

## **DesTieRRRadas (Land-deprived): Making visible the struggles and resistance of Human Rights Defenders that confront socio-environmental conflicts in Guatemala and El Salvador.**

The investigation has allowed the documentation of **specific violations of Human Rights suffered by women who defend, through 18 collectives, the rights to land, water** and, in general, the environment in El Salvador and Guatemala.

### **1. The incursion of national and transnational companies: the origin of the conflicts.**

In 2017, 312 Human Rights Defenders were killed worldwide for their peaceful work in 27 countries, according to data from the Front Line Defenders organization. The previous year the deaths totaled 281.

**As there is greater presence of women in environmental struggles, there is also an increase in the number of all sorts of aggressions to these women.** Data from the Mesoamerican Registry of Attacks on Human Rights Defenders indicate that between 2015 and 2016 there were 2,197 attacks against female Rights Defenders in the region, a 30% increase in comparison to the 2012-2014 period. These include the figures in El Salvador (102), Guatemala (231), Honduras (810), Mexico (862) and Nicaragua (192). In fact, women Defenders of land and natural assets were the most attacked, with 609 attacks. In that same period, it is estimated that 21 of these Rights Defenders were murdered, according to the same Registry, figures which could be higher.

Other aggressions that Women Rights Defenders face as a result of their activism are intimidation and psychological harassment (30%); slander, accusations and public campaigns of disrepute (12%) and threats or warnings, often followed by ultimatums (11%).

**It should be noted that the State, as an institution, is the main aggressor of female Rights Defenders in the Central American region: 54% of the identified aggressors are police, military, public officials or authorities at different levels of the administration, and most of them commit their aggressions during the Rights Defenders' activities of resistance to business projects.** Therefore, it is a violence that has a strong gender bias, increasing as women's participation in the mobilizations for the defense of rights intensifies.

### **2. Entryways and consequences of women's Right Defenders' Activism**

Women face specific problems in these contexts, given their greater relationship with natural assets (water and land). To this it must be added that usually the irruption of large investments leads to greater labor exploitation, an increase in wage

inequality, invisibility and intensification of care work, and an increased violence against women.

**Gender discrimination questions women who defend public reforms, leaving them isolated and without network support as well.** Society questions their "abandonment" of the tasks for which they are presumably born. This questioning usually takes place among families and communities.

An increased female presence in the public scene is not widely regarded as a constructive way to defend society's interests, and unlike in the men's case, women have to endure accusations over their private lives, such as: they go out to meet their lover, to practice prostitution, or to cut loose, due to a different sexual orientation.

Another significant fact is that **most of the interviewees expressed having had discrimination and open questioning of their abilities by the men who fight alongside them.** Some have even suffered sexual harassment from colleagues in the organizations where they worked.

**The way they are most commonly assailed is through their relatives and acquaintances.** It is the chosen way for them. Contrary to the male Defenders, which are attacked through their professional careers, female Defenders are harassed with their personal and familiar lives. As a matter of fact, many times these attacks are undertaken against the relatives themselves, especially against daughters, something highly uncommon if the Defender is a man.

Moreover, the strategy carried out by the media to justify gender violence, through the defamation and sexualization of protests, combined with the increasing visibility and leadership roles adopted by female activists in environmental conflicts, due to their closer bond with natural resources, makes up for an unsustainable situation for them

### **3. Breaking/Establishing Networks**

Generally, women Defenders of Rights **garner the greatest support to establish new networks from other women Defenders of Rights, primarily from their community environment,** their hometowns, and local NGOs, with whom they share like-minded interests.

For them it is also crucial to count on the support of their families and local communities, since their stakeholder's activism entails helping those closer to them as well. Nevertheless, neither of these parties' support is usually unanimous, which sometimes leads to some painful breakups and the ensuing pursuit of new relations that are more akin to their ideals.

*For some, the hardest time surges from the conflict with their families.* It is noteworthy that several have signaled that the opposition of their political families, such as brothers, parents or other relatives, has had a deep impact in them, paving the way for

them to break these relations. There are even some exceptional cases in which children have confronted their mothers because they disapprove of their activities.

Among those interviewees that remain with the same husbands or partners it was a common shared thought that their partners have experienced “swinging” attitudes towards them as they became more empowered. Some even admitted feeling more appreciated by their men, who now increasingly value their domestic work, whereas not long ago these same men were prone to looking down on them as well as resorting to domestic violence, verbal and physical. Thus, even though not every male partner collaborates in the activism of the women Defenders, they at least respect their fight. All the women valued having support inside the couple, recounting how valuable this is for their ultimate success. Notwithstanding, many also relate how their partners often appeal to them to quit this activism, adducing that it is for “their own protection” or “to avoid unnecessary risks”.

It is noteworthy that owing to the workshops and events being organized by national and regional organizations many women now have access to much broader networking opportunities, establishing bonds with like-minded people that otherwise could hardly take place.

#### **4. They would do it again: the fight has led them to great personal transformations**

The women Right Defenders’ activism accounts for **substantial personal changes** for all of them. The social context in which all of them grew up, in rural areas of Guatemala and El Salvador, is far from being favorable to the rise of female leaders, but their participation in the defense of nature’s resources has enabled them to “empower” themselves in vastly positive ways. It has changed their lives from a merely housewife lifestyle to one of preeminence in their societies, something they never thought they could accomplish. In those cases where adult or elder women undertook this activism, many acknowledge having changes so drastically that they could barely recognize themselves.

Although they also mention negative aspects, such as the loss of freedom, threats and lawsuits, social disrepute or family problems; most of these women recognize that these difficulties are not enough to hamper their fight for the land, water, forests or rivers. Moreover, the struggle has opened their eyes to the political, social and judicial situation of their countries, and thus they feel satisfied with the change experienced and the balance of their work.

In general, they affirm **that they have learned to feel freer, stronger, braver, more valuable and, above all, much more visible in their communities as well as at home**. At the moment they state that through their participation in resistance movements or in organizations or political parties they are much more aware of their ability to change their reality. This leads to a more egalitarian society in both general

and personal aspects, a society where women and men are equal and can resort to all the government instances on equal grounds.

The interviewees are convinced that they would act in the same way if new conflicts arise in their territories, where they all continue inhabiting. Likewise, the changes and transformations have taken place owing to women from every age: from those who already had a social and political commitment since a very young age or who are now young, to more mature and even older women who were never involved before in social movements and that now are those that encourage fellow women to get mobilized.

They emphasize that they have learned the core need of protecting themselves further and better. In fact, several admitted having faced serious situations of gender violence at home, some even death threats and injuries, but they claim that since they began to mobilize they are more aware of their rights as women and know how to better defend themselves. "We have opened our eyes", they point out, which ultimately means that they have discovered how far they can accomplish on their own.

Hence, defending everybody's resources, such as the land, rivers or forests, has evolved into a holistic defense against other major issues, like gender violence.

## **5. Some recommendations**

### FOR STATES

1. There must be public recognition of the reality of violence against women Defenders, with registries that have a distinct disaggregation over genre, as well as acknowledging States' responsibility in the violence and threats these women suffer.
2. Policies and measures must be carried out to enable effective investigations of the aggressions, persecutions, and threats endured by this collective, training public officials over this matter to end with the widespread immunity of perpetrators.

### FOR SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS

1. Local social organizations must continue to advance in the gender perspective of their actions to eliminate practices that are discriminatory for women Human Rights Defenders, incorporating a feminist perspective and improving their participation in decision-making.
2. Carry out training and support actions for their safety, which includes both equipment and special means of protection.

### THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

1. The approval of a legally binding international treaty that regulates the relationship between companies and human rights is essential. In addition, this instrument should include in its articles a special reference to avoid the specific violence suffered by women who defend rights against the illegal actions that abound in the business world, with mechanisms for observation and evaluation against discrimination and violence against women rights Defenders, as it is clearly stated in the UN Resolution of 2013.

[This is an unofficial translation of the Report “DestieRRadas”. The Full report in Spanish can be accessed [here](#)]