

# Dignas

Voices of Women Human Rights Defenders in Mexico

Peace Brigades International – Mexico Project



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This publication is the result of the commitment and dedication of the many people who have participated in PBI's work in Mexico. We would especially like to express our gratitude and recognition to the women who have shared their time and their testimonies with us; the volunteers who helped with the interviews, the transcriptions, the revision and editing, and their time, patience and constructive criticism; to the Canadian Embassy and the Canada Fund, who funded this publication; and to PBI Canada for their help throughout the process.

The ideas expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of PBI or our funders.

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# Prologue



This publication was created to celebrate Peace Brigades International's (PBI) 30 years of work on behalf of peace and justice in many countries around the world, and to applaud the work of Mexican women human rights defenders who have dedicated themselves to changing the face of the country. Despite extreme difficulties over the course of many years, these women continue their work with vision and determination.

It is time to celebrate their work and recognize their exceptional role in Mexican society.

PBI has been in Mexico for more than a decade. In 2001, we began to accompany human rights defenders at risk. We started in Guerrero 10 years ago, and now also work in Oaxaca and Mexico City. Our goal is to provide protection for human rights defenders while at the same time increasing the political space for non-violent actors in Mexican social movements. PBI accompaniment includes many facets: we provide a physical presence alongside human rights defenders, carry out meetings with Mexican authorities and the international community, distribute information, facilitate processes that strengthen civil society, create support networks, provide assessment in security and protection, and distribute publications like this one. All of these tools are part of a strategy to contribute to the protection of human rights and peace-building in Mexico.

Due to the challenges that many human rights defenders face throughout the country, we decided to broaden our area of work to other states. Our goal is to apply what we have learned to other contexts and support human rights defenders in different parts of the country. We do this work with the awareness that we are a grassroots organization based on the work of volunteers that come from every part of the world. The vast majority of these volunteers are women.

The early years of PBI Mexico were marked by contradic-

tory events—on the one hand, there was a democratization process in Mexico and an opening for human rights, however at the same time there was increased risk for human rights defenders. One example of this was the continued threats to the well-known human rights defender Digna Ochoa, who was later killed in 2001. The circumstances surrounding her death are still questioned by her family and other actors in civil society.

In the same year, the Cerezo Committee and the Center for Worker Support were formed. The Cerezo Committee was created to support the rights of political prisoners, and the Center for Worker Support was created to promote the protection of workers' rights. Many organizations have been formed since then; but at the same time, human rights violations have also multiplied. We must also mention the massive abuses to fundamental rights that took place in Atenco and Oaxaca five years ago, in 2006.

Mexico's civil society is currently flourishing, and many new civil society organizations are demanding truth and justice in thousands of new and historic cases of human rights violations. At the front of these movements are many women, human rights defenders who face a doubly difficult situation—they work to defend human rights in a dangerous and difficult context in which machismo is still very much alive. They put both their professional and private lives at risk as they continue to work to defend human rights.

During the preparation of this publication we contacted women who defend human rights in different parts of the country in order to learn about their work, their trajectories, their challenges, and their accomplishments. Talking to them has further inspired us to continue the work that we began in Mexico more than 10 years ago. We hope that their testimonies will also inspire others.

We have worked to bring the voices of each woman who was interviewed to life, and we have kept the written trans-

cription as close as possible to their original oral testimonies. We want you to feel the strength and expression of these women from their words and have their faces and voices etched in your memory.

In order to create a publication that was easy to read, we have organized the testimonies in three sections. In the first section, the women talk about their work as activists who have paved the way to defend human rights. In the second part, the women talk about their achievements, and in the last part they discuss the challenges they face. Even though we organized the stories of the women in this way, know that each woman has truly created a new pathway for human rights and each one has had her own accomplishments and challenges.

Some of the most recent accomplishments that we would like to highlight include the sentences from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights that reflect the struggles of women in the following cases: the "Campo Algodonero," case and the cases of Inés Fernández, Valentina Rosendo Cantú, and Tita Radilla. Tita was recently given an award for her more than 30-year struggle on behalf of the victims of forced disappearance. Each one of these sentences is the result of the work of many people, and the bravery and perseverance of these women who have kept this work alive despite pressures, threats, and even attacks. And still the struggle continues—the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) recently admitted and will review the case of the women who were tortured in Atenco, women who were unable to obtain justice in their own country.

In this publication we also recognize the bravery of the women who fight to make advances for sexual and reproductive rights and for the Lesbian, Gay, Transexual, Bisexual, Intersex (LGBTI) community in Mexico. In many parts of the world, many of these rights are denied.

The increasing violence all over Mexico as a result of or-

ganized crime and the "war against drugs" puts these human rights defenders in an unprecedented dangerous and vulnerable position. At the same time, the violence against women, the trafficking of women and girls, and femicides continue almost unnoticed. In addition, the lack of recognition of indigenous communities' collective rights, labor and environmental rights, and fundamental civil and political rights also make these women an easy target for attacks.

In an effort to demonstrate the magnitude of the risks that these women face and their bravery in the face of these risks, we also want to pay homage to Bety Cariño, a Oaxacan human rights defender who was assassinated on April 27, 2010. We have included the testimony that she gave during the Fifth Platform in Dublin organized by Front Line just two months prior to her death.

To conclude, we included speeches by Mary Jane Real, former Coordinator for the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition (WHRD IC), and Margaret Sekaggya, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders.

All of the women who were interviewed for this publication and all the other women that we would have liked to include in this publication know they are working to create spaces for democratic and peaceful dialog, justice, and the advancement of human rights. These are the same objectives that were defined when a group of visionaries from all over the world met in Canada in 1981 and formed Peace Brigades International.

# Protagonists in the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights in Mexico

## Working for change for 40 years

During the widespread disappearances and assassinations that took place in Mexico during the “dirty war”<sup>1</sup> in the 1970’s, women were the first to speak out in their roles as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters. These women faced the state and demanded that their loved ones be returned to them. In this atmosphere, the National Independent Committee for the Defense of Prisoners, the Persecuted, the Detained Disappeared, and Political Exiles was created—later known as the Association of Relatives of the Detained Disappeared and Victims of Human Rights Violations in Mexico (AFADEM) in 1997.<sup>2</sup> This movement continues to work for justice and against impunity to this day. Tita Radilla is one woman who has played a decisive role in this organization.

In indigenous and campesino (peasant farmer) communities, where crimes are rarely investigated or go to trial and visits from the Army (which are often hostile) are the only state security forces in the region, women are often the ones who have paved the way by educating and reflecting on the rights of each person. In this environment, women have acted as educators and promoters of human rights, taking guidance from practical experience and from the gender responsibilities they take on every day. In this way, they have been the ones who understand and defend the interrelation of all human rights—civil and political rights as well as economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights. Since the 1980’s, women like Graciela Zavaleta and Dora Ávila began by promoting human rights in communities, both on their own and together with organizations like the Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center, one of the organizations that pioneered the defense and promotion of human rights in Mexico. Other women like Nora Martínez played a key role in the creation of several Mexican social movements by raising awareness and creating spaces to reflect on human rights in the context of the social teachings by the Catholic church.

The economic crisis in Mexico in the 1970’s sparked profound changes in the economy of the country, with drastic repercussions for fundamental rights of rural, campesino, and indigenous communities. The territorial demands of campesino communities soon included social and cultural demands. These mobilizations reached their most prominent political expression with the Zapatista uprising and the subsequent demands for the right to autonomy by indigenous people. During this conflict, women like Blanca Martínez were witness to assassinations, kidnappings, and other human rights violations in Chiapas. They also played an important role in the process of negotiation and conflict resolution between the Mexican government and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN).

In many indigenous communities, especially in the South of Mexico, women were the ones who repeatedly confronted soldiers while men hid for fear of persecution from the military. Faced with crimes and human rights violations committed by the security forces in the communities, women have spoken out against sexual violence and rape, and demanded justice in the name of their relatives. In recent sentences regarding the cases of Valentina Rosendo Cantú and Inés Fernández Ortega, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights stated that it is especially difficult for women to defend their rights due to the lack of access to justice, indifference, and racial and gender discrimination in the country, which is widely accepted in society and practiced by many public authorities.<sup>3</sup>

The North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 contributed to deterioration in working conditions for Mexican workers.<sup>4</sup> At the end of the 1990’s, after Blanca Velázquez experienced firsthand the way in which her workers’ rights were violated, she decided to lead a movement together with other women to demand a shorter work day and fair wages; she initially did this as a union organizer and then later created the Center for Worker Support (CAT) in Puebla and Tlaxcala.

There are also similar problems in the north of the country. A variety of factors, including the increasing poverty of women and their increasing role in the workforce, migration, and a poorly organized society, have given rise to a specific form of gender violence—femicide. Ciudad Juárez is a paradigmatic example of this kind of crime. Once again, women were the ones to organize themselves and create human rights defense centers that specialize in this type of violence in order to fully support the victims and their families. In 2001, the Roundtable of Women of Juárez Network was formed, which is now led by Imelda Marrufo. This organization, together with other organizations, worked on the “Campo Algodonero” case, which went to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights—the Court found on behalf of the victims in this case.<sup>5</sup> These women provided a gender perspective regarding women’s rights and the ways in which they are violated. Through their work, they have documented the daily violence that women in Mexico face and the need to fight for profound changes in society.

Given the structural problems families were facing due to poverty and migration, many women began organizing to create survival strategies through productive projects. By creating these projects, women trained themselves and set the foundation so that their children, their families, and their communities would learn to recognize and demand that their rights. Celsa Valdovinos, president and founder of the Organization of Women Ecologists of the Sierra de Petatlán in 2000, played a fundamental role in the conservation of the environment and creating sustainability in the campesino communities in the Costa Grande of Guerrero.

In 2000, Mexican civil society once again began to turn to human rights as a tool for their social and political demands. Many individuals and organizations of women began to take part in the work to promote human rights. Both older activists and the new generations began to identify themselves as human rights defenders. For Emiliana Cerezo, her identity as a human rights defender was of utmost importance

during the work she did to free her brothers and her work to fight for the rights of others who were unfairly incarcerated.

