

Protecting Human Rights Defenders at Risk

Edited by

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Bartley, P. and Monterrosas, E. Pacheco Ruiz, P. 2020. Resisting a hostile and insecure environment for defending rights in Mexico . In: Nah, A.M ed. Protecting Human Rights Defenders at Risk. Abingdon,Oxon: Routledge, pp. 104-129



Acronyms

ASOTRACAMPO	Farmland Workers Association, Colombia
AUC	Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, The United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia
BPK	Badan Pemeriksa Keuangan Republik Indonesia, Indonesian National Financial Auditor
DAS	Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad, Administrative Security Department, Colombia
ELN	Ejército de Liberación Nacional, National Liberation Army, Colombia
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
FPM	Mecanismo Federal para la Protección de Personas Defensoras de Derechos Humanos y Periodistas, Federal Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists, Mexico
GAULA	Grupos de Acción Unificada por la Libertad Personal, Unified Action Groups for Personal Freedom, Colombia
Komnas HAM	Komisi Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia, Indonesian National Commission on Human Rights
Komnas Perempuan	Komisi Nasional Anti Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan, The Indonesian National Commission on Anti Violence against Women
KontraS	Komisi Untuk Orang Hilang dan Korban Tindak Kekerasan, Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence, Indonesia
KPAI	Komnas Perlindungan Anak Indonesia, The Indonesian National Commission for Child Protection
LGBTIQA*	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning or queer, intersex, asexual and other sexual and gender identities
LPSK	Lembaga Perlindungan Saksi dan Korban, the Institute for Protection of Witnesses and Victims, Indonesia
MORENA	Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional, National

	Regeneration Movement, Mexico
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PAN	Partido Acción Nacional, National Action Party, Mexico
PKI	Parti Komunis Indonesia, Indonesian Communist Party
PPDDH	Programa de Proteção aos Defensores de Direitos Humanos, Brazilian Protection Programme for Human Rights Defenders
	Partido Revolucionario Institucional, Institutional Revolutionary Party
PLHIV	People living with HIV
RED TDT	Red Nacional de Organismos Civiles de Derechos Humanos Todos los Derechos para Todas y Todos, National Human Rights Network; All Rights for All, Mexico
SCAF	Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, Egypt
TNI	Tentera Nasional Indonesia, Indonesian National Armed Forces
UN	United Nations
UNP	Unidad Nacional de Proteccion, National Protection Unit, Colombia

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5 Resisting a hostile and insecure environment for defending rights in Mexico

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Introduction¹

Marisela Escobedo Ortiz became a human rights defender as she pursued justice for the killing of her 16-year-old daughter and other victims of violence in Mexico. Marisela's daughter, Rubi Fraye Escobedo, disappeared in Ciudad Juárez in August 2008. Her body was recovered, burned, dismembered and dumped at a pig ranch near the city in June 2009. Following their daughter's femicide, Marisela and her husband started investigating the case and discovered that Rubi had been killed by her partner, Sergio Barraza Bocanegra. Barraza was found, arrested and confessed to the crime in court, but was later acquitted and released. Marisela began a series of protests against the authorities' decision to release her daughter's killer, until the court overturned the acquittal and sentenced Barraza for murder. On 16 December 2010, an unknown assassin killed Marisela outside the governor's office in Chihuahua, where she was holding a vigil against impunity for her daughter. Marisela was killed despite the fact that state authorities knew about previous threats against her.

Marisela's murder made national headlines, but it is not an isolated case. Violence against human rights defenders remains a serious issue in Mexico with authorities failing to provide adequate protection, despite being aware of the pervasive attacks against them as in the case of Marisela. Notwithstanding the existence of official protection mechanisms at both the federal and the local level since 2012 (further elaborated below), human rights defenders are routinely silenced, with 32 killed in 2017 alone.²

This chapter focuses on the experiences of risk and protection of human rights defenders in Mexico. In the next section, we provide an overview of the hostile and insecure context that defenders face in Mexico. We highlight the lack of guarantees and the wide-ranging violence that defenders confront, shaped by militarised public security strategies and the existence of a multiplicity of perpetrators in a complex environment of corruption, aggravated crime and impunity. Against this backdrop, we highlight the initiatives and efforts of civil society to respond to the insecurities experienced by defenders. We then examine the Mexican government's protection policies, including the current Federal Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists (Mecanismo Federal para

la Protección de Personas Defensoras de Derechos Humanos y Periodistas, FPM). We offer a critical analysis of the government's approach to security, drawn from the perspectives of defenders benefiting from this protection scheme. We emphasise the importance of thinking about protection in alternative, creative and unorthodox ways. We highlight in particular, the significance of distrust amongst human rights defenders towards the governmental institutions providing protection; the importance of protecting those close to defenders, as risk is experienced collectively; as well as the importance of understanding security multidimensionally, taking into consideration mental and emotional wellbeing and digital security amongst other factors. We then focus on civil society responses to the protection of defenders at risk. We examine strategies for building legitimacy and political visibility aimed at creating safer environments and defusing threats in the complex territorial environment of diverse perpetrators in Mexico. We then examine the ways in which experiences of risk, security and protection are gendered and intersectional. We highlight the issue of gender discrimination within human rights movements, and the importance of self and collective care as strategies for sustainable activism.

