

Making Change Happen

RETHINKING PROTECTION, POWER AND MOVEMENTS

Lessons from Women Human
Rights Defenders in Mesoamerica



Making Change Happen is a series of short publications about ideas and strategies shaping social justice and women's rights work produced by JASS (Just Associates) in collaboration with various partners. Each edition takes on a different theme.

This edition was made possible with the support of Open Society Foundations, Novo Foundation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Netherlands, Oak Foundation, Foundation for a Just Society, the Fund for Global Human Rights, and Channel Foundation.

Edition 6 was produced by:

Authors: Marusia Lopez with Alexa Bradley

Key Contributors: Lisa VeneKlasen, Natalia Escrucera Price

Conceptualization: Alda Facio, Carme Clavel, Patricia Ardon

Editors: Annie Holmes, Adelaide Mazwarira

Translation: Anne McSweeney, Miguel Pickard, Emily Goldman

Design: Originally designed by Julie Montgomery and adapted by Jane Shepherd

Printed: August 2017

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RETHINKING PROTECTION, POWER AND MOVEMENTS: Lessons from Women Human Rights Defenders in Mesoamerica

1

INTRODUCTION

Around the world, a rising tide of violence and political repression against women human rights defenders, other activists, civil society organizations, and communities has raised questions and challenged assumptions about approaches to protection and human rights. JASS (Just Associates) as an organization that works with women activists to strengthen their capacity to organize safely and powerfully, seeks to contribute to the rich discussions related to these challenges.

This issue of *Making Change Happen* draws on our own experience as well as conversations with allies and partners on the issues of protection, power, gender, and movements in a context of closing space for civic participation. Our analysis is shaped by JASS' body of knowledge and history from our years of movement support in various contexts, the experiences of many of our founders in liberation struggles of earlier eras, and our specific work in Mesoamerica (Mexico and Central America) with allies to create and support networks of women human rights defenders. Our inquiry seeks to respond to a number of important questions that warrant exploration, including:

- Given the numbers of organizations, institutions and resources dedicated to protecting human rights defenders at risk, why are they at greater risk than ever?
- What are the shifting power dynamics that are driving violence against activists and closing the space for civic participation?
- Why do protection strategies need to integrate a gender perspective to increase the sustained safety and political leadership of women activists?
- How can we effectively challenge and change the political and social narratives that legitimize violence and criminalize activists?

And importantly,

- What can we learn from local communities and informal networks about strategies for collective protection? And how can these insights strengthen overall efforts to increase the safety of activists and their movements in the long-term?

In grappling with these questions, four key threads have surfaced as central to both the analysis and recommendations contained within this document:

1. POWER MATTERS

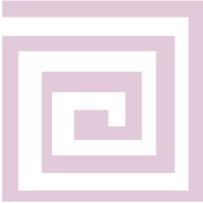
To address violence, attacks, and restrictions against activists requires a deeper understanding of inequality and power, including the key actors, interests, and dynamics contributing to attacks and restrictions, the rise of *shadow* power, and the extent of state complicity. Strategies developed with a more nuanced understanding of the multiple dimensions of power are likely to be more relevant and effective in their context.

2. WOMEN AND GENDER MATTER

An intersectional gender perspective—one that takes into account race, ethnicity, sexuality, class and other factors that multiply the vulnerability of women and LGBTI people—is essential for individuals and organizations to understand their own risk, particularly how stigma, slander, and misogyny are used to undermine activists and create conflicts within organizations and communities. Strategies that strengthen women's leadership, voice, and recognized roles within organizations and movements are a key element of collective power and protection.

3. NARRATIVES MATTER

Powerful state and non-state actors (e.g. corporations, religious institutions) manipulate public opinion and beliefs to legitimize their actions and to destabilize and divide opponents by shaping narratives (such as 'activists are terror-



ists'). To do this, they tap into and reinforce racism, sexism, and other prejudices to generate fear, legitimize repression, and call rights and community voices into question. Civil society and movement organizations need to develop strategies to (re)frame the debate and change mindsets.

4. LOCAL ORGANIZING AND MOVEMENTS MATTER

Experience suggests that the security of activists and their environments depends on sustained investments in community organizing and movement-building, and on the greater alignment between local organizations, and regional and international actors.

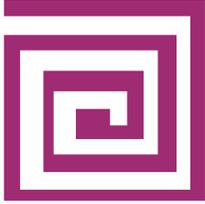
In sharing the observations and learning contained in this report, we hope to invite further dialogue and exploration of these critical topics. In particular, we want this collective rethinking to enable all of us to better support the safety of women human rights defenders and their movements.

WHY RETHINK THE PROTECTION OF WOMEN ACTIVISTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS?

In the early morning hours of March 3, 2016, armed men entered Berta Cáceres' house and killed her. Berta was a renowned feminist activist and indigenous defender of her community's territory and natural resources, and the coordinator of the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH). She was assassinated after years of threats against her and her family, surveillance and criminalization, not to mention the personal toll of living in a context of everyday violence and discrimination against women. She was murdered despite legal protective measures established by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2009, despite having received the prestigious and globally recognized Goldman Environmental Prize in 2015, despite numerous programs, campaigns and networks of national, regional and international entities organized to protect her and her organization. Neither the spotlight of this recognition nor the practical measures in place for her safety prevented her death.

With Berta's murder, we lost a *compañera*, a colleague and an ally. She was a powerful visionary and leader who combined a commitment to the protection of indigenous territory against the ravages of extractive industries, with a commitment to fight and transform the many manifestations of racism and patriarchy through community and global organizing efforts. The assassination revealed the condition of extreme vulnerability and risk in which activists and their organizations and movements undertake their work in Mesoamerica, as well as the gendered impact of political violence on women defenders.

Above all, it made us aware of the limitations of existing strategies to protect activists and their organizations, and the urgency of rethinking our approach to better address the risks and violence faced by those working for justice and equality.



The battle for hearts and minds is local as well as global.

Between 2012 and 2015, ten members of COPINH were assassinated: Berta Cáceres, Santos Alberto Domínguez Benítez, Tomás García, Nelson García, Lesbia Yaneth Urquía, Olayo Hernández Sorto, William Jacobo Rodríguez, Moisés Durón Sánchez, Maycol Rodríguez, Irene Meza. All were community members defending their land, territories and natural resources against their appropriation and exploitation by transnational companies in collusion with the state.

Berta's death was not an isolated case. It occurred in a context of growing political violence in the region and a significant increase in attacks on human rights defenders (HRD), particularly those, like Berta, protecting land and territories. According to a 2016 report by the NGO Front Line Defenders, "281 human rights defenders were murdered in 25 countries, 49 percent of whom were defending land, indigenous and environmental rights".¹ In Mesoamerica alone, at least 42 women human rights defenders were murdered in Mexico and Central America between 2012 and 2016, most of them for defending their territories, combating violence and impunity, and/or denouncing human rights violations, according to data from the Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders Initiative.

Given these realities, it is crucial that we deepen our understanding of the nature of the violence and threats facing women activists and examine the shifting power dynamics behind them. From Mesoamerica are emerging important lessons about the deadly convergence of several trends: the rise in power of non-state actors, the closing space for civil society, and the backlash against women stepping outside traditional gender roles. It is in this context that we must critically review and redefine our approaches to the protection of activists, taking into account the interconnected and multiple forms of violence they face publicly and the gender discrimination and conflict *within communities and movements* which undermine their safety and the capacity for unified action. While urgent responses, legal advocacy, and individual security measures remain vital, the times demand a fuller spectrum of strategies that improve the resilience, safety and social fabric of communities and movements. We must look at the strengths and weaknesses of our own movements and organizations to confront the fault lines of discrimination and violence that weaken our capacity to advance our agenda for change and increase our vulnerability to repression. We have much to learn from the leadership of women, indigenous communities, and other targeted groups as they innovate community approaches to protection and courageously engage with powerful actors to negotiate safety.

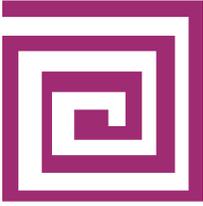
Who is a woman human rights defender?

While the language of human rights treaties offers a broad definition of a human rights defender, a common misperception persists that human rights defenders are necessarily affiliated with explicitly human rights institutions. Since women activists are often not affiliated to formal institutions or in leadership positions, women human rights defenders are often invisible.

The Declaration on Human Rights Defenders definition includes any person who individually and in association with others, promotes and strives for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels. Everyone has the right to defend and protect human rights.²

They include a mother seeking justice for her disappeared daughter, a teacher demanding quality public education, a factory worker insisting on fair wages, an organizer for LGBTI rights, an indigenous or rural leader who defends her land, water and territory, a trans activist who challenges discrimination and violence to open pathways to freedom for everyone, and a feminist who works for reproductive rights. Being a human rights defender means becoming outraged by injustices and organizing with others to transform them.

For purposes of this analysis, the term *woman human rights defender* (WHRD) is interchangeable with *women activist* and is inclusive of trans activists.



