

# Empowered

Integral Protection  
for Women Human  
Rights Defenders  
Mexico

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## **Title**

Empowered, integral protection for women human rights defenders  
Mexico

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# 1 Introduction

Drawing on over 30 years' experience accompanying human rights defenders (HRDs), Peace Brigades International (PBI) has identified particular protection needs, including those of women human rights defenders (WHRDs). On the basis of this analysis, the UK Section of PBI has decided to promote and contribute to the implementation of the concept of integral protection for WHRDs in all the countries where the organisation works, with a special focus on Mexico in 2015.

As part of these efforts, a course on integral protection was provided for and with WHRDs, using the Training Platform developed by PBI<sup>1</sup>. One of the outcomes of the course, which was taught both on-line and face-to-face, were important recommendations on the integral protection of WHRDs, drawn up by the students and other invited WHRDs from various parts of the country. They were then presented and discussed with a wide range of diplomatic representatives in Mexico from the European Union and elsewhere. The aim was to achieve better understanding and application of the concept of integral protection, thereby helping to improve the situation of many WHRDs at risk.

At the same time, PBI collected the testimonies and reflections of women defending human rights in Mexico. It was a further initiative to promote and increase understanding of the concept of integral protection, by drawing on the knowledge and experience of WHRDs themselves – 22 in total – expressed in their own words. This publication includes these testimonies as well as the learning points and reflections of the course participants.



Roundtable of WHRDs and Embassies, 22 September 2015, Mexico

There are three sections: (1) presentation of the concept of integral protection through the life stories of 22 Mexican WHRDs; (2) the students' reflections on the integral protection course; (3) the summary of the recommendations on integral protection presented on 22 September 2015 in Mexico to the embassies of various countries, including members of the European Union (EU), through its Delegation in Mexico City.

In addition, as an expression of PBI's recognition,

admiration and respect for the important work carried out by WHRDs, an online toolkit has been developed which aims to contribute to their protection. This website was created in 2014 and 2015 and is available at the following link: <http://www.herramientadefensorasderechostierra.org/en/>. It is a resource for human rights organisations, with over a hundred sources of information, ideas and useful contacts relating to the various aspects of integral protection, with a special focus on WHRDs

working on environmental and land rights.

In summary, we present here a further contribution towards making the integral protection of Mexican WHRDs a reality, with the potential to effect positive change in their situation and that of the people with and for whom they exercise the right to defend human rights.

<sup>1</sup> PBI's Training Platform for HRDs in Mexico is a project funded by the European Union. For more information on the platform, see the chapter "Report on the integral protection course" in this publication.

# 2 Women Human Rights Defenders Participating

**Alba Cruz** lawyer and legal coordinator for CODIGO DH (Committee for the Integral Defence of Human Rights Gobixha), based in Oaxaca, which provides advice and legal, medical and psychological support for victims of human rights violations. PBI has accompanied the organisation since 2009.

**Alicia Mesa** social anthropologist who has worked for Centro Prodh (Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Centre), RODH (Oaxacan Human Rights Network) and CDHDF (Mexico City Human Rights Commission), among others. She conducts research into techniques for the detection, prevention and treatment of burnout and depression.

**Alma Gómez** training coordinator for CEDEHM (Women's Human Rights Centre) in Chihuahua and is a member of *Mujeres Barzonistas* women's protest movement. CEDEHM provides legal representation for the victims and their relatives in cases of femicide, forced disappearance, torture, human trafficking and sexual and domestic violence.

**Ana Lorena Delgadillo** lawyer and director of *Fundación para la Justicia y el Estado Democrático de Derecho* (Foundation for Justice and the Democratic Rule of Law). Based in Mexico City, she provides legal support and promotes access to justice for victims of crime and human rights violations with a special focus on the situation of migrants in Central America and Mexico.

**Ana María García** member of the management committee of EDUCA which provides advice to organisations and indigenous communities in Oaxaca on defending their rights, promotes citizen education, provides capacity-building for indigenous leaders and facilitates community development projects. PBI has accompanied EDUCA since 2013.

**Ana María Hernández** member of the management team of the *Consortio para el Diálogo Parlamentario y la Equidad* (Consortium for Parliamentary Dialogue and Equity) in Oaxaca. The organisation's work focuses on legislative processes and monitors public policies, promotes citizens' networks and coordinates capacity-building for

women on the recognition of their rights. PBI monitors its security.

**Atziri Ávila** coordinator of the *Red Nacional de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos en México* (National Network for Women Human Rights Defenders in Mexico). Since 2010 the Network has promoted coordination among WHRDs in Mexico to counter the violence targeted at them because of their work and gender. It is involved in the Consortium's advocacy programme in Oaxaca.

**Blanca Martínez** director of the *Centro Diocesano para los Derechos Humanos Fray Juan de Larios* (Fray Juan de Larios Diocesan Centre for Human Rights), Saltillo, which provides support for victims of violence, especially forced disappearances and human rights violations committed against the migrant population. It also supports HRDs in the region attacked because of their work. PBI has been accompanying the organisation since 2014.

**Clemencia Correa** Colombian, academic, psychologist and founder of ALUNA, a Mexican organisation providing psychosocial support. It

is involved in capacity-building of human rights organisations, journalists and communities in psychological well-being, security and political strategy. The aim is to help them address the impacts of political repression which put them at risk by building prevention, protection and coping mechanisms into their organisational strategies.

