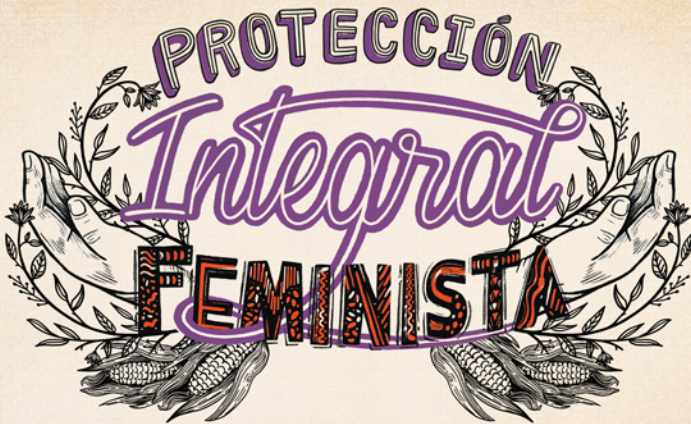


# The Pact to Care among Ourselves



2010-2021: IM-Defensoras' Approach to  
Feminist Holistic Protection in Mesoamerica



# *The Pact to Care among Ourselves.*

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Photo: Las Artistas MMXX



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# *Women defenders challenging a world in crisis*

Photo: Red Salvadoreña de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos

# THE PROBLEM IS THE SYSTEM

**I**n 2020, in the midst of a global syndemic<sup>1</sup> and at a time when the world needed our invaluable work, at least 4,650 attacks were perpetrated against women human rights defenders (WHRDs) in Mesoamerica. Nearly half of these attacks (37%) were collective attacks.<sup>2</sup> Between 2020 and 2021, 38 WHRDs were killed and another 28 suffered attempted killings. Among them were sister defenders, compañeras,<sup>3</sup> who stood alongside their communities defending territories and natural resources, trans defenders, journalists, feminists, sexual and reproductive rights defenders, defenders of peace and social justice, women who struggled against sexist violence and stood up for memory, truth, and justice.

The global emergency triggered by the COVID-19 syndemic – along with other crises including climate, hunger, migration, violence, and the deepening authoritarian and totalitarian

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<sup>1</sup> | IM-Defensoras uses the term “syndemic” to refer to the crisis that was deepened by COVID-19. This term describes how a health situation can have a bigger impact due to its interaction with social and environmental conditions that increase people’s vulnerability. Source: IM-Defensoras, Unraveling the Crisis, Weaving Futures. <https://im-defensoras.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/IMD-UnravelingTheCrisis.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> | Source: IM-Defensoras’ Regional Registry of Attacks.

<sup>3</sup> | Translator’s Note: We have left the word compañera in Spanish, as it does not have an equivalent in English that fully conveys the meaning. A compañera is a sister in struggle, a comrade, a fellow member of a group or movement. As women defenders, we are together in struggle; and so we refer to another women defender not as the “other” but as a compañera.

trends among the region’s governments – has revealed the unsustainable nature of this system that is taking us to the brink of collapse and keeps us in a constant state of emergency. In this context, the exploitation of care and reproductive work, and violence against women in all their diversity continue to serve as effective instruments for social control, furthering inequality and the destruction of the social fabric.

**IM-Defensoras affirms that the crisis was already here because the problem is the system.** The many realities and stories in our region, and the history of massacres and armed conflicts that are repeated time and again reflect the imposition of an economic, political, and cultural paradigm rooted in colonial heritage, dominated by the capitalist logic of accumulation through dispossession, and sustained by racism and patriarchy. This paradigm dispossesses, plunders, and destroys the lives of all Mother Earth’s beings in order to satisfy the voracious interests of national and transnational power-holders, for whom the lives of women, peoples, and the commons hold no value other than as merchandise and objects of exploitation.

Within this paradigm, States are instruments of a conglomerate of de facto powers (corporate powers, so-called “organized crime”, cacicazgos [chiefdoms], religious hierarchies, communications monopolies, etc.) that benefit from institutions, public resources, and repression. Even when political forces that emerge from social movements reach government, it has proven difficult to change the prevailing logic of power and privilege.



Photo: JASS

**In this context, the following trends help explain our current reality:**

**1 Communities at the limit of survival, overwhelmed by violence, and with little perspective for a life with dignity on the horizon.** On the world’s most unequal continent, the syndemic hastened the growth of poverty,<sup>4</sup> and in 2020 alone, “Hurricane Eta and Iota left a path of devastation in Central America, with more than 6.5 million persons directly affected.”<sup>5</sup> Tens of thousands of people continue fleeing violence, hunger,

4 | ECLAC. Social Panorama of Latin America 2020. <https://www.cepal.org/en/pressreleases/pandemic-prompts-rise-poverty-levels-unprecedented-recent-decades-and-sharply-affects>

5 | Pan-American Health Organization. Initial Donor Alert & Funding Request - Hurricanes Eta and Iota. <https://www.paho.org/en/documents/initial-donor-alert-funding-request-hurricanes-eta-and-iota>

and the effects of climate change; there has been an increase in necrocapitalism<sup>6</sup> (or gore capitalism, as coined by Sayak Valencia within her transfeminist perspective<sup>7</sup>) – extortions, murders, disappearances, extreme sexual violence, etc.; and we still have some of the highest femicide and murder rates in the world.

6 | Necrocapitalism speaks to the existence within the capitalist system – and particularly in the neoliberal model – of a criminal economy, organized crime phenomena, drug trafficking, and other forms of economic exploitation and wealth generation based on violence and death, which become fundamental drivers of economies. “Necrocapitalism [is] defined as contemporary forms of organizational accumulation that involve dispossession and the subjugation of life to the power of death.” [https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/6088/1/Necrocapitalism\\_OS2008FINAL2.pdf](https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/6088/1/Necrocapitalism_OS2008FINAL2.pdf)

7 | BBC. Qué es el “capitalismo gore” y por qué se le asocia en especial con América Latina. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-58522348>. See also, LSE Business Review. Gore Capitalism - Book Review. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2018/09/23/book-review-gore-capitalism-by-sayak-valencia/>

## 2 Extractive plunder and dispossession without limits.

Extractive policies and the pacts between private companies and governments to carry them out have remained unchanged, despite evidence of the resulting destruction and violence. Supported by State security forces and laws, territorial control exercised by mafias, caciques [chieftains], or national and international corporations have pushed this expression of capitalist dispossession forward. The digitalization of life and its extractivist logic has also contributed to hastening the destruction of Mother Earth.

**3 Co-opted States, pretenses of democracy.** World powers – with the United States at the forefront, transnational corporations, industry and financial lobbies, religious groups, drug cartels, and other mafia organizations control elections and the decisions of governments, parliaments, and justice systems. They squander public resources, make use of security forces to protect their own interests, and impose a conservative morality that legitimizes inequality and violence. Even in countries where elections have enabled the rise of progressive forces, the control by de facto powers continues to dominate in many territories.

## 4 The advance of authoritarianism and the extreme right.

The role and presence of the armed forces in every country continues to rise; the same goes for their impunity regarding the many human rights violations they commit. Totalitarian governments and narco-dictatorships have particularly affected Nicaragua and Honduras, but we see similar trends in El Salvador and Guatemala. Ultra-right groups, with ideological and financial support from the international extreme right, have gained ground in institutions, public spaces, and communications media, where they attempt to impose their racist, misogynist, and reactionary vision. Social protest and freedom of expression are at risk due to reactionary laws, the proliferation of repression, and the actions of paramilitary or parapolice groups.

**5 Hate speech and neo-truths.** Manipulation of communications media, corporate-controlled social media culture, and information wars saturate and misinform. They promote polarization and depoliticization while at the same time peddling violence and hopelessness online. These types of hate speech and neo-truths have a significant impact on public opinion and on political systems in our countries. Added to this, States use digital technology to exercise control and surveillance.



Photo: JASS



# THE PATRIARCHAL NATURE OF SOCIO-POLITICAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN DEFENDERS

**V**iolence against us is always patriarchal. It is a basic mechanism of the system to control and subordinate women, destroy the social fabric, and assert power. Militarism is a paradigmatic manifestation of patriarchal power; acts of repression evidently seek to restore the “natural” gender order, subjugating women and gender non-conforming people.

Violence against women human rights defenders seeks to set an example, sending a message to all women, a threat about what may happen to them if they subvert the established order. Even if socio-political violence materializes against one person, these acts always intend to harm the collective and weaken its power.

**When we look at the range of violence that women defenders face, we can understand why we have a higher level of risk and why the violence against us seeks to maintain women’s subordination and weaken social movements:**<sup>8</sup>

▮ **As women’s voices and struggles become stronger, the violence against us grows.** From 2,025 attacks registered in the period 2015-2016, we registered 3,076 attacks in the period 2017-2018, and 4,650 attacks in 2020. The intensity of violence is higher against women defenders who protect territories, those who demand justice and reparation, those who investigate human rights violations, and feminists who denounce violence and struggle for sexual and reproductive autonomy.

▮ **Violence against women defenders is systematic and recurrent; it seeks to set an example.** The main types of attacks are intimidation, psychological harassment, slander, accusations, and smear campaigns. In the majority of cases, attacks are recurrent, demonstrating a pattern of systematic attack.

▮ **This violence always has a gender component, although it is not always possible to document because either we have normalized it or it is difficult for us to acknowledge it.** However, when we did document gender components of attacks, we mostly found insults aimed at minimizing and challenging our leadership, or stigmatizing us (questioning the exercise of our sexuality or our maternity, among others). We also found sexist threats (of raping us or our daughters, of sexist violence, of discrediting us for being women, etc.), sexual violence, attacks and threats to our sons and daughters, and damage to our possessions or economic autonomy.

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<sup>8</sup> | Source: IM-Defensoras’ Regional Registry of Attacks.



Photo: IM-Defensoras

△ **This violence seeks to silence our voices by hurting our families and collectives.** Because of our role caring for our families and communities, the impact of violence against women defenders goes beyond our person or organization. Additionally, we do not always have the necessary support and backing from our close circles – including, at times, from our own organizations – which sometimes do not take the threats and attacks we face seriously.

△ **The main perpetrators of attacks against us are State agents and, in large part, police or other armed forces** – often in complicity with, or at the service of, private interests. In all countries, we see the instrumentalization of justice systems to repress and criminalize our struggles.



Photo: Red Salvadoreña de Defensoras

△ **Authorities have no qualms about attacking women defenders who have been granted precautionary protection measures.** In 2019, at least 497 women defenders were beneficiaries of measures at the time they were attacked.

△ **Although to a lesser extent, attacks also come from people in our close and trusted circles,** such as our organizations, families, and communities. Violence from these close circles can have a more inhibiting effect on our work and activism than attacks from other actors.

△ **Violence against women defenders intensified during the syndemic.** The COVID-19 health emergency provided the perfect excuse to further increase authoritarianism and strengthen militarization in many countries in the region, as well as to restrict the right to demonstrate and defend rights. This situation specifically and disproportionately affected women defenders.



Photo: OFRANEH



## Women defenders in times of syndemic<sup>9</sup>

△ **Our human rights defense work was not considered essential**, and many of us were forced to request official permits to be able to participate in human rights protection activities. Some of us were detained and harassed by police agents.

△ **Attacks against us increased.** Between March and November 2020, alerts issued by IM-Defensoras increased by 123%, and 66% of women defenders felt that our risks increased during the pandemic.

△ **At least four of every ten women defenders lacked sufficient resources** to cover basic needs – needs that increased during the COVID-19 health emergency.

△ **The large majority (86%) of women defenders had to take responsibility for household tasks and care work** that multiplied during confinement, further affecting our ability to organize and defend rights.

△ **In 53% of the cases, we did not have resources for cell phone credit**; and barely 16% of us had access to Wi-Fi connection at the beginning of the syndemic.

△ **However, we remained active, rebellious, defending our rights and territories.** Responding to our communities' basic needs, denouncing abuses committed with the syndemic as excuse, accompanying women defenders at risk, contributing to solidarity economy alternatives, supporting victims of sexist violence, defending our territories from extractive industries, promoting community health alternatives, among many other initiatives!

<sup>9</sup> |IM-Defensoras. Unraveling the Crisis, Weaving Futures Impacts of COVID-19 on the lives and struggles of Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders. 2020.

# IN THIS SCENARIO, OUR STRUGGLES CREATE HOPE AND ALTERNATIVES FOR A LIFE WITH DIGNITY

**F**or more than 500 years, our communities and peoples have resisted and created alternatives for dignity for all beings. Women struggle daily and in all spaces of life to overcome violence, rebel against the system, and be free individually and collectively.

The systemic alternatives to confront planetary destruction are rooted in the ancestral practices of Indigenous Peoples, in feminist self-defense and autonomous collective practices, in the solidarity economy, and in the care of nature's commons embodied by communities throughout the region.



Photo: Red Nacional de Defensoras de México

The memory of our ancestral resistances and struggles; the construction of collective power and communities of care; the transgression of capitalist, racist, and patriarchal mandates; and the capacity to dream and make other worlds possible are a legacy that is present even in the most acute moments of repression and control, eroding and opening cracks in the system.





*The river  
of our life:*  
How did we  
emerge and create  
IM-Defensoras?

Photo: Las Artistas MMXX

# WELLSPRING

“In 2009, we were in a state of alert; the coup in Honduras was a sign that more violence would be unleashed in the region. We felt that all forms of violence was rising, and we were overwhelmed by the number of attacks... It is in this context that we began to feel the need to work together to sustain our struggles.”<sup>10</sup>

**The Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras for its acronym in Spanish) formally emerged in 2010 as an outcome of the First Mesoamerican Gathering of Women Defenders.**

However, its story begins earlier, in the learnings and experiences that many of its founders collected through actions to halt the persecution of feminists in Nicaragua; the call from Feministas en Resistencia [Feminists in Resistance] in Honduras in response to the 2009 coup d'état; in the protests at embassies around the world demanding justice for Marisela Escobedo – murdered in Mexico for denouncing the femicide of her daughter and denouncing the slander and stigmatization of feminists fighting for the decriminalization of abortion in El Salvador.

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<sup>10</sup> | IM-Defensoras. Honrar nuestra historia. Reunión del Grupo Impulsor en noviembre del 2021 [Honoring Our History. Steering Group Meeting, November 2021]

The feelings of impotence and worry regarding the violence that touched the bodies and lives of our compañeras in countries where repression and dispossession was intensifying motivated the convening of the First Mesoamerican Gathering of Women Defenders in Oaxaca, Mexico in 2010. This concern about the increase in violence was not new, nor was it only ours. It was the sound of alarm that came from afar, from the survivors of multiple forms of violence, war, genocide, and armed conflict; from organizations that spent decades confronting repression and building peace; from ancestors who called on us to defend ourselves from violence and to keep hope alive.

Responding to this reality, in 2009, a group of organizations active in the region – Just Associates (JASS), the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), Colectiva Feminista para el Desarrollo Local [Feminist Collective for Local Development, hereafter Colectiva Feminista], the Unit to Defend Human Rights Defenders in Guatemala (UDEFEQUA for its acronym in Spanish), and Consorcio Oaxaca para el Diálogo Parlamentario y la Equidad [Oaxacan Consortium for Parliamentarian Dialogue and Equity, hereafter Consorcio Oaxaca] – decided to begin building our own space of trust among diverse activists (we did not yet feel ownership of the identity as women defenders). We had no higher expectations than to understand how our lives and struggles were increasingly threatened in countries labeled “democratic”. In preparation for this gathering, we conducted a mapping of violence against women who defend rights in Mesoamerica. This initial exercise, although challenged by the lack of available information, revealed the gravity of the situation.

**And thus, as a wellspring, our history began to flow...**

# THE RIVER'S SOURCE

**T**he First Mesoamerican Gathering of Women Defenders took place in April 2010 in Oaxaca, Mexico, bringing together more than 50 compañeras from feminist, indigenous, labor, and peasant movements; from the gender-sex diversity; from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, and Colombia. The participants were diverse women; all were activists, each one with stories of resistance and rebelliousness, but also with experiences of multiple forms of violence. At the gathering, we shared our own rivers of life. As feminists, we knew that we could not analyze repression and violence against our organizations and movements without placing our body and our own story at the center.

“I think it was a good decision to hear the testimonies of such diverse compañeras about how they were experiencing violence. It made people – beyond ideological and political differences – understand that the context was very difficult and that we had in each other a possibility for response.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> | IM-Defensoras. Honrar nuestra historia. Reunión del Grupo Impulsor en noviembre del 2021



Photo: IM-Defensoras

Sharing our life stories allowed us to see that women activists live with forms of violence that are not always recognized in their gravity and impact. But we were also able to confirm that we hold multiple forms of resistance, of rebelliousness, of personal and collective transformation to destroy oppressive powers and create new realities for life. We had all lived through some form of violence, and we had all confronted it and survived.

At this gathering, we began to speak of “women defenders”, to learn about a term that for many of us was unknown, that left us with questions – above all because we felt it blurred our other political identities, or because we saw it as an “imposition” from international agencies. The term, however, also offered us a framework of internationally recognized rights that affirms the legitimacy of our struggles and the obligation of States and international bodies to protect us, where could also find a way to recognize our commonalities beyond the differences among our movements.



Photo: Las Artistas MMXX

After the exchange in Oaxaca, we decided to share the mapping and the reflections from the gathering in each of our countries. The response was very similar: Violence was deteriorating our lives and movements, we recognized our diversity but we agreed on the need to deepen our connection in order to protect each other, because we could not do it alone.

At the beginning of 2011, the organizations that convened the first gathering established ourselves as a Steering Group and began the process of developing the Initiative. We understood it as a Mesoamerican feminist political alliance, made up of women defenders from various social movements, that emerges from the needs and experiences in each country and focuses on protection for and among women defenders.

