

AS WOMEN DEFENDERS, HOW DO WE FACE **OUR FEARS** IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT?

virtual *Feminist* dialogue



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ALUNA

ACOMPANAMIENTO PSICOSOCIAL

Aluna Acompañamiento Psicosocial, A.C.

Yosemite 45, of. 2
Col. Nápoles, Del. Benito Juárez
03810 México City (México)
www.alunapsicosocial.org
www.facebook.com/alunapsicosocial



JASS Mesoamerica

Tlaxcala 69,
Col. Roma Sur, Del. Cuauhtémoc
06760 Mexico City (Mexico)
<https://justassociates.org/es/jass-mesoamerica>
www.facebook.com/jass.meso/



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Authors

Alda Facio, JASS Mesoamerica
Clemencia Correa, Aluna Acompañamiento Psicosocial

Key Contributors

Ana María Hernández, Ana Silvia Monzón, Analía Penchaszadeh, Anarella Vélez, Anya Victoria Delgado, Aracely GS, Cecilia Trinidad, Daysi Flores, Dilcia Zavala, Gilda Rivera, Isa Jodar, Jeannette Asencio, Liduvina Méndez, Lucía Morán, Magda, Malena de Montis, María Teresa Zúñiga, Mariela Arce, Mary Bolt G., Marlyn Krol, Martha Figueroa, Marusia López, Patricia Ardón, Patricia Orozco, Roxana Arroyo, Sato, Shi Alarcón, Valerie Miller, Verónica Aparcama, Violeta Pérez Gálvez, Yamileth Molina, Yésica Sánchez, and Zayda Treminio

Design

Medios Comunes

Proofreading (Spanish Version)

Pere Perello Nomdedeu

Translation

Laura Elliott

Proofreading (English Version)

Alda Facio, JASS Mesoamerica

SI NO TUVIERAS
MIEDO
¿QUE HARÍAS?

"If you weren't afraid,
what would you do?"

Image from graffiti shared by Ana Silvia

INTRODUCTION

"We find ourselves facing the daily fear of our realities and we are afraid to get closer to the center of the most profound part of our life, which, at the same time, is far away from our own existence."¹

Still moved after rereading what participants expressed and seeing how personal stories have been spun together to become a collective story of fears and resistance, we have opened ourselves to assembling a dialogue on the subject of fear. Aiming to harbor all the words, feelings, and reflections that have nurtured it and to strengthen ourselves, individually and collectively, we start by visiting the words of one of our dialogue participants:

*"Fear has gone about establishing itself in the 'intimate world' of our existence, which includes the psyche, feelings, affections, attitudes, intuition, our self-worth, self-esteem, material conditions, and psychological conditions that come about from the multiplicity of the power relations that we experience in our patriarchal cultures and societies. And therefore, it is so important to help one another as women and girls to recognize these elements that have power over us."*²

The dialogue began with the analysis of what fear was to ensure that, as participants, we all had a similar understanding when referring to it. The idea was to dedicate time to finding a common perception of fear to then talk about how it affected us and in what ways we have faced it.

This first part of the dialogue made us understand that there are many types of fear and that, because of this, the way that it impacts us and how we face it depends on the specific type of fear that we are referring to. This is why we decided to organize the piece in five sections. In the first, we'll share some of the dialogue participants' responses to the question: "What is fear?" The second is centered on some of the types of fear that were addressed during the dialogue. In the third, we analyze fear as a form of social control, and we see its effects on our lives in the fourth; while the fifth section is about how participants have faced their fears. We end with a series of conclusions about the importance of not ever losing hope.

During the dialogue, we realized that talking about fear could make us feel afraid, but that getting in touch with it would allow us to go into the deeper part of our beings in order to recognize ourselves and strengthen ourselves. Dialoguing with defenders from different countries and of different ages, ethnicities, and cultures who have varied experiences, educations, skills, and jobs allowed us to identify that, despite our differences, we all experience diverse kinds of fear and we have all been able to overcome many of them. We were able to create a dialogue based on our lives, which was expressed in images, reflections, and even poetry that provide evidence of our marvelous capacity to build hope, day by day, in order to transform the horrors of our patriarchal societies.

¹ Clemencia, 1987 undergraduate thesis

² Malena de Montis



*"Nothing in life is to be feared,
it is only to be understood"*

We were also able to share about the moments when we overcame a fear, and, as a result, we were able to create collective knowledge that can help us untangle ourselves from the patriarchy and strengthen our methods for facing fear in contexts where there is a great deal of violence.

Throughout the dialogue, there were many questions that came up about what fear is and how we face it, especially when positioning it within patriarchal societies and in contexts of sociopolitical violence, and when the subjects facing this fear are women defenders who have to face the daily violence against our feminine and feminist selves because of our gender, in addition to this widespread violence. In response, we attempted to create a fabric of ideas and testimonies about our fears throughout this document in order to see ourselves reflected in them and to then be able to continue constructing paths of resistance and hope.

WHAT IS FEAR?

There are varied definitions and interpretations of fear from the biological, psychological, and social spheres. The most standard definition, found in any dictionary, tells us:

<<. “Fear or dread is an emotion characterized by an intense sensation, usually unpleasant, caused by the perception of danger, real or assumed, in the present, future, or even the past. It is a primary emotion that results from the natural aversion we feel when facing a risk or a threat, and it is evident in all animals, including human beings.”³

We think that while fear is an emotion and, therefore, a subjective fact, there are also internal and external conditions that turn it into an objective fact showing us that there really are events that can undermine our integrity. Fear is associated with something that can harm us; it is associated with the line between life and death—between what we can do and what we cannot do—it is a feeling that, for its complexity and depth, has historically been used to control.

Therefore, fear does not arise in isolation from a cultural, historical, sociopolitical, or educational context; to the contrary, it is created, recreated, established, and internalized from and in these spheres, which, ultimately, are the roots of our own personal and collective stories.

Fear is a painful feeling, an emotion that arises in the face of a real or imaginary danger, which exercises “power over us” that conditions our attitudes about life, but from a positive side, it is also true that “fear is something learned that can be unlearned. While it can immobilize us and gain strength, it also creates resistance and transgressions. And the transgressions we carry out as feminists are a way of putting into practice our unlearning of fear. Fear is like a “gem” (as Buddhists would say) that facilitates our understanding it in order to overcome it.”⁴

Without denying the biological evidence that fear is a physiological survival and defense mechanism that was developed to allow individuals to quickly and effectively respond to adverse situations, the assertion that fear as something learned can be unlearned, is very fitting, as even though fear is biologically natural, what we are afraid of is, indeed, something learned in relation to our own backgrounds and experiences. We learn to be afraid of certain people, objects, or settings and to not be afraid of others. So, it is obvious that we can also learn to not be afraid of these people, objects, or settings such as we do as feminists each time we transgress patriarchal mandates upon identifying them. Moreover, we know that even if we are afraid, we have the mechanisms to face these fears.

