

THE EMBRACE OF THE HIVES



**SPACES FOR CARE AND HEALING
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS**



THE EMBRACE OF THE HIVES - Spaces for Care and Healing for Human Rights Defenders: is a publication of the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras) and Consorcio para el Dialogo Parlamentario y la Equidad Oaxaca AC (Consorcio Oaxaca)

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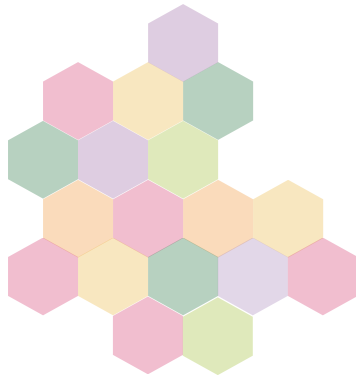
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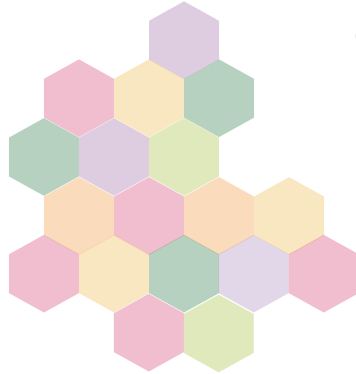
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COLECTIVO FEMINISTA DE
AUTOCUIDADO E CUIDADO ENTRE
DEFENSORAS DE DERECHOS HUMANOS



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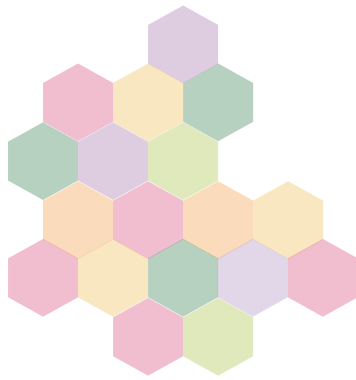
Brazil Respite House

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Casa La Siguata

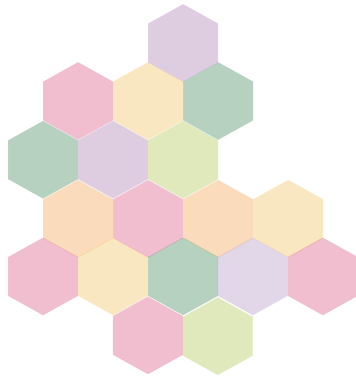
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We also express our gratitude to the sister defenders whose names we cannot list for security reasons, who through the **“Oasis for Itinerant Care and Healing”** are transforming the painful reality in their country.



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Introduction

*The respite houses are spaces that **connect us with the heartbeat**, this natural life force that emerges effortlessly, but with strength. With **collective respites that embrace hearts**, that unveil and wash away the wounds that defenders accumulate due to patriarchal and sociopolitical violence.*



In May 2023, the Consorcio para el Diálogo Parlamentario y la Equidad Oaxaca and the Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Mujeres Defensoras de Derechos Humanos convened a meeting with allied organizations with **the aim of strengthening the work on care and healing of defenders**. From this meeting held in Oaxaca, Mexico, and after a year of dialogues and interviews through which we shared our experiences, this publication was born.

THE EMBRACE OF THE HIVES is the result of a collective **process of reflection, exchange of knowledge and learning between seven spaces of care and healing that emerged in different geographies** to provide shelter to defenders who seek to go through their processes of healing, recovery and transformation of the impacts and pain generated by sociopolitical and patriarchal violence which defenders experience due to their activism.

The commitment of these houses contributes to **placing care at the centre of political action, to sustaining and strengthening social movements, to transforming the sacrificial culture of activism**, which, from very diverse struggles, contributes to building a better world. Over the years, these spaces have received hundreds of defenders in temporary stays and all of them, from different models and approaches, allow us to collectivize emotions, pain, impacts and recover strengths, hopes and vital energies as an act of justice. We hope that THE EMBRACE OF THE HIVES will inspire the emerging of other spaces of care and healing so that more defenders have access to rest and collective care.

Why are the experiences of healing houses and spaces important?



Self-care, collective care, and healing in a world in crisis

Latin America is a dangerous region for defending human rights. *Just in 2023, 142 defenders were killed in Colombia, 30 in Mexico, 24 in Brazil, and 19 in Honduras.* In Mesoamerica, the colonial legacy of the economic, political, and cultural model manifests in structural forms of oppression and a historical continuity of patriarchal, capitalist, and racist violence on women's bodies and territories. Their existence as political subjects challenges the patriarchal mandates that seek to silence the power of women and gender non-conforming persons who raise their voices in contexts of authoritarianism, corruption, closure of spaces for social and political participation, militarism, extractivism, organized crime's expanding or deepening presence, femicides/feminicides and other forms of violence, as well as an unprecedented migration crisis.

Between 2012 and 2023, IM-Defensoras' Registry of Attacks documented 35,077 attacks against 8,926 women defenders and 953 organizations that defend human rights in Mesoamerica. During this same period, 200 women defenders were killed, and there were an additional 228 attempted killings, which means that if these attacks had been fruitful, the number would have risen to 428. Of the 58 killings of women defenders documented between 2020 and 2022, 40% were of trans women defenders – 23 transfemicides/ transfeminicides that stand out for the viciousness with which they were committed. Almost half (46.3%) of the attacks against women defenders registered between 2012 and 2022 were connected to a series of violent events experienced earlier, and – although the percentage varies by country – their systematic nature reveals an escalation in their severity.

This explains the deep exhaustion that affects the majority of women and gender non-conforming defenders and activists, who regularly conduct their defense work in hostile environments and within a sacrificial culture of activism, all of which generates physical and emotional harms with impacts that transcend the person who suffers them. These conditions limit their power, leadership, and capacity for political action, in addition to weakening their organizational processes and affecting their close relationships. ***The care and healing houses and spaces emerge in this context as a key strategy to strengthen defense movements.*** They are a safe space for women and gender non-conforming defenders to take time for themselves, to distance themselves temporarily from their contexts and replenish their strengths in order to return with stronger tools to continue building a better world where care becomes a habit.



The political dimension of self-care, collective care, and healing in the experiences of care and healing houses and spaces

Although each experience of care and healing presented in this publication reflects different contexts and methodologies, they all understand healing, self-care, and collective care as a political practice that ***reclaims the right to heal from the impact of systemic and historical violence, and that creates spaces of resistance in which to experience new ways of living and struggling based on care, solidarity, and mutual respect in order to live, and live well.*** By taking a political approach to care, they can challenge the system and the dynamics within their movements; this is a crucial element in order to understand the emergence of care and healing spaces as an essential strategy in its implementation. ***In a context where 45% of attacks against women and gender non-conforming defenders are perpetrated by State actors*** – including police and military forces – and where the judiciary has become an instrument that on one attacks them and on the other hand promotes and ensures the impunity of their assailants, caring for oneself and each other collectively becomes resistance. Money and time do not limit or condition access to these experiences, which – therefore – do not generate profits or expropriate knowledge.

The stays are meant for those who do not face a high risk of attack. They generally take place in spaces that are far from city noises and from the communities where the women and gender non-conforming defenders come from. ***The houses thus become a safe space for physical and emotional rehabilitation, which in turn is a radical response to the neoliberal patriarchal system*** that perpetuates violence and exploitation. The care that the houses offer is framed as a human need and a basic inalienable right, a tool for resistance that opposes the commodification of well-being and the paradigm of personal sacrifice for the sake of social struggle.

Caring for oneself becomes a political act that defies a system that considers women and gender non-conforming defenders disposable and that cannot conceive of an activism based on the joy of life. These initiatives are places where, as Berta Cáceres said, utopia is lived in advance, and starting now. And while there are conflicts inside movements, self-criticism is needed in order not to replicate capitalist dynamics or reinforce gender stereotypes, thus avoiding situations where oppressed people become the ones responsible for the care of everyone else due to the pressure to be productive that leads them to exhaustion, stress, and anxiety.

Without doubt, these healing spaces enable women and gender non-conforming defenders to exchange learnings, weave networks, and build relationships based on trust. To identify and recognize the tools and resources for healing that they and their communities already have.

To care and protect oneself based on their peoples' and communities' practices and wisdoms, valuing the diversity of origins and identities as a source of wealth and learning, and honoring each inherited ancestral wisdom. To identify vulnerabilities and risks that may be unnoticed.

During the accompaniment and the development of their care plans, the decisions that people make according to their needs are respected. Importantly, ***these healing processes are promoted as a right***, together with reclaiming food sovereignty, the use of medicinal plants, eating healthy, and the connection with nature, land, and animals as sources of vital energy.



These experiences are therefore not merely places of rest, but political spaces where strategies are tested and practiced to build a fairer and better world for all. By centering care and healing, these become *the foundation for a future where the well-being, good living, and dignity of all people are a priority*, thus challenging the current prevailing structures of violence, discrimination, exploitation, and exclusion.



Care and healing houses and spaces: A kaleidoscope of experiences

The seven experiences of care and healing spaces described here are the heart of this report. Each one was presented by the teams of women and gender non-conforming persons, activists, and defenders who have breathed life into them, who have been developing, re-creating, and systematizing them. The order in which they appear here is chronological based on the year they were founded.

As can be seen when exploring their stories, the experiences have nurtured each other at some point along the way. It is also clear that each is unique, even when they share similarities regarding their principles and fundamentals. *The wealth of the whole creates a kaleidoscope that hopefully both contributes to the activism of these organizations and movements*, and presents an opportunity to enjoy and replenish hope about the existing capacities to create alternatives for the care for life, centering those who defend the rights of everyone.



Casa La Serena

A PLACE FOR REFLECTION, REST, AND HEALING
TO TRANSFORM EXTREME EXHAUSTION
INTO HOPE AND DIGNITY

With its murals and abundant plant life, Casa La Serena is located very near to the city of Oaxaca. It is a healing space sustained in the day-to-day by ***Consortio para el Dialogo Parlamentario y la Equidad Oaxaca AC*** (Consortio Oaxaca) as part of the pact to care among ourselves and care for our struggles through Feminist Holistic Protection (FHP) promoted by the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras). ***Based on a political and ethical approach to self-care, collective care, and healing***, Casa La Serena hosts stays of women and gender non-conforming human rights defenders and organizations facing situations of crisis, exhaustion, and extreme fatigue.

Casa La Serena was born after the first Mesoamerican Gathering of Women Human Rights Defenders held in Oaxaca, Mexico in 2010, where the exhaustion that women defenders experienced in the region was identified as a common theme. In 2012, IM-Defensoras conducted a **series of workshops and developed a baseline assessment about self-care in Mesoamerica**. These actions revealed the exhaustion experienced by women and gender non-conforming defenders in the region and the need to create spaces for them to rest and reflect on the activist practices that led them to this situation. After organizing focus groups to explore how they imagined the space, Casa La Serena emerged. It was originally an itinerant experience until a permanent space to build the project was identified in 2016.

The structure of Casa La Serena includes a **project lead** who manages and supervises the activities and resources, a general coordinator who contributes to the methodological implementation of the program and activities, an **administrative coordinator and another staff person**. The team also includes a **broad network of therapists**, persons who accompany, and healers from a diversity of disciplines who provide support during the stays.



THE TEAM

FUNDAMENTALS AND PRINCIPLES THAT GUIDE THEIR JOURNEY

The starting point for Casa La Serena's model of attention is the notion of women and gender non-conforming defenders as whole beings. It seeks to **address their physical, emotional, mental, energetic, and spiritual dimensions** taking into account a set of ethical and political principles. These include, for example, not recommending things to others that one cannot implement oneself; reclaiming women's right to joy and pleasure; reflecting on one's practices as activists;

understanding well-being as a right; identifying accessible resources and placing value on local resources; *making each experience specific*; and cultivating spirituality based on Indigenous Peoples' ancestral wisdoms of protection and healing. *Self-care is understood as personal and collective.*

The stays last ten days. They may be individual, collective, or organizational.

They focus on making people feel safe to share their stories, without the stereotype of “being strong at all costs”. The process is divided in three stages:

- 1) Before.** After each national network that is part of IM-Defensoras selects participants for the stays, the Casa La Serena team conducts diagnostic interviews to create a program of activities based on the needs of those who will attend.
- 2) During.** The stays include therapeutic, artistic, and recreational activities that contribute during the first three days to a “self-assessment, assessment, and crisis” by the participating women and gender non-conforming defenders regarding how they arrived at Casa La Serena. The following three or four days are dedicated to “noticing, broadening the map, and becoming aware” of the resources, capacities, and skills that each one has to face the crisis moment that develops in the first days of the stay. The last days are dedicated to “recovering strengths, focusing on priorities, developing the self-care plan” that will guide the return to their contexts.
- 3) After.** This includes writing a report to the network to which the woman and gender non-conforming defender belongs and follow-up to their self-care plan. The holistic approach helps them reconnect with their bodies and emotions, and to develop viable well-being plans.

NETWORKS, ALLIANCES AND RELATIONSHIPS

The network of therapists that La Serena leans on, the FHP approach, and the feedback after each stay has been crucial in refining the accompaniment that it undertakes. For Casa La Serena, being part of a broad fabric of healing houses serves to enrich the working approach, exchange learnings, and respond to the increasingly restrictive migration policies in force in our countries.

CHALLENGES

Some of the challenges that Casa La Serena faces are: **Over-demand**; following up on self-care plans once the participant leaves the house; integrating the care approach into the organizations; the **sustainability** of the space given the climate crisis; and **migratory restrictions**.



ACHIEVEMENTS

Casa La Serena has systematized and shared experiences and learnings with allies from other countries and has **received around 450 women and gender non-conforming defenders**, contributing to their awareness, healing, and acquisition of new self-care tools. It has also built a network of therapists to improve treatment and accompany complex cases and alarming situations. Its care model has inspired doctoral theses, university investigations, journalistic articles, and the creation of similar experiences.

Defenred Respite House

"DO WHAT YOU LIKE"
TO REST IN SIERRA NORTE



Defenred's Respite House is located in Madrid's Sierra Norte, an area known for its rural surroundings and cultural identity. The project takes place in a small independent apartment on the ground floor of a large stone house where one of the project founders lives with their family. There is no pre-established plan. The space is for human rights defenders who need to take a break and later return home with tools to improve their well-being. *Defenred receives activists and people who defend rights from all over the world*, who are situations of exhaustion, stress, and overload, but not people with high risk of violence because they are unable to provide attention or ensure their security.

INTRODUCTION

HISTORY

Defenred's Respite House was **created in 2012 by a group of friends** with a background in education and social work accompanying people and minors facing risk of exclusion, unhoused situations, and drug dependence. In addition to their own experiences, they were initially inspired by the book *What's the point of revolution if we can't dance?* In 2016, they engaged in a virtual dialogue with IM-Defensoras that resulted in the publication, "Dialogo Virtual de Autocuidado: Una Estrategia Politica en la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos" [Virtual Dialogue on Self-Care: A Political Strategy in Human Rights Defense Work].



The persons who work in Defenred's Respite House live in various towns in Madrid's Sierra Norte and collaborate at three different levels. **One team of volunteers** adapt their work to the needs that emerge during each stay and are responsible for organizing them and coordinating the functioning of the house. **A second team** offers the project their professional training and experience in psychological accompaniment, therapies, and medical attention. Finally, **a third team** contributes with time to accompany the defenders in leisure activities.

THE TEAM



FUNDAMENTALS AND PRINCIPLES THAT GUIDE THEIR JOURNEY

Each *holistic healing and well-being journey is unique* but it is part of a collective struggle. For Defenred, self-care is a political tool for defending human rights, integrated into daily activism. Their care model takes distance from capitalist consumption and the notion of self-care as “trendy”, and it is nurtured by the knowledge and experience of those who have passed through the house. Their vision of self-care is one without luxury or extravagance, with *stays that are designed jointly with the women and gender non-conforming defenders* according to their specific needs, but which have a collective impact.

They offer three one-month individual stays each year, based on a personalized accompaniment model. *The participating defenders require the backing of two social organizations*, except for those proposed by IM-Defensoras. It begins with a period of communication to learn about customs and specifics in order to prepare the space. At arrival, after all the coordination regarding travel and documentation, *participants* receive an economic allowance and they *are presented with different proposals for therapeutic, psychological, and recreational accompaniment*, as well as physical or emotional work sessions and leisure activities. The objective is to disconnect and rest, without activities related to their work. Around the third week, an evaluation and feedback is conducted regarding the stay.

In wrapping up, some of the teams will remain in contact at a personal level with the women and gender non-conforming defenders with whom they built a relationship of trust.

NETWORKS, ALLIANCES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Defenred's Respite House ensures that its work is sustained because *it is done through a network and it could not be any other way*. They do not develop alliances organizationally but rather at a personal level. Due to its geographic location, the Respite House has relationships with nearby organizations such as associations, neighborhood organizations, and consumer cooperatives that are located in the Sierra Norte and with whom the people who collaborate with the project have a relationship.

CHALLENGES

The main challenge has been the *economic sustainability* of a project that is not economically viable, is not widely publicized, is not productive in capitalist terms, and is not attractive to foundations or donors. Another challenge is promoting understanding of cosmovisions and cultural diversity. Defenders with *non-Western cosmovisions face challenges*, for example, in getting the medical system to understand their needs, particularly in relation to broad and complex dimensions such as the energetic dimension.



The achievements of this respite house are evident in the results. They include hearing from participant defenders themselves – sometimes years later – that *they returned to their community with energy and desire to replicate a similar project*, or that they were able to identify other ways of facing life and that they have felt long-term positive impacts in relation to what led them to participate in the healing experience. Others, after their stays, have made important decisions about their lives as part of their healing.

ACHIEVEMENTS

A DISSIDENT, ANTI-SPECIESIST,
AND ENVIRONMENTALIST SANCTUARY



Planeta Colibrí: the house for self-love

Planeta Colibrí, the house for self-love, is a *healing refuge* located in a rural area between Bogota and Cachipay in Colombia. Its name [colibrí means hummingbird in Spanish] reflects the symbol of the hummingbird as messenger of happiness and healing. They offer a safe and attractive *space for LGBTIQ+ communities, trans children and their families, dissident tribes, and women involved in sex work*. In addition to housing Mujeres al Borde, it is an *accessible place for people with different disabilities*. They live in community with the animals, from a place of non-violence towards them. In this house, wisdoms are exchanged, ties are woven, activism is produced, and freedom strategies are created. The stays are organized through calls inviting to different activities, and they are designed with an intersectional transfeminist perspective.

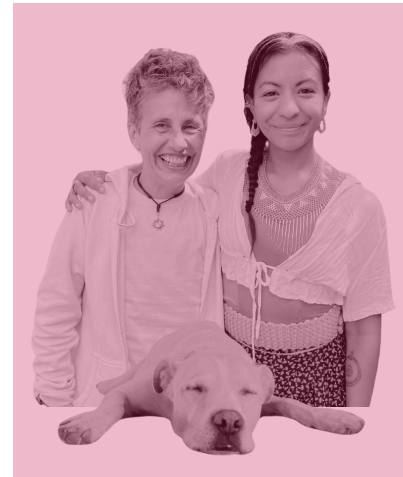
PRESENTATION

HISTORY

Planeta Colibri is a *space dreamt and created by Mujeres al Borde*, a group of activists who have organized transfeminist self-care and healing workshops with sex-gender dissident activists in Latin America and the Caribbean since 2015. In 2018, with support from Open Society, they bought a *rural farm and built a maloca* [traditional house] where, alongside friends and elders from the diversity community, they have access to ancestral medicine. Since then, they have conducted workshops, gatherings, and online processes with the aim of exchanging experiences and reflecting on pleasure, art, and creativity as a basis for healing. They have consolidated as a space for respite and for developing wisdoms on healing, activism, and sex-gender dissident care.

Members of Mujeres al Borde develop projects connected to Planeta Colibri's space and activities, offering support and leadership based on their strengths. An *advisory council* provides strategic guidance and an adviser supervises the plans and their sustainability. For gatherings, they seek out *trusted facilitators and experts* in each theme. They also turn to potential allies they meet in other activities and they *involve people from the local community* to care for the house and the animals.

THE TEAM



FUNDAMENTALS AND PRINCIPLES THAT GUIDE THEIR JOURNEY

They see a *need to transgress boundaries and build community* with people and social movements that have historically resisted systems of death. Their three fundamental principles are *dignity, memory, and transformation*. Their healing space includes food autonomy. Activism guides their space as an experience that cuts across the body and emotions. They aspire to make care an everyday reality.

Planeta Colibri organizes *different projects through Mujeres al Borde*, such as Matronas Ingovernables and Cuentos para una Niñez al Borde. It also houses the audiovisual school of Mujeres al Borde and the project on sexual care, health and sexual rights that it has led with pansexual and pan-amorous activists. Feedback received after every event contributes to leveraging learning and *building community*. The process begins with participants telling a story that they want to share and wisdoms that they want to offer. Through the Fogonazo Queer project, they use medicinal plants and promote healthy eating habits without animal suffering; this project is also a source of income for their autonomous livelihoods.

NETWORKS, ALLIANCES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Planeta Colibri has established *trusting relationships with the local community and donors* like Mama Cash, Foundation for a Just Society, Nebulosa, and Astrea, among others. They also have alliances with organizations such as Laboratorio Divergente, La Red Distrital LGBTIQ, and Akãhatã. The persons who visit this territory tend to fall in love with the place, and they sometimes propose *collaborations* with their organizations. *Alliances* to highlight due to their closeness and learnings are those with Consorcio Oaxaca and Comunidad Amigable de Diversidad Independiente (CADI.GT), with whom they have dreams and themes in common.



CHALLENGES

As a living and breathing body that is in constant change, Planeta Colibri moves with the planet, with the climate, with the energies. But **resources are needed to sustain the house**, animals, and plants, and this is not only to conduct activities but to sustain the place during periods without events. Additionally, their mission and projects have a strong impact on different places in Latin America, so they face the challenge of **finding more donors that share the importance of thinking in a holistic and intersectional manner**, separate from traditional paradigms, that do not question the raising of animals, the growing of plants, or the anti-speciesist care of Pachamama [Mother Earth].



ACHIEVEMENTS

Planeta Colibri has become a **transformative space for the LGBTIQ+ community** in Colombia, known for its activism and healing approach. It is the first organization in the country that has its own transfeminist sex-dissident house where they promote the **connection with land and nature**. Positive and harmonious changes have also been achieved between the local community and the LGBTIQ+ community.

BASOA, THE PEOPLES' EMBRACE,
THE STRUGGLES THAT CONNECT

Basoa

a space for life, solidarity, and rebelliousness



Basoa, which **means forest in Euskara**, is a space under construction in the outskirts of a small forest town. The house is a meeting place for migrant persons and local defenders and activists. They offer a **refuge for women and gender non-conforming defenders and activists from around the world** who urgently need to leave their territory due to risks to their lives, and who seek rest and care or who want to participate in exchanges of knowledge. They have received activists involved in defending land, Indigenous Peoples' struggles, and searching for the disappeared. Basoa promotes communality, learning, and support among social movements, transforming critical thought through practice. They foment **good living, horizontal communality, feminism, eco-socialism, food sovereignty**. They also seek to recover the wealth and diversity of popular culture, and to maintain itself as an autonomous space that is independent of institutions and that explores alternative models of social organization and self-sufficiency.

HISTORY

Basoa is located in Basque Country, a territory with a long history of struggle for their language and social and territorial rights. In 2018, ***the popular movement began to receive unhoused migrants***. In this context, members of Red Artea and Ongi Etorri Errefuxuatuak, along with activists from other movements, dreamt of a place where they could connect local activists, migrants, and human rights defenders. In 2020, with legal status as a foundation, they ***purchased the house in a rural valley***. Since 2022, they have received human rights defenders for short stays. They are currently in a process of trial and error, ***in permanent reflection about the project and their commitments***.



THE TEAM

The persons who collaborate with Basoa do so from a place of activism and horizontality. The organization is structured with an ***assembly and different commissions*** that are responsible for areas such as supporting defenders, logistics and communication, among others. A ***steering group*** makes urgent decisions and coordinates actions. Some of the events that take place at the house generate an economic contribution, and that is how they self-finance the project. They have a list of ***therapists*** who participate in the processes.

FUNDAMENTALS AND PRINCIPLES THAT GUIDE THEIR JOURNEY

Basoa's activism is guided by the principles of collective care and love, nurtured by the experiences of different social movements such as *internationalism, ecology, feminism, and food sovereignty*. They reject the culture of sacrifice and guilt; they promote self-care and collective care as strengths. They seek to create non-paternalist horizontal processes. Their sources of inspiration are the Latin American struggles, the experience of IM-Defensoras, and *feminist holistic protection*.

Basoa uses a flexible holistic approach to accompany defenders who need a space for well-being. The stays can last days or years. To access these stays, the person must belong to an organization, a social movement, or have the backing of an organization or social movement. Although they *prioritize women and feminist projects*, they receive male defenders who need it. The process begins with a referral *from trusted networks*, followed by an interview to design a personalized plan. Basoa also acts as a platform to amplify public struggles with activists who have a more public profile. They are currently systematizing their work and developing protocols for their methodology of accompaniment.

METHODOLOGY

NETWORKS, ALLIANCES AND RELATIONSHIPS

They have woven a network of *alliances and relationships with activists from Red Artea*, which works with migrants and refugees since 2016. Inspired by this network, they have learned and shared experiences with other houses, among which Defenred and IM-Defensoras' healing houses stand out. One of their objectives is to develop alliances and synergies between social movements, collectives, human rights defenders, and other local social actors with movements from other parts of the world. In 2022, they received more than 600 people from more than 40 social collectives and they organized large events with mass participation. They have propelled actions such as the Energy Roundtable working group. They have members who provide economic support.

CHALLENGES

Casa Basoa faces internal challenges that weaken **team unity** and endanger its continuity, such as achieving balance between personal lives and responsibilities for the people who are part of the project. **Financial sustainability** without external subsidies is also a challenge. They are trying to focus the house offerings for people from social movements; however, **logistics and emotional support** are often complicated, sometimes the defenders cannot leave their communities for long periods of time, or their needs conflict with the activities in the house.



ACHIEVEMENTS

Basoa has managed to offer protection, rest and well-being for defenders and their families. They have witnessed how participants transform and **weave community networks** to continue with their struggles. They have dismantled the capitalist patriarchal logic of sacrifice by demonstrating that **it is possible to advance with other logics**, to share from different spaces, to find refuge in nature, and to articulate among social movements.



A LOOK FROM WITHIN,
A DREAM MADE REALITY



Respite House in Brazil

The Brazil Respite House emerged thanks to the ***Colectivo Feminista de Autocuidado e Cuidado entre Defensoras de Direitos Humanos*** (Colectivo Feminista). It is located in Cabo Frio, Rio de Janeiro, surrounded by nature and with a small garden that provides food and healing. There are beaches nearby where women and gender non-conforming defenders can stroll accompanied by the sound of the sea. Their stays offer a 5-day immersion for defenders who face a work overload and hard life experiences, enabling them to rest and regain strength to continue their struggles. They do not receive women and gender non-conforming defenders who face elevated risks of attacks, as an explicit decision from the Colectivo Feminista and because they do not have the physical conditions to do so. They receive persons who are ***Indigenous, Black, Quilombola, Criolla, or Mestiza; rural and urban; women and gender non-conforming persons*** who fight against militarism, patriarchy, racism, and the exploitation and contamination of their territories. Until now, they have only received local women defenders and no trans persons, but they intend to strengthen alliances with this movement so that they can participate in a stable manner.

The Brazil Respite House emerged as a ***response to the misogynist violence and exhaustion*** that women and gender non-conforming human rights defenders face, particularly Black, lesbian, trans, and Indigenous women. Founded after the 2016 coup d'état and the 2018 assassination of Afro woman leader and city councilmember Marielle Franco, the project emerged from Colectivo Feminista, which was ***founded in 2014 by activists from different regions*** across the country. Its main objective is self-care and protection for women and gender non-conforming defenders. They have organized national gatherings to ***promote the inclusion of self-care in feminist agendas***. In 2021 and 2022, the Respite House organized its first immersive experiences for women and gender non-conforming defenders, centered on collective care. The project was ***inspired by international experiences*** and seeks to broaden its reach.

The team of this respite house is made up of women defenders and activists from Colectivo Feminista who are part of Articulação de Mulheres Brasileiras (AMB) and Articulação de Organizações de Mulheres Negras Brasileiras (AMNB). The team responsible for the house is ***led by an educator and feminist activist*** who organizes the logistics before each immersion, and who is joined by ***another five people highly experienced in self-care, feminism, anti-racism, and public health***. Throughout the immersions, the team is supported by body therapists, psychologists, and others who work to ensure healthy eating.

FUNDAMENTALS AND PRINCIPLES THAT GUIDE THEIR JOURNEY

The Brazil Respite House is guided by the principles of ***holistic care, covering psychological, physical, spiritual, mental, and energetic dimensions***. They believe care is an essential political strategy to strengthen rights defense, transform society, and achieve a better world in the face of the capitalist, racist, and patriarchal system that wants women and gender non-conforming defenders to be too tired to fight. The people involved in the project are ***anti-racist, leftist feminists, trans-inclusive, and they are committed to an anti-capitalist*** care that is a right and not a privilege.

In the immersions, they use a methodology based on listening and exchanges, inspired by Freirean **popular education pedagogy**. The house is not a permanent structure; it convenes specific immersions that begin with a call to women’s organizations – primarily within AMB and AMNB – for them to nominate women and gender non-conforming defenders in need of the stay. These organizations decide whom to nominate. **Personalized programs are designed** and the therapists are trained on the political meaning of the program, confidentiality, and security. During the immersion, participants are offered individual and collective holistic therapies as well as dialogues on healing and care. Safe spaces are also created for spiritual and religious practices based on each participant’s beliefs. At the end of the immersions, the participating women and gender non-conforming defenders **evaluate their experience**, contribute recommendations, and **develop a self-care plan** with concrete measures to which they can commit.



NETWORKS, ALLIANCES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Colectivo Feminista has key alliances with **anti-racist and feminist organizations of Black, Indigenous, and Quilombola women**, particularly with AMB and AMNB, among others. Some **with similar experiences**, for example the Defenred Respite House, Planeta Colibri, Casa Basoa in the Spanish State and Basque Country, Casa La Siguata in Honduras, and Casa La Serena in Mexico.

CHALLENGES

Long distances and limited resources make *logistics difficult* for women and gender non-conforming defenders coming from far-away regions; care remains an unfinished business for social movements, because *self-care and collective care are a need not yet taken up as a right*; women and gender non-conforming defenders face violent contexts that make their holistic treatment difficult, and they are challenged to find time to take a break and reflect on their *workloads*.



The Brazil Respite House has made considerable achievements in the well-being of women and gender non-conforming human rights defenders, the main ones having to do with the impact on participants. For many, it was their first exposure to these spaces and *they learned about self-care, which led to a transformation in their lives*. This has a collective impact because when they return to their organizations, they share their learnings, which leads to *the recognition of self-care as a political act*.

ACHIEVEMENTS



THE SEA AND NATURE,
A TRANSGRESSIVE SPACE FOR CARE AND REST
IN THE FACE OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

OASIS for itinerant care and healing¹



This project of *itinerant care and healing stays* started in Mesoamerica in 2021. It offers a temporary oasis of rest and connection in response to contexts of constant political violence and risk. Using nature as an essential element, it has *received more than 100 women and gender non-conforming defenders of different ages and backgrounds*, adapting to their needs and contexts. Participants are selected through a holistic pre-assessment, and they often arrive with health problems and complaints connected to their work in *violent and repressive contexts*. Some face the closure of their organizations and the loss of their political projects, which – especially when they are older – is a heavy emotional blow with strong impacts on their lives.

INTRODUCTION

¹ Given the context of repression in which the sister defenders who coordinate these itinerant spaces live in their country, we cannot mention who we are referring to because this would expose them to a serious risk.

HISTORY

The itinerant stays *emerged as a response to the need for safe spaces* for rest and care for women and gender non-conforming persons defending rights *in contexts of repression and in precarious situations*. Inspired by Casa La Serena in Mexico, they initially focused on three-day stays for rest, but they evolved to adapt to the growing security and emotional support needs, particularly given the COVID-19 pandemic and the increase in repression. Since 2022, *the approach expanded to include practical self-care tools and reflections about their political value*. In 2023, the stays were extended to 5 days, limiting the number of participants to offer a more complete program. It has become a political project for life, understanding rest as a means to strengthen networks and build collectivity.

The *team that coordinates* the stays is made up of *four women defenders*, including one who joined after having participated in a stay.

It is important for team members to be prepared to respond and contain emotional situations, and to practice the Feminist Holistic Protection (FHP) approach. An *external group of experts* facilitates the methodologies, which include healing, biodance, and nutrition, among others. The administrative team coordinates the logistics to ensure that the process is as careful and healing as possible.

THE TEAM



FUNDAMENTALS AND PRINCIPLES THAT GUIDE THEIR JOURNEY

The stays are based on political principles that prioritize the *well-being and protection of women human rights defenders in a context of surveillance and repression*. They are created as safe spaces to address emotional wounds and political struggles, with Feminist Holistic Protection (FHP) as a main thread. They also encourage the *autonomy and empowerment* of women defenders, promoting support networks and strengthening the social fabric that was weakened by persecution.

The methodology is based on *flexibility, security, and adaptation* to the individual needs of women and gender non-conforming defenders. The process begins with a pre-selection and personalized interviews that inform the design of the activities and the security measures. *A safe place is selected, logistics are organized, and activities are run* such as biodance, massage, energetic cleansing, and creative workshops – all with the aim of helping women and gender non-conforming defenders to connect with their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. The stay concludes with the *development of a personal self-care plan* to which they can commit, and based on which there will be follow-up to monitor progress.

METHODOLOGY

NETWORKS, ALLIANCES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Learning from similar initiatives implemented by *key allies* was essential for developing the itinerant stays. For example, the experiences of Consorcio Oaxaca and the National Network of Women Defenders in Honduras coordinating stays at La Serena and La Siguata have been crucial. *Weaving a broad network of trusted allies* was also key in maintaining the itinerant experience as a safe space. For example, having trusted drivers, close persons who can verify that the places identified to hold the experience are safe and have the appropriate conditions, among others.

CHALLENGES

Women and gender non-conforming defenders live through *surveillance and repression*, making it difficult to connect with the present and visualize a hopeful future. The *weakening of the social fabric and internal tensions* within social and feminist movements are an additional challenge to creating spaces of trust. The psychosocial impacts on women and gender non-conforming defenders create obstacles that lead to *over-burden and exhaustion in the team* that directs the stays. Furthermore, there are challenges to implementing the Feminist Holistic Protection (FHP) approach, among them the self-care of the facilitating teams, who continue to face burnout. Finally, *recognizing the limits of accompaniment* is crucial in order to understand that the results depend on the commitment, autonomy, and responsibility of women and gender non-conforming defenders in relation to their own care process.



The itinerant stays have succeeded in *offering a safe alternative, replicable with fewer resources in restrictive contexts*, strengthening the social and community fabric weakened by repression. The participating women and gender non-conforming defenders have created their own spaces for healing, adopting self-care plans, and connecting with their body and emotional dimensions. Additionally, they *prioritize their personal care in repressive contexts and they consider alternatives to their life projects*. The experience has become an example of rest and care in complex contexts, and has allowed for an extra-territorial expansion because of its flexibility and hybrid methodologies.

AURA BUNI AMURÜ NUNI
ME FOR YOU, YOU FOR ME



Casa la Siguata



Casa La Siguata is a collective care and healing space maintained by the **National Network of Women Human Rights Defenders** in Honduras as part of IM-Defensoras' Feminist Holistic Protection (FHP) strategy. Located in Valle de Angeles, surrounded by mountains and farmland, it is a collective construction to break with oppression and fulfill dreams. The name means "woman" in the Nahuatl language and is accompanied by a Garifuna community saying, "Aura Buni Amurü Nuni" (Me for you, you for me). It is part of a **project that aims for well-being, pleasure, community, and life with dignity**. They receive diverse women and gender non-conforming defenders from all over Mesoamerica who are attacked and persecuted by the judicial system.

HISTORY

The need for this type of space emerged in response to the *criminalization of the right to decide, femicidal violence, hate crimes, and the persecution of women and gender non-conforming defenders* from different movements. Inspired by experiences like Casa La Serena, the National Network of Women Defenders in Honduras launched the creation of La Siguata in 2019, which, since it opened in 2021, has become a refuge for women and gender non-conforming defenders to be able to *rest, reflect, and legitimize their right to heal*. The house promotes a harmonious relationship with nature, taking distance from the commodification of care.

La Siguata is coordinated by a *staff member* of the National Network of Women Defenders in Honduras, along with a *collective of people* who are responsible for the housework, caring for the gardens, the medicinal plant nursery, and logistics. *Therapists, artists, facilitators, and people who provide accompaniment* join to support the activities.

The Network's staff team politically and organizationally ensures La Siguata's functioning with jointly decided tasks.

EL EQUIPO

FUNDAMENTALS AND PRINCIPLES THAT GUIDE THEIR JOURNEY

Feminist political ethics, ancestral spirituality, and Berta Caceres' thinking – who said that utopia is lived in advance – sustain and inspire its actions. They recognize, respect, and embrace multiple forms of love, and they reject, denounce, and act to dismantle hatred. They have a proposal for healing through *feminist justice*, which is the capacity they have – as women and as peoples – to do justice to themselves, to name truths, and to legitimize their existence with their wounds, pains, and strengths.



Divided into three moments, the experience begins with a first contact during which the participating women and gender non-conforming defenders express their fears and pains to help personalize the care plan. The first moment, **“let go to balance”**, offers a space for participants to pause, listen to their bodies, share their emotions, and connect with their own story. The second moment, **“create new memories”**, seeks to transform pain into well-being, re-signifying the body and the collective space as places of care, pleasure, and joy. The third moment, **“make a pact for life”**, focuses on revitalizing the body-territories, reaffirming collective care as a political strategy to preserve life. Throughout the entire process, they use different therapeutic tools adapted to individual and collective needs. They promote connection with nature, combined with moments of rest, enjoyment, celebration, and play – always respecting participants’ rhythm and decisions.

METODOLOGÍA

NETWORKS, ALLIANCES AND RELATIONSHIPS

To be able to take the contents of the stays into practice, La Siguata has developed **relationships of trust with therapists, facilitators**, etc. who are sometimes part of the organizations that make up the Network of Women Defenders in Honduras. The experiences of **Casa La Serena and IM-Defensoras have been crucial** because they have allowed them to meet – and sometimes involve – therapists from other countries.

CHALLENGUES

The challenges that La Siguata faces include the *exhaustion of those who accompany the processes*, who suffer from bodily and emotional fatigue, and who require care plans before and after each stay. The need for *economic resources* limits improvements to the infrastructure of the house; although on the one hand they are necessary, on the other hand, the fact that they do not own the house is also a factor. Additionally, *climate change impacts* – like water scarcity in Valle de Angeles – make maintaining the garden and medicinal plants more difficult.



La Siguata *has built its political identity* based on the wisdom of women and gender non-conforming defenders and their experiences in the territory, recognizing it as a spirit house for feminist justice and collective healing actions. It *has politicized well-being* by taking distance from the patriarchal, racist, colonial, and capitalist mandate. This has allowed healing to become a legitimate right for all women and gender non-conforming defenders. And although there is no detailed guide for how to transit the challenges of defense work, it is possible to *build good company, political trust, and loving relationships*, all of which influences their reflections and decisions.

ACHIVEMENTS

Positive impacts of care and healing houses and spaces

The experiences of these care and healing houses and spaces have generated a range of positive impacts. The majority of women and gender non-conforming defenders refer to the experience as a *“turning point”*, like a transformative push in complex contexts of socio-political violence that subjects them to deep exhaustion. Furthermore, *the impact transcends the participants and spreads through their families, organizations, and communities*, deconstructing sacrificial activism. These processes are proof that other worlds are possible, where self-care and collective care are a reality, with an emphasis on sustainable activism that gives space for joy and connection with Mother Earth.

Methodologies for transforming reality



Each care and healing house or space develops *its own flexible methodology with a pathway and a model of attention based on its resources and capacities*, and in relation to the experiences of women and gender non-conforming defenders. The stays thus have become examples that inspire similar initiatives, and they draw from a wide range of alternative therapies and dynamics to create a holistic care program. Each house has promoted the *systematization of these experiences*, enabling collaborating teams and networks to adopt care and healing measures in response to the exhaustion that comes from providing emotional support in the complex situations that women and gender non-conforming defenders bring.



Care and healing houses and spaces: Learnings from the experiences

One conviction that these experiences sustain is that *it is not necessary to wait for big social transformations in order to begin to enjoy the well-being for which we struggle*. On a daily basis, we can live the utopia of feeling that we are “liberated territories”. Care is a political, personal, and collective process. *Healing is complex and requires a political perspective* that includes analysis, reflection, and action.

It is crucial to take into account contexts and the types of violence faced in each case in order to have a holistic intersectional perspective. This allows for the design of **methodologies that center people and their communities**, to help them achieve real and sustainable change in their lives. Although there are individual responsibilities, the process with women and gender non-conforming defenders must understand and engage the different spheres of their lives in order to transform the relationships and conditions that make their care and well-being possible.

Learnings about what must be taken into account before receiving women and gender non-conforming defenders and activists at care and healing houses and spaces



The **interviews and pre-planning provide context** about the territory from which women and gender non-conforming defenders come; they give an overview of the defenders' situation regarding their work, the risks they face, and how they are feeling emotionally. This information is combined with current health information to foresee any possible complications during their stay. These inputs inform how the physical conditions of the space are arranged, the themes and methodologies are chosen, and the therapists and persons who will accompany are selected.

In selecting and preparing the persons who will accompany the process, it is useful to have established alliances at different levels and a human resources map; to know the experience, capacities, and tools that each person offers; and keep their availability updated in order to make a proper selection. Every therapy and care action recommended has been previously tested personally. **There are no hierarchies in the relationship between participants and the accompanying team**, nor are decisions made on behalf of participants. Even with a base methodology, it is important to understand individual or group needs in order to implement the accompaniment.

Regarding emergencies, the facilitating team must be prepared to react assertively if needed. Knowledge of first aid, locating nearby clinics and hospitals, and having access to transportation.

For itinerant stays, the territory where the activity will be conducted must be located somewhere that the facilitators know and can easily move around in.

Lastly, *it is important to explain the purpose of the experience that each house or space provides*, what political project it is part of, and what it offers for care and healing – and what is not included or cannot be offered. This allows people to be clear on what they can expect and what is expected from them.



Learnings about what must be taken into account during the stays at care and healing houses and spaces

Adjust to each person's reality. People and collectives react differently, and each one has their own rhythm for healing; healing spaces must adjust to this. During the stay, it is important to analyze what is working and whether adjustments are needed for the rest of the days. What is planned does not always work, and so it is necessary to constantly evaluate and be flexible to make changes.

Offer practical tools grounded in the realities of women and gender non-conforming defenders. Although the majority of women and gender non-conforming defenders and activists have limited economic resources or little time for their care, they have knowledge and resources to address complex situations. This is why it is important that the self-care plans be structured according to their realities, day-to-day lives, wisdoms, and the practical resources that are accessible in their surroundings. It is vital to take up the ancestral wisdom of the peoples to which they belong, in addition to feminist practices and alternative experiences.

Co-responsibility. The responsibility for the functioning and continuity of the work during the stays falls on the facilitating team, who must learn to place limits on the accompaniment. It falls equally on the participants, who must commit to their well-being, open themselves to receive what is needed – whether it be emotional or medical accompaniment, body therapy, physical therapy, etc. –, and commit to continuing with their processes.

Setting boundaries. We must constantly review what can we do and what we cannot do, place limits on our hours of availability, being clear that they can only contact us off-hours in case of emergency. It is also necessary to place limits on aggressive behavior towards the space or other persons, or actions that place the security of the group at risk.



Learnings about what must be taken into account after the stays at care and healing houses and spaces

Evaluation, systematization, and follow-up. Feedback between those who visit the spaces and the teams that support the work is important. This leads to a response that is better adjusted to the needs of women and gender non-conforming defenders and changes in their context. Systematizing the work carried out provides clarity regarding what was done, the changes to be made, and how to improve. Finally, follow-up. The stay is not everything. Some experiences propose developing care plans to be implemented after the stay or immersion, setting levels of commitment between the women and gender non-conforming defenders and those who will follow up. However, it has also been shown that one must let go of what cannot be accompanied, because our sister defenders sometimes experience painful and complex situations whose solution requires the intervention of more specialized persons or entities. On the other hand, it is also important to understand when some people do not want to continue with the process or to commit to their own care.



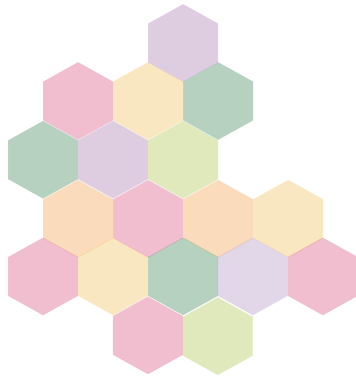


Learnings related to care for the accompaniment team

Recognize the impacts generated by the work. People who accompany processes make a commitment to their own care, because although the work is satisfying, it also involves exhaustion, frustration, and confrontation with their own wounds. Another learning is that the work of accompaniment creates tensions within the organization that can become conflicts. It is necessary to understand that these situations are normal and to manage them through assertive non-violent communication, to recognize that we are learning that these processes are difficult, and to interact lovingly.

Other learnings

Exchanging experiences in human rights defense enriches the joint work and promotes collective growth. This entails trusting our own processes and creating diverse healing strategies. We are always in the process of building experiences and improving them every day. In relation to diversifying sources of funding, these spaces have learned to dialogue with donors, to offer contexts and explanations about their work substantiated with their frameworks and approaches, to show the results and impacts of their work on the lives of women and gender non-conforming defenders and on their struggles. They also know that being self-taught in the process of applying for funding, networking, and reaching out to allies are all key paths to philanthropy. In addition to Basoa, which is a self-sustaining project, other experiences are also testing small initiatives to promote self-sustainability.



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The respite houses are spaces that **connect us with the heartbeat**, this natural life force that emerges effortlessly, but with strength. With **collective respites that embrace hearts**, that unveil and wash away the wounds that defenders accumulate due to patriarchal and sociopolitical violence.

