2012 Regional Assessment Report

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN MESOAMERICA

SUMMARY FINDINGS

MESOAMERICAN INITIATIVE of women HUMANS RIGHTS DEFENDERS

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SUMMARY FINDINGS

THE MESOAMERICAN WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS INITIATIVE

Thousands of Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) are currently at risk in Mexico and Central America. To address the widespread violence, the Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders Initiative (IM–Defensoras) was formed in 2010[1] with and for frontline women activists who are facing threats, intimidation, and attacks for defending justice and human rights.

IM–Defensoras currently works with over 300 women defending rights and their organizations to provide activists with the resources and support needed to address security concerns and strengthen and sustain their activism over the long-term.

The network is a key source for data and analysis on violence against WHRDs from a gender perspective, and can rapidly mobilize network members and influential allies for strategic engagement with governments and international human rights organizations.

1 IM-Defensoras was created in 2010 by: JASS (Just Associates), Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), Central American Women's Fund (FCAM), Consorcio para el Dialogo Parlamentario y la Equidad-Oaxaca, La Colectiva Feminista, and Unidad de Protección a Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos -Guatemala (UDEFEGUA).

REGISTRY OF ATTACKS AGAINST WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

The Mesoamerican Registry of Attacks against WHRDs collects and analyzes data on attacks against WHRDs and their organizations in Mesoamerica—a region that includes Mexico and Central America—, and aims to assess the scope and types of attacks suffered by WHRDs, as well as to describe the main features of these attacks and identify their gender components.

The 2012 Assessment Report is the first to make use of the data from the Mesoamerican Registry of Attacks against WHRDs, which was compiled from January to December 2012 in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico. Data from the Self-Care Assessment, conducted by the IM-Defensoras in 2012 with 58 WHRDs in Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, has also been incorporated into the report.

Information is gathered using a form that was developed and tested by the IM-Defensoras Steering Group and four national WHRD networks from the region. The form gathers data on attacks committed against WHRDs2, which includes specific gender indicators within the different fields of the form. Examples of gender indicators in the form include:

- Types of attacks: sexual violence and harassment, domestic violence, rejection by the community, or ridiculing sexuality.

2 Profiles of WHRD who suffer aggressions, location, sectors where they work, types of violence and threats they face, actors who commit aggression against them, presence or number of gender components of aggressions. Further, we seek to establish the prevalence of denouncements regarding aggressions and results thereof, and also investigate the attacks against relatives and other persons from the defenders' organizations or community. Data gathered are strictly confidential.

- Type of perpetrators: non-state actors such as family members, the community, organizations or social movements, and the defender's partner.
- Types of rights defended, gender indicators include: sexual and reproductive rights as well as LGBTI rights.

The national WHRD networks are responsible for gathering information on attacks in their respective countries. Each network has designated someone trained in basic digital security to submit the forms. Verification mechanisms are established in each country by local networks using established procedures.

While the implementation of the Registry constitutes progress in addressing the issue of documentation, it's important to underscore that underreporting of attacks occurs due to a number of factors. One factor is the difficulty many WHRDs face in recognizing and denouncing attacks. This particularly a challenge when attacks are perpetrated by non-state actors or are linked to gender-based violence that occur in their private lives, such as domestic violence or violence that occurs within the WHRD's organization or political group.

REGIONAL CONTEXT: GENDER VIOLENCE AS A MECHANISM FOR SOCIAL CONTROL

Mesoamerica is currently in the throes of a major crisis due to the prevalence of violence and systematic human rights violations[3]. This crisis is due in part to a legacy of impunity and violence generated by armed conflicts in Guatemala and El Salvador, as well as the slow deterioration of democratic institutions by Mexico's dirty-war policies and the coup d'état in Honduras.

The greatest impact of this crisis has been on groups who have historically faced discrimination, such as women. The urgent situation in the region stems from many factors, the most important of which include:

- economic policies that deepen inequality and poverty;
- the deterioration of the rule of law by security policies favoring militarization and alarming levels of impunity;
- patriarchy, which manifests itself through misogynist practices that are tolerated or encouraged by governments;
- an increase in femicide; and
- violations of sexual and reproductive rights.

In this context, violence against women is not only one of the worst effects of the crisis, but has also been used as a mechanism for social control. By exacerbating gender discrimination and destroying the social fabric, this gender-based violence facilitates the maneuvers by the region's political and economic elites, in both the private and public sectors, and

3 Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador continue to have the highest murder rates in the world. In the past six years, Mexico has officially documented 70,000 murders.

serves to uphold their power and privilege.