We are facing a crisis as a civilization. It is not just a political crisis, it is not just an economic or social crisis; it is truly a crisis due to a development model that is destroying our planet.”

Miriam Miranda, Honduras

4

SHIFTING POWER DYNAMICS: THE CLOSING OF CIVIC SPACE IN MESOAMERICA

To understand what is driving attacks against defenders, we need to take a deeper look at the political and power dynamics shaping violence and the wider crackdown on activism and civil society. After emerging from decades of brutal wars, dictatorships and repression that left thousands dead and disappeared, Central America is once again experiencing an increase in politically motivated violence.³ This trend, broadly referred to as the “closing for civic space”, manifests in the criminalization of activists, restrictions on non-governmental organizations, and intensifying efforts to silence dissent, including the killing of journalists and community organizers. Non-state actors (including religious leadership and business interests) wield growing power over public institutions and resources, and use this clout to pursue their objectives and suppress dissent. Weakened or complicit states are not just failing to uphold their citizens’ human rights in this context, but often also using state police, military, and legal capacities to protect and benefit from the financial gains of these private interests, while shielding their impunity.

“In the first gathering of the National Network, we said that the state was weak in defending human rights... In this last gathering, we’re saying it [the state] is negligent, complicit, and has lost control of the situation, and that’s why its institutional and legal capacity are severely undermined.”

Statement from the 3rd Gathering of the National WHRD Network in Mexico Kelman, Merce, Gaillard⁴

This changing political landscape reflects an overall shift in power dynamics. Private interests, both legal and illicit, such as transnational corporations and drug cartels, have long played a behind-the-scenes role in politics in

Mesoamerica. But these *shadow power* actors are exercising a new degree of control over territories and within state and governmental institutions, the structures of *formal power*. They use this power to further their economic and political interests and influence in different ways. Despite their differences, they are becoming more coordinated.

Drug trafficking organizations are increasingly embedded in political structures

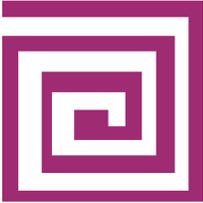
- In Guatemala, the International Commission against Impunity (CICIG) reports that criminal networks with ties to drug trafficking have infiltrated public policy and institutions mainly through financing electoral campaigns.⁵
- In El Salvador, transnational organized crime, particularly drug trafficking organizations and money launderers, have penetrated the police and other public agencies, influencing the entire political system and the country’s social fabric.⁶
- In Mexico, 72% of municipalities nationwide have been infiltrated by active drug trafficking cells.⁷

Religious institutions promote public policies to limit sexual and reproductive rights

- In El Salvador, for example, the Episcopal Church Conference has made it a political priority to block any possibility of legal abortion. By the end of the 1990s, its political influence led to the prosecution of all abortions regardless of the circumstances. Consequently, women, most of them poor, have been sentenced to 30 to 40 years in prison for everything from miscarriages to abortions to protect the health and life of the mother.⁸
- In Nicaragua and Honduras, the powerful influence of the Church has led to a ban on abortion, even when the mother’s health and life are at risk.

Transnational companies easily gain access to natural resources

- Favorable regulatory frameworks and impunity for violations of human rights and other laws enable



“For us, ‘development’ is a life in peace, living in harmony, living with the things we produce ourselves. While for us, a life with joy is a product of development, their life of development is product of an illness.”

Adelaida Cucue Rivera, activist from Cherán, México¹⁶

Understanding the intersecting forms of power¹¹

 To understand how different forces gain and maintain control of decision-making and resources, and heavily influence social norms and narratives, we look at three interconnected forms of power. (Gaventa, VeneKlasen¹²)

- **Visible or formal power:** Formal power is held by state and institutional political authorities including elected and appointed leadership and institutions, and exercised through decision making, policies, budgets, regulation, and the enforcement and policing of rules.
- **Shadow or hidden power:** Non-state actors who influence and determine political agendas and policy. Operating behind the scenes, shadow power excludes and de-legitimizes less powerful groups by

preventing their concerns from reaching the public, discrediting their perspectives by spreading disinformation and manipulating social prejudice, and using indirect or direct threats, fear and violence to maintain power. Shadow power ranges from legal entities (such as economic elites, corporate actors, and religious institutions) and illegal actors (such as organized crime, gangs, and drug cartels).

- **Invisible power:** Beliefs, ideology, social norms, and culture that shape people’s worldview, sense of self, values, and acceptance of what is considered normal and right. Cultural, religious, and political actors manipulate beliefs and narratives to legitimize certain ideas and behaviors, while delegitimizing and even demonizing others.

national and transnational companies to seize land and other resources from local communities and families.

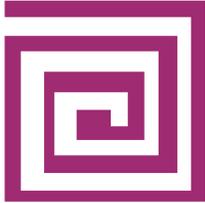
- In 2011, 14% of all Central American territory was granted in concessions to mining companies. In 2015, 25% of the national territory of Mexico was held by mining companies⁹ under concessions.¹⁰

In this new configuration of power, powerful non-state actors, having co-opted or built close ties within the state, are able to leverage the protection of the criminal justice system and military to repress organized resistance and efforts to expose their interests. The US government’s so-called wars against terrorism and drugs have been relatively ineffective in stopping organized crime and violence.¹³ Instead, they have been highly effective in creating the conditions and justification for a militarized response by states to organized opposition, allowing it to repress organizations and social movements, take control of territories, and facilitate land grabs and the exploitation of natural resources across the region.¹⁴

In March 2017, the Community Assembly of the municipality of San Mateo Macuilxóchitl, district of Tlacolula, in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, rejected a request from the Secretary of National Defense for a “donation” of communal lands for the building of a military base.¹⁵ So far, throughout the district of Tlacolula, 39 mining concessions are registered. In a communiqué, residents of San Mateo Macuilxóchitl stated:

“We interpret the complete militarization of the region as paving the way for big-money interests of the extractive and energy industries, bringing with it more violence and repression of communities that have resolved to defend their territory in the face of imminent dispossession.”¹⁶

Oaxaca is one of three Mexican states that have posted the highest number of attacks against environmental [men and women] human rights defenders.



Laws and human rights standards are repeatedly violated in the name of “security”, undermining the political conditions necessary for a robust civil society, public dialogue, and democratic participation.

6

Through their integration and complicity with the state, private interests have influence over security policies and support an expanded role of the police and armed forces in stifling dissent, particularly helpful when private initiatives (such as mega projects, natural resource extraction, etc.) meet with community opposition. Laws and human rights standards are repeatedly violated in the name of “security”, undermining the political conditions necessary for a robust civil society, public dialogue, and democratic participation.

“A transnational dictatorship that is incredibly violent has developed since the coup in 2009. Currently, 30% of Honduran territory has been surrendered to transnational companies under mining concessions, which clearly violates many fundamental rights ... The mining companies cannot function without water, without energy; therefore, this is also related to the privatization of rivers and the 300 hydroelectric dam projects in Honduras.” Berta Cáceres, Honduras

The conflict between shadow power actors and social movements in Mesoamerica has been described by human rights activists as a “dispute over bodies, territories, and the truth.”¹⁷ As this suggests, the clash is not solely over a given proposal or project, but over deeply held principles and beliefs about human rights, community self-determination, land rights, transparency, and democracy. A conflict over a proposed mine or dam often reflects divergent paradigms of development and opposing values, with one side looking at “development” in terms of the wealth generated by the extraction of natural resources, and the other focused on their right to self-determination and the long-term well-being of their community. For many communities battling an extractive project, the integrity of the local environment is tied to their livelihood, culture, history, and the preservation of a way of life. This clash of worldviews constitutes a significant dimension of the power struggle in which communities confronting powerful industries and their allies must defend themselves against attacks that characterize their beliefs, identity, and concerns as “backward”, anti-progress, and against the well-being of the rest of society.

Another dimension of the political dynamics that undermine defenders, is the insidious impact of *invisible power*

to shape the way people see themselves and the world around them, and to reinforce social hierarchies and the power of dominant groups. By manipulating certain social norms, ideas, and beliefs—including those related to race, class, ethnicity, and gender—and asserting certain ideas as true, superior or normal, both state and non-state actors tap into pre-existing bias, exploit conflicts within families and communities, and discredit the work of defenders and social movements, labeling them “terrorists”, “obstacles to development” and “destroyers of families.” In this way, they use *invisible power* to assert a political narrative that supports and legitimizes violence, inequality, and repression against those who oppose them. A deeper analysis of context, power, and violence enables us to better grasp the interconnections between threats, attacks, and killings of defenders; the legal restrictions on civil society; and the stigmatization of defenders and their organizations.

