

# SELF-CARE AS A POLITICAL STRATEGY

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- *Sustainability and well-being for women human rights defenders* •

## ABSTRACT

*This article contains reflections on the experience of the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras) and Consortium for Parliamentary Dialogue and Equity Oaxaca, AC (Consortio para el Diálogo Parlamentario y la Equidad Oaxaca) – a member of the IM-Defensoras’ Steering Committee – around the work they have been doing on self-care since 2010. Adopting a self-care approach not only ensures the sustainability of social movements, but also constitutes an ethical-political viewpoint that looks at the practices and relations established at work at the personal and collective level. This article also discusses the experience of Casa La Serena, a place of rest and healing for women human rights defenders.*

## KEYWORDS

Self-care | Well-being | Casa La Serena | Social movements | Comprehensive protection | Women human rights defenders

## 1 • Introduction

The Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras) was created in 2010 with the goal of generating alternatives for the protection, self-care and safety of women in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico and Nicaragua. Women in these countries are facing an increase in feminicides, a diversification of the forms of violence in society, transnational corporations' advances in land and territory grabbing, growing job insecurity and unemployment, impunity and the absence of justice, as well as the authoritarianism that prevails in governments.

IM-Defensoras accurately predicted that human rights violations would intensify in the coming years and, with this, the demand on human rights defenders would increase. Women human rights defenders were already attending to multiple needs, which often exceeded their energy levels and generated perceptions and feelings of anger, impotence, concern, fear, terror, despair and loneliness. That is not to mention the physical discomfort derived from such emotions and the neglect of their own selves, as they give priority to responding to other people's calls for help.

Data from the “Diagnóstico 2012. Violencia contra Defensoras de Derechos Humanos en Mesoamérica”<sup>1</sup> illustrate this:

- From 2010 to 2012, eight out of every ten human rights defenders suffered from illness.
- Five out of every ten defenders were not satisfied with the time they spent with their partner and their children – that is, when they existed.

We read this data as an indication of how many women human rights defenders strongly neglect their daily lives as a result of their commitment to the causes they defend. Based on a self-care approach, we are trying to develop reflection-action capable of establishing balance and that allows us to think of ourselves too, without any guilt.

## 2 • The principles of self-care

The IM-Defensoras' Steering Committee was initially composed of: Just Associates (JASS), the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), *Consortio para el Diálogo Parlamentario y la Equidad Oaxaca, AC* (Consortio Oaxaca, or Consortium for Parliamentary Dialogue and Equity Oaxaca, AC), *Colectiva Feminista para el Desarrollo Local de El Salvador* (Feminist Collective for Local Development of El Salvador), *Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres* (FCAM, or the Central American Women's Fund) and *Unidad de Protección a Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos* (UDEFEQUA, or the Unit for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders).<sup>2</sup> The committee decided to strengthen

the self-care strategy as an indispensable element for providing full protection to women human rights defenders from a feminist perspective.

To achieve this, we, at Consorcio Oaxaca, the organisation responsible for the IM-Defensoras' self-care strategy, adopted two fundamental ideas from the feminist movement:

**1. The personal is political.** This motto guides our reflections on the importance of seeing ourselves as political subjects who do for ourselves what we want for others. Thus, following the self-care approach, we do a personal assessment and reflect on the way we are developing the defence of human rights or activism. Would we like the people we support to have the workloads we have now? Does the way we relate to our women and men comrades in struggle contribute to social change? It is through these kinds of reflections that we attempt to concretise in our daily lives our discourses in favour of people's lives.

**2. What is the sense of a revolution if we cannot dance?**<sup>3</sup> The authorship of this sentence, which is the title of one of the books that inspired the development of IM-Defensoras' self-care strategy, is attributed to anarchist activist Emma Goldman who responded to criticism from one of her comrades for dancing "inappropriately" by saying, "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution."<sup>4</sup> We use this sentence to defend women human rights defenders' right to pleasure and to enjoy their own bodies.