In Honduras, feminicides jumped by 62% in 2009, the year of the coup d'état[4]. In Mexico, according to figures from UN Women, the rate of feminicides increased an average of 68% from 2007 to 2009 (coinciding with an increase in the presence of army troops in a number of areas in Mexico)[5].

In Guatemala, the number of femicides registered rose from 213 in 2000[6] to 707 in 2012[7].

The figures demonstrate how violence against WHRDs is indicative of how violence against women works to maintain unequal power relations, perpetuate privilege, and prevent or discourage the political participation of more than half of humanity. Further, the stigmatization and discrimination endured by large groups of WHRDs has a widespread impact both because it affects the entire community represented by them and because it calls into question those who decide to reclaim their rights and adopt alternative ways of life, putting them at risk.

4 National Campaign against Feminicides

5 Cf., UN WOMEN -SCF, Feminicidio en México. Aproximación, tendencias y cambios, 1985-2009 (2011), p. 33.

6 "De sobrevivientes a defensoras: Mujeres que enfrentan la violencia en México, Honduras y Guatemala", Nobel Women's Initiative (NWI)- JASS(Just Associates), http://www.justassociates.org/sites/justassociates.org/files/sp_nwi-mexico_centralamerica-lr.pdf

7 Area of transparency – Mutual Support Group (GAM), "Informe de monitoreo de violencia y situación de derechos humanos del 1 de enero al 31 de diciembre de 2012", http://areadetransparencia.blogspot.mx/2013/01/informe-de-monitoreo-de-violencia-y.html

TYPES OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Gender discrimination as a critical factor for WHRDs

In addition, to facing many of the same types of violence as their male counterparts —as a result of their justice work— WHRD are also attacked because of their gender, facing various forms of gender discrimination that affect all women.

Gender discrimination reduces WHRDs' capacity to confront and address risks. Some forms of discrimination are so much a part of daily life experience that they become normalized[8]. If WHRDs are accustomed to being hurt or belittled, or if they have come to accept as normal the constant attacks against them, it is understandable that they fail to recognize or they tend to minimize the violence they suffer as a result of their work. Discrimination undermines a person's sense of self, and therefore WHRDs often refrain from reporting an attack, fearing they will be ignored or shamed if they do.

Discriminatory gender norms within their family or household also affect WHRDs. The Self-Care Assessment found that 72% of WHRDs are in charge of household chores and family care in their households. This limits the time that they can be politically active and reflects how little support they receive in balancing their activism with their daily lives and family responsibilities.

8 An environment of hostility against women in the public sphere (including sexual harassment, little recognition for women's public leadership, misogyny, etc.), sexism in the media and cultural practices (women as sexual objects, or at the family's beck and call, concepts of beauty, etc.), and their experiences of domestic violence are part of a continuum of violence that are accepted as normal or less severe because they are commonplace and often socially sanctioned.

Generally, even when dealing with situations that put them at risk, WHRDs must continue to take on family responsibilities and often face objections and a lack of support from those closest to them. Therefore, when facing threats that might put their family at risk, WHRDs often decide to forgo their activism.

Another type of discrimination that affects WHRD is financial instability. Among the WHRDs surveyed by the Self-Care Assessment, fully half said they hold a second job due to their need for more income. Only three out of ten said they receive a steady income from their work as WHRDs. Six of ten WHRDs work as volunteers.

Responsibility for household chores and family care, plus a paid job in addition to the demands of their activism leads to exhaustion among WHRDs. The Self-Care Assessment found that excessive work took a heavy toll on WHRDs' health: 50% do not sleep enough; 98% have work-related stress; 83% have muscular pain; 55% suffer headaches; and 50% find it difficult to concentrate. A significant majority (81%) stated that in the past two years they have experienced some form of illness. Many illnesses can be attributed to an Extenuated Emotional State (EES), also known as Burnout Syndrome.

Number of attacks and murders

In 2012, 414 attacks against WHRDs in Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador were reported. Guatemala registered the most attacks, followed by Honduras and Mexico.

Table 1. Number and percentage of attacks by country (2012)[9]

Aggressions by country	Total	Percentage
Guatemala	126	30.43%
Honduras	119	28.74%
Mexico	118	28.50%
El Salvador	51	12.32%
Total	414	100%

From 2010 to 2012, at least 38 WHRDs lost their lives due to violence in Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico:

9 Source: Data from the Mesoamerican Registry of Attacks against Women Human Rights Defenders, January-December 2012.

Number and percentage of attacks by country (2012)

GUATEMALA

2010 Evelinda Ramírez Reyes.

2011 Margarita Chub Che, Catalina Mucú Maas and Emilia Margarita Quan Staakmann.

HONDURAS

2010 Claudia Brisuela, Teresa Flores, Jessica Gálvez, Janeth Lourdes Marroquín, Vanessa Zepeda, Neraldys Perdomo and Imperia Gamaniel Parson.