At the beginning, IM-Defensoras did not have its own operational structures. We developed the Initiative with the resources, knowledge, and political alliances built over the years by its founders – JASS-Mesoamerica, Colectiva Feminista, AWID, Consorcio Oaxaca, UDEFEGUA, and Central American Women's Fund (FCAM for its acronym in Spanish), and the organizations and compañeras who came together in each country. Some of them invested much of their personal and organizational capacity to make this effort possible.

Organizations like JASS (in the first years) and Colectiva Feminista (later on) took on the role of facilitating the coordination space. FCAM took care of administrating a large part of the resources, while AWID coordinated the registry of attacks. Consorcio Oaxaca advanced the work on self-care. Colectiva Feminista, UDEFEGUA, JASS, and Consorcio Oaxaca took on the work of promoting and building the national networks.

Each founding organization brought different experiences and capacities; those who knew about protection were learning about the feminist perspective, those who worked on strengthening and defending women's rights were learning about protection. We saw what each of us could contribute and so we designed IM-Defensoras' initial strategies.



## THE RIVER'S COURSE

**I**t may be difficult to believe now, but more than ten years ago, many women who defended human rights did not recognize ourselves as defenders, nor were we recognized as such by others. We spoke very little about this – our contributions and the forms of violence that we women human rights defenders faced. Very few organizations focused on protection for human rights defenders, and none promoted protection by and for women, much less from a feminist perspective. We were overwhelmed, and it was clear that we could not confront reality alone. Furthermore, existing networks and organizations did not take on protection as part of their political practice.

Regardless, there was historical wisdom in the region – and globally – about how to confront violence and repression; we were able to learn from many compañeras and organizations, nationally and internationally.

From the beginning, we knew that we needed to strengthen our collective capacity for protection from violence. We decided that the heart of our alliance – the main course of our river – would be networks woven from the realities and wisdoms that women defenders were articulating in their local communities, their territories, in the countries of the region. Promoting the creation of national networks and articulations of women defenders was our top priority. In each country, and each one at their pace and with their own approach, the networks began to develop their own structures and dynamics, bringing together organizations and women defenders from very diverse social movements.

After two national gatherings in Mexico, an agreement was made in 2011 to create the National Network of WHRDs in Mexico. In its initial years, the network was coordinated by Red Mesa de Mujeres de Ciudad Juárez [Ciudad Juárez Women's Roundtable], JASS, Consorcio Oaxaca, Alternativas Pacificas [Peaceful Alternatives], Red Sonorense [Sonora Network], and individual women defenders. It started as an urgent action and communication network, but it quickly began accompanying women defenders at risk.

The National Network of WHRDs in Honduras was also formed in 2011, coordinated by Centro de Derechos de Mujeres [Women's Rights Center], JASS, Centro de Estudios de la Mujer - Honduras [Women's Studies Center], and independent feminists whose support was essential in its development. Although at the beginning, some organizations in the country did not



Photo: JASS



Photo: IM-Defensoras

understand the need for a space of joint coordination among women defenders, the work of the network members accompanying women defenders at risk led to the consolidation of a legitimate space of their own.

Later, in 2012, the National Network of WHRDs in El Salvador and the National Network of WHRDs in Guatemala were created with the leadership of Colectiva Feminista and UDEFEGUA, respectively. In Nicaragua, compañeras from Las Petateras participated in IM-Defensoras' regional space starting in 2010, until a 2014 decision led to the creation of the Nicaraguan Initiative of WHRDs involving feminists from different organizations.

The networks began with small groups of different women defenders and organizations, and then grew to become spaces that gather hundreds of women defenders and convergence

processes in the territories, weaving a fabric that is increasingly closer to the realities, wisdoms, and resources of women defenders and their collectives. These spaces serve not only to respond collectively to violence, but also to recognize and consolidate our identity as women defenders and the contribution of women to all social movements.

While advancing in the network-building processes in each country, we also set out to build regional capacity to respond. Once the national spaces were more consolidated, we began building a regional team in 2015 seeking to strengthen and amplify the work in each territory through several strategies. On this path, the role of the founding organizations began to change from holding organizational processes and strategies in the initial years to contributing to the consolidation of the strategies within what we call Feminist Holistic Protection.

Building the river's main course, the structure that holds us together, has not been easy. It has entailed an effort that often overwhelmed and exhausted us. Certain differences among us led to the exit of organizations and compañeras in Guatemala, and a rupture between organizations and compañeras who founded the networks in Honduras and Nicaragua. In addition, we had to make inroads in spaces where talking about Feminist Holistic Protection was not always recognized, or where feminist organizations were not valued for their ability to undertake protection work. We have had to convince numerous organizations, human rights mechanisms, and donors that our voice and our strategy is valid and necessary.

Over the last ten-plus years, we have been able to sustain this process because we have had the flexibility to change our ways of organizing ourselves in response to changing contexts. Another fundamental element has been the political trust that we built by caring among ourselves, including in addressing our differences and accepting our ruptures. Also important were the donors who trusted our proposal, even when it was all still a rough sketch, as well as many allied organizations and individuals who – from their communities, mechanisms, and institutions – were always so generous with their support.

“...let's say that this initial pact of caring among ourselves has remained. It's not that we do not have our differences, to the contrary, and sometimes contradictions, but agreeing how we will resolve these, how we will find a way that even when we are in disagreement we will care for one another, I think that has been important...”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> | IM-Defensoras. Honrar nuestra historia. Reunión del Grupo Impulsor en noviembre del 2021

The year 2018 was especially important in our history. We took a big step forward in building our own organizational capacity, both regionally and in each of the countries; strengthening teams and strategies; and significantly increasing the resources to conduct our work, ensuring that these resources would be flexible and allow us to face the challenges of the context. It was not without obstacles and losses that we renewed the pact that holds us together. This proved crucial in facing situations as complex as the totalitarian regression in Nicaragua, the COVID-19 syndemic and the storms of 2020, the narco-dictatorship that emerged from the coup in Honduras, the persistence of violence in Mexico, and the resurgence of authoritarianism in El Salvador, among other challenges that tested our entire structure.



Photo: IM-Defensoras

# WATERSHEDS

**W**ith the objective of maintaining the main course alive – the alliances, pacts, and fabric that we have built in each country and at the regional level to care for each other and ourselves as women defenders – we built through practice the main strategies that make Feminist Holistic Protection possible.

The national and regional gatherings of women defenders and the capacity-building spaces have been particularly important in our construction process. The Second Mesoamerican Gathering of Women Defenders took place in Suchitoto in 2013, bringing together more than two hundred compañeras from around the region. The goal of the gathering was to develop an in-depth understanding of the characteristics and connections regarding the repressive and misogynist policies that we were experiencing as women defenders, as well as the range of strategies we had to confront them. The gathering gave us a sense of collective body and strengthened solidarity between us and with our peoples. The 2011 Regional Workshop on Feminist Holistic Protection, organized in Nicaragua, produced the same outcome. This was the first effort to bring a feminist perspective to protection processes; we understood the need to develop an approach to protection by and for women defenders, identified the challenges to make this possible with the tools that existed at the time, and affirmed the importance of developing our own strategies.

National and territorial gatherings in each country have been crucial for consolidating alliances and protection strategies. Over the last three years, the national networks have made significant efforts to bring their work to the territorial level, weaving networks in various communities, departments, or states.

“The Embrace International Feminist Solidarity Mission” organized in Honduras in 2019 was especially significant. The Embrace brought together 52 women defenders from 13 countries, from 28 organizations involved in networks, social movements, LGBTI communities, and black and indigenous organizations. We traveled to different territories in Honduras<sup>13</sup> to share the diverse struggles that women human rights defenders lead, and to embrace our peasant and indigenous compañeras from the Garifuna, Tolupan, Misquito, Maya Chorti, and Lenca Peoples, as well as leaders from rural and urban communities.<sup>14</sup>

Sustaining all of these efforts has been possible thanks to the work of dozens of compañeras, and the constant collective push to mobilize resources for the political visions and needs that did not enjoy support when we started. Example of this were the agreements with various women’s funds that supported us from the very beginning in convening the first gathering and that helped us secure a first donation from the Dutch Lottery in 2011, thus enabling us to advance in the organizational construction and development of feminist holistic protection strategies. Other examples were the Donors’ Gathering that took place in Mexico City in 2014, the numerous meetings with donors to explain who we were and what we needed, as well as the entire resource mobilization strategy set in 2018 that significantly increased the so needed flexible funds.

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<sup>13</sup> | Santa Barbara, Copan, La Esperanza, El Progreso, Tela, and Tocoa.

<sup>14</sup> | The Embrace International Mission. <https://im-defensoras.org/2019/01/outset-of-international-feminist-solidarity-mission-with-women-human-rights-defenders-in-honduras-the-embrace/>

“... I remember that we were very nervous, we practiced 20 times what we would say, when, it was bold on our part, because it’s unusual for an entity to call donors and sit them down, I don’t remember how many came, maybe 20, I don’t know, many important donors... I think this was a critical moment, because many processes flowed from there.”

» *Regarding the 2014 Donors’ Gathering*<sup>15</sup>

“...Berta was there, it was an important moment because we had been accompanying her for some time... 2013 was a difficult year for Berta, a lot of persecution, many smear campaigns, and at the gathering, she shared that the embodied support from the Network and the Initiative was so important to her.”