**Cristina Hardaga** Strategic and Political Engagement Coordinator for the Mexico-Mesoamerica Regional Office of Just Associates (JASS), an interregional feminist organisation that seeks to strengthen women's collective power through a range of measures, including training, self-care and national and international advocacy.

**Dirce Navarrete** works in the Advocacy and Training section of ELIGE Youth Network for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (REDLAC-Mexico), dedicated to promoting and defending human rights, especially for young women. She is active in *Las Enredadas*, a feminist women's collective, and in the project "*Voces de Mujeres. Historias que transforman*" ("Voices of Women, Stories for Change").

**Isabel Jiménez** member of the APPJ (Juchiteco People's Popular Assembly) in Oaxaca. Isabel promotes the defence of communities' natural resources in response to the establishment of wind farms, primarily in the municipality of Juchitán.

**Isabel Rosales** member of TADECO (Community Development Workshop) in Guerrero, which provides advice to communities defending their economic, social, cultural and environmental rights. It reports and monitors cases of kidnappings, disappearances and murders. PBI monitors the organisation's security situation.

**Itandehui Santiago Galicia** member of *Colectivo Mujer Nueva* (New Woman Collective), based in Oaxaca. This organisation, formed by women involved in the 2006 protest movement in Oaxaca, works to counter violence against women and provides information and training on women's participation in social struggles.

**Janet Figueroa** activist and human rights defender since 2011, following the extrajudicial execution of her father, Joaquín Figueroa Vázquez. Due to their demands for justice, the family has suffered threats which have forced them to leave their home.

**Lucha Castro** coordinator and co-founder of CEDEHM (Women's Human Rights Centre) in Chihuahua. CEDEHM provides legal representation for the victims and their relatives in cases of femicide, forced disappearance, torture, human trafficking and sexual and domestic violence. It also offers support to human rights defenders at risk.

**María Teresa Vallejo** president of the *Centro de Rehabilitación Fuerza, Unión y Tolerancia* (Strength, Union and Tolerance Rehabilitation Centre) in Baja California that provides assistance to people in detention and their relatives. She has suffered attacks in reprisal for her work since 2011.

**Martha Isaza** member of ALUNA, an organisation which, through psychosocial support and security advice, promotes capacity-building of individuals, social movements and organisations working to defend human rights so that they can continue their work.

**Minerva Nora Martínez** coordinates BARCA (Bartolomé Carrasco Briseño Regional Human Rights Centre). BARCA is a human rights organisation created by grassroots church communities to promote and defend the human rights of communities in Oaxaca. PBI has accompanied it since 2010.

**Pilar Noriega** lawyer. For over 30 years she has been defending political prisoners and dealing with cases of grave human rights violations, including the murder of the WHRD Digna Ochoa. She was a member of the Truth Commission set up to investigate human rights violations committed during the "Dirty War" in Guerrero.

**Rocío Culebro** sociologist and human rights defender, head of the *Instituto de Derechos Humanos y Democracia* (Human Rights and Democracy Institute) based in Mexico City. It promotes change in practices and institutions contravening human rights and the free exercise of democracy.

**Sara Bartolo López** member of the APPJ (Juchiteco People's Popular Assembly) in Oaxaca. It defends communities' natural resources in response to the establishment of wind farms, primarily in the municipality of Juchitán.

**Sara Méndez** coordinator of CODIGO DH (Committee for the Integral Defence of Human Rights Gobixha), based in Oaxaca. The organisation provides legal advice and support, as well as medical and psychological care for victims of human rights violations. It promotes access

to justice and fights against impunity. PBI has accompanied it since 2009.

**Silvia Méndez** member of the *Centro de Derechos Humanos Paso del Norte* (Paso del Norte Human Rights Centre). The Centre offers support to victims, giving priority to cases of torture and forced disappearance. It provides advice, guidance on civil rights and deals with cases, applying a holistic approach. PBI has accompanied the Centre since 2013.

**Silvia Rodríguez** mother of Claudia Lizarra Rodríguez, disappeared in Saltillo, Coahuila, and a member of FUUNDEC (United Forces for Our Disappeared in Coahuila). It campaigns for investigations into the whereabouts of the disappeared, and for those responsible to be brought to justice.

**Yésica Sánchez** lawyer and member of the management team of the *Consortio para el Diálogo Parlamentario y la Equidad* (Consortium for Parliamentary Dialogue and Equity) in Oaxaca. The organisation's work focuses on legislative processes and monitors public policies, promotes citizens' networks and coordinates capacity-building for women on the recognition of their rights. PBI monitors its security.

**Elsa Arista** co-founder of the *Red Universitaria de Monitores de Derechos Humanos* (University Network of Human Rights Monitors) and a member of LIMEDDH (Mexican League for Human Rights). She works on the training and institutional strengthening of various organisations such as the Zihuame women's organisation in Chichiquila, Puebla, and the Cholollán Human Rights Committee.

**Fabiola Hernández** journalist and women's rights coordinator for *Tequio Jurídico* in Oaxaca. The organisation supports indigenous peoples in the collective defence of their territory and in building their autonomy. PBI has accompanied them in a security analysis.

**Irene Noriega** lawyer and member of the *Centro de Derechos Humanos Cholollán* (Cholollán Human Rights Centre) which opposes the building of a tourist park at the pyramids of Cholula in Puebla. The organisation provides legal support for people detained or subject to arrest warrants for opposing this scheme.

