

# BERTA LIVES! COPINH CONTINUES...

**Patricia Ardón & Daysi Flores**

- *A legacy for life and the Earth* •

## ABSTRACT

*Berta Cáceres was assassinated one year ago. COPINH both celebrates and mourns at the same time: we cry for the loss of Berta while we celebrate the birth of the organisation she began and left as a legacy to inspire us in this harsh context where persecution and death await those who defend nature and life. Its past marked by war and inequality, Central America is now dealing with large-scale extraction projects that are at the heart of the economic model being imposed in the region. Women activists are on the frontline of resistance. They defend their communities from the destruction that large mining, monoculture and mega-dam projects cause, and at the same time challenge traditional roles and build a new paradigm of life together with their communities. With our allies, JASS promotes and supports the construction of women's collective power and the strengthening of their movements so they may withstand the attacks of megaprojects that tear apart mountains, dry up rivers, consume the water and prevent them from growing their own food.*

## KEYWORDS

Women human rights defenders | Honduras | Central America | Indigenous peoples | Land activists

One year ago, one of the most extraordinary women from our continent was assassinated. Her death was a heavy blow to the heart and soul, but it also mobilised thousands of women and men all around the world. It outraged and touched the hearts of everyone who feel and believe that the Earth, the rivers and all natural assets shelter and accompany us. We know that human life is in danger of extinction unless we begin to understand that we, humans, are one with nature and that our life is the life of our natural surroundings.

Berta Cáceres: friend, mother, daughter, fighter, winner of the Goldman prize and founder of COPINH (Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organisations of Honduras).<sup>1</sup> She founded the organisation 24 years ago together with other Lenca indigenous people (one of the indigenous groups in Honduras) with the goal of ensuring that their voices of emancipation and empowerment, their analysis and their spiritual, artistic and cultural celebrations strengthen our existence. It has left us an exceptional vision. Her slogan “against capitalism, patriarchy and racism” strikes at the heart of the power dynamics and structures that oppress and are imposed on the vast majority of people. It also aims to expose a system that works to prevent us from achieving a life of equality among humans; subordinates women, indigenous peoples and other groups of people; and drives the destruction of life by pillaging and destroying the Earth for the sake of accumulating money.

Since March 2016, COPINH both celebrates and mourns at the same time: we mourn the loss of Berta, while we celebrate the birth of a legacy that is an inspiration to us in a context where the women and men who defend the Earth from pillaging and destruction are assassinated, persecuted and expelled for defending life. Their courage and persistence in the struggle can be seen on their faces, in their stews (*guisos*) and in their songs. That is why we gather – just as we did on 3 March 2016 – on the second day of every month – with others at the Utopia Centre (*Centro de Encuentros y Amistad del COPINH*, or the COPINH Meeting and Friendship Centre) to experience the coexistence of joy and pain, struggle and repression, the cause and solidarity and, above all, the strength and courage that the Lenca people lend to humanity. For them, and for many other women united in the fight for life, resistance has involved the loss of personal and collective aspirations. This is why it is inspiring to hear the voices of people like Betina Cruz, a member of *Alquimia* – JASS’s School of Feminist Alchemy.<sup>2</sup> Betina travelled with other comrades from Mexico to meet with others from various territories and struggles to say, “You are not alone! We are in a time when the women who are at the forefront of the movements to defend their rights and those of their peoples are assassinated and persecuted. What is more, they are the target of all kinds of rumours spread to discredit and marginalise them. Defending life on the planet today is a life-threatening task. However, in the words of Marlene Reyes,<sup>3</sup> ‘After 24 years of existence, COPINH was born and reborn. Berta multiplied and we women are determined to continue to resist.’”

## 1 • Mesoamerica – A region of blood and fire

In the 1980s, Central America went through gruelling wars that left thousands of people dead or disappeared and deep wounds in the societies in the region. The military

dictatorships and their allies brutally repressed all attempts that were made against injustice and inequality, and subjected any attempt to violence. The repression left no room for democratic space or ways of living in diversity.