This chapter draws upon interviews, focus groups and a survey with 75 defenders, 30 men and 45 women, from a wide range of backgrounds and engaged in a broad range of human rights activities in Chiapas, Coahuila, Chihuahua, Jalisco, Mexico City, Nuevo León, Oaxaca, Veracruz, Puebla, Estado de Mexico and Morelos. They worked on issues such as civil and political rights, freedom of expression, enforced disappearances, the rights of political prisoners, indigenous peoples' rights, land rights, environmental rights, the right to health, the right to education, women's rights, LGBTIQ* rights and the rights of migrants and refugees. The participants were aged between 19 and 78 years old, with a mean age of 39.2 years. They described themselves as having conducted human rights work for between two and 24 years, with an average of around 12 years. 77.5 percent described themselves as leading others in human rights work most of the time (rather than following others most of the time).

The complex environment for human rights in Mexico

Mexico is a federal presidential representative democratic republic, in which the President is the head of state and the head of government. The federal government shares sovereignty with 31 Mexican states. In 2000, after seven decades of rule, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI) lost a presidential election, handing power to the National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional, PAN). As Mexico transitioned from authoritarianism to a nominal democracy over the next two decades, the Mexican state has been configuring a public discourse that is officially pro-democracy and human rights. However, structural violence exists in Mexican society, rooted in political corruption, criminality and impunity.³

In 2012, the PRI came back into power under the leadership of Enrique Peña Nieto, who was ousted subsequently in 2018 by Andrés Manuel López Obrador

from the National Regeneration Movement (Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional, MORENA) party. A major coalition of national NGOs reported that under the Nieto administration (and when this research was conducted), there was a large increase in violations of rights and crimes against defenders in the majority of states, at the three levels of government, as well as in the three branches of the state.⁴ Internationally, however, the federal government of President Peña Nieto and his predecessor Felipe Calderón (2006–2012) adamantly and publicly affirmed Mexico's adherence to the main human rights treaties. During the first months of the new President, López Obrador, the same discourse on human rights has continued to prevail. In fact, he created a Commission for Truth and Access to Justice for Ayotzinapa to examine the case of 43 disappeared Mexican students in Guerrero. The Mexican presidencies of the 21st century have exerted leadership on human rights issues in UN forums, even extolled the work of human rights defenders at public events. These assertions were complemented by extensive domestic reforms in 2011 that introduced the recognition of human rights for all persons in the constitution of Mexico.⁵ Furthermore, in 2013, the government introduced the widely heralded General Victims' Law (*Ley General de Víctimas*), in order to provide compensation to victims of crime and human rights violations but it has failed to fulfil this goal since its inception.

However, the positive developments described above coexist with one of the darkest eras for human rights defenders in Mexico's contemporary history.⁶ As reported by the participants in this study, manifestations of the prevalent environment for human rights defenders over recent years include criminalisation, stigmatisation, physical and digital surveillance, arbitrary detentions, extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. Between December 2012 and July 2017, 106 human rights defenders were killed and more than 81 disappeared.⁷ Persistent violence and impunity suggests that attacks and violations against defenders are – at the minimum – tolerated by the state and all its branches, creating pervasive conditions of risk and insecurity for human rights defenders both physically and in the digital sphere.⁸

Threats and attacks against human rights defenders occur in the context of high levels of violence and impunity fostered by Calderón's security strategy of military deployment for public security during his war against drugs. This continued de facto under Peña Nieto's administration, and was formalised with the ratification of the Interior Security Law by the Mexican Congress in 2017. Although this law was overturned by the Mexican Supreme Court two years after its approval with the support of Congress, López Obrador's administration has again strengthened militarisation with the creation of the National Guard, a 70,000 officer force mainly composed and directed by former military officers which began to act in an official capacity in April of 2019. In 2014, after a series of decisions by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the Supreme Court, the Military Criminal Code was amended to ensure that human rights violations and crimes against civilians are investigated and prosecuted by civil authorities. However, the military judicial authorities retain jurisdiction regarding human rights violations committed by members of the armed forces. In 2017, the homicide rate reached

25 per 100,000 inhabitants, the highest peak in 27 years.⁹ The magnitude and ratio of killings by state forces demonstrated the excessive and disproportionate use of lethal force in what the government claims to be legitimate security operations.¹⁰ Commentators suggest that given the magnitude of military force used, Mexico could be considered a humanitarian conflict or a traditional war without necessarily being categorised as such according to international law.¹¹