2011 Ilse Ivania Velásquez and Reina Mejía.

MEXICO

2010 Beatriz Cariño (Oaxaca); Josefina Reyes, Marisela Escobedo and María Isabel Cordero Martínez (Chihuahua); María Elvira Hernández Galeana (Guerrero) and Selene Hernández León (Estado de México).

2011 María Magdalena Reyes, Luisa Ornelas and Susana Chávez (Chihuahua); Isabel and Reyna Ayala Nava (Guerrero); Carmela Elisarraraz Méndez (Michoacán); Bárbara Lezama (Puebla); Julia Marichal, Ana María Marcela Yarce Viveros and Rocío González (Distrito Federal); Yolanda Ordaz (Veracruz) and María Elizabeth Macías Castro (Tamaulipas).

2012 Agnes Torres Hernández (Puebla); Regina Martínez (Veracruz); Durvin Ramírez Díaz (Tabasco); Manuela Martha Solís Contreras (Chihuahua); Juventina Villa Mojica and Fabiola Osorio Bernáldez (Guerrero) and Renata (René Espinoza Reyes).

Attacks with a gender component

A gender component was identified in 164 attacks (40%). In 218 cases (52%), no gender component was identified, and in 32 cases (7.7%), the gender component was unknown.

Table 2. Number of attacks with a gender component according to right defended by the WHRD[10] (2012)

Type of right	Gender component	%
Defense of land, territory and natural resources	40	24%
Right to a life free of violence (feminicide)	38	23%
Right to defend rights	25	15%
Women's right to political and community participation	20	12%
Right to information and free speech	15	9%
Labor and workers' rights	11	7%
Rights of indigenous peoples	5	3%
Right to truth, justice and reparations	5	3%
Right to sexual diversity	3	2%
Right to health	1	1%
Right to a childhood and adolescence	1	1%

10 Ibid.

Number of attacks with a gender component according to right defended by the WHRD (2012)

Risk according to where the attacked WHRDs works defending rights

The Registry reveals that the most vulnerable WHRDs work in rural areas (33.2%), followed by those who work in urban areas (22.3%), and the lesser risk are those who work at the regional or international level.

Number of attacks according to the right defended at the time of being attacked

Given the situation in the region, the WHRDs who have suffered the greatest number of attacks are those who challenge 1) prevailing economic policies, 2) gender inequality—especially involving violence—and 3) limits on freedom of speech.