“It is our belief that our territory is the space that our ancestors share with us. They say that it is necessary to take care of all life: life expressed as trees, animals, mother earth herself. Our territory teaches us that everything within it is necessary: water, earth, the wind that blows. We believe that we are not separate from mother earth; we cultivate, till, and praise her, because from her we receive the harvest of life. We care for her based on this conviction. The problem now is that capitalism views territory as [an opportunity for] ‘development’. The capitalists forget that they too are human beings and money will not buy them happiness. We are truly happy eating beans and living the period that life has lent us. Capitalists can’t buy affection, they can’t buy love, often they can’t even enjoy life with their children. In contrast, we have another way of thinking, feeling, and doing things. As long as we can be happy with our family, with the crops we grow, with our harvest, and with what we need to survive, that’s enough. For us, ‘development’ is a life in peace, living in harmony, living with the things we produce ourselves. While for us, a life with joy is a product of development, their life of development is product of an illness.” Adelaida Cucue Rivera, activist from Cherán, México¹⁸



Power and gender converge to put women activists... at extreme risk... Violence and the threat of violence maintain an otherwise unstable social order, protecting the privilege and control of resources—material and symbolic—by the more powerful.

DISCRIMINATION AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN MESOAMERICA

Power and gender converge to put women activists in the region at extreme risk. At the most fundamental level, deep and constant discrimination against women throughout society gives women and girls a lower status. Gender discrimination, intertwined with and compounded by other forms of discrimination based on class, ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation, is embedded in all formal and informal social and political institutions, reinforcing the dominance of powerful groups. Violence and the threat of violence maintain an otherwise unstable social order, protecting the privilege and control of resources—material and symbolic—by the more powerful.

Discrimination against the bodies and lives of women is a form of violence yet one is so normalized as to be invisible. Violence is a reality in all aspects of women's lives, from families and intimate relations to the public spheres of community, institutions, and the state. In Honduras, Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador, discrimination and violence against women is intense and takes many forms:

- Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Panama and Mexico are among the 25 countries with the highest rates of femicide in the world.¹⁹
- In 2012, 86% of human trafficking cases identified in Central America involved women, most of them girls and adolescents.²⁰ Trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation constitutes one of the three most lucrative illegal industries in the world.²¹
- Sexual violence as a form of torture is used systematically by security forces.²²
- Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua prohibit abortion in all circumstances.²³

- Unpaid domestic and caregiving work continues to fall primarily on women with serious impacts on their health and social participation. In Mexico and Guatemala, for example, women devote 59.9 and 36 hours per week, respectively, to this work, far above the hours devoted by men: 24.8 and 16 hours, respectively.²⁴

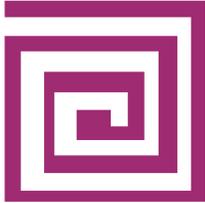
VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Between 2012 and 2014, a total of 1,688 attacks were reported on women human rights defenders in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, almost double those reported in 2012 (45.7%).²⁵ In addition to those who challenge human rights abuses and organize for social, economic, and political change, women who simply defy traditional gender roles by speaking out and participating politically are seen as a threat to the structures of privilege and power. In attacks against women defenders, gender-specific forms of political repression compound the pervasive and systemic violence and discrimination faced by women.

Specific forms of violence against women human rights defenders

There are specific ways in which women human rights defenders are attacked and attempts are made to limit their political participation:

- Women activists are at greater risk than male human rights defenders of experiencing sexual and other forms of gender-based violence, and it is more common for their sons and daughters to be threatened and attacked. According to the Mesoamerican WHRD Initiative, gender was identified as a factor in 37% of attacks recorded between 2012 and 2014. Gender-specific attacks included harassment and threats that use sexist and sexual insults, and/or sexual violence in the context of other repressive activity, gender stereotypes in judicial processes, and attacks specifically on those defending the rights of women.



Sustained movement leadership development and training are critical for women's protection and safety

"We are going to kill you, but before killing you, 'we are going to rape you and we will rape you in this way, and not just you, but also your daughter...' Threats of this type invade our being and generate great terror, great fear."

Woman human rights defender, Guatemala

- Some of the attacks and assaults against women activists come from their own families. Activists are criticized for their political participation, accused of being bad mothers or bad women, and physically and sexually attacked to stop or prevent their political involvement. Such violence, which violates women's most intimate spaces of safety and self-determination, may diminish their participation as much as or more than other forms of violence. Many women defenders do not report it out of fear or shame.

"María is an indigenous Honduran woman who married very young and had two children. María fought against huge transnational companies and looked death itself in the face while silently enduring the endless beatings her husband gave her." *Woman human rights defender, Honduras*

- Women human rights defenders do not always receive support from within their organizations. The Mesoamerican WHRD Initiative has calculated that at least 5% of attacks on women activists were perpetrated directly by their family members and/or organizations. Their leadership is often unrecognized and members of their own organization or movement may sexually harass them.

"I worked hard with this lawyer, we achieved progress in our community. But something occurred there that hurt me a lot. This supposed ally sexually harassed me over the course of four years. He threatened me, he humiliated me when I did not respond to his attempts. So, the day arrived when it was no longer possible for me to continue there and I left." *Woman human rights defender, Mexico*

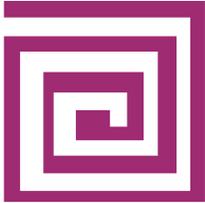
DIFFERENTIAL IMPACT ON WOMEN, ORGANIZATIONS, AND COMMUNITIES

The experience of the Mesoamerican WHRD Initiative, JASS and numerous other partner organizations since 2010 demonstrates that when a WHRD is attacked, she faces the possibility that her family will not support her and that her community will isolate her. In some cases, rather than taking the situation seriously and protecting her, her organization may minimize her risk, leaving her to cope with fear and strategies for safety on her own. This burden, coupled with the guilt of putting her family at risk, may lead a woman activist to reduce or cease her political activism.

The psychosocial impact on the lives of women activists working in risky contexts also differs from that of their male counterparts.

- Guilt over the impact of activism on her family is usually greater and is reinforced by social messages that defenders are bad mothers or "loose women".
- The intensity of her fear may be seen as a sign of "feminine weakness" and as a result, receive less attention and support.
- The combination of domestic chores, caregiving, and activism creates a high level of exhaustion that impairs women's health and hinders their political participation.
- The lack of recognition of her leadership undermines a woman activist's self-perception and confidence and reduces the likelihood that she will receive adequate support.
- The normalization of violence may decrease her capacity to acknowledge and be aware of her risk and vulnerability.

The combination of these different forms of discrimination and violence not only puts the lives and health of women activists at risk but also weakens families, organizations, and the social fabric of their communities—the cohesion and belonging that make communities resilient. Women are generally the first-responders to social breakdown, crises (health, economic, environmental), and community conflict; they also make up the majority of most social movements although often not playing visible leadership roles. By perpetuating inequality and discounting and iso-



The very fact that democratic societies require human rights remedies is in itself an expression of institutional deterioration and the lack of proactive state commitment to human rights.

lating courageous women leaders, discrimination and the failure to challenge it diminishes women's participation and vital contributions. This in turn undermines the power of movements and jeopardizes social gains, because women are not only on the frontlines of addressing injustice, they are also at the forefront of creating solutions and building community.

THE LIMITS OF OFFICIAL PROTECTION: CIVIL SOCIETY TAKING SAFETY INTO THEIR OWN HANDS

After many years of civil society advocacy, the governments of Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala have created state protection mechanisms.²⁶ It is the states themselves, however, that are often the primary perpetrators of violence in the region. Given the high levels of government corruption and impunity, it is extremely difficult for activists to challenge the state through the courts and receive protection and access to justice.²⁷

Existing official protection mechanisms in the region are ineffective, not only due to a lack of resources, trained personnel, or effective protocols but also because of a lack of political will on the part of government institutions and officials. Deliberate policies to inhibit political participation and suppress social protest go hand-in-hand with an indifference to human rights violations and impunity for those responsible. The very fact that democratic societies require human rights remedies is in itself an expression of institutional deterioration and the lack of proactive state commitment to human rights.

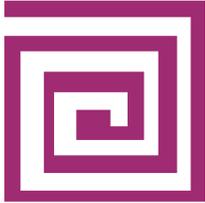
Perhaps because of this, it should not be surprising that the state also fails to address the specific protection needs of women human rights defenders. A 2016 comparative study²⁸ of the current protection mechanisms in Mexico and Honduras found that gender prejudice amongst officials responsible for protection measures and access to

justice, made it less likely that attacks against women defenders would be properly investigated or perpetrators held accountable.

At the regional and international level, hard-fought gains in activist protection by civil society include the creation and implementation of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders mandate and the Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Additional gender-specific mechanisms draw attention to the barriers to women's political participation and the specific safety needs of women human rights defenders, including the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the UN Working Group on the Issue of Discrimination against Women in Law and in Practice, and the UN Women Human Rights Defenders Resolution issued in 2013. Nonetheless, Mesoamerican states have repeatedly failed to comply with either official recommendations or calls from the international community to prevent and deal with assaults targeting activists

Regional and international human rights protection frameworks are increasingly undermined by states who comply minimally and only when it's at no cost to their interests or to their corporate allies. This disregard for human rights and increased impunity for violent repression has gained momentum. The election of Donald Trump in the United States, the traction of ultra-rightwing parties in Europe, and the coups d'état in Latin America that have gone unchallenged by the international community are all signs of a weakening human rights system.

