



Navigating Risk, Managing Security and Receiving Support: A Study of Human Rights Defenders at Risk in Mexico

Summary of Findings

Alice M. Nah, Katrina Maliamauv, Patricia Bartley,
Erick Monterrosas, Paola Pacheco Ruiz¹

Introduction

In this paper, we present key results from a research project examining how human rights defenders navigate risk, manage their personal security, and receive protection support in Mexico.² We interviewed defenders who have experienced risk or threat in the past five years, both individually and in focus groups, and asked them to complete a survey.³ We adopted the definition of a ‘human rights defender’ as set out in the Declaration of Human Rights Defenders⁴, that is, anyone who promotes and strives for the protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

This paper highlights some of the key findings that emerged in this study, including: the impact of threats and attacks experienced; feelings about security; the security

¹ This paper was translated by Gemma Sunyer. Reference: Nah, AM; Maliamauv, K; Bartley, P; Monterrosas, E; and Pacheco Ruiz, P (2017) Navigating Risk, Managing Security and Receiving Support: A Study of Human Rights Defenders at Risk in Mexico, Summary of Findings, Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York: York. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Workshop on Risk and Protection of Human Rights Defenders in Mexico organized by the University of York and Peace Brigades International Mexico in Mexico City on 14 January 2017. Available at <http://securityofdefendersproject.org/>.

² This research was also conducted in four other countries – Colombia, Indonesia, Egypt, and Kenya – using the same research protocol. For more information on this project, see: <http://securityofdefendersproject.org/>

³ A small number of participants only completed the survey and a small number only participated in an interview or focus group. Most participants complete both the survey and an interview or focus group.

⁴ Formally known as the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, accessible at <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Defenders/Declaration/declaration.pdf>.

management practices that participants adopt; the experience of security training; the level of support for human rights work that participants receive; common barriers to security management; reflections on wellbeing and self-protection; and perceptions of 'human rights defenders' in Mexico.

The Participants in this Study

There were a total of 75 participants from Mexico in this study (total number 407), comprising 30 men and 45 women. They were from a wide range of backgrounds and engaged in a broad range of human rights activities in Chiapas, Coahuila, Chihuahua, Jalisco, Nuevo León, Oaxaca, Veracruz, Puebla, Estado de Mexico and Morelos working on issues such as civil and political rights, freedom of expression, enforced disappearances, the rights of political prisoners, indigenous peoples' rights, land rights, environmental rights, the right to health, the right to education, women's rights, LGBTQ rights, and the rights of migrants and refugees.

The participants were between 19-78 years old, with a mean age of 39.2 years. 45.2% of participants were married, or living with a partner, 28.8% were in a relationship, and 26% were single. 62.2% had children. 45.9% live and work in urban and rural areas, 45.9% live and work in an urban area, while 8.1% live and work in rural areas. 64.9% of participants were employed, 24.3% were self-employed, and 10.8% were unemployed.

42% described themselves as conducting their human rights work as an employee or volunteer in a formal/registered organisation; 65% described themselves as conducting their human rights work as a member of an informal/ unregistered group, community or network; and 20.3% described themselves as conducting their human rights work alone.⁵

The participants described themselves as having conducted human rights work between 2 and 24 years, with an average of around 12 years. Most (77.5%) described themselves as leading others in human rights work most of the time (rather than following others most of the time).

Types of threats and attacks experienced

The most frequently mentioned types of threats and attacks experienced by participants were harassment; intimidation; stigmatisation; threats of violent attacks and death; surveillance; interference with communication; infection of computer with viruses; web censorship; physical harm (including sexual harassment, torture and kidnapping); arrest, detention, judicial investigation and criminalisation; and break-ins into offices and homes.

Participants also noted the deep impact upon them of the kidnapping, torture, disappearances and murder of colleagues and family members. Women participants were particularly affected by misogynistic attacks, the normalisation of gender-based violence,

⁵ Participants were allowed to choose more than one option.

public humiliation, stigmatisation, threats against family members, sexual violence, and femicide. Participants observed that protection agencies, enforcement officials, community members and even fellow colleagues often did not take threats and harm against women seriously. They noted that violence against women and against LGBTIQ* defenders are often depoliticised and left unaddressed.

Types of perpetrators

The most common type of perpetrator mentioned by participants were state actors, in particular, the police, military, and other authorities such as local politicians, municipal authorities, prosecutors, state prison wardens, and intelligence agents. Participants have also been threatened and attacked by members of organised crime and corporations and local 'caciques'. In some cases, perpetrators were unidentifiable.

Participants were particularly concerned about complicity between state and non-state actors, especially those linked to organised crime and drug trafficking. They noted that a complex web of perpetrators existed in Mexico, with collusion between the political elite, government officials, the police and both national and international businesses.

The impact of threats and attacks experienced

86.1% of participants who answered the survey said that they were 'concerned' or 'very concerned' about their physical security.⁶ 84.9% of participants were 'concerned' or 'very concerned' about their digital security. 89% were 'concerned' or 'very concerned' about their mental and emotional wellbeing.

Interviewees spoke about how the anticipation of attacks affected them in multiple ways. Mental exhaustion, being continuously stressed (and ill as a result), trauma, nightmares, living in panic, and having difficulty sleeping were some of the mental and emotional effects they described. One participant talked about the uncertainty that she had to live with every day:

The highest risk is knowing that your life can be taken away, and the conditions are ripe for that to happen. Uncertainty; you leave home, say goodbye to your family and you do not know if you are coming back [...] it is not like the risk of losing your job, a vehicle, a commodity; our work puts us in the position of losing our life or the life of a relative.⁷

The insecurity the participants live with is often pervasive, impacting not only the way they do their work but also the way they live their lives, their daily routines and habits, their family dynamics, and their relationships with others.

⁶ Participants were given the following options: 'I don't know', 'Not concerned at all', 'Not too concerned', 'somewhat concerned' and 'very concerned'.

⁷ Participant working on women's rights, forced disappearances and violence against women in Chihuahua. Interviewed December 2015.

As one participant said:

We had to change our life, the relationship with our family was impacted, the relationship with my partner... she and my family were the most affected... because [the government] had information about all the schools my nephew had attended... the mobile phone numbers that my father had used in the last 7 years... I had to talk with my family... [security] strategies had to be adopted by my family... we did not know if the attack was going to come against the most visible actor [referring to himself] or against my family circle.⁸

Reflecting on the impact of the attacks and the disruptions endured, one participant expressed anger:

These are measures that transform your life, but are also needed to save your integrity. This makes me angry [...] I am angry because we cannot defend and promote rights in a safe and free conditions [...] we should not be criminalised, repressed nor harassed.⁹

Their rights and freedoms are compromised in multiple ways. A participant spoke about the grief of losing what once gave her joy:

I have been negatively impacted by not being able to go freely to those communities, these are not abstract communities, these are people that have given me joy, that have taught me how to live joyfully despite (a lack of) material goods, taught me the culture of laughter, as an anthropologist I got drunk with *tesguino*... I see all that as lost. This is my mourning.¹⁰

Participants also spoke about the trauma they experienced when their colleagues, fellow human rights defenders and family members were attacked, killed or disappeared. A participant whose son was forcibly disappeared described how the insurmountable fear and pain from such a loss resulted in their paralysis and silence:

I understand that silence perfectly, I had it for at least five months. That silence that you can't ask people about because it's so big, the pain goes through your throat...¹¹

She broke her silence after five months, when she realised public officials had to be pressured or they would not act. She explains,

⁸ Participant working on right to education, land rights, indigenous rights, disappeared persons and extra-judicial killings in Mexico City. Interviewed in October 2015.

⁹ Participant working on women's rights in Oaxaca. Interviewed in December 2015.