As a result of the large protests and subsequent state repression in Atenco and Oaxaca in 2006 (a key moment in the recent history of Mexico), new initiatives were created to demand truth and justice, in an atmosphere that typically lacks transparency and accountability for massive human rights violations. Women like Sara Méndez, who was part of the November 25 Liberation Committee in Oaxaca, Edith Rosales and the other women in Atenco made demands for justice that were heard throughout the world.

Similarly, transgender women and representatives from the LGBTI movement have played a fundamental role in promoting respect for the sexual identity of all people, despite violent and discriminatory acts against these groups in much of the country.<sup>6</sup> This is the case for Pamela Sandoval, who promotes sexual diversity rights in the state of Guerrero. Organizations also work to provide sexual education by developing health projects in response to breakouts of HIV-AIDS and discrimination against those with the diseases. Some of the most noted accomplishments of these groups include the recognition of the right for same sex couples to get married and to adopt children in Mexico City.

Even though feminist movements have made an impact in the past, the defense of sexual and reproductive rights continues to be taboo in Mexican society. Verónica Cruz has spent more than a decade speaking out against the double abuse towards women, especially low-income women, who have been raped and then turned into criminals for choosing to have an abortion.

There are two main challenges for the press and the media in Mexico: the concentration of the media in the hands of a few and the violence against the press that has made this one of the most dangerous countries for journalists.<sup>7</sup> María Porfiria Antonio faced a strong reaction from authorities in

2008 because her community created an indigenous community radio station to increase community participation and communication. Another woman, Marcela Turati, has taken steps to ensure that journalists can continue to report everyday on what takes place in the country. Together with other women she has created support networks for journalists.

Despite the current violent context from the “war against drugs” which has led to the loss of thousands of lives,<sup>9</sup> women like Blanca Mesina and Silvia Vázquez have been working for justice for the victims of human rights violations at the hands of security forces in the north of the country. Blanca Martínez moved from Chiapas to Coahuila and now works everyday to support the families of the disappeared in this conflict in which, in her own words, “You do not know what we are going to win, nor who is going to win, and there are thousands and thousands of victims.”

## Accompanying Women

Since the beginning of PBI’s presence in Mexico in 1999, the majority of the people who have requested and who have benefited from international accompaniment have been women. More than half of them live and work in rural and indigenous regions in Guerrero and Oaxaca. PBI has witnessed the ways in which these women have been victims of aggressions in an attempt to stop their work for justice and to defend human rights.<sup>9</sup> We have documented the way in which their identity as women, and in some cases indigenous and campesina women, has exposed them to specific forms of violence. We have also received information about the way in which women have had to overcome racism and sexism in order to file complaints in the Mexican justice system regarding these aggressions. Their children have even been the target of threats and violent acts as a way to put a stop to their work and their demands. Frequently, women have said that their voices are not even heard.

Due to this reality, PBI closely monitors the organizing pro-

cesses of women activists and human rights defenders. In November 2011, there was an event where 47 women human rights defenders came together. We would like to highlight some of what was said at the close of the event:

“We have personally lived through the accelerated and alarming increase in violence and decomposition of the social fabric, which is mainly a result of the way the state has stepped down from its duty to guarantee human rights.

[...] In this context, we have seen how discrimination has gotten worse, and we have seen an increase in extremely violent acts against women. [...] This includes the impunity that directly affects victims of family violence, and the thousands of women that must take on the search for justice for their family members who were disappeared, kidnapped, or assassinated; the repeated use of sexual violence and femicide by both state security forces and criminal groups; [...]

This reality is putting women’s struggle for human rights at risk, with serious consequences for their integrity and for their families, as well as for the thousands of people that benefit from their work for justice and human dignity. Between 2010 and 2011, organizations reported that at least eight women human rights defenders were assassinated in Mexico: Bety Cariño in Oaxaca, Josefina Reyes, María Magdalena Reyes, Luisa Ornelas, Marisela Escobedo and Susana Chávez in Chihuahua, Isabel and Reyna Ayala Nava in Guerrero and Carmela Elisarraráz Méndez in Michoacán. Five journalists have also been killed: Selene Hernández from the State of Mexico, María Isabel Cordero Martínez from Chihuahua, María Elvira Hernández Galeana in Guerrero and Ana María Marcela Yarce Viveros and Rocío González in Mexico City.

[...] We are calling for the human rights movement to commit to the protection, the security, and the recognition of human rights defenders by strengthening their role and their visibility and by constructing democratic spaces that

are free of discrimination and that attend to the needs and demands specific to human rights defenders.

We demand that the Mexican state effectively comply with its human rights obligations and with its obligation to protect human rights defenders, and put an end to the violence and impunity that has brought our country to one of its most profound crisis.”

PBI supports this declaration and would like to add the following statement: “We express our profound respect and recognition to the thousands of women who work daily to construct a more just, free, and equal society.”

1. Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Rosendo Radilla Vs. Mexico. Merits, Reparations, and Costs. Sentence released on November 3, 2009, Series C No. 209, paragraph 132.

2. Human rights defenders in the state of Guerrero. Cases of resistance and initiatives from civil society regarding the defense and promotion of fundamental rights in Guerrero. Peace Brigades International – Mexico Project. December 2007, page 24.

3. Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Fernández Ortega and others. Vs. Mexico. Merits, Reparations, and Costs. Sentence released on August 30, 2010, Series C No. 215, paragraph 2; and Rosendo Cantú and others Vs. Mexico. Merits, Reparations, and Costs. Sentence released on August 31, 2010, Series C No. 216, paragraph 2.

4. For more information about labor conditions in Mexico during this time please see: Regulaciones laborales, calidad de los empleos y modelos de inspección, México en el contexto latinoamericano, publicado por la Comisión Económica para América Latina (CEPAL), LC/MEX/L.861, May 2008.

5. Inter-American Court of Human Rights González and others (“Campo Algodonero”) Vs. Mexico. Merits, Reparations, and Costs. Sentence released on November 16, 2009, Series C No. 205.

6. Please see the report titled: The Violations of the Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Persons in MEXICO. A Shadow Report, Global Rights, March 2010.

7. According to a joint report by UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Frank La Rue, and IACHR Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression Catalina Botero, between 2000 and 2010, 66 journalists were killed and 12 were disappeared, making Mexico the most dangerous country for journalists in the Americas. Report by UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Frank La Rue - Addendum - Mission to Mexico (A/HRC/17/27/Add.3), May 19, 2011, paragraph 73.

8. According to the most recent statistics from the Mexican government, from December 2006 until the end of 2010 there were 34,612 homicides associated with organized crime activity. According to the Mexican press: Grupo REFORMA (Ejecutómetro 2011) has counted 39,953 victims in the last five years, and the weekly paper Zeta has said that this number is close to 60,000.

9. For more information about the PBI’s experience accompanying women human rights defenders, please see our special report in Spanish, Defensoras de derechos humanos bajo amenazas [Women human rights defenders under threat], PBI Spanish State, 2011.



# Testimonies



Paving  
the way





## Tita Radilla

Vice-president of the Association of the Relatives of the Detained Disappeared, and Victims of Human Rights Violations (AFADEM) | Atoyac de Álvarez, Guerrero

My father, Rosendo Radilla Pacheco, was detained and disappeared on August 25, 1974, at a military checkpoint here in the Municipality of Atoyac de Álvarez. In the 1970's in the state of Guerrero, hundreds of people were detained and disappeared; others were executed and tortured. Since then, we began to fight to find out what happened to them; however the Mexican state continues to avoid the issue. There is no political will to clarify these sad events.

In the beginning, we families began to look for our loved ones by ourselves, first with people from other movements, and later as part of AFADEM. We did a lot to ask for the return of our disappeared family members. In 1999, we filed our first complaint with the National Attorney General's Office (PGR) for the disappearance of 143 people. As a result of these cases, the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) opened an investigation and received 543 complaints. The CNDH then recommended the creation of a Special Prosecutor's Office, the FEMOSPP (Special Prosecutor for Social and Political Movements of the Past), to investigate these cases. This Special Prosecutor's Office worked five years and did not achieve the expected results. These cases were then sent to the Coordinator of Special Affairs at the National Attorney General's Office.

*«It's not just Rosendo who we are looking for, but each and every person who was detained and disappeared.»*

We presented my father's case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2001, which released a recommendation about this case. However, the state did not comply with this recommendation and the case was sent to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which then released a sentence on November 23, 2009. The senten-

ce from the Court references the context in which these events occurred. This made us very happy, because it is not just Rosendo who we are looking for, but each and every person who was detained and disappeared. This means that the state must investigate everything that took place during that time.

The sentence was released two years ago, and the state has only complied with one part of it, [the publication of the sentence in the national media]. They are also excavating but this is not a result of official investigations—their search is based on rumors, and they have not yet found anything. The Mexican government should have carried out an investigation; we should not have had to go to international entities.

Our relatives were people who fought for just causes and they deserved to be treated that way. Many of them had nothing to do with the armed movements; they were from the civil population and they suffered from an act that did not have to happen.

Sadly, not much is known about the truth of what happened here. But today, with this sentence, there is more information. I think this should be written down so it is in the historical memory and so people know about the heroes, and so people know who damaged the nation and its people. This should also be in textbooks so that children and adolescents will know what happened and so it does not happen again.

We hope that the Mexican state will recognize its responsibility for what happened. [On November 17, 2011, the Mexican state held a public event in which it recognized its responsibility for these human rights violations, however neither the Radilla family nor any of the other relatives of the disappeared were present at this act]. Our disappeared family members had the right to a fair trial if they did commit an illegal act. For us, their relatives, we have the right to know what happened to them and where they are. We want them to be returned to us in the conditions in which they are found.