After more than seven years of existence, IM-Defensoras continues to affirm that the self-care concept is more valid than ever, as the situation in our countries and the conditions in which women human rights defenders carry out their work are still alarming. For example, in Mexico:

*"[...] the constant threats, attacks, sexual harassment and smear campaigns against activists cause increasingly high levels of stress, fatigue, depression, anxiety, migraines and even diagnoses of cancer."<sup>5</sup>*

These threats affect the health and wellbeing of the people who fight for human rights. In fact, in Mexico, 91 per cent of women human rights defenders experience stress on a daily basis.

This stress is generated by not only the risks we face within the social movement or the attacks or threats from the state, corporations, drug traffickers or other actors, but also the precarious conditions in which we work to defend human rights. Eighty per cent of women human rights defenders in our country do not receive a salary for the work they dedicate more than eight hours a day to. Because of this, they must look for other jobs to cover their day-to-day expenses, which increases both their workloads and the wear on their physical, mental, emotional and psychological health and energy.

Therefore, for IM-Defensoras and Consorcio Oaxaca, self-care and collective care are part of a comprehensive protection strategy to promote well-being, support and mutual

respect for our bodies, our sisters and other organisations. This undoubtedly ensures the sustainability of the social movements we belong to, as speaking about self-care means assuming an ethical commitment and a political stance based on the following principles:

**1. Spaces for the defence of human rights and activism are not idyllic.** It is important to realise that our spaces for work are often permeated by a sexist, patriarchal culture of exploitation or self-exploitation. We need to constantly revise and deconstruct what we have learned over our lives, which is continually being reproduced, even though our discourses defend the opposite. Therefore, it is vital that we do not idealise or demonise our organisations and/or movements, but rather continuously reflect on them so we may succeed in making them the spaces we imagine them to be.

Personal assessments are also fundamental. In his book *Psicopolítica*,<sup>6</sup> Byung-Chul Han talks about the capitalist system's current characteristic of not needing an external oppressor; instead, we build our own tyrant within each one of us that demands us to do more and more. This effective way of functioning makes it difficult to fight against capital, as it obscures who the oppressor is or what the oppressive situation to be transformed is. Thus, questioning the patriarchal or capitalist commands within ourselves, such as “live for others” or “work a bit more, but always more”, is fundamental from the self-care perspective.

**2. Defending human rights or activism is not a sacrifice.** Due to the violent contexts we live in, it is common to think that it is very important to “go the extra mile” in activism, as it can change the course of events. However, with the self-care principle, we invite people to reflect on whether it is true that what we have to do cannot wait for us to eat, sleep, rest and enjoy ourselves for a while. It is important to note that productivity is not the same as creativity or effectiveness. Often, in our quest to do more, we end up physically and emotionally exhausted, which inhibits both our capacity to respond and our attention span.

**3. Well-being is not a privilege; it is a right.** For many activists and women human rights defenders, having a moment of rest is a privilege in the situations they have to deal with. This is why we suggest they reflect on how necessary it is to take time to relax, let off steam, renew their energy and regain strength. In the comprehensive protection framework, which is where we situate the self-care approach for women human rights defenders, we have reflected on experiences where comrades have not noticed various incidents affecting their safety or have exposed themselves more than they needed to due to their level of fatigue and exhaustion. This is common, as is the point mentioned above: the pace of our work leads us to constantly feel stressed and sometimes angry, because of the tensions we face, or sad, because of the cases we have to support. These emotional states affect the dynamics of affectivity and relationships within the organisations we work with and sometimes generate conflicts with people close to us. It is important to ensure that the work we do contributes to social change, but not at the expense of our ability to live or work together.

**4. Neither money nor time is a limitation.** Often, the women human rights defenders and activists to whom we discuss the idea of self-care believe it requires spending a considerable amount of money. In opposition to this, we focus on valuing local knowledge, contact with nature, moments of reflection, breathing exercises, the appropriation and enjoyment of the body, etc. – elements that in some cases have to do more with willingness than economic resources. However, this does not free organisations and/or funders from their responsibility to provide funds for the development of reflections and joint actions on this issue in all spaces dedicated to the defence of human rights.