¹⁰ Participant working on indigenous rights, women's rights, right to food in Chihuahua. Interviewed in December 2015.

¹¹ Participant working on forced disappearances in Nuevo León. Interviewed in January 2016.

If you let them do their job without pressure, they don't do anything. There's another thing: the fear paralyzes the families of the disappeared. The fear of your family being harmed, that paralyzes us a lot. Because we don't know where they would come from and we know the police won't do a thing. As well as that, we know the police may be involved. So, we're lost, totally unprotected... I'm sure that's the reason many people can't work on this, even if they want to you can't. I'm sure thousands of family members, mothers or grandmothers, are dying in a corner of their homes from pure sadness, without speaking, without being able to speak because they can't talk, not because they don't want to.

Feelings about Security

A number of themes emerged when we asked participants to describe what made them feel secure and what made them feel insecure.

Understanding the context of repression

Participants saw the need to understand the context of repression as fundamental to feelings about security. As one participant put it, "clarity is a departure point"¹² where security is concerned. When asked what made him feel safe, another participant said:

Knowing where the risks I face come from. Being clear about what my vulnerabilities are, what can hurt me, and what cannot. The clearer you have that, the safer you feel.¹³

Others emphasized the importance of mapping the actors in the context of their work, and identifying their allies and foes.

Collusion between state and non-state actors creates complexities, fosters unpredictability, and contributes to feelings of insecurity. As a participant expressed:

....Another thing that makes me feel unsafe is that you don't know what you're facing at all,... it's a transnational company.. but you don't know the connections there may be, on one hand you have the political ruling class but also on the other hand you have organized crime. It seems to me that the complexity of today's context in Mexico makes me feel unsafe because, more and more we realize that and an attack is less predictable or avoidable. Like every formula there's some risk, but what I want to say is that the level of violence and uncertainty in which we're living, like the last case of severe human rights violations, places us in a complex situation, this is harder to characterize than we thought.¹⁴

¹² Participant working on land rights and women in rights in Oaxaca. Interviewed in August 2015.

¹³ Participant working on land rights, extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, indigenous rights in Mexico City. Interviewed in February 2016.

¹⁴ Participant working on cultural rights, civil and political rights, land rights, right to food and rights of indigenous people in Mexico City. Interviewed in February 2016.

The importance of the intersectional analysis of security

For women human rights defenders especially, an intersectional analysis of security was fundamental. As one female participant said,

we should conceive safety from an intersectional sense, mainly when we're talking about safety towards women; because of my own circumstances as a young and poor woman, a woman at times with precarious work, a Mexico City woman with roots in Oaxaca and Michoacán; then every social sphere and structure enables us or puts our safety at risk.¹⁵

Women defenders in particular expressed frustration that the pervasive violence against women, 'street harassment', and other forms of sexual harassment were often not taken seriously enough. As one participant said,

We ought to be more concerned that there are colleagues living in very dangerous places, that in order for them to get to their organisation's facilities they put themselves at risk. We should be more concerned with the impact of sexual harassment...¹⁶

Women human rights defenders also highlighted the grave impacts of violence and harassment from people within their own organizations and from other defenders. A participant noted:

When violence comes from within, from the closer sphere – such as (sentimental) partners, colleagues from the same organisations, machismo within social movements – when that happens, there is a danger of fracture, sometimes even more dangerous than that related to external actors... we need to work on that with networks of defenders in order to empower defenders...¹⁷

Strength from relationships and solidarity with others

Relationships with others, the networks formed and the perspectives held within those spaces, were important to feelings of security.

As one woman participant said,

[What makes me feel safe is] that currently there are women concerned for the security and protection of other women. That calms me a lot. It is not that I think that there are no men concerned with my security, but I know that if it is another

¹⁵ Participant working on women's rights in Mexico City & Oaxaca. Interviewed in February 2016.

¹⁶ Participant working with WHRDs in Mexico City. Interviewed in February 2016.

