

OPEN LETTER

Alarming context of impunity and attacks against women human rights defenders in Mexico and Central America

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UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders

Mesoamerica, August 26, 2016 – We, the 750 women human rights defenders of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, México and Nicaragua who make up the **Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras)** are writing to you to express our concern over the context of attacks and impunity that we face in Mesoamerica.

According to data from our **Mesoamerican Registry of Attacks against Women Human Rights Defenders**¹, between January of 2012 and December of 2014, a **total of 1,688 attacks** were registered on women defenders in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and México: 414 in 2012, 512 in 2013 and 762 in 2014, which represents an increase of almost twice as many attacks reported each year. Of these, 122 occurred in El Salvador, 633 in Guatemala, 318 in Honduras, and 615² in México.

The six **main types of attacks** are intimidation and psychological harassment (21%); threats, warnings and ultimatums (16%); slander, defamation and smear campaigns (9%); excessive use of force (6%); illegal detention and arbitrary arrests (4%); and criminalization and prosecution (4%). By the same token, **32 murders** of women human rights defenders and **39 attempted murders** were registered during the same period.

The women defenders facing the highest level of attacks are those who defend land and territory (38%), followed by those who work for a life free of violence against women. The women defenders at greatest risk are those working in local³ y rural areas (53.91% and 46.03% respectively). State actors are the main agents responsible for the attacks (66%), followed by the hired personnel of businesses (22%), and, notably, in 5% of the cases, family members or members of their own organizations.

The **Nicaraguan Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders**, which has investigated attacks against women defenders and activists, reports that in 2013, based on the responses of 108 women defenders polled and 113 community defenders who participated in focus groups, the **main forms of aggression against women defenders were smear campaigns, verbal threats and telephone**

1 Available at: <http://im-defensoras.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/286224690-Violence-Against-WHRDs-in-Mesoamerica-2012-2014-Report.pdf>

2 Due to a typographical error in the Report, 616 attacks were reported, but the correct number is 615.

3 By “local,” we refer to the immediate area where the defender lives, whether it is rural or urban.

threats. In 18% of the cases, threats and injuries came from family members, and in 21%, damage to personal or organizational property was involved. In the document that the Nicaraguan Initiative will present to the 157th Session of the IACHR⁴, examples are given of risk situations and challenges faced by community defenders during the 2015 – 2016 period, such as obstacles to defending rights and the operation of local party power structures that threaten women defenders for their resistance to the activities of the extractive industries.

In this document and in data reproduced in the IM-Defensoras Assessment Report, the current government is identified as being responsible for closing spaces for the dissemination of information, smear campaigns, attacks, and threats aimed at hindering the freedom of expression, mobilization, and all in all, inhibiting the work in defense of the rights of women, including continuous efforts to block peaceful marches and counter-marches through the use of anti-riot brigades and other measures.

So then, from 2015 to the present, **far from being stemmed, it seems that the risk context faced by women defenders in the region has worsened.** The murders of Berta Cáceres and Lesbia Janeth Urquía in Honduras, and those of Nadia Vera in México, and Marleni Estrada and Rosalinda Pérez in Guatemala; the hate crimes against LGBTTI rights defenders, especially in El Salvador and Honduras; the repeated cases of office searches and theft of information in Nicaragua; and the systematic use of criminalization as an instrument for sanctioning and inhibiting the work of women defenders, are evidence of this tendency.

An issue of special concern is the impunity that continues to exist with regards to the large majority of these attacks. The murder of Berta Cáceres is a prime example, as seen by the way in which the Honduran State has turned a deaf ear to the demands and recommendations made by family members, along with international organizations and agencies, which have repeatedly called for the initiation of an independent investigation in order to determine responsibilities of the masterminds and the perpetrators of the crime. Neither has the Honduran State responded to the demands for justice made at the time by both of these defenders against a business that failed to implement consultation processes before advancing with a project with negative implications for the lives of communities in resistance.

Impunity not only implies refusing to sanction the perpetrators and masterminds of these murders. In these cases, the failure to administer justice in each concrete case exposes all women defenders to greater risks, undermines the confidence of women defenders and their organizations in systems of justice, and in so doing, endangers the society as a whole, delegitimizing institutional channels for resolving social conflicts.

⁴ Report on Attacks against Women Human Rights Defenders in Nicaragua. Data provided by the Nicaraguan Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders, 2015 – 2016. Presented on April 7, 2016, at the Hearing on the General Human Rights Situation in Nicaragua at the 157th Session of the IACHR. See: <http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/sesiones/docs/Calendario-157-audiencias-es.pdf>.



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Such abuses go on despite **the dominant tendency (52%) among women defenders**, as reflected in the information contained in our Registry, **to file complaints against competent authorities**, which shows a high degree of omission by State authorities in complying with their responsibilities to duly investigate these cases.

Another disturbing fact that contributes to impunity regarding attacks on women defenders is that the States continue to be reticent in effectively implementing the recommendations of mechanisms such as the **CEDAW** or the more recent **UN General Assembly Resolution on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Defenders of the Rights of Women, 2013**, which explicitly establish the obligation to incorporate a gender perspective in both investigatory procedures and protective mechanisms. As you well know, these international instruments were emitted to lend visibility to the inequality gap faced by women human rights defenders in addition to the risks posed by their work and heightened by the gender violence that is so widespread in our region.

Lastly, we at **IM-Defensoras** wish to thank you, **Sr. Michel Forst**, for your continuous commitment and interest in the situation of women human rights defenders in Mesoamerica, and we urge you to bear this information in mind, along with our efforts as women defenders in our networks and organizations to generate and strengthen comprehensive protection strategies with a gender perspective, which serve to guarantee our security and our right to defend rights.

Respectfully yours,
Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders

