

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DATA THAT HURT US, NETWORKS THAT SAVE US

10+ YEARS OF
AGAINST WOMEN
HUMAN RIGHTS
DEFENDERS IN
MEOSAMERICA

2012
2023



IM-DEFENSORAS



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is the result of the collective knowledge and work of many women defenders, networks, and organizations that converge in IM-Defensoras. It is based on everyone's rigor, commitment, and generosity to shed light on a situation that was for too long silenced, ignored, or minimized in its severity. But above all, on the willingness and trust of thousands of women defenders who contributed their words and analysis regarding the violence and human rights violations that they suffered because of their dignified and necessary mission to defend the lives and rights of all the beings who live in Mesoamerica. They are the protagonists of these pages and deserve all our gratitude.

The development of this report was an arduous process that involved dozens of sister defenders named here; we also recognize all those who – for security reasons and risks in their territories – cannot be recognized by name, our deepest gratitude also goes to them.

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MESOAMERICA, JUNE 2024.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DATA THAT HURT US, NETWORKS THAT SAVE US

10+ YEARS OF ATTACKS
AGAINST WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS
DEFENDERS IN MESOAMERICA

(2012-2023)



Over the last 10-plus years, the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras) has developed a system to register attacks¹ that documents, quantifies, and allows us to conduct a gender analysis regarding the violence perpetrated against the diversity of women and sex-gender dissidences who defend human rights in Mesoamerica. The advantage of this system – a pioneer worldwide – is that, through its interaction with the other Feminist Holistic Protection strategies², it contributes to the protection of women defenders by identifying the types of violence and the concrete realities that we face, both individually and within our collectives.

This report has two main content areas. It presents an analysis of the numerical data gathered by dozens of sister defenders who, starting from a close relationship and commitment with the territories, are responsible for the registry and documentation in each national network of women defenders, and who come together regionally in our Registry Strategy.³ Importantly, the report also includes a compilation of the reflections and analysis we have collectively built over these more than ten years.

1. IM-Defensoras defines attacks (agresiones in Spanish) as violent actions that assault the dignity or integrity of one or several women defenders, or their organizations, within a specific time-period; they can be physical, emotional, spiritual, or psychological; direct or indirect..

2. IM-Defensoras: The Pact to Care among Ourselves. 2010-2021: IM-Defensoras' Approach to Feminist Holistic Protection in Mesoamerica. 2022. <https://im-defensoras.org/en/2023/06/the-pact-to-care-among-ourselves-2010-2021-im-defensoras-approach-to-feminist-holistic-protection-in-mesoamerica/>

3. In the case of Guatemala, the information presented from 2020 onwards is based on data sent by the registry of attacks operated by Unit for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (UDEFEQUA for its acronym in Spanish).



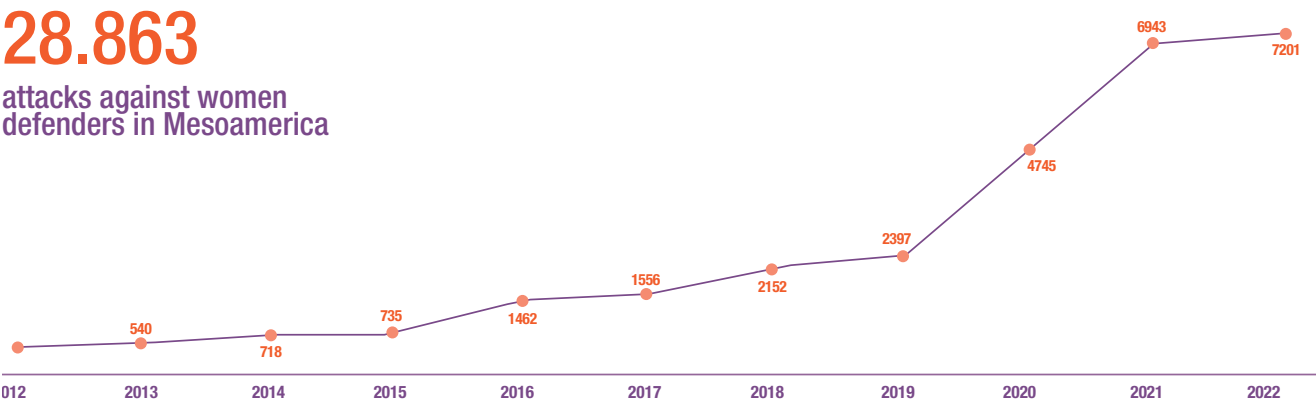
MESOAMERICA IN FOCUS:
**DEFENDING LIFE IN A
HOSTILE TERRITORY**

Women human rights defenders, along with our Peoples, communities, and organizations, are organized in different territories to resist the violence that besets us, to protect life and collective well-being, and to build hope and alternatives for a life with dignity. Our sole existence as political subjects challenges the patriarchal mandates that seek to silence the power of women and sex-gender dissidences. The world that we struggle for is diametrically opposed to the one they attempt to impose on us and, therefore, our work places the interests of the powerful at risk.

In Mesoamerica, we live under an economic, political, and cultural model that is a colonial legacy, which manifests in structural forms of oppression and a historical continuity of patriarchal, capitalist, and racist violence on women's bodies and territories. Within the context of global crisis created by this model, our region has experienced worsening economic inequalities, violence, poverty, and the impacts of climate change. Over the last decade, the situation in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua – from their respective particularities – has been characterized by the intensification of authoritarianism, corruption, the closing of spaces for social and political participation, militarization, extractivism, the penetration or expansion of the presence of organized crime, femicide and other forms of violence against women and sex-gender dissidences, as well as by an unprecedented migration crisis. Even in countries that have experienced progressive-leaning electoral changes, structural inequalities and violence has not been overcome.

The power-holders benefit from this model of death; they see repression, violence, and the use of force as the only way of containing our collective power. **In the 10+ years that the registry has been functioning (2012-2022), we have documented 28,863 attacks against 7,7384 women defenders⁴ and 880 organizations of women defenders⁵ that work to defend human rights in Mesoamerica.**

Figure 1
Evolution of attacks against women defenders
in Mesoamerica 2012-2022



During this period, 190 sister defenders were killed. We must add to this number 181 attempted killings, which means that if the perpetrators' intentions had succeeded, we would actually speak of 371 sister defenders annihilated for fighting for a better world.

4. Starting in 2020, the numbers exclude women defenders who experienced both personal and collective attacks. The historical sum of women defenders attacked may repeatedly include the same woman defender attacked in different years.
5. Similar to the counting of women defenders, the counting of organizations starting in 2020 excludes organizations that experienced both institutional and collective attacks; they are identified as a single woman defender in order to avoid duplication, prior to the change in the registry system in 2020.

Importantly, of the 58 killings of women defenders documented between 2020 and 2022, **40% of those killed were trans women defenders** – 23 transfemicides that stand out for the torture and viciousness with which they were committed.

THE SYNDemic: A TURNING POINT IN VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN DEFENDERS

In 2020 and 2021, in the context of the COVID-19 syndemic, there was an steep increase in IM-Defensoras' documentation of attacks. In 2020, we registered 4,745 attacks, representing twice as many attacks as the previous year. And in 2021, we registered 6,943 attacks, 46% more than in 2020. Many of these attacks are directly or indirectly linked to authoritarian social control measures implemented by governments at different levels (national/federal, state/departamental, or local/municipal) during the health emergency. Today, the syndemic seems an issue of the past; however, the advance of control measures and restrictions of movement imposed by States in the region has not been reversed. On the contrary, during the syndemic, the foundations were laid for the implementation of control strategies that are still in place today and have been consolidated as the true new normal.



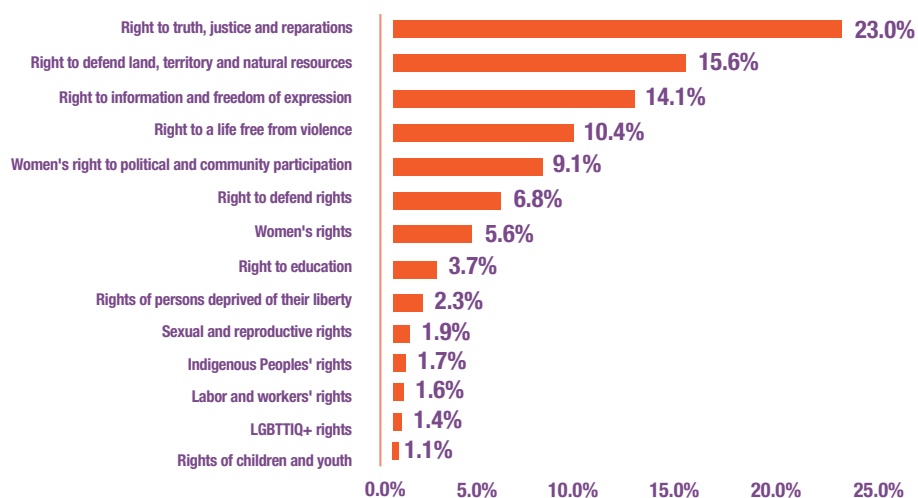


**WHICH RIGHTS ARE
WE DEFENDING WHEN
WE ARE ATTACKED?**

As protectors of life, Mesoamerican women defenders simultaneously defend a broad diversity of rights. Based on the data collected in our registry between 2010 and 2022, below are the main sets of rights (at the regional level) that we were defending when we were attacked.

Figure 2

Main rights defended at the time of the attack against women defenders in Mesoamerica 2012-2022



 **6,629 attacks for defending the right to truth, justice, and reparations.** This accounts for 23% of attacks documented between 2010 and 2022. Starting in 2020, we identified a permanent and alarming increase in attacks against those who defend this right. This reflects the increase in social violence created by the totalitarian practices of governments and other de facto powers like organized crime, which women (mothers, sisters, grandmothers...) challenge by taking up the search for justice and the accompaniment of victims and family members. Standing out are the attacks against the “searching mothers” collectives in Mexico, the Mothers of April in Nicaragua,⁶ and the family members of the girls killed in the massacre at the Virgen de la Asuncion children's home in Guatemala⁷ – all of them political subjects that face off powerful State and non-State actors working together to preserve a system of impunity.

 **4,504 attacks against women defenders or organizations that defend land, territory, and natural resources.** These attacks, which account for 15.6% of all documented attacks, primarily target Indigenous and Afro-descendent women and communities that struggle against extractivism and capitalist exploitation. Throughout the period covered in this report, we identified three moments that point to a substantial increase in this type of attacks. The first was in 2017 after the assassination of Berta Caceres, against women defenders who opposed mega projects and demanded justice in Honduras.⁸ The second came in 2020 in the context of the COVID-19 syndemic,⁹

6. The Mothers of April Association (AMA for its acronym in Spanish) is a key entity that emerged in the context of the socio-political crisis in Nicaragua, when mothers and family members of persons killed during protests organized themselves to demand justice, truth, and reparations for the crimes against humanity primarily committed by police and parapolice forces aligned with the government.

7. IM-Defensoras: [WHRD Alert] GUATEMALA / Mistreatment, Sexual exploitation, Extrajudicial execution and femicide against The Interns of the Virgin of the Assumption Safe Home. 11 March 2017.

8 IM-Defensoras: Informe tendencia en defensoras de tierra, territorio y justicia. Agosto 2021. <https://im-defensoras.org/2021/08/informe-tendencia-en-defensoras-de-tierra-territorio-y-justicia/>

9 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

where governments responded by restricting rights and accelerating processes of militarization to support policies of dispossession against women's bodies and territories. The third was seen in 2022, particularly in Honduras, with attacks related to stigmatization, criminalization, and violent racist evictions of Indigenous communities expelled from their ancestral lands¹⁰ to facilitate extractive, eco-capitalist, or tourism projects.

 **4,062 attacks for defending the right to freedom of expression.** They account for 14.1% of all documented attacks in the region, and they reflect the specific contexts in each country. In Mexico,¹¹ freedom of expression is confronting the media oligopoly and the frequent alliance and complicity between authorities from different levels of government¹² and organized crime. In El Salvador, since Nayib Bukele became president in 2019, journalism that does not toe the party line has suffered systematic harassment, with the use of the “Cyber-crimes Law” and the “Wiretap Law” to surveil and criminalize press coverage that is critical of the government. In Nicaragua, the closure and criminalization of communications media labeled as opposition based on the “Cyber-crimes Law” has cornered journalist and communications workers not aligned with the government, forcing them to work underground or from exile. Meanwhile in Guatemala, the security of those who practice journalism has degraded in the last years, with particular concern about the criminal persecution and censure of journalists and communications media that investigate corruption and human rights violations.¹³ The manipulation of regulations and the justice system to silence voices and criminalize those who defend the right to inform and express oneself freely has become notorious and recurrent throughout the region.

 **3,000 attacks against women defenders or organizations that defend women's right to a life free from violence.** These attacks, which account for 10.4% of all documented attacks in the region, affect women defenders and organizations that confront both the assailants of women who they accompany and defend, and the State and non-State actors that seek to protect these assailants and maintain the patriarchal system's order and privileges. In Mexico, attacks against women who defend this right account for 21.3% of all attacks registered in the country between 2012 and 2022; standing out among these attacks are those perpetrated in the context of feminist mobilizations protesting against femicides and other forms of gender-based violence.

 **2,614 attacks against women who defend women's political and community participation.** These attacks account for 9.1% of the regional total, but it is noteworthy that more than half of the attacks (1,475) were documented in Nicaragua. A process consolidating a totalitarian government in Nicaragua began in 2018. This process punishes and persecutes any action in defense of rights and deploys repressive strategies against women defenders or their families through harassment, banishment or revoking of citizenship,¹⁴ arbitrary detention, short-term forced disappearance, torture,¹⁵ and criminalization based on alleged crimes of “conspiracy and spreading of fake news”.¹⁶ Meanwhile, in El Salvador in 2021, we registered 185 attacks against women defenders who defend women's right to political participation, marking it as the year with the greatest number of attacks against these women defenders in the

impact due to its interaction with social and environmental conditions that increase people's vulnerability. Source: IM-Defensoras. July 2021. Unraveling the Crisis, Weaving Futures. Impacts of COVID-19 on the lives and struggles of Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders.

10 IM-Defensoras: [WHRD Alert] Honduras / Criminalizan a defensoras garífunas tras detenerlas en violento e ilegal desalojo de la comunidad de Punta Gorda, Roatán. 9 November 2022.

11. National Network of WHRDs in Mexico: Datos y tendencias del registro de agresiones a mujeres periodistas y defensoras de derechos humanos en México. December 2022.

12 In attacks against women defenders who defend the right to freedom of expression and information in Mexico, the perpetrators identified are often local authorities in alliance with expressions of organized crime.

13. The most emblematic case is that of Jose Ruben Zamora, founder of El Periódico, who is in prison since mid-2022.

14. IM-Defensoras: NICARAGUA / Migratory repression and banishment for defending rights in Nicaragua. 13 October 2022.

15. IM-Defensoras: [WHRD Alert] NICARAGUA / Feminist political prisoners face torture and abuse. 16 December 2021.

16 . IM-Defensoras: Persecuted for defending and resisting: Criminalization of Women Human Rights Defenders in Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua .Chapter on Nicaragua. 2022: <https://im-defensoras.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/IMD-Perseguidas-Ni-4rd-Final-1.pdf>

country. Among the attacks are those perpetrated against women defenders who participated in feminist demonstrations¹⁷ or those who stood up against President Nayib Bukele's authoritarian drift,¹⁸ with the most common forms of attacks being smear campaigns and online threats, police intimidation and surveillance, and attempted detentions with the use of violence.

 **540 attacks against those who struggle in the defense of sexual and reproductive rights.** Hand in hand with the advance of fundamentalist and ultra-right-wing discourses and the interference of religious hierarchies in public affairs, political party representatives with different ideological leanings in every country of the region have promoted policies that, in the name of the “protection of family values”, violate the rights of women, girls, and adolescents. Between 2012 and 2022, we documented smear and stigmatization campaigns that include slander, hate speech, and incitement to violence against women defenders and feminist collectives that promote sexual and reproductive rights, including the decriminalization of abortion. Some of these attacks were promoted locally and internationally by anti-rights organizations within the “40 Days for Life” campaign in El Salvador¹⁹ and Mexico.²⁰ Others occurred in the context of the demand for justice crystallized in a landmark judgment by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights condemning the State of El Salvador for the detention, conviction, and subsequent death of “Manuela”, a woman who was sentenced to 30 years in prison on charges of aggravated homicide after suffering an obstetric emergency.²¹



17. IM-Defensoras: [WHRD Alert] EL SALVADOR / Organizaciones feministas enfrentan el 8M en un contexto de hostigamiento y difamación. 7 March 2021.

18. IM-Defensoras: [WHRD Alert] EL SALVADOR / Acoso, estigmatización descalificativos y amenazas de muerte en redes sociales por protestar contra el autoritarismo presidencial. 7 September 2021.

19. IM-Defensoras: [Statement] EL SALVADOR / Pronunciamiento de la Red de Defensoras ante agresiones contra defensoras de derechos humanos. 19 October 2020.

20. IM-Defensoras: [Open Letter] MÉXICO / Red Nacional de Defensoras de DDHH en México solicita intervención del gobierno de Yucatán ante expresiones fundamentalistas contra defensoras de derechos sexuales y reproductivos. 14 February 2018.

21. IM-Defensoras: [Statement] EL SALVADOR / Anti-rights groups intensify stigmatization and hate speech campaign against feminist and women defenders accompanying the “Manuela” case. 16 April 2021.

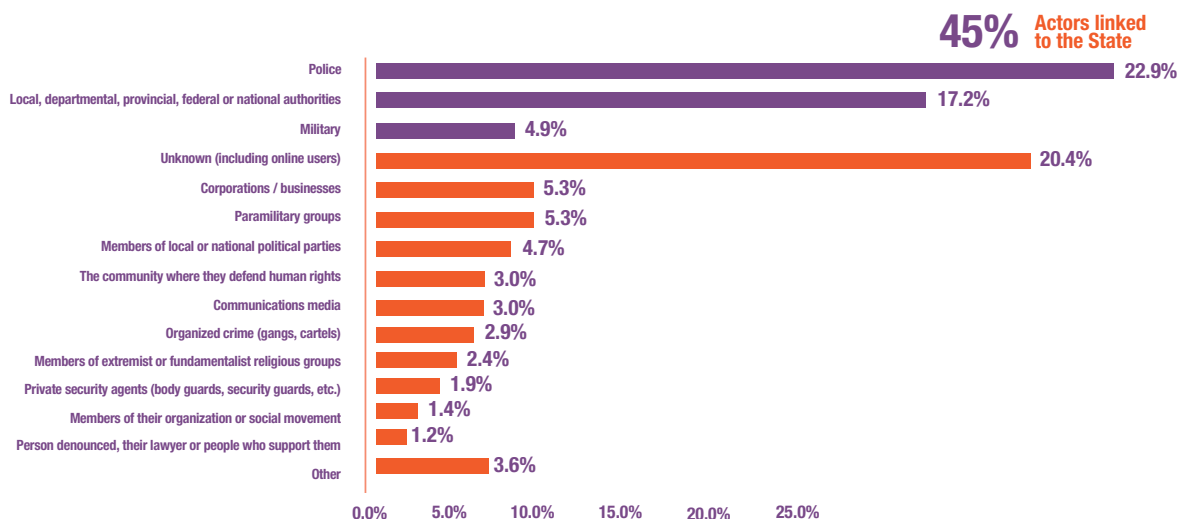
WHO
ATTACKS
US?



THE STATE IN ALLIANCE WITH DE FACTO POWERS

In Mesoamerica, almost half (45%) of our assailants between 2012 and 2022 were actors linked to the State, including law enforcement authorities (22.9%); municipal, departmental, provincial, state, national, or federal authorities (17.2%); and military forces (4.9%). Governmental institutions are co-opted and they protect national and transnational economic elites as well as other de facto powers (corporations, organized crime, religious hierarchies, communications monopolies, etc.).

Figure 3
Perpetrators of attacks against women defenders in Mesoamerica 2012-2022



THE (IN)JUSTICE SYSTEM

The capitalist, patriarchal, and racist model that reigns in our countries is supported by a system of (in)justice where the judicial power has become an instrument that attacks us, and that promotes and guarantees the impunity of our assailants. The same judicial system that is used to criminalize and judicialize human rights defense or to strip communities of their territories and resources, is also used to obstruct women defenders' access to justice, guaranteeing impunity for those who attack us. This sustains the power of the military and police forces, and protects non-State actors such as private companies, organized crime, and other de facto power-holders.

Our access to justice in response to the attacks we experience as women human rights defenders is undermined by the high levels of impunity, the lack of confidence in the State justice system, and the fear that filing a complaint can lead to further attacks against our personal integrity or that of our family members. Seeking security, women defenders turn to national, regional, or international protection mechanisms. However, these mechanisms are often ineffective; **19.2% of attacks documented in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua between 2012 and 2022 were against women defenders who had been previously granted protection measures.**

OTHER ASSAILANTS

Beyond the dominant role of the State as a direct assailant, other relevant perpetrators are:

 **Unknown persons:** 20.4% of assailants could not be identified, both in direct attacks that take place in the physical sphere and in those that take place online. In recent years, the anonymity afforded by social media has made it a preferred vehicle for attacks such as smear campaigns, hate speech, incitement to violence, threats, intimidation, and psychological harassment.