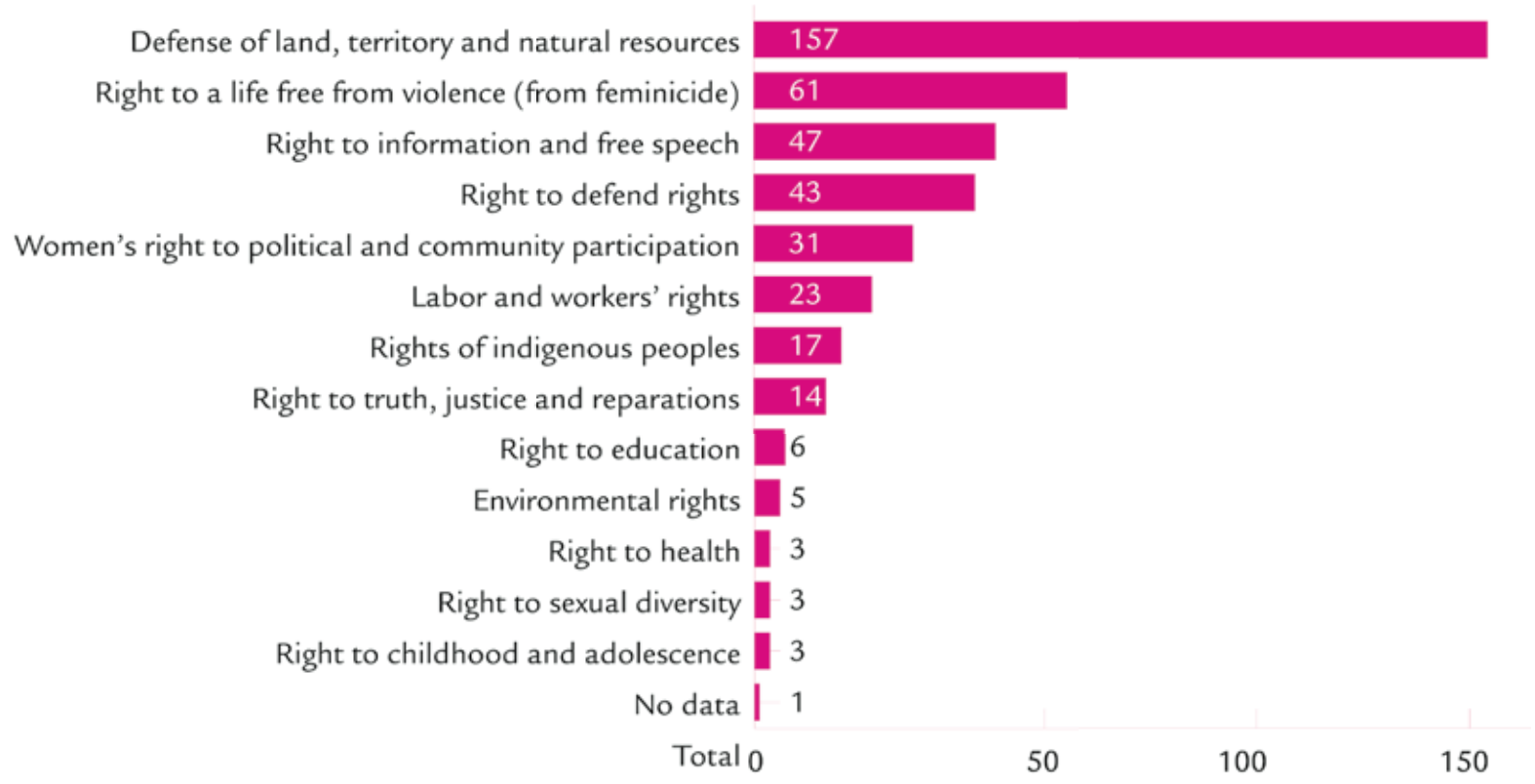
Table 3. Rights defended at the time of being attacked[11] (2012)

Right the WHRD was defending at the time of their attack	Number of Attacks	Percentage
Defense of land, territory and natural resources	157	37.9%
Right to a life free from violence (from feminicide)	61	14.7%
Right to information and free speech	47	11.4%
Right to defend rights	43	10.4%
Women's right to political and community participation	31	7.5%
Labor and workers' rights	23	5.6%
Rights of indigenous peoples	17	4.1%

11 Ibid.

Right the WHRD was defending at the time of their attack	Number of Attacks	Percentage
Right to truth, justice and reparations	14	3.4%
Right to education	6	1.4%
Environmental rights	5	1.2%
Right to health	3	0.7%
Right to sexual diversity	3	0.7%
Right to childhood and adolescence	3	0.7%
No data	1	0.2%
Total	414	100.0%

Rights defended at the time of being attacked (2012)



Main types of attacks and levels of repeat attacks

Threats, psychological harassment and the excessive use of force are the principal forms of aggressions faced by WHRDs in the region.

Table 4. 12 main types of attacks[12] (2012)

Generally, WHRDs were victims of more than one attack. Of the 414 attacks reported, 60% (248 aggressions) were part of a series of attacks, 11% involved isolated events, and in 29% of cases there was insufficient information to categorize the attack.

Perpetrators

In aggregate terms, state actors accounted for 87% of the attacks committed against WHRDs. These were mainly municipal authorities (26.8%), state, departmental or provincial authorities (23.7%), police (14.5%), military (14.3%), and federal authorities (7%).

The second group of perpetrators identified by WHRDs is non-state actors, mainly staff of large and small companies (24.2%), and private security agents (10.4%).

A third category consists of non-state actors within the WHRDs' circles: their communities (7.7%), relatives and people close to the WHRD (4.3%), traditional community authorities (3.6%), or actors within their own organization or linked to the social movement (1.0%). In total, these actors make up 15.6% of the aggressors.

12 Ibid.

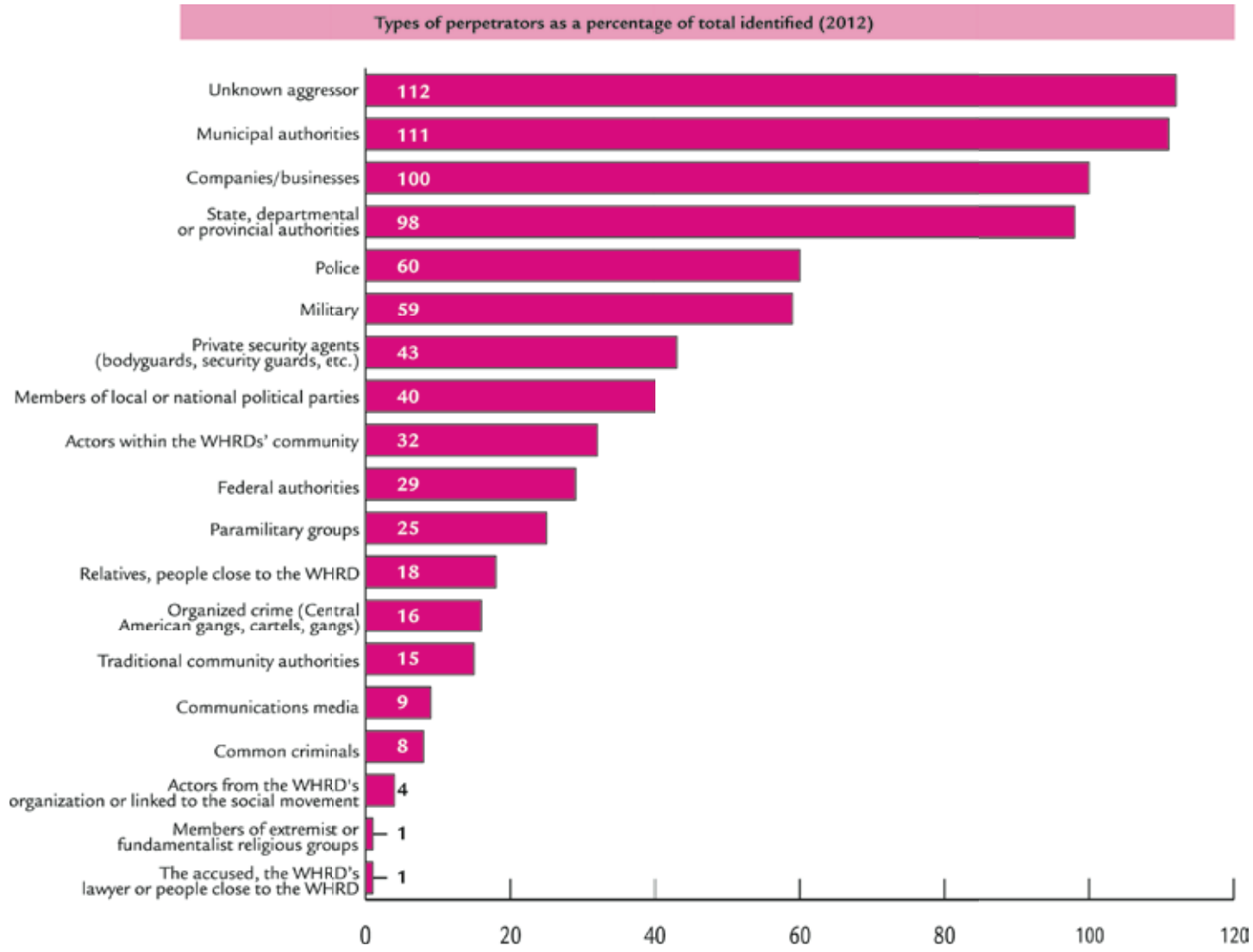
Table 5. Types of perpetrators as a percentage of total identified[13]

Perpetrators	Total	Percentage
Unknown aggressor	112	27.1%
Municipal authorities	111	26.8%
Companies/businesses	100	24.2%
State, departmental or provincial authorities	98	23.7%
Police	60	14.5%
Military	59	14.3%
Private security agents (bodyguards, security guards, etc.)	43	10.4%
Members of local or national political parties	40	9.7%
Actors within the WHRDs' community	32	7.7%
Federal authorities	29	7.0%
Paramilitary groups	25	6.0%
Relatives, people close to the WHRD	18	4.3%
Organized crime (Central American gangs, cartels, gangs)	16	3.9%
Traditional community authorities	15	3.6%
Communications media	9	2.2%

13 Ibid.

Perpetrators	Total	Percentage
Common criminals	8	1.9%
Actors from the WHRD's organization or linked to the social movement	4	1.0%
Members of extremist or fundamentalist religious groups	1	0.2%
The accused, the WHRD's lawyer or people close to the WHRD	1	0.2%
Total*	781	

*Percentage does not total to 100% since more than one category could be selected.