In recent years, the militarisation of public security¹² introduced a multiplicity of perpetrators acting against defenders. The relationships between them have also become more complex. At the state level, the armed forces and the different police bodies (federal, local, etc.) are often identified as perpetrators.¹³ Furthermore, gender-based violence including rape, is widely perpetrated by military and security forces in Mexico.¹⁴ As reported by our participants, aside from state security forces, private militia, hitmen¹⁵ and other paramilitary groups associated with *caciques* (local or regional bosses),¹⁶ whether in competition or in alliance with state agents, have joined forces making it difficult to identify perpetrators.¹⁷ The mapping of interests and links of collusion are even more difficult when it involves non-state actors, as the logics and rationality of attacks as well as chains of command become more obscure.¹⁸

Mexico has also been described as the home of “the hemisphere’s largest, most sophisticated and violent organised criminal groups”.¹⁹ Criminal organisations are often linked to political elites, social control, drug production and trafficking activities²⁰ and in recent years to megaprojects and territory control.²¹ This criminal activity operates in a context in which approximately 98 percent of crimes committed in Mexico remain unresolved²² and it is in this context of impunity that human rights defenders operate. The disappearance of 43 students from a rural indigenous school in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, in 2014 has become an emblematic example of widespread collusion between organised crime and state agents in cases of grave human rights violations.²³ This case sparked public outrage and massive citizen mobilisation; it also worsened conditions of risk for human rights defenders.²⁴ Two months after evidence of the role of public forces in this case went public, President Peña Nieto declared that public protests related to the Ayotzinapa case were intended to “destabilise, create social disorder while putting the Nation project at risk”.²⁵

Megaprojects related to neoliberal reforms in Mexico have generated significant investment in wind power, hydroelectric, mining and other extractive industries.²⁶ This in turn has promoted alliances amongst state and non-state economic actors to implement those projects, sometimes forcibly.²⁷ As an indigenous grassroots woman defender participating in this study highlighted, these megaprojects are perceived by their communities as “projects of death” destroying forests, animals and damaging the earth and traditional ways of living.²⁸ Defenders working on indigenous rights have been put at risk as they denounce powerful agents with privatisation interests for treating water, woods, minerals and other resources as commodities for profit.

For many human rights defenders, the violence and impunity they live with is linked to a strategy of spreading terror to quell social dissent in Mexico. According to civil society monitors, more than half of the human rights defenders who were victims of enforced disappearances during the 2006–2012 federal administration, were

leaders, or coordinators of social organisations, causing some to believe that social movements were being deliberately targeted.²⁹ As this study made clear, diverse perpetrators use multiple strategies aimed at disseminating terror. As an example, the widely publicised murder of the journalist Rubén Espinosa and woman human rights defender Nadia Vera along with three other women in a single episode in Mexico City in 2015 spread fear amongst human rights defenders throughout Mexico. As a woman defender explained, “This was a political execution, a femicide, including sexual torture. The message was brutal for all our networks; the message was of terror, it was in the capital”.³⁰ Such spreading of terror goes hand in hand with the infliction of different forms of violence towards groups that are part of heterogeneous networks of protection and the defence of human rights; one attack or episode of terror can be experienced in differentiated ways. Some of the participants in this study characterised the Mexican government as being highly capable of sophisticated strategies for the social cleansing, control and repression of civil society.

In many cases, the struggles of human rights defenders in Mexico and the aggressions they suffer are treated as isolated events, with no recognition that there is a human rights crisis in the country.³¹ As a defender expressed, reflecting on the killing of two prominent figures in his movement,

We should have stopped our exposure and activities after the killing of our first companion... we knew that there was a persecution against our movement but since the movement was [built as] as a network, different sectors of the network were attacked. We did not have an integral analysis of the threats against our whole movement... Persecution, imprisonment, killings of local leaders – [all this] was a general strategy.³²

Stigmatisation, smear campaigns and criminalisation have been on the increase. Some participants observed that while there is greater recognition of the value of defending human rights in society in general, some human rights defenders are still characterised as troublemakers, terrorists, defenders of criminals, crazy, and so on.³³ RedTDT highlights that in at least three quarters of the cases, aggressors in threats and attacks against human rights defenders were identified as being state agents.³⁴ The interviews with the human rights defenders in our study consistently made reference to the high-risk environment in which they operate.