Between 2020 and 2022, we documented 863 attacks committed by unknown online users, accounting for 17.3% of all assailants identified during these 3 years.

 **Corporations:** 5.3% of attacks were perpetrated by corporate actors. Economic power-holders seek to stop the actions of women defenders, organizations, and communities that expose the human rights violations and abuses behind capital accumulation projects. It is important to note that within the documented attacks, transnational extractive corporations stand out above all.

 **Organized crime:** directly responsible for 2.9% of registered attacks. Due to the nature of their actions – relying on anonymity – and the high risk involved in reporting and documenting them, it is very difficult to identify with certainty when attacks are perpetrated by these groups that base their business on violence, drug trafficking, and other illicit activities. However, actors linked to organized crime are often identified in our registry as the main suspects of attacks.

 **Fundamentalist and anti-rights groups:** directly responsible for 2.4% of registered attacks between 2012 and 2022. However, if we focus on the last three years of the period – between 2020 and 2022 – these groups accounted for 20% of the direct perpetrators of attacks against women defenders of sexual and reproductive rights. Additionally, these actors are frequently identified as the main suspects of being behind campaigns promoted anonymously or by unknown online users. Their increasing influence is due to two factors. First, the construction of broad transnational alliances with churches, far-right political parties, and shadowy funding networks. And second, their strategy of seeking to gain legitimacy and mobilize followers by constructing a social imaginary of a common enemy – the so-called “gender ideology” – and co-opting social justice language and the organizational forms of social movements.



GOBIERNO DE
MÉXICO

MEDIO
AMBIENTE
SECRETARÍA DE MEDIO AMBIENTE
RECURSOS NATURALES

**HOW THEY
ATTACK US?**

Ejido de Atenco

REINTEGRACIÓN DE TIERRAS

Atenco, Estado de México, 30 de junio de 2023



THEY ATTACK US REPEATEDLY

Almost half (46.3%) of the attacks against women defenders registered between 2012 and 2022 were part of a series of violent events that had taken place before. This percentage varies from country to country, ranging from 31.6% in El Salvador to 58% in Honduras. The systematic nature of the attacks reveals that these acts of violence are not one-off or isolated, but actually reflect a continuous strategy that tends to escalate in terms of the severity of the type of attacks in order to exhaust us and stop our defense work.

SPHERES AND SCOPES OF THE ATTACKS

 **Direct attacks against the woman defender personally:** Between 2012 and 2022, we registered 13,228 personal attacks. Above all, these attacks violated our right to personal integrity (31.9%); our right to reputation, public image, and private and family life (23.7%); and our right to freedom of association, assembly, and expression (14.1%). In the same period, we registered 1,730 harassments; 1,322 smear campaigns or challenging our credibility; 817 attacks involving psychological, verbal, or physical violence, torture or cruel treatment; 730 surveillances or monitoring or stalking of day to day life; and 619 threats.

 **Attacks on those closest to us:** The different forms of violence that we face are not only exercised on our persons and bodies, but also seek to control us and silence our struggles through narratives and acts that create angst and fear in our immediate circle – our families, organizations, and communities. Between 2020 and 2022, we documented that 39.5% of personal attacks experienced by Mesoamerican women defenders included an additional attack against the people close to us. This percentage ranges from 11% to 56% in the region's countries, and it is particularly severe in Honduras and Nicaragua, where it surpasses 50%.

 **Collective attacks:** Between 2012 and 2022, we registered 13,340 collective attacks.²² The evolution of this type of attack over time is generally due to high-profile mass protests to which governments responded with repression. Such is the case during feminist mobilizations against sexist violence and femicides, particularly on key dates like 8 March (International Women's Day) and 25 November (International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women). Student protests in Mexico²³ and collective actions to demand justice for the assassination of Berta Caceres and the 2021 femicide of Keyla Martinez while in police custody in Honduras also elicited a repressive response.²⁴ Additionally, we identified an increase in collective attacks in Honduras starting in 2020 – related to evictions of communities that defend their right to land and territory – and in Nicaragua in 2021 – perpetrated with the aim of obstructing the exercise of the freedom of assembly and association in the context of the presidential elections that took place that year.

 **The collective attacks** registered between 2020 and 2022 included 1,292 harassments and 1,241 cases of psychological, verbal, and/or physical violence, as well as 1,152 smear campaigns or challenging the credibility of members of an organization or movement. These attacks violated the right to personal integrity of the women who participated in collective actions (37.2%); the right to freedom of association, assembly, and expression (11.8%); the right to public image and private and family life (11.6%); access to justice (11%); and personal liberty and security (10.9%).

 **Attacks against organizations or groups:** Between 2012 and 2022, we documented 2,295 attacks against

²² IM-Defensoras calls collective attacks as those that simultaneously target several women defenders, who may or may not belong to the same organization or movement; or that target women defenders who are participating together in a collective action (public protest, march, demonstration, sit-in, etc.).

²³ IM-Defensoras: [WHRD Alert] MEXICO / 74 young women students, mainly indigenous, were attacked, detained for five days, and criminalized for defending the right to education in Chiapas.