Types of perpetrators as a percentage of total identified (2012)
Unknown aggressor 112
Municipal authorities 111
Companies/businesses 100
State, departmental or provincial authorities 98
Police 60
Military 59
Private security agents (bodyguards, security guards, etc.) 43
Members of local or national political parties 40
Actors within the WHRDs' community 32
Federal authorities 29
Paramilitary groups 25
Relatives, people close to the WHRD 18
Organized crime (Central American gangs, cartels, gangs) 16
Traditional community authorities 15
Communications media 9
Common criminals 8
Actors from the WHRD's organization or linked to the social movement 4
Members of extremist or fundamentalist religious groups 1
The accused, the WHRD's lawyer or people close to the WHRD 1
0
20
40
60
80
100
120

Invisible violence

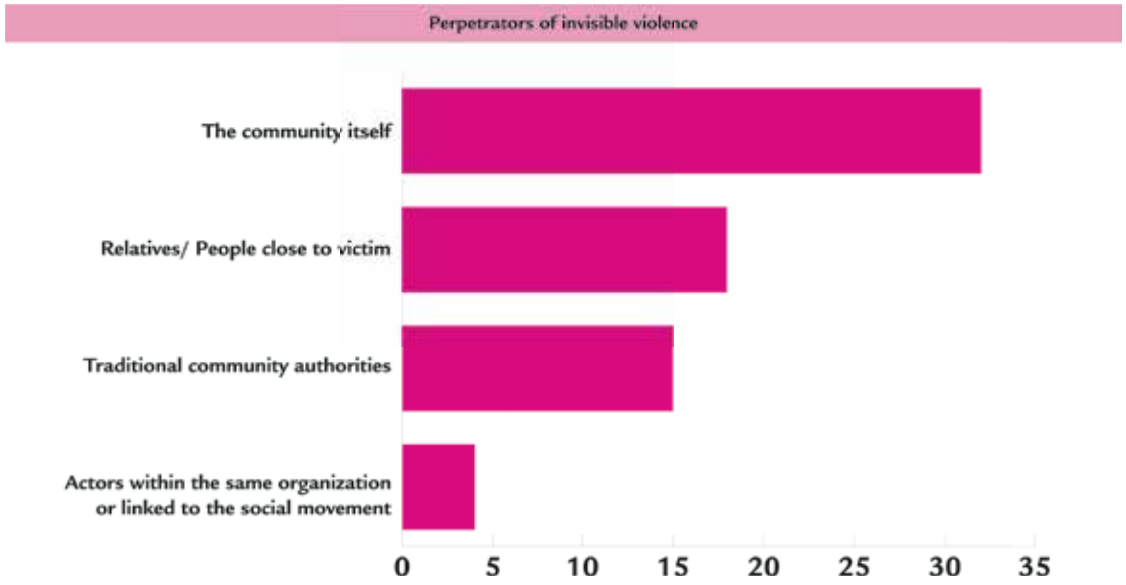
Not all attacks against WHRDs are fully recognized or reported, either because they are not considered work-related attacks or because WHRDs themselves downplay them, or because of the impact they have on the people close to them. We call these types of violence "invisible violence".

Specifically, invisible violence refers to incidents of domestic violence, the violence within social movements, defamation with a gender component, and sexual violence. Notwithstanding the difficulties of documenting these types of attacks, in 16% of cases, WHRDs identify people close to them as their attackers.

Table 6. Perpetrators of invisible violence[14]

Perpetrator	No. of perpetrators	%*
The community itself	32	7.7%
Relatives/ People close to victim	18	4.3%
Traditional community authorities	15	3.6%
Actors within the same organization or linked to the social movement	4	1.0%
Total perpetrators	69	16.6%

* Percentage reflects the aggregate of each category as it appears in Table 5



14 Ibid.

Similarly, the Mesoamerican Registry reports different types of violence occurring in the private lives of WHRDs that together account for 24.3% of total attacks reported.