On 1 July 2018, Mexicans went to the polls to vote for a new president. In the nine months leading up to the election, 132 politicians were killed,³⁵ a huge increase compared to the run-up to the previous presidential election in 2012, when fewer than ten politicians were killed. Furthermore, civil networks registered more than 185 cases of attacks against journalists and human rights defenders related to the coverage and monitoring of human rights violations during the elections.³⁶ The 2018 election results gave the MORENA party not just the presidency for 2018–2024 but a majority in Congress and the Senate as well as six governorships. MORENA, which dominates the political landscape for the first time, promised to reduce violence and corruption as well as provide redress to victims of human rights violations in the framework of a general amnesty – a high

ideal given the last decade's magnitude of atrocities. As yet, the Mexican state has yet to address the complicated risk environment for human rights defenders and to implement a comprehensive protection policy for them.³⁷

Institutional state protection for human rights defenders

In Mexico, there is an institutional state protection framework for human rights defenders, but it suffers from serious limitations. In 2012, after prolonged efforts from civil society, the Mexican government adopted the Law for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists (*Ley para la Protección de Personas Defensoras de Derechos Humanos y Periodistas*), which created the Federal Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists (FPM).³⁸ According to the Mexican Ministry of the Interior, between October 2012 and December 2017, the Federal Mechanism received 257 petitions from human rights defenders to receive protective measures, 40 of which were rejected.³⁹ Despite the increasing demand for protection since its inception, the financial budget of the mechanism has declined from 128 million Mexican pesos in 2013 (about 6.7 million US dollars) to 15 million in 2018 (approximately 787,750 US dollars). More than 20 civil society organisations have claimed that the government of Mexico is putting the lives of 727 human rights defenders and journalists enrolled in the Federal Protection Mechanism at risk by stating that there is no budget to maintain its implementation.⁴⁰

In addition to the FPM, multiple state mechanisms have emerged in recent years at the local level to protect human rights defenders. These have fragmented the national protection system, sometimes with contradictory standards and a low standard operational quality for protection at the local level.⁴¹ According to official reports by the FPM itself, alleged public servants could be the very people who commit the most aggressions against human rights defenders.⁴² Civil society groups have stressed that there is no integrated and comprehensive public policy that involves relevant federal and state-level authorities in a coordinated manner to provide an effective protection scheme that is accompanied by preventative policies and measures to combat impunity enjoyed by perpetrators.⁴³

The defenders in this study, who applied for and received governmental protection, expressed frustrations with the FPM's protection measures as well as with the unclear and inconsistent criteria used for risk assessment and formal acceptance into the Mechanism. As we elaborate in the section below, some of the main complaints include the insufficient number and continual turnover of personnel and that the protection measures are not implemented swiftly or adequately, especially in urgent cases, coupled with the absence of gender-sensitive, family-oriented and community-focused approaches to protection.

The limitations of institutional state protection measures

In this study, most of those who received FPM protective measures were given what is commonly understood as interventions for their physical security.⁴⁴

For example, they were offered panic buttons, emergency telephones, cameras and alarm systems, direct protection by security forces, the regular surveillance of their houses or NGO facilities by police patrols and were sometimes offered relocation. Some participants expressed distrust at delays in the implementation of protective measures and frustration at the inability of governmental institutions at the local level to act quickly to protect defenders. Another major concern is the increase in the federal government's outsourcing of the installation and set-up of these protection measures to the private sector. This implies that after protective measures have been approved by officials the implementation of those measures are often carried out by private companies with no adequate supervision.

Given the federal jurisdiction in Mexico, the implementation of the protection measures depends on the coordination of federal and local authorities. Generally, our participants reported a lack of coordination between the different authorities which should assume their protection. Despite official protocols requiring local and federal coordination between focal point authorities,⁴⁵ flawed or inexistent coordination is a widespread problem and one of the major challenges for the real implementation of measures for "hard" physical protection, especially those involving local police. This issue can be extremely thorny in several regions in Mexico, where there are open conflicts between different police branches, especially when some of the police are aligned with divergent criminal interests and collude to perpetrate attacks on human rights defenders.

There were different points of view about the effectiveness of the direct protective measures provided by government security forces, in particular, bodyguard accompaniment and escort/ police surveillance close to the defenders' home and workplace. A human rights defender in the north found it useful to be accompanied at specific times by a local police patrol when he entered extremely violent areas, where there are heavy weapons and organised criminal groups. Other defenders were reluctant to be accompanied by security forces since this heightened the perception that they were associated with criminals, even the perpetrators of the threats themselves. They were concerned that this would result in their human rights work and reputation being discredited amongst local civil society allies. As a women human rights defender from Ciudad Juarez told us, "The Victim's Attention Unit [government] offered us a patrol out of our place to take care of us, [but] we rejected that offer. They were putting the enemy close to us; in a good position for surveillance".⁴⁶

Those receiving protection from the FPM perceived it to be bureaucratic; they neither understood the risk assessment methodologies used by FPM staff, nor the decisions and protective measures implemented on their behalf. Another criticism of the FPM is that its staff does not have the necessary skills and training to determine a sound risk analysis for them. As a woman human rights defender from Guadalajara, Jalisco, working on land and environmental rights opined,