In the 1990s, peace processes were held and agreements were negotiated in the countries where war had been declared, namely Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. Honduras, the laboratory and base of counterinsurgency forces backed by the United States at the time, initiated a democratisation process. Yet, the country continues to maintain the military bases and a culture of militarisation. Similar to Guatemala and El Salvador, Honduras has one of the highest rates of violence in the world.

With the signing of the peace agreements and the sense of hope that emerged with the democratic opening up of Central America, two actors clearly emerged as political subjects with rights and specific aspirations: women and indigenous peoples. Other organisations and movements also addressed – and many continue to do so – the causes of the wars waged in the region in the framework of the *dirty war*,<sup>4</sup> namely the inequalities that put some Central American countries at the top of the list of the most unequal countries in the world.

Throughout the region, we have watched organised crime and drug trafficking penetrate our societies. This is accompanied by a complex series of dynamics in which groups yielding significant economic and political power engage in unprecedented levels of corruption and plunge the majority of the population even further into poverty. To this, one must add the emergence of gangs that often respond to these interests and establish themselves, in the absence of policies offering glimpses of hope for the youth and their families. The ability of states in the region to protect their peoples' rights is being constantly weakened; instead, the states are being turned into an instrument for furthering the interests of corporations and the elite, both of which are increasingly involved in governing and using public resources for their own ends. In this context, women continue to be the ones who are most impoverished and have the heaviest workloads. They are also the ones to assume a growing number of responsibilities to sustain their households in light of the migration phenomenon, as their male partners leave in search of opportunities elsewhere. Often, due to the violence this situation exposes them to, they are the ones who end up being forced to migrate together with their children.

Furthermore, large-scale extraction projects controlled by transnational corporations, which in many cases involve national capital,<sup>5</sup> are at the heart of the economic model. These corporations defend their colluded interests by hiring security forces or ex-soldiers that were trained during the dirty war. Taking advantage of the fear instilled in the social imagination and fuelled by the large media groups, they persecute and criminalise opposition to these projects, particularly the indigenous peoples of the region, labelling them as “terrorists” or “opponents to development”.<sup>6</sup> Established as a tool to oppress and subordinate indigenous people in order to subjugate them to the hegemonic economy and culture, racism is fuelled and used to defend these interests and to justify the persecution of activists who defend the communal assets of nature.

In this context, discrimination against women – a tool for maintaining privileges and justifying the violation of the rights of women, their families and their communities – is reaching unprecedented levels in Mexico and Central America. With the complicity or the indifference of states, women's bodies are used – through sexual violence and feminicide – to divide communities, increase fear and generate enormous dividends that bring little or no benefits to the people. In five of the countries in the region, the incidence of feminicide is very high: they are among the 25 countries with the highest rates of feminicide in the world. This phenomenon is part of a continuum of violence that is naturalised everywhere from the home to the public sphere. The region has high rates of human trafficking for sexual exploitation (one of the three most lucrative illegal activities in the world, according to the ILO). In 2012, “86% of human trafficking cases identified in Central America were women, the majority of which were girls and adolescents.”<sup>7</sup> Sexual torture is systematically used by security forces. A recent study by Amnesty International in Mexico demonstrated the frequency with which authorities resort to sexual violence to obtain confessions with the goal of raising the percentage of people detained for organised crime.<sup>8</sup>

Currently, the closure of democratic spaces for people's participation and the defence of their rights is threatening the few advances that have been made. This increases inequalities and substitutes dialogue and the search for solutions with the criminalisation of the groups that demand justice, which only aggravates conflict and violence. That is why Miriam Miranda, the *Garifuna*<sup>9</sup> coordinator of *Organización Fraternal Negra de Honduras* (the Black Fraternal Organisation of Honduras) and inseparable comrade-in-struggle of Berta Cáceres, emphasises that “to strengthen democracy, it is vital that we strengthen social movements and their proposals that challenge the system that is devouring us.”<sup>10</sup>

As we strive to build the way that men and women want to live and relate to one another, we face enormous challenges. The systematic destruction and deterioration of the environment by private interests, which are a minority, are given priority over the very survival of the planet. In this fight for survival and life, women continue to play a central role by showing their strength and resisting the system that aims to deprive them of the immediate means for sustaining life.