# 3 Integral Protection

## 3.1 Integral protection - the concept

The concept of integral protection presented here draws on the experiences and reflections of WHRDs themselves. They saw the need to rethink their approach to their security and protection, in a way that was much more effective and comprehensive, tailored to their own realities and the contexts in which they exercise their right to defend human rights.<sup>2</sup>

Integral protection is effective, appropriate and holistic. It is structured with a gender focus and a differential approach to embrace and address the range of situations, needs and contexts affecting WHRDs' security.<sup>3</sup>

Integral protection seeks to have a positive transformative impact on the situation; that is, it seeks not only to ensure that WHRDs are safe, but also to change the circumstances which put them at risk.<sup>4</sup>

Integral protection embraces not only physical safety but also other key areas such as well-being and physical and mental health. It is an approach which includes both reactive and preventive approaches to risk, and takes into account the WHRDs' life histories. Integral protection thereby goes beyond immediate protection measures ('hard' or 'soft') to incorporate other key elements, as set out below.

“

**Suddenly we began to notice that colleagues were being killed or attacked and that violence against women human rights defenders was increasing. We saw that the authorities' response was inadequate and also that the defenders didn't trust them, because very often it was the authorities themselves who were attacking them... So it was clear that we needed to join forces in a network ... [Because the] protection of defenders involves not only material things - security cameras, bodyguards, patrols. These are important - but we also have to address the various issues underlying the attacks on women human rights defenders...**

”

**Atziri Ávila**



Guillemina Navarro Benitez

“

**Integral protection involves electric fences, cameras recording who comes and goes, psychological support because the cases you deal with are so complicated, but it also involves recognising that as a woman you suffer from discrimination and violence and that the State is aware of this.**

”

**Yésica Sánchez**



Erma Marshall

“

**As we're a committee for the integral defence of human rights, in the team we try to look a bit more at the individuals themselves. We look at the personal situation of the human rights defenders we support, at their health, their circumstances, what they need... We look at their families, because often in this work the families are equally affected when there's a situation of risk. We've noticed that when there are attacks on a women human rights defender, the threats are to her family, to her honour as a woman...**

”

**Sara Méndez**



<sup>2</sup> The right to defend human rights is enshrined in the Declaration on human rights defenders adopted by the United Nations in 1998. Available at: <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Defenders/Declaration/declaration.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Although, by its very nature, this document focuses on WHRDs, the concept of integral protection is relevant to any human rights defender, male or female.

<sup>4</sup> In 2006, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, in its report on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders in the Americas, recognized the importance of protection programmes but also the need for protection to be geared towards eradicating all those acts that directly or indirectly impede the defence of human rights (paragraph 131).

### 3.2 Being a woman human rights defender

Human rights defenders are defined by their actions. They may act individually or collectively, but a key feature common to all of them is that they are working to make the promises of justice, equality, rights and freedoms a reality for everyone.<sup>5</sup>

“

...in this country - Mexico – a WHRD is a woman looking for her disappeared relative, accompanying someone to report a case of domestic violence, helping prevent her family and community from practising discrimination, demanding justice for the extrajudicial execution of her daughter or husband, denouncing sexual violence and torture... She confronts the authorities and demands they meet their obligations; creates new alternatives for living an egalitarian life. A woman human rights defender can do anything! Break down stereotypes, redefine men and women's traditional roles, open up new pathways... Calling us human rights defenders brings together a range of different demands and activities under a single banner - and creates a movement – to develop responses and joint actions. Although we're all different, we do different work, we live in different contexts, women human rights defenders are all striving for the same thing: justice, equality, a better quality of life...

”

**Cristina Hardaga**



“

I'm looking for my daughter who's been disappeared. She's called Claudia Lizarra Rodríguez... Every time there's news that a person has disappeared, it becomes my problem, too...

”

**Silvia Rodríguez**



“

Being a human rights defender has to do with a commitment to change the situation of injustice in our country and in the whole world. Working for human rights involves confronting the system of oppression and injustice and walking together with people whose rights are being systematically violated.

”

**Blanca Martínez**



“

Being a woman human rights defender involves an ethical and political decision to contribute to the work for a decent life. I'm a person who collectively creates alternatives to build up resistance in a context of sociopolitical violence: I've been able to do this by asserting my right to speak out, by believing in the experiences of others, by honouring the historical memory of people who've fought to confront an economic and political model of inequality and injustice sustained by patriarchal structures... And by not losing the hope of a better world.

”

**Clemencia Correa**



<sup>5</sup> On the concept of human rights defenders see, for example, United Nations Fact Sheet No.29, available at: <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FactSheet29en.pdf>

### 3.3 Life stories: an essential part of integral protection

Understanding WHRDs' security situation involves understanding their needs, realities and specific contexts - in other words, understanding their life stories and the fact that, for many of them, defending human rights is a life choice.

“

For me, it's meant learning to look at women within the context of their life stories. So when they come to talk to you, before you start taking down hard facts, you have to ask what's this woman's life story. A lot of women need to be heard because they come from a world which doesn't hear them and doesn't see them. You have to listen to them and see them... they're victims, because there's an abuse of power, but we shouldn't just see them in that light. They're *compañeras* [colleagues] who can be empowered and they're rights holders.

”

**Yésica Sánchez**



Emma Marshall

“

As time's gone on, I've become aware that I'm a human rights defender and this is the skin I feel most comfortable in. It's a life choice, a way of living, of being in this world. Being a woman human rights defender in Chihuahua involves filing complaints, questioning the authorities and the concept of security imposed on us, and you have to maintain a position of strength in order to be heard... If I were helping the victims without empowering them, I would simply be a good woman who helps women so that they're not beaten any more. But we teach women to question things, to put an end to the violence...

”

**Lucha Castro**



“

All this has a bit to do with my background. I've been formed by my upbringing by my grandparents in the countryside. As my grandfather didn't have any sons - well, he did have a son but he was killed - I was the one who had to work in the fields as I was the eldest granddaughter... You saw a lot of men there but only a few women. Women played a different role, it was the women who took the food to the workers... [But I] had to take on other responsibilities ...

”

**Rocío Culebro**



“

I'm a fisherman's daughter, and because of that we're defending our territory and the natural world. From a very young age my parents would take us on a procession with the fishermen, the farmers and the whole village and a lot of people would come from outside, too, in December or January, depending on the rains... It's all these historical and religious places that we're defending...

”

**Isabel Jiménez**



Emma Marshall

### 3.4 A gender and differential perspective

WHRDs have placed particular emphasis on the need for integral protection to incorporate a gender and differential perspective. This perspective should contribute towards the recognition and valuing of their human rights activities, as well as the identification and addressing of the various barriers, levels and forms of discrimination and violence which they face both in reprisal for their human rights work and through the simple fact of being women.

By applying a gender and differential perspective, it is possible to observe and then address specific differences and unequal relationships stemming from the roles, behaviours and activities socially expected of women and men, as well as other differences which are also important, such as age and ethnic, social and economic factors.

“

**There are still situations where you notice that sexism is very strong, where they ask to speak to a man... In this society, if you're a young, indigenous woman, you're stigmatised three times over.**

”

**Isabel Rosales**



“

**The human rights crisis has raised the profile of a very powerful women's movement... [but] because of the role we play we have a very hard fight on our hands which isn't recognised... In Guerrero... there was a very severe crackdown, like the ones we often have, and six fellow activists were arrested – four men and two women. The two women were raped and the men were beaten up... Both women were mothers. The husband of one of the women asked her for a divorce, blaming her for neglecting her family, and the husband of the other committed suicide... The four male activists had the support network of their family, consisting almost entirely of women... [In another context] I began to notice that some male activist leaders hit their female colleagues, or practised discrimination or made sexist jokes... I think that sexism within social movements, in couples and in society in general is still a challenge.**

”

**Ana María Hernández**



“

**Everyone addresses the men as 'Lawyer' whereas to me they say 'Oy, madam' or 'Miss' as if they're trying to belittle me... So just from that you can see that things are different.**

”

**Pilar Noriega**



“

**As a woman this isn't an easy job. You have to state your position and make your argument three times more than a man to make your voice heard.**

”

**Silvia Méndez**



“

Sometimes letting go of the role of care-giver is complicated because, in my case, I'm increasingly assuming this role and I'm worried about everyone... I think sometimes we neglect ourselves, we stop looking after ourselves...

”

**Fabiola Hernández**



“

I do feel afraid sometimes but it's for my children, that they might do something to them, take them from their school... Sometimes, instead of making me afraid, it makes me angry because [the authorities] protect foreigners but they don't protect their own people...

”

**Sara López**



Emma Marshall

“

In the case of fellow women defenders, we've found that their vulnerability stems mainly from what their communities say about them, from gossip, rumours or the disparaging remarks which, in those cultural environments, weigh heavily on them, when it's said, "Why do you go out so much when your job's here at home looking after your children?"

”

**Ana María García**



### 3.5 The primary responsibility to protect lies with the State

Integral protection reaffirms and reiterates the fact that the states have the primary responsibility for protecting human rights defenders. Such responsibility must take the form of mechanisms, actions and effective measures which, as well as protecting those who find themselves at risk, must aim to create a "safe and enabling environment for human rights defenders."<sup>6</sup>

“

It's the state that must protect us and must create adequate conditions for the defence of our rights and for the advancement of women's rights.

”

**Pilar Noriega**



“

We don't want to take over the authorities' responsibilities – that's not our job. On the contrary, we're continuing to name names and demand action from them. However, there are cases which we have to deal with urgently, because we've seen that bodies such as the Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists don't respond as they should... We don't want violence to become normalised. We want to publicise the fact that attacks on WHRDs are taking place, that they have different features to the attacks on men, that it is the authorities themselves at all three levels of government who are attacking the WHRDs, and that in a number of cases they're doing so in collusion with transnational corporations and organised crime. However, we also want public policies so that aggression towards women and WHRDs is no longer routine...

”

**Atziri Ávila**



Guillemina Navarro Benítez

<sup>6</sup> Report of 23 December 2013 by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders.

### 3.6 The responsibility of non-state actors such as companies

Integral protection reiterates and reaffirms the responsibilities of actors other than the state, such as private companies. Their relationship with human rights defenders should be one of respect, support and protection of their work. Within a framework of due diligence, companies must take human rights defenders into account when identifying, preventing, mitigating and being accountable for the impact of their activities on human rights.<sup>7</sup> This involves, as a minimum, companies recognising the relevance and legitimacy of WHRDs, through their actions, interactions and communications.<sup>8</sup>

“

**Our parents and grandparents taught us what each plant could be used for, what problems each herb cured, and so through all of this - customs, culture, history - they taught us to appreciate the trees, what it is that gives us life, and it's in that area where we collect plants that we're being invaded by the wind turbines. That's why we're asking for our way of life, customs and traditions to be respected... We want our future generations to continue to benefit from them. What's motivated me from the beginning is the desire to defend life.**

”