It is discretionary, they do not have clear criteria, nor an adequate systematisation... support is discretionary, there are power struggles on the board of officials, they do not really care about us, people in human rights do care, but

the ones taking the final decisions, those on part of the state and the [federal] police do not.⁴⁷

In addition to institutional mistrust, the participants mentioned a lack of contextual understanding of the work of human rights defenders by the government. In a focus group with two human rights defenders working on freedom of expression in Mexico City, one stated,

They had specialists coming to us [to do risk analysis]; they have technical expertise yet they do not understand several things... they do not have deep knowledge of the work of the organisations. We were told recommendations such as, “not everyone should have office keys” “not everyone should know where their colleagues are”...⁴⁸

His colleague concurred, stating “They lack an understanding of the context. They have technical knowledge but... they do an analysis of something they do not know”.⁴⁹

In Mexico there are many people who became human rights defenders because they experienced abuses of power and violations of their human rights. But the condition of being a victim has not limited them; on the contrary, it has propelled them to exercise the right to defend their rights. A recurring problem mentioned by participants was a lack of protection offered to relatives, close contacts and collectives who were also at risk because of the defenders’ human rights work. Furthermore, relatives who report serious human rights violations have frequently become human rights defenders themselves.⁵⁰ This lack of protection for families was of great concern to many, especially women human rights defenders, as they often care for children as they engage in human rights activism. As a defender working on cases of torture and enforced disappearances, a man, stated,

The greatest threat for me is that our relatives suffer an aggression, what are we going to do in order not to put our relatives in risk. Some mothers got to the extreme of saying “I do not care if something bad happens to me but I care if something bad happens to my children”.⁵¹

The lack of provision for families and loved ones was felt particularly acutely by those offered relocation to reduce the risk of attack. They felt that relocation promoted delineation of their communities, interrupted their work in defending rights and isolated them from social networks. As a defender from Ciudad Juárez seeking justice for the sexual torture and arbitrary detention of her daughter stated,

[The local government] proposed us [relocation for protection] that in three days they would take us to [a place in the same country located more than 2,500 kilometres away] ... they would pay just for one month of rent; did not offer other alternatives; [and] told us to take our personal documents without belongings.... this was not a solution ... we wanted justice, the judicial

process was running ... they wanted us to sign at the very moment, to take us out from the city in three days ... they told us if you do not sign then [the government] won't be responsible.⁵²

From the defenders' responses in this study, it is evident that other types of psychosocial protective measures related to wellbeing of defenders, their families and communities intersected with a gender perspective are needed.⁵³ As a woman human rights defender working on cases of torture and enforced disappearances declared, "Security is defined around life [being preserved], yes that's very important, but we as defenders suffer an everyday impact, physical and emotional, the worst is losing one's life, but we are also losing our health, there are no mechanisms addressing that".⁵⁴ As we discuss further below, dimensions related to emotional wellbeing are closely related to the perception of risk and security for human rights defenders in Mexico.

Another critical aspect of protection disregarded by governmental protective schemes concerns digital protection. Even if digital threats were mentioned explicitly as a priority by human rights defenders in this study, surveillance, monitoring and the intervention of communications and devices were openly discussed in several interviews. Some participants took it for granted as part of the inherent targeting of human rights defenders. According to a recent report by civil society groups, sophisticated malware developed by the NSO Group software company, sold exclusively to governments, was used to target and spy on dozens of prominent human rights defenders and journalists in Mexico.⁵⁵ A 2017 report revealed that between 2013 and 2015, Peña Nieto's government made at least 3,000 communication interventions, 40,000 metadata and 11,000 real-time geolocation petitions to communication companies.⁵⁶ Our participants did not report receiving any integral scheme or protective measures from the government to counter digital surveillance.

Measures intending to create an enabling environment for the defence of rights have also not been guaranteed widely by the state protection mechanisms.⁵⁷ For example, the public recognition of the role of human rights defenders by top level and local officials towards specific defenders at risk, even if legally contemplated by the Federal Law of 2012, has not been afforded to any of the defenders in our study. This would have been a helpful measure particularly in situations where their reputation and work have been severely discredited, thus putting them at further risk. As we will address in next section, these types of measures, aimed at bringing visibility and legitimacy to human rights defenders and their work, could deter further attacks.