“Fears are intimate constructions and talking about them can make us feel afraid. For me, they are three-dimensional historical constructions (mind-body-energy) that are part of our private lives; besides our loves, there is nothing more intimate than our fears. I believe that they show up in many ways and with different faces: from self-sufficiency and selflessness to aggression and careless treatment of others. I believe that one of the main bases of our illnesses, our internal conflicts, and our conflicts with other people are our fears.”⁵

³ http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miedo#Enfoques_sobre_el_miedo

⁴ Malena de Montis

⁵ Mariela

There are many fears, related to different stages of life that are experienced with varied content and according to the traumatic events that we have been through. Some establish themselves, others are reproduced, others are dispelled, and still others remain hidden and emerge when we least expect it—these are fears that appear in our contexts. There are also inherited fears:

“My greatest fear is a sort of ancestral burden that is not mine; since I was a girl, I have carried fears of abandonment, rejection, and loneliness. They are the fears that were inherited and that reproduce themselves in my cells, that are so rooted in the stories of my female ancestors, of my grandmother and my mother, that are very difficult to heal. These fears are associated with very profound sorrows—they stand in the shadows of those that I have to deal with every day, and they are present. While, on a mental level, I understand that these burdens are not mine, they appear within my body, where they have been engraved.”⁶

Another fundamental aspect that we cannot lose sight of is that *“fears are gendered. So, without underestimating the dangers of the context and the increase in the multiple types of misogynistic violence, generally, constructed fears are an important part of patriarchal thought, especially for us as women; they are rose-colored fears with artificial fragrances that are very nicely wrapped in colorful papers; they are fears that poison us and make us see ghosts, both by day and by night, that paralyze us and weaken us in our paths toward change, toward solidarity, sorority, trust among women, self-worth, and personal and collective fulfilment.”⁷*

Likewise, *“fear is one of the feelings that arises most in our process of raising awareness. Contextualizing our fears from our position as undervalued women in frightening societies allows us to understand them in the different spheres of our lives: fear of getting angry, fear of setting boundaries, fear of expressing our desires or asking for something, fear of expressing our dissensions, fear of taking on challenges, fear of being successful or of being perceived as successful, even fear of laughing or of simply enjoying.”⁸*

Nor should we forget that *“fear is a social construction as well as a patriarchal construction as associated with the feminine, with women. In opposition, bravery is praised, which is typically masculine. It is also a construction of class, because clearly, in these economically hierarchal societies, fears are not the same if you have money and resources compared to if you do not. The fear of a rich person might be to not be able to swap out his or her car for the latest model, while that of a poor person is not having money to eat the next day. This is cartoonish, but it’s the idea. Fears also have cultural characteristics; in some cultures, people are afraid of things that don’t have the same significance or meaning in others. And it is constructed according to one’s age: we are not afraid of the same things or situations when we are girls as when we are adolescents or adults.”⁹*

7 Mariela

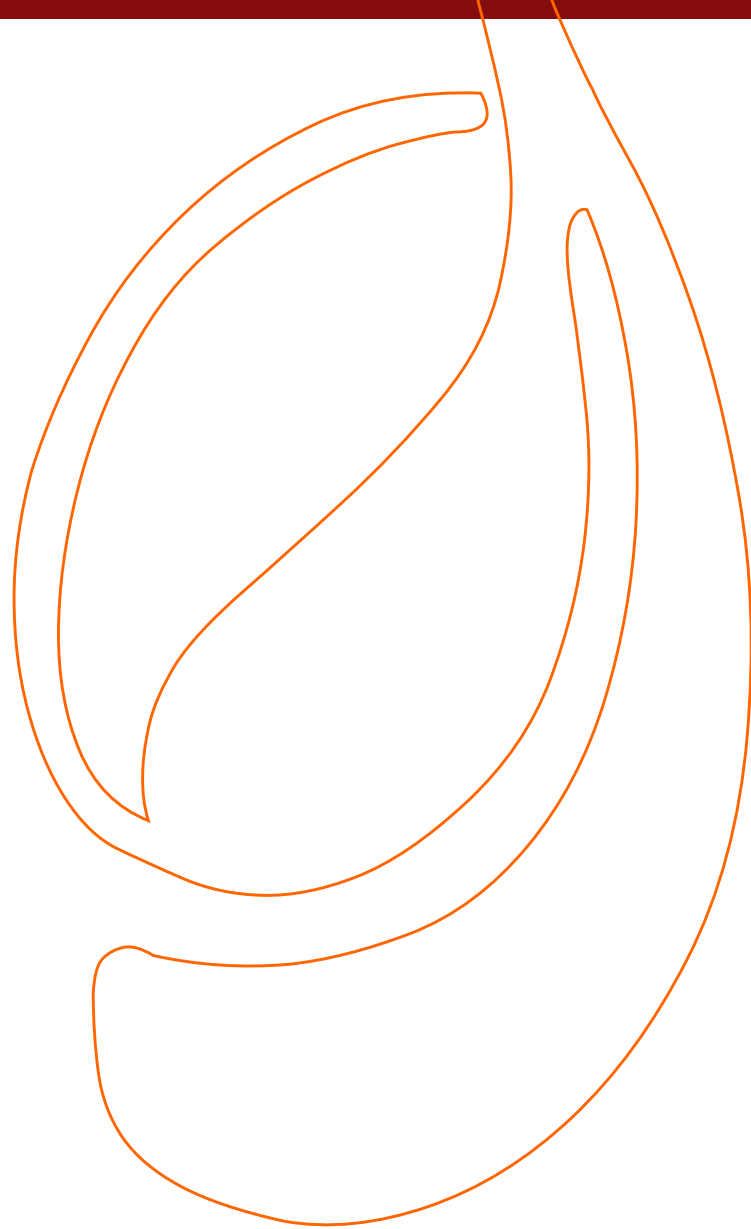
8 Jeannethe

9 Ana Silvia Monzón

While it's true that, as women, we face fears differently according to our age, social condition, resources, and more, this does not lessen the fear. The sorority among women that we learn from feminism has taught us that we should not undervalue the fears of other women and girls just because they are not the fears we suffer from personally. Many women from wealthy classes and/or from classes with political power live in fear of being killed or of their children being abused or kidnapped, and these are fears just as much as the fear of not having anything to feed your loved ones. There are millionaire women who live with the fear of losing their beauty, as it is why they have what they have: their husbands or their social positions. Many middle-class women in the United States are afraid of losing their houses or jobs or getting sick and not having health insurance. There are very empowered women and even female human rights activists who, conversely, live with fear of their husbands or with fear of making them feel inferior for being the empowered women that they are.

It is obvious that what we are afraid of will be different depending on our social class, ethnicity, age, disabilities, etc. It is not the same to walk on the street as a white woman as it is as a black or an indigenous woman, as a woman with sight or as a blind woman, as a young woman or as an old woman; it will also depend on the country that we live in, because a country with an authoritarian or militarized government creates more fear than a more democratic government, although both create fear due to their patriarchal and misogynistic characteristics.

"At present, a fear that comes over me at times are the advances of fundamentalist forces in our societies and the uncertainty they cause in our daily lives. Yesterday in Nicaragua, for example, First Lady and Secretary of Government Communications Rosario Murillo¹⁰ and Cardinal Miguel Obando unveiled a (life-size) replica of the traditional nativity scene and a copy of 'the way of life' in these times. The purpose of all of this was to make the argument that we should lead austere lives, withdraw in these times and be docile before Jesus."¹¹



Fear is created and expressed in a particular social context, in individual and social stories and experiences that make its content specific to each person and to each collective. The violent social-political contexts in which most of us as women defenders experience our different patriarchies, makes us all afraid of those who have power over us. And this is not a matter of baseless fears, because throughout our lifetimes many of us have lost fellow women human rights defenders or we have female friends who have been raped, tortured, murdered... These are all fears caused by acts of terror.

¹⁰ Rosario Murillo was the First Lady and Secretary of Government Communications when Patricia Orozco shared this reflection. Currently, at the time of publication, her position is First Lady and Vice President.