Faced with the failure of states to uphold their obligations to provide a safe environment for citizen engagement, coupled with the closing of democratic space for political dissent and participation, national and international civil society organizations and local movements have developed their own strategies for protection. These turn out to be more effective in dealing with imminent threats and have saved the lives of many activists. For women defenders with little confidence in authorities, these community-based protection measures, together with the support of civil society networks and organizations, have provided crucial pathways to addressing risk and strategizing for safety.



Regional and international human rights protection frameworks are increasingly undermined by states who comply minimally and only when it's at no cost to their interests or to their corporate allies.

In recent years, local, regional and international organizations with long histories in human rights have responded to the emerging threats with strategies, policies, and tools designed to help women defenders address risk and the need for security. Communities and grassroots organizations in particular, have developed innovative local community approaches to protection which draw strength from and nourish a resilient social fabric, community networks and meaningful ancestral traditions and worldview ('*cosmovisión*'). As the broader field of human rights comes to recognize the significance of these community strategies, they can inform conventional approaches to protection, challenging existing assumptions and inspiring collaborations led by frontline communities. The following are two examples of approaches to protection from a feminist and movement-building perspective:

- the *Mesoamerican WHRD Initiative*, a network approach to protection specifically for women defenders; and
- *Alquimia*, JASS' feminist popular education program for rural and indigenous women in Mesoamerica, a movement leadership approach to protection.

NETWORKS SAVE LIVES: THE MESOAMERICAN WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS INITIATIVE

"As women, we have given ourselves hope for life in the Mesoamerican Initiative... Thanks to the strength that sisters from many places have given me, I believe in life. I hope that we continue to exist, to be united and I hope that learning the stories of others encourages us to continue in this challenging world where mother earth tells us. 'there is life'". Lolita Chavez, Guatemala

The Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders Initiative has built regional and national networks of women activists to respond to the limitations of official protection. Founded in 2010 and currently coordinated by six local, regional,²⁹ and international organizations, and five national networks, the Mesoamerican WHRD Initiative strengthens and protects women defenders facing risk

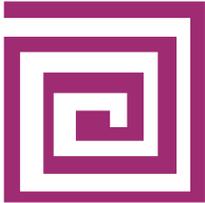
and danger in response to their social justice work. The Mesoamerican WHRD Initiative consists of regional and national urgent-action networks in El Salvador, Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Honduras that bring together a range of women activists, from women journalists and LBT and feminist activists, to mothers pursuing justice for family members who are victims of human rights violations.

Women defenders need collective support and encouragement, particularly in situations where their own families or organizations do not support them or criticize them for speaking out. These networks mean no woman is left standing alone or unsupported. The Mesoamerican WHRD Initiative develops comprehensive approaches to protection by:

- creating rapid-response networks;
- providing women defenders with human rights tools and resources for safety from self-care to close accompaniment (e.g. emergency resources, risk analysis, urgent actions, links with organizations that provide legal support or psychosocial care, training in digital security, self-care workshops, temporary relocation, etc.);
- documenting cases of attacks and publishing in-depth gender analysis of the violence that women defenders confront;
- collaborating with a range of regional and international human rights institutions to ensure that protection policies better serve women; and
- creating and running three shelters and a safe house specializing in the care of women human defenders and their families.

"Being with women gives you confidence—'we are among ourselves'—and we find something in common." Trinidad Ramirez, México

The first initiative of its kind, the Mesoamerican WHRD Initiative connects more than 700 women defenders from different social movements across the region, from Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador. Its contributions include four key elements:



IM-Defensoras is a collective response to the isolation of at-risk women defenders... When one woman activist is attacked, a whole national or regional web of women is activated.

1. Women define their own protection

Women activists need collective women-only spaces that provide safety and recognize their needs. Here, women can share their experiences and come to value themselves as human rights defenders, particularly important given that they are often not recognized as such despite their bold work for justice and equality. By bridging different movements and creating a sense of community and political trust, the Mesoamerican WHRD Initiative enables women to strengthen their organizing capacities and to develop protection strategies based on their own experiences of activism in the face of backlash, threats and gender discrimination.

2. Protection by networks

Mesoamerican WHRD Initiative is a collective response to the isolation of at-risk women defenders, and the common lack of backing and support from their own families and organizations. The political trust and connection within the networks enables the women to respond jointly when an attack occurs and, because responses are developed and led by the women themselves, they are able to draw on their first-hand knowledge to provide effective accompaniment needed. When one woman activist is attacked, a whole national or regional web of women is activated. The networks activate urgent response teams made up of other activists that provide accompaniment, resources and support, for self care.

3. Inclusion of a gender perspective

Before 2010, the specific experience of women human rights defenders in Mesoamerica was not adequately reported or addressed. National government protection mechanisms either did not exist or, lacked a gender perspective, leading to a failure to adequately protect women human rights defenders and prevent attacks. The risk of gender-based violence to women activists within organizations was largely overlooked or not considered relevant. By contrast, the Mesoamerican WHRD Initiative recognizes violence, discrimination and inequality in both what are considered “private” arenas of life—within the family, local community, and organizations—and the more visible and public areas of their lives. The Mesoamerican WHRD

Initiative has created a system to document assaults and attacks against women human rights defenders by country, and it analyzes the impact of gender-based discrimination, issues public reports, and mobilizes urgent actions with a broad international audience at the request of the women activists themselves.

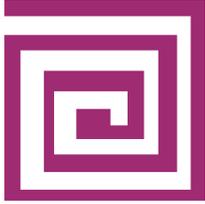
4. Self-care and wellbeing

The Mesoamerican WHRD Initiative has developed a new culture of activism that is rooted in practices of self-care, mutual support and wellbeing. Self-care is understood as a necessary condition to ensure the sustainability of movements. In three countries, the Mesoamerican WHRD Initiative manages specialized refuges or shelters for women human rights defenders, along with providing support for self-care. These shelters and strategies also address the needs of the defender’s immediate family, recognizing that her intimate circle can be a source of strength to sustain her justice work. The networks activate urgent response teams made up of other activists that provide accompaniment, resources and support, for self care.

Self-care and holistic protection

“One of the greatest contributions (of the Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders Initiative) is self-care, which means putting your body as a women defender at the center of the debate. Your body is political territory. It is one of the first spaces for constructing freedom... for defining how you exist as a woman, human being and a citizen in this struggle.” Gilda Rivera, Women’s Rights Center, Honduras

The physical and emotional trauma that women and women activists experience over years, particularly in violent contexts, can leave deep scars that, if unacknowledged, undermine women’s sense of self, agency, and security as well as impacting their work and family. In response to the insecurity and risks women and women activists often face, many groups



By strengthening the collective power of activists rather than solely that of individual leaders, an organization makes it more difficult for attackers to individualize attacks and threats, and it increases the group’s resilience and capacity for protection.

have recognized that sustaining and supporting well-being is critical to making women safer and stronger politically. The process helps address and dismantle discriminatory and violent practices within organizations and movements, and challenges models of activism that praise risk and sacrifice. A holistic protection approach acknowledges the profound impact oppression, inequality and violence have on our bodies and on our sense of self, and centralizes strategies for safety, self-care and renewal to sustain women’s organizing efforts in complex political contexts. It reflects a bold, even radical, affirmation of the value of women’s lives as a vital foundation for movement building. Importantly, holistic protection encompasses a concept of personal security that includes not only support for the physical and psychological well-being, but the collective security and mutual care needed among activists, families, organizations and communities to sustain our lives and long-term work for change.

COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP PROTECTS: ALQUIMIA FEMINIST LEADERSHIP SCHOOL

Sustained movement leadership development and training are critical for women’s protection and safety. These processes strengthen women’s confidence and skills to participate politically, develop their capacity for autonomous decision-making, and expand the social recognition of their work, all of which fortify both the activists and their movements. Equally important is building the political trust needed among members of organizations and movements so they can respond effectively and coherently when attacks or emergencies occur. By strengthening the collective power of activists rather than solely that of individual leaders, an organization makes it more difficult for attackers to individualize attacks and threats, and it increases the group’s resilience and capacity for protection.

The regional Alquimia leadership program in Mesoamerica³⁰ fosters confidence and skills in activists, establishing a new political culture of strategic collaboration with which to respond to a fast-changing and risky context. A recent publication by Peace Brigades International³¹ recognized JASS’

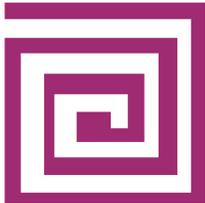
Feminist popular education³²

“Popular education” comes from Latin America where “popular” means “of, for and by people.” Popular education is most often associated with radical Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, whose literacy work with peasant farmers involved them in critically “reading” the class relationships in their lives and understanding the systemic roots of their poverty as much as learning to read words. He asserted that much education deliberately works to keep people passive and accept the status quo, but if reimagined, it could also be “a practice of freedom.” He was among many thinkers and practitioners to point out that no form of education is neutral.