**Isabel Jiménez**



Emma Marshall

“

**... that land now being used for the wind farms is communal, and a free, prior and informed consultation never took place. That led to several communities opposing them. There've been a lot of attacks on human rights defenders. Having that escalation in violence for the sake of the 'development' that everyone talks about doesn't justify the threats and loss of human life...**

”

**Alba Cruz**



Emma Marshall

“

**...many of the attacks come from the State but a significant proportion are coming from the companies... The State has a responsibility but there are also companies involved... The companies have a role in this. It's often difficult for us to prove but that's another story ...**

”

**Sara Méndez**



<sup>7</sup> Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, available at: [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/GuidingPrinciplesBusinessHR\\_EN.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/GuidingPrinciplesBusinessHR_EN.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> A/HRC/25/55, para. 102, 106 and 133; and Commentary to the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, page 19 to 23, available at: <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Defenders/CommentarytoDeclarationondefendersJuly2011.pdf>

### 3.7 Some important tools for integral protection

Integral protection goes beyond measures such as bullet-proof vests, security cameras, mobile phones or bullet-proof cars, these 'hard' or 'soft' measures which are often necessary but not enough. With the concept of integral protection, other important tools to address the risk are considered, both reactive and preventative, and ones which also take into account the underlying causes of the attacks. Some of these instruments are, for example: recognition, effective investigation and punishment of the attackers, self-care, forming solidarity networks, access to sources of funding, digital security, international accompaniment and advocacy. The WHRDs' experiences reaffirm this, as shown by the following extracts from their testimonies:

#### – recognition

“

**A human rights defender has a visible and, in theory, protected role, to put forward proposals, to ensure that the law and treaties are respected, to be a critical voice. We act as a kind of counterweight to the system... raising the political cost to the State. Because of the issue of protection, it was important for us to be called human rights defenders. The need for that recognition became increasingly obvious.**

”

**Ana María Hernández**



#### – effective investigation and punishment of the attackers

“

**Legal representation and documentation are important, as are public denunciations when there are serious situations which we have to file complaints on or provide evidence for, including international litigation... The point is that these cases should be investigated and the investigations should yield results.**

”

**Minerva Nora Martínez**



Emma Marshall

“

**Political will is needed to investigate the State's own agents. Political will is needed to apply disciplinary procedures to suspend those who violate human rights.**

”

**Alba Cruz**



Emma Marshall

#### – self-care

“

**We need to recognise that, as women, we also need to take care of ourselves... Something that really resonates with me is that my body is also my territory. By taking care of my territory, I feel I'm also equipped to go into the communities and encourage the participation of the women there, not only in caring for their land, but also in self-care activities. They not only have rights, they should also take care of themselves ...**

”

**Fabiola Hernández**



“

... how do you make sure that you don't become full of illnesses and stress that'll take you out of commission? The challenge is self-care, to feel that you're a human being with rights, and to not kick the bucket because you think you're the saviour of the world, when you're not.

”

**Ana María Hernández**



– solidarity and networks

“

Women have to be united and organised – there's no alternative. It's the only way we can resist the violence and face up to the economic, political and social situation.

”

**Itandehui Santiago**



“

What they want to do is spread fear, but we're protected because we're part of other networks, networks of women human rights defenders, the national network and the network which has come with PBI's accompaniment, which has been very important, very powerful. It raises our work's profile, opens doors...

”

**Minerva Nora Martínez**



Emma Marshall

“

With community defence, we've stressed that this is collective and not individual work. Defending a river or a village from a mine is an issue for the whole community living in that territory and everyone who's going to be affected... In doing so we've managed to gain support for the women defenders' work from their own local authorities, their assemblies and their grassroots organisations. That's very important because any action that's taken will have a greater impact and it also gives the women's cause greater legitimacy.

”

**Ana María García**



– access to sources of funding

“

In terms of fundraising and funding priorities, it's very important to encourage regular discussions with development agencies and embassies about the concrete needs of women human rights defenders; even more so in contexts where they face threats and risks. This is particularly the case in regions where women are or were located, carrying out important work which is now no longer possible because of the power of organised crime, acting in collusion with state actors. That's the new reality for many women human rights defenders ...

”

**Cristina Hardaga**



“

Lack of money is a major limiting factor - lack of money for even the most basic needs. If you're at risk you may have to leave, and sometimes people don't have the money for a ticket... It's precisely these emergencies that have forced donors to start creating special funds for cases of emergency, which can be a medical emergency or having to leave the area...

”

**Sara Méndez**



“

We must recognise that the work isn't an act of altruism but a job which deserves decent pay and social security... We also need to have this discussion with those who fund projects. We had a colleague who told me, when I started to do her risk analysis, 'No, I go all day without breakfast because I haven't got any money. I've only got enough for my travel and I can't give up feeding my daughter...' Is this the human rights movement we want to create? It's about basic things which also give your work dignity.

”

**Yésica Sánchez**



Emma Marshall

## - advocacy

“

I've had the opportunity to 'activate' the European Union guidelines on the protection of human rights defenders. The experience was a good one, in the sense that it was possible to build collaboration with the EU Delegation and the embassies so that they would act. Being able to implement the Guidelines also requires the "will" of the parties. There's no doubt that there are challenges, and ways in which more and better use could be made of the Guidelines, but we can't ignore the fact that they've served to support human rights defenders who've been criminalised and those at risk. Furthermore, with the Guidelines it's possible to generate pressure and publicity, but also to warn about and prevent attacks - that should be the ideal. They should also help to create a better environment, so that women human rights defenders' work and contributions receive greater recognition and they can work without fear of attacks and reprisals.