» *Regarding the 2014 donors’ gathering*<sup>16</sup>

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We also faced challenges in the process of developing strategies. We realized that feminist protection entailed much more than inserting gender indicators or specific measures for women defenders. It involved re-thinking and questioning our activism and our movements’ political action, as well as creating conditions of trust and safety to recognize and heal the multiple forms of violence that hurt and shamed us – such as those we experienced in our families and movements – or those we had totally normalized – such as burnout and sacrifice. It required new methodologies – like how we started from scratch regarding the registry – and new perspectives – like self-care and healing.

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<sup>15</sup> | IM-Defensoras. Honrar nuestra historia. Reunión del Grupo Impulsor en noviembre del 2021

<sup>16</sup> | IM-Defensoras. Honrar nuestra historia. Reunión del Grupo Impulsor en noviembre del 2021



Photo: IM-Defensoras

Accompaniment among women defenders is a very powerful process but it is also exhausting and can create relations of power or dependence. Additionally, we lost dear compañeras along the way, because they were killed or they died from illnesses that reflected the exhaustion of an entire life of struggle. Each one of these stories hurt and affected us greatly, and they made us re-think our strategies and practices.

We made the road by walking, learning from our mistakes and trusting our wisdoms. In 2014, we received the prestigious Letelier-Moffitt Award from the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, DC. The Award “honors our fallen colleagues by celebrating new champions of the human rights movement in the United States and the Americas”, and we received it in recognition of our work as a regional articulation.

# OUR RIVER IN A GLOBAL SYNDEMIC

**A**s we stated in “**The Crisis Was Already Here**”, the syndemic deepened structural inequality, racism, and misogyny – which we were already experiencing in the region – and forced us, in a context of growing authoritarianism, to make huge efforts to continue our work as women defenders. In the midst of fear and uncertainty, we were affected by this illness and experienced the loss of many family members and sisters in struggle.

However, everything we built in the last 10+ years has been essential in order to challenge this new context marked by COVID-19. Our work sought to make sure women defenders could face this crisis united and in safety, activating Feminist Holistic Protection strategies and strengthening our community of care:

▢ **We conducted an assessment** of the needs that women defenders faced with a group of approximately 500 compañeras.

▢ **We responded to the basic needs** of hundreds of women defenders for health, subsistence, and communications. We activated the Contingency Fund to support women defenders affected both by the syndemic and by the impacts of the hurricanes that battered Central America in 2020. We organized solidarity pantries, and we worked with communities promoting community health and alternative economy actions, etc.

▢ **We denounced the violence** committed with the syndemic as an excuse. In 2020, the alerts issued by IM-Defensoras multiplied and we maintained permanent contact with communications media and human rights mechanisms.

▢ **We healed the impact on our bodies and our lives** through communications materials; spaces for exchange and mutual support; and accompaniment in processes of self-care, healing, and grieving.

▢ **We established contact** with all the compañeras in the networks and maintained security accompaniment and safe relocations despite the numerous restrictions.

However, this has not been easy. Despite the sturdiness of our alliance, pacts, and fabric, we reached the limits of our strength many times, operating and responding to emergencies 24/7. The constant emergencies and work overload in all aspects of our lives did not allow us to stop to recharge energy, re-think our strategies and the challenges we face in the current context, renew the political pact, and strengthen the participation of everyone who is part of IM-Defensoras.

**This reality led to an internal reflection about how to strengthen care within all the fabrics that hold IM-Defensoras together.** We called this reflection “El Camino de la Tortuga” [“The Path of the Turtle”].



## The Path of the Turtle

*In Mayab lives a small turtle that can move over land and in the water. It can find its way through both rocks and wet mud... And when it encounters an obstacle, it digs a hole, crosses it, and continues on its way. They say its eyes are covered in tears, and that it cries for people, and that its tears create rain that benefits humans.*

When turtles are born, as soon as they stick their heads out on the beach, they begin their journey to the sea with great energy and speed. They are new in life, inexperienced but with the wisdom of their species in each one of them, tiny but with an energy and determination that can face all obstacles.

That is how IM-Defensoras began! New, small, with the wisdom of each of us and our struggles and histories, inexperienced, working on the protection of women defenders together, and with a strength and determination that made us quickly inhabit our shared territory and face all types of obstacles.

Once in the wide sea, turtles will have great adventures and face new predators. They will slow down because of their size, their age, the marks left by wounds suffered over the years. They will become wiser and they will know that going slower is important for a long and fulfilling life.

At IM-Defensoras, we are like that, too: larger, wiser, and slower; because our organism is complex, because caring for our fabric requires more time, and we have wounds that need recognition and time to heal.



Photo: Las Artistas MMXX



At the end of 2020, we became more aware of our fatigue, of the impact of contexts exacerbated by the syndemic, of the complexity of our fabric, and of the fact that our teams are growing increasingly larger and more complex, facing new risks in the work we do to accompany women defenders. So, in 2021, we set to work looking inward and began to identify the most pressing care needs, as well as the structural changes we needed to make in our articulation.

**We decided to increase the pace to make Feminist Holistic Protection also real in our own work teams. To this end, we set the following goals:**

▮ **Build internal care into our operational and strategic planning processes.** Identify short-term measures to begin creating the conditions for more profound changes, giving us the confidence that caring for ourselves is possible and necessary. For this, we designed a process of monitoring and learning exchanges between every team, network, and strategy.

▮ **Fine-tune and strengthen short-term measures** such as work-hour limits, addressing emergencies, periods of rest and disconnection, periods of temporary leave, healing stays, improving working conditions, access to the Contingency Fund,<sup>17</sup> improving our internal communications, and advancing autonomy in our digital infrastructure.

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<sup>17</sup> | The Contingency Fund is a mechanism at IM-Defensoras to address emergencies and situations not foreseen in the annual budget of the national networks and regional strategies. It allocates short-term resources to address a broad range of needs that may emerge.



Photo: Las Artistas MMXX

▮ **Open spaces for collective care and reflection** about issues that affect us as individuals and collectively: motherhood, guilt, grief, the impact of accompaniment processes, among other.

▮ **Use our experience to build** a policy of care within IM-Defensoras as part of our strategic planning and evaluation process.







# *What is Feminist Holistic Protection?*

Photo: Andrea Carrillo, "La Cuerda".



Photo: Las Artistas MMXX

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**FEMINIST HOLISTIC PROTECTION GIVES US A SENSE OF SAFETY AGAINST THE CONTEXT OF VULNERABILITY IN WHICH WE LIVE. WE KNOW WE ARE NOT ALONE, NOT LOCALLY, NOT NATIONALLY AND INTERNATIONALLY. THIS STRENGTH UNITES US, IT SUSTAINS AND CONTAINS US, IT FLOWS THROUGH OUR BODIES, IT MAKES US SEE OURSELVES AS VALUABLE SUBJECTS WITH THE RIGHT TO LIVE A LIFE FREE FROM VIOLENCE AND TO DEFEND RIGHTS.**

*– Woman defender from El Salvador.*

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**W**e are asked many times, what is this notion of **Feminist Holistic Protection**? We have been asking ourselves that question for over 10 years and we are still building the answer!

The first thing to say is that Feminist Holistic Protection, or FHP, is a political pact that we made as women human rights defenders and organizations from different Mesoamerican countries when we gathered in Oaxaca in 2010. We did not want our sisters in struggle to continue being killed; we did not want any more activists being criminalized. We were tired of suffering attacks from bad governments, and of the discrimination we experienced inside our own families, organizations, and communities. We questioned the sacrificial models of activism, and we wanted to search together for ways of placing care at the center of our political action.

**Within this reality, Feminist Holistic Protection emerged from our daily experience of caring for each other and ourselves as women defenders. It is a political practice and vision held up by four pillars:**



Artwork: Consuelo Mora B

### ***Placing care at the center***

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The first pillar is placing care at the center of our activism. *Care is a right, a vital need, and a basic principle of the world we want to build.* We know that no one survives without the daily protection of those who feed us, hold us, heal us; of that which gives us sustenance, such as water, crops, forests. Collective care is what allows our struggles to continue and our lives to not be silenced by violence.

## Feminist collective ethics of care

△ **Care is a right and a vital need.** Care is an act of justice that reconnects us with the web of life, good living, and individual and collective wellbeing. It transforms our movements by questioning the sacrificial logic, seeing care as a basic political strategy to confront violence and transform the system.

△ **We place care for life at the center** of our political action to protect our integrity and ensure the continuity of our struggles.

△ **Spirituality and struggle are one and the same;** for women defenders, ancestral wisdom and protection are the heart of our resistances and the defense we undertake. Invoking the ancestors gives us certainty in the paths we choose to travel, and provides a protective force that comes from historical struggles against dispossession, plundering, and violence.

△ **Care is a transgressive act** that challenges the capitalist, racist, patriarchal, and misogynist models and that builds a political practice of the world we want to live in.

△ **From our feminist vision, the starting point for care is that the personal is political,** and that women deserve joy and pleasure in our lives. We know how to care for life, we have done so historically, and we now practice this knowledge for our own benefit and that of other women.