Social movements all over the world have adopted and adapted popular education as both a learning process and organizing strategy to engage people in their own liberation. Feminists, especially, recognized the need to address complexities of power and oppression beyond class—including how gender, race and sexuality work to silence and exclude in all aspects of our lives—in order to give rise to truly transformative strategies for everyone. From freedom schools to the consciousness raising and organizing of women’s groups—people found power in uncovering deeper truths and shaping new understandings together as a foundation for action and change.

Alquimia program as one of several important approaches for protecting activists on the frontlines against extractive industries.

Women who are better equipped with skills, knowledge, and strategic relationships are not only better organized to transform structures of inequality, but are also safer. Alquimia uses a *feminist popular education* methodology that builds on the histories and knowledge of the participants and facilitators, and from that, develops a shared feminist analysis of current political realities. Developing strategic feminist leadership—the ability to analyze and act from a feminist standpoint—requires unpacking the multiple power relationships that oppress women and understand-



The ethic of sacrifice and strategies for political action based only on resistance is exhausting for activists and weakens movements over time. For women, the impact is intensified by the added burden of most domestic and caregiving responsibilities.

ing how these power relationships manifest in all aspects of our lives, from the intimate/personal, to the family, to the public. It involves changing those political practices in our social movements that are still based on hierarchical and masculine leadership and cultivating new ways of working.

“Much more than the domination of men over women, patriarchy is this violent logic of exercising power over those we believe to be inferior.” Heydi Murillo, WHRD and Alquimia alumna, Costa Rica

The Alquimia training is designed not only to strengthen women’s individual capacity as activists, but also to encourage alliances and collaboration between women, drawing on and building their relationships across movements and organizations. The emphasis is on the potential for aligned and collective action to have greater strategic impact at both country and regional levels and to provide protection in times of risk.

“Participants are now looking at problems and their contexts from another perspective—from a regional view and more coordinated thinking, to bringing a gender perspective to

their communities and organizations. This didn’t happen overnight it is through a deep process of critical awareness and affirmation by the other women. Now we hear personal stories in which women have taken control of their bodies, taken steps toward self-care and caring for their families, and begun to change discriminatory attitudes they harbored.” Helen Barrientos, Alquimia Coordinator, Guatemala

Alquimia’s 2013–16 course, *Strategic Leadership for Indigenous and Rural Women*, by and for women activists involved in struggles across Mesoamerica to defend land, water, territories, indigenous communities and women’s rights—among the most threatened kinds of human rights defenders in the world.³³ During the multi-year course, the participants came to recognize their own power and the knowledge and skill they have acquired over years as activists. They strengthened their leadership and ability to conduct contextual and power analyses which integrate the defense of territories and land against extractive models and the defense of women’s rights.

The participants’ experience of risk, fear and burn-out and its impact on their organizing and movements were a central focus in the Alquimia course to help women move toward

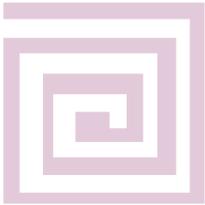
Safety, networks, and leadership to defend territory: the experience of Bettina Cruz Velázquez

“We demand that our rights as indigenous peoples and our territory be respected. Stop the forfeiture of territory to multinational corporations. Stop using the state apparatus to repress us.” Bettina Cruz, Mexico³⁴

 A Binnizá indigenous woman, Bettina Cruz Velázquez is a member of the Asamblea de los Pueblos Indígenas del Istmo de Tehuantepec en Defensa de la Tierra y el Territorio (APIITDIT—Assembly of the Indigenous Peoples of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in

Defense of Land and Territory), an agricultural engineer, and a specialist in territorial planning and development. Since 2007, together with the Ikjoots and Binnizá peoples of Oaxaca, Mexico, she has defended her territory as multinational corporations³⁵ attempt to install wind-energy generators on her community’s lands.

Authorities have allowed corporate interests to impose extractive projects despite community opposition, in clear violation of communities’ right to free, prior and informed consent. For this reason, communities have undertaken resistance and nonviolent actions to protect their territory. In response, the Mexican government has attacked and led a campaign to criminalize those involved. In 2012, the government charged Bettina of having committed two federal crimes,³⁶ after which she was threatened,



harassed, and arbitrarily detained by state authorities. After almost four years, Bettina was cleared of all charges, demonstrating that the false allegations were aimed at blocking and discouraging her organizing efforts.

“There is no real safety [in the protection mechanism]. Violence has to be prevented by respecting the work we do and our territory, not just by giving us a bulletproof vest or a panic button or safe house.” Woman human rights defender, Mexico³⁷

Despite being granted protection measures by the Mexican government, Bettina has continued to receive constant threats, forcing her and her family to move to a more secure location. Civil society organizations have been the primary source of her protection. Several organizations and networks, including the National WHRD Network in Mexico and the Mesoamerican WHRD Initiative, to which Bettina belongs, have publicized her case widely with national and international audiences, accompanied her during the trial, and facilitated emergency funding.

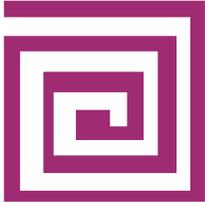
“It’s difficult, but we must address the idea that we as leaders are the ones who have to carry the entire burden.” Bettina Cruz, Mexico³⁸

Despite this support, unless Bettina and her organization can prevail in blocking the proposed projects that jeopardize their territories, they will continue to be at risk for their opposition. Because the struggle and need for protection continue at this point, Bettina works to strengthen her leadership and the resilience of her organization. As a participant in JASS’ Alquimia Feminist Leadership School, she had the opportunity to exchange experiences and strategies with other women activists also working to protect their communities and territories. Currently, Bettina is a member of the coordinating group driving the new Alianza de Mujeres Indígenas y Rurales de Mesoamérica (Alliance of Indigenous and Rural Women of Mesoamerica).

sustainable collective and individual leadership. The ethic of sacrifice and strategies for political action based only on resistance is exhausting for activists and weakens movements over time. For women, the impact is intensified by the added burden of most domestic and caregiving responsibilities. Alquimia incorporated healing and approaches to self-care/community care into the course as a vital element of social justice struggle and the basis for renewed commitment to the work.

“I felt like I was asleep, blindfolded, because I didn’t have information; now that I have information I understand, I’ve taken off the blindfold.” Apolonia Plácido, WHRD and Alquimia alumna, Mexico

One of outcomes of the Alquimia course is the creation of Alianza de Mujeres Indígenas y Rurales de Mesoamérica (Alliance of Indigenous and Rural Women of Mesoamerica), a coordinating body set up after the leadership course. The Alliance enables on-going exchanges among participating defenders and their organizations to support and strengthen their organizing and leadership.



An individual approach to security and protection, as important as it is in addressing imminent risk for an activist, does not change the conditions or the context in which defenders and their organizations are working, and therefore is a short-term solution to a much deeper and systemic problem.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE: CHALLENGING THE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT PROTECTION

Neither institutional approaches nor the efforts of civil society, nor noticeably improving state responsiveness to violence against women human rights defenders have succeeded in slowing the escalation of attacks. This troubling reality challenges us to rethink our approach to protection and to learn from the experiences and social movements. From JASS' experience over the last decade working with social movements and women activists at risk, and from our discussions with other organizations concerned about impunity and violence, we identified six limitations and challenges of current approaches.

1. THE LIMITS OF INDIVIDUAL APPROACHES TO PROTECTION

Although threats and attacks against human rights defenders may be directed at a person or a small group, they always have a broader collective impact. While a range of organizations and allies—national and international—are working to support movements facing violence, many of the efforts, resources, and protection measures focus on the needs of individual defenders, generally those best able to draw attention to their risk. While individual protection efforts are important and necessary to save the lives of defenders at risk, an individual focus is not enough.

First, the scope of individual protection is severely limited, since it can only provide resources and protection for a few people, rather than extending to everyone within an organization and/or community who are also at risk. One example is temporary refuge programs: these can only take in a limited number of defenders and may not grant refuge to family members. This has specific implications for women defenders, many of whom as primary caregivers, choose not to avail themselves of this protection measure since they cannot take their families. Furthermore, it is practically impossible to provide temporary refuge for entire organizations and communities at risk.

Unequal access to resources and protection measures and mechanisms can create tension and conflict within organizations and communities. As a result, an individual who receives protection measures may become isolated or lose connection with others. This weakens and often divides organizations, leaving them more vulnerable to violence. In some cases, women defenders of territory and land with strong leadership skills have ended up living outside their communities or have faced harsh criticism within their organizations for receiving resources and protection measures that were not decided upon collectively in their organization or community.

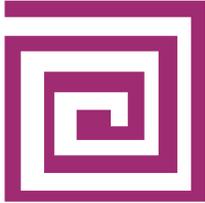
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Finally, an individual approach limits the recognition and development of collective approaches to protection that support many communities and movements. If the focus is on technical and external responses or only on the resources and tools for one individual or small groups, we can lose sight of informal networks that communities and organizations have built organically and which can provide collective safety and strength.