## Graciela Zavaleta Sánchez

President of the “Mahatma Gandhi” Regional Human Rights Commission, A.C.\* | San Juan Bautista Tuxtepec, Oaxaca

\*Civil Association

I decided at the end of the 80's to begin this work when the situation in the region became intolerable due to abuse of authority, corruption, torture, and extra judicial executions.... A group of people from civil society got together to talk about what we could do about these abuses. We realized that people were unprotected—they asked for help and they could not find it. We did not know where to go, because at that time human rights were not discussed. It was something that existed, but we did not know how to make use of them. We did not even know about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We heard that there were groups that could help us, and we got in contact with the Miguel Agustín Pro (Júarez Human Rights Center). We turned to them because we needed support, and they came and talked to us. Once we heard that we could do something about the serious situation in the region we got together and created the Commission in 1991. We looked for an office near the house where the police were detaining and torturing people. That was when we first started to work. The people from the towns and the communities came to us and we started to get a lot of cases... but we did not know what to do in the beginning.

It was very difficult when the repression began. There were clashes with the federal, state, and municipal police—we made very serious accusations [against the police] and they began to threaten and persecute us. I knew that if I was afraid and if I hid, they were going to kill me. I

said: “no, I have to keep going.” The most difficult part was when our colleagues began to step back out of fear, saying, “We love you a lot, we value what you are doing, but you have gone beyond what is necessary.” When the state saw that I was not afraid, they attacked my children,

they accused them of being robbers, drug traffickers, many terrible things. That was in 1993. We went to the Governor of Oaxaca and told him about what was happening and he told me, “Yes, it's true, but that is what happens when you get involved with these things.”

That year I documented 13 lynchings in the region. I have all the file numbers; all of them were reported to the CNDH and the Oaxaca State Human Rights Commission [now known as the Human Rights Defender's Office for the People of Oaxaca] who then released recommendations [about these cases]. The arrest warrants were issued, but as far as we know, none of these authorities who were involved have been punished for these illicit acts.

I also remember the day that the first people [I worked with] were released from jail. The jail was awful and horrendous. There were people who had spent two or three years in jail for robbing a turkey or a bike. Many of them were indigenous people and were in jail because they did not have a translator to explain what happened. Some of the first people that I freed included a couple whose daughter had accused her parents of land dispossession. When I saw them freed, and when I saw how happy they were, I realized that we had to continue this work.

*«I knew that if I was afraid and if I hid, they were going to kill me. I said: ‘no, I have to keep going’.»*

We chose the name Mahatma Gandhi precisely because he was a man that gave everything to free his people from slavery. He did not use violence, yet he was attacked and slandered. He did not abandon his ideals. He fought, and this cost him his life. This encourages me to

keep going. As a woman, I was weak, I was very afraid; but as an activist, I hold my head high and I fully act in accordance with my ideals. He was an example for me, and I am one small grain of sand in all of that thought.



## Blanca Isabel Martínez

Director of the Fray Juan de Larios Diocese Center for Human Rights, A.C. | Saltillo, Coahuila

It is difficult to pinpoint when I first started to say I was a human rights defender. I have always been involved in social movements, and at some point in my path, I saw how social demands were actually human rights. I spent 10 years in Chiapas, six of these years as the director of the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center (Frayba). During the armed conflict in 1994 in Chiapas, I began to also work with the National Mediation Commission. There were a lot of demands for certain rights, and for [more] attention to the structural causes that led to marginalization, discrimination, and structural injustice for indigenous people. It was then that my identity as a human rights defender got stronger and became more visible.

The time when the armed conflict was most intense was very, very difficult, filled with very painful, intense human experiences. You wonder, "How is it possible that someone can do this? Why do they come to massacre, displace, and make people disappear?" I often compare it to what is happening now—it is also a war, a different kind of war with a different context and with different actors, social processes, and hopes. In the conflict in Chiapas, I saw some hope. Here I see chaos. You don't know what we are going to win, nor who is going to win, and there are thousands and thousands of victims. There are forced disappearances, executions, massive kidnappings—very similar to what I saw from 94-99.

When my time as director of Frayba came to an end, Don Raúl, who was a member of the board of directors, needed support here in Coahuila. One day he grabbed me and he said, "Come here," and I went. I also did this because I cannot see myself staying in the same place. I am somewhat of a wanderer and I need to keep moving in order to un-

derstand the world and in order to understand myself in the world.

When I got to Coahuila, I said to myself, "Wow, this country is a giant hacienda!" The social organization, economic control, and the work relationships were very similar to feudalism, especially in the carbon [mining] region. You wonder, "What year am I in?" They live in tremendous poverty, in conditions that you would not expect in the North. Every family that you talk to has had someone die in some awful situation in a mine. It is a reality that few people know about in the country. Little is known about what happens in Coahuila and the people here who have disappeared.

I thought I came to the North to train human rights promoters and that I was going to spend my time promoting [human rights]. I thought I would main-

tain some distance from all the work with victims of violence. However there was no chance of this. When I arrived, a colleague and I began to work with the families of disappeared people, which took up all of our time. Now we do not have time for anything else; we are a team of two people working on integral defense. It is a large territory and the demand is very high.

After working several years with indigenous communities where organizing comes naturally, I found that here people organize in a different way... and it is very slow. So, the organizing process to defend human rights has another level of complexity. I think that defending human rights is not an individual matter, nor can it be reduced to the legal sphere. Fundamentally, it is a social matter. If the people do not organize themselves, no one is going to defend them. In one way or another, those rights are defended collectively.

*«You don't know what we are going to win, nor who is going to win, and there are thousands and thousands of victims.»*



## Dora Ávila Betancourt

Member of the “Näaxwiin” Center for the Rights of Women, A.C. | Matías Romero, Oaxaca

I thought of myself as a social activist, as a conscious person, a feminist who was convinced that women have rights. I have had this conviction for a long time. I think that since I was very small I was aware of injustices. I grew up in a rural mestizo community in Veracruz, and spent time with indigenous Nahuatl children who came from the Northern Sierra in Puebla. I noticed that there was a distinction that was made between us, and I thought that it was not right. I also had a teacher in my rural primary school—now looking back I think that she was a feminist—and I think that this influenced me. She did not distinguish between the boys’ and girls’ work. She taught us to defend what we loved.

I went to the Isthmus at the end of 85, after [I finished] at the university. My partner and I began to work with a social organization. We had a friend here who was doing similar work [with another local organization]. First my partner went and he wrote me a letter saying that there was a lot to do here, and that we were going to transform reality. It was a little bit of that hope, and a little bit of love that convinced me. And then the place won me over, the people, all of the richness...

Throughout the years, I think I have been able to influence other people. If I look back on what things were like when I started to work on women’s rights, I think that there have been changes in the region. However I have not accomplished this alone, but rather with the help of other women. When we started to work with the women, it was not common for them to meet, or even to leave their homes. It was almost inconceivable for them to be in a community assembly. Or, as another example, there was not much attention paid to health care. Now there are more federal programs, and there have also been changes in the community clinics. Overall, seeing the women here in the region take charge has been one of the greatest satisfactions; to see that if you

are not here, things will still continue. We also worked with other organizations and began to create networks. When we started this work we felt like we were alone, but then we realized there were other people working in the same conditions.

I am aware that this work is risky for me and for my family. I began to notice this risk awhile back in 1995 with the then recent uprising of the EZLN. Then we participated in marches, we went to Chiapas in solidarity to bring food when the Army entered the communities. All of this made our work more visible.

*«When we began, it was not common for women to meet, to leave their homes.»*

I have felt intimidated several times, and in 2008 these threats became a reality. I was detained by the AFI (Federal Investigation Agency) agents for several hours, I was not put before a judge, and I was unable to notify my family about my whereabouts. I was accused of attacking the public roads

and means of transport. Paradoxically, it was also a beautiful moment because there was an incredible movement on my behalf and I realized that we had sown many seeds. I am moved just thinking about this... I think one thing that saved me at that time was the support I received from the National Network of Promoters and Rural Advisors. That was very beautiful for me because I thought, “It is so awful that these things can happen to someone, but it is also so important for us to work together like this!”

Now I hope to strengthen what we created, pass on what I have learned to other organizations, to other women, and continue learning too. I hope that more women can become aware that they can be human rights defenders so that we take care of each other. As one child from the region who participates in theater says, “We have to take good care of each other because there are not many of us.”



## Minerva Nora Martínez Lázaro

Coordinator of the “Bartolomé Carrasco Briseño” Regional Human Rights Center, A.C. (Barca-DH) | Oaxaca de Juárez, Oaxaca

I was a catechist for the Catholic church for a long time, and I started to feel a commitment to transform my faith into a reality. As a Catholic, you think about making a commitment with the sacrament that you receive, since you receive this sacrament in order to give life and make changes. That is how I got involved, through workshops about Christ, and through the Basic Ecclesial Communities.

However, I was especially moved during the Zapatista uprising, because the poverty in the small towns was something that we knew existed and was something we had also felt. I thought, “How can I give more?” Here I was giving my two hours of catechism and I went back to my normal life: work, home, my catechism, and that was it.

At that time we participated in a youth group, and several of us got together when we heard about an open call to go to the Democratic Convention in Chiapas. We wanted to go because the ideals in the Zapatista message were the same as ours. We named delegates from the municipalities—they named me, together with other people from Xoxo, San Antonino, and San Pablo—and went to the Convention. Being there was different, seeing the situation with the indigenous people and the Zapatistas. From that moment I said, “Well no, I’m not going to spend my whole life like this. Yes, we have to urgently begin to construct something and organize ourselves.”

I began to look for ways to get involved and participate more. I had the opportunity to go to the parish in Teojomulco. A group of missionaries, including Mother Lupita, invited us to go to the communities where we were able to see the reality and the poverty in which they lived, the health conditions, and the roads... I then left everything and I began to work there. Mother Lupita invited us to join the team, but since I am not a member of the religious order, I got involved in human rights and health. There was already a working group: Father Uvi, Father Martín, and several people from the ministry. It was a team that delegated duties, and

they sent me to work in these areas.

