

FEATURE STORIES

The Public Statement of the Global Digital Consultation highlighted a wide range of issues and recommendations in relation to the gendered dimensions of violent extremism and counter-terrorism. UN Women conducted 11 interviews with human rights defenders and gender equality activists across five different regions (i.e. Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, Western and Central Africa, and Eastern and Southern Africa) to illustrate how they work in contexts affected by violent extremism, the challenges they face and the efforts they make to build peace in their respective communities and countries.

In the words of Manuela Royo: “Human rights must not only be defended through laws but also through education”

Manuela Royo, 37, is a Chilean lawyer and human rights defender who supports the rights of Mapuche communities in southern Chile. She fights for the recognition of the demands of indigenous peoples and the need to end their criminalization. Over time she has become an ardent defender of Chile’s Mapuche community, taking on some of the country’s most emblematic legal cases.



Chilean lawyer Manuela Royo. Photo: Francisca Stuardo.

“ I began building a relationship with Mapuche organizations when I was in my early twenties and working at an educational collective in Santiago, Chile. There, I met a Mapuche leader who invited me to visit the Temuicui collective in Malleco, in the Araucania region, over 1,000 kilometres from the capital. Since

then, I started working with these communities and, once I had my law degree, I joined the Defensoría Penal Mapuche and later, the Instituto Nacional de Derechos Humanos in Temuco – the city with the biggest Mapuche population and the epicentre of the struggles for the indigenous cause.



It's not that I chose to become a woman human rights defender. It is just what happens when you take on the responsibility of defending people that are marginalized by society.

There is a bond that grows. Human rights must not only be defended through laws, but also through education. This allows us to build shared paths towards equality.

For a long time, Chile's Counter-terrorism Law has been, and continues to be, used as a tool to criminalize the Mapuche people.

By building an image of indigenous communities based on stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination, it is used to associate the legitimate social demands of these communities with terrorist interests.

If someone is charged under the Counter-terrorism Law, that person will be placed in preventive detention immediately and face criminal charges. There is substantial intervention by the State, which limits people's liberties. In some cases, law enforcement agents infiltrate these communities and militarize territories. Testimonies from anonymous witnesses are also accepted as evidence in criminal trials. All of this breeds mistrust towards State actors and leads to social decomposition.

Also, media outlets systematically share images of raids and people being arrested, showing their faces and leaking evidence. This creates moral damage to their reputation and is a violation of their human rights. They also face discrimination from their peers, who accuse them of being terrorists, of burning people and property. Their own families cast them out, even if they are acquitted and their innocence is proven. The emotional damage is profound.

As a woman, it is hard to raise your voice and to reframe certain discussions in such a patriarchal context. There is a strong *machista* bias in terms of how women can voice their demands.

This is especially true for those of us who defend human rights. Chile lacks a welfare State that provides social protection for women or protects its people in general.

Both from the State and from organized society, I would like to see a commitment to building trust and establishing protection mechanisms. It's a challenge. And the fact that the opportunity of drafting a new Constitution was just approved overwhelmingly in a referendum on 25 October 2020 opens a new path towards that. The process ahead will need to acknowledge the existence of indigenous peoples, but also recognize their territorial rights.

It would be important for the international community to oversee this process and, why not, contribute to it by sharing comparative experiences. And in terms of what we do as defenders, it will be key to promote legal education, supporting women-led projects. It is definitely urgent that international organizations such as UN Women continue to raise awareness around our most pressing needs.

In the end, we women are those who sustain life. And this is why we persevere, despite great costs, there are also immense rewards. It's a lot like life itself: difficult, but ultimately gratifying.

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In the words of Lourdes Castro: “Terrorism tends to be associated with a political discourse and it becomes a tool used by those in power”

Colombian lawyer Lourdes Castro García coordinates the *Somos Defensores [We are Defenders]* programme. She has witnessed the consequences of terrorism and the violence faced by women in Colombia, but also the crucial role that society can play in transforming stigmatizing discourse.



Lourdes Castro García, coordinator of the *Somos Defensores [We are Defenders]* programme. Photo: Raul Rodriguez.

“ I consider myself a human rights defender. I began my career as a litigator for high-profile cases involving human rights violations and then I worked for an organization dedicated to human rights until I was forced to leave my country in 1994. Rather than defending my rights, the Colombian State treated me like an enemy, so I sought protection from Belgium.

I think my exile was precipitated by the fact that I was a woman and that I was young. The world of criminal law is considered a male domain – a rough place for rough people. I was much more vulnerable to threats and it was easy for them to see me as a thorn in their side that they could remove. I received threatening phone calls; I was put under surveillance; and I would get asked: ‘why do you have to behave so badly?’ when I visited military compounds.

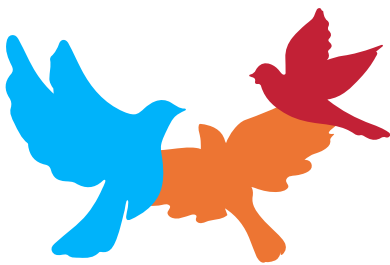
When the peace negotiations started in Colombia in 2012, I decided it was time to come back. I wanted to join the collective enthusiasm and introduce change from the field of human rights.

Terrorism tends to be associated with a political discourse and it becomes a tool used by those in power,

based on a classic vision of ‘national security’ that relies on the excessive use of force and on limiting fundamental freedoms. In the early 2000s, the terrorist discourse was used to frame guerrilla groups as ‘terrorists’ rather than participants in an ongoing armed conflict. However, with the rise of social protests in 2016, where violent actions also took place, we moved towards the concept of ‘urban terrorism’. When speaking about social mobilizations, the State tends to stigmatize them, publicly describing the organizations taking part in these protests as being infiltrated by armed groups that commit terrorist acts. That stigma naturally ends up affecting all of us who defend human rights and lead social movements.

We run the risk of being associated with armed organizations – or at least that shadow of doubt is cast.

Nowadays, our social leaders are experiencing a complete deterioration in their situation. In particular, we’ve noticed that aggression against women’s leadership has increased. Stigmatization also makes women more vulnerable because of the historic discrimination against us.



In countries like Colombia, where *machismo* [male chauvinism] and patriarchy are so entrenched, women in most territories face a difficult struggle to reach a position of leadership.

It usually entails facing many types of violence: within their own families, in the public sphere and violence directed towards people in leadership positions.

Threats against women are also meant to be symbolic, to scare them, and they can easily be used as a tool to keep women out of the running. That’s because women will always consider the effect of what they are doing on their environment: their families, organizations and communities. So, the multiplier effect of these attacks is even stronger.

The *macho* discourse seeks to ingrain more profoundly the idea that women human rights defenders are bad people.

And impunity always fuels cycles of violence. Hence, those of us working as human rights defenders have no guarantees whatsoever, and the vast majority of attacks are not duly investigated, judged and sanctioned. For this reason, international organizations – and the United Nations in particular – have a very important role to play, since they are authorized to hold the State accountable.

I am a human rights defender; I have always seen myself as one. Although I may be a lawyer, I am a defender first and foremost. It is my life-long project and because of this, I believe I will always feel that there is something more I can do. If a door closes, there may be a window to open instead, to try to push ahead, while always remembering that we can contribute to building more humane societies. ”

In the words of María Martin: “To inhibit the work of women defenders is to deprive society of the ability to review its history and reshape its future”

María Martin, the Advocacy Coordinator of the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras), has worked for almost a decade alongside many women who are struggling and resisting across Latin America. The effect of counter-terrorism narratives and measures used by governments across Latin America not only affects women, she says, but also keeps societies from reconstructing themselves.



María Martin, Advocacy Coordinator of the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras). Photo: SerapazMexico

“Over the years, many women human rights defenders have said to me: ‘I hope no other woman has to go through what I’ve experienced.’ The military dictatorships and authoritarian regimes that took place during the 1970s and 1980s in Central America left behind thousands of gross human rights violations cases. Also, they fostered the development of a deeply stigmatizing discourse around political opponents and human rights defenders, who were labelled and persecuted as terrorists because of their activism. This rhetoric persists to this day.

At IM-Defensoras, we continuously confront stigmatizing processes against people and communities. Lately, terrorism accusations have been used more and more to criminalize women, creating a recurring pattern.

We are not attacked because of the work we do as human rights defenders, but because we are women exercising such roles. We continue to be seen as actors who should be relegated to the domestic space and not be active in the public sphere – and much less so in the political arena.

States have aptly built protection mechanisms to protect human rights defenders, and especially women defenders. If the goal is to guarantee comprehensive



Photo: courtesy of María Martin

internal strategies, then we need all State institutions to be coordinated; however, in most cases, none of them work well. In most countries, the States in Central America even undertake legal actions based on broad and ambiguous definitions of terrorism, which enable criminalization.

Also, women rights defenders face repressive judicial systems. Our criminalization through the application of such serious charges as terrorism has significant implications from the very beginning.

We are tired of seeing irregular processes that begin with arrests, continue with investigative processes led by the Public Ministry, and are followed by cases going before the courts based on evidence that is obtained in an irregular manner. These processes often feature coercive measures, such as preventive detention, which are authorized by judicial bodies. They are also reinforced by all the violence the accused experiences during their deprivation of liberty.

These actions demobilize women and ultimately deter them from defending rights. I believe that this affects women in particular because they need role-models who can freely exercise their leadership and their human-rights-defence activities. There is also an important social dimension because the viciousness and the gender violence that are intertwined in the accusations against women human rights defenders – whether criminal or aimed at turning public opinion against them – deprive society of a vital force.



Photo: AmecoPress

To inhibit the work of women human rights defenders is to deprive society of the ability to review its history and reshape its future.

It is imperative for the United Nations to contribute, for example, by attending these hearings, because this places the Public Ministry and judicial bodies in the international spotlight. Likewise, UN Women or other agencies, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), can spark change when they get involved in building more rights-based justice systems.

I believe that UN entities should increase their technical support and monitoring in order to ensure that the regulatory frameworks countries develop do not increase criminalization.

Those of us who defend human rights do so because it is meaningful to us, but above all, we do it for others. We look for the small victories in the cases we assist directly, in the people we have somehow been able to positively impact by accompanying their process and making sure they are not alone when they demand their rights. I believe that those are not small but huge victories. ””