

# IM-DEFENSORAS

Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Mujeres  
Defensoras de Derechos Humanos

---

Case Study – Intersectional feminist  
perspectives in practice

FIGHTING FOR BODY RIGHTS SINCE 1933



# INTRODUCTION

---

The Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras) is a regional political movement of women human rights defenders (WHRDs), organisations, networks and multiple social movements. The Initiative operates from national networks in El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico, and with allied organisations in Nicaragua and Guatemala. Recognising the diversity of WHRDs, IM-Defensoras drives the Feminist Holistic Protection (FHP) framework to collectively strengthen the lives and wellbeing of WHRDs, as well as the sustainability and dignity of human rights struggles in various countries in the region. The FHP framework recognises that violence caused by the work of WHRDs is closely linked to gender discrimination; it therefore seeks to generate a strong social fabric that recognises the contributions and protection needs of WHRDs, provides them with access to resources for their protection and empowerment, and enables them to sustain their defence actions in conditions of security and sustainability.

The main objective of IM-Defensoras is to enable WHRDs in Mesoamerica to carry out their work and activism in safe and dignified conditions. The Initiative's strategic objectives are as follows:

- To position Feminist Holistic Protection as a key approach to the protection of WHRDs in the agendas and actions of various national, regional, and international actors.
- To strengthen WHRDs in their leadership and wellbeing, with capacities to build new forms of activism that counteract the impact of violence and ensure the sustainability of social movements.
- To build a strong IM-Defensoras, that is the basis for Feminist Holistic Protection of Mesoamerican WHRDs at the local, national, regional, and international levels.

IM-Defensoras applies the FHP approach through nine interconnected strategies implemented by the national WHRD networks and the regional structure. It is through the strengthening of these national and community networks that the Initiative aims to create a strong and cohesive collective organisation, with organisational capacities in FHP in the face of a hostile and challenging context.

Currently, the FHP framework is implemented as a political vision and practice based on four main pillars and the nine strategies that are continually reviewed.<sup>1</sup> The four pillars are as follows:

1. Putting care at the centre of activism. This is an act of justice that reconnects with the web of life, buen vivir,<sup>2</sup> and individual and collective wellbeing. It transforms movements by questioning a culture of sacrificial activism and positioning oneself as a basic political strategy to confront violence and transform the system.
2. Defiance. We recognise that WHRDs are diverse, and transgressive, that they are present in all social movements, and that they have their own specific ways of dealing with violence.

3. Context analysis. We challenge the system that harms and exploits our bodies and territories, and we analyse risk through this lens. We use a broad understanding of risk that integrates gender indicators and facilitates the recognition of the specific violence that impacts struggles, communities, and intimate spaces.

4. Woven together. We see protection not as an individual matter, but as a collective process and capacity that enables us to take care of ourselves together, in our communities, in our lands, and based on our own wisdoms.



The nine strategies within the FHP framework are led by WHRDs who are active in national and community networks and a regional space where WHRDs from different social movements come together. The strategies are applied according to the priorities in each context and the FHP needs of WHRDs and their communities:

- National protection networks lie at the heart of the work of IM-Defensoras, and are woven by and for WHRDs in various countries in Mesoamerica. The capacities of WHRDs to apply the FHP strategies are strengthened through training processes, according to context, culture, and interests.
- Accompaniment to WHRDs, their organisations, and communities in situations of violence. This accompaniment includes risk analysis, protection plans, psychosocial care, health, healing, permanent shelter spaces (including two safe houses: Casa El Abrazo in Mexico and Casa Marinela in El Salvador), and temporary shelter spaces, according to needs.
- Self-care, collective care, and healing to increase capacities for personal, collective, and community care, to recover from violence, and to build a joyful and non-sacrificial activism. IM-Defensoras operates two healing houses where WHRDs and team members can go for a stay (Casa La Serena in Mexico and Casa La Siguata in Honduras).