Beyond governmental responses: civil society networks of protection and strategies for building legitimacy and political visibility

Beyond formal institutional mechanisms of protection, human rights defenders rely on civil society networks for their protection.⁵⁸ Consistent with earlier

literature, building on the work of Keck and Sikkink and others on transnational advocacy networks,⁵⁹ we found that human rights defenders relied on both local and international networks to promote their agendas, develop protection strategies and generate legitimacy and acceptance for their work.⁶⁰ We found that human rights defenders exercised political imagination⁶¹ for resistance as well as diverse non-violent strategies to defend their rights and increase their security. For example, a group of more than 20 national and international civil society organisations (CSOs) came together in 2010 to advocate for the creation of a federal protection policy for both human rights defenders and journalists. Two years later, in 2012, Espacio de Organizaciones de la Sociedad Civil para la Protección de Personas Defensoras de Derechos Humanos y Periodistas (Espacio OSC) became the coordination platform for these CSOs and it continues to monitor protection policy and conducts advocacy for its improvement. CSOs working with human rights defenders include Peace Brigades International Mexico, which provides international accompaniment and training for human rights defenders at risk; Rompe el Miedo, a network that provides preventative security training and which monitors attacks on freedom of expression against human rights defenders and journalists, especially in relation to protest; the National Human Rights Network: All Rights for All (Red Nacional de Organismos Civiles de Derechos Humanos Todos los Derechos para Todas y Todos, RED TDT), which provides a national alert system for attacks against human rights defenders; and Just Associates and the National Network on Women Human Rights Defenders (Red Nacional de Defensoras de DDHH en México), which support women in activism at risk with a feminist perspective.

Civil society protection actors have also invested time in workshops and training on self-protection. This is more evident amongst defenders in more institutionalised organisational environments such as medium or large-scale NGOs with financial stability. Through the survey we found that 81.1 percent of respondents in Mexico – a comparatively high figure – had taken part in trainings on developing strategies to deal with risks derived from their work. Men had received slightly more training than women – 83.3 percent compared to 79.5 percent; and all participants had received an average of 2.8 trainings each. Without asserting that this figure is representative of all defenders in Mexico, it highlights that the topic of self-protection strategies and networking is on the agenda of human rights defenders in Mexico.

In terms of self-protection strategies, the human rights defenders in this study drew upon formal and informal networks to try to reduce possible attacks stemming from their work (see also the chapter on Kenya in this volume). Strategies for visibility and deterrence from attacks on Mexican human rights defenders at the local level are focused on generating legitimacy and acceptance for their work, which can increase the political cost of being attacked.⁶² Just being connected to others gave defenders a sense of safety. As a defender in Mexico City, a man, stated,

What makes me feel safe a lot is that we have a broad network of connections with different groups... with the clergy... with feminist groups, with sexual

diversity groups but also with workers' movements, union movements, farmers, environmental groups and properly our human rights counterparts that claim themselves as human rights organisations. What makes me feel very safe is that there is a broad network in which we include ourselves and we know that [they] support us to keep on with the work we do.⁶³

However, defenders have different levels of access to networks that provide them with political visibility. Defenders based in cities, or working in more institutionalised environments, or in networks of NGOs had easier access to international contacts, compared with those working in community-based organisations focused on human rights issues in their locality. Interestingly, according to participants interviewed in this study, the most relevant networks supporting the work of human rights defenders are located within Mexico. In our survey, 73 percent of respondents in Mexico stated that they received "high" or "very high" levels of support from other people doing human rights work in their own country, while only 45.2 percent of them received such levels of support from people doing human rights work in other countries.⁶⁴

Notwithstanding, international networks of support matter. Some participants mentioned using networks to make their situation of risk more visible amongst foreign embassies in Mexico following Keck and Sikkink's "boomerang" model.⁶⁵ Even in cases in which clear signs of collusion and a clear chain of command between state and non-state actors were reported by human rights defenders, some strategies of dissuasion were undertaken by defenders with official political actors at the international level to put pressure on government officials. In some cases, those strategies were (in turn) reported as effective to prevent aggressions perpetrated by organised crime actors. As a woman defender working on indigenous rights in Chihuahua stated, "We knew that these criminals would now go through their contacts in government, at state level, that they should be dissuaded from harming us... organised crime groups are linked [with the government]".⁶⁶

In spite of the above, strategies aimed at building acceptance and legitimacy in contexts where organised crime operates can have very limited effects.⁶⁷ We found that many strategies to prevent attacks from organised criminal groups do not always have the same effect as they do with some political actors. This may be related to the impunity that these criminal actors enjoy. As a woman defender on Oaxaca working on the protection of human rights defenders said, "[Organised crime] cannot be controlled; in our risk analysis, this actor does not care a lot [about reprisals]; this actor is not really paying [for its violence]; there cannot be a negotiation with them".⁶⁸

In addition, there are divided opinions among human rights defenders about the effectiveness of public visibility as a protection strategy. In some cases, civil society groups deliberately make human rights defenders visible as part of campaigns, for example through the publication of alerts to denounce attacks. Defenders also increase their own visibility by taking on public roles and by building alliances with well-known personalities in order to legitimise their human rights work. However, some participants considered the strategy of visibility to

be counterproductive at specific times; it can have unintended consequences. As a human rights defender reported, “Visibility is such a debate, because it does not guarantee you more safety”. A feminist woman defender working on civil and political rights stated:

