender perspective not only sheds light on the attacks against WHRDs in the region, but defines them as violations against WHRDs. This alternative approach to

documentation provides a more complete picture which recognizes discrimination and inequality as defining elements to understand the forms and effects of violence against WHRDs. This includes attacks defined as human rights violations against WHRDs as well as violent experiences and assaults not always recognized as human rights violations, which ensures that no attack is minimized simply because it occurs in the private sphere.

4.4 *Reporting and international visibility*

While official national and international human rights mechanisms do not necessarily guarantee our safety, they are tools that increase political cost and shed light on states' responsibility.

As a strategy to engage with these mechanisms, IM–Defensoras understands advocacy as a means to strengthen the protection capacity of WHRDs individually and through the national networks, and not as an end in itself. Based on this approach, the urgent actions and regional and international denunciation activities, as well as advocacy with the regional and international human rights mechanisms, carried out by IM–Defensoras have always been in dialogue with the WHRDs and national networks at opportune moments, and not as an ongoing activity.

In order to take advantage of official reporting mechanisms at the regional and international level, IM–Defensoras has facilitated the engagement of WHRDs in international arenas and has presented reports and communications to international agencies. This includes meeting with the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; participating in forums during the Human Rights Council sessions in Geneva; presenting a hearing on Mesoamerican WHRDs before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in Washington, DC; and public activities during the Mexican report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in New York.⁸

An important component of reporting and international visibility is the creation of international solidarity with local WHRDs and their struggles. For instance, the Nobel Women's Initiative (NWI) and Just Associates (JASS) toured through Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras, generating solidarity among high profile women and WHRDs in the region, and bringing much greater visibility in the media to the conditions in which WHRDs work (JASS and NWI, 2012).

Coordination with the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition through the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) has also increased the visibility of Mesoamerican WHRDs' situation through statements made by the Coalition in response to specific attacks and the production of three case studies from IM–Defensoras which were included in the Global Report on WHRDs (WHRD–IC, 2012: 52, 65, 110).⁹ This

8 For CEDAW's observations on the Mexican report, see UN CEDAW (2012).

9 In addition, activities organized in collaboration with the International Coalition of WHRDs during the Human Rights Council session in March 2011, including a delegation of WHRDs

relationship has also allowed international human rights organizations to work more closely with agencies that provide support to WHRDs and HRDs in order to respond to urgent situations in more comprehensive ways.

4.5 *Self-care*

A priority for and a principle of IM–Defensoras is self-care as a feminist collective political strategy to ensure the sustainability of our struggles and movements. A feminist approach to self-care seeks to recognize and respond to the many pressures WHRDs face, both in our work and in our family and community life, and takes into account the intersectional context and conditions of patriarchal oppression which blame women for ‘not taking care of themselves’. Self-care implies changes to our work practices that allow us to better resist, adapt and respond to the stereotyped role of women as ‘caretakers of the world’ and that help us to defend rights in inherently risky contexts but as political actors able to foresee and mitigate possible attacks.

In order to incorporate self-care in the daily practices of WHRDs we have launched a series of workshops in collaboration with the national networks where together we explore experiences and challenges. We conducted an initial assessment to understand self-care experiences and needs in Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, and created a fund to support individual and collective self-care actions. The fund allows self-care mechanisms to be decided on within the organizations to address stress and burnout, and to provide gynaecological health exams, as well as medical and psychological care for WHRDs whose family members have experienced attacks as a result of their activism.

As WHRDs, we face many challenges in prioritizing self-care, in particular accessing resources and support for self-care strategies, yet it is important to keep it on our agendas and those of our organizations. It is also important to build capacity so that as WHRDs we can, both individually and collectively, generate our own protection, safety, self-care and networking strategies in order to strengthen our struggles.

5. Protection challenges

Through our cumulative experiences working with our organizations and promoting IM–Defensoras we have identified several challenges that must be confronted in order to create a safer environment for WHRDs and to respond to our needs for protection in an integrated manner.

One challenge is that we tend to minimize the impact of gender-based discrimination and violence both in our struggles and in our lives. We tend to reproduce stereotypes of women and activists that place us at risk and minimize the violence

from Mexico, Honduras and Guatemala, contributed to increased references to the situation of Mesoamerican defenders in communications and reports by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders.

that we face. The collective construction of our identity as WHRDs must include our daily experiences as women in our societies, without creating a greater sense of risk than that which we face, or minimizing the attacks that we experience.

Self-care is essential for the sustainability of WHRDs, our organizations and the future of our struggles. Lack of awareness of the political impact of protection and self-care prevents us from realizing the true importance of taking care of ourselves and each other in order to make our struggles and movements sustainable. We must cease to consider self-care a luxury and work with it collectively as a survival strategy for our movements.