2. THE CONTRADICTIONS OF VISIBILITY AS A STRATEGY

Global campaigns, urgent actions, awards, and other efforts to raise the visibility of particular defenders at-risk can provide short-term safety for that individual, but may increase danger for her, her organization and community over the long term.

- Experience shows that such campaigns, focused as they are on a global solidarity audience, have **little impact on the local and rural environments in which threatened defenders live and organize and where most attacks take place.**³⁹ They do not seem to deter attacks by non-state interests,⁴⁰ or even focus attention on the perpetrators of the violence.



At-risk women defenders in Mesoamerica consistently report that being shamed as a “bad mother” or accused of having affairs is more devastating to them than physical attacks because it creates conflict within their own families, the one place that should provide a sense of belonging and security.

- Efforts to spotlight threatened activists often portray them as heroic victims, a narrative that with its **focus on the individual, obscures the reality that activists are part of broader movements and organizing efforts.** The perception that resources will go to those in greatest danger, encourages people and groups to emphasize their own risk and victimization.
- Campaigns that **focus on an individual can generate resentment among members of community organizations and movements,** sapping the necessary social support for women activists.
- By highlighting individual risk, **the narrative can appear to value and even glorify those targeted,** rather than focusing attention on the collective protection strategies developed by communities.

3. LIMITED STRATEGIES FOR SHAPING PUBLIC PERCEPTION

The use of the media by powerful interests to undermine, discredit, and demonize activists and movements has escalated in recent years.⁴¹ Slander and smear campaigns that use radio, TV, and social media to label women activists “loose women”, “home wreckers” and “bad mothers” and to frame activists who defend land or water as “backward” or “terrorists” are common. These strategies seek to build opposition to social movements, isolate activists within their own communities, sow social division, and ultimately legitimize repression; all of which works to silence dissent. At-risk women defenders in Mesoamerica consistently report that being shamed as a “bad mother” or accused of having affairs can be as devastating as physical attacks because it creates conflict within their own families, the one place that should provide a sense of belonging and security.

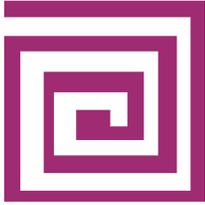
Propaganda, ‘fake news’, and the suppression of information—age-old strategies of the powerful to control the narrative—have successfully turned public opinion against activists and social movements, and generated the kind of fear that increases public support for military and authoritarian ‘solutions’. Yet existing approaches to protection are insuf-

ficient to interrupt these damaging narratives and provide a contrasting view of women human rights defenders, activism, and the issues at stake. Few communication campaigns and urgent action appeals are designed to appeal to audiences beyond those already concerned with human rights issues or to take on the bigger challenge of winning over public support for activists and their movements.

This is not a new problem. In order to gain public traction social movements have always had to challenge the dominant narrative—from women activists recasting domestic violence as a public concern not a private matter; to indigenous peoples describing their efforts in terms of *buen vivir* (good living) to explain that they are not against development but for a world which preserves and protects life against destruction and exploitation; and more recently, to #BlackLivesMatter with its hashtag framed to expose and positively challenge the unacknowledged racism underlying mainstream indifference to the deaths of black men and women in police custody.

By contrast, human rights defenders campaigns tend to not specifically challenge the values underpinning problematic narratives, or propose an alternative perspective with which to view activism and the injustices it seeks to redress. The result is that while the cases of certain women human rights defenders gain attention and support, problematic messages continue to shape public perception, undercutting possible support for their efforts and the issues on which they are organizing.

Resources are part of the challenge. Confronting “fake news” and smear campaigns requires a continuous media presence and smart strategy, capacities that few activist organizations have. And while international NGOs can invest in broad media and communications, the battle for hearts and minds is local as well as global. The accessibility of social media opens an opportunity to reach audiences and build support, but grassroots activists need more time and resources to carefully frame and transmit their message and story in their local areas. And ultimately changing the narrative about activists and their movements will require sustained, strategic, and complementary communication.



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4. PROTECTION EFFORTS ARE HINDERED WITHOUT AN INTERSECTIONAL GENDER PERSPECTIVE

“There seems to be a general confusion about what constitutes discrimination against women and about gender issues. The very concept of gender is widely misunderstood as is the concept of feminism which continues to be denigrated and discredited, even by some in the human rights community” Alda Facio, Chair of the UN Working Group on discrimination against women

Human rights and protection organizations are becoming increasingly aware of the unique risks and needs of women activists, but a full gender perspective—one that is intersectional and nuanced—is not yet adequately reflected in protection strategies. Lacking such an intersectional gender perspective—one that takes into account the multiple identities of women (ethnicity, class, race, sexuality, including trans and intersex identities)—limits the understanding of the subtle, internalized impacts of oppression and the complex forms of social exclusion and violence that women human rights defenders experience. This gap in analysis and planning weakens protection measures in several ways:

- Protection processes assign **scant attention, importance, or response to gender-based violence faced by women and trans HRD especially when they occur within families, organizations, or the community**, despite the impact of such attacks. Nor do they recognize how misogyny, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and other social prejudices weaken movements, isolate activists, and can be manipulated to create conflicts within communities.
- Discriminatory practices within movements and organizations are not considered relevant or addressed. Protection processes do not take into account that **resistance to women’s leadership and resentment about it in organizations and communities, increases risk for women activists.**
- **Women human rights defenders do not have adequate resources or spaces for self-care or**

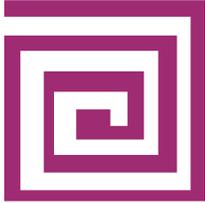
psychosocial support to help them, their families, and their communities to heal from the specific impacts of violence, fear, and trauma. This is a vital part of fostering their resilience, leadership and power.

- **The initiatives, strategies, and networks created by women human rights defenders themselves struggle for recognition** by the mainstream human rights community and are not adequately resourced. This marginalizes their influence in local, national, and international arenas in which protection strategies and policies are defined. It also makes it harder to sustain the safe women-only spaces that are essential for dealing with the deeper issues of vulnerability, identifying specific protection needs, and developing individual and collective strategies for safety and community organizing.

5. DIVISION AND CONFLICT WITHIN MOVEMENTS POSE RISK

Internal conflicts, tensions, and divisions are a significant source of vulnerability for organizations and communities as they are easily exploitable by outside actors seeking to undermine their cohesion. If not addressed, internal tensions limit the capacity of communities and organizations to respond strategically to threats, prevent violence, and protect their members. Additionally, they isolate, alienate, and wear out members of an organization, weakening leadership, unity, and participation. Ultimately, simmering tensions deplete energy and take vital time away from collective action. This takes various forms:

- **In conflicts or tensions caused by disputes over leadership or undemocratic styles of leadership, individuals or splinter groups often lash out at each other.** As a result, grassroots participation and confidence in the organization diminishes and community perspectives are unvoiced or unacknowledged.
- **Internal conflicts and divisions created by infiltrators** working for government or non-state actors may weaken or divide a movement or organization.
- **Tension can build up through exhaustion** arising from long work days, from placing greater worth on



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sacrifice instead of personal and collective care, and from a lack of space to process the psychosocial impact of human rights work in violent contexts.

These and other conflicts increase with gender discrimination and other forms of social exclusion. Exhaustion, for example, has gendered impacts, since many women activists, in addition to their political work, take care of their families and domestic chores. When women demand greater leadership and recognition, or report threats or violence by their own colleagues in the struggle, for example, the response is often to downplay their concerns, or ostracize and stigmatize the women making the demands. Women can end up doubly victimized in these situations, first by the initial abuse, then by the response to speaking out.

Because resolving conflict requires time and is difficult, already strained communities may lack the capacity, time, and tools to address conflicts adequately or to factor the need for them into their protection plans or processes. Given these challenges, organizations often choose to deny the existence of a conflict or to acknowledge that it may increase risk.

6. PROTECTION EFFORTS FALTER WITHOUT COORDINATION AND ALIGNMENT WITH LOCAL LEADERSHIP

Avoiding confusion, duplication, and overload

Concern on the part of national and international organizations about the rising violence against activists and movements in recent years has led to increased funding for protection initiatives. The effectiveness of their response, however, is hampered by duplication of efforts, lack of coordination, competition for resources, and a lack of sustained analysis and dialogue about the changing context and the implications for existing protection strategies.

The difficulty of fostering strategic alliances and sharing resources among human rights organizations and movements can leave communities and activists more vulnerable to violence and limit the scope of protection actions and processes. For example, when different organizations seek to protect the same activist or organization without

mutual coordination, this generates confusion and additional demands on at-risk individuals and organizations as they try to manage the various protection resources offered.