I liked being with the people in the communities, living with them, accompanying them, and participating from there. We started to make progress with the workshops from the Prodh (Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center); I learned everything about human rights from them. Their lawyers and their education team came to train us. They showed us how to present complaints, how to do administrative work... [...] We had to look for an institution that would provide the resources. Later we received specialized training from the Prodh for human rights promoters, and I participated in order to get trained even though I was still not yet part of Barca-DH.

*«Well no, I will not spend my whole life like this. Yes, we have to urgently begin to construct something and organize ourselves.»*

At that time I was 24 years old; I was not so young. Giving myself to a project was not so easy. In my home I was the strange one. My father’s vision was, “You have to think first about yourself, about your possessions, about getting everything and then, whatever else you want [to do].” They did not send me to study at the university. There were six of us children: three men and three women. The men were sent to study because my parents said, “Well, the men will have to provide for their wives and the women will not have to do that because the women will get married and then they will have someone to take care of them.”

Far from giving up, I got more involved.



## Valentina Rosendo Cantú

Victim of rape and torture by Mexican Army soldiers | Ayutla de los Libres, Guerrero

My name is Valentina Rosendo Cantú. I am 26 years old and I am an indigenous Me'phaa woman from the state of Guerrero. I began to think of myself as a human rights defender as a result of my case... my fight is not just for me, it also helps other women who have also been raped by soldiers. That is very important for me because through my struggle, together with Inés Fernández, our cases have helped many women see things in a different way.

My life has not been all beautiful. No. There have been times when I wanted to abandon this struggle, I say that clearly. When they tried to take my daughter when she was leaving school, that is when I did not want to keep going. For what? But in that moment I also reacted. I knew I should keep going and I decided to continue. There is a part of me that does not want to continue, I think that I cannot live this way, with fear, but I have to keep fighting. I see my daughter, I see my family, I see my sisters, I see the reaction of many

*«I will not go back as a woman that was humiliated [...]. I will go back as someone that can do something for my community.»*

women in the community who have suffered from this situation and who have lived through the same thing. That is when I decide to continue, I have to keep going even though it is difficult, right?

The sentence from the Inter-American Court was a very important moment for me because it was a very clear step forward. It was a step towards hope, a step forward to show that indigenous women like me can do whatever is necessary. This gives us the strength to continue to fight

and also the hope that this will not stop here. The struggle began and we have to finish it—for me, for that reason, the sentence from the Court is very important.

However the greatest accomplishment has not taken place yet. This will take place when the Mexican government makes a public recognition [of responsibility for their actions. This ceremony took place on December 15, 2011. The Mexican state publicly recognized its responsibility for the human rights violations committed against Valentina Rosendo Cantú in 2002 when she was assaulted by members of the Mexican Army]. I imagine that many things will change once the Mexican government makes a public recognition. That is when it will be known, where so many people who did not dare to file a complaint and who never spoke out will think... this part is going to change. I have something prepared [that I want to say that day] so that these women can see things differently.

Today I am at a point in which I cannot say [where I am living] because in this never-ending struggle, I fear for my safety and for the safety of my daughter and my family. I would like to return to my community someday, to see my family, to see my parents, my brothers and sisters; to go to the place where I was born, where I grew up.

I will go back, but not like the woman that left nine years ago, a woman who was humiliated, beaten, mistreated, and discriminated. I will go back as someone who can do something for my community.

I am now finishing high school. I would like to continue studying to be a nurse so that I can go back and help other women in my community. There are women who have also been mistreated by their husbands, and that makes me sad, too. Many women in the community do not have information, they do not have a clear education so that they can also speak out, [because] women are equal to men, and women can do the same things as men. That is what I would like to do when I go back to my community.

Making  
changes



## Imelda Marrufo Nava

Coordinator of the Roundtable of Women of Juárez Network, A.C. | Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua

More than 11 years ago, I got very interested in working with young women who live in violent situations. I was especially interested in sharing our experiences as young activists—at that point we did not think of ourselves as human rights defenders. I think that the most interesting and intense work that I have done is the work in Ciudad Juárez regarding violence against women and femicide. When we began to speak out about this situation, I found myself with many other women. Together we began to construct a group with a human rights agenda, an agenda with a focus on speaking out and taking action to work towards justice.

We have had significant tension. For example, around 2002 and 2003, the state government created a campaign to divide the social organizations in Juárez. This generated a lot of speculation. I heard from colleagues in other organizations that the government wanted to spread the idea that the organizations in Ciudad Juárez are divided. That is not true. Yes, there was tension between two organizations in the area, but that did not mean that all of them were divided.

I see my human rights defense work as collective work. We have shown that we have the ability to trust, to work in a team, to listen to each other, and to dialog. I believe I am part of a movement of women that has spoken out in the international arena; we had success not alone, but with the solidarity of many human rights defenders, human rights organizations in the country, and with other countries. Ciudad Juárez received international recommendations, and together we achieved a sentence from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights two years ago for the “Campo Algodonero” case.

One very important issue related to the effective compliance with this sentence is the Alba Protocol. This Protocol is used to search for disappeared young women in Ciudad Juárez. The most recent disappearance was less than two months ago. It is incredibly urgent, because we can save the lives of these young women if the Protocol is im-

mediately implemented.

The Network pushed for a Justice Center for women in Chihuahua [which has already been inaugurated], and for another one in Ciudad Juárez. We proposed this idea because we documented the way in which women were doubly victimized—when they file a complaint they have to go through many centers until they can get to the right person. Then, on many occasions women receive poor attention and are told to go home because the process is very slow and nothing will happen. And so, part of the proposal for the

*«One thing that is common among the defenders in Juárez is the love that we have for the city.»*

Center is to concentrate all of the services in one building where they can all be provided. This building has childcare for their children, psychologists, and special investigators specifically for women. All of the service providers must have an understanding of gender, they must do their work based on investigation protocols, and they must fulfill all the legal norms according to international human rights standards.

I have never thought about no longer doing this work. It is a very strong political conviction for me; it is a life project. One thing that is common among defenders in Juárez is the love that we have for the city. Many people have left, there are thousands of displaced people in Juárez, but we must continue because we want people in the city to live a different life. The right to stay in the city where you want to live should not be taken away.





## Emiliana Cerezo Contreras

Co-founder and member of the Cerezo Committee Mexico | Mexico City

We created the Committee in 2001, when three of my brothers were accused of putting bombs in several offices of the National Bank of Mexico, Banamex. Five days later, they were detained and held for 36 hours at a police station in Camarones [in Mexico City], and then they sent them to the maximum security prison. They were detained on a Monday, on Tuesday I found out, and that day protests began at the UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico). Through some friends, my brother Alejandro got in contact with Pilar Noriega and Digna Ochoa, two lawyers who took on their cases. That is how the Cerezo Committee was created.

There were two options: I could stay silent and continue with my normal life while they served their sentence, or I could get involved. Together with my brother Francisco and my brothers' friends who were mostly from the UNAM, we began to create the Committee.

Why did I do this? Well, it is very simple: one, out of love and two, out of conviction—and both of these go together. One, because of the deep love that I have for my brothers—not just because they are my brothers, but because of all the things we went through together, and because we have similar ideals. So I decided to fight for my brothers' freedom in order to act in a way consistent with my values, since what they did to them was an act of injustice.

There were many important moments, for example: when Alejandro was found innocent and released in 2005; when Pablo Alvarado was freed in 2006; and then when my other brothers, Héctor and Antonio, were freed three years later. Another moving moment was our 10 year anniversary, because we saw that we had achieved most of our objecti-

ves. We did not stop with the Cerezo brothers' and Pablo Alvarado's cases. We looked around us and this made us keep going.

There have also been difficult moments, such as the state actions against us. We were followed and harassed. There was video surveillance in front of our house and threats—the most recent one came yesterday. Or, in 2005, when they transferred Héctor Cerezo from the Altiplano, the CERESO [Federal Prison] No. 1, in the State of Mexico to Puente Grande, [Jalisco] and Antonio Cerezo to Matamoros, [Tamaulipas]. It was a strong hit because only a few of us could get into this maximum security prison due to so many regulations. Also, Antonio was in solitary confinement

for over 100 days in Matamoros. The most difficult moment depends on each stage of this struggle. For example, it was devastating when Digna Ochoa was killed.

Despite the obstacles, I get my strength from the same place as in the beginning—love and conviction. I was

taught that I have to be just, fair, and honest. I am not going to tell you that we are white doves, but we try to be consistent [with our ideals]. In the Committee, we also have a collective vision. The Committee is not just five brothers and sisters; other people are part of it, and without them we would not be able to do this work.

Sometimes people think that there are only four brothers [in the Committee], but that has not affected me because it means that they do not know the case. I do what I have pledged to do, and even though I do not maintain a high profile, I have specific tasks within the Committee. Just because it is not visible, does not mean that the work is not being done.

*«There were two options: I could stay silent and continue with my normal life while they served their sentence, or I could get involved.»*



## Verónica Cruz

Director of the Center “Las Libres” Information about Sexual Health, Central Region, A.C. | Guanajuato, Guanajuato

We decided to create our own organization to fight for women’s rights from a feminist perspective. Our organization decided to publicly work on an issue that comes from a complicated political context. When the National Action Party (PAN) won the presidency in 2000, they thought that society had given them a blank check to do whatever they wanted and they began to get rid of the small rights that women had won, including legal access to abortion in the case of rape. We decided to fight against this law that made poor women and rape victims criminals, and we were able to get this law vetoed. That is when we began to politically position ourselves in favor of taking away the penalty for abortion. We started by working for legal access to abortion for victims of rape.

From 2000 to 2006, we searched for all women and girls who were victims of rape in the state who had decided for or against a legal abortion. During those six years, we accompanied each woman throughout her process of filing, or not filing, a legal complaint. We provided all of them with support, so that each woman could find the best way to get back to her life. We saw how the state created obstacles throughout this process... it seemed like no one cared. We were the crazy ones saying what happened—that the majority of girls were raped in their own homes, and these girls got pregnant from their own fathers. In 2006, we published a report with Human Rights Watch titled, “The Second Assault: Obstructing Access to Legal Abortion after Rape in Mexico.” We were able to show how women, mostly girls, who were victims of rape were doubly violated by the state—they were denied access to a legal abortion and therefore obligated to become mothers. As a result of this work, I was given a prize as a human rights defender. Still, the most important thing was the opportunity to tell the world

*«We are working to create an environment in which all women in Mexico can have access to a safe abortion.»*

what was happening in Mexico even if the problem was not recognized here.

