

## El Salvador: Organizations express concern about the increase in digital violence against Women Human Rights Defenders

*The COVID-19 measures put in place by the government of El Salvador have fostered a violent and hostile environment that hinders the work of Women Human Rights Defenders*

**19 June 2020** - The undersigned organizations denounce the alarming increase in attacks against organizations and women human rights defenders (WHRDs) since the government of the El Salvador's measures in response to the COVID-19 global health crisis. Of particular concern are attacks in the digital sphere. This has created a violent and hostile environment for WHRDs and hinders their work.

The Nayib Bukele government's use of Information and Communication Technologies as a primary tool for transmitting institutional information is noteworthy. The President has also taken to digital media to delegitimize those who criticize his policies, including messages that discredit human rights organizations<sup>1</sup> and use misogynist language.<sup>2</sup>

According to the information gathered in the Regional Monitoring System of Attacks against WHRDs<sup>3</sup>, after the measures decreed in the context of COVID-19, there has been an increased in governmental statements and positions that put human rights defenders at risk, particularly those who have a presence in social media and networks.

The increase in gender-based violence in the digital sphere is particularly concerning. The Regional Monitoring System shows an increase in the number of WHRDs who denounce cyber-harassment, defamation, threats and public discrediting. WHRDs and journalists (primarily those who have publicly denounced alleged irregularities or disagreements in the government's management of the crisis) have stated that they are being targeted by smear campaigns with a high component of gender violence. They also point out that some of the messages come from social media accounts belonging to public officials, persons who are close to the current government, or the official Party.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, the Journalists' Association of El Salvador (APES for its acronym in Spanish) presented its quarterly report on 3 May, describing 54 cases of freedom

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1244370925815988226>

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1252805340006985730?lang=es>

<sup>3</sup> Developed by the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders and the WHRD Network in El Salvador.

<sup>4</sup> For more information, see: <http://im-defensoras.org/es/> (Alerts on the cases of [Montserrat Arévalo](#), [Movimiento de mujeres eco-feministas de El Salvador](#), [Camila Portillo](#), [Bertha María DeLeón](#), [Yaneth Estrada](#) y [Agrupación Ciudadana por la Despenalización del Aborto](#)).

of the press violations. The report states that 39 of these incidents took place during the March-May emergency and that at least 9 of them were directed at women, identifying acts like restrictions to journalism work, digital attacks, and removal of access to public information.

Other human rights violations that are frequently denounced in the context of the pandemic are police abuse and exclusion from State services that guarantee access to basic rights. WHRDs have not been spared these forms of violence, and the WHRD Network in El Salvador has documented cases such as those of Sara Yamileth Benítez and Ana Cristina Barahona, two WHRDs who were detained and accused of breaking the lock-down when they were purchasing food and medicine.<sup>5</sup>

The essential role of organizations and human rights defenders in promoting recognition of human rights and constitutional rights and guarantees in the country is particularly important in the context of the pandemic.

For this reason, we demand that the authorities in El Salvador immediately adopt all the necessary measures to guarantee the exercise of rights and the respect of constitutional guarantees and international law.

Additionally, and responding to the importance of exercising freedom of expression and the right to defend rights, we request:

- **To the President and officials of the Executive Branch**, that they abstain from publishing messages that stigmatize human rights defenders and journalists and puts them at risk, as well as messages that promote discrimination against women.
- **To the Ministry of Justice and Public Security and the Ministry of Defense**, to take measures to prevent the arbitrary and excessive use of force by agents of the National Civil Police and Armed Forces.
- **To the General Prosecutor's Office and the Ombudsperson for Human Rights Defenders (PDDH in Spanish)**, to swiftly investigate the complaints lodged by human rights defenders and journalists about acts that may constitute crimes.
- **To the Institute for Women's Development of El Salvador, the PDDH, and the General Prosecutor's Office**, to investigate violence and discrimination due to human rights defense activities and the exercise of freedom of expression, as well as the arbitrary detention of women, some of whom are mothers, who leave their homes to purchase food and medicine,

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<sup>5</sup> For more information, see:

<http://im-defensoras.org/2020/05/alerta-defensoras-sv-actualizacion-las-defensoras-cristina-barahona-y-sara-benitez-siguen-retenidas-en-centro-de-contencion-de-covid-19/>

and whose young children are now in a vulnerable situation without their primary care-givers at home.