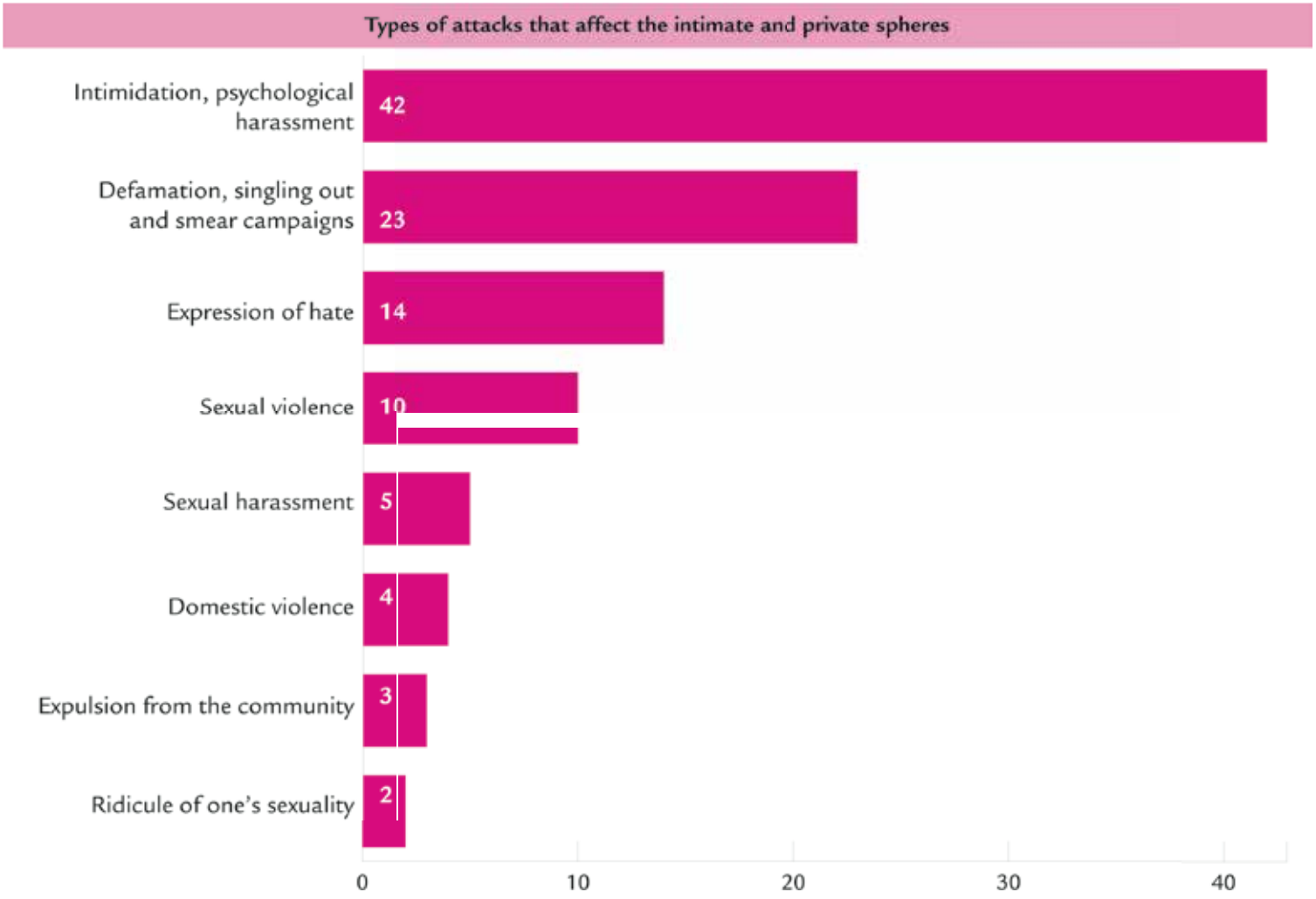
Table 7. Types of attacks that affect the intimate and private spheres[15]

Types of aggression that affect the intimate and private spheres	Number of aggressions	%
Intimidation, psychological harassment	42	10.1%
Defamation, singling out, and smear campaigns	23	5.6%
Expressions of hate	14	3.4%
Sexual violence	10	2.4%
Sexual harassment	5	1.2%
Domestic violence	4	1.0%
Expulsion from the community	3	0.7%
Ridicule of one's sexuality	2	0.5%
Total	**106**	**24.3%**

Reporting

In spite of the overall environment of impunity in the region, 217 WHRDs (52.4%) have reported attacks to law-enforcement authorities, while only 50 (12%) say they have not. No information was available in 35% of the cases.

15 Ibid.


Types of attacks that affect the intimate and private spheres
Intimidation, psychological harassment
42
Defamation, singling out and smear campaigns
23
Expression of hate
14
Sexual violence
10
Sexual harassment
5
Domestic violence
4
Expulsion from the community
3
Ridicule of one's sexuality
2
0
10
20
30
40

Protection programs and measures

In Mesoamerica, institutional efforts to establish protection measures for human rights defenders are still nascent. As a result of significant pressure from the human rights movement some countries such as Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras, have established or defined various types of institutional mechanisms, each with a differing level of outreach, development, and institutional capacity.