**5. Every individual knows what she or he needs.** In relation to self-care, it is impossible to know what helps another person feel good. While it is necessary to discuss the issue, each one of us – every person, organisation or group – must to define what we need based on an honest assessment of our own needs. This is not simple to achieve. As human rights defenders, we are very accustomed to engaging in analysis and reflection while we neglect our bodies, which disconnects us from ourselves and others.

**6. Self-care is personal and collective.** It is important for our organisations – when we have one – to lay the basis for reflections on self-care and generate institutional policies that help create a culture that is conducive to it: for example, respect work hours and days, establish periods of rest, put conflict resolution mechanisms into place, etc. The principle of self-care is linked to the idea that we feel emotions, not only because we are human, but also because we live in a community and are constantly relating to other people.

Based on IM-Defensoras and Consorcio Oaxaca’s experience with women who are victims of violence and women human rights defenders at risk and suffering from chronic burnout, we believe it is necessary to look at women defenders and human rights organisations from a comprehensive perspective. For us, such a perspective includes a personal and collective level, and has physical, psychological, mental, energy-related and spiritual dimensions:

DIMENSION	ON A PERSONAL LEVEL	ON AN ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL
Physical	This can be understood as the state of health and what we do to meet our bodies’ demands: food, sleep, rest, medical check-up, etc.	This refers to having facilities and workplaces that are adequate for and friendly to the people for whom we work: conditions of the furniture, security, among other elements.

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DIMENSION	ON A PERSONAL LEVEL	ON AN ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL
Psychological	This has to do with how the work being done affects people's self-concept: how safe they feel, how capable they believe they are to do the work.	This refers to how we evaluate the collective work being done and its scope, and can lead to thoughts such as: the organisation is not doing enough; my colleagues are not giving everything they should; there is not enough commitment to our cause.
Mental	This refers to what motivates us to learn and acquire knowledge and allows us to feel fulfilled professionally in our work as women human rights defenders.	This is in reference to the courses, workshops, seminars, etc. that an organisation holds or participates in to strengthen its work.
Energy	We often suffer from a loss of energy, which makes us feel tired even after sleeping several hours, or sad or dissatisfied for apparently no reason.	This dimension can be understood in organisational terms as the "work environment": tension between members of the organisation, or recklessness among them, etc.
Spiritual	This has to do with the beliefs of each individual, not only in religious terms, but also in relation to the meaning of life.	This refers to the values and beliefs that govern the organisation's actions.

Personal and collective self-care do not eliminate stress or rivalries definitively, nor do they improve our workplaces permanently. Even so, we are convinced that they offer tools for dealing with, talking about and reflecting on conflict, and looking differently at the tensions and obstacles that emerge in the defence of human rights, without condemning others who do the same, understanding instead why they do it and being aware of the impact of their actions on us. We do not aim to idealise self-care. We know that even with this approach, things that we do not like will continue to happen, but the way we deal with them will be different. We also do not want self-care to turn into a burden or guilt for not having done enough, as we are convinced that human relations are complex and always impose challenges on us. The more tools we have to get through them, the better. We believe in taking breaks and finding breathing space so we can look compassionately at our setbacks and keep going.

### 3 • Casa La Serena: a space for self-care, care and well-being for women human rights defenders

After several years of reflecting on self-care, constantly reaffirming its importance and seeing the changes that come about when this approach is adopted, in August 2016, IM-Defensoras and Consorcio Oaxaca created Casa La Serena.<sup>7</sup> This project offers temporary stays to women belonging to one of the national networks of human rights defenders in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Mexico in Oaxaca, Mexico. The goal of these 10-day stays is to create a space for women human rights defenders who are experiencing extreme fatigue, emotional or physical exhaustion, personal crises, mourning, losses or other impacts derived from the context of violence and patriarchal cultural that obstructs their work of defending human rights to recuperate, heal, rest and reflect.

Casa La Serena functions according to the comprehensive approach described earlier. One defender from each member country of IM-Defensoras has the opportunity to stay at the house, where they will take part in:

**Healing therapies:** Psychological therapy, thanatology, yoga, anti gymnastics,<sup>8</sup> energy management and chakra alignment, breathing techniques, neuromuscular massage, nutritional programmes, Bach flower therapy, reflexology, herbal medicine, cleansing and temazcal, and medical and gynaecological care with allopathy, homeopathy and Chinese medicine.