¹¹ Patricia Orozco

*"I was never an easily-frightened girl, or, at least, I didn't identify my fears easily; and this caused the people around me (teachers, aunts and uncles, grandmothers, partners, classmates, neighbors, and even my mother's friends, etc.) to try to make me understand that fear was useful and that not being afraid was not allowed. So, I finally ended up having fears; some are mine, but others just arrived and were established within me as if they were my own. Lately, I have been very disappointed and, by reading from all of you, I am realizing that my disappointment is actually directly proportional to the fears that I have now: I am afraid that history will repeat itself, as if so much death and suffering has not served any purpose, and I am afraid of losing—yes, each time the telephone rings at night, or when they report another death on the radio, I am afraid that it will be someone who's close to me. What's more, in my searching, I have always found voices within feminism that provide me with encouragement and support, and now I'm afraid that this collective alliance will disappear due to the strategies for dismantling movements. Because these strategies work, and they distance us from each other more and more, or at least this is what I have been perceiving."*¹²

Could it be that the fear we feel is not real? The fear we feel, as an emotion is always valid for each of us. We might not be in real danger every time that we feel afraid but still the fear is there even though one thing is to feel afraid about a situation and another is to know that the fear we feel is tied to facts that imply a probability of something happening to us. Perhaps one of the most important challenges that we have as women defenders is to learn to differentiate between the fear that we feel and the real risk that we find ourselves in, so we can then be able to face both in a better way.

Many dialogue participants treated fear as an emotion that connects us with our vulnerability; others spoke about how being afraid is a sign of weakness, cowardice, or intellectual inferiority within our social imaginaries; many others mentioned that since women are who most experience fear this is used to confirm the prejudice that we are weak or inferior.

In contrast, for others, *"fear is a type of intuition (a form of knowledge) that alerts us but that we don't always pay attention to because of intuition's 'bad reputation', as unscientific,' 'feminine,' and, therefore, 'disqualified' as real."*¹³

Fear¹⁴

It nests in my stomach
Taking on a life of its own
Bursting into my days
From morning to night
Every hour, minute, second
It lives, it throbs
Subduing me
Identifying me
Trapping me
It spreads
Growing stronger with violence
with inequality

I detain it
I deconstruct it
it diminishes
I invalidate it
with the light of the moon
and the rumor of water from the rivers
or the verdure of the pines
I expel it from my unconscious
I rationalize it
At dawn my fears are detained
They do not advance.

12 Daysi

13 Ana Silvia Monzón

14 Anarella

DIFFERENT TYPES OF FEAR

All the lost fears are there again. The fear that a small woolen thread sticking out of the seam of my blanket may be hard, hard and sharp like a steel needle; [...] the fear that some numeral may begin to grow in my brain until there is no more room for it within me; [...] the fear that I may betray myself and tell all that I dread; and the fear that I might not be able to say anything, because everything is beyond utterance; and the other fears... the fears.

By Rainer Maria Rilke, translated from German by M. D. Herter Norton, The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge¹⁵

By exploring the complexities of fear, we find that it exists within several typologies:

- Fear of the unknown, of something happening when we don't really know what it could be;
- Fear of the known, a concrete threat (of being apprehended, of security forces; of a violent coworker or classmate, of one's authoritarian family, of sexual harassment in the workplace or on the street, etc.)

In contexts of violence, these two types of fear are interlaced: on the one hand, the social sphere, the implementation of authoritarian power, or disinformation lead to the spread of fear of the “unknown”; on the other hand, ongoing threats and experiences of repression within and outside the family create fear in the face of the certainty of the threat. Both produce uncertainty, but we can face the latter better because we know what it is about.

Positive fear also exists, which is a warning and defense mechanism for our survival, like “the emotional experiences that are inherent to any life through which we learn boundaries—what we can do and what we cannot do—dangers, and possibilities. It is a healthy emotion that warns us of danger and tells us that there is a need to protect ourselves. It provides us with the energy that is necessary for putting an end to a threatening situation, whether it be to confront or run away from it. It is a sign of alarm; it's useful as a guide to our own perceptions which we should listen to. When we are not capable of attending to our fears and listening to them, they become frustrating, unpleasant, bothersome.”¹⁶

But there is also negative fear, one that paralyzes us, “it's the fear that is imposed and, while it's different for everyone, we all suffer from it in one way or another. I have different fears, but I believe there are three fears that, from time to time, are those that determine some of my actions: the fear of losing my connection with other women, with other feminists, with people whom I have formed alliances with to change the world; the fear of not being able to live up to people's expectations of me (this is a strange fear, but I have it, it's a fear of success, an imposed fear because I believe I'm good at what I do and yet I'm afraid of not being as good as people think, sometimes I self-sabotage) and; the fear of fundamentalists and of things getting worse in Costa Rica.”¹⁷

Just as it has been expressed in several of the reflections, it is important to stress that fears are felt, they manifest and become concrete in multiple ways, taking backgrounds and personal experiences, ages, cultures, and, above all, the patriarchal context into account:

“I would like to share that I am discovering that I have felt a strange resistance to talking about fears; I think it's because, for me, it represents a complex internal process, as I have identified that some of my fears are, in effect, ancestral, that some of them—the strongest ones and the ones that have been most present throughout my life—are perhaps the same fears that my mother and maternal grandmother and my aunts and sisters have had, and that perhaps—because of this and due to multiple invisible mechanisms of defense, self-protection, self-care, and evasion—they could even turn into phobias and restraints, over a considerable amount of time, in the stories of some of the women from my maternal and paternal families. I speak of fears or phobias as if they were similar to driving a vehicle (or of the risks that this involves), the fear of going over a dark bridge, of the darkness itself, of cucarachas, of rats, of speaking in public, of heights, of fire arms, or the fear of making mistakes, among others.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Excerpt shared by Yerberani

¹⁶ Yerberani

¹⁷ Shi

¹⁸ María Teresa

*"The fear of being, of existing, of being free, independent, autonomous, of leaving the house, of walking and going wherever we want is what is imposed by patriarchy and sustained by the homogenizing and misogynistic construction of femininity."*¹⁹

*"A somewhat ancestral fear that women have is the fear of not fulfilling the mandates that different religions establish for us because we are women; these same religions show us gods who punish, which causes fear of not abiding with what they establish for us (good mothers, good wives, good daughters, and the quintessential servants or caretakers of others—of husbands, fathers, brothers, and other male relatives."*²⁰

*"I think that this fear of disappointing, of not meeting the expectations of others, is part of the fears that have been imposed on women to paralyze us and subordinate us; they are internalized evaluations by others of ourselves... These fears—which I myself have experienced many times, are not rational but rather about the emotions that we have internalized—they are part, I believe, of the fears we have to unlearn because they were imposed on us."*²¹

Moreover, fears do not always remain the same; they go about changing throughout life:

*"If I think about my fears, they have been many and varied at different stages of my life: the fear of losing my parents when I was little, of not having someone who would take care of me; the fear of not being accepted in adolescence; then—though in a different way but more profound—the fear, which perhaps has been the most difficult fear for me to get around, is the fear of the people I love suffering, of something happening to them because of the choices I have made in life that have involved clear risks."*²²

*"Luckily, I've already been through the fear that I felt about seeing myself as an old woman, because now I've gotten used to my wrinkles, my white hair, my saggy boobs, etc. etc. etc. And I even like all these things more because I know they've brought about some very lovely sensations of having more confidence in myself and feeling more at peace with the world around me. But I'm afraid of the other things that come with having an old body or mind. I know the women who are still not approaching old age don't want to think about aging because our patriarchal cultures only values young bodies and disregard the experience and wisdom of the elderly. But I would, indeed, like to know if some of the young women, or not so young women (but not old women), think about old age and if it scares them."*²³

This exercise of thinking of one's own fears and listening to the fears of other women helps us realize that we share many of the same fears:

*"I am afraid of becoming seriously ill and, since I live alone (even though I'm also terrified of loneliness), of not being capable of taking care of myself; I have a fear of not having a job, a fear of something happening to my son or my loved ones, to my female friends, a fear that my beloved country will fall into even greater despair. In any case, I experience the fears that we all have as women, but the important thing is to face them, to not let them paralyze us."*²⁴

The fears that are created by repression and de facto powers have a significant presence in the lives of many woman defenders: fear of defamation, of being mocked, of their organizational spaces and movements being excluded for assuming non-legitimized stances, or the fear of experiencing violence from their own families and partners for having assumed a leadership role and requesting new arrangements of the sexual division of work.