If you are protected by your organisation, you are still at risk. If you lower your profile, or leave your organisation, thus being demobilised ... you have no eyes upon you, but at the same time you are vulnerable without your support networks. I have decided to continue being involved with my political network. But I know that also puts me at risk too.⁶⁹

Gender and intersectionality in experiences of risk, support, and wellbeing

Women human rights defenders’ experiences of human rights work, risk and support are gendered and intersectional. Their experiences are shaped by patriarchal expectations about their gender roles. As a woman human rights defender stated,

There are moments where either in a subtle or a very cruel way you have to pay for the patriarchal logic that says “how can you put your children at risk by participating [in politics] if you are a mother, you could be the cornerstone of your home?” those are almost imperceptible “pay checks” that we have to pay.⁷⁰

Women defenders observe the importance of taking gender and intersectionality into account in the development of security protocols and protection initiatives. As a woman defender asserted, “There are protocols not focused specifically towards women; it’s like they’re created in a general way, like if every person was facing the same risks”.⁷¹ Another woman defender reiterated this point:

Something desirable we have proposed for new methodologies is to take into account gender specificities, forms of confronting fear or security plans ... comprising holistically a set of tools to continue working and getting support for living wellbeing, self-care healing, digital security, political incidence and case accompaniment, psychosocial and legal accompaniment, generating safe spaces such as shelters ... Security is just a small part of the picture, protection is not just related to risk, but having the right to live in a context with good conditions to continue our work.⁷²

While non-institutionalised, community networks, comprised of dense emotional bonds, can sustain and promote collective action in risk contexts,⁷³ the gendered psychosocial dynamics in these networks and how they relate to the creation and sustenance of safe spaces, has been under-researched.⁷⁴ In this study, we found that men and women defenders experienced different senses of safety and protection within human rights circles. Specifically, women defenders reported

experiences of discrimination, marginalisation and violence from within their organisations and movements. As a woman defender working on women's rights in Mexico City stated,

Like a lot of women I had to confront harassment and a lack of recognition of my work as a woman human rights defender, most of all in organisations comprising men and women. I used to work in those kind of organisations; afterwards, I became involved in the feminist agenda and I realised that harassment is pervasive. I had different experiences with men human rights defenders that were close to violence. I had to confront this. And usually there are not mechanisms [to address this]; this situation has become normal in organisations. On the other side there is a lack of credibility and recognition to the work of women human rights defenders within organisations. Having recognition for women's leadership within organisations is very difficult.⁷⁵

Another woman defender observed,

When violence comes from within, from the closer sphere, such as sentimental partners, colleagues from the same organisations, machismo within social movements, when that happens, there is a peril of fracture, sometimes even more dangerous than that related to external actors.⁷⁶

Existing literature demonstrates that social actors such as human rights defenders can be very creative in terms of developing resources of resilience for resisting political repression dynamics.⁷⁷ Indeed, over the past decade, women defenders in particular have been developing measures for self-protection, wellbeing and self-care drawing on feminist methodologies.⁷⁸ Such approaches emphasise the importance of collective support, solidarity-building and care for resilience-building with a critical gender perspective, as well as the incorporation of a psychosocial approach to security and self-protection. As a woman defender working on women's rights in Mexico City and Oaxaca said,

When I give psychosocial support to women defenders, I've found myself in high risk situations; but I also have to contemplate, personally, which strategies I'm building for myself. It also has to do with feminist theory, or the feminist movement – [these have] given me a lot for my healing processes; I am more conscious about my security.⁷⁹

Being able to share feelings and experiences of vulnerability are a crucial part of building collective wellbeing practices. Another woman defender observed,

Women human rights defenders hear and accompany painful and tense situations, if you add the fact that one is passing through domestic violence for example, of course you can get affected by that. When we analyse security

incidents, me and my companions have learned to open [the discussion] on our feelings, we have passed through very complicated emotional processes.⁸⁰

In contrast, socio-cultural gender norms make it difficult for men defenders to show weakness. As a man working on civil and political rights in Mexico City said,

There's a very interesting thing about the duty of the defender, so you couldn't be weak; and if you're a man even more, because of the mandates of the hetero-patriarchal society, c'mon, you're here to help, so there isn't much of a chance to know our limitations too. We can't say no...⁸¹

Some defenders find it challenging to establish intra-organisational support networks in environments where violence is normalised. As a grassroots defender, a man, with experience working in both rural and urban contexts stated, "Certain people in my team, at times, think that the risks we face, because of the job we do in this kind of conflict, is inherent to the work itself, so they take it as something normal and natural".⁸²

These prevailing dynamics are framed in a context of socio-cultural expectations about how martyrdom and invincibility associated with the struggle for human rights must prevail at all costs.⁸³ In Mexico, there are particularly high expectations about human rights defenders who seek justice for family members who have been subject to serious human rights violations. As a woman defender working on cases of torture and enforced disappearances observed,

Relatives becoming defenders are resisting, giving their voice, defending their cases, torture survivors are in jail, and their relatives give their voice, for the disappeared young people, relatives are the ones searching for them [...] a father and a mother will never get tired of looking for justice, they are the ones at the forefront demanding justice.⁸⁴

Mothers seeking justice in cases of femicide, extrajudicial executions or disappearances are expected to make a greater sacrifice as woman human rights defenders, while simultaneously being judged for challenging pre-established social norms within the context of Mexican machismo by not remaining within the private sphere.⁸⁵

Conclusion

Mexico has signed numerous treaty commitments within the Inter-American and United Nations systems, and has been a champion of human rights standards on the international stage and in domestic level reform. In 2012, it approved the Law for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists and established a Federal Protection Mechanism for human rights defenders. Yet despite the state's outward commitment to human rights, the expansion of the Federal Protection

Mechanism and the political pressure from civil society and international bodies, defending human rights in Mexico remains a dangerous occupation. Our research showed us that a diverse repertoire of attacks exists against human rights defenders across Mexico. Even with the electoral party transitions in the 21st century, the militarisation of public security, the expansion of megaprojects and the escalation of complicity of governmental actors with organised crime have generated a hostile environment for the defence of rights.

In theory, Mexico has institutional resources to prevent, prosecute and punish crimes against human rights defenders; the question remains whether Mexico has the political will to do so. Successive Mexican governments have failed to ensure accountability for crimes against human rights defenders carried out by federal and state actors, or by non-state actors. The government continues to minimise the extent and nature of human rights violations committed against human rights defenders. High levels of impunity persist, along with pervasive failure to provide reparations to victims of crime. The lack of effectiveness of state institutions and the complicity of state actors in crimes and human rights violations have driven human rights defenders to find alternative solutions and allies for their protection and support.

A paradox exists in the institutionalisation of protection. Despite investment into and the growth of the Federal Protection Mechanism since 2012, it has fallen short in many ways – it focuses primarily on the physical security needs of individuals in a reactive way; it does not create an enabling environment for the defence of rights; it does not provide adequate protection to communities, families and loved ones; it does not provide psychosocial protective measures or meet the digital security needs of defenders at risk. The lack of coordination between federal and local authorities involved in protection remains a key concern amongst human rights defenders participating in this study. The protection schemes proposed by the Mexican government are not tailored sufficiently to the experiences and needs of human rights defenders within their communities and families; they overlook the real contexts in which human rights defenders operate. These factors generate distrust amongst defenders towards the state institutions that are supposed to protect them.

Our research shows that human rights defenders have developed many diverse strategies designed to defend their rights and increase their security. They have generated strategies of legitimisation, visibility and dissuasion, as well as building solidarity with civil society networks locally and transnationally. Human rights defenders reported that generating public legitimacy and acceptance for their work was effective at increasing their protection in some cases, for example, with the use of international and local networks of protection to increase the political cost of being attacked. Strategies of dissuasion through engagement with diplomats have at times also worked, suggesting that Mexican political actors may be sensitive to international pressure given that it is the Mexican state's intention to be perceived internationally as a protector of human rights. There were divided opinions about the use of visibility as a protective strategy; while some benefited from increased public profile, some experienced higher risks.

Women human rights defenders highlighted that their experiences of risk and protection support differed from their male counterparts; they emphasised the importance of using an intersectional lens to understand risk, security and protection in human rights work. Women defenders highlighted that organisational and collective spaces were not always safe spaces and free of risk for them. Women defenders emphasised the importance of self and collective care especially in the framework of feminist activism in Mexico; this may have crucial implications for protection that could be further explored, adapted and expanded beyond the feminist movement. Last but not least, we found that socio-cultural understandings about gender inform constructions of risk. For example, we found a higher propensity to assume risk amongst human rights defenders as well as for relatives of victims of serious human rights violations who became defenders.

To die for my work

We do not see
objectively
people think
we want to be notorious.
I do not want
the fire line,
alerts
suspend.
I do not want to be a martyr
Break my struggle
we all have a day and time.

I was in a shelter,
under surveillance
day and night
without being able to see my son.

Isolation

constantly shifting,
a “friendly solution”.
The adrenaline is like an addiction,
my future is this.

I do not want to die now
when the criminals want me to,
I will die struggling. With that vision
I take care of myself
under fire, I respect certain rules.
A bodyguard
I told him: If I die, please give this
to my son. He replied
“If you are killed
I will be dead too”.

There are certain things that I do not tell.
There are several things I do not know:
how to encrypt information,
keep things safe,
a sound and structured security vision,
contingency
plan.
I do not want to die for my work,

I want to die
old.
So far I have learned how to say no
to protect myself.

Composed by J.A. Mensah

This verbatim poem was created from the interview transcript of a woman human rights defender in Mexico working on women's rights and enforced disappearances.

Notes

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