”

**Cristina Hardaga**



“

The government has an iron grip on the media. We have to use a range of national and international mechanisms to report the situation here... We've been to the United Nations and the Inter-American Human Rights System. All the encouragement and support of international organisations and bodies has been essential to us...

”

**Alma Gómez**



“

We've had two hearings with the Inter-American Commission. It's worked for us because there we make proposals and reach agreements which we can continue working on back in Mexico.

”

**Ana Lorena Delgadillo**



Pan para el Mundo

# 4 Report on the Integral Protection Course

The course on integral protection with a gender and differential perspective was conceived and developed using the training platform as a space for reflection and dialogue with and between the WHRDs and the training team.<sup>9</sup> The main objective of the training was for each student, from her own life experiences and work as a WHRD, to reflect on the risks she faced in her work, and acquire theoretical, analytical and practical tools for integral protection in her daily life. The concept for the course therefore embraced activities such as analysis and management of information, as well as trainings in self-care, outreach and advocacy exercises.

## - What were the students looking for?

The students were looking for new tools which would strengthen them in their work.

“

**I'm a activist and human rights defender. I live in the land of impunity where democracy doesn't exist, and I'm currently displaced for my own personal safety and my family's, after there were attacks on my family as a way of intimidating me because of my human rights work. I'm on this course because I hope to gain more tools to carry on with my work promoting human rights.**

”

**Maria Teresa Vallejo**



<sup>9</sup> PBI's Training Platform for human rights defenders (HRDs) in Mexico, a project funded by the European Union, is an educational space that offers training and theoretical and practical tools to strengthen HRDs' work and security practices. In 2015, the Platform provided six courses. The first dealt with integral protection with a gender perspective for WHRDs. The remaining five covered institutional strengthening of human rights organisations using conflict management techniques; advocacy based on strategic planning; campaign planning; networking and finally guides to various human rights instruments (the United Nations Universal Periodic Review, protection measures under the Inter-American Human Rights System, the European Union Guidelines for Human Rights Defenders and the Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists in Mexico).

## - Some features of integral protection for women human rights defenders

Integral protection should be strategic and multi-level, and it must be based on each WHRD's experiences, work and relationships with others as well as from her particular context.

Examining the situations, cases and challenges faced by the students for demanding respect for human rights in violent contexts reaffirmed the importance of a suitable methodology for documenting and presenting cases and situations of aggression or risk. Various national and international entities, instruments and courses of action were proposed for use as protection mechanisms.

To promote reflection on this topic, activities included analysing several hearings of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, including "Challenges of Protecting Women from Violence 20 Years after the Belém do Pará Convention" in 2014.

## - Concept - women human rights defenders

As a starting point for the training, the concept of "human rights defender" was examined, as well as the importance of appropriating this name, as a platform and a normative framework reaffirming the legitimacy of their human rights activities. On the basis of this, the need to apply a gender and differential perspective was highlighted, one that acknowledged the different needs, realities and contexts relevant to each situation.

“

**I've felt vindicated in being a human rights defender since I recognised that my work has a positive impact on the lives of others and on the struggle in various places and spaces to defend and exercise basic rights. For me, it's crucial to recognise myself as a human rights defender and for other women to recognise themselves as such. It's a fundamental step towards the recognition of our work and the contribution we make to initiatives to combat problems such as violence and inequality, and to build a better world...**

”

**Atziri Ávila**



Guillemina Navarro Benítez

“

In the activist groups I belong to, we've perceived that criminalisation, a process which tries to hinder our human rights work by delegitimising our struggle, consists of at least three stages: stigmatisation (dissemination of stereotypes and prejudices about women defenders), judicialisation (arbitrary detention, persecution, harassment, torture and violence via the judicial system) and criminalisation (amending regulatory frameworks, creating new offences, restrictive laws, etc.). They're all totally interrelated, as one stage makes it possible to apply the others... It's important to address the mechanisms through which women are stigmatised, judicialised and criminalised, as well as the intersectionality of factors such as age, ethnicity, and sexual and gender identity, which lead to the multiplication and diversification of violence.

”

**Dirce Navarrete**



“

I identify with all Latin American women who are human rights defenders – we've all dealt with the same issues and been in similar situations. It was very interesting to learn about gender mainstreaming. ...It seems to me there isn't enough emphasis on integral [protection] mechanisms, including access to justice, health care in cases of physical and sexual attacks, counselling, etc. In the case of Digna Ochoa's murder, which has gone entirely unpunished, I think it was because she was a woman, she lived alone and dealt with cases in a very direct way. She was treated as a human rights defender who was inefficient and was in poor mental health... Violence against women human rights defenders often comes from within their own organisations, their families and the State. That's why there's an urgent

need to apply a gender perspective within the structural, regulatory, cultural and institutional spheres.... It's also important for us to work on our resilience and know when to withdraw a bit. I've seen women defenders who've been seriously affected mentally and have even wanted to commit suicide. It's something we must be alert to... It's important not to disappear ourselves. Strengthening our self-esteem and our self-care, being objective about our limits, being flexible and able to make new plans will very often help us to survive, to live better and to find new ways of being and acting in the world as human rights defenders.

”

**Alicia Mesa**



### **- Empowerment and life stories, building blocks for protection**

The course participants reflected on security and protection using a methodological approach based on life stories, their own experiences and self-care. This technique allows them to formulate security and protection plans appropriate to their own practices and particular circumstances and contributes to their own empowerment and to that of the people with whom they work. In this exercise, experiences of empowerment were recounted and self-care exercises were proposed and carried out.