²⁴ IM-Defensoras: [WHRD Alert] HONDURAS/ Policía Nacional reprime con balas y gas lacrimógeno a manifestantes por feminicidio de Keyla Patricia Martínez. 8 February 2021.

880 organizations or groups²⁵ that defend human rights. Organizations are attacked as an attempt to destroy organizational processes and collective bodies created to defend rights. These attacks reveal the strategies of instrumentalizing political power and the (in)justice system, in complicity or alliance with other de facto powers, to erect regulatory frameworks that institutionalize and legalize the criminalization of social organizations.

Attacks against organizations or groups in Nicaragua stand out, where the mass revoking of legal status, closure, and seizure of organizations took place as a result of the approval of the “Foreign Agents Law”. Between 2018 and December 2022, 212 organizations that worked on the rights of women, girls, and youth were closed in Nicaragua.²⁶

Between 2020 and 2022, we noted that more than half (52.2%) of registered attacks against organizations or groups limit the right to freedom of association, assembly, and expression. Regionally, the main forms of attack entail using legislation and fiscal and administrative processes to limit the ability of organizations function, either to impede or obstruct their legal status (222), their freedom of association (217), or their access to or use of financial resources (178).

TYPES OF ATTACKS

Among the 28,863 attacks registered against women defenders and organizations or groups of women defenders, the types that stand out due to their frequency are harassment; smear campaigns; threats; physical, verbal, and psychological violence;²⁷ surveillance of our everyday practices;²⁸ and excessive use of force. All of these forms of violence can appear in our lives simultaneously, and they escalate in severity within contexts of impunity or with weak mechanisms of protection of our work.

It is worrisome that the systematic attacks that we often face are part of a broader and more complex process of criminalization of human rights defense. **Between 2012 and 2022, we registered 849 arbitrary arrests and 858 launches of criminal, fiscal, or administrative investigations or trials that are not supported by facts or that are clearly based on false information.** As a systematic process, criminalization seeks not only to silence leaders that challenge powerful private and State actors, but also to delegitimize the work of defending human rights in the eyes of the community and society as a whole.²⁹ In addition, we see that criminalization processes depict the defense of human rights as a crime that is punished differently when it is committed by rural, Indigenous, or Afro-descendant women or sex-gender dissidences. In the case of women defenders, the attacks have a cautionary message against us and our social movements that seeks to discipline and control other sister defenders, preserving patriarchal gender mandates by imposing new barriers to the political participation of women and sex-gender dissidences.

25. The count of organizations may repeatedly include the same organization that was attacked in different years or - prior to the change in the registry system in 2020 - on different occasions in the same year.

26. IM-Defensoras. [WHRD Alert] NICARAGUA / Daniel Ortega cancels 29 more feminist and women's rights organizations, with a total of 176 since 2018. 11 October 2022.

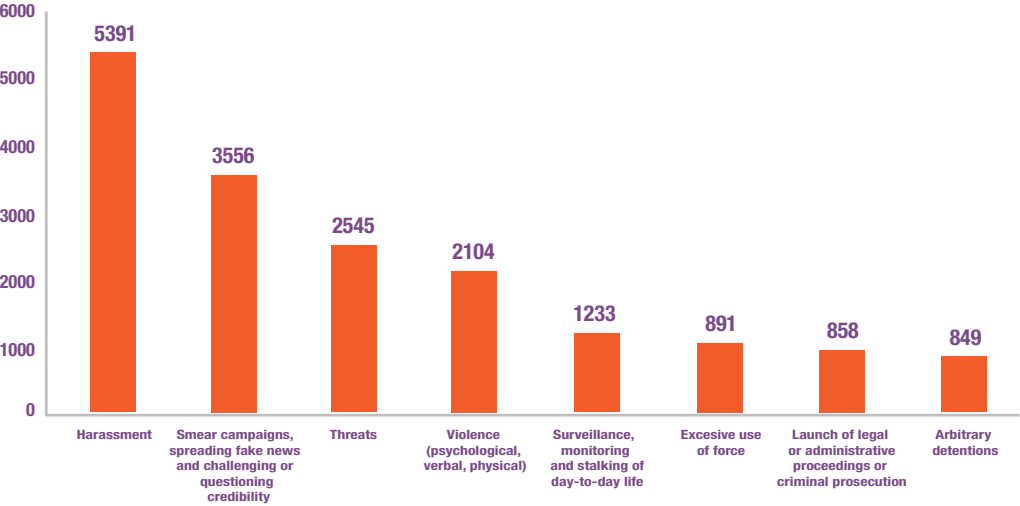
27. We began to document these types of attacks in 2020, thus the number of attacks corresponds to those registered between 2020 and 2022.

28. Ibid.

29. IM-Defensoras. 2023. Internal document on Criminalization in Mexico.

Additionally, one of the clearest expressions of patriarchy is the use of sexual violence³⁰ to send messages of control, power, and sovereignty over our bodies. **Between 2012 and 2022, we registered 475 attacks against women human rights defenders that included a sexual component. Just between 2020 and 2022,³¹ we registered 12 cases of rape, 60 cases of sexual harassment, and 155 cases of sexual abuse.**

Figure 4
Types of attacks against Mesoamerican women defenders 2012-2022



30. There are huge challenges to registering this type of attacks, due to a patriarchal socio-cultural context full of beliefs, norms, and practices that normalize or minimize the severity of sexual violence. Plus, sometimes people stay silent for fear of the assailant or to avoid stigmatization or re-victimization.