Later, in 2010, the most important accomplishment for me and for the organization was when we fought the government, with all of its power, to free nine women who were each sentenced for up to 35 years in jail because they had a miscarriage. It was like breaking an unbreakable wall. The women had spent an average of 10 years in jail. Many of them were poor, had little resources, were victims of violence, and were victims of sexual abuse. The state never thought that anyone would find them or that anyone would want to defend them. When we talked about their cases in the public sphere, we were able to generate social and political pressure and pressure from the media, all which obligated the government to free them. This reality paved the way to legalize abortion.

The majority of the organizations that work on behalf of the sexual and reproductive rights of women take action in several ways. One step we are taking is to ensure legal access to abortion and health services. Even though there are legal exceptions [that allow abortion] in the criminal codes throughout the country, this does not mean that this right is guaranteed. The second step is working to legalize abortion [throughout the country] like it is in Mexico City. We are working with doctors and public hospitals to create an environment in which all women in Mexico have access to a safe abortion. They have the duty to safeguard the lives of women, maintain their privacy, and take steps to provide access to a safe abortion for all women, rich or poor. We are also working to take specific cases to the Supreme Court in order to eliminate this crime from the legal code in the whole country.



## Celsa Valdovinos Ríos

President of the Organization of Women Ecologists of the Sierra de Petatlan, A.C. (OMESP) | Petatlán Guerrero

When my husband Felipe Arreaga was taken to jail in November 2004, I had to look for lawyers and I started to navigate the [human rights] world. When he was taken to jail, it was a very difficult surprise for us because he had not committed a crime—he had not done what he was being accused of. I no longer had any hope that he would get out. Many people scared me because they told me, “That crime your husband is accused of, they will never let him out of jail for that.” We were surprised because we did win the case and he got out of jail.

The organization was created in 2000, and our first goals were to raise awareness so that people would produce their own food to eat and take care of the environment. Later we got to work and yes, we have accomplished many things: people are growing vegetables, we have our own community savings bank, and we are taking care of the rivers by not throwing trash in them. The OMESSP’s work is very visible, for example with the trash. Before when you went on the roads, there was trash all over the place. Not anymore; now the communities are clean.

In addition, now men also do the work. For example, they help the women with the vegetables. During the clean-up campaigns they almost never helped, but now they are careful about not throwing the trash [where it does not belong]. Before we suffered from a lot of aggression from the men, they said, “Women are not good for anything.” They discriminated against us. “When have you ever seen women get together in a group?” They always said that to us. Before the women could never speak at assemblies, and now, the majority of the people in the school committees are women. Many of us now know how to defend ourselves, we know our rights, they do not trample on us anymore. Women have started to value themselves the way that they should.

We have made progress in the administration of the organization. Before, I had to do all of the work together with the board of directors. We had to hold meetings in all of

the communities and we did not have any help. We had to do double the work. I had a lot of work. But now we have promoters in the communities and they are doing this work. Now there are about 12 promoters. They work in Barranca, Parotitas, Cananejas, Las Galeras, La Pasión, Guapinoles, and Zapotillal. Now I just have to do some of the administration. I have meetings every two or three months with the promoters. We have manuals that we had made and all the promoters write down the work they have done, including how well they did their work, what topics they talked about, what commitments they made. When we get together at the meetings everyone reviews the manuals.

*«Before, women could never speak at assemblies, and now, the majority of the people in school committees are women.»*

Still, only two people are working now because we have a problem with crime in the Sierra de Petatlán—the promoters are afraid. They say that if people see them meeting they might say, “Who knows what those women are up to.” This has also caused a lot of damage to our work. It is a very concerning situation. Another serious problem is that many people have been displaced from the communities. There are communities that are now empty.

I have always said that what I want is for the people to take ownership of the work that we have done and what we have learned. Even if I am not around, I want the work to go on, as if I were here. I want people to say: “I learned this, I am going to put it to use, and I will keep doing it for the rest of my life.”



## Sara Méndez Morales

Anthropologist and Coordinator of the Committee for the Integral Defense of Human Rights  
Gobixa, A.C. (Codigo-DH) | Oaxaca de Juárez, Oaxaca

I started by defending women's rights in Tlaxiaco, in the Mixteca region, by documenting cases of violence against women. I worked for two or three years in several organizations and then I got involved with the Oaxacan Network for Human Rights, which was created in 2000.

In 2005, I was chosen to be the technical secretary for the Network. It was a complicated year, mostly because of the elections for state governor, which were very controversial. There was a big uprising and we could already tell that it

*«At this time, I do not think I am capable of leaving all the people that have given us their trust.»*

would not be easy. And then when [Governor] Ulises Ruiz took office, there were a series of aggressive acts against freedom of expression.

The most difficult time was during the conflict in 2006. There were many difficult moments. The moment that I really felt overwhelmed was on November 25. It was very difficult to receive reports from people who said to me, "My relative is not here, I can't find him, I don't know where he is." We knew that some people were in jails in Miahuatlán and others in Tlacolula. However, suddenly they began to transfer prisoners and no one knew where they were taking them. Several hours went by and we did not know where they were.

Also, there was the day that Marcelino Coache was hit with a tear gas bomb in his head. Seeing him in the hospital while the media said that he had been killed... and I said, "No, He is alive, I just saw him! I talked to him! He is conscious!"

You think about him, about his family.

I think that it is very gratifying to see the solidarity at those times.

One very happy moment was when Juan Manuel Martínez Moreno was freed. He was in prison for 16 months; during that time we accompanied his family, we accompanied him in jail, and we carried out a campaign on his behalf. It was very moving when he was freed. For him it was like being reborn, like coming back to life.

Something that I like to point out is that as of 2006, women have had a strong presence in many ways—in terms of defending human rights, but also in the social movement. After that year there has been a greater recognition for the work of women from different areas.

Now we are in a new stage in our work. It is the first year for Codigo-DH, [a newly formed organization]. We have made a big leap in our work, the way we organize information, and the way we accompany cases. Although the work has mostly focused on cases of ex-political prisoners, survivors of torture, arbitrary detentions, and extra judicial executions from 2006, we are also creating new areas of work. The new office we opened in San Pedro Amuzgos is a wonderful challenge; we are changing activities a little bit and we are [learning more]. Indigenous communities have a need for information about human rights, and we can provide information about everything we have learned throughout these years.

At this time, I do not think I am capable of leaving all the people who have given us their trust and who hope that we will achieve something.



## Edith Rosales

Victim of sexual assault and torture in the Atenco Case | San Salvador Atenco, State of Mexico

I was imprisoned for one year and 10 months in two jails: Santiaguito and Molino de Flores. There were several violations in the procedure: we were detained without an arrest warrant and we were isolated for 24 hours. I did not even know what we were being accused of until we were sentenced to prison on May 10. Only then were the lawyers allowed to have access to the case file. In the beginning, we were accused of kidnapping, attacking public roads and transport, and organized crime.

We were in Tlateloco when we found out about the repression [in Atenco] and the death of a child, Javier Cortés. On May 3, we went in solidarity to Atenco. The Other Campaign was passing through, and the next morning the police and army came in. First, they detained us and we were beat, there were a lot of crude words. And then when we were transferred to jail we were raped.

I remember the day that they took us to Santiaguito. At one in the morning they took our statements. They did not want us to file a complaint for the rape. The FEVIM (now known as Special Prosecutor for Crimes of Violence against Women and Human Trafficking, FEVIMTRA).

When I was in jail, there was a lot of propaganda against us, "There are the ones from Atenco, they are bad, they are damned." There were 47 women, and then 46 because a child was taken to her guardian. We were bloody, our clothes smelled, we smelled, and they were going to bring us buckets, soap, clothes. When you talk to the people you understand why the solidarity within the jail began. It was a reflection of what had happened to all of them—when they were detained, guilty or not guilty, they were sexually

assaulted, tortured, and beaten.

The people who were organized had an easier time dealing with this situation. However, the people from town like the flower vendors, people who only wanted to defend their work, and many other innocent people were detained, and their lives have since been chaotic. There were women who were abandoned by their husbands whose families have reproached them; there are people who still have not overcome this and live in fear.

The most positive aspect is that the case has reached the rest of the world. We received many letters; many people got together and took action in other countries. That is why we feel a lot of responsibility. The other [positive part] is that we are still standing. It has been five years now and we are still organized and we still have the conviction to keep going. We formed a brotherly connection amongst those of us who were detained in Atenco, and this is good because it shows that the government did not succeed in beating us down and breaking up the movement—no, it brought us together. The other good thing is that the IACHR has admitted the case. [The IACHR admitted the case of the eleven women in Atenco against the Mexican state during the 143rd period of sessions in November 2011.]

When something like this happens you cannot go back. With everything that has happened, you channel the impotence in order to keep fighting. One, for justice, and two, so that it does not happen again. Why? Because it did not happen just to Edith, or to one of the 11 [women who were sexually assaulted], it was the whole town. They violated the rights of a whole town.

*«You channel the impotence in order to keep fighting. One, for justice, and two, so that it does not happen again.»*

Facing  
challenges



## María Porfiria Antonio Nieves\*

Artisan and member of the Radio Ñomndaa Committee - The Word of Water | Xochistlahuaca, Guerrero

\*This testimony was originally given in Amuzgo, and was translated by David Valtierra, member of Radio Ñomndaa

Many years ago I had heard that the Radio existed, but I had never seen one until we put it here in our town in 2004. It was easy to get involved with the Radio; it is a pleasure to participate. I am happy that it is here because it keeps us informed about everything: about what we are going through, about what happens to us, even about what we have lost. All of that can be heard on the radio. It does not just help the women or just this community. The message, the reflection, the ideas reach far away places. This thought has a long road. We will die one day but these ideas will live on.