¹⁷ Participant working on psychosocial support for HRDs, rights of political prisoners, rights of indigenous peoples, reproductive rights, rights of survivors of violence, and other forms of feminist work in Oaxaca. Interviewed in December 2015.

woman, she will understand some aspects that for example my partner or my father won't, not because they do not want to understand or they do not have the sensitivity, but because those are different experiences. That brings me a lot of security, [women solidarity] it is something that is already set up, at least amongst us. Even if sometimes we [women] are seen as offering non-professional protection, I think this is partly true, we need to learn more, but constructing these spaces of solidarity is very necessary, sometimes these spaces take you out of very difficult situations.¹⁸

It wasn't just women in this study who emphasized connections with others as vital to feelings of security. As Table 1 shows, 90.4% of participants in the survey stated that they 'often', 'almost always' and 'always' made sure they kept others informed of their movements and what they were doing when undertaking sensitive work, a much higher percentage that amongst participants in other countries in this study.

Security is shared

Understanding that both risk and security is shared was also a common theme among participants reflecting on the meaning of security. As one participant said:

...it's almost impossible for an organization to carry an agenda almost exclusively, in fact I believe that as organizations, as defenders, we are realizing that, if we are not together, our safety level diminishes, that's why I think that one of the strongest points of this organization is that we are always focussed on bonding together our efforts and solidarity...¹⁹

Participants recognised that they needed to be purposeful in connecting, creating and strengthening relationships with others. As the same participant above explained,

Personally, I try not to isolate myself from the rest, because the work and dynamics can also pull you into desk based work without participating in the connecting processes, so I believe that participating in connecting processes allows you to be visible, allows you to even share working efforts, and that's what I think that even gives the organization so much solidity protection-wise and feeling safe, even though what we're doing without a doubt can offer us unpredictable situations, but it does reduce our risks when we see each other...

Security Management Practices

Participants described using a wide range of security strategies and practices for their personal and collective security. Table 1 indicates the frequency in which they engage in some commonly adopted security management practices.

¹⁸ Participant, women human rights defender in Mexico City. Interviewed in February 2016.

¹⁹ Participant working on cultural rights, civil and political rights, land rights, right to food and rights of indigenous people in Mexico City. Interviewed in February 2016.

Table 1: The Frequency of a Selection of Security Management Practices

Security Management Practice	Percent who practice this 'often', 'almost always' or 'always'
Assess the risks involved in their human rights work	59.7% ²⁰
Proactively manage the risks involved in their human rights work	67.1% ²¹
Follow a personalised 'security plan' (a plan of what to do in response to specific threats)	58.0% ²²
When doing sensitive work, making sure that someone else knows where they are going and what they are doing	90.4% ²³
Before doing sensitive work, making contingency plans in case things go wrong	63.0% ²⁴

As discussed previously, networks of support were vital to the security practices of participants. The most frequently cited sources of support were work colleagues and other human rights defenders. Community members, neighbours, friends, family, religious bodies and mental health actors were also mentioned as sources of support.

While one third of participants sought protection from State authorities, not all did so because they did not believe they would actually receive it. Participants filed cases so that the security incidents would be 'on record'. Some participants also mentioned documenting and keeping records of threats as a protection strategy. These strategies were consistent with the call by participants that for security to be addressed meaningfully, 'the logic of repression' needed to be understood. Keeping a paper trail, recording the actions of perpetrators, and making connections within the complex and challenging context of their work were therefore long-term strategies but important steps to prevent continued insecurities.

²⁰ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 55.4%, Kenya 71.1%, Indonesia 60.1%, Egypt 51.3% (Average 59.5%).

²¹ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 58.1%, Kenya 66.7%, Indonesia 63.4%, Egypt 39.5% (Average 59.0%).

²² Percentages in other countries: Colombia 42.7%, Kenya 64.0%, Indonesia 58.8%, Egypt 34.6% (Average 51.6%).

²³ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 77.4%, Kenya 80.3%, Indonesia 63.0%, Egypt 71.8% (Average 76.8%).

²⁴ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 52.7%, Kenya 70.3%, Indonesia 50.6%, Egypt 53.9% (Average 58.1%).

Over 60% of participants in this study (more than in other countries) also frequently developed and employed security protocols. Security protocols were used at organizational, individual and familial levels. Changing movements and routines, avoiding certain places and people, and assessing the security climate were also security practices employed by participants.

Participants also focused on their visibility as a security strategy. While some participants chose to decrease their personal or work visibility (either by going into shelters, temporarily stopping work, going *incognito* or in disguise in public), many participants saw increasing their visibility as a security strategy. Visibility was increased either by assuming more public roles; campaigning to highlight their work and the insecurities faced; using the media (especially social media) and building alliances with high-profile individuals.

Visibility, however, was both advantageous and dangerous. As one participant said, “visibility is such a debate, because it doesn’t necessarily guarantee you more safety”²⁵, while others saw the importance in ‘increasing the political cost of attacks’.

Sometimes, increased visibility was a difficult and unintended consequence of engaging in other security practices, for example by remaining active in targeted organisations, a tension described by a participant here:

Even if you are changing things, you are putting yourself in a terrible position [risk]. If you are protected by your organisation you are still at risk, if you lower your profile, or leave your organisation, thus being demobilised ... you have no eyes upon you, but at the same time you are vulnerable without your support networks. I have decided to continue being involved with my political network. But I know that also puts me at risk too.²⁶

Only three participants mentioned receiving accompaniment from other organisations.

Some participants shared how they organised their own groups and collectives to protect their own communities from perpetrators.

Security Training

81.1% of participants in this study stated that they had received some training on security management.²⁷ Men received slightly more training than women (83.3% of male participants compared to 79.5% of women participants). The average number of trainings received was 2.8 per person.

²⁵ Participant working on cultural rights, civil and political rights, land rights, right to food and rights of indigenous people in Mexico City. Interviewed in February 2016.

²⁶ Participant engaged in feminist work, student activism and civil and political rights in Oaxaca. Interviewed in January 2016

²⁷ This relatively high figure is due likely to a bias in the selection of participants for this study.

Recommendations for future security training included:

- Conducting political analysis and a mapping of actors and perpetrators within a particular context
- Adapting trainings to particular contexts, as sometimes the trainings are too general to be effective
- Conducting trainings in indigenous languages, in rural areas, and for hard-to-reach communities
- Ensuring trainings were more diverse and inclusive
- Working with smaller and underfunded organisations
- Using practical exercises and ensuring there is follow-up so that understandings of risk and security are complemented by the actual adoption of security management practices.
- Delivering basic trainings on digital security to avoid hackers and surveillance

Level of Support for Human Rights Work

The participants in this study reported receiving high levels of support for their human rights work from close friends and others doing human rights work in Mexico.

Table 2: The Level of Support Received from Human Rights Work

Levels of support described as being 'High' or 'Very High' from their:	Percent of participants in Mexico
Partner	64.4% ²⁸
Parents	53.5% ²⁹
Close Friends	78.1% ³⁰
People doing human rights work in the same country	73.0% ³¹
People doing human rights work in other countries	45.2% ³²

Barriers to Security Management

²⁸ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 55.1%, Kenya 52.0%, Indonesia 63.8%, Egypt 48.7% (Average 56.8%).

²⁹ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 48.7%, Kenya 35.1%, Indonesia 61.9%, Egypt 21.3% (Average 44.1%).

³⁰ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 53.8%, Kenya 61.1%, Indonesia 74.3%, Egypt 68.4% (Average 67.1%).

³¹ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 64.5%, Kenya 70.2%, Indonesia 75.6%, Egypt 65.8% (Average 69.7%).

³² Percentages in other countries: Colombia 47.4%, Kenya 37.7%, Indonesia 58.3%, Egypt 58.7% (Average 49.5%).

We asked participants to identify the level of significance of specific barriers to them managing their security.³³

Table 3: Barriers to Security Management

Barriers to security management described as being a 'very significant barrier' or a 'rather significant barrier':	Percent of participants in Mexico
Lack of Technical Support from Experts	73.6% ³⁴
Lack of Knowledge	71.9% ³⁵
Lack of Money	82.1% ³⁶
Lack of Support from Leaders in my Organisation / Group	43.8% ³⁷
Lack of Support from Family	16.2% ³⁸
Lack of Support from Close Friends	22.9% ³⁹

More women (78.6%) expressed the lack of technical support as a 'rather significant' or 'very significant' barrier compared with men (66.7%). Similar, more women (76.74%) expressed that the lack of time was a 'rather significant' or 'very significant' barrier compared with men (56.67%). This could be related to the longer working day of women defenders who are usually responsible for domestic (as well as formal) work.

Reflections on Wellbeing and Self-protection

Gender roles, machismo culture, heteronormative patriarchy and toxic masculinity were raised as both reasons for various forms of violence, and as an explanation for why many human rights defenders do not engage in wellbeing practices or self-protection.

For male defenders in particular, needing protection and wellbeing measures are interpreted as signs of weakness. Expectations of them as men, as 'leaders' and 'heroes'

³³ Participants were given the following options: 'Very significant barrier', 'Rather significant barrier' and 'Not really a significant barrier'.

³⁴ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 66.2%, Kenya 89.4%, Indonesia 79.0%, Egypt 78.6% (Average 77.0%).

³⁵ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 65.8%, Kenya 57.9%, Indonesia 75.4%, Egypt 73.7% (Average 68.9%).

³⁶ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 86.4%, Kenya 92.2%, Indonesia 70.3%, Egypt 73.1% (Average 80.8%).

³⁷ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 38.4%, Kenya 54.0%, Indonesia 65.0%, Egypt 53.4% (Average 50.9%).

³⁸ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 25.0%, Kenya 25.0%, Indonesia 64.4%, Egypt 55.9% (Average 37.3%).

³⁹ Percentages in other countries: Colombia 33.8%, Kenya 35.5%, Indonesia 58.1%, Egypt 48.6% (Average 39.8%).

demanded that they undertook this work ‘without limits’. As one male participant said (highlighting his perceptions of other male defenders):

[They think] “How do I dare to think about my safety when the matter is about the collective, the community, not about me, but all of us?” There’s no way for them to understand it most of the time and there’s a chauvinist culture in everyone, where they think that, as men, no one will threaten them, scare them, and that doesn’t help.⁴⁰

One female participant⁴¹ also shared that it was challenging to incorporate wellbeing actions into an organisation when female colleagues are willing to process their emotions together, but male colleagues often chose not to participate. Wellbeing practices need to be enacted and learned. Beliefs and norms that do not support wellbeing (such as machismo and martyrdom) need to be unlearned.

Female participants also spoke about how as women, they are socialised to believe that they need to take care of others, not themselves. Women defenders who chose to prioritise their wellbeing also had to confront feelings of guilt when doing so.

Martyrdom, a sense of invincibility

Guilt, however, was not merely a result of gender dynamics, but rather intertwined in the identity of ‘defender’. Participants talked about how defenders felt they “belonged to others”, and that they were “mean” and felt guilty if they chose to step back and not provide assistance to others (as a self-care strategy). Others said that defenders sometimes did not protect themselves because they believed that risk was inherent in their work, and that by choosing to be a defender, they just had to assume the risk. One male participant stated that male defenders sometimes just did not believe attacks would happen to them.⁴²

While acknowledging the pervasiveness of martyrdom culture in Mexico, not all participants prescribed to that belief, and instead saw it necessary to change that narrative through their work. A female participant talked about her frustration with how the media sometimes chose to portray her (and defenders) as if they choose to be martyrs, propagating this false narrative about defenders:

I was very upset when I realised that media and journalistic narratives extolled the image of a strong woman reading (at a rally) a very radical and critical political position against the government. It was like saying: 'here we are and we do not care about anything else' they fabricated the imaginary for patriarchal culture, using a woman [...] a woman reproducing revolutionary patterns. I had to give my own

⁴⁰ Participant working on land rights, extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, indigenous rights in Mexico City. Interviewed in February 2016.

⁴¹ Participant working on socio-political rights, rights of indigenous peoples and right to education in Oaxaca. Interviewed in August 2015.

⁴² Participant working on civil-political rights, rights of indigenous peoples, enforced disappearances and freedom of expression in Mexico City. Interviewed in April 2016.

version, separated from the edited videos, videos with epic music, with explosions, as though we did not care about getting killed. Of course we do care about being killed! Of course I do care about people close to me getting killed! I am not willing to die as a symbol of anything! I did that [reading the political statement] to avoid that, but the narrative was the opposite [...]⁴³

Participants talked about needing to be intentional in changing that narrative of martyrdom, of valuing life, and seeing human rights as “life not death projects”. Reflecting on this, one participant said,

I’m not saying this from my worldview, but there’s a martyrdom mentality in Mexico; and not martyrdom in a religious way but rather in a way than the most you can do is to sacrifice your life for the people you defend, and we have tried to change the discourse from Coahuila, saying: We can do more being alive than dead.⁴⁴

While another emphasized valuing oneself as an important dimension too:

I believe that self-love of oneself is underestimated too; because, as defenders, we become beings for others and we support everybody, and we help and defend, but we can’t do it if we don’t take care of our own lives, in many circumstances our relationships, our nourishment, our rest, our spaces.⁴⁵

Participants stated that wellbeing and protection measures are prioritised in bigger organisations that have the resources for them. One participant observed that rural, grassroots defenders were the most burnt out because workshops and resources do not reach them.

Wellbeing practices

Despite the personal, organisational and cultural struggles around security, wellbeing and protection, participants spoke too about the necessity of caring for and protecting themselves and other defenders. This is reflected in the fact that while the majority of participants stated that there was not a strong culture among human rights defenders in Mexico to prioritise their mental and emotional wellbeing, over half the participants interviewed engaged in various measures to address their own wellbeing. These include:

- Leaving activities before you reached burnout
- Reprioritizing, stepping back from activism if need be
- Finding places that give you strength – work, family, like-minded comrades, spirituality

⁴³ Participant working on socio-political rights, feminism, student activism in Oaxaca. Interviewed January 2016.

⁴⁴ Participant working on migrant rights in Coahuila. Interviewed in January 2016.

⁴⁵ Participant working on women’s rights in Mexico City and Oaxaca. Interviewed in February 2016.

- Choosing to work in feminist and women-only circles (especially for women defenders battling against misogynistic, patriarchal cultures within organisations)
- Personal leisure activities – yoga, socializing with friends, meditation, not working at weekends

Some participants also mentioned undergoing therapy with psychologists, while recognising that this was an uncommon practice in Mexico and an expensive one.

Perceptions of ‘Human Rights Defenders’ in Mexico

Of the participants in this study, 80.8% referred to themselves as a human rights defender, a higher number than participants from other countries (an average of 75%).

Growing familiarity with the term

Participants observed that the term human rights defender was more widely recognised in Mexico than in other countries in the region, and that it was a “more acceptable” label today. However, it was widely agreed that this familiarity only developed in the past few years. One participant explained that until recently, “we didn’t know how to call people defending human rights.”⁴⁶ Another noted that she had not known that she was a human rights defender until she was described as such by an international NGO.⁴⁷ Some participants highlighted that there was ignorance about human rights work in general and suggested that more could be done to improve this.⁴⁸ Perceptions of a human rights defender varied according to location, region, and the type of work they did. Land and environmental HRDs are often referred to as ‘activists’ or ‘community workers.’⁴⁹

Negative perceptions

Participants reported that human rights defenders are often seen as ‘troublemakers’, ‘defending criminals’, ‘rapists’, ‘crazy’, ‘*revoltosos*’ ‘political opponents’ or simply naïve. This was often attributed to negative narratives and misinformation spread through mass media and even government agents. Others reported that sometimes defenders are perceived to be working for state institutions or the police and therefore not seen as trustworthy.