“

We went in - two teachers and three mothers. They took photos of us and asked us for identification, and one officer told us that we were putting the children at risk, and asked us why we were protesting. We explained that we didn't understand why they were refusing to hand over what had been donated. We insisted that we weren't going to move. In the end he gave the order to load a truck with tiles, toilets and sinks and we went out to where the mothers and children were waiting for us. When they saw us coming with the things, we all screamed and hugged each other because we'd achieved what we'd set out to do. In a few days we had a roof, toilets and desks – we had a school. For me, it's a source of satisfaction and pride that we mums and teachers overcame the fear we felt in facing up to the army, especially as we'd brought the children along, that we'd managed to finish the school and had been left with the lesson of working together and goals achieved.

”

**Martha Isaza**



## - The theory of change and designing an integral protection plan

The concept of the theory of change was presented and applied to each student's specific case in order to design an integral protection plan appropriate to their particular needs and situations.



**In my case, my weak point was ignorance – I didn't think I'd be attacked for dealing with human rights issues... My NGO was created only recently; we formed the day before the demonstrations on 6 October 2014. I was alone, I didn't know who to contact or what to do, I had a double workload... We must support each other by forming mutual support networks, find out how to prevent possible attacks, refuse to allow impunity, raise our voices. It's important to have a directory of human rights bodies to report attacks to, as well as to inform new NGOs about how to prevent attacks, what to do if they are attacked, and where to go. We need to have information on how to protect ourselves.**



**Irene Noriega**



**Institutions need to be accountable and to respect and recognise women defenders' right to defend human rights... The Mexican government hasn't respected this right - quite the opposite, the killings, arrests and threats have been constant... Today, simply being a woman puts us at a disadvantage, and this coupled with the attacks on women in general, including feminicides, is alarming.... One example is the Mexican state authorities where you can't report attacks. When women go to the Prosecutor's Office to file complaints, they're turned back home. They're told that they have to turn up with signs of having been beaten, and if they do that then they're told that they've brought it upon themselves. If you look at its official website it says that there are programmes for the violence against us, that we can report it, etc, but it's just words.**



**Elsa Arista**



## - Building networks and dialogue with the diplomatic corps

The course ended with two days of face-to-face meetings. On the first day, there was a workshop which reinforced and deepened learning of the subjects studied through a series of activities and sessions devoted to topics such as self-care and international advocacy. For much of the day, other Mexican WHRDs also participated in the workshop, which had the additional benefit of helping to consolidate support networks among those attending. On the second day there was a meeting with the diplomatic corps to discuss specific options for strengthening support for WHRDs (more information on next page). The online tool already mentioned in this publication, which brings together information, ideas and contacts relating to the components of the concept of integral protection, especially for WHRDs working on the defence of the environment and the right to land,<sup>10</sup> was presented both to the defenders and to the diplomatic corps.

In the evaluation meeting the students reflected on the training process. Janet Figueroa and others regarded the practical exercises as important and stressed the need to continue the dialogue with the diplomatic corps on a gender perspective in the protection of WHRDs, with discussion of possible concrete action to promote reflections on the issue. Dirce Navarrete, Yésica Sánchez and various other WHRDs considered the methodology used in the integral protection training, giving positive feedback on the emphasis on the theoretical and practical study of the potential uses of protective mechanisms (such as the European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders). Finally, the course students were invited to join the *Red Nacional de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos* (National Women Human Rights Defenders Network), an invitation which was accepted by all of them, so that they could continue working, through theory and practice, on the integral protection of WHRDs in Mexico.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.herramientadefensorasderechostierra.org/en/>



**Dirce Navarrete**



**Janet Figueroa**

# 5 Recommendations to the Diplomatic Corps

## Rethinking the European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders and the Guidelines on Violence against Women from a gender perspective

Mexico, 22 September 2015

The students of the course, with 12 other invited Mexican WHRDs, had a meeting with a wide representation of embassies of the European Union and other countries, 11 in total.<sup>11</sup> The aim was to explore possibilities for concrete action by the embassies in implementing the concept of integral protection. The meeting was convened by the European Union Delegation in Mexico, which has funded the integral protection course as part of its support for the training platform.

To formulate the proposals submitted for discussion, the WHRDs reviewed the concept of integral protection through the prism of their

own experiences and knowledge, as well as taking into account the scope for action offered by the European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders and the European Union Guidelines on Violence against Women. Below is a summary of the recommendations made.

The European Union Delegation, as well as the embassies and WHRDs present, valued the meeting and made a commitment to follow up on it in the future. The Delegation stated its intention to systematise the actions already taken to implement the guidelines, so that it could use these past experiences for future reference. In addition, it would issue public statements which include express support for WHRDs, and send information about the meeting and the issue to the European Union's External Action Service in Brussels.

The following is a summary of the recommendations presented by the WHRDs to the diplomatic corps:

The EU Delegation and/or embassies should open and promote spaces for dialogue, discussion and documentation, to generate ideas and actions for the implementation of the guidelines and consolidation of good practice. For example:

- 1 Set up a working group of embassies and WHRDs to meet regularly to discuss the attacks they suffer as part of the repression of their work and gender-based violence against women in Mexico. The purpose of the meetings would be to draw up guidelines for concrete action on pressing issues or cases to help guide the actions of the Delegation and diplomatic missions in Mexico. It would thereby be possible to make progress in formulating proposals for a gender perspective to be better

incorporated into the EU guidelines for HRDs.