## 2 • Women human rights defenders/activists

For decades, women have been the voice that reclaims the rights of not only women, but all of society. In recent years, all over the world and especially in Latin America,<sup>11</sup> women have been on the frontline defending their communities from the destruction caused by large-scale mining projects, monocultures and hydroelectric dams that destroy the natural surroundings, make water increasingly scarce and disrespect the organisational forms, culture and life of their communities. More and more women call themselves women human rights defenders, as they defend not only their own rights, but also those of their communities, organisations and movements. In the words of Alda Facio,<sup>12</sup> calling ourselves women human rights defenders:

*turns us into one enormous movement. In other words, it is possible that feminists, the women who defend the territories, the women who fight against impunity and corruption, against male violence and for education for all, the indigenous women who defend their culture while questioning the patriarchal elements in it and so many other women in various social movements are a minority. But if we unite all of the women who are part of different movements together under the name of 'women human rights defenders', there are many more of us. By doing so, the movements and their members complement and strengthen one another without losing their specificity.*

Many of women's struggles against oppression, though fraught with indignation, have also been marked by efforts to build a just peace and harmonious relations that transform inequality and put love and affection at the centre, thereby contributing to the construction of a world without violence. This is why in the current context, women human rights defenders and their organisations are seen as a threat: not only because they question and put at risk the gender-based structure of discrimination and all the privileges and power it generates, but also because they bring to light, in a way that is simple and related to daily life, just how harmful it is to continue sustaining a system that preys on life of the planet. The *IM-Defensoras'* report on violence noted that, between 2012 and 2014, the number of assaults recorded in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico nearly doubled (45.7 per cent).<sup>13</sup> In these cases, it was noted that for the defenders, the violence was a product of both repressive policies and also of the patriarchal structure.<sup>14</sup>

*"We, as women, must decide to resist when a corporation comes into our community and have the strength to do whatever is necessary to defend our rivers and our rights. It doesn't matter how many times they change their name, we will always be strong." Paulina Gómez,<sup>15</sup> Rio Blanco.*

The fear of women leaving their traditional roles to defend their communities occurs within the framework of a historical process and a model that portrays women as beings with little or no value to society and denies them their rights and freedoms in the different areas of their life – from their homes to the political arena. Historically, women have organised themselves in all areas of life. Isolating women in the home and away from the public sphere is one way of limiting awareness of their condition and their contributions to the economy and to caring for society and the surroundings. *"Let us remember this seed of rebelliousness that must continue to germinate in all women. Let us make Berta's dream in relation to healing and justice a reality not only for the peoples, but for the women."* (Lilian López)<sup>16</sup>

Women human rights defenders defend the right to build a just and equal world. The activists and defenders of land and territory are largely, but not exclusively, indigenous and rural women - women who, often at the cost of their own lives, defend the communal

assets of nature for their sons, daughters and communities and fight to keep alive their visions of the world in which humans coexist with the rivers, mountains, forests and oceans in ways that guarantee our common survival.

Women human rights defenders and activists organise based on the daily life of their communities and the webs they weave among themselves. They organise with women from other communities and territories to share experiences, support each other and build safe spaces in which women feel free to speak and heal their traumas, share strategies for family life and organisations and to give each other strength. These spaces are as diverse as the women are. Whether through women's assemblies, networks that fight to end violence or the search for spaces of reflection, it is the power of building collectively that pushes them to continue challenging a context that constantly questions their place in the world and in the struggle.