31. Registering these three types of sexual attacks separately began in 2020. They were previously registered as “sexual violence” and “sexual abuse”.



A LAS
DESAPARECIDAS
LAS
SEGUIREMOS
BUSCANDO
HASTA
ENCONTRARLAS
#VivasNosQueremos

A LAS
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BUSCANDO
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YO
MI CUERPO
MIS DERECHOS

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AMNISTIA
INTERNACIONAL

**ATTACKS
AGAINST WOMEN
DEFENDERS ARE
PATRIARCHAL
VIOLENCE**

Violence against women in all their diversity, racist and xenophobic violence, transphobic violence, among others, are effective instruments of social control, deepening inequality and destroying the social fabric. In this sense, the socio-political violence against women defenders described in this report manifests in our bodies as part of a continuum of patriarchal, classist, and racist violence.

Despite the challenge posed by the social and cultural normalization of sexist violence, which means that we do not always recognize it and denounce it, we were able to document **specific situations of gender-based discrimination in 39% of the attacks**. This percentage varies significantly country by country, reaching 22.4% in Nicaragua and 76.3% in El Salvador.

The situations registered between 2020 and 2022 included:

 In 19% of the cases, the attacks are a direct response to the work of the organization or group that promotes the defense of women's and LGBTTTIQ+ rights.

 18% are misogynist messages that disparage women defenders because they are women (statements full of hate against women, such as perras, putas, zorras, feminazi, malparidas, [bitch, whore, slut, feminazi] etc.). These attacks are often perpetrated both by unknown online users and by State authorities – during incidents with excessive use of force or arbitrary detentions.

 16% of these situations involve the disparagement of the work and/or achievements of women human rights defenders. They generally seek to disparage us by spreading fake or manipulated information about our private life, our partner, or our sexual life.

 In 13% of the cases, we identified situations of hate based on sexuality, gender identity, age, ethnic or racial identity, etc.

 9% relate to attacks that include contents related to preserving a specific order in society or the community; for example, what a family, a man, or a woman should be (stay at home, be a good mother, how to dress, who owns the land, among others). These messages seek to discipline and control us, challenging our participation in the social and political sphere. Women who are mothers are also questioned for abandoning our role as care-givers and accused of abandoning our families.

 In 8% of situations that included sex discrimination, we identified sexual violence: sexual abuse, rape, harassment, smear campaigns based on the woman defender's sexuality, use of fetishes, manipulation of underwear, or sexualized drawings.

 **Between 2020 and 2022 we identified 68 cases where women defenders were attacked and even killed by their partners or ex-partners.** In these cases, being women and defending human rights may have exacerbated the situation or exposed them to greater violence as punishment for subverting the established order.

THE IMPACTS OF THE ATTACKS

The data registered in the 2020-2022 period also reveal the impacts of the attacks that we suffer. These impacts are exacerbated when we are systematically attacked.

🦋 In 59.5% of the personal attacks and 32.7% of the collective attacks, one of the impacts we identified is the restriction to our fundamental freedoms and rights. Among them, the rights to free expression, association, movement, political participation, education, and health.

🦋 In 12.6% of personal attacks and 36.8% of collective attacks, we registered physical harms where we identified a pattern of excessive and disproportionate use of force by State authorities, and physical attacks committed by para-State actors to obstruct social mobilizations.

🦋 In 26% of personal attacks and 8.2% of attacks during collective actions, we identified risks for the close circle of the woman defender who was attacked, as well as changes in their daily lives.

🦋 We documented 466 personal and 377 collective cases where the attacks were identified as the cause for forced displacement, both internal and out of the country.

🦋 The use of legislations and processes of administrative and fiscal control to limit the ability of organizations to act in the region has affected the access to financial resources (10.2%), the suspension or permanent revoking of legal status (12.9%), and, finally, the temporary or permanent closure of organizations (45.2%). Additionally, the criminalization of organizations is regularly accompanied by smear campaigns and/or the promotion of stigmatizing lists.

Subjection to continuous situations of violence and injustice, both for our human rights work and due to the attacks we face, forces us to be in constant touch with horror, death, and hopelessness. Nevertheless, women defenders and our organizations and communities continue to resist, multiplying ourselves and defending hope, strengthened by our ancestors and by the energy of diverse youth that join our struggles for life. We continue because we enact embodied support within our networks and our collective protection strategies, because we have the power and experience to survive the violence and persevere in our struggles. This belief in the personal and collective power that women defenders have to defend and protect ourselves is what brought us together more than thirteen years ago – through the “pact to care among ourselves” – within the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Defenders.³² Since then, we have made Feminist Holistic Protection our guide to care for our lives and our struggles.