- Document, from a feminist perspective, the violence experienced by WHRDs in each country and at the regional level through the Mesoamerican Registry of Attacks<sup>3</sup> against Women Human Rights Defenders.
- Communication and advocacy for protection. This consists of supporting the struggles of WHRDs, alerting others about the violence WHRDs face, demanding accountability from states and other powerful stakeholders, thus enabling solidarity to be activated.
- Promotion of digital care, building infrastructure and capacities for digital safety and self-care in the face of continual increases in access to and use of online spaces.
- Mobilising resources that make autonomous organising and protection based on needs and knowledge of WHRDs possible.
- Systematisation of experiences and learning by further developing the FHP framework to strengthen the Initiative's work and generate collective knowledge.

## THE SELF-CARE, COLLECTIVE CARE, AND HEALING STRATEGY

---

This document analyses how IM-Defensoras implements one of its regional strategies, the self-care, collective care, and healing strategy. The regional vision that guides this strategy, as well as the other eight strategies, has been and continues to be a process of constant construction, reformulation, and personal and collective learning.

Within the FHP framework<sup>4</sup> it is possible to understand care, self-care, collective care, and healing in the following way:

Care	Care is at the heart of IM-Defensoras' feminist political commitment, since it implies the recognition of women's contribution to the protection of life (our own, that of other human beings, and other creatures as well as the planet as a whole). In this sense, it is a transgressive component that questions capitalist, racist, individualistic, and patriarchal models, and builds a political practice of the world we want to live in.
Self-care	This involves accepting our vulnerability as WHRD's, listening to our bodies and attending to their needs, taking responsibility for them, and deciding what we can do to meet those needs. We have opened up spaces to give ourselves permission and, above all, the right to talk about these impacts; but also to recognise our strength, our courage and wisdom to confront violence, to continue fighting with our communities, and to renew hope. We have validated and supported the rest and health needs of many activists through resources and time to listen to our bodies and recover our energy.

Collective care	<p>We recognise that as WHRD's we are interdependent and interconnected. In this sense, we are convinced that our networks of defenders save lives and that each one of us contributes to them with our knowledge, resources, and experiences, while also taking from the network what we each need.</p> <p>Based on the recognition of this right, we take care of ourselves together, collectively and in our communities, combating capitalist and individualistic approaches to self-care and wellbeing. We do this through self-care workshops, accompaniment of organisations and communities, respite and healing stays at Casa La Serena and Casa La Siguata, through participatory diagnoses, training processes, accompaniment, campaigns, production of materials, etc.</p>
Healing	<p>This is a living and ongoing process that strengthens WHRDs and their collectives by transforming wounds and pain into experiences and learning. It is a political path that articulates ancestry, communality, and spirituality. It is a process that recovers ancestral wisdom, the connection with mother earth and spirituality in order to heal historical violence that connects the body-territory.</p>

Self-care, collective care, and healing are three processes and dimensions that are dynamically intertwined. They make it possible to place care for life, people, and communities at the centre of all political action, to protect the integrity of many WHRDs and to enable the continuity of struggles.

## SELF-CARE

---

Reflections on self-care originated within IM-Defensoras at the First Mesoamerican Meeting of Women Human Rights Defenders, held in 2010 in Oaxaca, Mexico, from which the IM-Defensoras emerged as a political network. At this meeting, it was identified that the multiple forms of violence were having a detrimental impact on the lives and movements of WHRDs, and it was therefore necessary to coordinate to protect the struggles of all WHRDs.<sup>5</sup> Some of those who attended the meeting described this as a pivotal moment:

“We came together at this gathering to understand what was happening, how structural and patriarchal violence was imprisoning women defenders. We opened a space of trust in order to analyze how we were feeling, how we were perceiving reality, how it affected us. We shared that women defenders were sad and angry; that we were exhausted. A part of us was silenced, perhaps a bit forgotten about ourselves and it only took turning on the tap as they say – the water tap – to begin somehow to let out the pain, the sadness.”<sup>6</sup>

I think that the space was key to giving us the courage to talk about the fact that we were in pain, tired, with a lot of grief, and I feel that it hit the nail on the head in an intersectional analysis that not only has to do with class, but also has to do with gender and also has to do with how we dissect how women in the communities are affected in a different way. We were looking at how the ways of taking care of themselves or of healing began to be different from the very beginning.