Many of these women participate in mixed organisations in their community and are part of a variety of communities and networks<sup>17</sup> that form movements and go beyond borders. Indigenous women, especially in the fight for land and territory, act in solidarity among themselves and with other women and peoples from other regions. For example, with the people of Dakota in the United States and other regions of the world.<sup>18</sup> They speak out in support of the common aspirations that unite them. Together with our allies, JASS – Just Associates promotes and supports the construction of collective power among women and the strengthening of their communities and organisations. We do so by reflecting on the power and practices of a holistic and community-based approach to protection, investigating the situations that are specific to women, organising feminist popular education and living schools, consolidating networks and engaging in efforts to make women's voices heard in struggles or online dialogues. We promote and give visibility to the contributions that women make to both the struggles and life itself.

Women activists and defenders of land and territory find among themselves, and in those who support them, the strength they need to face the attacks of the capitalist and racist system. They face, on a daily basis, the threats of a system that exposes them to greater difficulties in mobilising than their male counterparts, as women are the object of sexual discrimination and abuse.<sup>19</sup> They are also subject to defamation for coming out of the traditional roles that limit them to the home and for raising their voices in contexts where their activism is attacked by conservative and fundamentalist voices that see women exercising their rights as a threat to traditional power.

### 3 • Where we are headed

Day after day, indigenous and rural women protect their communities from environmental destruction. Not only do they seek to withstand the onslaught of megaprojects that tear up the mountains, dry up rivers, consume the water and stop them from growing their own food, but they also propose – together with their communities and their peoples – a

paradigm for a new way of life. The Buen Vivir or the “Living Well” paradigm:<sup>20</sup> this dream of an alternative way of life lays the foundation for reflecting on how we can live in harmony with nature and have harmonious relationships that are free from violence while building collective power and leadership that bring us tenderness, wisdom and community life. Feminism has also made fundamental contributions to ensuring that these paradigms take into account all dimensions of life and historical specificities when rebuilding the fabric that enables us to confront the violence we face daily.

The words COPINH general coordinator Tomás Gómez shared during the organisation’s anniversary celebration still echo in our hearts: *“When we demand respect for nature, we do so not only for ourselves as a people, but also for life – even for the life of the sons and daughters of all those who want to end life. This is why our struggle is not only just; it is inclusive.”* These words fill our hearts with love, affection, music, healing and energy and reinvigorate us so we can continue building feminist alchemy with others who are also building life.

## NOTES

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1 • COPINH (<https://www.copinh.org/>) has been active for 24 years. It is one of the most important organisations in Honduras. It works with 200 communities in the territory of the Lenca people, one of the national ethnic groups. Its work to defend the rights of indigenous peoples is known for its struggles and organisation.

2 • The School of Feminist Alchemy (<https://justassociates.org/es/mesoamerica-escuela-alquimia-feminista>) is JASS Mesoamerica’s initiative on learning and education. It emerged from a network of relationships of solidarity and political and working ties among women activists, educators and scholars from various regions of the world who have a broad experience in popular education, feminist training, advocacy, social movements and struggles to end inequality. It was born out of JASS’s accumulated experience and intention to promote feminist popular education processes to respond to the need to support and develop collective learning and knowledge-building processes in order to strengthen the capacities and political

actions of the women and their movements.

3 • Marlene Reyes is a COPINH member from the La Esperanza community. The quote was taken from an interview given to JASS’s *Tercas con la Esperanza* (Determined to Hope) radio programme during COPINH’s anniversary celebration.

4 • After the victory of the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (Sandinista National Liberation Front or the FSLN) on 19 July 1979. With its interests at stake, the United States could not afford to allow other revolutionary groups to triumph in the area and did everything in its power to stop this from happening: from funding counter-revolutionary armies to making agreements with the armed forces of other countries on the training of death squads on the Isthmus. “Operation Charly”, or the “dirty war”, was the response to prevent this from happening. It consisted of implementing state terrorism by adopting the illegal methods of repression used by the Argentine army during the dictatorship.

5 • Two cases worth highlighting are: the case of peaceful resistance to La Puya mine in Guatemala,

exploited by Exploraciones Mineras de Guatemala, S.A. (EXMINGUA), which is currently a subsidiary of the Canadian mining corporation Radius Gold Inc.; and the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam in Rio Blanco, Honduras, which is managed by the Honduran corporation Desarrollos Energéticos S.A de C.V (DESA). Initially, the project was executed by the Chinese company Sinohydro and is now receiving financing from El FINFUND, BCIE and FMO.