- **That the National Civil Police** conduct their work in the context of the crisis adhering strictly to human rights, with a gender perspective, and taking into account that care-giving work, community protection and defense in crisis situations is often led by women.

We also demand that international human rights organisms remain vigilant to this type of events and respond to the serious human rights abuses that WHRDs are facing in El Salvador.

### Signing Organizations

1. *Access Now, Global*
2. *Acoso Online, Iberoamérica*
3. *Agrupación por la Despenalización del Aborto, El Salvador*
4. *AIETI, España*
5. *Aluna Acompañamiento Psicosocial, AC, México*
6. *Amigos de la Unesco, Colombia*
7. *Amnistía Internacional, Global*
8. *Articulación Feminista Marcosur, América Latina y El Caribe*
9. *Artículo 19 Oficina para México, Centroamérica y el Caribe, Global*
10. *Asociación de Investigación y Especialización sobre temas Iberoamericanos, Global*
11. *Asociación Feminista La Cuerda, Guatemala*
12. *Asociación Mujeres Transformando, El Salvador*
13. *Asociación Nuevo Amanecer de El Salvador ANADES, El Salvador*
14. *Associação Mulheres pela Paz, Brasil*
15. *Association for Progressive Communications, Global*
16. *Asuntos del Sur, América Latina*
17. *AWID, Global*
18. *Calala Fondo de Mujeres, España*
19. *Campaña 28 de Septiembre por la Despenalización y Legalización del Aborto en América Latina y El Caribe, América Latina y El Caribe*
20. *Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto Legal, Seguro y Gratuito, Argentina*
21. *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir - Colombia, Colombia*
22. *CEAR-Euskadi, Euskal Herria / País Vasco*
23. *Centro por la Justicia y el Derecho Internacional - CEJIL, América Latina y el Caribe*
24. *Centro de Derechos Reproductivos, Global*
25. *Chikume Siwat, Feministas Universitarias, El Salvador*
26. *Ciberfeministas Guatemala, Guatemala*
27. *Ciberseguras, México, Brasil, Chile, Guatemala, Colombia*
28. *CNCD-11.11.11, Bélgica*