Photo: Las Artivistas MMXX



Photo: Red Nacional de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos en Honduras

## Defiant

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The second pillar is the recognition that women defenders are diverse and transgressive. *We are political subjects present in all social movements*, and we have our own needs and our own ways of understanding protection.

The identity of women defenders has been useful to recognize women's contributions to human rights defense in their communities and organizations; to protect each other; to create a space for dialogue; and to leverage an international protection framework that mandates State and non-State actors to respect us.

Inspired by the feminist principle that “if they touch one, they touch us all”, we have built bonds of sisterhood among women.

## Intersectional feminist perspective on violence and risk

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The third pillar is context analysis. *We challenge the capitalist, racist, and patriarchal system that harms our bodies and territories*, and we analyze risk through this lens. The feminist perspective is a key tool to expose the reality of discrimination, violence, and repression that we face as women defenders, organizations, movements, and struggles; and to understand that all of these sociopolitical forms of violence are intrinsically patriarchal.

We use a broad understanding of risk to recognize the specific forms of violence that affect us personally, and affect our families, organizations, and communities; we do so taking into account all the forms of oppression that cut through our lives, as well as the territorial context in which we act.

An intersectional feminist perspective acknowledges that, since society teaches us to normalize violence, gender discrimination overlapped with various structures of oppression restricts the recognition of risk; it limits our power for making decisions regarding our own safety; and it reduces the possibility of leaning on support networks.

## Woven together

The fourth pillar can be summarized with the statement, “Networks save lives!” *We see protection not as an individual matter, but as a collective process and capacity that enables us to take care of ourselves together*, in community, in our territories, and based on our own wisdoms. This recognizes and values women defenders’ experiences, analysis, and proposals for their own protection.

We learned that the most effective form of protection is the one that is nearest, the one that weaves a protective fabric rooted in community and territory. For this reason, the reality and strategies developed by women defenders in our territories are the building blocks for alliances and regional and international responses to leverage resources, solidarity, and embodied support.

Collective protection is rooted in territory and spreads as a community fabric to support, recognizing and combating violence against women defenders and every person, being, and element that is part of this territory.

“For women and the Indigenous Peoples of Abya Yala, territory is much more than a physical space, a dot on a map, or a political administrative division. It relates to the place that a collective takes up as its own, because that is where they find sustenance and recognize their history, because that is where they bury ancestors and honor their memory... When the social fabric is strong, with solidarity, well organized, it becomes more difficult for the perpetrators of violence to dispel, divide, and stop human rights work.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> | Lolita Chávez, Marusia López. Women human rights defenders lead in the collective protection to defend life and territory. JASS & Fund for Global Human Rights

## We put these four pillars of Feminist Holistic Protection into practice through seven strategies:



Artwork: Consuelo Mora B

## Networks of women defenders

**Networks of women defenders are at the heart of IM-Defensoras.** We are more than 2,000 women defenders and 300 organizations in Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, connected through national and territorial networks, and coordinated in a regional space where compañeras from very diverse social movements have converged.

Currently, IM-Defensoras brings together the National Network of WHRDs in Mexico, the National Network of WHRDs in Honduras, the National Network of WHRDs in El Salvador, the Nicaraguan Initiative of WHRDs, Consorcio Oaxaca, FCAM, JASS, and Colectiva Feminista.

We are 156 women defenders in El Salvador, 309 in Mexico, 600 in Honduras, and 1,200 in Nicaragua. Most of us are organized and have spent between 6 and 20+ years working for a more just world, creating alternatives for life, dreaming and celebrating our struggles. We are Binni Záa, Chorotega, Creole, Garifuna, Ixil, Lenca, Maya, Maya Achi, Maya Chorti, Maya Kekchí, Maya K'iche, Maya K'iche Kaqchikel, Maya Mam, Maya poqomam, Maya tzutujil, Maya-Kaqchikel, Mazahua, Mephaa, Misquita, Na savi, Náhuatl, Pech, Pipil, Pocomam, Poqomchi', P'urhépecha, Xinca... We are lesbian, heterosexual, non-binary, trans...

“Our network is very diverse, there are compañeras from the education sector, from sexual and reproductive rights, defenders of land and territory, etc., there are also urban defenders, indigenous defenders, young and old defenders, trans defenders, defenders who move more in NGO or institutional spaces and defenders who conduct more work in the social movement. So, for us this is a great strength. We have a network that manages to unite us, that creates spaces of encounter among such a diversity of women defenders.”

— *Woman defender from Mexico.*



Photo: IM-Defensoras

“Women defenders have felt a call to accompany struggles that are not necessarily their own. There is a call among them to accompany struggles like the law for transitional justice, or to accompany the struggle for the human right to water. This has been possible because the network is a space where I don’t only go to meet others who have similar experiences to my own, but where I also meet allies who will join me in the struggles I participate in.”

— *Woman defender from El Salvador.*

“The decision was made to set up a small team for security and protection with a feminist perspective, taking into account this holistic approach and recognizing that we were working in a context of political violence.”

— *Woman defender from Nicaragua.*

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The networks of women defenders facilitate *safe spaces among women*; create trust in order to express fear, guilt, needs, and uncertainties without worrying about being challenged or accused, and *they enable us to recognize and strengthen our wisdoms and power for protection*. This notion of protection through networks allows for faster responses to emergencies and pools members' resources and knowledge, thereby achieving more support.

“Opening spaces for compañeras to release so many things, this is what has made the network also a space of trust that has even led many women to denounce violence within their organizations, this does not happen just anywhere.”

— *Woman defender from Honduras.*

“Personally, I feel cared for, I feel the embodied support, being part of this team fills me with strength. When I have to go to court or hearings, I won't deny that I am very afraid, but feeling the closeness with everyone, their messages, the special water with drops, the perfumed alcohol, each detail of you is so pleasant that it helps in surroundings with so much violence and abuse. You have helped me, but I also feel prepared to help other colleagues or women defenders who are accused.”

— *Woman defender from Nicaragua.*

Networks are spaces of **collective protection**, the only way we can have the necessary power and capacity to defend ourselves from violence. They work towards protection that can strengthen and transform social movements in favor of solidarity, dialogue, mutual care, and the recognition of women and their contributions.

“The network is a political space, a space for debate; it belongs to us, to all the diverse women in our territories. I think this has marked the work in Honduras, the network works with women in territories, women who are in resistance.”

— *Woman defender from Honduras.*

“I think we have been creating the path. We are being recognized as defenders. In earlier years, we felt very alone in these struggles for rights, but I think now there is a strong organizational fabric that supports us.”

— *Woman defender from El Salvador.*

At the national level, each network organizes itself and converges around the specific needs and characteristics of the context. However, they have all created convergence space that is open to the participation of women defenders from different territories and social movements. They all have jointly coordinated spaces for strategic decision-making and operational teams made up of women defenders who organize themselves to respond to emergencies, accompany women defenders at risk, promote actions and self-care processes, and register attacks. Every country has a national convergence space and local processes to facilitate protection among women defenders who are located in the same territorial space.



## Accompanying women defenders at risk and their collectives

We conduct **accompaniment in situations of risk and violence**. Just in 2021, we undertook 2,808 accompaniment actions with women defenders at risk and facilitated 596 support actions to contribute to women defenders' lives with dignity.

“The network has saved the lives of many women defenders in Mexico. Without intervention in certain cases, or if the network did not exist, many compañeras who today continue their defense work surely would not be alive.”  
— *Woman defender from Mexico.*

“At the National Network of WHRDs, one person's pain is everyone's pain, one person's problem is everyone's problem. If it wasn't for this Network, I would not be alive. Thanks to the National Network in Honduras, I am still alive and my children still have me.”  
— *Woman defender from Honduras.*

“I am satisfied with the accompaniment that we have had, both as an organization and personally; we have always received an immediate response and they have paid attention when incidents with family members take place... The Feminist Holistic Protection workshop was very useful because we tried to work on it with our linkages; it helped us create our own internal monitoring.”  
— *Woman defender from Nicaragua.*

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Photo: Equipo de Comunicación de Consorcio Oaxaca

### **We accompany ourselves among women defenders, as equals.**

This accompaniment is characterized for its company, caring, daily embodied support, allowing us to overcome isolation and loneliness, and resist in difficult times, feeling that we are part of a community of care with other women defenders.

“...the compañeras who we accompany, we know them, we know where they come from, we know their home, their territory, who they are, what they do, they have a bond with us and if they don't then we build it. That is, we are not just an organization that has a vest and the vest gives them the power to care; instead, we are nearby, we know what is happening in their territories and that makes a difference in the type of accompaniment.”  
— *Woman defender from Honduras.*

“When we were suffering these impacts, we asked for help and the support came from the Network. We looked at these women who seem like they belong to our own families, because they help us struggle for these goals.”

— *Woman defender from Honduras.*

“The events of 18 April place us in a perspective that was unforeseen... from 18 April until 3 August, we documented and verified killings, we went to the territories, visited families, sheltered women defenders... we created a level of rapid response based on existing experience.”