⁴⁶ Participant working on land rights, extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, indigenous rights in Mexico City. Interviewed in February 2016.

⁴⁷ Participant working on socio-political rights, rights of indigenous peoples and right to education in Oaxaca. Interviewed in August 2015.

⁴⁸ Participant working on protection of HRDs and gender-based violence in Tonamecca, Oaxaca. Interviewed in January 2016.

⁴⁹ Participant working on socio-political rights, rights of indigenous peoples and right to education in Oaxaca. Interviewed in August 2015.

Positive perceptions

Participants noted that the use of the term gave greater legitimacy to their work both locally and internationally. Some mentioned that this was particularly important for women human rights defenders.⁵⁰ Another spoke of the importance of the term being used by a wide range of organisations (such as NGOs, the United Nations, and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights) and making defenders part of a wider human rights movement.⁵¹ One participant observed that a growing number of people saw defenders as being very necessary, “because they dare to do things that other citizens wouldn’t dare to do, they say things publicly and privately that other citizens won’t say.”⁵²

Recommendations

These are some of the recommendations made by the participants in this study.

Recommendations for State actors

- Combat structural impunity; investigate threats and attacks against defenders and bring perpetrators to justice
- In relation to the implementation of the Mechanism to Protect Human Rights Defenders and Journalists:
 - Promote awareness amongst the public about the work of human rights defenders, the protection offered by the Mechanism, and how defenders at risk can access this protection.
 - Use an intersectionality lens to assess the risks that defenders face. Respond in a timely way to protect defenders, with tools, methods and personnel that are appropriate to their specific circumstances.
 - Recognise and address the concerns that defenders may have about the personnel involved in implementing the Mechanism’s protection measures. Ensure that personnel are well trained and carry out their duties professionally.

⁵⁰ Participant working with women human rights defenders in Mexico City. Interviewed in February 2016.

⁵¹ Participant working on land rights, enforced disappearances, extra-judicial killings, rights of indigenous peoples, and other serious human rights violations in Mexico City. Interviewed in February 2016.

⁵² Participant working on migrant rights in Saltillo, Coahuila. Interviewed in January 2016.

Recommendations for protection actors

The participants in this study also made the following recommendations for actors who provide protection support and assistance to human rights defenders, including NGOs, embassies, UN agencies, and donors.

- Support defenders in conducting context analysis, mapping of actors, monitoring of changes relevant to risks faced, risk analysis, and risk management. Help organisations and groups to develop security policies and protocols. Provide resources for follow-ups to security training to ensure that security management practices are enacted. Extend these resources to women defenders, defenders in rural areas, and defenders from minority communities.
- Foster spaces for reflection on the importance of wellbeing, recognising that gender and cultural roles influence the way wellbeing is understood and experienced. Invite defenders to share their experiences. Support them in developing knowledge and skills on wellbeing and self-care.
- Recognise the impact of funding practices of the security and wellbeing of defenders. Support the inclusion of security management activities into work plans and budgets, including digital security practices and wellbeing practices.
- Recognise that the implementation of security measures often poses a 'cost' to defenders, for example, in terms of time, money, privacy, and freedom. Some security measures can be disempowering or isolating. Give defenders as much choice as possible in choosing security measures that fit their personal needs.
- Support defenders in building legitimacy, credibility and acceptance for their work; in countering stigmatisation; and in developing contacts and support networks locally, nationally and internationally.