29. *Código Sur, Centroamérica*
30. *Colectiva Amoraes, El Salvador*
31. *Colectiva de Mujeres Periodistas, Comunicadoras y Trabajadoras de la Información (CMPCTI), El Salvador*
32. *Colectiva de mujeres Venus, El Salvador*
33. *Colectiva por el Derecho a Decidir, Costa Rica*
34. *COLECTIVO ANSUR, Colombia-América Latina*
35. *Colectivo Editorial Marcha Noticias, Argentina*
36. *Colectivo Josefa Lastiri, Honduras*
37. *COLECTIVO MUJERES DE ASFALTO - ECUADOR, Ecuador*
38. *Colectivo Rebeldía, Bolivia*
39. *COMCAVIS TRANS, El Salvador*
40. *Comité de América Latina y el Caribe para la Defensa de los Derechos de las Mujeres CLADEM, LAC*
41. *Confederación Sindical de Comisiones Obreras (CC.OO.), Internacional*
42. *COTIDIANO MUJER, Uruguay*
43. *Derechos Digitales, América Latina*
44. *El Churo Comunicación, Ecuador, América Latina*
45. *ELA - Equipo Latinoamericano de Justicia y Género, Argentina*
46. *Entrepueblos/Entrepobles/Entrepobos/Herriarte, Estado español*
47. *Equidad de Género, Ciudadanía, Trabajo y Familia, México*
48. *Equipo de Reflexión, Investigación y Comunicación, Honduras*
49. *Equipo Jurídico por los Derechos Humanos, Honduras*
50. *ESCRITURA CRÓNICA, Argentina*
51. *FIDH, en el marco del Observatorio para la Protección de los Defensores de Derechos Humanos, Global*
52. *Fondo de Acción Urgente para América Latina y el Caribe Hispanohablante, América Latina y el Caribe*
53. *Forum Syd, Global*
54. *Fundación Acceso, Centroamérica*
55. *Fundación Activismo Feminista Digital, Argentina/América Latina*
56. *Fundación Cristosal, Centroamérica*
57. *Fundación Datos Protegidos, Chile*
58. *Fundación Desafío, Ecuador*
59. *Fundación Huaira, Global*
60. *Hiperderecho, Perú*
61. *ICCPG, Guatemala*
62. *ICID (Iniciativas de Cooperación Internacional para el desarrollo), España*
63. *IFEX-ALC, Alianza Regional*
64. *IM - Swedish development partner, Global*
65. *Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Mujeres Defensoras de Derechos Humanos (IM-Defensoras), Mesoamérica*
66. *IPANDETEC Centroamérica, Panamá*
67. *IUDOP-UCA, El Salvador*
68. *JASS Mesoamérica, Mesoamérica*

69. *Jóvenes Voceras y Voceros en Derechos Sexuales y Derechos Reproductivos, El Salvador*
70. *Laboratorio de Periodismo y Opinión Pública, México*
71. *LaLibre.net Tecnologías Comunitarias, Ecuador*
72. *LATFEM, Argentina*
73. *Luchadoras MX, México*
74. *Mesa por el Derecho a Defender DDHH, El Salvador*
75. *Movimiento Centroamericano 2 de Marzo, Centroamérica y Sudamérica*
76. *Movimiento de Mujeres de Santo Tomás, El Salvador*
77. *Mulier, Venezuela*
78. *Ni Una Menos, Costa Rica*
79. *Ojos de Perro vs la Impunidad, A.C., México*
80. *OMCT - Organización Mundial Contra la Tortura, en el marco del Observatorio para la Protección de los Defensores de Derechos Humanos, Global*
81. *ONG Amaranta, Chile*
82. *Probusqueda, El Salvador*
83. *Protection International Mesoamérica, Mesoamérica*
84. *Proyecto de Derechos Económicos, Sociales y Culturales A.C - ProDESC México*
85. *R3D: Red en defensa de los derechos digitales, México / Latinoamérica*
86. *Red de Hondureñas Migradas, España*
87. *Red de Mujeres de Matagalpa, Nicaragua*
88. *Red de mujeres periodista de Morelos, México y Morelos*
89. *Red de Periodistas Feministas de América latina y el Caribe, América Latina y el Caribe*
90. *Red de Periodistas Feministas de Chile, Chile*
91. *Red europea de Comités Oscar Romero, Unión europea*
92. *Red Internacional de Periodistas con Visión de Género, Global*
93. *Red Internacional de Periodistas con Visión de Género de Argentina, Argentina*
94. *Red Salvadoreña de Defensoras de DDHH, El Salvador*
95. *Revista Feminista Muy Waso, Bolivia*
96. *Segudigital, México-América Latina*
97. *Servicio Social Pasionista, El Salvador*
98. *Servicios Humanitarios en Salud Sexual y Reproductiva, Latinoamérica y Caribe*
99. *Sursiendo, Comunicación y Cultura Digital, Mesoamérica*
100. *Taller de comunicación mujer, Ecuador*
101. *TEDIC, Paraguay*
102. *Universidade Federal da Bahia, Brasil*
103. *Usuarios Digitales - Ecuador, Ecuador*
104. *Women's Link Worldwide, Américas, África, Europa*