— *Woman defender from Nicaragua.*

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**We seek to create the conditions to analyze risk and build a roadmap for protection.** Creating conditions for trust, rest and respite, to identify and make necessary decisions at a time of risk, is crucial. This is why we emphasize that the women defenders and the organizations we accompany must be able to access safe spaces for respite.

**We design protection routes with the leadership of women defenders at risk:** to recover and value their wisdoms; to strengthen their agency and autonomy; to reduce risk; and to strengthen their power, their projects, and their collective spaces. We seek to ensure that the protection process does not close off political action and that we are able to continue our work as defenders.

**We view accompaniment in a holistic manner, encompassing all the dimensions of care and security** – both for women defenders and for their families, organizations, and communities; organically bridging security strategies with those of self-care and healing, understanding that this is the only way to respond to our compañeras’ protection needs.

We offer women defenders a wide range of protection tools specifically tailored to each case: risk analysis; protection plans; physical, psychosocial and digital protection measures; urgent alerts and communications; advocacy with authorities and human rights mechanisms; safe relocations; attention to basic needs; presence in the territories to show our support and solidarity, among many other actions. Only a few networks – Nicaragua and El Salvador – offer direct legal assistance, the other countries count on alliances to channel cases as needed.

We accompany safe temporary relocation processes within or outside the country and, in some cases, we support the process of requesting refuge or asylum as well as re-defining the political and life project of the women defenders who will have to restart their lives in new territories. In this context, we have two houses where we receive women defenders – with or without their families – when they need a place with medium-level security.

We accompany the process of implementing the protection plan. We know how difficult it is to implement a protection plan – due to the context, the challenges in changing dynamics and practices, the lack of support and conditions, etc. That is why **we walk alongside our sister defenders in this process**, we offer resources and other conditions to make the plan possible, we are with them in difficult times – both personal and in their defense work, and we create complicity that allow us to address different obstacles.



## Embodied support

Over the years, we have understood and strengthened our approach to protection that involves not only accompanying each other when facing risks, burnout, or developing protection measures. Our experiences in protection have been based on being present and acknowledging the legitimacy of women defenders' struggles when they confront actors seeking to silence their voices and those of their organizations and communities.

We name this action “acuerpar” – to embrace with embodied support<sup>19</sup>. It entails physically placing our bodies, being present in the territories, in protests, at moments that are significant to women defenders, so that they feel our embrace full of solidarity, our recognition of their struggles, and our commitment to raise our voices if any attack takes place. It means demonstrating that we are not alone, which in itself can contribute to facing fear and finding ways of continuing our struggles in violent contexts. Some examples of this type of action include:

▲ **Viva Berta Feminist Camp.** Over several months, the National Network of WHRDs in Honduras held space in front of the trial against one of the actors in the murder of Berta Caceres. Numerous organizations and communities converged at the camp; they shared food and organized artistic expressions, they honored Berta's memory and her continuing relevance for the struggles in Honduras, and they denounced the injustices and rights violations perpetrated by

<sup>19</sup> | *Translator's Note:* The word *acuerpamiento* in Spanish does not have an equivalent in English that fully conveys its meaning in the context of embodied support and accompaniment among women defenders in Mesoamerica. *Acuerpar* brings forth the image of using our bodies to support someone, an up-close accompaniment that comes with an embrace that provides physical and emotional protection. In Feminist Holistic Protection, women defenders embody their support for each other in a collective manner to embrace and surround each other (and especially those at risk) with love, affection, and protection.



Photo: Red Nacional de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos en Honduras





the government. It was a space of protest, care, creativity, and – above all – popular grassroots feminist justice.

△ **Solidarity with women workers from the maquiladora Florenzi.** The National Network of WHRDs in El Salvador accompanied and supported the hunger strike and other protest actions organized by the women workers of this company, who were fired in the middle of the lock-down and were owed back-pay. The women defenders from the national network accompanied the striking workers on a daily basis, organizing solidarity actions and addressing basic needs, making the workers feel their embrace.

△ **The National Network of WHRDs in Mexico** responded to the calls for solidarity issued from other countries in the region. Especially in Honduras with the coup d'état or the murder of Berta and Nicaragua with the repression of feminists, the Mexican network mobilized at the embassies and put pressure on Mexican authorities to take a critical position regarding the rights violations taking place in these countries.



Photo: IM-Defensoras



Photo: Las Artistas MMXX

## | Self-care, Collective Care, and Healing

Together, we have developed reflections and processes for self-care, collective care, and healing that have contributed to changing how we understand protection itself; challenging the sacrificial models of activism and collectively looking for ways of placing care at the center of our political actions. From the beginning of IM-Defensoras, we realized that we could not remain silent about the impacts, harms, and traumas that we are sometimes late at identifying and that many other times shame us. From then until now, it remains a challenge within our movements to listen to each other, acknowledge our emotions, and care for each other and ourselves in order to recharge our energy and rescue life.

## \_ Self-care

We have created space to give ourselves permission, and above all the right, to speak about these impacts, but also to recognize our strength, courage, and wisdom to confront violence and continue fighting alongside our communities and renewing hope. We have validated and supported the need of many of our compañeras to rest and take care of their health, through resources and time to listen to our bodies and recharge energies.

“Personally, it has helped me to look at the rhythm of my life, to have a bit more care for myself, to love myself a bit more... and it has been a space that I value as a space for building tenderness also because sometimes activism is not taken to deeper levels. For me, to find myself, speak, find alternatives in very difficult contexts, knowing we have to struggle but at the same time learning to place ourselves at the center, learning to say we have to take care of ourselves, not only take care of others but also ourselves, this has been an important lesson.”  
— *Woman defender from El Salvador.*

“...I remember that we started on self-care because of small things – compañera, you have kidney pain, let’s go to the doctor; compañera, you can’t see from one eye, let’s go to the doctor. Meaning, it was not to do with relaxation or massage, it was health because women here are not used to going to the doctor, for fear of lack of resources, or whatever. The fact that women could recognize even that, the right to health, this is a contribution of the network.”  
— *Woman defender from Honduras.*

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## \_ Collective Care

Based on recognizing this right, we care for each other collectively and in community, pushing back on the capitalist and individualist perspectives of self-care. We do so through self-care workshops, accompaniment for organizations and communities, stays at the healing and respite houses La Serena and La Siguata, participatory assessments, training processes, etc.

“In Nicaragua, the health of women defenders is often deteriorated, there is a lot of emotional exhaustion... So, the fact that women defenders have a space for catharsis, for embraces, for laughter, for tears, where they can talk about their frustrations, express their sadness, their rage, their pain, this is a great help in releasing those energies that often accumulate in us.  
— *Woman defender from Nicaragua.*

“Among our community accompaniment actions in Guapinol, we have given emotional support to women defenders whose partners are political prisoners, women community leaders who are attacked, and their children are affected as well. We have organized activities with massage therapy and flower therapy, feminist activism workshops, collective self-care workshops, workshops with child defenders...”  
— *Women defenders from Honduras.*

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Photo: Equipo de Comunicación de Consorcio Oaxaca

## \_ Healing

Learning from women and Indigenous Peoples', we also promote healing processes. We understand healing as a process that recovers ancestral wisdom, connection with Mother Earth, and spirituality in order to heal historical violence that connects the body-territory.

“We understand healing as a political path that links ancestry, communality, and spirituality. It is a process that honors, strengthens, and recovers the ancestral memory of peoples. It is based on the Tzk’at principle, which means ‘web’ in the Quiché language, the web of life in reciprocity and in body-territory unity. It is a critical process of deep questioning through which women have played a crucial role challenging the aspects of ancestry that have harmed and exploited them, the ancestral ‘machismos’ [sexist behaviors]. It is a wisdoms process

that fights the colonial logic and the ‘supremacy of humans’, wherever it comes from. It is experienced as a process of gratitude to restore the web of life, healing the violence that has harmed it.”<sup>20</sup>

We do this in alliance with healers and therapists from a broad range of wisdoms and cosmovisions, who accompany individual, collective, and community processes. In this framework, along with the Urgent Action Fund [Latin America], we have promoted a process of linkages and learning among women healers in the region.

“In our experience, we have recovered the connection with Earth, plants, energy, and spirituality that comes from our Indigenous Peoples to strengthen our identity, to heal and give them new meaning as elements of protection.”

— *Woman defender from Mexico.*

**Self-care, collective care, and healing processes are crucial for protection.** The lack of basic conditions for wellbeing and serenity make a risk analysis more difficult to conduct. Not addressing basic wellbeing conditions can lead to failure in the security plan. In addition to contributing to addressing risk, self-care, collective care, and healing break the logic of exploitation, sacrifice, and death that the system imposes on us, transforming solitude into company and greed into solidarity.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> | Lolita Chávez, Discussion Group to Systematize the Self-care, Collective Care, and Healing Strategy, 23 September 2020.