6 • This kind of declaration can be found in the national news media: "Video de Elsie Paz en Frente a Frente 11 Octubre 2016," video on Youtube, 14:25, published by Ultima Hora Hn, October 11, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p52e45o2KxU>; "Opinión de Elsie Paz: A Oxfam se le Acabó la Fiesta en Honduras y las Razones son Espantosas," Tiempo Digital, April 5, 2017, accessed May 21, 2017, <http://tiempo.hn/elsia-paz-oxfam-se-le-acabo-la-fiesta/>, as well as accusations such as the one Suyapa Martínez is facing: "Denuncia contra Suyapa Martínez es persecución y criminalización denuncian las mujeres defensoras de derechos humanos," Criterio, March 7, 2017, accessed May 21, 2017, <http://criterio.hn/2017/03/07/denuncia-suyapa-martinez-persecucion-criminalizacion-denuncian-las-mujeres-defensoras-derechos-humanos/>.

7 • "Violenciay Trata de Personas en Centroamérica," Save the Children, 2012, accessed May 21, 2017, <https://www.savethechildren.es/publicaciones/si-lloras-te-matamos>.

8 • "Sobrevivir a la Muerte. Tortura de Mujeres por Policías y Fuerzas Armadas en México," Amnesty International, 2016, accessed May 21, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/es/documents/amr41/4237/2016/es/>.

9 • The Garifuna people are one of the largest ethnic groups living on the coast of Honduras. The population is estimated at approximately 300,000 inhabitants. They are distributed among 47 communities located along the northern coast of Honduras in the departments of Cortés, Atlántida, Colón, Gracias a Dios and Islas de la Bahía. There are also Garifuna people living in Guatemala,

Nicaragua and Belize.

10 • Interview with JASS's *Tercas con la Esperanza* (Determined to Hope) radio programme in the lead up to the regional summit of indigenous peoples on extractivism.

11 • To mention only a few: Honduras: Berta Cáceres: Lenca indigenous leader, COPINH; Miriam Miranda: Garifuna leader, OFRANEH; Magdalena Morales: peasant leader, CNTC. Guatemala: Las mujeres de la resistencia pacífica La Puya; Las mujeres de Sepur Zarco. Panama: mujeres indígenas Ngöbe Bougle.

12 • Chair of the UN Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice and JASS advisor.

13 • "Violence against Women Human Rights Defenders in Mesoamerica 2012-2014 Report," Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras), 2016, accessed May 21, 2017, <http://im-defensoras.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/286224690-Violence-Against-WHRDs-in-Mesoamerica-2012-2014-Report.pdf>.

14 • Marusia López Cruz, JASS-Just Associates.

15 • Paulina Gómez, member of COPINH and of the Río Blanco community – the community resisting the attempts to build a dam on the Gualcarque River and the struggle for which Berta Cáceres was awarded the Goldman prize and assassinated.

16 • Member of the COPINH coordination team and participant in the *Escuela de Alquimia Feminista* (School of Feminist Alchemy).

17 • Networks of women human rights defenders, healers, indigenous and rural women; Mesoamerican or continental alliances; indigenous, peasant, teachers, feminist, workers, artists and ecologist movements.

18 • Such as in global talks where the experiences and actions against extractive industries are being shared. Exchanges such as the one promoted in Mexico, the events of the AWID Forum, the exchanges with regions in Southeast Asia, such as Cambodia, and South Africa and those with other allies such as WOMIN, are particularly important for advancing and promoting the struggles that we



women are involved in.  
 19 • IM-Defensoras, 2016.  
 20 • “Paradigma del buen vivir. L. Chávez. [ponencia completa] – Curso Calcuta Ondoan – UPV 2014,”

video on Youtube, 1:37:28 (minute 11:33), published by Calcuta Ondoan ONGD, accessed November 28, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BjplCB4Mg8>.



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