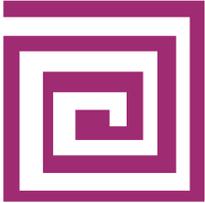
Space and time to assess, learn, and plan

The urgent and on-going need to address violence against defenders leaves organizations at all levels with little space to assess and develop coordinated strategies and networks. Organizations need to carve out time to reflect on their strategies, learn from other approaches to protection, and plan in ways that build on the existing capacities and knowledge of organizations and communities.

Aligning with leadership from local organizations

While international organizations increasingly recognize the need to consult local organizations and communities as a crucial first step in aligning strategies, more needs to be done to take leadership directly from those communities and movements. For instance:

- **In many cases, the approaches of international organizations are not based on lessons from local and community experiences**, nor have they have integrated the strategies of collective protection developed by indigenous and other communities, nor the advances of feminist approaches to safety. Global strategies will not align fully with local efforts or avail themselves of needed innovation without more space to listen and learn from the defenders on the frontline.
- Urgent actions or campaigns denouncing violence and repression at times go public before consultation and alignment with the human rights defenders or their organization. Organizations too often send out urgent actions before the defender or organization at risk has decided to make their case or situation public, or before the family or organizations of a murdered defender can verify key information, give their consent, or advise as to the best and safest way to present what happened.



The creation of safe spaces in which women human rights defenders, their organizations, and allies can regularly come together and openly explore what is changing in their context is a protection strategy in and of itself.

RECOMMENDATIONS: STRATEGIES FOR PROTECTING ACTIVISTS AND STRENGTHENING THEIR MOVEMENTS

“While traditional protocols and measures that secure offices, provide cameras and panic buttons and protect individuals most at risk continue to be important, protection and security in the face of the new political landscape demands strategies that improve the sustainability and resilience of communities, organizations and movements.”

Ana Paula Hernández, Fund for Global Human Rights (FGHR), Mexico⁴²

JASS’ experience with numerous allies affirms the need to better understand the dynamics of violence against activists and to redefine approaches to the protection of activists, their organizations, and movements. As regional and international organizations concerned with human rights and the safety of women activists, we need to more fully ground ourselves in local realities, focus on complementing local protection approaches, and better coordinate our efforts with others.

The recommendations below have emerged from our experience in Mesoamerica and extensive conversations with frontline activists, allied organizations, and donors around the world concerned with keeping women human rights defenders and movements safer and stronger.

1. RECOGNIZE THAT SAFE SPACE AND COMMUNITY POWER ANALYSIS ARE VITAL TO PROTECTION

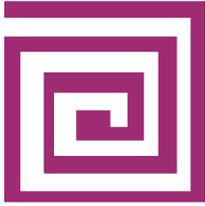
The creation of safe spaces in which women human rights defenders, their organizations, and allies can regularly come together and openly explore what is changing in their context is a protection strategy in and of itself. Together they

Safe spaces as political spaces

 Safe space allows diverse women to come together across movements for open dialogue and discussion of their experiences and the realities and risks of their contexts. These strategic women-only spaces cut across cultures, age, and the rural-urban divide to surface common concerns, define collective action, and, over time, develop strong networks for greater influence and self-protection. These safety networks diminish the isolation of women activists and provide a sense of belonging and support. They enable women activists to better understand and confront sexism and violence by fostering a shared understanding of the impact of these dynamics and encouraging collective approaches to safety, wellbeing, and survival. This kind of contextual analysis then becomes a tool for women and their organizations to strategize, respond to, and prevent violence. Such networks help women feel strong enough to push for more inclusive and feminist social justice movements and, as a result, increase the recognition of women’s leadership and contribution.

can develop a thorough and comprehensive analysis of the politics shaping the violence and restrictions they face, including repressive attacks on civic space and the ways in which these power dynamics increase their vulnerability.⁴³ A critical dimension of this analysis must include the multiple forms of discrimination and threats that women face, including in their homes and private life, which undermine their leadership and raise their level of risk. Movements and organizations need to create safe space in which women activists and others facing discrimination, can share this kind of information without fear of reprisal or ostracization.

Frontline activists and organizations have the most in-depth knowledge and understanding of risks, key actors and interests, motivations, and conflicts in their context. Well-grounded participatory processes can help communities to make sense of what they know and are experiencing, assess risks, and develop strategies to mitigate violence, while continuing to push their organizing agenda.



Effective strategizing requires mapping and analyzing the connections between international, national, and local actors as well as the complicity between state and shadow forces.

A range of methodologies exist to support communities and organizations to undertake their own analysis, including JASS' power framework⁴⁴ along with other participatory methodologies. Tools for “naming the moment” and understanding power are rich in Latin America's traditions of popular education and political analysis. These resources support a more complex analysis of the interface between private and public violence, and strengthen community strategies for defense and action.

2. MAP THE CONVERGENCES BETWEEN POWER, VIOLENCE, AND PRIVATE INTERESTS

Research on the distinct actors and interests behind violence and restrictions on activists and their social movements is vital to creating smart, proactive protection strategies. Despite the complexity of identifying the various interests in an ongoing political conflict, especially those behind-the-scenes, effective strategizing requires mapping and analyzing the connections between international, national, and local actors as well as the complicity between state and shadow forces. It must also include how those interests use the media to manipulate and mobilize public opinion against activists.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to in-depth research and power mapping. Experiences and strategies for protection from other places offer useful lessons, but each context has its own complexities which require specific analysis. Context-specific mapping allows communities to develop a full picture of their situation that can guide strategies for better risk-analysis and protection, and for advancing their organizing agenda.⁴⁵

3. STRENGTHEN AND SUPPORT WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AND FEMINIST APPROACHES IN PROTECTION

An analysis of violence and power is incomplete without an understanding of their intersections with gender and other forms of discrimination. As described above, this takes a number of forms: attacks on women activists have a particularly sexualized and gender-specific nature; gender discrimination and violence are used as a mechanism of control against activists by both states and private inter-

ests; and even within their own organizations and communities, women activists must contend with deeply ingrained discrimination as evident in the lack of recognition of their contributions and the lack of acceptance, sometimes violent, of their public roles. All of this not only increases the isolation and risks women activists face, but weakens the unity and power of organizations and movements.

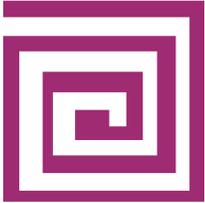
These dynamics taken together underscore the need for safety strategies to address gender-specific forms of discrimination, violence, and risk, including how they manifest within organizations and communities. Strategies need to strengthen and support women's leadership and integrate an understanding of gender-specific forms of violence and risk as a key element of their approach to protection.

“We need to stop pretending that discrimination against women no longer exists; we must support the groups of protection that women are forming themselves... Networks provide concrete solutions to the danger faced by women activists.” Michel Forst, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

Strengthening women's leadership and collective power is also important because they play a crucial role in community resilience and in organizations' security. Women often attend to social breakdown, crises, and conflict, and foster essential social relationships and community connection. It is important, therefore, to strengthen women's leadership, voice, and recognized roles within organizations and movements.

To achieve this, movements and organizations need to recognize the barriers to women's political participation—including family and community violence—and define supportive and preventative measures to address them. More broadly, this needs to include sharing the domestic chores and caregiving that overburden women defenders. Some movements and organizations, such as COPINH and the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH), have adopted these important shifts in gender roles.

Lastly, strengthening feminist approaches and women's leadership to protection also means prioritizing the support



Strengthening organizations includes enhancing their ability to conduct detailed risk and power analysis and to develop protection and communication networks that can prevent, not merely react to, threats and attacks.

of women human rights defenders and feminist organizations, initiatives, and self-created networks essential for their protection. This requires both allocating necessary resources for their strategies and including women activists themselves more fully in decision-making on HRD protection policies both nationally and internationally.

4. SUPPORT AND LEARN FROM COMMUNITY-CENTERED APPROACHES TO PROTECTION

Community-centered approaches to protection are some of the most effective. With their people-to-people communication networks⁴⁶ and on-the-ground presence, they can monitor specific areas and territories for threats and act quickly in the face of attacks. In addition, they strengthen community social fabric and proactive strategies for safety and well-being. Existing institutional protection strategies—from security protocols to international advocacy—can have a much greater impact if they are aligned with and complementary to those anchored in specific communities.

After years of repression and violence, excluded and discriminated groups—including women, LGBTI, and indigenous communities—have developed knowledge and creative strategies for personal, collective, and community survival and safety. These approaches offer insight (from which others can learn) into the development of community resilience and the power of people-to-people protection networks to reduce the isolation and vulnerability of activists and to organize timely action.

Thus, protection needs to be re-conceptualized to not only include but also deeply value the community-based and collective strategies that enable organizations and communities to be more resilient, more strategic, and more cohesive.

Such community approaches include:

- creating “safe spaces” and deep processes for learning, political education, and power analysis;
- dealing with fear and trauma and fostering well-being;
- sharing community ritual and celebration;
- developing collective models of leadership (to prevent

easy targeting, foster organizational resilience and make women’s leadership more visible); and

- mobilizing broad community involvement and support.

These strategies enable communities and organizations to resist attacks as well as to foster cultural and organizational practices and vision to sustain them through tough times.