<sup>21</sup> | Ana María Hernández. Presentation of “Between Fresh Water and the Tides” publication. Consorcio Oaxaca, IM-Defensoras

## Houses for healing and respite

From the very beginning of IM-Defensoras, we raised the need to have spaces to offer shelter and respite to women defenders who needed it. We visited various feminist shelters for women who were victims of violence, we learned about the different experiences that emerged from feminist solidarity during the armed conflicts in the region as well as temporary relocation programs for human rights defenders, and we consulted with women defenders throughout the region. Based on these learnings, we decided to create spaces with the following features:

- △ **Spaces specifically designed for women defenders** to address their needs for protection, respite, and healing, but where they could also be with family members or loved ones, as we understood that one reason why women defenders do not use existing shelters is that they cannot be there with their children or loved ones.

- △ **Spaces with different levels of security** that would allow us to shelter women defenders who face different levels of risk, and who are in different stages of burnout and exhaustion and facing different profound impacts of violence.

- △ **Spaces located nearby – both geographically and culturally**, which would not entail severely uprooting themselves from their homes, where they could find pieces of their food, their culture, from where they could return without having to cover big distances.

- △ **Protocols, political engagement, and alliances to carry out emergency relocations** at times of high risk. IM-Defensoras has been developing significant experience identifying safe travel routes, activating institutional mechanisms, building a network of alliances with different organizations to accompany and support compañeras who must leave because of the risk they face.

Photo: Las Artistas MMXX



We currently have two healing and respite houses – La Serena and La Siguata – and a network of safe spaces to provide shelter for women defenders at high risk. Our healing houses have also become examples for how to develop protection infrastructure for women defenders in Latin American and in other regions of the world.

“It was only when I found myself at La Serena that I notice that my body is ill, tired, exhausted, and I begin to question myself as a feminist – what am I doing to this territory? Ah! Here I am defending the forest, defending environmental struggles, Mother Earth; but I don’t defend my first territory. Or, how do I care for it? ... That is when I adopt two tools: self-care and spirituality, which for me have been the strongest tools that have helped me to transcend from individuality to collectivity, to believe that other compañeras can also do it, to delegate tasks, to believe that they will do it well, to unburden myself from work. At the same time, they are developing capacities or building experience in what I have been doing. Yes, La Serena marked a before and an after in self-care...”  
— *Woman defender from El Salvador.*



## | Regional registry of attacks.

In each country and regionally, we use a shared methodology to systematically document and analyze the violence that affects us as women human rights defenders. By 2020, we had documented more than 17,000 attacks perpetrated against more than 5,000 women defenders in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua. We conducted the first Assessment on the Situation of Mesoamerican WHRDs in 2009, which served as the basis to develop our system for registering attacks.

We launched the registry of attacks in 2012 and it now has a decentralized database with the capacity of generating regional and country-level reports. It is based on the information gathered in the registry sheets that each national network and articulation documents and verifies in coordination with the regional team. It allows us to generate information about the violence traditionally documented, such as criminalization, threats, murders, and other attacks due to human rights work. Importantly, it also allow us to understand the particular forms of violence perpetrated by the patriarchal, racist, and capitalist system in the private sphere, within the organizations, movements, and other social spaces in which women defenders circulate.

Beyond documenting, identifying trends, and making the situation of women defenders visible, the registry is part of our work on protection.

“...we had to support the documentation of those who were murdered, and that not only meant the registry but also going to the territory to verify how the killing took place, where were they, who was the person killed, if it



was true... so we created a commission and went to the territories, to each burial, funeral, to see the conditions of the victims, gather testimonies of the mothers, how they were living it, it was really hard..."

— *Woman defender from Nicaragua.*

"...we created a newsletter sharing the data from the registry of attacks, we brought it with us and could share the information with sister defenders. This action – in addition to the accompaniment, self-care, and advocacy processes carried forward by the National Network of WHRDs in Honduras – enabled us to gain more national and international recognition, our contribution was visible and it became a reference point for protection, a moral reference point for feminist organizations as well as for other social organizations."<sup>22</sup>

”

The Registry System is the first instrument of its kind for documentation by and for women defenders. Today, various national and international organizations register and denounce violence against us, but ten years ago, we were invisible and in fact, we faced questions about the need for a specific analysis on the situation of women defenders.

“ “Most women defenders are not located in visible advocacy spaces, around nice tables, in hotels; they are in the territory and they are not seen, they do not receive a salary and on top of it all they face all the violent, sexist, patriarchal opposition. So, the Mesoamerican Registry of Attacks is important because it makes this work visible and valid.”

— *Woman defender from El Salvador.*

”

<sup>22</sup> | Interview with Cardoza & Trinidad, 26 February 2020.



Photo: IM-Defensoras

Over the past ten years, we created a shared methodology for registering attacks that is regularly updated to capture the reality that women defenders face. We set up a secure decentralized database that each national network can access, and we have built capacity in the national teams so that they can generate their own reports and improve the quality of the information they document. We have also consolidated spaces for collective analysis of the data that allow us to understand the reality and strengthen protection actions.

IM-Defensoras' reports are an example for other organizations wanting to use an intersectional feminist approach to documentation with the participation and leadership of women defenders themselves. In places such as Colombia, Brazil, Southern Africa, and the Middle East, organizations and women defenders have used IM-Defensoras' registry system as a reference point when creating their own documentation processes.

## Communications, advocacy, and digital security as tools for protection.

We have advanced a communications and advocacy strategy that focuses on protection for women defenders at the national, regional, and international level, helping us break the silence and lack of attention and recognition for our needs and demands.

Today, the information and analysis that IM-Defensoras disseminates is a reference point for numerous organizations, human rights mechanisms, and communications media. An important component of IM-Defensoras' communications work is its purpose as a protection tool that can be activated and deactivated as needed, verified with women defenders at risk and their families and organizations, and disseminated through media and channels that are meaningful for women defenders and useful for their protection.

The communications strategy has also focused on uplifting women defenders' voices and struggles to avoid the victimization that tends only to show the violent aspects. We work through different campaigns and actions to achieve recognition among ourselves in ways that strengthen the social, organizational, and community support we need for our political action.

In addition to strengthening the embodied support for our sisters facing attacks, communications towards Feminist Holistic Protection strengthens our identity; it shows how we see ourselves and how our allies see us, how we name ourselves and how our allies name us. The narratives, visuals, audios, and written pieces also contribute to creating realities.

“Bring visibility to what is going on with women defenders has been a significant political achievement. Being able to show the seriousness of what is happening with women defenders, and obviously what it means to be women defenders in a violent context, is something that has come out at the national and international level.”  
— *Women defenders from Mexico.*

The strategic direction of national, regional, and international advocacy work has also been to give authority to the demands of women defenders for their protection. We turn to regional and international human rights mechanisms to expose the fact that most States in the region systematically fail to comply with their human rights obligations, and to have a voice of our own in asserting our right to defend our rights.

Thanks to the close work with various Special Rapporteurs at the United Nations and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, we have not only succeeded in positioning the situation and demands of women defenders – as seen in their communications and reports – but in some cases also in changing their ways of working. For example, during Michel Forst's mandate as United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, we worked together with other organizations to ensure that every visit and every report that the Rapporteur made in our region included a space for consultation only with women defenders, a safe and trusting space where they could speak freely.

We also understand advocacy as a way of adding allies to the work of solidarity and embodied support. Through actions such as “The Embrace Mission” (Honduras, 2019), the numerous demonstrations and delivery of letters to different embassies in the region denouncing violence against women defenders, international solidarity campaigns, and the campaign to support



Photo: IM-Defensoras

women defenders imprisoned in Nicaragua (“Que las Liberen” – “Free Them”), we have connected with numerous organizations, communities, and networks to build alliances of mutual support.

“The contribution of IM-Defensoras is political, it is solidarity, it is sisterhood. The movements see that the Network is not alone. And regarding accompaniment in international political advocacy, I’ve heard comrades say, ‘No, those women defenders, mess with them and the whole world hears about it because they are many.’”  
— *Woman defender from Honduras.*

More recently, we have integrated digital security and care into the different strategies. In the registry strategy, we documented sexist violence that women defenders face in digital technology like the Internet and mobile phones. In the accompaniment

strategy, we integrated participatory digital assessments in the risk analysis process. The collective care strategy has addressed the need to strengthen mechanisms for secure management of information and communications.

As a regional team, we chose to promote autonomy in our digital infrastructure, thus strengthening technology sovereignty and governance of the data we use in our work. We question the impact of digitalization on Mother Earth, and we seek to raise awareness of the consequences of technology use in our lives, our organizations, and on territories.

## Resource mobilization

Mobilizing resources is a key component of Feminist Holistic Protection. Aiming to develop our own strategies and organizational styles with autonomy, sustainability, and in the best conditions, a priority for us has been to mobilize flexible resources for protection processes created for and among women defenders. Resources to enable the development of national networks and the regional space; to respond to changing and unforeseen needs of women defenders at risk and their contexts; received through safe channels; that contribute not only to overcoming risk but also to creating conditions of improved wellbeing and rights for women defenders.

Some examples of the collective effort made between 2012 and 2014 towards this end include the agreements developed to achieve the Dutch Lottery donation, the Donors’ Gathering, and the numerous meetings to explain who we were and what we needed. The re-design of the resource mobilization strategy in 2018 has enabled us to grow and consolidate the work teams and strategies.