Not only do women experience different fears, but these same fears also affect us differently than they affect men:

*"I believe that the fear of the unknown, for example, is a very primitive fear that women and men take on differently, and that the complexity of today's world also makes it difficult to face because we live in an unsafe world, in which occult powers sometimes make it difficult to clearly identify what we are up against."*²⁵

19 Liduvina

20 Patricia Orozco

21 Pati Ardón

22 Pati Ardón

23 Alda

24 Zayda

25 Gilda

FEAR AS CONTROL

For example, the Honduran participants shared that the repression of protests scared them because of the probability that the police would sexually assault them. Accordingly, one of the deepest fears has been, precisely, that of “feeling vulnerable.” The social construction of women as vulnerable beings and objects of violence is a factor that heightens the sensation of vulnerability and the fear of it:

“I’ve perceived other types of fear. There is a fear of illusions, of creating stories for ourselves that don’t have any sustenance, a fear of saying things and speaking frankly—as we don’t want to lose the affection of other people—a fear of not feeling loved or accepted, and this is why we keep quiet and we lie. Fear of losing power and visibility in different spaces. Fear of falling ill and, in many cases, not enjoying life anymore. The media has a great influence on our feelings of insecurity—with its daily front pages of violence and death—and often we go out the door with the impulse to buy something for our protection and security, but it’s nothing more than a ploy of this system. How do we face these fears? A new way of facing then is rising day after day; I believe that it is by looking within oneself and sharing this feeling, by having a conversation about it, by finding spaces where I can express myself and feel free.”²⁶

“It seems to me that one of the things that conditions us the most since we are girls is fear, which is a form of oppression, of control: first in our family, then in society, in church... There’s this fear of death, of God—because if we don’t do good, we’ll be punished—, there’s fear of loneliness and of expressing what we feel, and then all of the fears fuse together if we have been mistreated and/or abused in our childhood.”²⁷

We know that through the ages, the most powerful started to use fear in many cases to control the masses or to shape the population as they wished. Men use fear to control women in the same way that the great powers use it to control the masses.

Fear and terror are old strategies for controlling the population: producing terror so that there is not organization, creating intimidation so those who oppose the system put a stop to their efforts, establishing fear to paralyze people and entire societies. It is a strategy for controlling the population by carrying out acts of terror. Under the imposition of fear, the ruling power is gradually able to confuse the members of a particular society, make social groups question their cohesion, and cause the construction of alternative policies to dissolve.²⁸ Our memories are overflowing with examples of authoritarian policies and policies of terror: Nazism during the 1930s and ‘40s, the dictatorships of the Southern Cone, the dirty wars in Central America, terrorism in the State of Colombia, the dictatorship in Honduras... and now what can we say in Mexico!

There are two categories of women who have historically been the target of attacks of special attention from authoritarian powers: the first encompasses those whose political conscience drives them toward political activism with the aim of establishing a fairer social order; the second involves women who, not having a properly recognized political identity, are objects of attention for their relationships with men. The latter stand out for the activism of their husbands, lovers, sons, fathers, or brothers; that is, they are seen as the extension and property of men whom the authoritarian powers consider as enemies.

²⁶ Verónica

²⁷ Sayda

²⁸ Clemencia Correa González: “La violación sexual en la represión política (Rape in Political Repression)” pg. 3

<http://www.congresochiapas08.codigosur.net/ponencias/DFmesadialogo01.pdf>

The Chilean psychologist Elizabeth Lira carried out research on the psychology of political threat and fear in which she proposes that the military dictatorship was characterized by the existence of systematic human rights violations that ultimately represented a constant threat. This deals with what we have characterized as a political threat, and one of its psychological and political effects was widespread fear among the majority of the population. Some of the dialogue participants gave testimony of this:

*"I have always been an easily-frightened person, and I believe I have had many of the same experiences as those that have been shared in this space. There is a fear that has made me tremble since I was a girl—a product of the exile from Argentina and a childhood in Venezuela in an exile community. I remember that we would say amongst ourselves, amongst the boys and girls, 'be careful because if you misbehave Videla will come and disappear you.' This didn't come from our families, but from the fear that we absorbed from conversations between adults. The physical expression of fear appears without justification in the first second after turning off the light and finding myself in the dark; it's no more than a second, but it makes me shudder."*²⁹

*"Personally, I have breathed fear since I was born; this fear has been with the Guatemalan society, imposed upon us with blood and fire, since the invasion, the colonial times, the dictatorships, the military regimes... this history of violence that creates fear of losing one's life, of torture, of being disappeared, of suffering for your family, friends... because it's not something you read about, you carry it around adhered to your skin. Fear of saying, of protesting, of criticizing... many of our generations are made of fears... fear of others, of that which is different. And it is this fear (or fears) that we share with varied facets and intensities in this region that we share, and that just in recent history we have started to name, to conjure (individually and/or collectively)."*³⁰

The horror that rural laborers (or campesinas and campesinos) who were members of the Community Front in Defense of Land (Frente de los Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra) experienced against them on May 3 and 4, 2006 in San Salvador Atenco in Mexico is an example of clearly planned political repression with the intention of harming the population. All types of human rights violations were committed: detention without arrest warrants, torture—and it is important to stress the sexual torture of 26 of the 47 women who were detained, which degraded, humiliated, and submitted them to power in total defenselessness and with total impunity by using their bodies as political spoils. The brutality was evident as well as the intention to destabilize the organization and create terror among the population, not only in Atenco but in Mexican society in general.

The State security forces' repression of organizations' fight for the restitution of the democratic government in Honduras is an example of violence aimed against women's participation. Different women's organizations in the country, despite having shown themselves to be very critical of the policies and practices of the president who was removed by coup leaders, joined the resistance struggle in light of the violation of democratic rights. The Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders stated that the civil and political rights violations recorded during the coup d'état cost them the lives of at least ten women defenders and left a balance of hundreds of women defenders who were sexually assaulted and many were raped (as at least ten cases could be documented), raids of organizations, and closures of feminist radio spots:

*"For some women defenders, the effects of genocide, of ethnocide, of State terrorism, and other forms of extreme violence, the internal displacements and those of exile, as well as the impunity in which many of those responsible for the violence have remained continue to influence the deterioration of the social fabric, the weakness of the rule of law and the current dynamics of violence.">*³¹

Finally, the dialogue participants coincided in identifying fear, as well as the violence associated with it, as one of patriarchy's main instruments for exercising control over women:

*"For me, fear is a state of constant terror that has been historically, socially, and culturally established in our minds and bodies and that changes throughout our life. When I was little, I was afraid in family, community, and school environments; now I have these same fears along with several more, and as I have grown and politicized my life, these fears have also gotten bigger, becoming monsters that can only be scared off for moments at a time, because they promise to return stronger and, what's more, with the threat of staying forever. I have learned to live with fears, and it's terrible! They restrict my life, keeping me from enjoying it, from getting from one place to another, but at other times I take off [...] and I try to regain peace and live at ease, that's what I do—for moments at a time; it doesn't last long. It is definitely a feeling that comes from the vigilance and historical control that we as women have been submitted to, and poor women have been submitted to it even more."*³²

29 Analía

30 Ana Silvia

31 *Violencia contra defensoras de derechos humanos en Mesoamérica. Un diagnóstico en construcción. Síntesis ejecutiva* [Violence Against Women Human Rights Defenders in Mesoamerica. An Assessment in Progress. Executive Summary]. IM-Defensoras, July 2010. Reference translated to English by Aluna Acompañamiento Social for use in this publication.