The government, the authorities, do not let us have tools as Amuzgo people. Now that we are with the Radio, we are not locked up like animals in a pen, we are free. [...] We are better off living together united in this way, the indigenous people, the poor people. We are Amuzgo people, we speak the word of water.

The Radio is in our town and if we do not take care to defend it, it could be at risk. For example, three years ago there was an operative in which they wanted to take away the Radio. I was sad because we did not have any way to file a complaint with the government about this—the federal authorities were the ones that sent in the Army. We could not file a complaint. They had arms and if they had fired them, they would have killed many people. They came with large caliber weapons, with violence. They did not come with a good word.

We know how this Radio was created, [we created it], and then the government wanted to destroy it. That is not okay. This is something that we constructed; the government did not give it to us. If they had given it to us, we could give it back, but this Radio is a result of our own effort.

Our heads, our hearts were hurt by the way they acted.

I was very angry and I was not afraid. This is why I think that it is helpful to not be afraid. We were able to defend the Radio when they came to take it away from us. Many people participated in the defense. I felt very good about it because we showed them that they cannot take away our Radio. There are other people who know how to defend us because they know the law. We also get strength from other people, because we cannot do it alone.

*«We will not pay for being in this struggle — fighting is not a crime.»*

I sometimes ask God to make the soldiers forget about us, because they only come to make us afraid. We do not have money to give them, nor do we have weapons. We do not get help, we do not have work, there is nothing. That is why many people migrate, and many do not come back or they come back dead. They do not know when they will return to their home town. This is one thing that hurts me a lot. They go away for many years and then we hear: “No, he died there.”

There is a lot of work to do together so that the Radio can stay alive. We need better installations, there are things that we can do, and there are things that are out of our hands. We have to stand strong. With one step that we go forward, we cannot go back. We have to keep looking for a way to organize ourselves, and find a way to come to an agreement so that the Radio will stay in our town. It does not need many resources, the only thing that it needs is our word. We will not pay for being in this struggle—fighting is not a crime.



## Marcela Turati Muñoz

Journalist and co-founder of the Network “Red de Periodistas de a Pie”, A.C. | Mexico City

The Network was created in 2006 by women, a group of journalists that covered social issues. In Mexico, women journalists are the only ones to choose topics related to education, human rights, or health. The men are sent to the political and legal sections. The social topics were used as fillers and we always said, “But why? These are the topics that people are interested in!” We noticed they did not publish our work and that we needed to have different strategies. We needed to learn to write, to see different angles, and to connect politics and economics with social issues so that our articles could create a spark.

In 2007, we began to see everything that was happening in the country, especially the increase in assassinations and disappearances of journalists. The editors began to tell us, “Hey go to Juárez and get me the name of the head of the local drug trade and what police forces they work with.” And I said, “Well, how do we do that?” That is when we took a turn with the Network, and we started to learn how to protect ourselves and how to give a human rights focus to our articles. Last year the number of assassinations and disappearances of journalists was alarming. We saw that the government was not doing anything, and we called for a march in Mexico City and in 18 other cities.

When the violence began, I was caught by surprise like any other journalist in this country. Suddenly you are reporting from dangerous areas. When I was reporting on ghost towns, for example, I went to do an article about displaced people, and a car came up to my truck. The people that were in the car told me to leave and that I should stop asking questions and go home. Or you feel like you are in the wrong place and that gunfire could break out at any moment, or they tell you that they are watching you, and that you have to go, and you must leave quickly. This makes me

rethink everything about how I do my work because there was a very drastic change in the context. You do not know who the actors are working for anymore. It is very difficult to do work in the field. You have to learn to do it safely.

One of the most important things that we did in the Network was when we decided to get rid of our egos and our individuality and support those who do their work in dangerous regions. We want to publish; it does not matter who publishes. We also want to cover topics related to the victims. We try to do this by respecting each person so that the victim is not put at further risk. Sometimes, they tell you things that are so harsh that you cannot publish them, and well, as a journalist you fail, but as a person you know that you are going to put that person at risk.

*«Sometimes they tell you things that are so harsh that you cannot publish them, and well, as a journalist you fail, but as a person you know that you are going to put that person at risk.»*

Women journalists from several states call us and tell us and that they want to form a network, that they are inspired. When one of us travels, we take some time to talk [to other journalists]. That is how the Network of Journalists in Juárez was created [also by women]. In Guadalajara they want to form a network too, and in Guerrero...

Now we are concerned about Veracruz: the incarceration of the “twitters,” the assassination of several journalists, attacks on the media, and people are fleeing [the region]. What is happening here is what happened in Tamaulipas, and we are trying to provide visibility to this situation so that the journalists are not silenced. We do not have infrastructure, but we are journalists, we do what we can. We get testimonies—people tell us what is happening. We are also going to do an online training about how to safely publish information in order to defend these spaces and to defend freedom of expression.





Silvia Vázquez Camacho

Blanca Mesina Nevares

## Blanca Mesina Nevares

Representative for the victims in the case of the twenty-five police officers who were detained and tortured | Tijuana, Baja California

I began my work as a human rights defender in the case of the arbitrary, illegal detention and torture of a group of 25 police officers in Tijuana, Baja California. It was an experience that was close to me—my father was part of this group that was detained. He was a municipal police officer in Tijuana, he was the head of the delegation, and he had given about 30 years of service.

When the military went into Baja California to carry out an operative titled “police cleansing,” they began to detain many police officers. My father’s group was held in the military barracks. We did not hear from them for five days and they underwent harsh torture sessions. When I began to work on the case, the families of the 24 remaining police officers began to join the movement.

When they were transferred to the federal prison in Tepic, Nayarit, the CNDH got involved with the case. We began to speak out more and we took the case to the Inter-American Commission in Washington. That is when Silvia Vázquez and I began to receive threats. We received [threatening] telephone calls, we were followed, sometimes we were followed in our car and they tried to get us to go off the highway.

The event that took us to self-exile was when they put a gun to my head on May 18, 2010, threatening me to stop this work. The person told me that the only reason he did not kill me right there was because of the elections in Baja California and because the case was at the international level. We reported what happened, and we have looked into the state of the investigation, and there is still nothing.

We wanted to cross over to the United States for refuge but they closed the door on us. As of May 31, we have spent nine months far away from our city, our home. However

even though we had to go into exile, we continued our work from a safe place.

My children spent two months with me. However one day I asked my son, the oldest, if he wanted to be in that city [where we were in exile] and study there, and he said no. He said that he wanted to be with his friends, in his school, with his teacher, in his environment. It was difficult for them because suddenly we had to share. The apartment that we rented was a two bedroom—one for Silvia and her family and one for me and my family, which had five people. Imagine that. We were on top of each other.

It was my decision to go back to Tijuana because my family and my children were there. Being separated from them for such a long time affected me. My father had been released, and I decided to go back and see if the precautionary measures would help. Thirteen of the group of 25 police officers who

were detained were freed in August 2010.

There were times in which I got depressed, but my father was always my strength. Also, the bond within the group, with the other families, was so strong. We made a commitment: from the beginning we said that we would not drop the case until everything was fixed, until they repaired the damages, and until there was justice. We are still waiting for damages to be repaired, that is the most important thing. They want to defend themselves and show that they are innocent. Now they are fighting the administrative part so that they can go back to their work. The rest of the group is still in the federal prison. The case will soon be sent to the Inter-American Court of Human rights so they can rule on the situation. In 2010, the CNDH formally said that they would release a recommendation about the torture in this case, but there is still no recommendation.

*«From the beginning we said that we would not drop the case until everything was fixed.»*

## Silvia Vázquez Camacho

Lawyer for the Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights, A.C. (CMDPDH) | Mexico City

Baja California was one of the states where there was a pilot program for public security to fight drug trafficking. There was an operative in which the military was placed in high-ranking positions in the police forces.

Blanca led the defense of a group of 25 municipal police officers and contacted the Mexican Commission [for support]. In November 2009, the IACHR got involved and held a thematic hearing [about human rights and public security in Tijuana] in which four [similar] cases were presented: one case involving four civilians, one case involving two ministerial police, and two group cases—one involving the 25 police officers and another involving 11 municipal police officers. All of them had the same pattern: they were detained with the participation of the municipal or state police

*«I never thought that I would be treated like a criminal in this profession.»*

and the Army. They were tortured with electric shocks, they were not fed, they were exposed to low temperatures, they were isolated, and the appeals on their behalf were ignored.

After the hearing, Blanca was threatened over the phone. I began to work on the case as a liaison from the Mexican Commission—I started to work on the issue and I made statements to the media.

I went to Mexico City to file a complaint at the Federal Prosecutor’s Office and it seemed like I was being watched. Then I was threatened and someone threw a Molotov cocktail at my parents’ truck, thinking that I lived with them. I was pursued by the municipal police [in Tijuana] from February until May 31, 2010—this is when I moved to Mexico City. We finally asked for precautionary measures from

the CNDH in March for both the Mexican Commission and the Citizens Commission of the Northeast in Baja California, our counterpart in that state. We agreed that police officers would check in on us, that we would get an emergency number, that authorities would carry out a thorough investigation and risk analysis, and that we would be provided with police escorts. One day when I sent a message from the phone that they gave us saying that I was being followed, the response was, “Go somewhere safe, cover yourself.” And I thought, “With what? With a coat? Where do I go?”

One Friday, I do not remember exactly the date, a black car was circling around an organization where I went to do some work. Fortunately, I had asked the people who check in on us to accompany me because I had a hearing and I knew that there was increased risk there. Three days later, a man got out from that same vehicle and put a gun to Blanca’s head. Since then, Blanca and I had to implement security measures with each other. If she went to pick up her children from school she let me know. I calculated the time that she would take to get home, and if she did not call, I would call her or look for her. She did the same thing for me. There was one time that I had to take my son out of school and stay at home. Then we decided to leave [Tijuana] until things got better or until we received armed escorts. The armed escort has still not arrived.

