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COURAGE HAS MANY FACES

Celebrating 25 years of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders

INTRODUCTION

2023 marks the 25th anniversary of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. This landmark document sets out the rights of human rights defenders and obligations of States with a view to their protection. The Declaration was the first UN document to recognize the importance and legitimacy of the work of human rights defenders. Although it is not binding, it contains principles and rights that are based on human rights standards enshrined in other legally binding instruments. Moreover, it carries considerable moral force and reflects the commitment by States to its implementation.

Despite the importance of the Declaration and its broad support, its anniversary also reminds us of the challenges that human rights defenders face in their daily work in increasingly hostile contexts. The organisation Front Line Defenders has documented more than 400 targeted killings of human rights defenders in 2022 alone.

The highest number of deliberate killings directly related to the defence of human rights recorded in one year to date. In addition to physical violence, defenders continue to be exposed to a variety of other risks, such as defamation, smear campaigns, criminalisation and other forms of psychological violence.

Peace Brigades International (PBI) has been providing protection and support to human rights defenders in situations where they are threatened and attacked, for over 40 years. Now, for the anniversary of the Declaration, we want to highlight the important work of human rights defenders supported by PBI. How did their journey as human rights defenders begin? What does their work mean to them? And which challenges do they face in their work? The following case studies attempt to provide insights into the work of accompanied human rights defenders – the people who bring the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders to life.

SUCCESSES AND ONGOING CHALLENGES IN THE DEFENCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Guatemala: Defending Land, Defending our Territories, Defending Life

Visiting the departments of Alta and Baja Verapaz in Guatemala for the first time, one is struck by the beauty of its landscapes, with abundant rivers and rainforests, which merge into jungle in the lower parts. This territory has been inhabited for more than five centuries by the Q'eqchi' and Poqomchi' Mayan peoples, among others. However, the beauty of the landscape contrasts with the history of abuse and suffering to which these indigenous peoples have been subjected. The dispossession of their lands by coffee owners from the 19th century onwards should be emphasised. Later, economic interests of the elites changed, and today the greatest threat to these peoples are hydropower plants and agro-industrial megaprojects.

Faced with this situation, the affected communities have long been organising to defend their right to land and life, as well as to demand respect for their human rights. It is important to point out that this is one of the regions of Guatemala with the highest rates of poverty and extreme poverty.

Sandra Calel is a Poqomchi' defender and member of the Union of Peasant Organisations of Verapaz (UVOC). She has a long history in defense of land, ancestral territories, Mayan culture and indigenous peoples' rights.



Sandra shares that “it is a great challenge for families to gain access to land, especially for women. And access to land is vital for us because there are many single mothers, widows and abandoned mothers because their husbands have emigrated.

After many years of struggle, we have achieved that the Naranjales community has legal certainty regarding their land. They received the land as compensation for the day labourers who worked the land for decades without receiving payment in return, as a recognition of their labour rights. Thanks to this achievement, they no longer fear eviction, but it took 20 years to achieve this.

Another success was the suspension of the eviction of the Lajeb Kej community with support of a delegation of international lawyers whom we had asked for help. We were able to stop the eviction, which is a success for us as defenders, maybe not 100%, but it was a great achievement in which women, elders and young people participated and mobilized to demand their rights. In this way, we were able to stop the eviction.”



Lesbia Artola, Q'eqchi' defender and member of the Comité Campesino del Altiplano (CCDA) – Las Verapaces Region, who also has a long history of struggle, says that "it is a challenge for us to defend our rights, because unfortunately we have a system for which it seems to be a crime being an indigenous woman and a defender. Our daily life is a challenge. It is a challenge for us to stay alive. It is a challenge for us to continue fighting with strength and to have this militancy and that vision and to be at the forefront of this struggle."

For both defenders, the strength that women have achieved in their territories is a source of satisfaction and pride. They highlight the "empowerment of women, their rich leadership role". Thanks to this, Lesbia says, they were able to legally secure land for 81 families on the Flecha Camuy farm in 2019, benefiting 81 female and 81 male members of the organisation. It was a fundamental success, a big change, because not only legal certainty was achieved, but also that men and women have gained equal rights to land". PBI Guatemala accompanies Sandra and Lesbia as well as other women and men who are part of these organizations.

Honduras: Commitment to empower

Since the coup that shook Honduras in 2009, violence against the LGBTBI+ community has increased. According to data from the National Commissioner for Human Rights in Honduras (CONADEH), 194 murders of people with sexual diversity were registered between 2017 and 2022 alone. Violence manifests itself not only in murders, but also in discriminatory treatment in health centres, in the workplace and in the media. Violence in its various forms is forcing many people in the community to leave the country. In this difficult context, defending the rights of LGBTBI+ becomes a risky task. Despite this, organisations such as the Asociación LGTB Arcoíris de Honduras and the Centro para el Desarrollo y la Cooperación LGTBI - SOMOS CDC have remained steadfast in their work to build a more inclusive and just society.

The Asociación LGTB Arcoíris de Honduras was founded in the shade of the trees of El Obelisco Park, in Comayagüela, where the organisation's first ten volunteers met and realised that what they really needed was a house with open doors for any person of sexual diversity. They founded Arcoíris on 1 August 2003 with the commitment to empower the LGBTBI+ community in areas such as holistic health promotion, the promotion of human rights and political advocacy.

Today, Arcoíris is a safe haven for around 350 people who support the organization's activities on a voluntary basis.

It is also a school of learning for many people: according to José Figueroa, a member of the organisation, "Arcoíris not only teaches you to grow as a person, but also to fight, it teaches you that you have to keep supporting and helping the members who need it." Donny Reyes, technical coordinator, concludes, "We know that we have supported many lives, young people, men, women, boys and girls who have passed through here and who come to us to say thank you. We have done our homework."

The Center for LGTBI+ Development and Cooperation – SOMOS CDC was born on 18 August 2007, although it was known under the name Asociación Jóvenes en Movimiento (AJEM) until 2015.



According to **Elloy Ponce**, member and founder of the organization, the main achievements of SOMOS CDC are also marked from 2015: "It was when we identified other lines of work and importance for LGTBI+ people such as economic and political inclusion. We went from being an emerging organisation to a referent organisation for strengthening other emerging LGTBI+ organizations in the technical, administrative and mercantile part."

In Elloy's words, SOMOS CDC focuses its work on the "elaboration and consensus of proposals for laws and public policies

to address the challenges of social, political, economic and cultural exclusion and the violation of human rights". SOMOS CDC's valuable work has undoubtedly helped the LGTBI+ community to improve its visibility and political participation in the country. According to Grecia O'Hara, a member of the organization, "We have the power and the voice. We are not asking for privileges, we are asking for our rights".

PBI's accompaniment, in the case of the Asociación LGTB Arcoíris de Honduras since 2015 and in the case of SOMOS CDC since 2022, has increased the visibility of LGTBI+ community initiatives in Honduras. It has also served for organizational strengthening on security and protection issues. In recent years, PBI has given hugs and words of encouragement and love, but has received the same back, because if there was one thing to highlight about Arcoíris and SOMOS CDC it would be their enormous and contagious commitment. In Donny's words, "we don't fight because we want to be martyrs or because we want to be part of the statistics, but because we want to live in dignity, to have the right to live, to love and to be happy like any human being."

Kenya: Defending Dignity

Judith Adhiambo Ochieng is a Human Rights Defender in Langata, Nairobi. In the heart of Nairobi's Langata urban area, Judith emerges as a guardian of human rights. She is not only a human rights defender but also a paralegal and a passionate advocate for women's rights. Her journey is a testament to the indomitable spirit of those dedicated to uplifting their communities.



Growing up in Kibera, Judith witnessed the stark realities of gender-based violence and human rights violations on a daily basis. Initially, she accepted these injustices as normal, but her interaction with civil society organizations opened her eyes to the fact that gender-based violence was a violation of human rights. The 2017 post-election violence served as a catalyst, prompting Judith to take action. She recognized that documenting these violations could bring about change, leading her to co-found the Lang'ata Legal Aid Center (LLAC).

As a human rights defender, Judith's life is fraught with challenges and risks. Her work often places her in the crosshairs of those who feel threatened by her advocacy. Her experiences have given her insights into the complexities of GBV cases, forcing her to navigate delicate situations where she champions the cause of survivors.

One of the most significant challenges faced by Judith and LLAC is the constant threat to their safety. Handling cases of GBV can lead to retaliation from those implicated, putting the defenders' lives at risk. Ensuring the safety of volunteers is an ongoing challenge.

Financial constraints are another hurdle, as LLAC operates on a shoestring budget, relying on volunteers and pro-bono legal services.

Despite these obstacles, Judith and LLAC have achieved remarkable success. They have trained and graduated 21 paralegals to serve the community, collaborated with universities, and opened their doors to advocates offering pro-bono services. In legal aid clinics, they have reached out to the vulnerable, ensuring that they have access to justice. Their impact extends beyond their immediate community, creating a ripple effect.

Through her partnership with Peace Brigades International (PBI), Judith learned that being a human rights defender is an ongoing journey with no defined endpoint. The tools provided by PBI has strengthened her capacity, enabling her to lead LLAC effectively. It has also emphasized the importance of building a network of community organizers to create a unified front in the fight for justice.

Kenya: From Survivor to Defender

Catherine Wangui, affectionately known as Kate in her Kibra community, is not just a mother of two; she is a fearless human rights defender and an unwavering feminist. Her journey from a survivor to a champion of justice is a remarkable tale of courage and resilience. Kate's motivation to become an HRD was deeply rooted in personal experience. She was a victim of the 2007/08 election violence in Kenya, an ordeal that left her scarred.

However, it was witnessing the violations suffered by her close friends that spurred her into action. She later realized that she needed the knowledge and tools to fight for justice, for both herself and others.



Her path led her to join an organization called Kibera Women For Peace and Fairness, which focused on reconciliation and healing after the election violence. Initially harbouring bitterness, Kate's involvement gradually helped her see the importance of forgiveness and individual responsibility. He wanted to help others escape the cycle of tribalism, bitterness and injustice. Kate's work as an HRD did not come without its challenges. She faced threats, navigated complex cases, and sometimes put herself in harm's way.

One of her most significant achievements was securing justice for a young boy who had been sexually abused by his teacher. She mobilized fellow HRDs, took the victim to the hospital, and ensured the perpetrator faced legal consequences. This was a turning point in her career, reaffirming the vital role of HRDs in their communities.

It was through this journey that she encountered Peace Brigades International (PBI), which offered training and support to HRDs.

The training not only equipped her with valuable skills but also allowed her to find her voice as an activist, focusing primarily on the rights of women and girls. She realized the importance of advocating for the voiceless. It also fostered recognition of her work beyond the country and connected her with international human rights actors.

Nicaragua: Defending human rights in exile

Fernanda Martinez is one of more than 400,000 Nicaraguans who have been forced to leave their country after the socio-political crisis of 2018. Fer, as she is affectionately known, studied Law and International Relations and from a very young age, she was linked to the defence of Human Rights. Her main school, after university was the Civil Coordinator, an instance of articulation of more than 100 social movement organisations that existed since 1998. There she worked in the training of young activists and in the design of social advocacy campaigns, in addition to representing the organisation in national and international articulation spaces.

When the police and paramilitaries began to repress young people demonstrating in the April 2018 protests, she did not hesitate to activate to give them support and backing. For that reason, she herself became a victim of persecution, harassment and threats. At first, that persecution was directed at the Civil Coordinator, but then it progressed until she felt it personally with surveillance around her house.

To save her life and protect her family, she was forced to move to Costa Rica, where she requested political refuge and has been living for more than five years.



Continuing to defend human rights in exile has been a road full of obstacles. However, Fer always knew that being organised was the best way to face them. That is why, she founded the Red de Mujeres Pinoleras (REMUPI), together with a group of refugee women. It is an organization inspired by the principles of Feminist Economics to continue defending the rights of women in exile, while collectively building strategies for economic sustainability. REMUPI is a space for solidarity, empowerment, denouncing violence, defending rights and promoting Nicaraguan culture. Fernanda is one of the coordinators of the Network, for which she works voluntarily. Her natural cosmetics business enables her to make a living in the host country, as she was unable to practice her profession for pay, due to restrictions on the recognition of her qualifications – a situation she shares with other REMUPI defenders.

For Fer, defending human rights from exile means promoting a culture of peace and respect for the fundamental rights of people in general without distinction; advocating for the rights of

people who live in situations of vulnerability and oppression and thus cannot express themselves; and creating awareness of the importance of living in a more humane world. Many challenges lie ahead. One of them is to continue to be exposed to threats and political persecution, the worry that her family will be in danger because she denounces what she or women in general have to go through. However, the biggest challenge is the state of being forcibly displaced. When you migrate, your priorities start to change and there is a moment when you have to work to support yourself in order to continue to be activists and defend human rights.

Peace Brigades International has accompanied REMUPI since its founding, both in organisational strengthening and in psychosocial support for women human rights defenders and in political advocacy. Fernanda shares with us that ever since she graduated in International Relations, she dreamed of pursuing a diplomatic career to defend human rights in international forums. That dream was cut short when she went into exile. However, this year she represented REMUPI on an international advocacy tour, accompanied by PBI, and was able to make a statement at the UN Human Rights Council to denounce violence against women in Nicaragua, so in a way she fulfilled her dream, albeit in another role, as a defender.