<https://justassociates.org/es/publicaciones/violencia-contra-defensoras-derechos-humanos-mesoamerica-sintesis>

32 Sato

EFFECTS ON OUR LIVES



Based on the testimonies and reflections that we shared as dialogue participants, we reached the conclusion that fear has many effects on our lives. It is worth emphasizing that the effects are not pathological, but rather situations or emotions that have come up at certain moments in which we face borderline situations; although, as we will see below, recognizing its effects allows us to face each situation much better.

"It seems that fear, while it can be a survival mechanism, can also paralyze us or leave us stunned. These reactions are quite varied, depending on many factors, both biological and social...and we should reiterate that one of the pillars of patriarchy and of any system of oppression is, precisely, fear; that fear that gets into your bones and your mind in such a way that allows those who exercise power over you to interfere and quash your will by provoking self-censuring, auto-subordination..."³³

"Since the birth of my son, I have felt a fear that I had never experienced before and that is related to the possibility of losing someone who is so essential in my life. I share this fear with many of you and I think that, once again, it is marked both by the natural instinct of protection and by the complexity of facing the uncertainty that this experience implies, and, at the same time, by the gendered mandates associated with maternity. During the first years, this fear paralyzed me and angered me a great deal, as it made me think that I had lost my freedom and autonomy. Now, I think that this fear has made me more aware of my limitations; it has helped me deal with uncertainty and motivated me to take care of myself and take care of the people I love. Fear as a defense mechanism, as Ana Silvia says, I believe that it has turned out to be a great ally."³⁴

Some testimonies showed us how paralysis is something we can experience at one time or another and that it manifests, for example, as no longer taking part in group activities—as “staying home to avoid problems”—or as being paralyzed in a violent situation or in a situation of personal or collective risk. This is reinforced by patriarchal socialization and media that constantly bombard us with images and ideas about the inefficiency of women to act in the face of danger.

Yet others made us aware that fear can also be *"something very healthy that makes us vigilant in situations that can put us at risk on all levels. It's a feeling that inhabits our body and that, in many instances, by paralyzing us leads us to deep reflection. But it is also true that, as women, the patriarchy uses this healthy fear against us. Chauvinist violence against our bodies is a weapon of terror that is used to suppress us. I try to reconstruct my fear as a healthy sensation that lives within me so that I can reflect; I also try to notice when it is a sensation that patriarchy imposes on me to subdue me."*³⁵

The political violence and repression that are imposed by acts of terror and violence exercised by patriarchy have left aftereffects. We face many of them; others can leave us with deep wounds that, for their complexity, are difficult for us to gauge.

"I knew I felt fearful, but I thought it came from violent acts or episodes in my life. But, little by little, I came to realize that I had grown up in a home that was under the banner of fear. I was taught not to do things out of fear: that if I touched something, I could ruin it; if I said something, I could be punished.... Everything was taught with a fear of something. What's most surprising is that I am just now identifying the fears that I carry and how they have affected me by turning me into a tremendously insecure woman, and I wonder: 'How does fear function in my life? Could it be that I will only be able to overcome it by becoming aware of it?'"³⁶

Moreover, there are other effects that we sometimes do not identify as fear or that we do not perceive as harmful to us. Carlos Beristain has systemized the effects that fear creates, some of which coincide with our life experiences and came up in our dialogue. For example:

33 Ana Silvia

34 Marusia

35 Roxana

36 Dilia

- Thinking obsessively that someone is following you, not trusting your female or male peers because of insignificant matters or misunderstandings.
- Feeling guilty or cowardly for feeling afraid, feeling guilt for not having done something (as society blames women for so many things, this is almost a constant sensation).
- Constantly being “on guard” or being in a state of alert or tension because of what can happen, which triggers fatigue and stress.
- Feeling helpless, living with the sensation that there’s nothing we can do, that what can happen to you does not depend on you (the social construction of women as socially, economically and affectively dependent on men can heighten this feeling of helplessness).
- Feeling that you cannot really know where the danger is—which appears as a vague threat—, where the boundaries are, or what is really happening. This is reinforced by the patriarchal socialization of women that makes us believe that we are not capable of distinguishing between what is real and what is imagined or that we are not capable of fully understanding reality because our emotions get in the way.
- Bodily reactions like suffering from palpitations, sensations of breathlessness or of “something coming up from your stomach,” or rapid breathing, which are normal in situations of fear but can make us ill if experienced constantly.
- Refueling the fear: sometimes fear becomes a tangled knot that wraps us up within it, and it is an experience that grows increasingly larger, as the act of not facing fear fuels fear even more.
- Disorganized behavior: sometimes fear can lead us to have impulsive behaviors—to do things without thinking when the situation is out of our control.

“There are countless experiences of physical, emotional, sexual, and spiritual abuse; the majority of which happen in the home, a place that is supposed to be the safest for boys and girls. These abuses of power and forms of violence are carried out by a family member or someone very close (called intra-family or domestic violence) and can be experienced directly or by witnessing them. I see how these painful events, in many cases, become obstacles or restrictions for moving forward; they cause us to become paralyzed or immobilized without being able to flow, and they are expressed in various forms, as strong feelings of guilt, self-demanding attitudes and elevated perfectionism as well as in severe self-criticism and harsh criticism of others, in low self-worth, in contained rage, in reoccurring nightmares, in the fear of traveling, the fear of heights, and the fear of being alone. Similarly, these fears are expressed in toxic attitudes toward our relationships, like trying to save others or control them as well as the difficulty of setting boundaries which can turn into self-abuse (as Celia Coria says). All these varied forms of expressing our fears might be understood as being codependent.”³⁷

Many agreed that the more we visualize and accept our fears, the more clarity and wisdom we will have to face them. Moreover, merely telling ourselves that it is normal or rational that we feel fear in the context of the horrors that we have experienced helps us to overcome them:

“Fear is a state that’s so present in my surroundings, in myself. This fear that institutions and those who are called government leaders make us believe is ours rather than being part of their creation, as if women thought, felt, and made decisions isolated from everything around us. I’m reminded of Guadalupe, the sister of a young woman who was murdered by her boyfriend. Today, we went to see the magistrate who is analyzing the case. Guadalupe was furious because the murderer is free due to ‘lack of evidence,’ and I see her fear turning into indignation. This indignation drives her to demand justice. Moving from fear to indignation has been important, of course; although I wonder how else we can pull ourselves together, pull myself together... because the indignation has made me weary.”³⁸

37 María Teresa

38 Aracely

“The point is that in our contexts, fear has taken control of us. We are returning to the states of fear that we read about in books, to the feudal era during which the powerful charged the villagers unpayable taxes for the right to live in the village. Now in Honduras, there is what we call a “war tax” and there’s almost no one who can make a living from some type of business without paying for it in some way: whether by paying private security or by paying “marero” gang members not to hurt them. At any rate, we pay the armed men to ‘protect us’ from violence that they themselves create and that is sustained by fear and disconnection. We live in a time of fear, or maybe it is only another time of fear, because it doesn’t seem like this capitalist patriarchy would have been able to last for so many millenniums if it weren’t for its capacity to intimidate us.”³⁹

In addition, fear has effects on the whole of society, on collectives and organizations; it creates confusion, it leads to questioning of the constructed models, to the sensation of vulnerability, of lack of protection, and of individual and collective helplessness; it can even lead to the perception of it being impossible to find a way out. Likewise, it can create emotional blockages and political confusion, which explains why we start to think that, no matter what we do, everything will stay the same, which creates a profound sense of desperation.⁴⁰ When fear is a means, an aim, a necessary condition, and a result gained by political repression, when it is a situation that is created, planned, and exacerbated by the powerful, then it stops being a natural reaction of alarm and a purely individual experience and it becomes the backdrop of social relations:

“Other fears come from the situation of irrational and absurd violence that has taken root in my country, just like in other places throughout the region. This fear hurts and angers me, above all when I see the viciousness and savagery of this violence on women’s bodies. However, I believe that after the last six years (which left 70,000 murdered people, 20,000 disappeared, and over 250,000 displaced—thousands of people, mostly women relatives of the victims of this war) we are turning our fears into outrage and transgression.”⁴¹

Just as neoliberal capitalism benefits from a frightened, confused population that does not have convictions, patriarchy benefits from all women being fearful and not knowing or understanding that we are correct to be afraid of a system that abuses us in so many ways.