**Social activities and reflection.** Walks in the country, preparing and sharing collective meals, discussions on their work as women human rights defenders, comprehensive protection and healthy activism.

**Creative workshops.** Clay, pottery, narrative therapy, gardening and circular dances.

These three areas combine to form a care programme put together based on a diagnostic interview with the human rights defenders who stay at the Casa La Serena. This allows us to better meet their needs.

Consortio Oaxaca's team, together with a network of approximately 15 therapists who are experts in their fields, are responsible for accompanying the women during their stay. Consortio Oaxaca has shared with these therapists what the feminist approach to protection for women human rights defenders consists of and the importance of the work to defend human rights.

The stay at Casa La Serena involves very intense personal work since all of the therapies, activities and workshops focus on taking a good look at ourselves. This is undoubtedly both a pleasurable and painful process, as it implies "taking note" and imagining other ways of being and relating.

For us, it is extremely important that, in addition to identifying certain elements that must be worked on at a personal or collective level, women human rights defenders leave Casa La Serena with a self-care plan. We later follow up on the plan to guarantee that their stay brings concrete changes for them in accordance with their context and real possibilities. What can happen is that while the actions suggested based on their experience could be highly beneficial for them, they do not have enough resources to implement them. Therefore, we elaborate a series of questions that help identify what effective self-care actions or paths they can take and how.

#### 4 • By way of conclusion

We believe the self-care approach strengthens our social movements' sustainability, creativity and well-being. It invites us to establish new relations with ourselves, others and nature. We know that it is not a "fad", but rather a defiant political, feminist strategy that helps us move forward in a loving and collective way in today's turbulent times.

This is not easy, of course, and it involves recognising our own vulnerabilities and not only those of the people we support. And it is a challenge, especially considering the value given to strength and even heroism within our social movements. In this context, we believe that it is important to question these characteristics, not because they are bad *a priori*, but rather because they lead us to make very strong demands of ourselves, which often put us at greater risk. We are convinced that new forms of engaging in activism and defending human rights are being developed all over the world, which will be even stronger provided that we regain trust in our colleagues, build networks and are aware that many women are creating new ways of being in the world.



## NOTES

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- 1 • “Diagnóstico 2012. Violencia contra Defensoras de Derechos Humanos en Mesoamérica,” IM-Defensoras, September 2013, accessed November 17, 2017, <https://justassociates.org/es/publicaciones/diagnostico-2012-violencia-contra-defensoras-derechos-humanos-mesoamerica>.
- 2 • The IM-Defensoras Steering Committee now includes the coordinating teams of the national networks in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico and Nicaragua.
- 3 • Jane Barry and Jelena Djordjevic, “¿Qué Sentido Tiene la Revolución si no Podemos Bailar?,” Fondo de Acción Urgente por los Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres, 2007, accessed November 17, 2017, <https://urgentactionfund.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/06/WTPR-in-Spanish1.pdf>.
- 4 • Manuel Morales, “La Mujer que Estados Unidos Odiaba.” *El País*, January 21, 2015, accessed November 17, 2017, <http://blogs.elpais.com/historias/2015/01/la-mujer-que-estados-unidos-odiaba.html>.
- 5 • Macarena Aguilar, “Luchar Por La Igualdad Conlleva Enormes Riesgos Para La Salud, Sobre Todo Si Eres Mujer.” Interview with Ana María Hernández Cárdenas from Consorcio para el Diálogo Parlamentario y la Equidad Oaxaca, AC, 2017.
- 6 • Byung-Chul Han, *Psicopolítica. Neoliberalismo y Nuevas Técnicas de Poder* (Barcelona: Herder Editorial, 2014): 1-128.
- 7 • For more information, send an email to: [casaserena.dh@gmail.com](mailto:casaserena.dh@gmail.com).
- 8 • Consists of performing movements of the body to liberate chronic and deep tensions that settle into muscles, tendons, ligaments and organs, since the time of conception, and that alter the body's structure and affect the functioning of the different organs and systems. These alterations gradually evolve into different diseases, limitations and/or alterations to the body and the mind.



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