Ana María Hernández, IM-Defensoras

In the early years of IM-Defensoras, there was broad reflection on the main causes of physical and emotional exhaustion of WHRDs.<sup>7</sup> The strategy to be followed was to promote an activism that was not based on sacrifice but on enjoyment and pleasure,<sup>8</sup> and that also responded to WHRDs' experiences and needs in a context of structural and patriarchal violence. Through diagnostic workshops in various countries, IM-Defensoras began to explore WHRDs' perceptions of their care. The issue of self-care began to gain a space for reflection and legitimisation.

"So, as part of the IMD, what we did at the beginning was, I remember, we went to the countries, Ana and I went to each of the countries in the region and listened to the compañeras [fellow defenders] and heard what they were doing in terms of their activism, but also in terms of their care practices. And I think Ana and I had a methodological proposal that already included working with didactic tools such as the Cartas del Alma, which already included the ritual theme and so on, but I think that this proposal was fed a lot by what the compañeras [fellow defenders] in each of the countries were also doing or were asking us for. I remember that after that trip, very soon Ana returned to El Salvador, for example, with a proposal to work on grief, because the colleagues there had had the case of a colleague who had committed suicide. But as well as doing some workshops to diagnose what practices the compañeras [fellow defenders] were doing, what the issue of care meant to them, self-care in particular, we talked about self-care. We took advantage of these trips to make questionnaires that we then systematised and which were our first questionnaires, our first, let's say, regional diagnosis."

Nallely Tello, Consorcio Oaxaca

During 2012 and 2013, diagnostic workshops were held at the regional level with the aim of listening to WHRDs, understanding their practices and visions of self-care, and gathering experiences and needs on self-care.<sup>9</sup>

"The Nicaraguan compañeras [fellow defenders] had worked with Capacitar (International), but also in several places there were already elements of herbalism... So we found that although it was incipient, there was already a lot of work in terms of thinking about what tools we could use in our movements for wellbeing. From there, I think what we started to do was to follow the path of listening."

Nallely Tello, Consorcio Oaxaca

Between 2012 and 2014, self-care groups were formed within the national WHRD networks. It began to be recognised that self-care directly touched the bodies and lives of women defenders, which has to do with their personal and collective history as well as their lands.

“Another key moment was how to understand that women defenders do not die or are not attacked just because they are killed by governments or the powers that be, but we began to document, to see that many had died of illnesses... There was a moment, a memorial for those who were no longer there and many were women who were no longer there because they had died of illnesses and aggressions not recognised as human rights violations, attacked by their husbands, by all this machismo and all that... I think these were key moments for building a broad understanding of risk, and the need to gradually build this framework of feminist holistic protection recovering the fact that women are affected differently by the context of our bodies and the impacts on our bodies, and that this intersects with the social condition of being socially marginalised.”

Ana María Hernández, IM-Defensoras


**An important advance in our way of understanding the strategy was the need to dismantle the patriarchal mandate of ‘living for others’ in which women defenders have been socialized. We began to question activism’s culture of sacrifice, exhaustion, and giving one’s life for the struggle; and thinking about self-care as a feminist practice that challenges the current system, including practices within our movements.<sup>10</sup>**

## COLLECTIVE CARE

---

The notion of collective care was manifested in the actions and practices of the national networks, and in the close accompaniment of diverse compañeras [fellow defenders], communities, and organisations. IM-Defensoras launched regional self-care and security funds. In response, not only were self-care proposals generated, but also collective care actions that sought to strengthen organisations. The Initiative began to systematise how self-care, collective care, and community care actions were being carried out in Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico, and Honduras. At the same time, members began to train in self-care and collective care tools, together with the organisation Capacitar Internacional, and to take up the knowledge of indigenous peoples.

There was no single moment when the notion of self-care was transformed into collective care; rather, the validation of the term was the result of a process of reflection. Yet it is clear that this process has gone hand-in-hand with the process of legitimising care as a set of habits, a set of transformations, of reflections on the work of women defenders, and a proposal for FHP that differentiates itself from a culture of "care fashion" and neoliberalism.



**Self-care is not possible if we cannot contextualize it and construct it to strengthen our collectives, movements, and protection networks.<sup>11</sup>**

“And collective care refers to our family, but importantly to our spaces of collective organization and movement ... the way we relate to each other in our work; how we can take care of ourselves to share the burdens but also share power. Taking care of ourselves entails challenging power, the power relations among us, strengthening leadership, acting in solidarity, seeking mechanisms in our organizations to resolve conflicts in a constructive manner, collectively taking care of ourselves in the face of risk, talking about our emotions, having the opportunity to begin destroying judgement, guilt... We must find ways to strengthen even our work benefits, to receive a fair salary for what we do, to be recognized as organizations and defenders. All of this is part of the collective care package and it all goes together.”<sup>12</sup>

“We always said that although we talked about self-care as the name of the strategy, we did talk about the importance of collective care in the contents we handled, but the women from Guatemala also felt that the issue of healing was not visible when we talked about self-care and collective care. So that is also why the name was expanded, the name of the strategy in an exercise of listening and of something that I think is a vocation of the Initiative and of the organisations that are part of it, which is to try to make us all feel included.”

Nallely Tello, Consorcio Oaxaca

This exercise in listening and constant learning has allowed IM-Defensoras to redefine the idea of self-care, collective care, and healing as transgressive practices and knowledge necessary to strengthen WHRDs and movements. The experience was and continues to be cumulative.



# HEALING

---

IM-Defensoras has been providing spaces for WHRDs to breathe, renew energy, and heal since 2013. The first healing stay (in August 2013) was an individual stay by a Guatemalan woman defender, a Mayan indigenous leader. She was in a situation of extreme exhaustion due to persecution by the State because of her work as a defender.

There were three respite and healing stays for WHRDs in 2015. The first, with two women defenders, tested a package of methodologies and therapies developed by Consorcio Oaxaca with good results; the second, with three women defenders, implemented for the first time the 10-day temporary respite and healing stay model; the third stay tested a family stay model.

The experience of the respite and healing stays led to a regional agreement, promoted and led by Consorcio Oaxaca, to build a space for respite and healing, at Casa La Serena in Oaxaca, Mexico. In order to give substance to this dream of having a house for respite and healing, focus groups were held with women defenders from the various countries. These generated inputs on a number of issues, including: what type of house would be needed, and what characteristics should it have, to be a welcoming space for women defenders; what therapies or care services the house should offer; what criteria should guide the selection of women defenders to go on the respite and healing stays; the length of each stay; and types of stay (individual, collective, family). The results of these focus groups guided the next steps, and Casa La Serena was opened in August 2016. Subsequently, in 2021, Casa La Siguata was created in Honduras. For this experience, the learning and models of Casa La Serena were revisited and enriched with the cosmovisions of the native peoples of Honduras and the wisdom of the colleagues of the Network of Women Human Rights Defenders of that country.

# INTERSECTIONALITY

---

Intersectional analysis is woven into IM-Defensoras' thinking and action on self-care, collective care, and healing of WHRDs. In this sense, it is recognised that:

"Intersectionality gives us an awareness of how the matrix of oppressions operates and how it manifests itself in the lives, bodies and communities of women defenders."

Jelena Dordevic, IM-Defensoras

"The Initiative works with a conception of intersectionality from which the factors, elements and characteristics that make up a group or a partner and their life history are understood. And that when they are attacked, threatened or suffer from attrition, they experience it from that specificity, their specificities, in their contexts. And all of this is very complex."

Ana María Hernández, IM-Defensoras

Women human rights defenders are diverse: Their lives are intersected by multiple conditions, including ethnicity, social class, educational level, gender identity, and sexual orientation, among others. The threats that women defenders face intersect with these identities. Acknowledging these specific experiences and understanding how these identities and conditions intersect is indispensable.

The dimensions of care are multiple: For IM-Defensoras, care encompasses the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and energetic dimensions. Each of these dimensions is important and key to the work of self-care, collective care, and healing.

“When the groups come to the Casa [La Serena], the first thing we do is conduct a diagnostic interview prior to the stay to listen to their needs, to find out where they are in their lives, what issues they want to work on. And on that basis we put together the programme. But it is not that we say: “we are going to do it this way because we want to”; rather, it starts with listening to the needs of the compañeras [fellow defenders] and on that basis, with the range of tools we have, which are the therapists, healers, activists and others, we say: “now I use this [tool], or this one...”. Trying to meet the needs.”

Nallely Tello, Consorcio Oaxaca

In a context of different oppressions, it is not possible to have a single model of care or a single therapist to address the needs of all WHRDs. The IM-Defensoras model is based on having a holistic and complementary vision of care, with a broad network of therapists, and making use of different techniques and healing tools that respond to the specific needs of each group or person.

“Often the same colleagues cannot explain, or rather we cannot all explain with our thoughts what is happening to us. So the fact that there is a diversity of therapists who handle different techniques in some of these five dimensions (physical, mental, spiritual, energetic and emotional), what it does is that sometimes we colleagues feel the accommodation of something that we didn't understand, you say “ah, I understood that this is so and so because such and such”, but if we didn't have that range of therapies, that range of possibilities, I think it would be much more difficult, to find ourselves from different levels and from these different perspectives that I was telling you about.”

Ana María Hernández, IM-Defensoras

Security has multiple dimensions: The sources of stress on those who defend human rights are partly associated with the diversity of actors against them and the collusion of these actors, be they authorities, organised crime, companies, attacks on social networks, etc.. This makes it imperative that, in addition to physical and digital security, the emotional and psychosocial security of activists must also be protected. It is therefore important that practices to strengthen wellbeing are not seen as isolated events or individual actions but as part of a comprehensive protection plan, which includes strategies across different dimensions: the individual, family, organisational, institutional, community, and social.

Violence and its impacts do not only have an individual dimension: Using a broadened understanding of risk allows IM-Defensoras and other defenders to recognise the specific forms of violence that impact on the personal, but also on the family, organisational, and community levels. It is necessary to recognise the specific ways in which violence affects each woman defender in a particular way, as well as the ways in which this violence expands and also affects the collective and the community.

Spirituality and struggle are one and the same: Pooling different healing knowledge and practices from a holistic perspective has allowed IM-Defensoras and other defenders to cultivate spirituality, connection, and rootedness with life and nature. They also incorporate creation, art, literature, and active listening to the life testimonies of their fellow defenders, always in a process where each defender is reflected in the others.<sup>13</sup>

IM-Defensoras' political approach to self-care, collective care, and healing is expressed through the following principles:<sup>14</sup>

1. The personal is political. It entails being political subjects who practise for themselves what they wish for other people.
2. What is the point of revolution if we cannot dance? To reclaim the right of women defenders to joy, to pleasure, to the enjoyment of their own bodies, and to strengthen creativity and meaningful human bonds through movement.
3. Spaces for activism and defending of human rights are our strength, but they are not idyllic. Defenders must maintain a permanent review of the forms of machismo, discrimination, and patriarchal domination that are reproduced within organisations and movements.
4. Activism for justice and human rights is not a sacrifice. In the eagerness to do more, women defenders end up physically and mentally exhausted, which inhibits their capacity to respond. For this reason, IM-Defensoras is committed to building new forms of activism that are healthier and more sustainable, promoting care, limits, the complementarity of capacities, the confidence to delegate to others, and the collective exercise of power.
5. Wellbeing is not a privilege; it is a right. It has been found that when women defenders are affected by stress, sadness, anger or fear, security risks increase and the incidence of conflict within groups and organisations increases.
6. Neither money nor time is a limitation. The knowledge and resources for self-care within IM-Defensoras are within reach because they do not require significant amounts of money, but rather individual and collective willingness and time. The Initiative is committed to dismantling the structures of exploitation that wear down women defenders and put their wellbeing at risk. At the same time, it is working to obtain and allocate specific resources for the care of women defenders and their collectives that will allow IM-Defensoras to have a greater reach and impact on the actions and processes of care and healing.
7. Giving value to the experience of each person and collective. Each person and collective has their own worldview of life, their own social pains, and their own ways of healing. From this premise, the exchange of knowledge and experiences is promoted so that each person can define what they require based on an honest listening to their own needs.
8. Self-care is personal and collective. Changing these group practices is essential for women defenders' movements to be strengthened, based on the wellbeing of their members and the promotion of healthy and joyful activism.
9. Healing is a living process and repairs life. Healing in a network is a living process, in constant construction and reformulation, and with personal and collective learning.

# HEALING IN A NETWORK – TOGETHER WE KNOW BEST

---

IM-Defensoras' approach to healing consists of constructing a model of life based on collectivity as opposed to models of competition, because no one is saved alone. It is not possible to work on self-care as an individual or isolated responsibility, because from this perspective, the meaning of neoliberalism and capitalism is somehow reproduced. From a feminist perspective, IM-Defensoras seeks to break the isolation, the ideas based on guilt and shame that patriarchy has historically imposed on women's bodies and lives, through collective spaces that allow for questioning, empowering, removing blame, validating feelings, authorising the voice<sup>15</sup> of others, and the experiences of others.

**They are different levels of talking about care in the collective of weaving networks, but they all start from the validation of the experience, of the contribution, of the voice of others, of the conviction that we all have knowledge but that this knowledge, in relation to the knowledge of others, grows, strengthens and nourishes us, and nourishes the work we do and the women defenders with whom we are working.**

**Nallely Tello, Consorcio Oaxaca**

The search for a balance between the individual and the collective means recognising the social, historical, economic, and family context from which the experience of each person starts; the individual responsibility to self-regulate and identify one's own medicines, focusing on autonomy, on respect for personal decisions and processes, but at the same time on recognising the power of the collective. This also means weaving networks to resist, to accompany, and to walk, in order to find measures and processes that allow us to work on the individual and collective impact of the violence faced and to be able to build solutions to structural and social damage.

“When we talk about naming the damage, about measuring the damage, it is from this place of “it is not me”, it is not individual, the damage is collective, the damage is structural and the damage manifests itself in different ways, and my physical body manifests itself in this way, my soul and my emotional state in another partner in this way, links like this... so the intention is from this place of demystifying the damage. We start from there in a way that politicises the impact, without pathologising and looking for collective ways of confronting. Two very concrete examples: care policies, the webinars that are built to think about the sexualities of women defenders, maternity issues, mental health... looking for these collective spaces to be able to collectivise and name the impacts and from there look for measures, processes to work on the impact.”

Jelena Dordevic, IM-Defensoras

Healing in a network is a living process, in constant construction and reformulation, with personal and collective learning. It is nourished by non-hegemonic healing practices and knowledge, by experiences of accompaniment based on empathy, and from a holistic perspective that is best adapted to each advocate, to each collective.

“There is neither right nor wrong where that person has their worldview of life, they have their values regarding different things, they have their own social pain, but also their own ways of healing, right? And that many times, sometimes we may not understand from another worldview, but we validate that they have that space to be able to express themselves. In other words, they are like principles: empathy, in listening, in giving them the value that those who know best about their processes, about what they need, are the ones in their own communities. We have been looking more and more for the healing experiences to be close, territorially close to their lives and values, to their sense of what it means to feel cared for. And at the same time it seems to me that our proposal of networking, of healing in a network, makes the maps widen.”

Ana María Hernández, IM-Defensoras

Healing in a network also entails living through many confrontations, and when the crisis arrives it is key to be able to trust that from everyone's experience and from the place that each one occupies, it will be easier to contain and sustain any difficulty.

“... I think that what we try to guarantee is a safe space, but this safe space does not mean that it does not confront the defenders we are accompanying right?... Something that is very confrontational in the stays [retreats] is the issue of food, because we try to ensure that the defenders we are accompanying eat as little meat as possible, as little sugar as possible, but it is still confrontational, right? There are many confrontations that inhabit us, but the issue of having a safe space is that even when you enter a crisis, you go here, it will be solved, the group will contain you, let's say, right? And the space, the team, and so on will contain you. So, no, I feel that if I think about it now, I mean, in general we are always moving in great diversity, because a network as broad as the IMD [IM-Defensoras] is, I don't know how many women defenders we are right now, but we are more than 2,000 and so many, which means that you also need a multiplicity of strategies.”