We find that our respective state institutions for the protection of rights are very weak. Increasingly, state authorities and organized crime collude in perpetrating attacks. This aggravates the situation of impunity and hinders our own analysis of the sources of risk and the sources of protection. Moreover, existing protection mechanisms were not created with a gender perspective and tend to victimize WHRDs or fail to encourage their empowerment. The demands of the official reporting processes intimidate us and reinforce our tendency to minimize our own experiences of violence. Lack of a gender perspective leads to protection recommendations that do not respond to the true needs of WHRDs.

In the last few years there has been an increase in resources and services available to defenders, both in international human rights organizations and within national networks of WHRDs and HRDs. However, the existing resources are still insufficient and difficult for the most vulnerable WHRDs to access. The reduction of available funds in the Mesoamerican region for the work of non-governmental initiatives in general, and for women's rights in particular, has also caused greater vulnerabilities for WHRDs.

IM–Defensoras seeks to create a context in which WHRDs in the region can access the necessary resources to meet the specific protection needs of WHRDs and to ensure a feminist perspective in all safety strategies. Another obstacle we have identified in this respect is the lack of political agreements and protocols that allow a strategic linkage between our existing resources, mechanisms and experiences. That is, in the last few years there has been an increase in organizations and donors that are providing support for protection of WHRDs, but there is still a lack of coordination among them to provide more effective joint responses, for example, defining joint protocols for intervention, better allocation of resources, and strategies of international denunciation and visibility that could be more impactful.

6. Conclusion

IM–Defensoras seeks to be a space for Mesoamerican WHRDs, with a shared analysis of the situation of WHRDs in the region, a common identity across movements and geographical areas, and direct contact between WHRDs in the places where we live, work and defend rights.

There is still much to accomplish in the Mesoamerican region in terms of strengthening capacities and available resources for us to protect ourselves collectively and ensure the survival of our struggles as WHRDs. The construction of a regional identity and a greater comprehension of regional expressions of local and national issues will allow us to strengthen regional action. Placing greater emphasis on the capacities of our organizations will allow us to engage in incident reporting and actions of solidarity with WHRDs that have more impact at the regional and international level. It is also important to better articulate and disseminate current experiences of protection, safety and self-care, and ensure this knowledge is spread and adopted by WHRDs in our region and transformed into useful tools that respond to violence. This collective building of knowledge includes our experiences in transforming political practices and organizational strategies to better protect and care for ourselves, as well as to prevent burnout and the negative impacts it can have on the continuity of our movements.

Thousands of WHRDs are currently at risk in the Mesoamerican region. From a feminist perspective, IM–Defensoras offers an important contribution to the creation of a strong social fabric among women from diverse social movements in order to care for each other, protect ourselves from violence and continue fighting for our dreams.

References

- Acción Urgente para Defensores de los Derechos Humanos (ACUDEH). 2012. Informe de Violaciones de Derechos Humanos Cometidas contra las Personas Defensoras de los Derechos Humanos en el Periodo 2011–primer trimestre de 2012. Alejandro Cerezo, coordinator.
- Barcia, I., and A. Penchaszadeh. 2012. *Ten Insights to Strengthen Responses for Women Human Rights Defenders at Risk*. Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) with the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition (WHRD-IC).
- Barry, J., and J. Dordević. 2008. *What’s the Point of Revolution if We Can’t Dance?* Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights.
- Barry, J., and V. Nainar. 2008. *Insiste, Resiste, Persiste, Existe: Women Human Rights Defenders’ Security Strategies*. Front Line – The International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights, and Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation.
- Bernal, M., Artemisa, and Elige. 2008. *Self-Care and Self-Defense Manual for Feminist Activists*. New Delhi: CREA. <http://files.creaworld.org/files/self-care-brochure.pdf>.
- Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras (COFADEH). 2012. Informe sobre Amenazas, Hostigamiento y Agresiones en contra de Defensores y Defensoras de Derechos Humanos Miembros del COFADEH.
- Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos (IM–Defensoras). 2011. Violence against Women Human Rights Defenders in Mesoamerica: An Assessment in Progress. Marusia López Cruz, coordinator. <http://www.awid.org>

[Library/Violence-Against-Women-Human-Rights-Defenders-in-Mesoamerica-An-assessment-in-progress-2010-2011-Update.](#)

Just Associates (JASS) and Nobel Women’s Initiative (NWI). 2012. From Survivors to Defenders: Women Confronting Violence in Mexico, Honduras and Guatemala.

Mexican National Network of WHRDs. 2013. Public Statement of the 3rd National Meeting of Women Human Rights Defenders. http://www.justassociates.org/sites/justassociates.org/files/3rd_national_meeting_of_women_human_rights_defenders_public_statement.pdf.

Unidad de Protección a Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos – Guatemala (UDEFEUGUA). 2013. Quitemos el Tabú: Informe sobre Situación de Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos.

UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). 2012. Concluding observations: Mexico. CEDAW/C/MEX/CO/7–8.

UN Human Rights Council. 2010. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Margaret Sekaggya. 20 December. A/HRC/16/44.

Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition (WHRD–IC). 2012. Global Report on the Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders.