# Self-Care and Self-Defense Manual for Feminist Activists

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# Self-Care and Self-Defense Manual for Feminist Activists

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Artemisa is an interdisciplinary group working on gender, sexuality, youth and human rights in Mexico.

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Elige, a feminist youth organization comprised of young women and men, is a leading advocate for young people's sexual and reproductive rights in Mexico and throughout Central America.

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# Contents


| | |
|---|---|
| Preface to the Translation | 4 |
| Preface | 5 |
| Foreword | 6 |
| Introduction | 9 |
| Chapter I: Recognizing who I am | 12 |
| Chapter II: Recognizing the violence we face | 28 |
| Chapter III: Lack of self care: a form of violence | 46 |
| Chapter IV: Optimizing our vital strengths | 60 |
| Chapter V: Self-defense | 86 |
| Chapter VI: Resources | 106 |
| Diary of vital strengths | 117 |
| Annexure: Project Background | 120 |
| Bibliography | 122 |

# Preface to the Translation

*Geetanjali Misra*

When we were introduced to this manual in Spanish, our collective thoughts were, 'How useful! We wish we could read it! It should be available in other languages to a wider audience who needs it greatly.' Thus, CREA embarked on the collaborative process of translating this manual into English so that it could be accessible to feminist activists, and indeed others, globally.

This manual reflects a lot of thoughts and information that feminist activists have been articulating, debating with themselves and sharing with their peers – younger and older – in varied ways and through informal media. This manual brings a lot of issues together in one place, in an exceptionally articulate manner, spanning the need for activists to connect with themselves as persons and not just activists, to reflect on treatment of themselves and their loved ones and the nature of their relationships, to identify the tools and skills they need to be equipped with to care for themselves, the importance of self-love and fun!

This manual helps users to know themselves better and compels them to ask themselves some hard questions. It might evoke bitter memories and tears at some times and laughter or smiles at others. It urges them to take themselves seriously, and also to lighten up. It takes users on a journey of self-exploration that will make them say, 'I wish I had done this before!'

We hope that this manual will prove helpful to every user as it has to us. Now that you have picked it up, we urge you to finish reading and using it. Feel free to share your feedback with us and the authors. Bon voyage!

*Geetanjali Misra is co-founder and Executive Director, CREA, New Delhi. She has worked extensively at the activist, grant making and policy levels in the fields of sexuality, reproductive health, gender, human rights and violence against women. She is also the co-founder of SAKHI for South Asian women in New York, the President of the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), and is on the Board of Directors of Reproductive Health Matters and Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice. She has co-edited Sexuality, Gender and Rights: Exploring Theory and Practice in South and Southeast Asia (Sage, 2005).*

# Preface

*Alejandra Sardá*

This important manual developed by Marina Bernal, *Artemisa, and Elige*, is a valuable asset for all women engaged in the task of constructing and inhabiting a world in which all of us can fulfill our best potential. An indispensable tool, it invites us to stand our ground while attempting to undo the injustices meted out to us, and nurture the inherent resources that are so easily depleted: our bodies, affection, intelligence, creativity, spirituality…and ourselves.

For many of us the word "ourselves" brings a certain sense of discomfort, while the daily battle against discrimination and living life on fair terms leaves us with no time or inclination to deal with any issue that may not be of the utmost urgency. It also seems selfish, unpardonable and even cowardly to focus on ourselves. But sooner or later our bodies are afflicted with migraines or paralytic strokes; or the woman, man, or trans person whom we love, leaves us because he or she is tired of seeing us for only a few hours in a year or a day. Suddenly, we turn 70 and discover that our activism did not automatically entitle us to a pension...and then we crumble or continue to plod on as mere shadows of ourselves.

A unique feature of this manual is that it talks of realities that are almost always never understood, such as the breach that exists between our discourse on human rights and social justice, and the reality of the labour practices adopted by our organizations and work spaces. It is imperative that we recognize ourselves as workers with rights and duties and break free from the rhetoric of "sacrifice", which only serves to justify forms of violence that we would never accept in a factory or workshop, yet continue to live with every day in NGOs, collectives, and groups.

During a seminar on women human right defenders in Mexico, Celsa, an incredible environment activist asserted, "It is we ourselves who are violating our human rights". This manual could serve as an excellent basis in drafting the *Convention on the Rights of the Body and Soul of Women Activists*, which every person should endorse.

There is a wide range of options that offer a compromise between the selfishness of one's concern for one's own body and desires and the supposed altruism which concerns itself with the welfare of the entire universe at the cost of that one person who would never complain to any authority even if he or she were ill-treated i.e. our self. Women of my generation and the one before thank the wise young women who have drafted this manual to show us these paths and lead us by the hand to explore them. For those even younger than the authors, this manual could well be the passport to a more balanced and pleasurable life.

*Alejandra Sardá is a psychologist, literary translator, and activist who has been associated with various social movements (women's, feminist, LGBT, and sexual rights movements) at the local, regional and international levels, for more than 15 years. She lives in Buenos Aires, and heads* Mulabi - Espacio Latinamericano de Sexualidades y Derechos.

# Foreword

*Monica Alemán*

Five years ago we came to understand that our body is a map where the entire history of our lives can be traced, where every step that we have taken has left its imprint. Now, this manual equips us with the tools to retrace this journey with patience and sensitivity, explore its darkest spaces and reveal the results of the process. It is a guide and invaluable contribution to our histories and journeys, which will help us establish ourselves in the fields we have chosen and at the same time, savour the pleasure of getting to know ourselves.

What started out a few years ago as a simple guide focussing on the protection and promotion of the human rights of women activists, has been transformed into a remarkable set of exercises that will help every woman identify the varied facets of their human fabric. It opens up multiple paths through which each of us can navigate our personal histories to reconstruct forgotten moments and rejoice in the pleasure they bring or acknowledge the pain they still cause and in the process redefine ourselves as individuals with rights and liberties.

## Discovery

The first part, "Recognizing who I am", gives us the opportunity to explore what it means to be a woman, allowing us to identify the footprints that our individual contexts have left within us. In the process of shaping our understanding we see that at times, the mere fact of being a woman becomes a motive for attack, so some of us choose to distance ourselves from our womanhood, while others choose to embrace it. It is very important to discover what it means to be a woman in our present circumstances. Added to this is the dimension of being an activist or a human rights defender and in this we discover the various elements of our daily lives in the streets, markets, universities, offices, other workspaces, and our homes.

In the context of our home environment, we take one more step towards initiating the process of self-care and understanding what is fair and real. While helping to increase our self-awareness, this process also determines how we reshape our existence and learn to explore poverty, wealth and privileges in our context.

In the second chapter, "Recognizing the violence that we face", we observe and examine the violent elements around us, and gain clarity on how to deal with them. This exercise gives us *carte blanche* to say: 'this is it, we will take no more'. So let us move forward now, together, for the time has come to change our lives.

The third chapter of the manual deals with "Self-inflicted violence". This strikes a chord with most women as they are often told to place families and elders before themselves. So, this part of the manual makes us sit down and say, 'it is fine, I may be all this but I am my own person too and I first need to reconcile with my own self'. Thus, for all of us who have shared this experience, let us not allow traditionalists to stop us from being free, both from within and without.

There are many different ways in which we can take care of ourselves and this is one space where we can sit down and reflect on what our spirit symbolizes, look at ourselves in the mirror, observe our environment and say, 'That is enough! No more!'

## Power from discovery

In the fourth chapter, "Optimizing our vital strengths", the various streams that converged to help create this manual are discussed in detail. But, perhaps, submerged by the strong currents of our existence, we fail to understand the magnitude of the flow before it is lost in the immense sea of daily reality. This is an inevitable effect of globalisation. Therefore, it is important to try to map the extraordinary strength that we all possess within us.

Some years ago I tried to go back home and say 'No more!' I wanted the daily reality of progressive yet conservative families to be a part of my existence. But in the process I bottled up many emotions that prevented me from looking beyond my family. However, with the guidance and care of my activist colleagues I discovered that it is very important for us to continue to be active and on the streets, fighting for long overdue social changes. So actually, my failed attempt at fading into oblivion helped me discover the 300 different things that I could be doing for my community and myself—all thanks to the power that came with understanding myself.

Many of us derive this power from our connection with the earth, spirits, and our ancestors, all of which shapes our lives. So let us identify all those elements from which we derive our inner strength. However, when we talk of a holistic sense of well being in our lives, we must not only think in terms of the tangible world, but also look at other ways of finding this integration, duality and cosmo-vision.

For me, the chapter on "self-defense" was the most difficult because I cannot stand pain and suffering though I do understand it is part of our daily reality. This, in spite of having lived the first twelve years of my life in the middle of a war promoted by the United States. Every night, every single person in my house would go to bed thinking that the North American forces would invade us, and every morning we would wake up to check our courtyard to see if the so called "blackbird" had done its usual round…surrounded at all times by military personnel, suffering the anguish of seeing neighbours being assassinated merely because the mortar hit the wrong "target"…all this has made me what I am today. Self-defense in those times was more mental, it lay in the power to smile through the trauma of having to hide in trenches every now and then. Therefore, I believe that in this exercise we must explore these spaces of defense as well and go beyond what we can achieve with just our hands and feet. Although I do believe that in today's context it is also very important to learn to defend oneself.

We will discover that the main source of this strength lies in the power that we have within. We the indigenous women, the original people of this America, feel that we must live in a state of deep spirituality. We even "cleanse" our minds regularly and I invite you to explore what is akin to a cleansing of spirit and to continue with the good work.

It is with admiration that we look at 'ourselves' and see how we have benefited and learnt from the process of our self-development. How comforting are the spaces we have created for ourselves, how much pleasure there is in tasting the freshness of the morning and being able to sleep at peace with ourselves. Although, we do feel somewhat burned out by long hours of work, let us, dear sisters, sit down and embark together on this

journey of self-exploration and find ourselves infused with a new sense of vigour. It is, of course, equally important to continue to make ourselves strong with that tasty plate of beans, *tamales*, or *tortillas!*

Forward dear sisters! Health to the authors! We bring you good vibrations from these temperate lands…

This has been the most interesting journey that I have undertaken in the last few years.

*Mónica Alemán is a young indigenous Miskita from the northern Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. She is a feminist and a women's human rights defender. She is programme director at MADRE, an organization that she represents at the international level, and is the coordinator of the International Indigenous Women's Forum (IIWF). She has facilitated the participation of indigenous women in the Beijing process and the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.*

# Introduction

For many years, women's and feminist movements have been fighting on many fronts to eliminate violence against women. This struggle has highlighted the need to develop long- and medium-term strategies to generate the cultural, economic, and social changes necessary to transform the gender configuration that sustains this type of violence.

Similarly, various actions have been implemented that, within a short period of time, aim at providing women with resources to deal with the violence they face on a daily basis. Thus, many practical solutions have been proposed to manage and prevent situations of violence. We ourselves as women activists, continue to face situations of violence on a daily basis. Often, though, we are unable to handle or prevent such acts, as we find it extremely difficult to acknowledge that we, too could be at the receiving end of this violence.

We must start with the belief that the struggle to eliminate gender violence in all its manifestations must first involve work on one's own self. To take care of ourselves, know how to defend ourselves, and ensure as far as possible that what we are fighting for on behalf of others is also very much a part of our own lives, are the key elements in strengthening our struggle and continuing our march forward.

This *Self-Help Manual*[1] is a resource to get to know yourself better, optimize your strengths, reflect upon your context and work on caring for yourself. Here, we have proposed a series of reflections and exercises that are an invitation to dedicate a few moments a day, or a week, just to yourself. This, in itself, is an important step forward in building personal self-care strategies and is a vital basis for self-defense against various forms of violence. If you are already in the process of doing so, then use this manual as a resource to accompany you on your journey of self-knowledge and self-care.

The *Self-Help Manual* has six chapters:

1. The first chapter, *Recognizing who I am*, explores our social conditions and the manner in which we shape our perception of ourselves as women and as activists.

2. In the second chapter, *Recognizing the violence that we face*, we situate the different types of violence that we experience as women and activists. Here, we have attempted not only to talk of recognizable forms of gender violence towards women but have also touched on violence that occurs in spaces that are considered nonviolent—which could even include the organizations that we are part of—or forms of violence that we do not identify as such.

3. The third chapter, *Lack of self-care*: a form of violence, explores the ways in which the lack of self-care translates into self-inflicted violence in the lives of women activists.

1 The background of this manual was the preliminary version of a self-help manual targeting young female activists from Mexico, printed in 2003. Marina Bernal and Marusia López authored this preliminary version. For more information on the project, on which this manual was developed, please see the annexure at the end.

4. The fourth chapter, *Optimizing our vital strengths*, deals with the issue of women's empowerment and the optimization of vital strengths and self-care as indispensable elements for empowerment. It highlights the importance of examining the reappropriation of the body, taking care of it and seeking a sense of holistic well being in our lives.

5. The fifth chapter, *Self-defense*, explores some resources to combat violence in its physical, legal, and psychological dimensions.

6. In the sixth chapter you will find a section on "*Resources*" to draw from in different spheres of your life or in situations of crises. You will also find some sheets that you can use to record the experience of using this Manual.

For the manual to be effective, the following points are important:

- In this manual *you are your own material for study and reflection.* Your own experience and knowledge of yourself are your resources for moving forward.

- By *looking at yourself*, identifying the social orders that affect your life, reviewing your personal self-care, and making yourself aware of the different forms of violence that you face, you will gradually learn to identify the ways in which we as women activists can protect ourselves, taking into consideration the resources we have to do so.

- But. …careful! *This does not mean imposing new demands* on your already overwhelming "to do list "; or distancing yourselves and shifting attention away from yourself, believing that you have no problems and that you are here to "empathize with and understand" those who "are genuinely in a bad way".

- It is about believing, once and for all, that *all that we know, all that we are fighting for and all that we defend on behalf of other women is possible, and thus it is important to start looking at it and making it a reality within us.*

Undertaking this journey of self-exploration and deepening our self-knowledge will help us understand our limitations and strengths, what makes us strong and what makes us vulnerable. It will also help us understand why we are victims of certain types of violence and why we react in one way or the other when we are faced with it.

So…. let us then get down to work!

# *I. Recognizing Who I am...*

*In this chapter you will:*

- Review your own history and identify the processes of change in your life
- Understand how you have shaped your identity as a woman and an activist over time
- Take the first steps forward in caring for yourself through self-awareness

# 1. Who Am I...?

## SEE

When we invite you to question "who you are", we are not referring merely to your name, age or profession; we are not just referring to your qualifications or achievements, or to your nationality and where you come from. Neither are we asking you to define yourself in terms of what you are not by "radically contrasting" your life with the life situations of others which are completely different from your own, for example, with the reality of people you get to know through your work or activism.

We are inviting you to reflect on the power relations in which you are involved, the multiple social conditions that affect you, and the way in which these find expression in you, on the understanding that you have of yourself at a given point, and how these conditions have been changing over time and you with them.

## THINK

There are multiple social orders in the world, shaped by interweaving diverse social hierarchies[2]. These social orders form a web of power relations in which we are all involved. Every human relationship is, thus, a relationship of power. Power, therefore, is not something that can be possessed in itself, something that can be given or taken away. It is more an exercise in the social relations of daily existence[3].

Power is expressed through the different social orders that lay down specific conditions for people; that is, the possibilities, limitations, privileges, or disadvantages that some people have vis-à-vis others. The social order defines the universe of possibilities of "being and doing" in the world. It allows or disallows people to recognize similarities, acknowledge differences, or identify with each other on the basis of shared practices, ways of thinking, personal qualities, or characteristics.

These social orders are always articulated and are interactive, which makes it possible for each person to be a part of diverse orders simultaneously, establishing certain conditions that modify one another.

Thus, belonging to a particular class or any other social order has different implications for men and women; i.e., it means different things to be a woman or a man in each community, class, or ethnic group.[4] Among hegemonic social orders, for example, are the patriarchal gender order, the ethnic order, the racial order, the age order, and the religious, caste, and sexual orders.

We can therefore say that to have a *certain identity* means recognizing oneself and having others recognize you as being different from others. Throughout our lives we acquire various labels that mark us as different from some people and similar to others. These are not *natural* labels but are *cultural constructions*: symbols that influence how we feel about ourselves and how we act, and determine our membership in, and exclusion from, various groups.

2. *Cazés*, Daniel (1988), La perspectiva de género, Consejo Nacional de Población (National Population Council) (CONAPO), Programa Nacional de la Mujer (PRONAM) (National Programme for Women).
3. *Foucault, Michel* (1988), "The Subject and Power" in Dreyfus, H. and P. Rabinow, Màs allà del estructuralismo y la hermenéutica (Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics) UNAM, Mexico. P. 239.
4. *Cazés, Daniel* (1998). "La perspectiva de género", Consejo Nacional de Población (CONAPO), Programa Nacional de la Mujer (PRONAM).

Each person lives these labels in a different way according to her own experience. We do not merely reproduce the labels assigned to each identity—on the contrary, we continuously live them in different ways and many times act in a manner that is in conflict with these labels, sometimes resisting or even transforming them.

For example, feminism has historically questioned the supposed naturalness of the labels assigned to gender. It has questioned the order that legitimizes the supremacy of the male and validates the oppression of all that is considered *non-masculine*—that is to say *feminine*.

## ACT

We invite you to begin by tracing the course of your life. The following exercise will help you think about how these reflections translate in your own experience.

### Exercise 1: The river of my life

Let your imagination take flight and uncover the treasure chest of your memories…Take pen and paper and trace the course of your life in any way that you wish. We have suggested the imagery of a river as one of the ways in which you could represent your life, but feel free to use any form you like.

- Imagine the paths you have taken and the changes in your life to be like the flowing movement of a river, the people who contributed to these changes as streams that changed the course of the river of your life or made it stronger.
- Think of the obstacles you have faced through your life, which became challenges to overcome, and imagine them as small stones or big rocks that made the flow of the river slower or more cautious.
- Identify how your river has changed over time—its strength and its trajectory. Identify the established paths, how your path has been transformed and where you are headed now.

## REFLECT

1. What does 'how you have changed in the course of your life' mean to you?
2. How do you define the important moments in your life, beyond the categories traditionally defined as the stages of childhood, adolescence, youth, and adulthood?
3. What other moments or phases can you identify, which have given your life rhythm or meaning?
4. What experiences, encounters, or ties have made you what you are today?

> *What we are cannot be reduced to a mere question of identity or labels that are assigned to us, which allow us to identify with or distinguish ourselves from others. What we are also has to do with the experiences we have lived, people who are important to us and what they have given to our lives. What we are also has to do with our imagination as well and the possibilities of dreaming and re-creating ourselves to grow beyond all restrictions*[5].

Above, we pointed out that dominant cultural constructions very often determine how we act, and therefore it is very important to reflect as directed in the following exercise.

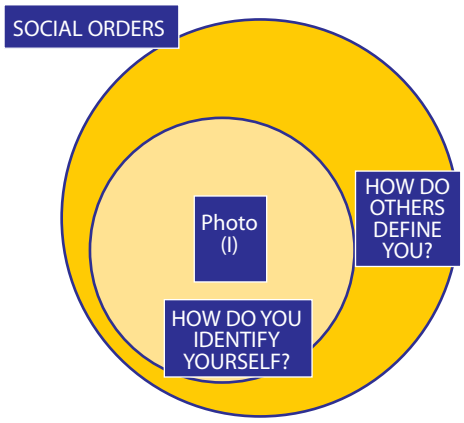
### Exercise 2: The conditions that affect me:

- Think about the conditions that are affecting you at this point in time.
- Draw two concentric circles (as in the example given below). In the inner circle stick a recent photograph of yourself. If you do not have one, simply write "I".
- Then, outside the larger circle, write down the social orders that you feel have shaped your daily existence.

5. Observations of an activist on the preliminary version of this manual, August 2005.

- Inside the larger circle, write down the different descriptors that people use for you, but with which you do not identify, and which to you mean something different or contrary.
- In the smaller circle, write down how you identify yourself.

Here is an example of how this is to be done:




Now think about how the social orders you identified find expression within you: as identities or parts of your identity, or as characteristics.

- How have these social orders expressed themselves differently in you through your life, how you have resisted them, how you have accepted and assumed them to be a part of your own understanding of yourself, how you have been changing their significance through your life? Name any significant changes.

- Write about the characteristics or aspects of your identity that correspond to hegemonic or privileged orders; for example, belonging to a religion that is hegemonic in your country or being heterosexual in a fundamentalist or homophobic context.

- Write about the power relations that you have established with other persons with whom you share these identities and how you exercise power over other persons whose characteristics, practices or identities are not hegemonic in nature.

## REFLECT

- In this exercise you can see the way in which multiple social orders converge and translate into social conditions that have different implications for you.
- These orders establish certain labels that you either appropriate or reject; that either leave their mark on you or you are able to confront and resist; those with which you are in agreement so you assume them without any conflict as you consider them to be a part of your "nature", your "identity" or "identities", or of the "deepest understanding that you have of yourself."
- In Chapter 3, we will see what it implies for women activists to assume some of these conditions as fixed identities, or assume them to be flexible and susceptible to change.

Continuing on this path of self-awareness, we invite you to explore an important aspect of your understanding of yourself. We are referring to the elements that make you feel that you are in harmony with other people, with groups or social movements.

### Exercise 3: My identifications

Think of the personal traits that help you identify with other people, the characteristics that make you feel you are a part of collectives, organizations or movements.

Perhaps the traits that make you feel "yourself" are those that you share with other people, groups or movements; or it could be that only some of these characteristics are central to your relationship with other persons.

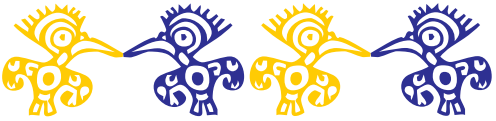
| Categories | Aspects with which you identify |
|---|---|
| Significant person (s) | |
| | |
| | |
| Significant group(s)/collective(s) | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| Significant social movement(s) | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

## REFLECT

- Based on your replies, try to identify the elements of your personality that are central to establishing ties, and identifying with or feeling part of a collective.
- Try to clarify the issues around which you normally establish ties and create a sense of belonging with a group or collective:
  - Shared issues: for example, world poverty, destruction of the ozone layer and violence against women.
  - Shared social conditions: for example age group, race and profession.
  - Shared experiences or common problems: for example, the lack of housing, the need for a mortgage, being a victim of rape, and being victim of State abuse.
  - Shared interests: for example, national politics, poetry and sport.
- When your sense of belonging to a collective or a movement is the result of one or more traits, your belonging to the group becomes more complex as your expectations of the group and what you can achieve through collective action will be even greater.
- It is likely that with this exercise you will be able to observe the way in which your identity as a woman and activist begin to take clear shape—the two key aspects that shape your understanding of yourself and help you identify with other people.

- This exercise can also help you identify with greater clarity the key aspects of your life that influence your role as activist and your commitment and work in a collective or as part of a social movement.
- It also helps you understand better how your activism, which is influenced by different dimensions, interests, issues, social conditions, concerns, and experiences, soon becomes a part of your life in which you make great personal (and often material) investment. This helps you gain greater clarity on why we tend to feel that our 'life depends on it' when things are not going well or the way we want them to.
- Putting all this in context helps us understand and deal with the various implications that are at stake in our activism, especially in relation to our ability to take care of ourselves.

# 2. Women and Activists



*"We women activists are a very diverse lot,*
*A mix of different flavours and colours…"* [6]

## SEE

When we try to describe who we are, it is like talking about an infinite universe. We are as different from each other as the multiple conditions that affect us in our diverse realities: race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, gender expression, nationality, and religion. Nonetheless, we do share some common dimensions: our gender status and our commitment to a social cause. We invite you to explore these in this section.

## THINK

### Being a woman

*"Women and men are not defined by gender alone;*
*Our lives are not organized around the gender order alone."* [7]

Every woman in this world is different and unique. However, being a woman is not merely a question of "being a female human being"—it is not just a question of having certain biological characteristics that allow you to procreate or be recognized externally as female simply because you are born with the physical traits that are acknowledged as typically female.

Being a woman is the result of a social order known as the "gender order". Not only does this confine subjects to a generically established order, defining who can be considered male and who female, but it also causes people to display certain mannerisms and expressions of affection that correspond to what has been established as masculine or feminine.

Thus we learn not only how a woman should conduct herself, how she must dress and wear her hair; but also how a woman should relate to another woman, how she should relate to men so as to not invite social sanction, what she can do or say, what she is supposed to like, what she can aspire to or desire.[8] We thus internalize a series of restrictions on our movements and actions that strongly influence the way we live. These restrictions also influence our choice of study, career, and what we dare to dream.

So, we learn how our sexuality is to be expressed and with whom—that a woman can only like and relate sexually to men in accordance with certain parameters and criteria.[9]

Therefore, the gendered social order promotes self-recognition based on this understanding of the world and identification with this order through "social sanctions."

6. Comment of an activist to the draft version of this Manual, August 2006.
7. *Cazés, Daniel* (1998). "La perspectiva de género", Consejo Nacional de Población, Programa Nacional de la Mujer (PRONAM).
8. *Butler, Judith,* (2002) "Cuerpos que importan: los límites materiales y discursivos del sexo" (Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"). Paidós.
9. This has also been referred to as heteronormativity, or the order that establishes heterosexuality as the norm.

Thus, a woman who doesn't conduct herself as a woman in her social context should, may be stigmatized as a tomboy, libertine, or an abnormal person, depending on the context and rigidity of the gender order. She may even be punished socially, psychologically, medically, or legally, under the guise of promoting her rehabilitation or normalization.

## Being an activist

Activism is often wrongly associated with participation in a political party or with lobbying.

Today, activism is defined as any organized activity intended to bring about social or political change that denounces the status quo or proposes appropriate alternatives and undertakes positive actions to end a general social malaise or one that affects a particular group or sector. This covers a wide range of issues and sectors in which diverse people contribute through organized action for a worthy cause.

The many forms of activism are also, to some degree, social constructs, as various actors have defined them through time in different social environments. There are certain assumptions about what being an activist means, in particular what being "a good activist" means, and what constitutes "commitment". In many cases, these assumptions centre on "sacrifices for the cause" and "making this struggle the focus of one's whole life".

These values certainly need to be cherished, but they often promote practices that are difficult to sustain and are, at times, incongruent with the self-care and self-protection of the activists themselves.

In their zeal to achieve these ideals, activists have often had to sacrifice certain aspects of their personal life considered to be of little relevance to the cause—personal issues that should not interfere with work, or concerns that are seen as selfish or incongruent with the social struggle.

## Activists who question the hegemonic order of gender[10]

Returning to Marcela Lagrade's reflections, here are some characteristics of activists who seek to change the oppressive relations between men and women through their actions, regardless of whether or not they call themselves feminists:

- *Being a dissident or resisting:* objecting to the world and its stereotypes. This means taking a political stand against a power that is conceived as unchangeable and which can only be resisted.
- *Being a rebel:* not just resisting and objecting, but actually making a move. It means doing what is prohibited and being bold; breaking limits and taboos by taking risks and overcoming fear.
- *Being subversive:* challenging preconceived values, aspirations and desires.

10. The questioning could be by way of reflection to start with and eventually translate into concrete actions.

All these forms of activism are characterized by the fact that they do not radically change the system that legitimizes the oppression of women. They merely question it, challenge, or fight it boldly. However they are unable to free themselves from it and construct an alternative system.

However, there is another way that aims at doing away with this binary:

*Being a transgressor (individually or collectively):* Transgression is a process that is built on a history of subversion, rebellion, or resistance. It entails recovering the resources for interpretation of the people who came before us. It encompasses imagining other ways of being beyond the realm of the known, e.g., constructing a utopia.

### What being women means to feminist activists

For some activists, being a woman is irrelevant as an issue or it is a natural and unchangeable category; for others (in particular those who are a part of the feminist movement), being women has been a key driver for self-identification: a meeting ground and a common struggle.

Feminism takes many forms, and offers many ways of understanding and being feminists. However, the very fact of being a woman is a binding and deeply empowering factor, as it is a political identity[11] and the driving force that questions the oppressed status of women. Over time, it has become a key factor for building ties and collective action, as well as an ethic and an ideology with which other social groups have been able to identify.

### Age

The "age order of society" is extremely contradictory. In interplay with other orders such as the gender order, it imposes restrictions on what a woman should be and how she should behave. For example, it defines the importance of image and sexuality depending on the age of a woman and influences the different norms dictating the behavior, practices and mannerisms of young girls, women, and older women.

Specific values, qualities, and issues are assigned to age categories such as *youth, maturity* and *elderly.* These vary depending on the society and context. For example, pregnancy may be referred to as a problem or issue for adolescents, while sexuality is deemed a non-issue for old women. Youth are characterized as dynamic and adolescence is characterized as a phase of conflict. These homogeneous criteria describe extremely diverse and complex population sectors. Often, these criteria are absurd and dogmatic and serve as mechanisms of control or sanction against those who do not fit the parameters.

Thus, depending on the social context, an elderly person may be ridiculed if she expresses a desire to have an active sex life; or a young girl may be punished for wishing to be independent of her family before reaching the age of majority or, in some societies, before marriage.

11. For us, "political identity" is the re-signification of the category 'woman.' This follows from taking a critical stand against the naturalization of the category and reclaiming its power for transformation in order to reinvent it as a driving force.

*"When stereotypes such as 'young women are inexperienced', 'they don't know what they want', 'they don't know anything about feminism', 'they need to be taught', 'they don't read', 'they're not interested in political struggles' among others, are reinforced, it also reinforces discriminatory discourses and practices and with these, underlying power relationships."* [12]

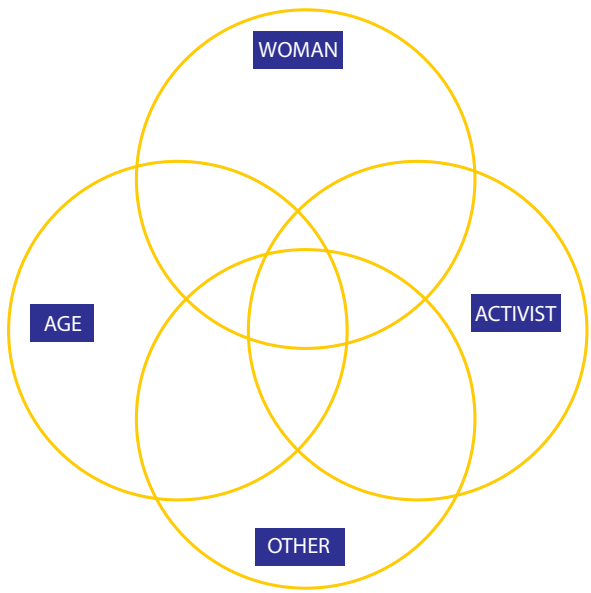
At times people are able to re-signify[13] the age group they have been socially assigned to, using it as a binding factor to bring two groups of equals together in order to achieve a collective goal, but at the same time highlighting the need to recognize the multiple differences that exist among them.

## ACT

We now invite you to explore these three conditions: being a woman, an activist and belonging to a particular age group. We believe it is important to identify the way in which our experience of these conditions continues to change depending on which stage of life we are in and how it finds expression in understanding ourselves.

### Exercise 1: *Part A*

j Draw four circles on a sheet of paper in such a way that they intersect as shown in the diagram below (if you find it more convenient, you can use this diagram).




12. *Alpízar, L. and Wilson, S.* (2005), "Haciendo olas: cómo las mujeres jóvenes pueden transformar (y están transformando) las organizaciones y movimientos", In La Mira, AWID, 2005:5 (March).
13. To deconstruct a meaning after analysis and reflection, so as to develop on a new idea that has implications in our lives.

- In each circle write down all facets of yourself that relate to these dimensions, taking care to write the common characteristics or those that are mutually reinforcing in areas where the circles intersect.
- Add another circle so you can indicate another aspect at play within you, to assess how it relates to or is in conflict with the aspects of your personality you have already identified. For example, class, race, or urban or rural status.
- During this exercise it is important to keep in mind how your social context reinforces certain aspects of your personality; creating tension between them or converging and mutually strengthening them.

### Exercise 1: *Part B*

Based on Part A, we invite you to assess how these conditions impact your life, shaping your identity and perhaps enabling you to identify with others. However, even if these elements are not a part of your identity, they may place you in a privileged position or at a disadvantage with people who are not described by these characteristics. In other words, these elements position you in power relations with people who are different from you.

## REFLECT

What aspects of your "being a woman" give you an edge over other persons who are not acknowledged as or don't identify as women. For example, although trans women identify as women, socially they face great difficulties in being acknowledged as women.

What aspects of your "being a woman" represent a disadvantage for you? For example, consider men or other people who are not socially recognized as women or who don't identify as women.

What aspects of your "being an activist" bring you advantages over other women who are not activists? How has it shaped your worldview? What access to information has it provided?

What aspects related to your age put you in a privileged situation or give you an advantage over other women activists not of the same age? What power relations do you establish and what benefits do you draw from these relationships?

Write your reflections in the corresponding columns:

### As an activist

| Privileges | Disadvantages |
|---|---|
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

### As a woman

| Privileges | Disadvantages |
|---|---|
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

### Your age or the way in which you define yourself in terms of your age

| Privileges | Disadvantages |
|---|---|
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

*"The way in which I live my sexuality and pleasure are two of the most important things that feminism has given me, it is a subjective conquest…"*

*- Virginia Vargas*[14]

- In this exercise you have explored how different orders intersect in your life. You can now identify those elements that are in conflict with each other and those that mutually strengthen each other, both to your detriment and to make you stronger. These characteristics will be examined in greater detail, in the following chapter. However, this exercise will help you understand how the different facets of your personality cannot be viewed uni-dimensionally, because every individual characteristic is a form of identifying with or distinguishing oneself from others.
- This status confers advantages and privileges on those who identify with it and disadvantages on those who do not.
- Finally, you can observe the role that age plays in terms of your "being a woman and an activist"; probably your position of advantage or disadvantage has changed in the course of your life, or is expected to change over time. This puts you in a different power equation with other women, activists and people. Although we have touched on some characteristics of power, we will deal with this topic in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

### Exercise 2: What I "should" be, what I want to be, what I am…

As women activists we are constantly subjected to the "should be." Many people and institutions feel they have the authority to tell us what is correct and incorrect for a woman.

We have built an ideal of 'what we would like to be", challenging the dominant patriarchal order through our activism, defending our rights and questioning the experiences that we do not wish to live again.

***What we "are" develops from the interaction between what we "should be" and what we "want to be"…***

Write down what you think you should be, what you want to be, and what you are according to the categories that we have worked with.

14. Interview conducted by Marina Bernal, October 2005.

### Activist

| What I "should" be | What I want to be | What I am |
|---|---|---|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

### Woman

| What I "should" be | What I want to be | What I am |
|---|---|---|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

### Your age or the way in which you define yourself in terms of age

| What I "should" be | What I want to be | What I am |
|---|---|---|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

*Wanting to be…* is usually an ideal that we never really achieve. However it does possess an extraordinary force that guides and motivates us on our journey.

It is not surprising that we have our moments of anguish because we are unable to achieve what we 'want to be' or because we are not able to change things to what we would like them to be.

This is merely a constant process of tensions and conflicts which we can handle with much less stress if we are able to identify and work on it. In this way we could continue to focus on the horizon of possibilities, on *utopia.*

> *"Utopia is just over the horizon. I take two steps… and it moves two steps away from me… and the horizon too moves ten steps away from me.*
>
> *So, then, what purpose does the Utopia serve? Well it does just that, it helps us move forward…"*
>
> *- Eduardo Galeano*

# II. Recognizing The Violence We Face

*In this chapter you will:*

- Identify the different forms and types of violence you face as a woman and an activist
- Identify specific forms of violence you face as an activist in different spheres of your life

*"Why violence? Well, the truth is, I believe that among women in general, we as activists don't really face violence. I mean in the way that we perceive violence ... I don't know...*

*Maybe it is because my idea of violence is associated with the typical view; you know what I mean... beatings and things like that...well, if it is that then, not at all. But I don't know, I haven't really got down to thinking if I am "actually" facing any violence. But now that you ask me…well seriously speaking…Oh! I really don't know what to tell you…I would rather not think about this now, if I do then I will get depressed and I really 'cannot indulge in the luxury' of being depressed at this point of time…."*[15]

The word violence conjures up multiple images that are largely disturbing: blows, insults, murder…. Perhaps it makes us think of structural violence, economic violence, or the violence exercised by the State against those who, by their practices or their very existence, question or challenge its norms or regulations.

If we live in a country that has experienced the terrible reality of a dictatorship or war, the word may evoke images of total violence or state-inflicted terror, the type of violence that seeks to silence and completely obliterate any expression of resistance.

If we live in a large urban environment, maybe the word evokes images of daily violence on the street and the stress of being assaulted or harassed while using public transport or even at home. Maybe some of us would think of specific situations of rape or sexual harassment that we have experienced, while others may think of less explicit situations they face on a daily basis in their family or organization.

All these forms of violence are evoked[16] because they are a part of our experience, because we have lived them or are facing them at this very point in our lives, even though we may find them difficult to acknowledge.

## SEE

*"There are things about which I don't talk with other activists. I think it's the first time that I have sat down to think whether I am being subjected to violence of any type. I've never thought about it before; it's just now that you forced me to …"*[17]

It is said that "we are only able to see what we can put a name to" and this may explain why at times we are not able to see certain forms of violence. It may be because in our social context or life we never learned to identify these as acts of violence and name them as such.

It may also be that we find the terms for violence too strong, far removed, or harsh when applied to ourselves. So when a person tries to acknowledge that she herself has faced a certain type of violence, the situation gets complicated.

15. Interview by Marina Bernal, September 2005
16. These images came up in various interviews conducted by Marina Bernal between September and December 2005, with activists of different ages from different parts of the Latin American region. Likewise, these types of associations with the word *violence* also came up at different points during the workshops held as part of the self-care and self-defense project for young women activists, promoted by ELIGE, between 2001 and 2003.
17. Interview by Marina Bernal, October 2005

For all the reasons explored in Chapter I—related to how we shape our understanding of ourselves—it is an extremely complicated issue for us as activists to acknowledge the violence we face. It creates a feeling of vulnerability, which—on the one hand—questions our self-image as modern and liberated women, and—on the other—affects the image that we want to project to our communities, colleagues, families, and friends. We struggle to preserve this image at all costs.

It becomes even more complicated when a person with whom we have a deep emotional bond—a family member, a movement colleague, or a lover—inflicts the violence. It is quite possible then to experience feelings of confusion, shame, humiliation, and vulnerability, as what we perceive does not fit in with the expectations we have of ourselves and what others think of us.

The different types of violence we may face includes censure, criticism, mockery, or even physical, sexual, and psychological violence, which may be inflicted with an intensity that puts our life or physical integrity at risk.

Perhaps, you feel this is not the time to acknowledge the violence you face; maybe you could do it later or have already dealt with it more than adequately. You may think that your work or the activism has provided you with ample knowledge about this, and since you even impart training to other people on violence or human rights, you are totally in control when it comes to violence.

You may be right. Probably, you are aware of or even have extensive knowledge of the issue. However, information is not enough. In the context of this self-care and self-defense manual, the first step forward is to understand *who we are* (Chapter 1). During this journey into self-awareness it also becomes vital to identify the different types of violence that we, as women and activists, face in different situations at different moments in our lives.

This manual will enable you to identify what you need to work on during the process of self-care. Based on this, you will be able to identify your need for self-defense, the resources you already have, and those that need to be strengthened.

We invite you to explore this issue in greater detail …

## THINK

### Violence against women

The various hegemonic social orders examined in the previous chapter initiate ways of exercising power that are authoritarian, exclusionary, and domineering, and benefit particular groups of people to the detriment of others.

From this perspective, violence against women[18] should be understood as an exercise of power based on the existing patriarchal order of gender where the male dominates the female. This order suppresses women, restricts the full development of their potential, prevents them from exercising their rights, makes them live for others, forces them to exercise their reproductive functions, and usurps their right to self-determination. The various mechanisms used to impose the violence range from ostracism to physical attacks and even death.

Violence against women is defined as any action, word, or omission that aims to subjugate, subordinate, denigrate, harm, marginalize, demean, or exploit a woman or group of women, physically or psychologically. Thus, it is not only inflicted in the form of beating, rape, or insult, but also through harassment, economic and political marginalization on account of gender, or restricting and undermining a woman's abilities, contribution, and potential.

The body is one of the favoured territories for the exercise of control and imposition of regulations and repression. The body is often the object of multiple forms of violence. The patriarchal order deprives women of their right to free determination over their bodies and controls their sexuality and their relationship with their own bodies as well as with other people. Thus women are not allowed—nor taught—to make their own decisions about their bodies (they feel they do not have the authority to do so and in some cases laws prohibit them from doing so). As a consequence, they are unable to enjoy their bodies and experience them as spaces for pleasure. Thus, their bodies are for the service, pleasure, care, control, and attention of others (mainly men).

This expropriation and control finds expression in various ways, often with extremely negative consequences. In different societies it manifests itself differently. For example:

- In a general disregard for women and the failure to acknowledge that women have knowledge of their own bodies.
- In the criminalization of abortion, exposing women to the risk of unwanted pregnancies or death on account of poorly performed abortions.
- In imposing motherhood as the sole objective of a woman's life.
- By restricting her mobility, by regulating the times and spaces in which she can move around freely. Disregarding these rules could result in social rejection, rape as punishment, and even death.

18. Our definition of violence against women is broadly based on Article 1 of the Inter-American Convention of Belem Do Para.

- Through different types of sexual abuse and rape.[19]
- Through the imposition of cultural values and practices such as virginity before marriage, clitoridectomy, forced marriage, or being sold or bartered in exchange for goods.
- In establishing parameters for beauty that impose unhealthy practices or customs, and translate to disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, or a compulsive obsession with one's appearance or weight.
- In a greater vulnerability to STIs[20] caused by lack of information on sexual and reproductive health, as well as differences in the power to negotiate barrier methods with sexual partners.

Violence against women is socially legitimized in multiple ways. Violent and discriminatory discourses and practices against women are encouraged among men, exhorting them to demonstrate their manliness, assert themselves through physical violence, not express their affection freely, and use women as objects.

This does not in any way imply that there is no violence among women, since gender socialization also influences how we relate to each other and teaches us to compete for men and power. We are trained to distrust each another, undermine our own authority and value, and use other destructive ways of relating to one another. We act on this training daily by being violent with each other, particularly with those we consider at a disadvantage. Thus, we often reproduce the system of domination without realizing it.

### Violence faced as women activists

Like many women, activists expend a large part of their energy in surviving violence on a daily basis. We face violence in nearly all the spaces we inhabit: the family, our personal relationships, at work, and other public places such as the street, public transport, and even recreational areas. Every day, we react to these situations, which leave us drained, burdened, and disturbed. As modern women rather than traditional women[21], we are usually economically independent (or at least attempt or wish to be so). Although we harbour our own personal ambitions and invest considerable energy in defending our identity as liberated women, we suffer considerable guilt—born of social conditioning—for not fulfilling traditional expectations (or fulfilling them partially).[22]

In addition to these forms of violence common to nearly all women, we also face specific forms of violence on account of our activism. Freeing ourselves from the ideal of the traditional woman and being activists definitively puts us in a position of strength. In response to this institutions react with various mechanisms of coercion, assimilation, and violence.

There is also a great deal of self-inflicted violence that we rarely recognize: we do not attend to our needs or our body, and we expose ourselves to multiple situations in which we are overburdened and at risk, which ultimately leave us exhausted and drained.

19. Classified in different forms in each country, rape is recognized in general, as physical or psychological subjection, exercised by one person against another, without consent, in order to perform a sexual act, which may or may not involve the insertion of the penis or any instrument in the body of a person, in the mouth, vagina, or anus.
20. Sexually transmitted infections.
21. *Lagarde, Marcela* (1999). "Claves feministas para el poderío y la autonomía de las mujeres"
22. *Dio Bleichmar, E.* (1991). "La depression en la mujer." Ediciones Temas de Hoy, Madrid, p. 163.

## ACT

We now invite you to spend some time reviewing your life in detail, in terms of the various forms of violence discussed below, without giving in to any tendency to evade issues. This discussion highlights issues that are a part of the activist's daily routine, to help you assess whether you are facing any form of violence in your life, so you can then decide on a course of action.

### Violence in the family environment

Several activists experienced physical violence during their childhood and adolescence. The struggle not to yield to an order that they rejected resulted in many leaving home at an early age to seek alternative relationships and build their own families or support systems outside the original family environment. However, in many cases psychological and verbal violence—manifested by offensive behavior within the family environment—remains an unspoken part of their daily lives.

Though close family members sexually abused some activists, these deeply painful experiences remained unvoiced till they became adults or left home. In many cases, this traumatic past prompted them to become involved with the defense of victims of abuse through provision of services or research.

However, in some cases, the experiences remained unvoiced and unshared, resulting in anger, frustration and impotence, which affected their ability to form healthy sexual and emotional relationships.

For those activists who become mothers, the constant recriminations from partners and children for having chosen a lifestyle incompatible with the parameters of a traditional family, wife, and mother is one of the main forms of violence and vulnerability experienced in their daily lives. This deeply affects their personal and family dynamics, often leading to depression, anxiety, and frustration.

> *"In our day to day interaction, we older activists face many conflicts in our relationship with our daughters…. Their complaint is that we haven't given them the things that other mothers give their daughters… that basic regularity of presence that we didn't give them because we couldn't, because we weren't there, or because we were only there half the time or we had help …That hurts because we didn't have any alternate role models of motherhood. I simply did it as best as I could."*[23]

23. Interview conducted by Marina Bernal, October 2005.

## REFLECT

How much time and what spaces you have actually allocated to deal with these types of issues?

What resources have you used and what type of support have you sought?

Have you tried talking to other activists who could be going through a similar situation?

For some, seeking family therapy has been an important resource that allows them to deal with these issues on neutral ground. For others, working out an agreement on time that is "reserved" to be spent with their children or partners, has helped in not only improving relations with their families, but even made it possible for them to set their own limits for their work and family.

Write the resources or strategies available to you and think how you can improve or strengthen them:

### Violence in couples[24]

Violence in couples is a problem that we share with non-activist women, though it has different dimensions for activists. This type of violence may be justified or tolerated for very different reasons, including economic,

24. You must remember that the notion of a couple is not only limited to relationships where two people are living together, as violence in couples also occurs during courtship or lovers' relationships and is expressed in diverse ways.

emotional, and affective dependence; low self-esteem and a feeling of inadequacy; religious principles that urge couples to keep a relationship together at all costs; or fear of being discredited or socially rejected in case of separation.

When children are involved, they often become the primary reason for remaining in a destructive relationship. The social obligation to settle down and be in a relationship, and an inability to remain alone or fear of solitude, are also reasons couples remain in violent or destructive relationships.

For activists, some other elements are involved; for example, guilt for not being able to correctly fulfill the role of spouse or mother, the impediment of age in finding a new partner, the challenge of mixing personal spaces with spaces for participation, the fact that giving up a relationship involves giving up the space for political participation and the ties on which it has been built, and the fear of being judged by common friends. Wherever applicable, write 'yes' for any hint or degree of these forms of violence that may be inflicted by you or your partner in your relationship (or relationships) as a couple(s):

| Type of violence | Does this happen in your relationship with your partner? |
|---|---|
| **Isolation and intrusion:**<br>j Hides your things, listens to your conversations, reads your correspondence, e-mails, or personal documents. | |
| j Does not let you go out or be alone when you want to. | |
| j Controls your activities, who you see, who you speak to, and where you go. | |
| j Prevents you from seeing or visiting your friends and family, or them from visiting you. | |
| j Interferes in your friendships, calls friends behind your back, or asks them questions about you. | |
| j Other: | |
| **Emotional abuse:**<br>j Makes you feel clumsy, stupid or crazy. | |
| j Blames you for everything. | |
| j Ridicules, makes fun, or jokes about you or your family in front of your family, friends or strangers. | |
| j Uses your personal information to manipulate or humiliate you. | |

| Type of violence | Does this happen in your relationship with your partner? |
|---|---|
| j Does not respect your decisions or take your needs into account; pressurizes or manipulates you to do what he/she wants | |
| j Blackmails or threatens you. | |
| j Does not address you, ridicules you or speaks to you in an aggressive manner. | |
| j Other: | |
| **Economic abuse:**<br>j Does not let you work outside the home, puts pressure on you or creates obstacles so you are not able to. | |
| j Makes you ask him/her for money or in case you have shared expenses, denies you money for these common expenses. | |
| j Questions how you use your money, blackmails you into spending to fulfill both your needs and unilaterally establishes the priorities for spending. | |
| j Checks your accounts or "manages" your money. | |
| j Other: | |
| **Sexual abuse:**<br>j Physically or emotionally obliges you to engage in sexual practices against your will. | |
| j Does not take your wishes or needs into account even when you express them. | |
| j Hurts you physically (without your consent) or emotionally during sexual intercourse. | |
| j Ignores you sexually, tells you that you are no longer desirable, that you do not excite him/her or and that he/she has sexual relations with you as a "favor to you". | |
| j Other: | |
| **Physical violence:**<br>j Pushes you, pulls your hair, pinches or slaps you "in jest" or "by accident." | |

| Type of violence | Does this happen in your relationship with your partner? |
|---|---|
| j Slaps you in the face, twists your arm, kicks you "to get a reaction out of you, make you listen or see reason". | |
| j Throws things at you to hurt you. | |
| j Causes you injury with arms (knives, firearms or any other) either intentionally or "by accident." | |
| j Openly hits you. | |
| j Other: | |
| **Intimidation and threats:**<br>j Terrorizes you with looks, gestures, and acts or by shouting. | |
| j Breaks things and destroys or hides your things. | |
| j Prevents you from entering or leaving the house. | |
| j Threatens to hurt you, hurt others or to commit suicide. | |
| j Other: | |
| **Domestic Slavery:**<br>j Holds you solely responsible for managing the house and keeping it clean (paying bills, managing things, services, cleaning, tidiness and maintenance), or for some reason it is always 'your turn' when distributing activities | |
| j Does not participate in domestic chores (or in looking after the children if there are any) or only "helps" you and makes you feel that he/she is "doing you a favor" or that "you should be grateful." | |
| j Demands that you serve him/her or blackmails you into doing so. | |
| j Other: | |

## REFLECT

List your reasons for continuing in a relationship marked by these characteristics.

How do you contribute to continuing the relationship the way it is, with no changes or re-negotiation of agreements?

What benefits or advantages do you gain from the conditions that have prevailed thus far?

What should your role be to make a relationship work?

What would happen if you decided to move from the place in which you have been stuck in your relationship? What would happen to your partner? What would happen to your relationship? What would happen to you?

## Political violence as a direct result of activism

As activists and nontraditional women, we question the symbolic social order in different ways, which many people, groups and institutions perceive as a threat to their identities, interests, and privileges. When we go beyond personal transformation and organize ourselves politically to fight injustice, the threat we pose to the social order increases. Therefore, many groups, institutions, and individuals consciously and intentionally engage in exemplary violence against us to demonstrate the risks inherent in transgressing the order, using us as examples to others of what could happen should they dare express their nonconformity.

This is the reason why activists are often targets of aggression, criticism and ridicule. Sometimes they are also threatened and their privacy invaded by raids at home, thefts, violation of correspondence, telephone threats, blackmail, kidnapping, and even murder—acts legally recognized as offences (but not always reported).

> *"The simple fact of stating that I am a feminist is a disadvantage. Thus, I avoid saying it or choose the context in which to mention it. I feel I am labeled or mistreated because somehow when I use this term it is as if I have now become part of some other category."*[25]

Sometimes, this political violence is perpetrated directly by the State or groups with political or economic power, using the military, police or judicial force to suppress activism through force, exile, threats, public defamation, false charges, arbitrary detention, imprisonment, physical or psychological torture, rape, and murder.

Although political violence occurs mainly in the context of authoritarian states, even supposedly democratic regimes violate fundamental rights such as freedom of speech, right to free association, freedom to demonstrate in public, right to impartial trial, and freedom from torture. This type of violence occurs at all levels.

Developing their inner strength and integrity has helped many activists who have faced political violence to survive extreme situations of abuse, continue their struggle, and inspire others. Others have chosen to address their pain via counseling, therapy, and group work with people who have had similar experiences.

However, many have simply continued working, hoping their memories will fade with time. This decision often results in persistent physical and emotional discomfort, nightmares and other distressing symptoms collectively referred to as post-traumatic stress disorder, which leads to a deterioration in the quality of their lives.

> *"One night I heard someone crying. I got up and I realized that it was my mother who was crying because she was having a nightmare of the time when she was kidnapped and raped during the war. As I asked myself 'what do I do now?' I realized that she had never got justice and this was something that was long overdue in the case of activists who had lived this type of violence. They have never confronted or worked out these situations within themselves or with their children. The fact that she had never worked it out, and that I didn't know what to do, affected me very deeply."*[26]

25. Interview conducted by Marina Bernal, October 2005.
26. Ibid

In other cases, being an activist questions both the established social order in which real or assumed sexual practice is sometimes used as a weapon to discredit a person publicly or for political disqualification. This practice has had multiple repercussions on the lives of activists since, in certain situations, it has translated into threats, persecution, and even a danger of death. In other cases, the use of sexuality as a weapon has contributed to aggravation of homophobia or paranoia among activists—whether they are lesbians or not—when faced with the possibility of being identified as such.

However, in the face of threats, affirming their sexual identity publicly has given some lesbian activists a solid resource that has helped eliminate the use of sexuality as a means to disqualify or violate.

> *"I think that yes, you can and must dignify what you are. Because at the end of the day that is what you are. We cannot live like ostriches with our heads buried in the sand. And when you say it, this disarms people. They don't know what to say, or how to reply when faced with confirmation of what they suspect. The word lesbian to some people is too strong a word. But I ask, why should it sound weak? Is it because it's used in reference to women? Gay sounds light or soft. Lesbian is a strong word and I like it. I identify strongly with being a lesbian. I recognize and like myself as a lesbian, and that's that."*[27]

In your case, what manifestations of these forms of violence have you experienced?

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What resources have you used to confront this violence?

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### Violence at work or in spaces for participation

As activists, the workplace at times is the same as the space for participation. Lately, nongovernmental organizations have witnessed a reduction in their budgets due mainly to new international economic policies and budget cuts in resources allocated to women in international collaborations, multilateral agencies, and national and local level funding agencies.

27. Quote extracted from Adeim, Artemisa, et al. "Informe sobre derechos laborales de lesbianas." IGLHRC, Buenos Aires, 2005.

As far as remuneration is concerned, many of us are not happy with our salaries as we consider that they do not correspond to the workload or skills involved. However, this is an issue that is rarely addressed. The low salaries and the almost nonexistent social security create added tension. On the one hand, we don't demand better social benefits and payments in our spaces for participation; and on the other, we are frustrated because our work and professionalism are not valued or adequately remunerated.

> *"I can't demand anything because I'm an activist. As a teacher, I have been able to demand more—I stop work, I go on strike…however in activism it is a given that being an activist involves sacrifices, it implies that one is not going to earn a good salary, it implies that part of what you earn would also be a contribution to activism. I would like to have time to have a second job."*[28]

Besides this, the lack of social security becomes more evident and more worrying with the passage of time. "How are we going to retire? What is going to happen if we are suddenly afflicted by a chronic or degenerative disease?" It is somewhat of a contradiction that an emancipated woman must depend on her sons, daughters, or others in order to survive after she reaches a certain age. This is something that is rarely spoken about, but it is a fundamental issue in the struggle to improve our living conditions.

> *"My mother has been an activist since the 70s, and has now spent the last ten years worrying how she is going to manage after retirement. Because in Latin America there is a lot of poverty and we don't have unemployment or retirement benefits. So she has now suddenly realized that in the last 30 years she had done nothing for her retirement."*[29]

In many cases work conditions are dangerous, and often relationships in such negative conditions are not necessarily equitable and fair. Thus, the ideal of building a just and non-exclusionary society is very far removed from what actually exists in practice. When we face discrimination, abuse and disqualification from our own colleagues at work, the sense of frustration, helplessness and sorrow is much greater.

> *"I think there is a conflict of power in organizations. Various power dynamics are played out in relationships in organizations… there are many models and many forms of abuse. So much so that the various situations of abuse that I experience in my organization have led me to consider whether I really want to continue working in human rights. Reproducing the same model is of no interest to me"*[30]

For young activists, age can be a disadvantage, as when they are disqualified from opportunities or experience prejudice regarding the quality and complexity of the work that they are considered capable of handling.

For those who don't have children or are unmarried, the issue of time and their supposedly greater inclination to do things that others who do have commitments and children cannot, becomes an imposition and a cause for recrimination if they refuse to give up their personal time. The setting of limits is evidence of an

28. Interview conducted by Marina Bernal, October 2005.
29. Ibid
30. Ibid

uncooperative attitude that is not in keeping with the demands of the job.

> *"Sometimes they do abuse us a bit within the organization. As 'I am young and don't have children' they dump a lot of work on me … besides this the way they speak to me and the abuse of authority within the organizational dynamics is routine."*[31]

When we are a part of mixed organizations or groups, sexist jokes are another frequent form of violence at the workplace. Those who take a feminist stand or defend the human rights of women, are frequently the targets of disparaging comments meant to demean them.

There is also the case of men and women holding the same responsibilities and professional status, who do not receive the same remuneration or compensation for their work, whether financial or in the form of political and professional benefits.

> *"It's not easy when there are insinuations and harassment from colleagues within your own organization or movement, because you assume that they know you and you expect them to respect you, but it's not like that. Thus the truth of the matter is that you no longer know what to expect."*[32]

Finally, women are meant to fulfill the role of activists, make sacrifices and promise unconditional devotion to the cause because they are the ones expected to live for others. This forces a double sense of duty that translates into long working hours, not eating or eating erratically, insufficient rest or recreation, and excessive demands and sacrifices. Added to this are the many risks inherent in this field, such as constantly visiting unsafe places without protection or company, and facing groups that disapprove of their actions.

In workspaces other than nongovernmental organizations, the problems of finding work and holding on to a job are greater for some lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual women whose gender expression does not fit the feminine ideal prevailing in their social context. In such spaces, an enormous amount of energy is invested in trying to hide the facts.[33]

On the other hand, in recent years the weakening and loss of credibility of unions has had a direct impact on the lack of real opportunities to improve women's working conditions. Even where unions exist, gender discrimination and discrimination based on sexual preference persists. In general, women's needs and demands are not given much consideration by unions.

31. Ibid
32. Interview conducted by Marina Bernal, October 2005.
33. Adeim, Artemisa, et al. "*Informe sobre derechos laborales de lesbianas*" IGLHRC, Buenos Aires, 2005.

Let us now do a small analysis—ask yourself:

Do you receive a salary, some income or compensation for the work that you do in your organization?

Do you do any other work that is remunerated?

Do you enjoy employee rights, such as a contract, festival bonus, paid vacations, and social security?

Are you subjected to violence in your workplace or in your spaces of participation? What type of violence?

Do other women in the same space also face the same forms of violence?

What have you or they done about it?

*"My female boss's behavior is completely like that of a jealous husband and an abusive and violent man, and has made me reconsider my entire way of working and how I relate to others. This psychological pressure affects my day-to-day work a lot and I know that this is what causes many young people to stop participating in social movements or working in organizations like mine. It is much more lucrative to work in a company and besides, this one also comes across lesser contradictions than in an organization."*[34]

## REFLECT

- All the situations that cause us discomfort or hurt in our professional environment affect our ability to perform our job with more creativity, efficiency and strength.
- Therefore, these situations must be the key focus of our personal and collective reflection.
- It would help to reflect on these conditions and to speak about them with women who share similar situations.
- Project some of these issues as important to be dealt with in the next strategic planning session.
- Discuss with colleagues what the ideal working conditions would be and set a goal to achieve them in your workplace, specifying minimum conditions that would gradually result in social benefits for all those who are a part of your team.
- Review the assumptions that underlie the supposed horizontal nature of the organization.[35]
- Find out whether a pension or retirement plan is viewed as a realistic possibility in your company or organization. What is being done to achieve it?

Violence inflicted on account of our status as women and activists affects our participation in several ways when we do not know how to recognize and confront it. This includes the lack of motivation to continue, fear of public protest, and negative impact on important relationships with partners, family, and friends. There is a general loss of personal and collective credibility and disillusionment with the causes and social movements we are fighting for. Some women leave their spaces of participation. Serious ruptures or dismantling of groups may also occur.

34. Interview conducted by Marina Bernal, October 2005.
35. http://www.nodo50.org/mujeresred/feminismos-jo_freeman.html

Although these are just some of the types of violence we face, there is another dimension relating to self-care that is a separate issue and a form of violence not really identified or dealt with within our organizational and participatory spaces. We thought it was important to deal with this topic in a separate chapter so we can realize how, when we speak of violence, we only think of the violence others inflict upon us—the violence dealt with in this chapter—and not the violence that we inflict upon ourselves.

Let us now proceed with our reflection.

23. Interview conducted by Marina Bernal, October 2005.

# *III. The Lack of Self-care: A Form of Violence*

*In this chapter you will:*

- Recognize that not caring for yourself is a form of violence
- Identify the different forms and types of violence associated with a lack of self-care
- Identify your level of self-care, including strengths, weaknesses, and challenges

The failure to take care of ourselves and attend to our needs is something activists rarely talk about. The silence shrouding this type of violence often makes us believe that we are the only ones who face it; we imagine we must be the complaining sort, or lack commitment because we think this way. However, this violence is fed and sustained by learned sentiments, behavior, beliefs, and attitudes that have been reinforced throughout our lives in different environments such as home, school, the workplace, and spaces of participation. We start seeing the failure to care for ourselves and its effect as only to be expected of a good activist.

This is important, because for many women activists there is an enormous gap between our ideal conception of our lives and our actual quality of life. When we investigated this, diverse women from different groups in several countries[36] exhibited a lot of similarities. Below are some examples of lack of self-care. We hope the proposed exercises will help you identify your own situation in terms of self-care and understand the issues that require greater attention.

# 1. Lack of attention to the body and physical well-being

Most of us relate to our body in a slightly aseptic manner, treating it merely as a collection of organs that need to function well so we can continue our routine activities and fight our battles. The problem with this is that we lose track of what the body feels, enjoys, learns, and what makes it feel alive and express itself in all its possibilities. It also blurs the political dimension of our relationship with our body.

*"When we talk of health, there is a mixture of carelessness and fear. It is a way of denial and at the same time letting yourself be swept away by the dynamics of routine life."*[37]

The illnesses that women activists normally suffer are associated with a chronic neglect of physical and emotional problems: overworking, bad eating habits, stress, and poor time management. In times of crisis, this translates into frequent infections of the respiratory tract, gastrointestinal disorders (such as colitis, gastritis, and constipation), muscular ailments, and headaches and migraines. The immune system is affected, increasing vulnerability to opportunistic illnesses.

Though we frequently have access to important information on illness prevention because of our work on sexual and reproductive rights, human rights, and women's health, we often live in complete contradiction of this information. Often, we are ignorant of our own blood type, allergies, and hereditary illnesses—information that is fundamental to maintaining our physical health.

36. In a research entitled 'Women, youth and activists: The situation in terms of self-care and self-defense in the face of gender violence' *(Mujeres, jóvenes y activistas: Situación de auto cuidado y autodefense frente a la violencia de género),* Mérida, Ciudad Juárez and Federal District (2004). And through interviews and testimonials from women in different parts of the world.
37. Interview conducted by Marina Bernal, October 2005.

We usually do not undergo periodical medical check-ups, though we are aware that these are necessary. Only a few of us get regular pap smear tests and breast examinations or use barrier contraceptives[38] during intercourse to prevent STIs and other infections. In addition, we tend to ignore the discomfort caused by menstruation or menopause, delaying treatment till it begins to drastically interfere with our performance.

Discomfort is considered normal. We are accustomed to living with physical distress, such as chronic back pain, headaches, and stomach aches. Our threshold of pain is often skewed, so our bodies get used to functioning with a moderate degree of discomfort. Generally, we only react if our pain is intense, and even then the corrective action we take is usually merely palliative.

### Exercise: Try to get in touch with your body through this exercise:

- Lie on a flat, comfortable surface. The temperature should be comfortable.
- Close your eyes and breathe deeply.[39]
- Concentrate on the sound of your breathing; think of the air entering and leaving your body and your muscles expanding and contracting.
- Now focus on your muscles and identify which ones are tense.
- Try to make these muscles relax following the soft rhythm of your breathing. Focus on your body again and observe which of your internal organs are under stress. Relax them.
- Slowly move your mind's focus across your body from head to toe.
- Does anything hurt? How long has it been hurting? If this pain had a voice or a sound, what noise would it make?
- Let it express itself (by a sound, word, movement or signal). What does this pain tell you about your state of mind, your physical health, diet, and the demands you routinely make on yourself?
- This pain could be a call for attention by your body, asking you to attend to it.
- Give it time to express itself.
- Record the experience and the sensations you felt during this exercise in your diary, writing your strengths, what your body communicated to you, what you learned about yourself and how you relate to your body and its discomfort.
- Make a pact with yourself that you will pay more attention to your body when it sends out another distress signal calling for attention.

## REFLECT

- Identify what kind of pain and discomfort you treat as "normal" (what have you learned to live with because you feel it is a part of you?).
- Often, some of this suffering or pain has a long history, acquires the character of a family trait or tradition:

38. Research 'Women, youth and activists: The situation in terms of self-care and self-defense in the face of gender violence' *(Mujeres, jóvenes y activistas: Situación de auto cuidado y autodefensa frente a la violencia de género),* Mérida, Ciudad Juárez and Federal District (2004). In the workshops held in these cities with young women activists, it was found that 46% did not use any form of contraception.
39. If you want to check that you are breathing correctly or need to improve your breathing pattern, focus on the following characteristics: Are you breathing deeply? Are you just moving your chest and shoulders or the abdomen as well? Try to breathe by first expanding the abdomen, next transfer the air to the chest and finally exhale through the mouth. How much time do you spend inhaling and exhaling? How long are the pauses between inhalation and exhalation?

*"It's normal in my family… All the women in my family suffer migraines, from my grandmother to some of the youngest granddaughters."*

- These family illnesses are likely the result of negative patterns established in expressions of affection or conflict, which manifest and are treated as physical ailments rather than emotional problems.
- Sometimes these negative family traits are intensified at work or places of social participation. Hopefully, this exercise will help you start identifying some of these patterns and problems.

*"It's quite terrible but the sicker and more messed up we are, the better we are as activists. And it is increasingly unacceptable to say that you are simply tired or you just need some space for yourself, or that you need to take a vacation …or a short break…*
*And this I think began when I was a small child, because of all the expectations that my family had, how I never tired and was always full of life. I used to think that I had not followed my family's orders but at the end of it all…I did end up doing so in some way…"*[40]

# 2. Diet

Healthy food and adequate rest are important aspects of self-care, but when we consider our tight schedules, the two or three jobs we handle in addition to domestic chores, motherhood, and sometimes taking care of others, the time available to eat and rest diminishes. So we do not follow proper mealtimes, eat less than three meals a day, eat in a hurry, and pay little attention to the quality and nutritional balance of our food. It is clear that few of us follow a satisfactory diet.

Analyze the dynamics that exist in the spaces where you operate; for example, your work or space for participation: are mealtimes considered important or dispensable so they are rescheduled to prioritize other activities? Though it is reasonable and expected to occasionally reschedule meals, when rescheduling, canceling, or restricting mealtimes becomes the norm, it may be necessary to change the pattern and mindset.

Assigning a fixed time for mealtimes should be a priority. The type and nutritional value of the food is also important. However, rather than merely doing a calorie count or nutrient analysis, it may be of interest to review your relationship with food.

40. Interview conducted by Marina Bernal, October 2005.

## REFLECT

Respond to these questions here or in the diary of strengths at the end of this manual:

1. What is your relationship with the food you eat? Is your diet is an expression of the care you take of yourself or the lack of it?

2. Why?

3. What would you like to change about what you eat and how you eat it?

4. What, for you, is the difference between the repressive control of your body and taking care of it?

5. Do you need support to evolve or maintain a healthy relationship with food? If yes, what type of support do you require?

6. How does your work space or space for participation influence your eating habits?

7. What agreements can you establish in your workplace or space of participation to change harmful habits and promote respect for mealtimes… so that the importance of taking a moment of rest during the day and ensuring that you have a meal in peace can be legitimized?

# 3. Weight and body image

The issue of body image is also linked to the diet. For many activists, particularly the younger ones, body image and weight are a source of constant anguish because they don't meet aesthetic standards.[41]

For older activists, lack of attention to body image goes hand in hand with the overall lack of respect for the body and its needs.

Many activists follow multiple diets and dietary regimes without practicing any form of exercise, which is harmful for the body. This situation often causes a conflict in terms of our image as activists expected to take a critical view of cultural stereotypes pertaining to women's physical beauty.

Answer these questions:

1. How do you feel about your body?

41. In the research project 'Women, Youth and Activists: The status of self-care and self-defense in the face of gender violence' *(Mujeres, jóvenes y activistas: situación de auto cuidado y auto-defensa frente a la violencia de género)*, Mérida, Ciudad Juárez and Federal District (2004), it was found that 82% of young women activists think of their weight several times a day and 46% think that they should go on a diet to control their weight, having done so at various points of time.

2. How do you feel when you move your body and exercise it?

3. What sort of activities that you enjoy are good for your body?

4. Do you engage in any form of physical activity on a regular basis? Why? Why not?

5. Are there physical activities—which you once enjoyed—that you no longer engage in? Why did you stop? Try to evoke the feeling of well being that they produced.

6. What do you need to be able to spend time and effort on your physical well being?

**Physical exercise is essential as it helps us feel strong and healthy:**

- Exercising has a deep impact on the optimal functioning of the body. With exercise, your muscles increase in size so they can protect your bones, provide better support to the spinal cord, and help digestion.[42]
- Twenty minutes of continuous, energetic exercise makes the heart stronger, increases the blood circulation and helps eliminate waste more rapidly. It also increases the production of endorphins that make you feel more active and positive. This is why exercising makes you fresh and invigorated.
- Exercise also benefits the internal organs and can help in regulating conditions such as premenstrual syndrome and colic. It is always beneficial for the body, even when there is a chronic illness.

Those unable to exercise can transform a routine activity into an exercise to help strengthen the body and stay active.

# 4. Pleasure

Though we view ourselves as transgressors of conventional norms, both the traditional and modern co-exist within us—and our lives reflect the slow pace of cultural change. We are still affected by what we learnt as children while other women are a constant reminder of what we are expected to follow.

Restricting ourselves or feeling guilty about experiencing pleasure is perhaps one of the most difficult issues for us to consider, since pleasure is not a priority in practice. We justify this on the grounds of an excessively heavy workload and a lack of time. However, this mindset is yet another dimension of the demand to live for others and forget about ourselves.

> *"When I think of pleasure, I think of the precious little time I have for it. I realize that, in general, I place the pleasure of others before my own, I like the things I do, I like my work and it is satisfying, but I know that if I could do things that gave me pleasure perhaps I would be doing other things."*[43]

For many of us, it is normal not to have time for sexual or erotic[44] pleasure. This leads to dissatisfaction and frustration with the way our time is distributed because the things that give us pleasure do not have priority. Again, there is the contradiction that those who promote the importance of pleasure and sexuality for others are unable to enjoy it themselves.

> *"The other day I saw a couple kissing and I couldn't hold back my tears… I thought to myself, just how long it had been since I had kissed someone? How long since I had enjoyed intimacy?"*[45]

42. Adapted from *"Nuestros Cuerpos, Nuestras Vidas"* (Our Bodies Ourselves), The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, Editorial Plaza Janés, Spain, 2000.
43. Interview conducted by Marina Bernal, October 2005.
44. The abovementioned source indicated that 36% of women do not have time or do not make time for this aspect of their lives.
45. Interview conducted by Marina Bernal, October 2005.

The following exercise will help you identify how you restrict your time and possibilities for the enjoyment of pleasure:

- Make a list of the 10 things or activities that give you the greatest pleasure in your daily life. These could be simple or very complicated and may or may not be linked to sexuality.

  Activists often declare that our activism is a source of great pleasure. However, in this exercise we want you to identify other things that give you pleasure, adding variety to your life and making it more sustainable. Try to identify things or activities that give you pleasure and are not linked to your work.

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. | 2. |
| 3. | 4. |
| 5. | 6. |
| 7. | 8. |
| 9. | 10. |

Try to remember the last time you did something that gave you pleasure and how often you do this.

Identify the personal, environmental, or social obstacles that have prevented you from enjoying these pleasures more often.

- At times, it could be that our way of organizing our priorities and distributing our time is governed by the logic of *work before pleasure*. But, probably, your to-do list is so long that the time for pleasure is never available.
- It is also possible that in your social or organizational context, the activity you consider pleasurable is not socially sanctioned because:
  - It is not appropriate for an activist.
  - Your sexual orientation is not considered acceptable in your social context or you feel marginalized and prefer to avoid rejection by avoiding relationships.

Making time for pleasure and sexuality requires a decided effort on your part to overcome the feeling of inertia and fight the obstacles that confront you. It also means changing your perception of yourself, if it prevents you from enjoying your sexuality. Later, we will explore the question of pleasure as a key dimension of your vital strengths.

# 5. Time for recreation and rest

Most activists have an accumulated deficit of sleep and rest because all their time is spent in work related activities.

When we think of the distribution of our time we often feel dissatisfied by the meager time available for leisure, recreation, and rest. Time for friends is limited to obligatory or festive occasions, vacations are reduced for the sake of work, and weekends used up for other professional activities such as workshops or lectures.

This routine leaves us exhausted, stressed and depressed at not being able to regenerate the energy we need for our family and daily chores.
Respond to these questions and reflect on your pattern of rest and sleep:

1. Do you get to sleep for the number of hours that your body needs to recharge energy?

2. Do you need or take any type of medication to help you sleep?

3. Can you find alternatives, such as changes in your routine or habits that would help you feel more relaxed when you go to bed and help you fall asleep more easily so you are rested?

4. Do you rest sufficiently when you are tired, exhausted, or sick?

5. When you are resting, do you just rest or use the time to do things you are unable to complete during your working day? (Such as, checking your e-mails, correcting a document, planning an activity for the following day, or calling for a meeting.)

6. How frequently do you work over weekends? Do you make up for it during the week?

7. When was your last vacation?

8. Are your holidays spent resting or do you use the time to finish pending work?

9. Do you ask for and take time off when you need it or only when it is given to you?

10. Promise to make three changes to improve your pattern of rest:

As you will have realized, taking work to bed and trying to resolve problems when you are trying to fall asleep do not create conditions for quality rest. Rest is essential for your body to function properly and even helps you get a different perspective of yourself and the world.

Reflect and practice these recommendations:

- Establish a ritual to follow when you go to bed, to create conditions that will help you get quality rest.
- If you are very tense or extremely tired, take a hot bath before going to bed, drink some relaxing tea, give yourself a foot massage, and listen to soft music—the things that help to relax your mind.
- It is better not to have a television in the bedroom or ensure it is switched off before you sleep.
- Involve yourself in pleasurable activities that help you relax during your rest periods and disconnect from the daily hustle of your life.

# 6. Emotional well being

In seeking to transform social and gender inequalities, we are in constant touch with the pain and desperation of others. Frequently faced with situations of violence and injustice, we are stressed, angry, frustrated and anguished, which often makes us distance ourselves from our own pain. So we spend much less time dealing with our own problems and emotional issues.

When faced with personal crises, we do not always have the time to share our feelings with friends and others whom we trust. Access to professional assistance, such as psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, and alternative therapies is limited due to economic considerations and because it is not considered a priority. Thus, we live many moments of crisis alone, not according them the importance they deserve, or arguing that those whom we are working to help face the *real* problems.

Over time, it is normal for us activists to experience emotional depletion, thanks to the constant exhaustion of our physical and emotional energy, which at times results in us being completely incapable of valuing our own selves.

### Why does this happen?

As we saw in the previous chapter, activists experience a constant conflict between the different dimensions that intersect in their lives; for example, the ideal of being a woman (influenced by patriarchal norms) contrasts sharply with the ideal of being an activist (with liberated views). This affects us in different ways depending on our age, status, and moment of life. In this interplay of tensions, each of us shapes our own ideal of ourselves. We continue to choose from the various possibilities of our social relationships, because what we are, what we do, and what gives meaning to our lives is not uni-dimensional, nor is it a process that is ever complete. It is interlinked and in constant flux. However, the way in which we resolve these tensions often makes us the transgressors of different ideals and mandates, and this has positive and negative impacts on our lives.

Caring is a quality socially acknowledged as feminine, but this only applies when the caring is directed towards others. Living for others is a quality so deeply ingrained in us, that it often translates into the complete abandonment of our own needs, which rank as less important than the needs of our children, partner, relatives, work, or space for participation. But self-care is a prerequisite for autonomy, so it is fundamentally important that we transgress this stereotype of the traditional woman.

> *"I respond much better to the expectations and requirements of others rather than listening to my own self. I experience great conflict in knowing what I really want and what it is that truly moves me."*[46]

46. Interview conducted by Marina Bernal, October 2005.

In today's world, there is a general idea of self-care that is mainly associated with health and is completely biased by the western view of allopathic medicine—which is projected as the only school of medicine with the authority to ensure our well being and which possesses official and scientific knowledge of our body and its needs.[47]

However, it is essential to understand that self-care refers not only to the correct functioning of the body, but also to the understanding we have of ourselves, our personal and family history, and our experiences, recognizing the signals the body sends us and its discomfort, knowing when something is happening to it, listening to it, and identifying those aspects of our lives and bodies that are censured, silenced, and forgotten.

A very critical first step is being able to recognize that placing others' needs before our own is a problem, that we spend very little time on our own nutrition, leisure, and pleasure, and pay inadequate attention to our own health.

Paying attention to ourselves requires us to change our personal practices and the prevailing culture at our workplace, spaces for participation, and organization. It is important to face the challenge of promoting self-care processes within our organizations and movements, so that our lives and work become more sustainable and consistent with our struggles.

- The failure to take care of and pay attention to ourselves is common in women activists and is a form of violence about which very little is spoken or heard.
- The first step is to recognize that this is something you personally want to change within yourself.
- Seek out women activists who are also interested in improving their well being.
- This process could become an experience for collective growth and a challenge that could revolutionize your workspace and space for participation.
- Learn new ways to relate to yourself through personal growth and self-care.

47. Le Breton, David (1995). *"Antropología del cuerpo y la modernidad"*. Nueva Visión, Buenos Aires, P.8.

# *IV. Optimizing Our Vital Strengths: Self-knowledge And Autonomy*

*In this chapter you will:*

- Understand your vital strengths
- Make progress in your process of self-care
- Explore and strengthen key resources for your autonomy and self-knowledge

In Chapters II and III we reviewed the different forms of violence we face as women activists, which included lack of self-care as a form of violence. We explored how our discourses and practices are steeped in gender conditioning and perceptions about what it means to be a good activist or person committed to social justice. In Chapter IV we explore the key issues for strengthening our capacity for self-care.

Here, we will deal with our resources—we refer to these as vital strengths—which can help us make progress in terms of our self-care and self-defense.

# Empowerment, or the strengthening of vital forces

Empowerment is a process by which we appropriate resources, assets, skills, capacities, opportunities, and all the elements that favor, enrich, and strengthen our life at the individual and collective level. Some refer to it as strengthening rather than empowerment, arguing that power is not given or taken: it is exercised. Regardless, these terms describe the process of acquiring tools to help improve the status of women vis-à-vis their ability to dialogue and negotiate in all their spaces and social relationships.

The notion of empowerment allows women to analyze and unlearn the oppression that marks their lives. Thus, empowerment allows us to strengthen ourselves and become more secure, free, and self-sufficient, and more capable of transforming the oppressive relations that exist in society. While recognizing ourselves as persons with rights, empowerment allows us to identify and utilize the various resources at our disposal (knowledge, information, the awareness of having and benefiting from our rights) in the best possible manner.

We shall start by identifying three dimensions of empowerment:[48]

- In the personal dimension, empowerment supports development of a sense of one's self, individual ability, and capabilities (which requires the negation of internalized oppression). A woman achieves this by recognizing her vital strengths, expanding and using them as personal resources, developing a sense of individuality and confidence, and thus eliminating the conditions that oppress her.
- In close relationships, empowerment provides the ability to negotiate and influence the shape and form of relationships (e.g., with family, spouse, friends, or colleagues), the conditions in which they develop, and the decisions taken within them.
- In the collective dimension, empowerment enables people to work together to make a greater impact than would be possible individually. In this case, collective empowerment is a prerequisite for individual empowerment.

It is important to understand that self-care and self-defense contribute significantly to our sense of complete well being. Empowerment is a gradual process towards greater awareness and a commitment to engage in activities that promote physical well-being, ensure a balanced diet, adequate rest, enriching relationships, a balanced prioritization of our time and appropriate stress management. It also enables us to recognize that

48. Rowlands, Jo, "*Empoderamiento y mujeres rurales en Honduras: un modelo para el Desarrollo*", en Leñon, Magdalena (comp), *Poder y empoderamiento de las mujeres*. Tercer Mundo Editores, Bogotá, 1997, pp. 222-223.

progress in the projects we work on is only possible if the project is sustainable and congruent with our lives.

Feminism, over the years, has developed multiple reflections around issues crucial to the process of strengthening and emancipating women, issues that—once identified and addressed—become empowering and transformative. The challenge here is to explore the vital strengths that exist in each one of us, which are a result of our experiences, knowledge, ties, and personal resources. When these strengths become visible and acquire meaning and focus, they become the basis for self-care and self-defense, and serve as fundamental tools for our collective and individual empowerment.

# Develop awareness of your self

Many meanings define self-awareness: to be oneself, work on oneself, achieve self-realization, study one's self, or undergo individuation. Here, it means broadening our awareness by exploring those aspects of our selves that we have been ignoring,[49] being in touch with our body, acknowledging our emotions and feelings and learning to express them, identifying our needs and desires, discovering talents we have not pursued, and awakening our ability to dream. It requires exploring our emotional conflicts, reviewing the way we relate to ourselves and to others, and unleashing our own creativity.

Self-awareness is a basic premise of empowerment; when there is self-awareness we are able to identify the assumptions that are made about our behavior, what is expected of us; review what it means for us to be women *and* activists; identify what it takes to feel and acknowledge that we are part of a community, and at the same time recognize that we are distinct, different, and unique.

## SEE

If you were asked, *Who are you?* how would you describe yourself?[50]

- By stating what you are not:
  *I am not rich, or good looking, or stupid…*
- By highlighting your qualities:
  *I am a happy and optimistic person.*
- By stating what you do not like about yourself:
  *I am scatterbrained and completely disorganized.*
- By listing the things that help you fade into the background and not stand out; for example:
  *I am of average height.*
  *I try not to cause problems.*

49. Craig, Chalquist. *"Para el Estudiante Serio de la Individualidad: Una Caja de Herramientas para el Auto estudio".* At http://www.acosomoral.org/recup14.html
50. Falconi, F. and Poso, S. (1999), "Revalorización *de la personalidad de la mujer agredida," Corporación Mujer a Mujer,* Ecuador.

- By underplaying your qualities:
  *I am intelligent, but at times not the way I should be and I thus make a lot of mistakes.*
- By listing your achievements:
  *I am economically independent, a professional, and have my own house.*
- By comparing yourself with how you used to be:
  *I am fat now, unlike when I was younger and had a svelte body.*
- By referring to your relations with others, or to external descriptors:
  *I am John's wife, I have three brothers, and I live in the south of the city.*
  *I am the prettiest in my family.*
- By stating what you do:
  *I work on projects.*
  *I cut hair.*

## REFLECT

The thousands of impressions, evaluations and experiences we have been collecting about ourselves during our lives combine to generate either a positive feeling or a sense of frustration and rejection for not having become what we wanted to be. Both men and women have been taught to define themselves in relation to others and through their relationships with them. Women have been taught that the value of their "nature" depends on how they relate to men—those who give them security and protection and legitimize their presence. But they have not been taught to become the main providers of their own security. We women soon learn that our sense of self-worth depends on the value that others assign to us, to what we are or what we do, and the legitimacy of our learning and knowledge is often influenced by the validation and authorization of others.

Nonetheless, many of us have learned new ways to define ourselves by recognizing our personal contributions and triumphs and dismantling the logic that attempts to make the oppression of women seem natural. Unraveling these mechanisms helps us become more positive about ourselves and enriches our lives.

What you are is changing with every new experience. With each person you meet you broaden your vision of the world, as well as the view you have of yourself. Thus the experience of self-awareness is constantly renewing itself, as your abilities increase or evolve and your tastes and needs change.

It is important that you explore who you are and move beyond the opinions that others have of you. In this way you will acquire a more authentic and deeper knowledge of yourself.

## ACT

### Exercise: This is me…

First, identify the following aspects of your own personality. Then reflect on them by answering the questions under each aspect, recording your thoughts in the diary of inner strengths that is provided at the end of this manual.

| Your three best qualities | Your three main drawbacks | Your three main skills | Your three main fears | Your three greatest desires |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.<br>2.<br>3. | 1.<br>2.<br>3. | 1.<br>2.<br>3. | 1.<br>2.<br>3. | 1.<br>2.<br>3. |
| 1. Why do you think these are your best qualities?<br>2. Who else thinks these are your best qualities?<br>3. What other aspects of your persona do you consider positive qualities, although important people in your life may not agree with you? | 1. Why do you consider these as drawbacks?<br>2. Who else thinks these are your main drawbacks?<br>3. Do these hinder your life or development in any way?<br>4. What can you do to change these? | 1. Why do you think these are your main skills?<br>2. What other skills would you like to develop?<br>3. What are the main impediments to the development of these new skills?<br>4. What do you need to achieve this?<br>5. Who can help you? | 1. Why do you think these are your main fears?<br>2. In what way do these hamper your life or development?<br>3. Have you faced these and how?<br>4. What can you do to fight these and what do you need to do so? | 1. What are you doing to achieve these?<br>2. What is stopping you from achieving them?<br>3. Who can help or is helping you achieve them? |

### REFLECT

The positive and negative characteristics that we attribute to ourselves give us an idea about how our self-image is shaped not only by real and personal characteristics, but also by the criteria and perceptions that are a result of the way we have been educated. The gender conditioning we receive from birth influences us in multiple ways: our perception of ourselves (self-image), the way in which we define ourselves (self-conception), and the importance we give to the opinion of others in terms of the worth and appreciation that we have of ourselves, as well as our knowledge and experience (self-esteem). All this impacts the decisions we take about our lives, how we relate to others and to ourselves.

- Sometimes, the negative convictions we have internalized are a reiteration of the opinions that people important to us have expressed, explicitly or in a veiled manner, at some point in our lives.
- Over time we tend to assume that these opinions are the absolute truth; this leads to self-criticism, condemnation, and disqualification based on ideas others have expressed about us. These ideas are typically a reflection of what we have imbibed through gender socialization or other forms of learning[51] and the traditional ideal of womanhood.
- Our negative convictions about ourselves can be changed through reflection, questioning, and deconstructing traditional mandates, by recognizing and appreciating those aspects of ourselves that make us feel strong, safe, vital, and independent—even if those aspects are not very popular with others.

## 2. Recognize and express your feelings and emotions

### SEE

The way we perceive things and events around us, and the significance that we accord to them produce emotions. Emotion is a subjective reaction to the environment, which is often accompanied by innate organic changes (physiological or endocrinological).

Beyond the biochemical explanation of emotion, it is important to identify the manner in which emotions influence our experience, because we learn at an early age what is supposed to arouse our emotions and whether or not it is correct to express them. Certain emotions clearly respond to direct experience; for example, sadness or pain is a response to loss; rage is a response to abuse; fear is a response to a dangerous situation.

Generally, our emotions change throughout our lives. Thus, an event that once evoked a certain emotion may now evoke a different one. In addition, the range of emotions increases with experience.

Our work as activists constantly offers us new experiences. For instance, injustices we may not have noticed before now make our commitment to redress them much stronger.

51. Dio Bleichmar, E. (1995). Op. cit.

Recognizing ourselves as rational, thinking persons capable of critical thought is as important as identifying the emotions evoked by the issues we question, and the pain and anguish caused by the situations of violence, abuse, and violation of human rights of people in the sectors in which we work.

## REFLECT

Western culture pays homage to rational thinking, which has traditionally been associated with masculinity. Just as development, science, and politics have been represented by men, femininity has been associated with emotions, sensitivity, weakness, and domesticity.

Thus, emotions associated with tenderness, fear, and love are considered signs of weakness as they are associated with women; anger and rage are traditionally considered expressions of strength and therefore associated with men.

Education on emotions is imparted informally, as a transversal activity at home, school, work, and elsewhere. Since formal education does not include a specific curriculum for emotional education, the rigid separation between reason and emotion, favoring one over the other, limits our growth. Throughout life, our emotional spectrum is rigidly delineated or restricted so emotions build up without being worked on so we are unaware of their effects. These effects are then expressed somatically in our bodies, manifesting themselves in stereotypical ways and often exploding to produce crisis situations.

In general, we tend to adopt specific patterns of expressing emotions and affection. It is necessary to recognize these patterns so we can improve our capacity for expression and change those patterns, which could be damaging or counterproductive…

## ACT

To get in touch with our feelings, it is important to observe our patterns of expressing emotions and affection, acknowledge them, and identify other ways in which emotions are expressed in different aspects of our lives.

### Exercise: My expression of emotion[52]

Think of a recent experience, which evoked in you a very strong emotion—of love, hatred, shame, or any other. Recall the situation, the person or persons involved, and the way in which you interpreted and communicated your feelings.

52. Extracted and adapted from: *María Cecilia Claramunt (1999). "Ayudándonos para ayudar a otros: guía para el auto cuidado de quienes trabajan en el campo de la violencia intrafamiliar." Series Género y Salud Pública 7,* Pan-American Health Organization, *Programa Mujer, Salud y Desarrollo,* San José, Costa Rica.

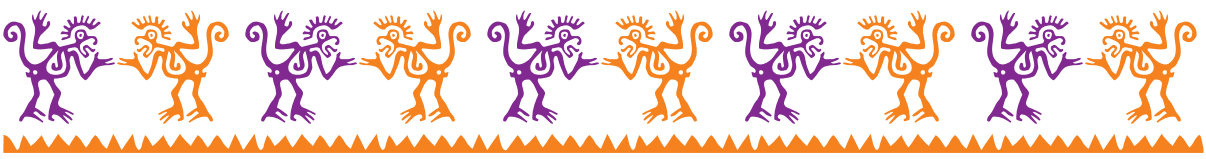
*The Situation:*

1. Describe what you felt (feelings) in a few words.

2. How did your body express this?

3. How did you interpret your feelings in light of this situation? Or in other words, what was your internal dialogue?

4. Were you able to express what you felt in words? How did you do this?



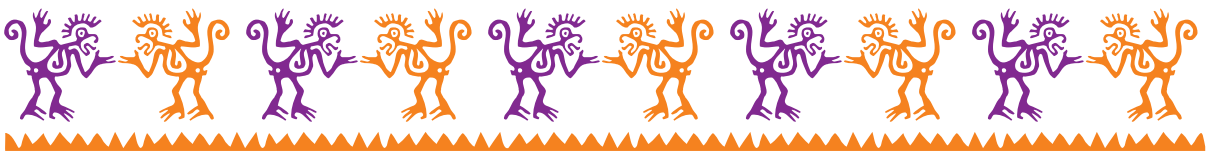
5. If you were unable to express your feelings, what do you think the reason was?

6. What would the situation have been like, had you been able to express your feelings?

7. How frequently do you avoid expressing your feelings?

8. Write down what you would have liked to communicate and what you did not say.

9. To what extent are you able to freely express your sentiments in the different spaces that you operate in (family, work, space for participation)?



10. Is there organized support to do this in your workplace or space of participation? When was this implemented? How have your colleagues usually responded?

11. Discuss a collective proposal to improve free communication of feelings and needs with your colleagues. This would include, for example:

## REFLECT

- The ability to express our needs and emotions clearly, establishing certain criteria and limits in our relationships, is commonly referred to as assertiveness[53]. When a person is capable of communicating his/her thoughts and feelings to others, and manages to get social recognition (and thus support for this type of conduct), we say that person has an assertive nature.
- In women, assertiveness is not always considered a positive trait—some people interpret it as being aggressive or insulting when we are assertive.
- This happens when courage or anger is expressed. Anger, for example, is a signal or a message that reaches us suddenly, something hurts, something about us is not being taken into consideration, something is humiliating, not right. When we experience physical pain we say "Ouch!" but when we experience pain or emotional rage, many of us remain silent, so the anger is somatically manifested in our bodies.
- We have been taught that women should not express anger; they should be passive and calm. However, this does not mean that women do not feel these emotions—the girl who never gets angry has no choice but to keep suppressing unexpected feelings.
- The ability to acknowledge and express emotions improves with regular practice, by laying down clear limits and giving firm and clear responses in social situations.
- Assertiveness is necessary not only in relation to others but also for ourselves. In order to become stronger we need to acknowledge and express exactly what we feel beyond our grief or pain. We need to convey clearly how much damage was caused, how much anger and disgust, and also acknowledge the desire for self-chastisement or vengeance.

53. Chris, Mruk, *"Auto-estima: Investigación, teoría y práctica"* (Self-Esteem: Research, Theory and Practice). *Biblioteca de Psicología*, Bilbao, 1998.

To be assertive is to be able to clearly and directly communicate what we feel or need, and act accordingly. It is a question of learning to say without discomfort or regret:

*I don't want.*
*I don't like.*
*No, thank you.*

Being assertive gives us strength, clarity and security. Being extremely honest with yourself is the basis for the assertive expression of your needs and feelings.

# 3. Recognize and accept your aggressiveness

## SEE

Since, socially, women are clearly prohibited from expressing rage and anger, whenever a woman does express these emotions, she suffers social rejection, major guilt feelings, and the fear of being punished by losing the love of those who are important to her.

## THINK

Social recognition is important for people. Women are taught that social status is acquired by being useful to the family, through close social relationships, and their social and intellectual abilities, although the former is valued more than the latter.

## ACT

### Exercise 2: Letting your emotions flow

- Go to a remote place where nobody is around and it does not matter if you are seen or heard: out in the country, in a forest or park, or your home, if no one else is there.
- Close your eyes and recall a situation in which you felt you were being attacked.
- Locate the feeling in your body and let it expand.
- Feel the form that this anger, rage, or frustration takes.
- Give it a sound. This could be a shout, a howl, or a word.
- Now shout loudly. Let the strength and volume of your shout reflect the intensity of the anger and rage you are experiencing.

- Move and allow the anger that is trapped in your legs or arms to escape, by kicking or shaking your arms.
- Shake your arms and hands and slowly sit down and relax, breathing deeply.
- Now think about how you felt during the exercise.

### REFLECT

- In general, the suppression of aggressive feelings is not due to timidity or introversion. But since too much emphasis is put on being nice, we are not sufficiently true to ourselves for fear of being rejected or abandoned.
- Expressing emotions such as rage and anger is one of the ways in which women can begin to create and preserve a balanced relationship with themselves and others. So it is important to experiment with productive ways of expressing anger.
- Discrediting feelings of rejection and aggression can result in not reacting when faced with situations of intrusion, abuse, and violence. Feelings of aggression are a sign that something is not right. If we do not recognize these signs and do not acknowledge our anger till much after the incident, we are at the risk of realizing it when it is much more difficult to handle—either when the violence has escalated too much, or realizing what we could have done but did not do.
- Suppressing these feelings can also affect our emotional growth, as we could have problems showing our feelings or acting at the opportune moment.

# 4. Develop your autonomy

Autonomy and self-sufficiency are fundamental issues for women; both entail a radical transformation of our social gender construct. Historically, our rights to take decisions that concern our social, political, and economic environment and our selves have been expropriated. The justification for considering us incapable of taking our own decisions has been that women lack the ability to reason. No person without the power to reason is capable of being free.[54]

Perceiving ourselves and being perceived as reasonable persons with free will and the power to make decisions in all arenas of our lives (e.g., sexual, economic, political, social, civil) requires simultaneous collective and personal efforts. Just as we have fought to eliminate educational, economic, and political inequalities to directly benefit and empower women—as activists, we need to equip ourselves with the conditions and resources that will allow us to exercise our autonomy fully. This involves self-government and developing the initiative and confidence to take responsibility for the consequences of our actions.

From a feminist perspective, achieving autonomy includes recognizing and identifying autonomy within ourselves as well as in our political practice.

54. Lagarde, Marcela (2003), *"La soledad y la desolación"* at: http://www.mujeresdeempresa.com/sociedad/030201.shtml

Building autonomy is indispensable to the process of empowerment, and is also the basis for establishing satisfactory and enriching personal relationships, improving our quality of life, and achieving our goals. It encompasses the personal, economic, social, and political spheres. Let us reflect on what is required to build autonomy.

## A. Learn to live in solitude

According to the Mexican feminist, Marcela Lagarde, solitude can be defined as the time, space, and state in which there are no people to act as intermediaries for us. It is a privileged space in which a person can have independent experiences in which no one else participates.
To achieve autonomy, women must convert solitude:

> *"into a pleasurable state to be enjoyed, a creative space, an opportunity for thought, questioning, meditation and reflection."*[55]

It should be a space to explore one's individuality, doubts, and the fantasy of complete independence, reflection, and intellectual exploration.

We need to be alone in order to build autonomy and eliminate the multiple mechanisms we have developed to avoid being alone. We must face our fear of solitude and work on feelings of desolation by making ourselves the focus and converting solitude into a pleasant state of well-being.

> *"The ideological treatment of solitude and gender construction ignores the positive experience of solitude as part of human experience. To become subjects is to assume that we are really alone: alone in life, alone in our existence. Assuming this implies that we stop demanding that others be our companions in our lives; stop threatening others into being and living with us"*[56]

## B. Build affective autonomy

Learning to live alone also requires reducing our dependency on others. This means learning to establish different ways of relating to and perceiving ourselves in relation to others—particularly those who threaten our individuality due to deep emotional ties, such as family, partners, or lovers.

It also requires developing the capacity to experience life without needing others to affirm our existence, validate our emotions, or sanction our desires and decisions.

It is a question of learning to enjoy and experience triumphs, joys, frustrations, and failures alone. So, while you develop the ability to experience strong emotions or pleasurable experiences without depending on other people to identify, organize, or legitimize them, you can also share your happiness with them if you choose.

55. agarde, Marcela (2003), *"La soledad y la desolación"* at: http://www.mujeresdeempresa.com/sociedad/030201.shtml
56. Ibid

### C. Have your own space

Women generally have difficulty finding a space of their own. It is even more difficult when we are young and still living in our parent's home. After we have our own family and children, or share a living space with another, the key challenge lies in setting limits, defining spaces, and creating a sacred space—however small—that belongs just to you. One of the fundamentally important conditions for autonomy is to have a space that is exclusively yours, with your own stamp.[57]

If you do not have such a space, create one or reorganize your home to identify a patch of your own—which would probably represent a breaking away from the past and a starting point for changes in your environment. It could be a corner in the room you share with someone else, or a room just for yourself where you can think, reflect, write, and express how you feel: your needs, thoughts, and personal plans.

Normally, women try to justify their movements by saying that someone or something needs their attention, or they are fulfilling a duty. Of course there are times when we are needed, but generally this is a way of situating ourselves in the world on the basis of our gender status, or justifying our movements in such a way that we are permanently answerable to others.

Though this situation is changing slowly in different parts of the world, there is a personal dimension that we can change ourselves by reviewing the arguments we have internalized and which have limited us.

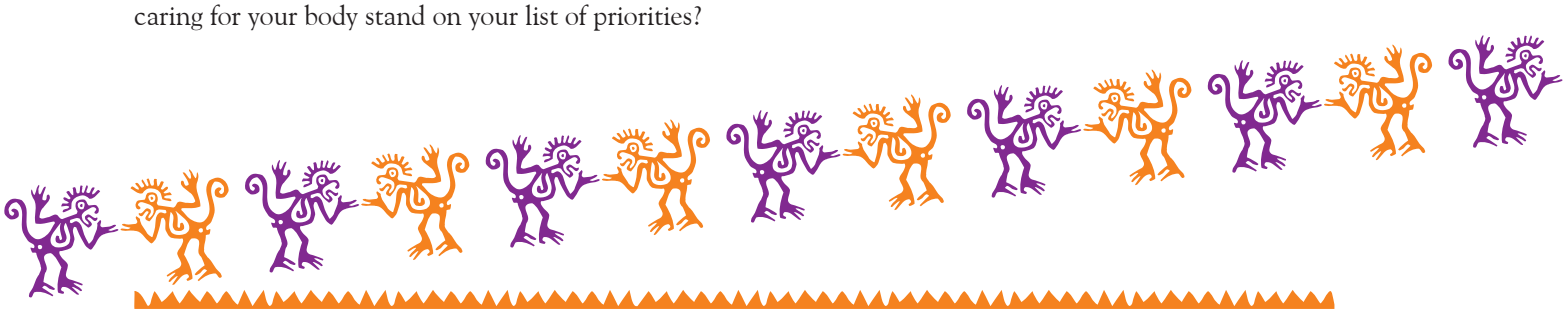
## REFLECT

What are the things in your environment that affect you positively and what affects you negatively? What would your ideal environment be? What can you do to get closer to living in your ideal environment?

Creating new spaces and new conditions within our current spaces allows us to transform our perspective of the world and the way in which we live in it.

### D. Prioritize your time

What is most important to you in terms of how you use your time? Where do your needs, your free time and caring for your body stand on your list of priorities?



57. Virginia Woolf, the famous 20th-century writer, suggested that a private room and an independent pension were indispensable for a woman who wanted to write. Woolf contributed to the debate about the oppression of and discrimination against women. We recommend her long essay, "A Room of One's Own".

## Exercise

Try to remember how you distribute the number of hours in terms of the activities that are mentioned below, per day, per week, and per month, in a typical month. Write your comments on a photocopy of this table:

| Issue | | Hours/Day/ Week/Month | Comments |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. How many days do you work in a week? | | | |
| 2. Hours per day/week/month that you spend working: Meetings (in or out of the office), events, conferences, work chats, replying to official e-mails, workshops, office work, or other activities. | | | |
| 3. Hours per week/month spent on non-remunerated activism. | | | |
| 4. Hours per week/month spent on domestic chores. | | | |
| 5. Hours per week/month spent on your training (as appropriate): school, classes, library, courses, lectures, workshops, diploma courses, preparing for exams, or thesis | | | |
| **6. Personal Care** | *Food:* Hours spent eating per day/week/month<br>How many times do you eat, on an average? __<br>Do you frequently skip any meal in a day or substitute it with junk food? YES __ NO __<br>Which meal? ___ | | |
| | **Exercise:** Number of hours spent on some form of exercise | | |
| | Hours spent per day/month on personal care (having a massage, applying a mask, having your hair cut or your nails done). | | |
| | Number of monthly or annual visits to the doctor for a routine check-up.<br>Number of monthly or annual visits to the doctor for any specific problems. | | |
| | *Rest:* Number of hours/day/week/month spent sleeping or resting. | | |
| | Hours spent per day/week/month on personal development (being with yourself, reflecting, meditating or undergoing any sort of psychological therapy). | | |
| 7. Hours spent per day/week/month on your interpersonal relationships: Family, partner/lover(s), friends, others | | | |
| 8. Hours spent per day/week/month on sexual pleasure (alone or in company) | | | |
| 9. Hours spent per day/week/months on other activities (indicate what they are). | | | |

## REFLECT

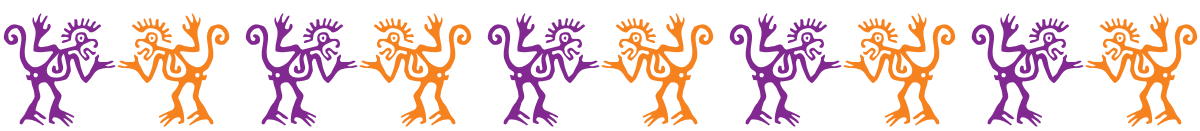
After completing this exercise, think about the following and write down your answers.

1. How do you feel about the way you distribute your time?

2. On what activities or aspects of your life do you spend most of your quality time?

3. What aspects or activities that are a priority for you, are practically absent from your daily routine or are very occasional? Why do you think this happens?

4. How would you design an ideal schedule that would satisfactorily balance the different dimensions of your life? Make two more photocopies of this table. Write the ideal way in which you would like your time and priorities to be distributed on one of the photocopies of the table.



5. Which activities in your daily routine can be restricted so that the actual distribution of time is as close as possible to your ideal?

6. Who is in a position to help you with this?

7. Would you be able to commit to changing your daily routine, at least in terms of one third of your time, to ensure that your life is a little more balanced?

8. What changes do you need to make in the different aspects of your life so that this new distribution of time can become a reality?

### Exercise

Now, using the reference of your ideal distribution of time, complete the second photocopy of the table by working out a redistribution of time that you think is achievable in the short term, with realistic changes that can definitely help you ensure a much more balanced and satisfactory time allocation.

## REFLECT

1. Write down what this redistribution would entail, what you have to do to ensure it, with whom you need to discuss it, and the changes required to achieve it.

Now try to follow your plan step by step. When it becomes difficult, return to your ideal table to see if you are being too ambitious by attempting to bring about a personal transformation in such a short time. Get clarity on the new challenges or obstacles that come in the way of changing your priorities.

2. Look within your organizational or professional space for allies seeking to make the same changes in their lives.

Our work and professional development are a reflection of our empowerment and autonomy and indicate that we have taken our lives in our own hands. However, the desire for professional growth, a social and political commitment, or an affirmation of what gives meaning to our lives may not be the only reasons we spend our time and energy on professional and activist issues. We could also be transferring the need to live for others onto the persons or sectors with whom we work, thus benefiting others to our own cost.

### E. Recognize and validate your achievements and your knowledge

It is important to acknowledge our achievements and triumphs and the different types of knowledge we have acquired. This appreciation helps our relationship with others, strengthens us, and affirms our decisions.
It is important to remember:

- Your assessment of your knowledge and achievements should be based on your own perspective, and not weighed in comparison with others.
- Your knowledge and achievements are measured by how you value them and not how others look at them.
- The efforts you make and your achievements are not isolated events or a result of luck. They constitute a chain of actions that make you what you are; they are a part of your life experience and the decisions you have taken.
- Allow yourself to acquire new knowledge or skills that would help you add dimension to your growth, even if it is not socially expected of you because you are a woman, due to your age or your background, or because you think that you are not capable of developing in these areas, even though you are interested in doing so.

## F. Economic self-determination

> *"For many centuries the handling of money was considered the prerogative of men, women were excluded from it as it was associated with filth and ruin."*[58]

The view was that since women were mothers and pure beings, they should be kept away from any dealings with money, which would taint their purity.

Women who handled money who were considered slaves to their desire and sexuality. So for a long time any woman who handled money or charged for her work, regardless of the nature of service, was believed—without doubt—to be engaged in prostitution.

Wealth in its multiple forms (e.g., electronic money, shares) symbolically represents a power that is used to oppress all that is feminine.

That is why women's emancipation movements have always advocated that women must build their economic independence as a basis for developing emotional and affective independence. When we have greater economic independence, we are able to put an end to the control that others exercise on our autonomy.

However, being economically active and independent does not solve the basic problem. Those who have discovered the advantages of having their own income know that it is not merely about having money but what they do with it that makes the difference. Therefore, it is important that we review the way in which we use and distribute our money, and how we relate to it symbolically.

### REFLECT

- How authorized do you feel to spend the money you earn?
- What criteria do you follow to decide how you spend your money?
- How much of your money do you spend on yourself?
- Who is involved in deciding what you do with your money?
- How do you feel regarding the participation of this person in your decision making?

Without realizing it, gender biases, guilt, or restrictions governed by your own understanding of what an activist should legitimately spend, could be influencing your decisions about your money.

Solidarity, community support practices, and joint social responsibility are key values that guide us in our daily activities as activists and make us feel happy to be a part of a movement. However, without losing this sense of giving and sharing, it is necessary to review your priorities so that the sharing does not translate into your own vulnerability.

58. García Canal, María Inés (2003) *"Género y Dinero en la vieja ecuación de poder"* en: http://www.creatividad feminist.org/articulos/relac_2003_dinero.html

59. Judith Botero E. and Gloria E. Hernández T. *"La construcción de autonomía de las mujeres en la experiencia de decidir sobre el aborto"* at: http://www.terrelibere.org/index.php?x=completa&riga=110

- If your answer is no, can you identify places to which you can run in case of an attack?

- Which parts of these routes represent a danger?

- Is it possible to, once in a while, change the routes that you take regularly? Write down or trace alternative routes.

Home:

Work:

Other:

Can you change unsafe timings to others that pose less of a risk?

_____

_____

_____

_____

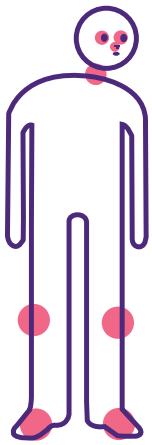
_____

*Step 6: Do not divulge what you know.*

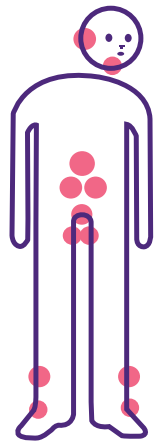
It is better not to let people know that you are familiar with self-defense techniques. Then, if your attacker were someone known to you, he/she would not know how to attack you effectively. It is better to retain the element of surprise.

*Step 7: Identify the most vulnerable parts of the attacker's body.*

The body is divided into primary and secondary zones. Mark these in the figures below and then try to locate them on your body and another person's as well.



The **primary zones** are those, which you can attack more easily and effectively: the knees, feet (if your attacker doesn't have leather or metal capped shoes) the eyes, nose and the throat.



The **secondary zones** are those that you can attack but at the risk of not being so effective: testicles (because this is the area that is protected the most. In any case one should aim at the back of the testicles for the blow to be effective), ears, chin, solar plexus, kidneys, groin, shin and the instep.

*Step 8: Learn how to react to any attack.*

These measures are useful in an aggressive situation:[62]

- Try to remain calm: Reserve your anger and determination to put a stop to the violence.
- Always remain alert: Anticipate the aggressor's move, never be trusting, and always expect the unexpected.
- Ignore what your attacker is saying: He/she could insult you or say things to affect your self-esteem and inhibit your capacity to defend yourself by trying to make you believe that you deserve the aggression.

62. Posada Kubisa, Luisa. (FECHA) *"Pactos Entre Mujeres,"* in *Patriarcado y Sororidad,* at http://www.consorcio.org.mx/documentos/pactos_mujeres.pdf

- Avoid direct confrontation: It is sometimes better to run away (always run in a zigzag pattern and never in a straight line, in case the aggressor has a firearm) than to offer resistance or try to defend yourself.
- Defend and protect yourself: Especially your head and stomach. Put up a fight only if you feel that you will be able to get the aggressor to stop injuring you further. Use all your resources—everything counts—and remember that the objective is to safeguard your integrity.
- Call for help, scream or—if you can—escape: Run to the closest person or house. If it is dangerous to stay where you are, run away, call a neighbor, or seek refuge.

### REFLECT

Learning physical self-defense techniques allows you to develop physical and verbal self-defense skills and the inner strength to be able to use these skills. It also gives you the opportunity to explore the wide spectrum of emotions that well up when you begin to understand the degree of violence you are facing.

## Legal self-defense

### SEE

The law and the judiciary are social constructs that organize the state and bring order to social relations.

As a means of self-defense, the law allows us access to justice and to seek compensation for damages caused. It is important for us to know the law in order to be able to use it to our benefit, at least in terms of the practical aspects.

#### On the international level

It is necessary to make a distinction between legal advancements made at the international level and the national legislation in each country. International law—constituted by pacts, conventions, treaties, declarations, platforms for action, and recommendations—create an ethical framework based on the basic principles that all states undertake to respect and follow as guidelines. This framework is binding on each state, which can be sanctioned for non-compliance.

With regard to human rights, feminist movements have managed to influence international legislation. Certain basic references have been created to incorporate women's rights into national legislation, through specific definitions and obligations, which states must comply with to guarantee the equality and liberty of all women. This process has taken place at different times in different ways. Since equality was initially only relevant to men, one way was to make women's specific needs, based on their gender status, visible.

This was done to recognize that there are specific violations based on one's gender and these are violations of human rights. The effort was to make women visible within the existing legal framework. However, this sometimes led to women being considered as equals only if they exhibited male characteristics, while sexual differences were completely obscured.

Another way, which is not antagonistic to the abovementioned way, was to create legal instruments that, in keeping with the principle of equality of all people, recognize the existence of sexual discrimination against women and create specific obligations to eliminate it. For example, there are instruments that establish criteria for national legislative reforms or policies, which guarantee and implement the laws that are already in existence in each country.

The main international legal instrument in this area is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW),[63] which has been ratified by 185 countries thus far, and in its definition includes violence against women as an act of sexual discrimination, according to the terms expressed by the CEDAW committee in its general recommendation No. 19.

During this process, in order to include the needs and certain specific rights of women, there has been a tendency to separate and break down rights in general. On other occasions, the recognition of these rights has led to the definition of policies and institutions that are specifically aimed at women, and more so at women in certain conditions, such as young women who are at a reproductive age, or in situations of war or poverty.

In this context it is important to keep in mind three features of international law:

1. The definitions and recognition of international legislation are a fundamental reference for the construction of women's rights and their protection in our daily lives.
2. International law creates obligations for states through its mechanisms for making appeals to international bodies, and allows us to report the countries that are violating internationally established rights.
3. The obligations stated in international legislation allow us to know what we can demand and within what frameworks we can develop proposals for further legislation, access to justice, and reparation of damages in our country and locality.

### At the national level

It is necessary to consider some characteristics of the legal system, especially at the national level. In feminist work it is very clear that law consists of more than the norms published in codes and laws. Law and legality also encompass the institutions and people who apply these norms, as well as society and its culture, which recognize and do or do not value these norms.

Generally, the law functions in three interdependent arenas.[64]

63. Text available at: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm
64. *Nuestros cuerpos nuestras vidas:* The Boston Women's Health Book Colective,Plaza & Janes. 2000. España. Pag. 183 y Alda Facio, Cuando el Género Suena Cambios Trae. ILANUD. Costa Rica, 1999.

1. Formal-normative: refers to the formally constituted law, whether in the form of international treaties, the National Constitution, or the regulations of the local police.
2. Structural: includes institutions that create, interpret and apply the law. As institutions, they abide by their own norms. Since laws are applied by people, the structural aspects also include unwritten norms and criteria based on practices that could on occasion be in conflict with or affect the fair implementation of the law.
3. Politico-cultural: refers to unwritten, legally invalid norms that have considerable influence on the way the law is applied. These include customs and beliefs about what is considered legal or illegal and what can be imposed; and even includes knowledge of the law and rights, which determine the reporting of violations.

## THINK

Examples of these components are given below to enable you to reflect on your legal knowledge of issues relating to violence against women.

### Formal-normative component

Women in most countries of the world have a fundamental international legal instrument to protect their right to a life free from violence—the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).[65] This instrument is binding on the states that have ratified it and it is important to know the definitions it provides of discrimination and violence against women, as well as the obligations defined for each state.

Due to the strong influence of this convention, many countries have modified their constitutions to establish legal equality[66] between women and men, and some have included prohibitions against discrimination on account of sex or gender in their constitutions.

By studying the structure of the hierarchy of norms, we can also find national or federal laws that guarantee and implement equality, non-discrimination, and protection to ensure a life free from violence for women. Many laws on equality have prompted the establishment of institutes, ministries, or women's secretariats that implement programs and policies to prevent and address violence against women.[67] Some countries also have laws that create institutions to prevent and sanction discrimination, not only against women, but also on account of other factors, such as age or sexual preference.

65. In the Inter-American region, another legal instrument exists—the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention of Punishment, and Eradication of Violence Against Women, also known as the Convention of Belém do Pará. In Europe, The Organization for Security and Cooperation has a Gender Action Plan that describes the need to promote gender equality and identifies the elimination of the threat of violence against women as an important condition for reaching this goal.
66. It is important not to confuse the concepts of identity with that of equality. Equality established by law means that all people are equal before the State and for all legal purposes, which means there are no blood privileges or privileges of any other sort. In some debates, equality is confused with the elimination of differences in the identity of persons. This is not very different from the concept of equality before the law that maintains that beyond the differences in our social conditions, every person is born with the same rights and the same duties. (For more information see: Ana Rubio (1997), *Feminismo y Ciudadanía. Instituto Andaluz de la Mujer*. Spain.
67. In the last decade, most countries have passed legislation on domestic violence. These norms, although promoted mainly by feminists and women's movements, seek to recognize that the family is constituted by individuals who have human rights, that there are different types of families, and historically the organization of the family unit has legitimized domination on account of sex and age, among other categories. This legislation covers women as specific subjects. Subjects are all persons who are members of a family unit or have familial or matrimonial ties.

In addition, depending on the country, there could also be different federal or provincial legislation; such as penal codes in which discrimination, physical harm, sexual violence, or other forms of violence are classified as crimes and are punishable, even though they have been committed by a family member or someone with whom there is a relationship of trust. Civil legislation stipulates grounds for divorce, and in many cases covers issues of violence, rights, and the obligations of family members, and may or may not affirm the principles of equality and liberty of women.

At the municipal level, as well, there are norms that establish rights and obligations, such as laws governing the municipal police. These often regulate the scope of police intervention in stopping violence against women perpetrated by their partners.

We are referring not only to those norms where the definition of rights and their protection is outlined, but also those that establish the procedures to access justice when rights are violated. Either these are mentioned in the same text as the norm or there are specific codes, such as the code of criminal or civil procedures. It is important to be aware of the type of sanctions applied or the procedures involved in seeking compensation for damages when a right has been violated.

These written norms, approved by authorized state bodies, are a part of the formal-normative component.It is important to be aware of the norms that guarantee our right to a life free from violence so we can seek justice and redress from the right channels.

### Structural component

This component identifies the institutions applying the norms, how these are interpreted in terms of application, and existing unwritten criteria.

The structure of the previous component shows that CEDAW has set up a committee of experts who are responsible for the follow-up and application of its protocols. This committee formally interprets the content of the convention, based on the General Recommendations,[68] which are legal references. It is as important to be familiar with these references, as with the Convention itself.

At the national level, knowing how the judiciary interprets the norms—that is, the criteria for applying the law to citizens—means understanding jurisprudence (jurisprudence is the interpretation of the norm by judges). Jurisprudence gives us an indication of the concepts and convictions that exist—for example—about family and the gender stereotypes that exist within the family unit. It also clarifies the content of rights, such as the right to health, equality, or education. For example, in Mexico until 2006, there was a jurisprudence, which, contrary to the stipulations in international and national law, established that rape in a married couple could not be sanctioned and was merely an abuse of a right. This jurisprudence has already been abolished and now it is recognized that rape—copulation forced by violence or its equivalent—is rape, regardless of the place or type of relationship with the offender.

68. Text available at: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/recomm.htm

Thus, even when a penal code establishes rape as a crime, the interpretation of the code can limit or extend access to justice. Further, sexually discriminatory criteria are often applied.

Just as in the case of international committees and bodies, institutions with authority at the federal, local, and municipal levels have procedural norms for accessing justice. In the case of women, even though the norm or jurisprudence may establish egalitarian criteria, those who are enforcers of the law may limit access to it based on their own beliefs. For example, when a formal complaint is lodged for sexual harassment at the workplace, the authority responsible for registering the complaint often doubts the victim's word. He asks whether there is any possibility that the event was misinterpreted or if the complainant has some motive for revenge. This attitude, shaped by the personal beliefs of those who are in charge of enforcing the law, violates procedural norms and fair treatment standards.

So when we develop strategies to report violations and seek access to justice, it is important for us to consider and understand the criteria for interpretation and application of the norms to be enforced.

In the case of collective actions, it is advisable to consider what is most necessary: changing the law, training law enforcement officers, promoting a new corpus of laws, or, perhaps, all three. However, we need to set priorities for collective action.

### Politico-cultural component

With regard to the politico-cultural component, it is important to be aware of prevailing beliefs on violence against women. For many people and societies, violence against women is seen as legitimate and almost necessary. For others it is standard practice, which is reflected in legislation that does not sanction this type of violence.

These beliefs about gender violence prompt victims to remain silent and not press charges. It may also ensure that aggressors and criminals know beforehand that they are likely to go unpunished, since those responsible for enforcing the law—and society in general—may not penalize violent behavior.

Although many of us are aware of international conventions, we may be unfamiliar with national legislation on violence against women. It is possible that our demands made on the basis of international legislation may not have any national or local references. Sometimes we approach human rights authorities with a complaint (which assumes an administrative sanction by the authority) when what we wish to do is report a crime (which assumes sanctions such as imprisonment of the person committing the crime), resulting in complications and delays in getting justice.

## THINK

As previously mentioned, the above components are related. By clarifying them we aim to broaden the perspective on legal issues and develop better tools and strategies for legal defense.

In addition, the knowledge of our rights and procedures in seeking justice can give us greater security in daily negotiations. Often, it is not required—nor do we wish to—initiate legal proceedings, but we certainly want to restrict abuse and acts of violence that are not considered criminal offences. For example, we are often unaware of a father's obligations to his children, and though it may not be necessary to initiate civil or penal maintenance procedures, we must know how to negotiate with him on what he is expected to contribute. Similarly, when there are acts of violence being committed in a relationship—such as psychological violence—it is not necessary to lodge a criminal complaint and put the person in jail, but it is important to be aware that psychological violence against women could, in extreme cases, constitute a crime. Armed with this knowledge, the person can be confronted to modify the relationship, or administrative bodies contacted to use other forms of State force and help ensure a life free of violence.

Analyzing the judicial perspective allows us to measure the divide between formal equality (as established by the law) and real equality (experienced in daily life). Since discriminatory beliefs against women do exist in society, the principle of equality between men and women should not only be declared in the norm, but concrete steps should be taken in laws, jurisprudence, and in the training of authorities and conduct of social awareness campaigns to eradicate discrimination from our daily lives.

## ACT

Based on this structure of components, ask yourself the following questions so you can assess your knowledge of the legal instruments you can use for your defense. The tips provided here can be applied to your particular context:

1. What international human rights instruments are you aware of?
   You could read up on some international human rights instruments (such as the Universal Declaration of the Convention on the Rights of the Child) and think about the implications these have for women's lives, specifically, and whether there are different implications for men.

2. Of these instruments, which ones do you think have a direct impact and create specific obligations to guarantee a life free from violence for women?
   CEDAW is a part of the Universal Human Rights System. The Inter-American System of Human Rights includes the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention of Punishment, and Eradication of Violence Against Women. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has a Gender Action Plan. It would be interesting to read the preambles of these and other documents so as to get a clearer picture of

why specific conventions and action plans have been necessary to guarantee the rights of women.

3. Does your personal definition of violence against women integrate the elements mentioned in the CEDAW or other international instruments?
   You could first write down your own definition and then compare it with the definitions in these instruments. Remember that these definitions are aimed at specifying the obligations of the State, so it is quite possible that your definitions or those made from the perspective of other disciplines may be more detailed or contain other elements.

4. Are you familiar with the articles in the constitution of your country, which protect you against violence, whether it is in the context of the family, the State, or workplace?
   The articles that refer to equality, non-discrimination, protection within the family, health, public safety, and the safety of legal processes among others, are the articles that establish your right to a life free from violence.

5. Do you know the difference between reporting a crime, filing a lawsuit or lodging a complaint with an administrative authority? Are you aware of what you can expect from each of these?
   If you have doubts, ask a lawyer known to you. Each process has different aims and effects. In general, the penal code defines crimes punishable by imprisonment. However, many matters that relate to the family are legislated in the civil code; for example, the requisites for marriage or divorce. As far as administrative sanctions are concerned, penalties usually take the form of fines or arrests. On some occasions, one single event can lead to trials in each of these areas.

6. Are you aware of the different phases in and the approximate time that a legal process takes when you report a crime, ask for a divorce, or lodge a complaint with an administrative authority?
   We often think that initiating legal proceedings is a quick process that will ensure immediate justice. It is important to be aware of the time that the legal process takes. Keep in mind that the legal process involves presenting proof, coordination with your lawyers, and approaching the court. Whenever you seek legal advice, ask about the time as well as approximate costs involved, so you can take the best decision.

7. Do you have a directory of government and civil institutions that can provide help or guidance in case you find yourself in a situation of violence?
   Many civil and government organizations have directories with details of entities offering specialized services, including those of a legal nature. It is very important that you have the telephone number of at least one of these, should you or a friend need it.

8. Do you have the telephone number of a trustworthy person who can provide legal advice should a violent situation occur?
   Apart from organizations or institutions, you should also know a good lawyer with good references, who can guide you or accompany you, whenever required, even outside office hours.

9. Do you know the quickest way to reach and opening and closing hours of institutions that can provide you with protection in a violent situation?
   Once you have your directory of services, it is important for you to be familiar with their locations. In emergency situations, we are often so confused and shocked that we forget the resources at hand.

10. Do you know how to maintain a record of an act of violence? Such a record could eventually be presented as public evidence; for example, if you report a threat or obtain a medical certificate of injuries.
    A serious act of violence is very often preceded by acts that are not so alarming. Although at that point of time you may not consider it necessary, recording all the facts and presenting them to the pertinent authorities will provide you with evidence of the risk you are under and the danger posed by the perpetrator.

11. Are you aware of the basic documents which you require to initiate a legal process, whether penal or civil? Are these documents in order and accessible to you in case of an emergency?
    The documentation required depends on the nature of the procedure, but in general you will need your birth certificate and the birth certificates of your children, if any; if you are married, your marriage certificate is generally required; and for immigrants, residence permits are typically required. We sometimes store these official documents in different places. It is important to keep them in order and stored in a safe place. Without these, the whole process could be delayed.

12. Do you have anyone close by, who in case of a situation of violence can alert the authorities or help you?
    Often, when facing a situation of violence, we find we are alone. It is important to have an understanding with people you trust, with whom you can also share information (e.g., places offering legal services) so that they can hasten the process or help you through the entire process. This is not only because in a moment of crisis two heads think better; it is also because, when faced with a violent act, it is essential to have someone to count on in terms of personal safety.

13. Have you thought of possible responses or resistance to the misogynistic prejudices harbored by law enforcement agents, who try to dissuade us from seeking legal recourse?
    Misogynistic statements often paralyze and prevent us from seeking legal recourse. All of us have at some point heard the comments and the anecdotes of women who have experienced such situations. Besides openly rejecting such attitudes, you can also use your ingenuity to respond to such statements, with full awareness of your rights (avoid falling into the trap of provocations and violence).

Similarly, having important telephone numbers at hand, familiarizing yourself with the location of help services, preparing cool-headed responses to misogynistic attitudes, or knowing that you can count on someone to accompany you will help when you seek justice.

## REFLECT

- Before acting, it is important to know what you can demand. If you are in doubt, ask for and approach the authorities who will be able to resolve the problem to your satisfaction. This will avoid wasting time dealing with the wrong authorities or initiating proceedings that do not meet your requirements.
- Collectively, it is important to maintain a record of typical cases that will help create awareness and bring any contradictions and legal lacunae to light. It is also important to continue researching and enhancing our knowledge not only of the content of norms, but their interpretation and the criteria for application.
- This information can accompany complaints or denouncements against authorities who do not wish to protect our rights or who violate these rights by their actions. When seeking justice it is important to keep in mind:
  1. Whether, in view of the existing norms, justice can indeed be sought and how?
  2. Whether you have all the facts, background, and information on the time and place, as well as proof and witnesses to prove that one of your rights has been violated, and that you know what you want so the damage can be redressed.
- If possible, approach the authorities in the company of someone with legal knowledge or who can give you moral support. If necessary, and if there are such organizations in your vicinity, seek the support of professional organizations.
- In modern states, it is the law that defines what is protected, how it is protected and how damages are compensated. The law vests corresponding institutions with the authority to ensure that justice is done. The effort is to ensure that our social relations are governed by collective agreements. Therein lies the advantage in knowing and using the law as a tool to guarantee women's human rights.

> *"We must reflect on this world of paradoxes that has been created by man, in which he—and his masculine attributes and needs—have been established as the reference or standard of the human form, positioning the woman as the variant in order to control the enormous power that we as women enjoy in the reproduction of the species. In order to understand the reasons for the oppression of women, we should not lose sight of the fact that the patriarch's view of us as a threat is correct, because if we did decide to exercise our enormous power, we would not simply be talking of sharing power the way men have exercised it, it would instead be a veritable revolution, which would completely change the concept of power."*
>
> *Yadira Calvo*

# VI. Resources

*This chapter contains:*

- Resources relating to specific areas such as one's relationship, work or the area of participation, the street or public spaces
- Resources to draw on in critical situations
- Pages on which you can note down your own resources or reflections

In this section, we highlight some practical tips to help you deal with certain types of violence and specific contexts.

# 1. In a relationship

## A. Keys to a relationship as a couple

A fair relationship between two partners that is free of violence is characterized as follows:

*Support:* It is of fundamental importance to support each other's personal and professional goals, respect their right to feelings, friendships, beliefs, activities, and opinions, as well as to recognize and validate their opinions, decisions, feelings, space, and time.

*Negotiation:* Jointly find solutions to problems that are satisfactory to both parties. Be amenable to giving way without compromising on fundamental issues, and accepting responsibility. In order to negotiate, we need a certain level of self-awareness. It is important to know what we like and do not like, what we want, what interests us and what we need, so that when an agreement is reached, neither party finds itself at a disadvantage and their interests and needs are respected.

*Affection:* This should be demonstrated physically or verbally in such a way that it is not interpreted as a threat or an obligation. Threatening conduct should be avoided; on the contrary, one's partner should be made to feel secure in what he/she says and does.

*Shared responsibilities:* In an equal relationship, domestic chores are divided, and family decisions and the responsibilities of child rearing are shared. Economic decisions are taken together so that the arrangements benefit both parties.

*Respect:* It is of fundamental importance for sexual relations to be based on mutual consent, for sexual and reproductive rights to be respected, and in particular the woman's decisions.

*Communication:* The key to all these elements is communication and creating an environment that promotes the sincere expression of thoughts, feelings, ideas, and needs.

## B. Dialogue within a relationship

Communication within a relationship is always somewhat complex, as it can often be loaded with guilt, fears, resentments, or unfulfilled expectations, and reflections of other significant ties. The following principles can help improve communication and deal with conflicts.

*Principle One:* Your life, your physical and psychological integrity and that of your partner are limits that should never be overstepped, though often in the heat of the moment we may tend to cross them. However, in such cases it is better to remove oneself from the situation rather than having to face the consequences. It is always better to discuss or negotiate things in a calm frame of mind.

*Principle Two:* The way we face a particular situation of conflict very often determines how it is resolved. Conflict is intrinsic to human relationships and in fact offers us a lesson in peace, so it is always better to face conflict than to avoid it. To do this we need to equip ourselves with certain resources that will place us on an equal platform in a conflict situation, respecting our interests and needs, as well as those of our partner.

An important tool is to use the first person when something hurts or bothers us in our relationship. Communicating a message using I is not easy, as we have learned to face situations of conflict by not acknowledging the idea, interest, need, or validity of another person's judgment. This way of facing conflict, which nullifies the other person, is called violence and provokes a similar reaction in the other party, leading inevitably to an escalation that then becomes difficult to handle.

Expressing something by using *I* communicates how I feel about a specific action, and what specific steps I propose to end this problem. I do not make personal accusations, I do not ridicule or generalize about the other person, and I avoid putting him/her in the defensive. By speaking in *I*, without converting the phrase into a veiled accusation, I show honesty and confidence in the other person, thus boosting their self-esteem, and helping them to open up.[69]

Here is an example of how this tool works:

**I see …** (Once the issue that is bothering us has been identified, we start a dialogue that describes the situation as clearly as possible. At times we tend to beat around the bush, making it difficult for the other person to understand that he or she is hurting or bothering us, and therefore it is important for us to clearly identify the issue)

> *"I can see that there are issues with the housekeeping. Sometimes more than a week goes by with the house dirty, the plants drying out …"*

**I feel …** (We should explain how the situation makes us feel. Instead of blaming the other person we could talk about what is hurting and affecting us.)

> *"It infuriates and upsets me that the house isn't always clean and tidy…when I look for something I can't find it. I don't like a dirty house and I don't want to feel that I am the only person responsible for keeping it clean."*

69. Aprenderh, (S/F), "La Zanahoria, Manual de Educación en Derechos Humanos para Maestras y Maestros de Preescolar y Primaria", Aprenderh, Acción pro Educación en Derechos Humanos, A.C., Querétaro, Mexico pp. 148-149.

**I think …** (This is our interpretation of the problem. This is done in a non-accusatory manner, avoiding the projection of our perspective as the absolute truth and communicating what we feel are the reasons for the conflict)

> *"I think that housework is something we should both share so that neither of us takes on too much and the house is kept clean."*

**I would like …** (This is our proposal, which is open to improvement or modification.)

> *"I'd like us to share these chores. I can give you some ideas as to how this can be done in a simple manner, without becoming too much of a burden and we can share some tasks respecting each others timings and possibilities."*

## C. Finding a life beyond your partner

We often tend to force our insecurities and worries on our partner, which they are unable to resolve even if they want to or may use to dominate us. This creates a relationship of dependency, which stop us from identifying when a relationship is harming us and when it is necessary to end it for our partner's or our own good. One way to resolve this is by identifying and engaging in activities that strengthen our individuality and give us the resources to challenge our dependence on our partner. We propose that you:

- Make a list of all the activities that you can do without your partner and which give you pleasure (try to list more than five). If you cannot identify any or there are only a few, think of activities that you enjoy and should not be practiced with your partner.
- Think of whether you are able to engage in these activities with the desired frequency or what is keeping you from doing so.
- Set a weekly target to engage in at least one of these activities, aiming to add one new activity each month.
- Give yourself a whole day or half a day free from work, family, partner, and friends. On this day wake up as late as you wish, eat what you really want, go to the cinema, take a long bath, or do something else that you really enjoy.
- Write down a list of activities that you could do to feel good should your relationship break up, the people you would like to have close by, and the changes in your life that would help.

# 2. In the workspace or space for participation

## A. Improving work conditions

***It is important to have spaces to deal with the experiences and internal conflicts that arise during the course of the development of projects.***

These spaces can be used to comment on work dynamics, the tensions that are generated, experiences in implementing projects, or any personal situations that may be affecting the work. For this to be effective, it is important for everyone to participate voluntarily to deal with and resolve conflicts.

***It is of fundamental importance to have social security.***

We know how difficult it is for organizations to maintain financing, but there are several ways in which the lack of social security can be compensated: take a collective medical insurance to cover medical expenses, make arrangements with organizations that have an in-house doctor to attend to the members of your group, set up a savings fund to provide a provisional source of income in case a person is unable to work or leaves the organization, or set up a fund to pay child daycare fees. Activities aimed at promoting health can also be established within the organization; for example, fix dates for medical check-ups—such as the Pap Smear test—and go in a group to get it done; allocate time for recreational activities such as parties and visits to the cinema; and make it obligatory for everyone to take at least one day off in a week and two weeks of vacation in a year.

***Do not measure your social commitment by your level of saturation in your work.***

Sacrificing personal work for the sake of the ideal image we have of ourselves as activists and women who live for others not only harms us, but also creates tension within the organization and problems in the way we work.

***Establish clear timings and working hours.***

It is important for each group to ensure that it is realistically possible to achieve the projects and targets so they do not end up harming the physical and mental well being of the people implementing them. It is important to allocate work according to the capacities of the organization, individuals, and workloads. If this is not considered carefully, it will be difficult to meet the objectives and respect the rights that we are working for.

***The organization's resources should be fairly distributed***

This should be done according to the abilities and responsibilities of each individual. It is unfair and incorrect for a person to be inadequately paid on account of being a woman or a younger person even if he/she has the same responsibilities as an older person or male colleague.

Fair distribution of resources can also contribute to reducing violence.

## B. Self-care promoted by groups or organizations[70]

It is important to promote these protection- and care-related systems:

- Strengthening work teams
- Appropriate professional training
- Reviewing and developing those aspects of people's personal history that could affect professional performance
- Periodic external monitoring and follow-up of work teams
- Building, strengthening, and maintaining social and professional support networks
- Transforming work processes such as rotation of personnel or change in responsibilities before burnout sets in.
- The clear definition of tasks and results expected in the execution of these tasks, which are in keeping with real possibilities, and incorporating mechanisms for recognition and appreciation of work completed.

These few points offer a broad idea of how organizational and collective support can be developed and how this complements the process for self-care and emotional strengthening.

### THINK

- You have the right to protect your integrity and your mental and physical health.
- You have the right to work in conditions that contribute positively to your quality of life.
- You have a responsibility that requires knowledge, attitude, and the ability to provide quality attention. This means that you should enjoy the support of your institution to perform your duties in an effective manner.
- You have the right to receive feedback and support from individuals and groups in a confidential, reliable, and supportive space.
- You have the right to live in a way that ensures congruence between what you practice and preach at the personal and organizational levels.

## C. Sexual harassment at the workplace[71]

- Always keep in mind that a woman who faces sexual harassment is not guilty. It is the person harassing her who is committing a crime.
- Write down everything that is happening and keep accurate records of places, times, types of incidents, witnesses, and other useful data to prove and report harassment.

70. Based on Jessica MacDonald (2004), *"Salud Mental y Violencia Intrafamiliar,"* Ministry of Health, Costa Rica and Pan-American Health Organization, San José, Costa Rica, pp. 39-54.
71. Taken from *"Nuestros Cuerpos, Nuestras Vidas"* (Our Bodies Ourselves), The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, Editorial Plaza Janés, Spain, 2000, Page 177.

- Break your silence and seek help from colleagues at work. You will find other people who have been harassed or at least some who will be empathetic and willing to take action with you.
- Collective action and a joint statement of admonishment will strengthen your position.
- Approach a women's organization to support your action, although yours may also be one.
- Make it clear to the harasser (male or female) as clearly, directly and explicitly as possible that you are not interested in his/her attention.
- Evaluate your options. What type of action is most convenient for you? What are the possible results and risks involved in each action?
- Do not ever leave your workplace unless it is on account of some justifiable action connected with the incident you are fighting.
- If your harasser is your boss, never sign a letter of resignation, or accept any type of change in work conditions or position.

# 3. In the street or public places

There are many forms of harassment and they are committed so often that it is impossible to actively fight all of them. It is important to prioritize those that hurt and violate us the most.

After identifying them, think of the easiest, most effective ways in which you would like to respond, ensuring that your response does not provoke more violence, because it is unwise to respond to an insult at the risk of being physically harmed or assaulted.

Some practical ways to respond:

- No matter how we react, always try to offer an unexpected response. For example, since women tend to become quiet when attacked, respond, instead, without fear and firmly—if we scream or hit out (assess your position before doing so), the aggressor stops seeing us as victims and normally stops his attack. It is important that we do not come across as victims but as equals who are capable of defending themselves.
- When pinched, slapped on the bottom, or groped at (especially in crowded places), shout loudly at the aggressor to stop touching you. When you make it public, he/she will most likely stop and claim that he/she has not done anything. You could also elbow the perpetrator or stamp his/her foot if you feel safe enough to do so. Whenever applicable remember these tips; for instance, if you are traveling by train at night, find a place in the first few carriages as they are closer to the driver from whom you can seek help. You can also pull the emergency chain to let it be known that someone is harassing you, though you will be directly confronting your aggressor. However, it may be worthwhile to do so because you would be making the aggression public and the aggressor will be punished.

- Ignore or laugh at exhibitionists, making them realize that their actions have no effect. They are almost always highly insecure people. Saying something regarding the insignificance of their action or their body disconcerts them. You could also make comments to others, saying:

  Look at what he's showing us!
- To avoid being followed or touched in a lonely or dark place, always walk against traffic, do not turn a corner close up against the wall, walk with a firm and confident step, and remain alert. To get out of an emergency situation go into a shop, run, start talking loudly so someone will hopefully hear you, or knock on the door or ring the bell of a house.
- If your attacker is no longer anonymous and repeats the attacks, try to report him/her, and describe him/ her to various people. It also helps to change your route or get someone to accompany you when you go out.

# 4. In case of a sexual attack

## How to react to sexual aggression[72]

- It is most important to keep calm. In this type of situation, some women see things as if they were watching a film; this allows you to distance yourself and think about how to defend yourself.
- Before reacting, try to think of the most appropriate way to defend yourself. You can fight, offer no resistance, or run away. Everything depends on the options before you.
- If you cannot put up a fight, the most appropriate thing is to have everything end as soon as possible. Remember, that your life is much more important than what is happening.
- Resisting forcibly can be dangerous (especially if the rapist is armed); remember that you do not need to nor should you risk your physical integrity.
- What you must try to do is observe all possible details, as this will ensure you are more certain of the facts and have the required information when you decide to report the attack.

## When everything is over[73]

- Never blame yourself for what happened; the rapist is the only person responsible.
- Talk to someone who will listen and understand what you are going through: friends, family, professionals, or women's associations. All of them can help. Find someone you trust to accompany you when you report the attack. You are not alone: seek psychological (and if necessary physical) support, as this will help you get over the incident more quickly and pay a lower personal price.
- It is important that you report the attack as soon as possible and do not wash yourself until the pelvic

72. Op. cit pp. 186-185.
73. Ibid.

vaginal examination is done. Take your time, but try to get to a hospital or doctor as soon as possible, for an examination (so that necessary evidence such as semen, pubic hair, as well as a statement of your physical and emotional state can be collected), treatment of injuries, prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, and information on HIV/AIDS.

Make an effort to ensure that this incident does not change your life radically. Go back to everyday life and familiar places, and do not let it change the way you live.

Never forget: you are worthy of help no matter how you responded to the rape.

## After a rape[74]

Understanding some common reactions after a rape can help you recognize your own responses and realize it is a process experienced by many others as well.

1. Some immediate reactions might be numbness or skepticism, making you seem calm and rational or extremely nervous, scared, and disorganized.

2. In the second phase it is common to feel physical pain due to contusions, genital injuries, nausea, or stomach aches. You might also feel depressed, angry, frightened, humiliated, or have sleep-related problems. Try to find friends, family members, or advisors to help you through this period as you learn to externalize your feelings.

3. In the third phase you may go into a period of "calm after the storm", which may last weeks, months, or years. During this time you may feel the trauma has passed, but it is only a period of maturing, which, unfortunately, does not mean that the trauma has been overcome.

   Though you seem to have forgotten the incident, suddenly something happens—a joke about rape, a pregnancy test, or a court appearance—and once again you feel you are losing control of your life, as you felt during the rape.

4. In the fourth and final phase you are finally able to discuss your deepest feelings with others. Many women who speak during the initial crisis prefer to discuss the rape again. Similarly, there are some who join support groups to interact with those trying to overcome a similar experience. Though women can lose faith in the safety of their environment after a rape, it is also possible for them to regain a strong sense of themselves in the world.

74. Ibid.

# 5. Crises

A crisis is a temporary state of disorder and disorientation mainly characterized by the inability of a person to manage certain situations (emotionally and cognitively), by utilizing the usual methods for resolving problems and obtaining a positive or negative result.

The individual going through a crisis finds himself/herself at a turning point. Regardless of the type of crisis, the event is emotionally significant and represents an important change in the person's life. The person is faced with a problem in which the capacity to adapt fails and the usual defense mechanisms do not work. The problem is too big to be dealt with, so the person is in a clearly unbalanced state of mind. As a result the person experiences greater stress and worry, making it all the more difficult to find a solution.

## Psychological first-aid in crisis situations[75]

Some psychologists have developed crisis intervention techniques and strategies to prevent emotional disorientation, which even those not necessarily trained as psychologists or therapists can use to help people close to them.

A crisis is a response to events that compromise one's emotional or physical stability and is experienced as a painful state. Strong responses are often required to help relieve a person of discomfort and recover balance and emotional stability. If this happens there is a good chance the crisis can be overcome and the person is able to learn to use new adaptive responses that can help in the future. It is also possible that the person may be in a better mental and emotional state than prior to the crisis.

In a crisis situation, it is advisable to follow these steps and respond immediately:

1. Empathize with the person's feelings. When starting an intervention during a crisis it is important to listen to how the person visualizes the situation and communicates it. Ask the person to speak while you listen carefully to what happened (the facts), observe the reaction of the person to the event (feelings) and try to identify some channels of thought. It is of fundamental importance that the person feels listened to, accepted, understood, and supported, as this helps in reducing the intensity of stress and the pain of loneliness, as a first step.

2. Analyze the various aspects of the problem in the immediate past, present and immediate future. The immediate past throws light on the events that led up to the state of crisis (for example, the death of a loved one, unemployment, physical wounds, or separation from a loved one). Finding out about the present situation involves asking who, what, when, where and how. The immediate future involves an evaluation

75. Extracted and adapted from a text of Juan Carlos García Ramos *"Modelo para Intervenir en Crisis: Enfoque Terapéutico de Urgencia y Breve"* at: http://www.psicocentro.com/cgi-bin/articulo_s.asp?texto=art59001

of short-term repercussions, including the possible difficulties for the person and his/her loved ones.

3. Evaluate possible solutions. Identify alternate solutions to the person's immediate and short-term needs. This process also helps identify obstacles to specific solutions.

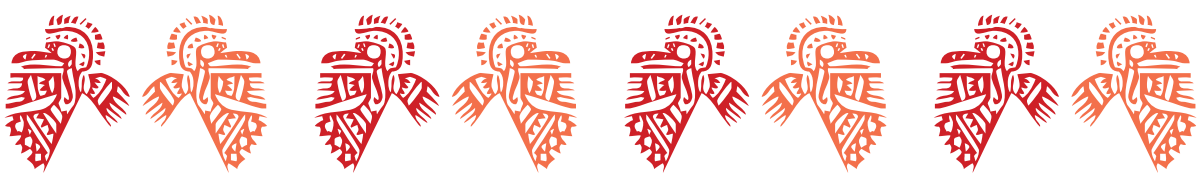
4. Help in taking concrete steps. Help the person take action and be proactive.

5. Follow-up to check on progress. Plan subsequent steps and establish a procedure to monitor the process and progress of rehabilitation as closely as required so you can provide feedback or offer support in the future.

# 6. Design a personal safety plan[76]

Being ready with a plan for emergency situations means having an organized strategy to fall back on in case it is needed. If you do not have one yet, do consider the following points:

- Identify the source of danger and its imminence.
- Find a safe place where you feel protected from other people or from yourself. This place could be a safe house, the house of a friend or family member, or within your own house. It should be a space where you feel good and have privacy.
- Have a list of telephone numbers at hand, so you can call for help in a crisis situation or when you feel your life is in danger. If you do not have a telephone, find a way of sending a signal to a neighbor or informing a friend.
- Have documents, medicines, and other objects at hand that might be needed in an emergency.
- If there are children or people who depend on you, check to see whether they are in danger and seek alternate solutions for their safety.
- Build a support network.
- Share with others what you need to fight an attack. This means identifying people you completely trust in a situation of crisis, such as a friends, relatives, therapists, or help centres. Likewise, if the source of danger is directly related to your work environment, then it is important that you share this with colleagues. You should express your fears and jointly seek alternatives to manage the situation.



76. Adapted from María Cecilia Claramunt (1999) *"Ayudándonos para ayudar a otros: guía para el auto cuidado de quienes trabajan en el campo de la violencia interfamiliar", Serie Género y Salud Pública 7,* Pan-American Health Organization, *Programa Mujer, Salud y Desarrollo,* San José, Costa Rica, pp. 71-73

# Diary of vital strengths

# Annexure

## Project Background

In 1999 and 2000 Elige[77] and Grupo de Educación Popular con Mujeres (GEM) developed an intergenerational project, which provided a meeting point for feminists of different generations.[78] It also created a space where young women activists from different organizations and states of Mexico could get to know each other and exchange their experiences.

A group of young people who participated in the process and were concerned about the increase in violence against women in the country; in particular, the violence faced by women activists, examined the possibility of carrying out joint actions to strengthen and support each other. One of the basic concerns was that the feminist and women's movements are normally unable to articulate their needs and respond in a coordinated, consistent manner to violent situations faced by activists within the movement itself. It also became clear that activists generally deny any possibility of being the objects of violence.

To offer some alternatives and contribute to the struggle to eliminate gender violence and violence against women, Elige promoted the project, *Eliminating gender violence: a proposal by young women.* The objective was to generate and strengthen empowerment processes among young women activists by providing access to tools for self-care and self-defense at the physical, psychological, and legal levels. The initiative was aimed at young women activists in Chihuahua, Yucatán, and the Federal District in Mexico.

The first phase of the project was jointly carried out in 2001 with three other organizations: the Sexology, Psychology and Educational Unit for Personal Development in Yucatán (UN ASSE, AC-Yucatan); Alternatives for Community Development in Chihuahua (ALCADECO, AC-Chihuaha); and Sista to Sista (NY-USA). This phase involved the development of a reference framework to deepen reflection on the issue of violence faced by young women activists, and the design of a series of initial resources to combat and address the violence. The workshops held in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, the Federal District of Mexico, and Mérida, Yucatán, analyzed the violence faced by young women activists in these places. A directory of young activists was also compiled in these states. During the process, another organization, *the Casa Promoción Juvenil AC,* headquartered in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, joined the movement to ensure continuity of the project in its state.

The second phase of the project launched in 2002, and focused on designing and conducting workshops for the development of self-care and self-defense resources, in the Federal District and Ciudad Juárez.

The first few years of the project led to the development of a self-help manual for self-care and self-defense of women activists. The first printed version[79] was widely distributed to women activists of all generations with the aim of finalizing a pilot version incorporating user opinions and feedback. After reading it, many women realized that self-care and self-defense were not issues that concerned young activists alone: the same issues were faced by women of all generations.

77. Based on Jessica MacDonald (2004), *"Salud Mental y Violencia Intrafamiliar,"* Ministry of Health, Costa Rica and Pan-American Health Organization, San José, Costa Rica, pp. 39-54.
78. http://www.laneta.apc.org/generacionesfeministas/der.html
79. The authors of the first version are Marina Bernal and Marusia Lopez, 2003.

In 2004, inputs resulting from the application of various tools and workshops were analyzed and incorporated in this version of the manual. While identifying the resources available to face violent situations, this manual highlights self-care and self-defense options for young women and activists.

Based on the feedback received and the presentation of a draft proposal in different national and international spaces, a re-edited version of the manual was proposed. Artemisa—an interdisciplinary group working on gender, sexuality, youth, and human rights—and Elige took over the task of reworking key features to give it a broader focus. This included interviews with different generations of activists, integrating new content to ensure that the manual would not limit itself to the situation in Mexico, and incorporating the experience of women activists at a more regional level. This publication is the English translation of this joint effort and has been adapted for a global readership.

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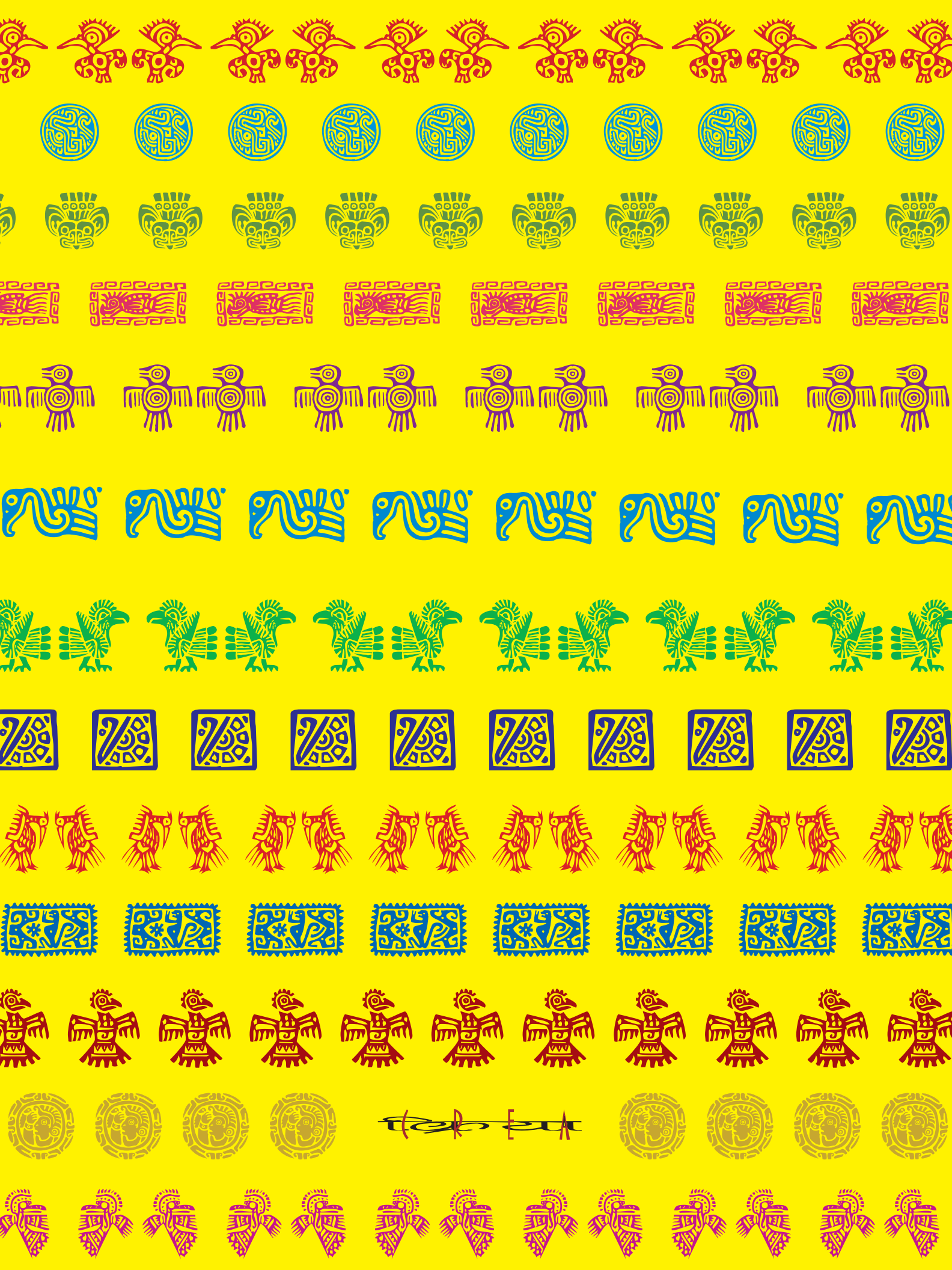
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