Nallely Tello, Consorcio Oaxaca

# LESSONS LEARNT

---

Reflecting on the ways in which care work is key to sustaining IM-Defensoras' advocacy movements, the compañeras recognise that:

- Self-care, collective care, and healing processes are fundamental to protection.
- Organisations that can work on collective care, naming and protecting themselves from the impacts of hazards, are far more sustainable than those that cannot.
- The experiences of care must be territorially close and in harmony with what each person and collective recognises as care.
- There is a profound need to work through and process the pain experienced by WHRDs, not only at the individual level but also at the collective level. This is crucial in order to sustain their struggles.
- Preventive care has lower costs than crisis care.
- Healing in a network is not a fad, it is not a luxury; it is a political commitment.
- Care policies should be part of the public policies of states and their mechanisms for the protection of rights, such as protocols for human rights defenders.

# CHALLENGES

---

Care work in a region where rights, and safeguards for the defence of rights, are increasingly undermined poses significant challenges for care work, such as:

- Situations of imminent risk: The processes of self-care, collective care, and healing are slow and take time, while risk situations are imminent, and the need to have protection plans in place often requires acting on an emergency basis and without the necessary conditions to do so.
- Moving towards preventive rather than crisis care: Moving from crisis care to preventive or early attention is not always possible given the contexts of risk faced by WHRDs. Preventive care also entails a demand for resources that may ultimately be less than crisis care.
- Migration restrictions: The migration policies of different countries deny entry and free movement to many WHRDs. This limits women defenders' access to healing spaces such as Casa La Serena and Casa La Siguata.
- Water crisis and climate change: The climate and water crisis are increasingly felt in healing spaces such as Casa La Serena and Casa La Siguata, which require the adaptation of sustainable infrastructure, equipment, and systems that are kind to the environment and people, and the investment of resources that are often lacking.
- Over-demand: In the face of post-pandemic impacts on mental, emotional, and psychological health, the Initiative and national networks have been confronted with a constant and growing demand that has, at times, exceeded the capacity to provide holistic care and to build the capacity of other defenders.

# CONCLUSIONS

---

The self-care, collective care, and healing strategy within the FHP framework reconfigures the traditional paradigms of self-care, in which this practice is presented as something individual and removed from the structural realities that determine people's living conditions. IM-Defensoras proposes a model of thinking and practising care that not only focuses on the specific conditions of each woman defender, but also seeks to transform the system that harms them. The Initiative is committed to collective care practices that guarantee the wellbeing and holistic protection of WHRDs.

The implementation of healing spaces from an intersectional and feminist approach, such as Casa La Serena and Casa La Siguata, reflects the value and importance of fostering healing environments that are born out of collective experiences and that in turn break with the sacrificial culture of activism.

However, the challenging reality faced by countries in the Mesoamerican region means that some challenges remain, demanding continued adaptation and additional resources to sustain women defenders, their struggles, and their movements.

# END NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Feminist Holistic Protection, IM-Defensoras. <https://im-defensoras.org/en/2022/12/protecci%C3%B3n-integral-feminista/>

<sup>2</sup> Buen vivir or Sumak Kawsay (Quechua) is a concept originally from indigenous thinking and cosmovision. It describes a way of doing things that is community-centric, ecologically balanced, and culturally sensitive.

<sup>3</sup> See the various reports listed on the IM-Defensoras website page, 'Mesoamerican Registry of Attacks', [here](#)

<sup>4</sup> IM-Defensoras (2022) [The Pact to Care among Ourselves. 2010-2021: IM-Defensoras' Approach to Feminist Holistic Protection in Mesoamerica.](#)

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p.27.

<sup>6</sup> IM-Defensoras (2023) [Between fresh water and the tides. Ten years building and learning about care and healing among women human rights defenders and their collectivities](#), p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> WHRD-IM-Defensoras (2013) [What does self-care mean for women human rights defenders?](#) [Spanish only].

<sup>9</sup> IM-Defensoras (2014) [Travesías para pensar y actuar. Experiences of self-care of women human rights defenders in Mesoamerica.](#)

<sup>10</sup> IM-Defensoras (2023) [Between fresh water and the tides](#), p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p. 15

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p. 16

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, p. 18

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, p. 23-26

<sup>15</sup> "It's in the way that others hear my voice and they can give me feedback, or they feel that my story is a mirror for them and I can share how I have thought about solving it or they can share with me how they solved it and so on, that's what we always say that we always believe in the voice of others, we validate their experiences."