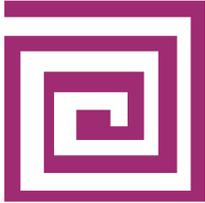
5. STRENGTHEN ORGANIZATIONS, NETWORKS, AND MOVEMENTS

Comprehensive protection requires coordinating and combining urgent responses to threats and attacks in specific moments or circumstances, with sustained organizational strengthening so groups can both proactively prevent violence and advance their social change goals. Those best placed to confront the violence occurring in a given context are the very organizations who are attacked. Thus, stronger organizations, networks, and movements can proactively create strategies for their own safety as well as lead efforts for change.

Strengthening organizations includes enhancing their ability to conduct detailed risk and power analysis and to develop protection and communication networks that can *prevent*, not merely react to, threats and attacks. Strategies for overall resilience and safety need to promote collective protection where all the members, not just the leader or coordinator, are responsible for the security of others, and must confront discrimination and violence against women within their ranks.

From a movement-building standpoint, being strong is about being part of resilient communities and organizations connected in mutual care, organizing together creatively and safely to resist and challenge oppressive forces and power dynamics, and leveraging alliances and allies across movements and regions for greater impact. By building networks of solidarity and mutual support, movements develop the collective power to confront the forces of backlash, stigma, and oppression in order to create change.

A network approach to protection allows for quicker and more opportune responses in emergencies, optimizes existing resources, prevents duplication, and enables a more holistic response locally and internationally. A network pro-



By building networks of solidarity and mutual support, movements develop the collective power to confront the forces of backlash, stigma, and oppression in order to create change.

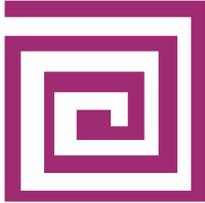
vides activists and organizations at risk with a range of protection expertise, capacities, and resources developed by diverse organizations and people within the network. They are at their most effective when they foster strong bonds of political trust between members, develop clear protocols for action and move beyond reacting to emergencies to strengthening the skills and strategies needed to prevent attacks and threats.

6. CHANGE THE NARRATIVE TO GENERATE SUPPORT AND HOPE

An essential aspect of protection work is the development of new narratives that effectively counter the image of activists and defenders as ‘criminals’, ‘terrorists’, ‘bad mothers’, or ‘loose women’, and their activism as ‘extremist’, ‘backward’, and ‘dangerous’ to society. These strategies must not only counteract messages of hate and stigmatization but also encourage the public defense of activists and support the work of their movements. Women human rights defenders and other activists need a positive and hopeful narrative to reach the public strategically and expand support for activists and their agendas—something that celebrates their efforts in ways that resonate in the broader community. Ultimately, these communication efforts need to renew hope and belief in systemic change.

“People who don’t know the kind of insecurity we confront every day can’t imagine how hope or a sense of a better future helps us to survive. This violent context of undeclared war has generated some of the most inspiring acts of courage and innovative citizen organizing imaginable. Guided by our great faith in women’s know-how and their capacity for resistance, we have built women’s collectives that are connected to broad networks and alliances—indigenous, rural, black, trans, young women together with trade unionists, journalists, and feminists. We are bound together by the complex realities, and by our hope and vision for the future.” *Daysi Flores, JASS Mesoamerica, Honduras*⁴⁷

We know from history that shifting public understanding and culture requires a mix of deep political education and organizing with clever multi-layered communications strategies that combine social media, hard news, popular education, art, culture and music.



An analysis of violence and power is incomplete without an understanding of their intersections with gender and other forms of discrimination.

CONCLUSION

The pronounced spike in threats against social movements and violence against human rights activists is the repression accompanying the closing of democratic civic spaces in Mesoamerica and throughout the world. It is integrally linked to conflict over a political and economic model that favors private interests at the expense of human rights and that jeopardizes the sustainability of the entire planet.

Berta Cáceres, Miriam Elizabeth Rodríguez, Marilyn Topacio Reynoso, and many other *compañeras* and defenders were murdered because of their opposition to this model and its impact on their communities. Today, criminalizing, threatening, or assassinating human rights defenders and their organizations is a strategy by those in power to maintain unfettered access to resources, elite privilege, and political control. The complicity of corrupt government officials and the undermining of human rights institutions forces us to rethink our reliance on states and the international community to fulfill their obligations and roles in human rights protection.

The best way to honor the legacy of Berta and all the women and men human rights defenders murdered while struggling for a better world is to make our movements stronger, more powerful, and more adept at confronting violence. We must rethink protection — moving beyond largely reactive and individual responses toward collective protection based in communities and supported by movements — to both provide safety and address the structural causes of violence.

Rethinking protection also means changing our own way of thinking about violence and risk. We do not want any more *compañeras* murdered, people arrested for political reasons, or movements strategically undermined by violence. We must cease exalting risk as heroic and emphasize care and protection as basic components of our political activity.

To sustain and protect movements, we must maintain hope that justice and equality are possible if we, as coordinated organizations and communities, work to “open” political

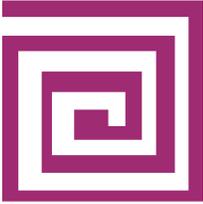
space for change and move towards a future based on caring for life and the environment, respecting civic participation and achieving substantive equality. We ought to channel increasing resources and energy to strengthen the ability of movements to achieve this transformation.

To do this, acknowledging the collective leadership and power of women is vital, not just because of their ever-increasing importance in sustaining social movements and communities, but also because eradicating discrimination against women and other structural patterns of exclusion is an essential condition for achieving the transformational change we want.

“The power of women is a collective power that generates community; that’s what strikes fear in backers of energy policies, mining policies, globalization policies. We are carrying out struggles not only in our territory but also in our own lives, in our beds, in our homes and communities, because violence hasn’t stopped. We need to continue struggling and declare our territories free from violence, free from mining; we want freedom in our territories and want to be able to welcome water, land, air as elements brimming with life, not as commodities for sale.”

Lolita Chávez, Guatemala

The level of attacks and restrictions on freedom of expression, environmental, and indigenous rights, and women’s rights are attacks on the hope of democracy and a healthy planet. This challenge requires all of us, no matter our issues, to come together—at community level, across geographic borders, in support of organized movements. Louder, stronger voices against destruction and violence will bring backlash and will require that we all think about safety differently. Let us activate hope, a hope that mobilizes more and more people, that enables us to face fear, and that centers on the care and the protection of our movements and struggles.



“People who don’t know the kind of insecurity we confront every day can’t imagine how hope or a sense of a better future helps us to survive”

Daysi Flores , JASS Mesoamerica, Honduras

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank the many human rights defenders, organizations, and organizing processes that have contributed to this analysis and learning:

The Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders Initiative and especially our fellow founding organizations and networks: the Central American Women’s Fund, the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID), the Feminist Collective for Local Development from El Salvador, the Consortium for Parliamentary Dialogue and Equality – Oaxaca, the Guatemalan Human Rights Defenders Protection Unit from Guatemala (UDEFEGUA) and the National WHRD Networks of Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua.

Organizations in Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala from whose strategies and analysis we continue to learn from, especially: the Center for Women’s Rights in Honduras, the Center for Women’s Studies – Honduras, the Committee of Relatives of Detained-Disappeared Persons in Honduras (COFADEH), the Council of Popular and Indigenous

Organizations of Honduras (COPINH), the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH) in Honduras, Aluna, Pacific Alternatives, the Project for Economic, Cultural, and Social Rights (PRODESC), the Peoples’ Front for the Defense of the Land of Atenco in Mexico, the UK’ux b’e Maya Association, Sepur Zarco Alliance in Guatemala, and the organizations and colleagues from the Mesoamerican Alliance of Indigenous, Rural and Mestiza Women.

International organizations that work on protection and whose experience has contributed to our own strategies and analyses: Peace Brigades International, the Urgent Action Fund for Latin America, Amnesty International, Protection International, the Fund for Global Human Rights, Front Line Defenders, and the Institute of Development Studies, among many others.

Lastly, thank you to the members of the global JASS community—in Southeast Asia, Southern Africa and especially Mesoamerica—all of whom contributed insights and wisdom.

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JASS (Just Associates) is an international network of activists, popular educators, and scholars in 26 countries working to strengthen and amplify the voice, visibility, and collective power of women for a just and sustainable world for all. We put women's leadership at the heart of cutting-edge economic, environmental, and human rights strategies. We work primarily with leaders and organizations focused on freedom of expression, health and sexual rights, defense of natural resources, and the protection of women human rights defenders. Our priorities and programs are defined and driven by the women and organizations we work with and supported by regional teams and partners in Mesoamerica, Southern Africa and Southeast Asia. Our strategies train diverse local leaders, strengthen community organizing, build broad alliances, and link grassroots solutions to global advocacy. Using creative communications and documentation strategies, we publicize the innovative ways women are building inclusive communities and deepening democracy.

www.justassociates.org

jass@justassociates.org