32. Op cit. IM-Defensoras: The Pact to Care among Ourselves. 2010-2021: IM-Defensoras' Approach to Feminist Holistic Protection in Mesoamerica. 2022. <https://im-defensoras.org/en/2023/06/the-pact-to-care-among-ourselves-2010-2021-im-defensoras-approach-to-feminist-holistic-protection-in-mesoamerica/>

**A PRELIMINARY
VIEW AT
2023**



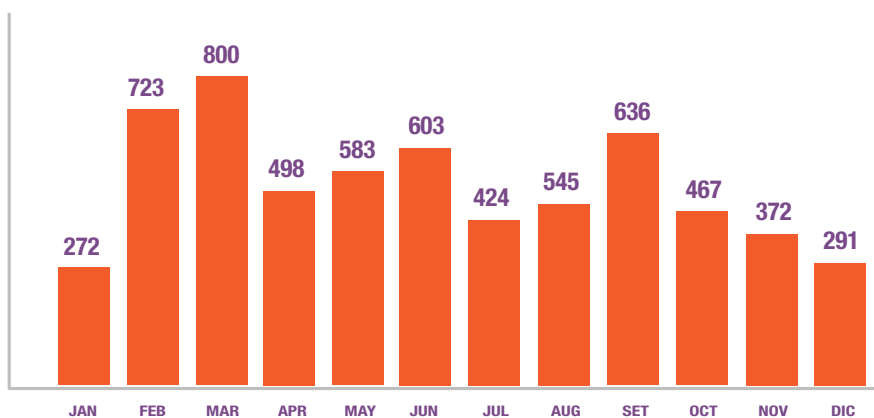
A PRELIMINARY VIEW AT 2023³³

In 2023, we registered 6,214 attacks against at least 1,18834 women human rights defenders and 73 organizations or groups in El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua. Compared to 2022, this is a 13% increase in attacks against women defenders and organizations and groups. In line with the historical trend in our registry, attacks registered in 2023 were primarily perpetrated by actors linked to the State (47.8%).

Ten sister defenders were killed in 2023, among them three trans women who defended the right to transgress the gender order in Mexico and Honduras, and three women defenders who searched for family members in different states across Mexico. Forty-seven other sister defenders were the target of assassination attempts, which, fortunately, were not successful.

Figure 5
Number of monthly attacks against women defenders in
El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua

JANUARY-DECEMBER 2023



In El Salvador and Honduras, we identified the continuity of militarization of territories and attacks against women defenders in relation to the suspension of fundamental rights and freedoms as a result of states of emergency. In Nicaragua, the absolute closure of all spaces for participation and the criminalization and lack of legal protection for women defenders continued, while new repressive strategies were strengthened, such as banishment and revoking citizenship or residence permits. In Mexico, attacks against women defenders of truth, justice, and reparations continued to grow in 2023, both in percentage and severity (21%). Noteworthy are the following, threatening, and surveillance of “searching mothers” and attacks perpetrated by state police during demonstrations demanding the return with life of disappeared persons.

Worryingly, in 2023, there was an increase in our documentation of forced displacements and digital attacks. We documented 240 attacks related to forced internal and external displacements, which is 4 times more than in 2022.

33. Mesoamerican Registry of Attacks against Women Defenders: Preliminary Annual Data - 2023 <https://im-defensoras.org/en/2024/04/mesoamerican-registry-of-attacks-against-women-defenders-2023-preliminary-annual-data/>

34. Total number of women defenders: To avoid double-counting in the total number of women defenders attacked, women defenders who faced both personal and collective attacks are counted only once, representing 84 women defenders in 2023. This number also excludes unidentified women defenders who were part of a collective attacked.



The women defenders forcefully displaced are primarily from Honduras (168) and Nicaragua (69). In Honduras, the displacement of women defenders was internal within the country, taking a collective form due to the mass evictions promoted by the Commission for Agrarian Security and Access to Land. In Nicaragua, 2023 was the year with the highest number of displacements outside the country for women defenders since the beginning of the State repression in 2018.

Meanwhile, **we identified 1,222 digital attacks against Mesoamerican women defenders and their organizations or groups in 2023, accounting for 20% of the total number of documented attacks.** This percentage increases significantly in El Salvador, where the government maintains control and surveillance of the digital sphere. Digital attacks are part of the continuum of violence that women defenders experience, and they are generally linked with other attacks in the physical sphere.



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The historical data presented here, gathered over more than a decade, show how Mesoamerican women defenders are systematically attacked in order to silence our voices and weaken our collective resistance, creating terror around us with cautionary messages for us and for our communities. This violence, far from being a consequence of failed States, is connected to historical and structural forms of oppression that use the justice systems and public security forces – among other actors – to sustain the racist and patriarchal capitalist system.

The analysis of patterns of attacks allows us to identify how violence continues to escalate, and how the COVID-19 syndemic served to set the basis to consolidate the control strategies that continue today. It also allows us to recognize how the social construction of gender is expressed in the types and contents of the harassment, the smear campaigns, the criminalization, and the physical, psychological and sexual violence experienced by women and sex-gender dissidences who defend human rights in the region.

Despite this, women defenders continue fighting for life and building hope. To protect ourselves from the violence that seeks to silence our struggles, IM-Defensoras has spent more than thirteen years promoting Feminist Holistic Protection (FHP). FHP is the pact of caring among ourselves as women defenders from different social movements, identities, and territories in order to face together the violence that affects us, through a convergence in national networks, a regional alliance, and diverse strategies for security, self-care, collective care, and healing.

Our struggles to win full recognition of human rights deserve the guarantee of our right to defend them. This is why we demand:



Recognition and legitimacy of our contributions and our struggles.



Commitment and effective action by States and institutions to stop attacking us to protect private interests.



Strong international mechanisms with the ability to respond when States do not comply with their human rights obligations.



Sustained and flexible support for our protection and strengthening processes.



An end to the violence that we face within our organizational, community, and family spaces.



The guarantee of having legal and policy frameworks as well as protocols in place to ensure our holistic protection and that of those who depend on us.