I decided to be a human rights defender 11 years ago. I worked in the State Human Rights Commission (Baja California Commission for Citizen Protection and Human Rights) as a General Examiner. It is not something that I just decided to do easily, but still I never thought that I would be treated like a criminal in this profession. I have questioned this decision because I have sacrificed my family. My friends don’t want to go out for coffee with me in the city anymore. But it is worth it because my son will be educated in a different way. He wants to be a human rights defender, he wants to be a soldier for human rights because he knows that the military are the ones that attacked me. He wants to make changes. He is a six-year-old boy right now.



## Blanca Velázquez Díaz

Coordinator for the Center for Worker Support, A.C. (CAT) | Puebla de Zaragoza, Puebla

The CAT is an organization that promotes workers' rights. We have been working with men and women for 10 years. During the last five years, we have been working mostly in the automotive industry. We believe that empowering women is extremely important so that they can have the necessary tools to defend themselves, and so that they can provide visibility to the problems that they are facing.

On a national level, we see many abuses, mostly sexual harassment and psychological violence. We have documented and denounced many cases in which women are the objects of discrimination—they are given denigrating requirements, like undergoing a pregnancy test. We have been working with them on leadership because we believe that in the same way that men can create leadership groups, there should also be groups of women who are leaders. Women have always been at the head, but sometimes they remain invisible in this role because they have a lot of responsibility that goes beyond their work day. We have to talk to them and support them so they value themselves and so they see how much they are giving economically to their families and to the country. But there are many obstacles: one, when you go up against yourself, and then when you go up against your boss; and finally, when you go up against society.

I started to get involved in this in 1999, in a movement led by women. At that time I worked in an auto parts company in which there were constant violations: long work days, lack of freedom to join a union, discrimination, psychological violence, and sexual violence. We formed a union, and I was part of the executive committee. This union was led completely by women.

My parents were people who always fought. They are peasants and they fought for the right to the land. I carry this in my blood. At the same time, when you live through a difficult situation as a worker, you can't just sit there with your arms crossed. In my case, I just cannot be quiet about it.

This work is very important for me but it is also very dangerous. Since I became a human rights defender, we have

been slandered and threatened. In some cases it was very subtle, and in others it was very harsh. After the last threat, in 2011, we were very afraid, and we started to think about whether or not we would return to our work. It got to the point where I had to leave the country. We received a threat by email saying that we would be kidnapped; they robbed our offices and wrote on the wall: "You don't know who you are involved with." They hacked our personal [email] accounts and our institutional account. That is when you realize that your work is transcendent, and that there are some people, including the state, who are uncomfortable

*«We have to gauge our level of responsibility, we do not think we are heroes because heroes are useless.»*

[because of your work]. It was a very difficult six months. We thought that we would not go back, but we have taken the necessary measures [so that we can return]. It has not been easy, either, because we have had to face the justice and the injustice.

When the CAT decided to return to the work, we found ourselves with another surprise—the president of the Chamber of Commerce, a businessman, made some terrible statements against us. He said that the CAT was a dangerous organization and that I was provoking instability, especially for the transnational companies. All we wanted was responsibility, a clear investigation, and protection for the physical and psychological integrity of each member of the CAT.

It is satisfying work, and human rights defenders have to gauge our impact and our risks. We have to gauge our level of responsibility. We do not think we are heroes, because heroes are useless. You also have to know when to take a step or two backwards, and then when to go back [to the work], if you decide to continue.



## Pamela Sandoval Gómez

Hairdresser and Delegate from the Center for Studies and Projects for Integral Human Development, A.C. (Ceprodehi) | Tixtla de Guerrero, Guerrero

It was my sexual preference that led me to human rights defense work. My roots are very humble. My parents are from the mountains, and when they brought me to the capital, to Chilpancingo, I was still not accepted. I then decided to work in human rights. I studied to be a primary school teacher, but because of one homophobic teacher I had to cut my career short and spend my time doing something else. I decided to study cosmetology so that I would not have to depend on my family. Later, I wanted to emigrate, and I spent 10 years in the United States. That is where I got in contact with human rights groups, but I never fully participated until I got involved with Ceprodehi. I have been working there for five years now.

I have received a lot of criticism, but I have always responded to this criticism by saying that we have fought since we were young so [that men] can put on makeup, dye their hair, shave, and wear earrings. Society was not open to this before; we created this opening so that the gay community could be included. It is not that strange, we only want respect and we want people to know that we are [normal] people, that is all. Technology has advanced, but we have a very small space within society because, within quotes, we are “accepted” but in reality we are discriminated [against]. Just while going to the bank, doing something as simple as paying a bill, the discrimination is clear. I think the problem is not the lack of information, it is the strongly rooted machismo that we have had since the time of our ancestors. We cannot separate this from our everyday lives.

As of June [2011], there were already 25 assassinations because of homophobia. This is simple—we have to eradicate homophobia. The death of Quetzalcoatl Lejía in May of this year was one of the most difficult moments for me because he was a brilliant person. It was one of the most painful moments that we have faced together as an organization. They stoned him. That is the worst part, his death was awful. In these circumstances it is still hard to accept. He was a brilliant political scientist and he had a lot of ideas

for the LGBTI [Lesbian, Gay, Transexual, Bisexual, Intersex] community. He worked full-time to defend the rights of the community. I do not think this is right. I hope that we have a response to his death. We are demanding an exhaustive investigation; we do not want scapegoats, no.

When we were at his funeral, a great force took hold of the organization. Instead of falling, we got up with greater impetus to continue to fight for the work that he did. He lobbied to prevent discrimination in the state and from there he worked to establish norms. He wanted to lobby for marriage and adoption in the gay community, as well as to classify hate crimes in the penal code.

Now I am organizing the first march for sexual diversity in Tixtla. The marches that we organize always have a goal, and now the main goal is our demand for clarity in the death of Quetzalcoatl Lejía.

*«Within quotes we are accepted but in reality we are discriminated.»*

We also held an event in the auditorium in the town hall in a low-income neighborhood. They decorated the stage with paper flowers and everyone participated. We collected 60 food baskets and I delivered 60 kilos of used clothes. We also carried out a brigade to provide free hair cuts. I also give free hair cuts at the federal prison. The organization is about to get larger. It is not just about working with the LGBTI community—we have to work for all vulnerable groups, for all of the people that really need support.

1973  
2010

## Beatriz Alberta (Bety) Cariño Trujillo\*

Coordinator for the Center for Community Support Working Together, A.C. (CACTUS) | Huajuapán de León, Oaxaca

\*Bety Cariño was killed during a violent paramilitary attack on a peaceful solidarity caravan on April 27th, 2010 as the caravan tried to enter the autonomous indigenous municipality of San Juan Copala. This is the testimony that she gave during the Fifth Dublin Platform for Human Rights Defenders, Front Line, February 2010.

Our feet steady and firm on the ground.

Our heads held high; dignified, with focused spirit and burning heart.

Brothers and sisters. With my voice, I speak for my brothers and sisters of my Mixteco people, from rebellious Oaxaca in the great country called Mexico. And in these lines I cannot speak of myself without speaking of the others, because I can only exist if they exist. Therefore, we exist as us.

Brothers and sisters, these women I am; a daughter, a sister, a mother, a comrade, a teacher, an indigenous woman, a Mixteca, an Oaxaqueña, a Mexican, they represent us women who go forward leading our peoples against the looting of our Mother Earth, for the benefit of large transnational corporations and financial capital. Today, with our voices, with our struggles, with our hands, the legitimate wishes for social justice of the Mexican revolution are being kept alive; our struggle is the same one as that of Morelos, Magón, the great Zapata and, in today's Mexico, the EZLN-led struggle that has cost the lives of thousands of Mexicans, all of them poor people from the bottom of society who have fought these fights. The place they have been given in history continues to be one of exclusion and they have been forgotten. Today we, the young, the indigenous peoples and the women are at the head of this catastrophe.

Our fields now are the scenes of ruin and disaster, victims of indiscriminate commercial exploitation, genetically modified crops, the ambitions of the multinationals; this has consequently caused the forced migration of millions of our brothers and sisters who, in the words of my grandfather, "have to leave in order to remain."

In Mexico the right to autonomy, the right to exist for the indigenous peoples is still being denied, and today we want to live another history: we are rebelling and we are saying enough is enough, today and here we want to say that they are afraid of us because we are not afraid of them, because despite their threats, despite their slander, despite their harassment, we continue to walk towards a sun which we think shines strongly; we think the time of the peoples is coming closer, the time of unrepressed women, the time of the people at the bottom.

These days, discontent is present throughout the length and breadth of our national territory. Because of this the presence and participation of us, the women we defend, cannot be put off anymore in the daily business of human rights; we want to construct a world with justice and dignity; without any kind of discrimination; today we are pushing forward a profound and extensive process of organization, mobilization, analysis, discussion and consensus which is helping us to build up a world in which many worlds can fit. We are the result of many fights, we carry in our blood the inheritance of our grandmothers, our roots make demands of us and our daughters are rebelling.

Brothers, sisters, let's open up our hearts like a flower waiting for the first rays of the sun in the morning. Let's plant our dreams, harvest hopes, remembering that we can only build this from below and to the left, from the heart.



# Epilogue

# Mobilizing for Peace as Women Human Rights Defenders\*

Mary Jane N. Real, former coordinator for the Women's Human Rights Defenders International Coalition (WHRD IC)

\*Excerpt from a Presentation at the Conference: Women Human Rights Defenders at Risk in Latin America: Resolution 1325 and other protection mechanisms for women in conflict areas, November 25, 2010, Madrid, Spain.

Deriving from the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders that presents a definition of the role and responsibilities of a 'human rights defender', the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition (WHRD IC) defines women human rights defenders as "women active in the defense of women's rights who are targeted for who they are as well as those who defend women's rights who are targeted for what they do". As former UN Special Representative on Human Rights Defenders Hina Jilani emphasized, the term 'women human rights defenders' is not intended to establish a special category of defenders. Its purpose is to highlight not only the gendered forms of abuse and their consequences on women because of their gender, but also the heightened threats they face because of their activism, including in particular situations of armed conflict.

The critical role of women human rights defenders in the context of armed conflict cannot be underestimated. Defenders provide early warning of emerging problems, including of gross human rights violations. They help protect the lives of civilians caught in conflict, and through their presence and activities, prevent violations. They contribute significantly to efforts to end the conflict and to peace-building by strengthening the rules of law, demanding accountability for past and on-going violations by all parties to the conflict, and supporting the establishment of democratic principles and good governance in post-conflict reconstruction processes. As women defenders broker for peace between the parties to the conflict, they are exposed to greater risks because they are accused either as traitors or supporters by the opposing sides. Protection and support for women human rights defenders, therefore, are crucial in situations of armed conflict.

The UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders supports the intent of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, which gives due recognition to the important role of women in peace-building and their right to equal participation in all levels of decision-making on matters pertaining to peace and security. Read together, these international pronouncements acknowledge that women are not only victims and survivors in conflict, but are active participants, and actually have the right to be involved in peace processes. It gives added legitimacy to women's role in peace building by asserting that peace advocates in essence are engaged in the defense of human rights. In her 5th annual report to the UN General Assembly in 2005, Special Representative Jilani validated that varied activities undertaken for the restoration of peace and security, such as documenting human rights violations, assisting victims of the conflict, or engaging in peace negotiations are human rights activities. Her report affirms that peace advocates are also human rights defenders and entitled to the same rights.

The context and the locus of their activism critically account for the situation of vulnerability of women human rights defenders as the recent case of the ambush and killing of Bety Cariño illustrates.

On 27 April 2010, gunmen killed two activists on their way to the autonomous municipality of San Juan Copala, Oaxaca as part of an international aid caravan. Oaxacan indigenous leader Bety Cariño and Finish observer Jyri Antero Jaakkola were killed, and three other Oaxacans were injured. Her goal was to break a paramilitary siege that left San Juan Copala in the indigenous region of southern Mexico, cut off from the outside world since January, and to deliver food, clothing, and medicine.

As Betty Cariño exemplified, in real life, the lines are blurred between advocating for peace and defending human rights. She was both an indigenous leader and an active participant in the peace process.

An ISIS International study on Cultural Politics of Conflict, Peace and the UNSCR 1325 further concludes that for women who live in situations of armed conflict, their participation in peace-building are "less formal, non-conventional and happen more in their everyday lives". They volunteer during evacuation services; facilitate inter-faith relations; organize neighbors to meet their basic needs; teach or give training on values of peace and diversity; participate, to the extent that they can, in community meetings. Seldom invited in formal peace processes, they create or invent their own opportunities for public participation. Gender discrimination and the gender bias in existing political structures that favor men have excluded them from formal peace processes, but more significantly, account for making their "informal, less conventional" contributions to peace-building devalued and invisible.

It is therefore important in the implementation of UNSCR 1325 to support not only women's role in formal venues of peace-building, but also validate the contributions that women human rights defenders make in their everyday lives to foster peace and security and as further mandated by the Resolution, create more opportunities for "local women's peace initiatives" to prosper. Making sense of the attack against Cariño and her death, the human rights defenders' framework offers a counterbalance to the emphasis of UNSCR 1325 on women's participation in formal peace processes by acknowledging that their human rights activities to maintain peace in the community, albeit in informal public spaces, are in furtherance of their roles as women human rights defenders.

The cases of Valentina Rosendo Cantú and Ines Fernández Ortega before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights clearly demonstrate these gendered dimensions of security for women human rights defenders. The rape and torture committed against them by members of the military in the context of their community's struggle for self-determination is a political offense intended as an affront to their politi-

cal organizing. As a consequence of the rape, Valentina was ostracized from her community. Her relationship with her husband and family broke down and she became a single mother. Members of their families and their organizations were threatened and there were attacks against their daughters, with an attempted abduction of Valentina's daughter. Aside from employing sexual violence to subdue the community, gender stereotypes of women as mothers or caregivers account for this high incidence of threats or attacks against family members and children of women defenders. The Court, in deciding in their favor, ordered the government of Mexico to pay financial compensation and as reparation, put in place comprehensive measures to guarantee the non-recurrence of violence against women in the community, including establishing a community center so Ines can "continue with her work as a promoter of the human rights of women in her community".

So with the UNHRD Declaration as a starting point, an integrated security approach recognizes that defenders like Valentina and Ines are rights-holders, and frames their needs for security and protection as corresponding obligations to be met by the state as duty-bearers. It seeks to enforce the normative terms or standards with which to comply with these obligations. It acknowledges the centrality of the principle of gender equality and non-discrimination and underscores responding to immediate as well as underlying and structural causes of violence and discrimination against women. Integrated security is about generating an enabling environment for the realization of women's human rights to sustain defenders, their organizations and movements. The aim is not just to keep the women human rights defenders safe, but ultimately to support the social movements in changing the situation that put them at risk.

# Women Human Rights Defenders

Margaret Sekkagya, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Human Rights Council

The rights of women to promote and protect human rights, is contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as asserted in various international treaties, foremost among them the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). These rights, among others, are reiterated in the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, also known as the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by the General Assembly on 8 March 1999.

The Declaration makes it clear that we can all be defenders of human rights if we choose to be and no “qualification” is required to be a human rights defender. Moreover, human rights defenders may address any human rights concerns, which can be as varied as, for example, summary executions, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, female genital mutilation, discrimination, employment issues, forced evictions, access to health care, toxic waste and its impact on the environment. In this context, women human rights defenders are those women who, individually or in association with others, act to promote or protect human rights, including women’s rights. Because of the similarities of the situations that they face, the term women human rights defenders can also refer to male human rights defenders working on women’s rights as well as on gender issues more generally.

Around the world, women human rights defenders face a variety of threats as a direct result of their human rights related work. As women, they are also exposed to or targeted for gender-based violence and gender-specific risks such as verbal and sexual harassment, rape, prejudice, exclusion and repudiation. On my last report presented to the 16th session of the Human Rights Council in 2011, I highlighted

that women’s voices are still perceived as presenting a challenge to fighting against accepted socio-cultural norms, traditions, perceptions and stereotypes about femininity, sexual orientation, and the role and status of women in society, which often serve to normalize and perpetuate forms of violence and the oppression of women.

This can, in certain contexts, lead to hostility or lack of support from the general population, as well as from the authorities. For instance, Government or police officials may themselves share the prevailing conservative and patriarchal views of the community in general towards women defenders and those working on women’s rights or gender issues, and thus may have little or no enthusiasm to intervene effectively for their protection in spite of their obligation to do so. Another factor affecting the situation as well as the efficiency of protection mechanisms for women rights defenders is that non-State actors are not recognized as part of the group of perpetrators of violations against women defenders and those working on women’s rights or gender issues.

From Mexico, I receive allegations of violations committed against women human rights defenders and those working on women’s rights and gender issues based solely on the work they do. During the last years, many defenders were forced to abandon their places of living because of hostility to their work in the defense of human rights. Furthermore, killings, threats and harassment were reported against women defenders working in the defense of women’s rights, workers’ rights, indigenous peoples’ rights, peasant farmers’ rights, environmental rights and migrant rights. Women human rights defenders who have denounced disappearances and killings of women in Mexico and those working on issues of impunity and access to justice, including witnesses and victims of human rights violations seeking redress, as well as the lawyers, individuals and organizations representing or supporting them, have been subjected to violence in some states. Sexual assaults of

LGBT activists have also been reported.

Based on the information I receive, I would also like to stress the important role of women journalists and media professionals working on human rights issues in Mexico. This group includes women investigative journalists working on human-rights related issues, women columnists advocating human rights reform, women reporters monitoring and reporting on violations of human rights, as well as women bloggers. I am aware of the tremendous risks to which they are exposed to as a result of their work.

I would therefore like to take this opportunity to raise my voice once again, to denounce the threats, intimidation and harassment that women human rights defenders and those working on women’s rights and gender issues face every day, the stigmatization and criminalization that hampers their ability to work and the unacceptable impunity with which State and non-State actors commit these violations against them. The obligation to provide defenders with an effective protection and adequate remedy requires authorities to ensure a prompt and impartial investigation into the alleged human rights violations, the prosecution of the perpetrators, the provision of reparations, as well as the enforcement of decisions or judgments. In this regard, parliamentarians, government officials, the judiciary and national human rights institutions have a responsibility in the protection of women human rights defenders and those working on women’s rights and gender issues, particularly regarding the implementation of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

Furthermore, I extend my full support and encouragement to women human rights defenders and those working on women’s rights and gender issues in order to spread the content of the Declaration on human rights defenders, so that human rights defenders become aware of the key role they play as agents of social change. As part of my efforts to increase the understanding of the rights enshrined in the

UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and contribute to raising awareness on the challenges that defenders face when carrying out their work, I launched in July a “Commentary to the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms”. The “Commentary” is a practical guide which maps out the rights provided for in the Declaration, addresses the most common restrictions and violations that defenders face and provides recommendations to facilitate States’ implementation of each right. This commentary pays particular attention to the specificities of the situation of women human rights defenders and the particular challenges they face.

I have a final message to women human rights defenders: Please, be alert; report attacks and threats to the relevant mechanisms; systematically keep a register of all threats and attacks, which details including dates, places, people involved, type of attack; establish protection networks at local level to improve your safety and promote unity within your community. In this regard, the website of my mandate contains a page entitled ‘Submitting complaints’ which sets out guidelines on the kind of information that the mandate requires in order to take action on a case and on how the information should be submitted. It is important to mention that the identity of the source of information of the alleged violation is always kept confidential.

There is a lot to do, and the on-going work of women and those working on women’s rights and gender issues is fundamental in tackling human rights violations and in fighting impunity. I will continue using my voice and my mandate to contribute to their protection and encourage them to continue with their important work.





Fondo Canadá