While it is important to acknowledge these efforts and particularly the work many organizations have done to make them possible, there is still no evidence of their effectiveness. Even in countries such as Mexico, where slightly more progress has been made in implementing the mechanisms, serious institutional shortcomings persist. Some of the most serious are:

- State discourse about their commitments and obligations to protect human rights has not resulted in a decreased in the attacks committed by state actors.
- Proposed mechanisms are particularly weak in terms of investigating attacks, in spite of evidence that suggests that punishing perpetrators is not only one of the main demands of WHRDs at risk, but also a powerful deterrent to new acts of aggression.
- Protection mechanisms are hampered and delayed in their implementation by the weak coordination between national and local governments.
- Gender indicators are never included, not even in risk analysis or in determining specific measures for WHRDs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

By documenting and producing an in-depth analysis of the violence faced by WHRDs in Mesoamerica, the lives of hundreds of women who have suffered attacks simply for defending human rights are brought to light and given the recognition they deserve. In addition, it highlights the need for improved and specific protection mechanisms and reveals the way gender-based discrimination and gender inequality perpetuate privilege and maintain social control, undermining the ability of citizens to make decisions that are rightfully theirs to remedy injustices and to ensure that states act in the public interest.

Preparing the 2012 Regional Assessment Report on WHRD and its results have allowed the IM-Defensoras to identify three aspects that need to be addressed in order to provide comprehensive protection to all people who defend human rights in the region:

A. The importance of incorporating a gender perspective in analyses of violence against all human rights defenders

Recommendations

- 1) Governments should include gender indicators in all public information on violence in their national registry systems, including data on WHRDs at risk. Institutions created to protect defenders should have reliable registries with updated data on the number of attacks, broken down by gender and ethnic origin.

- 2) International and regional human rights protection mechanisms, particularly those in formal and informal agreements of the United Nations and the Organization of American States, should recommend and constantly remind governments of the need to include gender analysis in their reports on human rights defenders, breaking down data by gender and ethnic origin.
- 3) Social and civil society organizations should contribute by developing and mainstreaming adequate methodologies for gender-based analysis of attacks in their own reports, such as those proposed by the IM-Defensoras, thus helping improve government records. These methodologies should include gender-based indicators detailing specific situations of risk and detail the effect that gender discrimination has on WHRDs' lives and work. Methodologies should ensure WHRDs play a leading role in recording and analyzing the data.
- 4) Governments, international organizations and civil society organizations should carry out campaigns that spotlight the work of WHRDs and their organizations, and implement specific measures to eliminate the violence they face.

B. The need for further development of a regional perspective in order to identify trends and patterns that explain the violence faced by WHRDs

Recommendations

- 1) The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights should give greater attention to violence against WHRDs in countries with the highest incidence of attacks (such as Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico), and to groups most impacted (WHRDs who defend land and natural resources, WHRDs who fight against violence and impunity, and

journalists). This includes making specific recommendations in their reports and strengthening protection mechanisms, especially precautionary measures, easing access to such measures, and guaranteeing the adequate implementation and enforcement of such measures for as long as needed by the WHRD.

- 2) The Organization of American States and Council of Women Ministers of Central America (COMMCA) should widen the scope of their research to include an analysis of the regional dynamics of violence and specifically how it affects WHRDs, and create spaces for dialogue with WHRDs and their organizations in order to develop region-wide protection mechanisms that prevent attacks.

C. The importance of recognizing and highlighting the role of WHRDs in building democracy, peace, and justice in the region and the impact and consequences of attacks against them

Recommendations

- 1) Society as a whole should recognize the contribution WHRDs make in overcoming injustice, inequality and discrimination.
- 2) Governments must take action to prevent the discrediting of WHRDs and their work, beginning with clear sanctions against those who promote hostility towards and stigmatization of WHRDs.
- 3) Social and civil society organizations should highlight the work of WHRDs and undertake public awareness and support campaigns.
- 4) Government offices responsible for existing protection mechanisms and public human rights organizations should

maintain an ongoing dialogue with WHRDs at risk in order to jointly agree on comprehensive protection measures that favor empowerment and facilitate their work, making it a priority to ensure that perpetrators are investigated and brought to justice. Evaluation of measures currently in effect is urgently needed to ensure that they are adequately applied and implemented.

- 5) Organizations and social movements should critically evaluate their style of activism and internal political practices to ensure that they are not reproducing discrimination, risk, violence, oppression or damaging the health of WHRDs. We need to collectively review the impact of protection projects and strategies on our human rights advocacy work with an aim to build and strengthen agreements and strategies to offer further protection to all human rights defenders while also maintaining and expanding our struggles.

Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders
(IM-Defensoras)

INICIATIVA MESOAMERICANA
de mujeres Defensoras
DE DERECHOS HUMANOS

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