“But, what am I afraid of? The patriarchal system is based on fear, generally on women’s fear of the violence of men, of the lack of affection, and of the non-acceptance of men, which comes with low self-esteem, non-acceptance of who we are, and, often because of this, we refuse (and we are refused) to accept that we have talents, abilities...”⁴²

In light of this, we should also be afraid of widespread fear, the multiple armed conflicts, the structural racism, the homophobia, and the many other forms of violence, discrimination, or oppression as well as our racial, class, and situational differences and other factors that overshadow the specific violence that we all experience as women or make it invisible; this is regardless of where we are or of our age, race, ethnicity, or culture or whether or not we experience discrimination due to our (dis)abilities, sexual orientation, or other characteristics. Accordingly, we should avoid allowing our real differences to distance us from each other as women, of not being able to support each other or to build a strong movement capable of eliminating all this violence.

“I have learned that I have to analyze where the fears I feel come from, how feasible it is for them to materialize as harm, how much of this depends or not on me, what help I need and to whom can I ask for it. I must be attentive to when I’m getting caught up in the chauvinistic rhetoric of not having fears and, even more so, of not allowing them to manifest as well as when my heroic attitude and ego are creating unnecessary risks. This is not easy, and I have to be on always on the alert with my fears so they don’t trick me into falling into their traps and being paralyzed, but also that they don’t make me irresponsible with life either, mine nor the lives of those around me.”⁴³

39 Daysi Flores

40 Clemencia Correa González. *La reparación integral afrontando los daños de la represión política* [Comprehensive Reparation: Facing the Damage of Political Repression].

https://issuu.com/alunamexico/docs/acompamamiento_psicosocial_integra

41 Marusia López

42 Ana Silvia Monzón

43 Mariela

FACING FEAR

“Accepting fear showed us that we are vulnerable; Facing it made us strong.”⁴⁴

By reading the reflections that were shared during our dialogue, we can state that we have all developed and used coping mechanisms, and, in many cases, we have grown and we have been empowered by doing so. We have been capable, not only of continuing to participate in our life projects, but also of being very creative in order to strengthen them and even to create new ones:

“Fears, like every social construction, change according to the stage and cycle of life that we are in. Therefore, the ways of processing them also change. Before, I used certain tools, and, now, I’m using others; for example, before I faced fears with great rationality, information, study, and organizational preparation, using tools and techniques. This was in line with my hard and pure Marxism-Leninism stage. Today, I do it in a more integrated way, which is non-dogmatic, intuitive, creative, flexible, simple, and loving.”⁴⁵

“When I find myself in a great deal of fear, a reoccurring image is to bury myself in a clay vessel and stay there, in the fetal position, while everything transpires and I renew strength and energy or allow myself to think about the situation and find the paths to follow. Often, I would like to stay like this, immobilized—to let everything happen and let things resolve themselves on their own; but I know that this is often not possible, that I have to act, yet I allow myself a few moments of immobility and then, well, I have to pick myself up. Imagining a safe space, symbolized by a clay vessel, which is actually my house, has helped me a great deal. Although we as women know full well that even our homes have become unsafe places.”⁴⁶

*<<“May you have enough happiness to keep you sweet,
May you have enough trials to keep you strong,
May you have enough sorrow to keep you human,
May you have enough hope to keep you happy,
May you have enough failure to keep you humble,
May you have enough success to keep you eager,
May you have enough friends to give you comfort,
May you have enough wealth to meet your needs
May you have enough enthusiasm to look forward,
May you have enough faith to banish depression,
Enough determination to make each day
better than yesterday.
May you have enough.>>⁴⁷*

“To transcend imposed fear (not the fear that protects us and helps us survive) it is indispensable to push it out with action and creativity, by reconstructing love for ourselves, for our bodies, lives, emotions, biology, and spirituality. I mention creativity because, in my case, it is what has allowed me to not stay unraveled.”⁴⁸

Sometimes we can minimize the fear that we feel by thinking that there’s nothing wrong, even when facing circumstances that can, indeed, cause us harm. But we can also maximize them, for example, by thinking that we can be killed when that danger does not actually exist. How do we differentiate between a fear and a danger or a true threat? The concept of risk (the possibility of an incident happening that causes some type of harm) can help us with this and, in order for us to evaluate if we are at risk or not, we can construct preventative security measures for our protection. In this regard, some of the methodological proposals developed by organizations that work in the area of protection can be useful to us.⁴⁹

However, the majority of the dialogue participants insisted that it was not only about analyzing whether or not the fear has a “real” basis or whether or not we are at risk, because even though we often are not, that does not decrease fear’s capacity to dominate our lives and cause us to have many conflicting emotions. This is why there is a need to face our fears from a deeper emotional level. It’s about becoming familiar with the feelings of fear, sharing the entire array of emotions that fear—in general or each individual fear—causes us:

44 Testimony from Consorcio para el Diálogo Parlamentario y la Equidad Oaxaca A.C. at the opening event for Aluna Acompañamiento Psicosocial (Aluna Psychosocial Accompaniment) in March 2013.

45 Irish toast shared by Martha

46 Mariela

47 Gilda

48 Liduvina

49 For example: <https://protectioninternacional.org>

*"In life there are moments when it is better to be than to have; fear is a resource for doing what must be done. [...] Simply put, there's a reason that we experience things that we don't want to experience. Death is not always physical, it can also be psychological; that is, we must not be prisoners of our fears, there is not a cure for fear, everything is mental. One day, my granddaughter, who's only four years old, told me: 'Don't be afraid, mami, when someone leaves your life she always returns, or when something is not okay, things always work out too, and that's all there is to it.' I learned from her that life continues in the way that it comes about, possibly among fears, sadness, pain; but, in the end, we are women who have the ability to overcome all adversity, simply because we are very intelligent, and this makes us different."*⁵⁰

"Without doubt, we have been educated to the tune of fear, it is so internalized that we will die in the attempt to open the infinite bolts with which they have molded the historical patriarchal confinement of women."

Each time I defeat a fear
The world that I know
Expands to me
I am myself no longer
Somewhere
I seem more
Like the woman
I have dreamt of."⁵¹

To be able to face acts that threaten our integrity, we have cognitive, emotional, political, and cultural tools that change according to the events that harm us and the context in which we might find ourselves. They depend on each story, each of our social, economic, and political conditions, and even on the possibilities and abilities that we have; there are no standard recipes and the same tools are not useful in different situations. What is, in fact, true is that as we become conscious of them we can use them in the best way possible and, by sharing what we experience with other female peers, we learn from their experiences, which allows us to incorporate other ways of strengthening ourselves, not only personally but also collectively. In fact, the majority of the dialogue participants noted feminism's fundamental role in recognizing and coping with their own fears:

*"Feminism has provided important contributions for averting the fears that are imposed upon us by patriarchy, it reveals the origins of our cultural values of competence, of low self-esteem, of a lack of sisterhood among women. Patriarchy positions males and stereotypical male characteristics as a paradigm of what is valuable, true, human, strong, and real; it is the male who validates us as women before ourselves and before society; and from there, in this search for patriarchal validation, out of fear of not meeting the standards of this model of value, many of us fall into traps and illnesses. We can face them alone, but it is more enjoyable to do it hand in hand with sisters who are as scared as we are, seeing fear as an opportunity to find ourselves with others who have the same troubles as we have."*⁵²

Women need other women, as a gender, to recognize and strengthen ourselves. It is very important for us to be able to share positive experiences about ways of facing fear, including the experiences of survivors of patriarchal violence as well as those of feminists who fight against patriarchy and of female human rights defenders—for example, sharing experiences about situations in which doing one thing or another had a positive outcome for us. Personal or group experiences through which women have faced fear caused by patriarchal violence can be a great help for facing the fear caused by public or de facto powers.

*"So, the phenomenon of fear is more complex for me. Fear imposed as terror can only be faced from feminism and with feminists, in different spaces and with the most diverse feminists. Reflecting on fear, not in solitary but in sisterhood, is the only way to set ourselves free."*⁵³

Political violence and the terror that it unleashes do not impact us as women in the same way that they impact men. For us, political violence is also patriarchal violence, and both have affected all dimensions of our lives on personal, family, community, and national levels. Therefore, one of the most important challenges in analyzing how to cope with fear is talking about our different fears experiences at the intimate and personal areas of our lives as well as those experienced in public spaces. Both must be faced collectively, challenging the causes that have given rise to them and their negative and paralyzing effects.

50 Violeta

51 Lucia

52 Mariela

53 Roxana

We can never forget that if inflicting fear is a strategy of our partners, our families, or the organizations we belong to, it is probable that they will not be on our side in our process of facing the fear. Therefore, facing the fear should be an individual goal but one that is supported by feminist peers, and whenever possible, by organizations and networks that we form to support each other:

“Fear has led us to spend more of our time taking care of each other, building protection and self-care networks, going over the risks of our activism and seeking new ways to continue our struggles without putting our integrity and dreams at risk.”⁵⁴

Recognizing our fears, analyzing them, socializing them, and deconstructing them allows us to confront the risks that exist. Creating spaces of trust and basic agreements of respect is essential. In the case of women defenders who work with mixed sex/gender groups, it will be beneficial to have specific spaces for women in order to give credibility to their word and so they can recognize dynamics of fear linked to the social dynamics of undervaluing women and the tolerance of violence against them.

“During the 80s, I had such a close-up experience of the war—the absence of my father, the restrictions and loneliness of my mother—that I learned to look after myself, with the latent fear of the absences of my loved ones. But when I joined the women’s movement, I started to learn about a monster that devastated the lives of women—patriarchy—; which, so subtly, made me recognize many women’s experiences of fear which had seemed normal to me. Thanks to this great feminist school and the opportunities that female friends, organizations, and networks have offered me, I now see these fears and have learned to face them. I believe in teamwork, in identifying these signs of danger and keeping an eye out for them, and I believe in the solidarity between us, among women, that has made these fears reveal themselves so we can face them in a more dignified way.”⁵⁵

These understandings are leading us to become aware of who we are, of what we want, of how we want it, of how we have been culturally constructed, of what we need and what we can do to face this situation. We are talking about options, about the work of reflection, and about agreements: social control is gendered and therefore must be confronted collectively by women.

“Of course, as women we have internalized fears that serve patriarchy, but we have also built the strength, the resistance, to get through it all, facing them or distancing ourselves so that they do not paralyze us. I was thinking about my own life, full of situations and events that provoke many fears, some paralyzing, terrifying, and real... I am burdened with the fears of a violent country, but also with the fears that my ancestors lived with, which are similar to my contemporary fears; fears that I am often not able to identify, but that I know are there, that give me anxiety, that try to paralyze me... Sometimes it is not easy to identify the borders between the two and I wonder: Are there borders, are there boundaries? There are fears that arrive; one faces them, believes to have exorcized them, but then they come back for ‘x’ or ‘y’ reason, and we realize that they have been there, stalking us, waiting, until they attack once more looking to paralyze us. But with the passage of time, in one way or another, we have learned to face them with a bit more intelligence, we could say, with wisdom, from other individually and collectively constructed strengths.”⁵⁶

“Daysi’s question about how to avoid passing on the ancestral fears that we grew up with to today’s activism seems crucial to me. It is crucial because if we do not pass them on to other spaces, to other women, to current-day activism, there must be something we are doing with these fears, perhaps without even noticing it or being sufficiently aware of it. And this is already an added value, as it shows bravery, courage, determination, and, why not, transgression of the fears themselves—transgression of what we are driven toward. Is it not our job as feminists to transgress the norms, to transgress the status quo, to tear down the patriarchal order so we can construct another order, another culture, other relationships where fear is not an element of our gendered selves?”⁵⁷

54 Marusia

55 Yamileth

56 Gilda

57 Patricia Orozco

Along with this need of get past fears and share them in feminist spaces, many dialogue participants also coincided in marking transgression and creativity as basic tools for facing them:

*"I am open to looking for creative ways to face my fears as long as they trim down my surroundings or fatten them up; I cannot always respond in the same way. I am healing myself, I meditate and I fill myself with positive energy, with confidence in humanity; I look for spaces that give me inspiration and the strength of hope, like JASS, so I can continue to contribute even if it might be with a little grain of sand, as we must not forget that there can be an entire universe in a little grain of sand."*⁵⁸

*"Action, rebellion, transgression, and creativity have been my companions and guides, as well as my conscience, at different levels. As feminists, we overcome the constantly imposed fear when we challenge the system, the paradigms, and we stop being believers in patriarchy and everything that comes along with it. We have been capable of naming and breaking the silences and secrets that make rape and sexual violence in all its expressions seem normal. We have created new relationships that are not based on control, authoritarianism, and terror."*⁵⁹

Facing fear also implies a task of unlearning and deconstruction, of transforming one's own identity, of questioning vital dependencies in order to build autonomy, of strengthening our self-esteem and transforming gender roles and stereotypes.

*"I agree that the fears we have of things and people can be unlearned, and we can corroborate this with the women and girls who are survivors of violence who are able to overcome their fears and find total strength and rootedness in life.... Recognizing and speaking of our fears makes us move forward and, above all, facing them makes us be strong every day. This year, I took part in many sessions to work on fears with bodywork techniques, and it is incredible how our body cells store each one of the fears, from minor fears to major fears, but there is only one way to heal them: to face them, to have an ever-present network of communication and self-help where you feel backed up, to know how to define which fears are rational and which are irrational and, accordingly, to look for a way out. But above all, to heal our hearts and fill them with strength, and to change the image of the vulnerable woman for that of the warrior who has an array of tools for facing the battle."*⁶⁰

*"When the coup d'état happened in Honduras, I started to relive the fears of forced disappearance again. When I would drive by myself to my house, I would be fear-stricken, afraid that they would detain me, that they would disappear me again, even though I would be coming from singing 'nos tienen miedo porque no tenemos miedo' ('they're afraid of us because we're not afraid'). It helped me that, in the street, singing this song, we would recognize with friends, female and male alike, that we were, indeed, afraid, but when we were together this fear didn't paralyze us. We laughed about how contradictory this was, 'they're afraid of us because we're not afraid,' and, quietly, we said: 'Yeah right! We're scared to death!' I believe that the meaning of this song is to say, 'Yes, we are afraid, but your threats, your weapons, your violence will not paralyze us; we're going to keep moving forward, resisting, facing you.' During these times, something that helped me to not become paralyzed was the strength of feminists, of women, and of the people in the street, knowing that, as both women and men, we would be together the next day, but I also thought that, even if something were to happen to me, I have lived a full life and no one can snatch that away from me. I would think of my female friends who had already passed on, like Narda, and I would tell myself, 'Well I'm going to meet up with Narda... it won't be so bad after all.' I would also let myself cry, scream; this really helps me, and it helped me during those times."*⁶¹