- 2 Produce public annual reports on the situation for WHRDs, using input from the WHRDs themselves who document the actions undertaken and the issues and cases dealt with. These reports could facilitate continuity in actions and work programmes, as well as the training and information on this issue for new staff.
- 3 Publicise the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders and on Violence against Women, including information on the specific actions that the EU can take to support WHRDs, using, for example, the WHRD networks which already exist in Mexico as a route for dissemination.

Recognition of the legitimacy and relevance of WHRDs' work:

- 4 Ensure that all communications on human rights defenders issued by the EU Delegation and embassies include a gender perspective, for example, citing the need to implement appropriate measures for WHRDs, the risks they specifically face and the distinct impacts of the attacks against them.
- 5 Public statements on days of special significance such as 25 and 29 November<sup>12</sup> as an expression of support by the EU and other countries for women and WHRDs, to recognise their contributions to society, and to inform about the risks, criminalisation and attacks they face both for their work and for being women.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The WHRDs participating in the roundtable were: Ana María Hernández (Oaxaca Consortium), Atziri Ávila (National Women Human Rights Defenders Network), Cristina Hardaga (JASS – Mexico-Mesoamerica Regional Office), Dircé Navarrete (REDLAC-Mexico), Elsa Arista (LIMEDDH), Emilie de Wolf (Oaxaca Consortium), Janet Figueroa (WHRD), María Luisa Aguilar (Centro de Derechos Humanos de la Montaña, Tlachinollán – Tlachinollán Human Rights Centre), Imelda Marufo (Red Mesa Mujeres de Juárez - Women of Ciudad Juárez Committee Network) Irene Noriega (Cholollán Human Rights Centre), Lucha Castro (CEDEHM), Martha Isaza (ALUNA), Niamh Ni Bhriain (PBI Mexico), Olga Guzmán (CMDPDH), Yesica Sanchez (Oaxaca Consortium) as well as Nancy Tapias and Susana Nistal (PBI Training Platform).

**6** Issue public statements on specific cases of attacks on women and/or WHRDs who are at risk.

**7** Conduct a campaign recognising and publicising the importance of the work of WHRDs; for example, by publishing photos and individual profiles. Such an initiative should reaffirm women's right to defend human rights on equal terms and without fear of reprisals.

where WHRDs have been detained in reprisal for their human rights work, and visit them in detention centres.

**11** In addition, send observers to trials brought by WHRDs against the direct perpetrators and masterminds of attacks against them.

Dialogue with the Mexican authorities:

**12** Ensure that the situation of WHRDs and violence against women is an integral part of all political dialogues on human rights, including critical issues such as femicide, attacks on WHRDs, their treatment by the authorities when they report their attackers and the effectiveness of investigations and protection measures.

**13** Encourage monitoring and evaluation of the Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists and of other public bodies tasked to protect WHRDs.

**14** Meetings with the state and/or civil society to be informed of progress in the implementation of public policies to combat violence against women and to protect WHRDs. In addition, evaluation of the implementation of the budget allocated for this, ensuring that the input of WHRDs and their organisations is requested for these meetings, and that they are provided with feedback on what has been discussed.

Prevention of potential attacks associated with projects by companies from EU countries and other states:

Support to prevent and react to attacks against WHRDs:

**8** Support WHRDs at risk and their families and those who return to their homes after a period of forced displacement or temporary relocation caused by attacks and situations of risk. This support should include meetings with local authorities and other explicit expressions of support, and monitoring to help strengthen their integral protection - their wellbeing, security and guarantees that they can continue their work.

**9** Keep visiting WHRDs in their workplaces. Continue inviting them to meetings and public events at the EU offices and embassies, and then publicising these meetings through articles and photos on websites, making this standard practice. If necessary, bear the costs involved in ensuring the attendance of WHRDs.

**10** Send trial observers to hearings of particular importance, both inside and outside Mexico, especially in cases

**15** Request that companies from their countries act with due diligence to respect human rights, including the right to consultation and the right to defend human rights, paying particular attention to vulnerable groups.

**16** Convene roundtables so that companies, communities, HRDs and the authorities can meet to achieve better understanding of the risks and impacts of projects on the communities affected.

**17** Encourage an environment in which commercial interests and the obligation to respect human rights are reconciled to a greater degree. Various mechanisms laid down in the Guidelines should be activated on a preventative basis in regions and communities where major projects are planned, and there should be visits to WHRDs at risk in areas affected by projects or investment.

Dissemination internationally:

**18** We recommend that the EU Delegation and embassies present share this experience with the EU institutions in Brussels, with other EU delegations and with their respective governments so that these recommendations and dialogues can strengthen the implementation of the EU Guidelines and other relevant instruments, such as the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders adopted by the United Nations in 1998.

**12** 25 November is International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and 29 November is International Women Human Rights Defenders Day.

**13** EU Guidelines on Violence against Women. Point 3.2.2. Specific additional measures to combat violence against women - "Action to combat violence against women will be implemented by means of the following initiatives: (d) by supporting women's rights defenders and female human rights defenders, in particular those who are threatened or who are the victims of specific and targeted repression or harassment" as laid down in the EU guidelines on human rights defenders, in the section "Role of EU Missions in supporting and protecting human rights defenders": "providing, as and where appropriate, visible recognition for human rights defenders and their work, through appropriate use of the media."



Workshop - Integral Protection Course for Women Human Rights Defenders, 21 September 2015, Mexico



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