The organizations and women defenders who founded IM-Defensoras and the networks have contributed their connections with different donors, as well as their own resources, staff, and time to mobilize other resources that IM-Defensoras needs.

Over the years, we forged strong ties with different donors who trust and support the work of IM-Defensoras, among which women's funds and private foundations play an important role.

Faced with the new and unexpected needs created by the turbulent contexts in our region, we set up special funds such as the COVID Fund to respond to the needs of women defenders (especially in the context of confinement and their increased health, communications, and security needs); the Emergency Fund for each network and the regional space to address urgent situations; and the Contingency Fund for self-care, health and security emergencies.

We held many dialogues with different donors over the years, to build a more complete understanding of the situation of women defenders in Mesoamerica, the type of support they need, and what it means to provide funding in a context in which financial resources have also become a source of risk for women defenders, including criminalization and other serious attacks.

## | Systematization.

“I really feel proud and represented in so many things that have come out of the systematization of the Salvadoran Network, because these are things said by those of us who are present in different processes, and we are so busy doing things that we don't give ourselves the time to sit and reflect, to write.”  
— *Woman defender from El Salvador.*

We launched the systematization of our strategies in 2019 because Feminist Holistic Protection is not a recipe or a finished model; it is permanently under construction based on our wisdoms, practices, and experiences.

The collective construction of Feminist Holistic Protection – what it is, how to do it, what it entails – has been undertaken as a permanent process through the reflection and analysis of practice, and the development of responses to the challenges that we have encountered in different contexts. There is a lot of wisdom accumulated in our personal histories, our organizations and networks.

While constantly responding to emergencies, we have managed to recover our wisdoms and share them through assessments, reports, and a systematization of our approach and strategies; through capacity-building processes, denunciation campaigns, and making our contributions visible; through multiple spaces of reflection and dialogue with other organizations, publications, videos, radio programs, etc. Systematizing our experience contributes to strengthening our protection capacities and advancing our struggles.

The systematization of IM-Defensoras' experience captures our 10-year trajectory, both regionally and nationally. It has enabled us to recover learnings from our organizational processes and from the practice of Feminist Holistic Protection. Most important, it has enabled us to meet, reflect together, share our stories, and identify accomplishments and challenges.



*Challenges  
and hopes that  
open pathways  
for futures*

Photo: Las Artistas MMXX



“The Initiative helped me recognize myself as a woman defender and as an activist. And it’s not just that, I think that it also gave me a profound sense of being able to recognize others, support each other, embody support, create spaces for dissent, but to continue saying as the Zapatistas say, ‘the pact is to stay alive.’”

– Woman defender from Mexico)

**H**ere is a small piece of our history; the path we have walked by weaving stories of mutual care, accompaniment, and embodied support among women defenders so that our individual struggles and those of our organizations and communities continue to bloom. We know that in the long timeline that Indigenous Peoples have taught us, our action is only a small step in the continuum of struggles, resistances, and hopes. However, for this tiny step to exist and open pathways for those who come after us, we need to care for it, and that means caring for each other, enjoying the path, fine-tuning our strategies and political vision.

In a world subjected to the extreme cruelty of the racist capitalist patriarchy, it is easy to lose hope and the path, to deplete ourselves to the extreme. This is exactly the reason that placing care at the center of our political action is more urgent and necessary than ever.

The crisis deepened by COVID-19 made it clear that we urgently need other paradigms that make lives worth living possible. These alternative paradigms – which many sister defenders and their organizations have activated to take care of their struggles and their communities – have demonstrated that they are much more effective in facing the structural crises that we currently experience.



Photo: Las Artistas MMXX

If we do not build from other paradigms, it will be very difficult to create a safe environment for our political action and for advancing the social transformation project for which we struggle. Governments face fewer and fewer limits to advancing the private interests they represent; and even in countries where less conservative governance options are gaining ground, they are running up against structures, institutions, and inertia that are unlikely to solve current problems.

Thus, today more than ever, we see that **promoting Feminist Holistic Protection entails accompanying the struggles that are driving these alternative paradigms, supporting their protection processes, learning from them, and contributing to increasing their recognition.** To achieve this, our history invites us once and again to collectivize and root our protection processes in the territory. A strong articulation in each territory

with a solid regional alliance involves changes in our current structures to reflect this diversity; it also entails recognizing the political complexity and context in each territory, and weighing our strength and capacity to respond.

This crisis has also revealed something that we had noted long ago: without the material and symbolic conditions for living in dignity, it will be very difficult for women defenders to confront violence and continue promoting our change processes. The increasingly evident and pressing needs among women defenders and their collectives compel us to add a component to our Feminist Holistic Protection approach: contributing to ensuring these minimum conditions for a life with dignity that make political action possible.



Photo: Las Artistas MMXX

More than ten years later, we have walked a long path that we must honor and care for, updating our pacts and recognizing what each of us has contributed and learned at each moment. We must strengthen each regional process, their autonomy, collective ownership and action in the regional meeting space, finding ways to address conflicts and changes.

We face the challenge of creating the conditions to move forward in the midst of a growing demand and an increasingly violent context, making Feminist Holistic Protection possible also within our teams, which are experiencing heavy fatigue. We have taken significant steps in this direction, but this is a daily effort in permanent construction.

**We continue to be guided by the vision we built from the very beginning: to build a space for regional coordination from a feminist perspective and based on the reality of each territory. A space that contributes to protecting women defenders of diverse social movements from the violence caused by political repression and its intersection with the structures of oppression; recognizing and giving value to our needs but also to our power, our dreams, and our experiences. Why? Because this is the only way we can contribute to building the world that the web of life deserves and needs.**





APPENDIX

# *Brief overview of Feminist Holistic Protection*

Photo: Las Artistas MMXX



Feminist Holistic Protection emerged from our daily experience of caring for each other and ourselves as women defenders in Mesoamerica.

It is a political vision and practice based on four main pillars:



Artwork: Consuelo Mora B

△ The first pillar is **placing care at the center of our activism**. Care is a right, a vital need, and a basic principle of the world we want to build. Collective care is what allows our struggles to continue and our lives not to be silenced by violence.

△ The second pillar is **recognizing ourselves in our defiance**. Recognizing that women defenders are diverse and transgressive. We are political subjects present in all social movements, and we have our own needs and our own ways of understanding protection.

△ The third pillar is **our feminist intersectional perspective on context and risk**. We challenge the capitalist, racist, and patriarchal system that harms our bodies and territories. This perspective gives us a broad understanding of risk to acknowledge the specific forms of violence that affect us personally and collectively, taking into account all the forms of oppression that cut through our lives.

△ The fourth pillar can be summarized with the phrase **“Networks Save Lives”**. We see protection as a collective process and a capacity that enables us to take care of each other and ourselves together, in community, in our territories, and based on our own wisdoms.

**We put these pillars into practice through seven strategies:**



Artwork: Consuelo Mora B

**Networks of women defenders are at the heart of**

**IM-Defensoras.** We are more than 2,000 women defenders and 300 organizations in El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua, connected through national and territorial networks in which compañeras from very diverse social movements have converged.

**We conduct accompaniment in situations of risk and violence.**

We accompany each other among women defenders, as equals, organized in work teams at the local and regional level. Just in 2021, we undertook 2,808 accompaniment actions for women defenders at risk.

We have a holistic understanding of accompaniment, and we conduct it with women defenders at the individual level, as well as with their families, organizations, and communities. Actions include risk analysis; protection plans; physical, psychosocial, and digital protection measures; urgent alerts; advocacy with authorities and human rights mechanisms; relocation within and outside countries, including safe houses; attention to basic needs; solidarity actions, among many other. We accompany at times of risk and we strengthen capacities for protection.

We develop reflections and processes for **self-care, collective care, and healing** that contribute to changing the traditional way of understanding protection, challenging the sacrificial models of activism, and placing care at the center of our political actions.

We recognize that we have the right to take care of ourselves and address our needs. We take care of each other and ourselves together, in community. Learning from women and Indigenous Peoples, we also promote healing, understood as a process that recovers ancestral wisdom, connection with Mother Earth, and spirituality. We do so through self-care workshops, stays at the healing and respite houses La Serena and La Siguata, assessments, resources, training processes, accompaniment, etc.

We have a **regional registry of attacks**. We use a shared methodology to systematically analyze the violence that affects us as women human rights defenders. By 2020, we had documented more than 17,000 attacks perpetrated against more than 5,000 women defenders in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua.

We activate **communications, advocacy, and digital security as tools for protection**. We use alerts, statements, and various materials and communications channels to denounce the violence we face, giving visibility and voice to our struggles and forms of protection; advocating with States and human rights mechanisms; accompanying and training women defenders on digital care; and building alliances for solidarity and embodied support.

We carry out a constant effort to **mobilize resources** to implement our own strategies and ways of protection with autonomy, sustainability, and improved conditions.

**We launched the systematization of our strategies in 2019** convinced that Feminist Holistic Protection is not a recipe or a finished model; it is permanently under construction based on our wisdoms, practices, and experiences.





Photo: Las Artivistas MMXX

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Photo: Las Artistas MMXX

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