58 Mariela
59 Liduvina
60 Zayda
61 Gilda

“Rosa Parks participated in an event at Highlander Folk School, a rural education center in the southern United States known for its popular educational processes and its radical trajectory, and during the ‘80s it supported gatherings among activists and popular educators from the United States and Mesoamerica, participating in campaigns against imperialism and Reagan’s war policies. There, we sang together, exchanging lyrics and music, weaving common bonds and strategies, analyzing contexts, and laughing and enjoying the place’s nature and beauty. Today, Highlander continues to confront and resist the horrors of misogyny and the policies of immigration and discrimination. It reminds me of the importance of safe and creative spaces, of friendships, and of music and song, which can give us energy and encouragement when facing inevitable fears. I think the lyrics to ‘Gracias a la vida’ (Thanks Be to Life) have always inspired me in difficult times, the power of joining in with other voices, singing out loud...”⁶²

From the testimonies, we can point out that “The forms of coping with fear are basically put into action from the moment of the attack, first as a way of preserving one’s life and personal integrity or that of loved ones, and then to recognize the impacts and face them. Forms of coping tend to be valued positively, although their positive value may change if they become rigid or are prolonged over time. Some examples of this double ‘valence’ of the forms of coping are: 1) emotional encapsulation, which at first helps one to be strong and face the most critical phase, but, if sustained, hinders emotions from being released and the trauma from being processed; 2) the state of alertness, that helps as a form of protection, but that, without a risk analysis to evaluate the possible occurrence of an assault, causes body tension, an emotional toll, distancing from others, or the abandonment of activities.”⁶³

“It happens in a similar way with the very tough repressions within my university and outside of it: I am in the middle of tear gas and I take the time to call out, say what is happening and yell. I did this recently last year, with these experiences that are so hard, where death is the first thing that you think about and the times are so short. I believe the way to face it is with things as simple as talking, crying, yelling... I don’t know... It’s the way that I have physically faced fear. Here, of course, I’m only referring to those fears in specific moments, because I haven’t been able to overcome the others. Although I went through many fears last year, I hope to continue fighting this year, facing those that I can, as I know that many will live with me and I know that I have to learn to hide them in a very faraway place or to make peace with them so they will let me live with greater serenity.”⁶⁴

“At this stage in my life, having recently turned 65, the main fear that I’m trying to deconstruct is the fear of death... and of my own death. We must prepare ourselves for death, do what is within our reach to be able to have a painless, pleasant, calm, and peaceful death. I am very afraid of pain and, so, I am focused on taking care of my body, my health, my family and close friends so that, from this personal power, I might live as well and as much as I can to continue building power among us women and the world that we want until my last hour arrives. It has been a challenge to calm my voracity toward life. For the time being, I have even put little labels on my bathroom mirror that might say things like ‘Yes I Can,’ because we know that this issue of unlearning never stops needing a lot of impetus and positive messages, first from ourselves, but also by requesting support from our loved ones. I believe that, among us, we could support each other more in this way. Women can unlearn and love our bodies, not the bodies that the wolves would like for us to have, but our healthy bodies, yes, at healthy weights, well taken care of. And with regard to death, my question is: How do we die without feeling we still have things to do, satisfied to have been placed in this life with a constant yearning to develop ourselves into better people and to have stood in solidarity with each other, building the power of being together as women?”⁶⁵

62 Valery

63 Lilliana Souza (Coordinator) *Claves hacia el acompañamiento psicosocial* [Keys towards psychosocial accompaniment], pg. 21
https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/536db9_4b1749e680c5415c8b32818a75f6effc.pdf

64 Dilia
65 Malena

"More consciously, my fears started to soften when I met women who were working for other women. I went out to live on my own, I paid a psychologist, I decided not to neglect myself any longer and to go after my dreams...not by myself anymore, but rather with many other women. Today, I try everything, without fear of failing. What's more, now I understand that "failing" is a dry and flat concept that empties out its contents and it ignores all the good that one gains each time one tries something and doesn't achieve it. I don't believe that there are formulas. Perhaps the answers depend on the situation.... When I am afraid of something, I look for its origin—if it has been planted there or if there are 'more objective' reasons for feeling afraid; and I also reflect on how and when I am going to face it. Without a doubt, today I have much more hope in things, in my own strength, and in that of those around me. Without hope, I believe that we wouldn't be able to accomplish much to defeat a fear."⁶⁶

"Thanks to women like you, Alda, we have revealed and continue to reveal the depraved subterfuges of patriarchy, and we have taken so much power away from them that there are thousands of survivors talking about incest and sexual abuse and naming their aggressors: priests, teachers, fathers, stepfathers, uncles, partners...and no one will keep us quiet now. Also, we are, there are, and we make up thousands who are changing history, and in all the different spaces we have created tools, new relationships, new paradigms, and new active female subjects to face, prevent, and eradicate violence and patriarchy. Thank you!"⁶⁷

TO CONCLUDE

It has been very meaningful to be able to have a dialogue about fear: it's a frightening feeling, and, at times, I reject it, but the way in which we did it, creating a space of trust without judging ourselves, allowed us to come closer to ourselves. Being able to read each other from our emotions and thoughts made the text that we are sharing today possible.

We have confirmed that reflecting about fear among women, as a sex/gender socialized for fear, allows us to reach very profound moments of our individualities, because, in the end, it involves touching our stories from the past, from the present, and from the future that we visualize, where we flush out painful experiences as well as those that give us hope. Fears as warning mechanisms, ancestral fears, fear of aggression, of patriarchy, some paralyzing and others as drivers of resistance...

The possibility of interweaving our ideas and emotions allowed us to carry out a collective construction of women defenders, in which we can identify, in order to understand, the different types of violence, harm, and impacts that we have suffered, but also to recognize the many and varied approaches that we have used to face them. This dialogue demonstrated to us that feminist analysis of our fears definitely gives us clues about how to see them from another perspective.

Finally, fear has been an emotion that has allowed us to grow and empower ourselves, with the certainty of not losing the sense of what we have been and of what we have believed in, of conserving everything that we have historically constructed. The testimony that Lydia Cacho takes from Esther Chávez Cano, the mother of activism against the femicides in Ciudad Juárez, is an example of this:

<<She told me more than a decade ago that what she feared most was losing the hope that her work was useful to the community. 'Hope,' she said, 'is a candle in the darkness, and every day I look to the survivors, who remind me that the candle should remain lit at all costs, for all Mexican women.>>.

66 Anya
67 Liduvina

AS WOMEN DEFENDERS, HOW DO WE FACE **OUR FEARS** IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT?

virtual *Feminist* dialogue

By Alda Facio and Clemencia Correa

with contributions from Ana María Hernández, Ana Silvia Monzón, Analía Penchaszadeh, Anarella Vélez, Anya Victoria Delgado, Aracely GS, Cecilia Trinidad, Daysi Flores, Dilcia Zavala, Gilda Rivera, Isa Jodar, Jeannette Asencio, Liduvina Méndez, Lucía Morán, Magda, Malena de Montis, María Teresa Zúñiga, Mariela Arce, Mary Bolt G., Marlyn Krol, Martha Figueroa, Marusia López, Patricia Ardón, Patricia Orozco, Roxana Arroyo, Sato, Shí Alarcón, Valerie Miller, Verónica Aparcama, Violeta Pérez Gálvez, Yamileth Molina, Yésica Sánchez, and Zayda Treminio.



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Asociadas por lo Justo



ALUNA

ACOMPANAMIENTO PSICOSOCIAL