President Michael D. Higgins

Dear colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen

Good afternoon!

It is a great honour and privilege to be here with you all today representing The Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras). We are an alliance of 6 organizations (AWID, La Colectiva Feminista, JASS, FCAM, Consorcio Oaxaca, UDEFEGUA) and 5 national WHRDs networks contributing to the development and implementation of a holistic protection model with a gender perspective for women working for human rights in several social movements in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua.

IM-Defensoras feels also very proud to have the opportunity in contributing to the HRD Memorial Project that Front Line Defenders had the vision to develop and jointly create with many of us here today.

Killings and impunity for Human Rights Defenders, being women, trans, intersex people and men are a sad and gloomy reality not only in Mesoamerica but also across the globe. Standing in solidarity and being the voice for those who are no longer with us and who had fought for human rights and justice for all is our responsibility. We stand here today exercising our right to speak out and demand justice for those who have been silenced.

Women Human Rights Defenders work tirelessly for equality, justice and peace. However, they do this work under conditions of discrimination, violence, impunity, and human rights
violations that put their integrity at risk. Women Human Rights Defenders face the same risks as their male counterparts but also face other specific risks related to their gender. Sexual Violence, smear and slander campaigns, threats to their families specially their daughters and sons, exclusion from decision making processes in their own organizations, violence in their own communities and private spaces are some of the specific risks to which they are exposed because of their work. They also perform their human rights work in a context in which violence is normalized and used as justification of misogynist violence and of perpetuating gender stereotypes.

Through our Registry of Attacks on WHRDs, IM-Defensoras has registered 1,688 attacks on WHRDs in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico between 2012-2014. Among those attacks 32 were murders and 39 attempted murders against WHRDs. The majority

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1 MÉXICO (16) 2012 (8) Agnes Torres Hernández (Humana Nación Trans), Regina Martínez (periodista, corresponsal del Semanario Proceso), Durvin Ramírez Díaz (ambientalista, Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Tabasco), Manuela Martha Solís Contreras (El Barzón), Juventina Villa Mojica (Organización de Campesinos Ecologistas de la Sierra de Petatlán y Coyuca de Catalán), Renata – René Espinoza Reyes– (defensora trans), María Edy Fabiola Osorio Bernaldez (Guerreros Verdes), Carmela Elsarrararáz Méndez (Monarcas Libertad de Michoacán); 2013 (4): Rocio Mesino Mesino (Organización Campesina de la Sierra del Sur), Irma Ascencio Arenas (defensora comunitaria), Ana Lilia Gatica (Organización Popular de Productores de la Costa Grande) y María Concepción Martínez Medina (defensora feminista); 2014 (2): Sandra Luz Hernández (defensora de víctimas de desaparición), María del Rosario Fuentes (Valor de Tamaulipas); 2015 (1): Nadia Vera; 2016 (1): Alessa Flores (Lola Dejavu).

HONDURAS (12) 2013 (2): María Enriqueta Matute (defensora del territorio) y Mireya Mendoza (Asociación de Jueces por la Democracia); 2014 (5): Margarita Murillo (Foro Social del Valle de Sula), Alma Janeth Díaz Ortega (líder campesina), Uva Herlinda Castellanos (grupo campesino Bella Vista), Marlene Banegas (fiscal), Patricia Eufragio Banegas (fiscal); 2015 (1): Angie Ferreira (colectivo trans). 2016 (4): Paola Barraza (colectivo trans), Berta Cáceres (COPINH), Alejandra Padilla (Asociación Feminista Trans), Lesbia Urquia (COPINH)

GUATEMALA (12) 2012 (4): Feliciana Raymundo Matom (defensora indígena), Feliciana Ceto Matom (defensora indígena), Petrona Moran (defensora del territorio), Sandra Saquil Nájera (defensora del territorio); 2013 (4): Blanca Rosa Gonzalez Munguía (Comisión Coordinación de Mujeres de Xalapan), Kira Zuleta Enríquez Mena, Santa Alvarado (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de Salud de Guatemala), Lea Marie De León Marroquin (abogada penalista de casos de alto impacto); 2014 (2): Patricia Samayoa (defensora feminista), Marilyn Topacio Reynoso (defensora del territorio); 2015 (2): Rosalinda Pérez (defensora indígena), Marleni Estrada (Unión Sindical de Trabajadores de Guatemala).

EL SALVADOR (2) 2013 (1): Tania Vásquez (COMCAVIS TRANS); 2015 (1): Francela Mendez (comunidad Trans)
of those crimes remain in impunity in a regional context marked by the militarization of territories, authoritarianism, the development of mega projects and extractive industries, the presence of criminal groups that are backed by the authorities. This in the middle of profound social and economic inequalities that forces millions of people to migrate thus weakening the social tissue of entire societies.

In order to confront this violence and impunity IM-Defensoras has learnt over the years that the needs of protection for WHRDs have some particularities given the gender nature of the attacks and risks they face while carrying out their work. Having this in mind our work has been focusing on developing a holistic protection model that goes beyond providing “hard” security measures. Through the creation of WHRDs national netwroks between and for WHRDs, we have developed several strategies that take into account their specific needs such as self-care and collective wellbeing, rapid reponse funds, the establishment of shelters and self-care centers, national and international advocacy, communication and documentation of the violence suffered by WHRDs.

Beyond our own efforts we are certain that the main responsibility to protect WHRDs relies on States. Thus, they must ensure an enabling environment in which we can exercise our right to defend rights and allow us to generate experiences and good practices that can evolve into concrete safety measures to be implemented by public authorities.

As our dear Alda Facio\(^2\) clearly expresses: “In order to protect WHRDs States must start by recognizing the fact that these women perform their work in a patriarchal context in which their lives and contributions are not valued to the same degree as those of men”.

\(^2\) ald Facio is a well known Latin American feminist and scholar and Chairperson of the UN Working Group on Discrimination against women in law and in practice.
Our movements and our societies at large are also responsible for promoting and encouraging women’s political participation without the fear of being attacked because of their gender.

The challenges are many but the road will be easier when human rights’ work is not seen as opposed to the realization of democracy and peace but the only way to get there. And together we can!

Thank you!