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## Security through Solidarity: Honduran Women's Post-Coup Strategies of Support and Survival

By Christine Gervais and Betsy Estevez<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract<sup>2</sup>

As a follow up to the article "From Discovery to Dissidence: Honduran Women's Conceptions and Claims of Human Rights", published in this journal in May 2010 (Vol. 11 #4), this paper examines forty-eight Honduran women's experiences of state-based insecurity and feminist-based solidarity following the June 2009 coup d'État. The authors reflect on the ethical implications of the participant-centered and solidarity-oriented qualitative methodological approaches constrained by state repression. The women's testimonies shed light on the potential of a solidarity-security symbiosis.

*Keywords:* Women's Rights, Coup d'État, Solidarity, Honduras

### Introduction

*"What I want is that the truth become known about what has happened in Honduras and how we as women live and are violated by the oppressors. Help us bring to light the extent of the femicide."*  
(Workshop Participant 2005-2010)

In an article entitled "From Discovery to Dissidence: Honduran Women's Conceptions and Claims of Human Rights", published in this journal in May 2010 (Vol. 11 #4), the primary author highlighted the experiences of one hundred and fifteen Honduran women who demonstrated agency, resistance and solidarity in their individual and collective pursuit of gender equality following their participation in human rights workshops. In that same article, the primary author alluded to a follow up study that would explore the challenges the women were facing and the strategies they were employing in the aftermath of the coup d'État that abruptly destabilized Honduras' democratic<sup>3</sup> governance on June 28, 2009. In this current article, we convey the results

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<sup>3</sup> While the coup disrupted Hondurans' lives, it was not a new situation given that it was the seventh coup since the mid-1950s and that the country has been governed recurrently by repressive military rule since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Feministas en Resistencia Honduras [FEHR], 2009:6; Mejía and Fernández, 2010).

of the ensuing study in an effort to shed light on the women's evolving capacities to utilize their workshop-based knowledge and solidarity to manage their [in]security amidst overwhelming political turmoil.

The circumstances that gave rise to the Honduran coup d'État in 2009 are undeniably complex<sup>4</sup> and have been debated through diverse political, corporate and human rights perspectives. While we recognize the importance of scrutinizing the conditions surrounding the coup d'État, our interest in this paper is neither to endorse nor to condemn political preferences and actions. Instead, our concern pertains to the nature and extent of the repression experienced by the aforementioned workshop participants after the coup and to their ability to negotiate their survival and safety amidst the political violence and instability.

Since the coup, thousands of Honduran citizens have been actively engaged in pro-democracy and anti-coup protests. The interim and subsequently elected<sup>5</sup> governments have left a wake of widespread human rights violations as they have countered civilian demonstrations with curfews, media censorship and violent repression involving the use of excessive police and military force. Consequently, human rights-oriented citizens, journalists, lawyers and judges have been victims of systematic<sup>6</sup> state-based violence, sexual aggression, arbitrary detentions, torture, death threats, employment dismissals, assassinations and disappearances (Amnesty International, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2010a,b; Mejía and Fernández, 2010).

The plight and role of activist<sup>7</sup> women have been especially significant in these volatile circumstances, since, on the one hand, their gendered vulnerability became even more precarious, yet on the other hand, their resilience was strengthened not only by their resolve to stand up for their rights to democracy and equality (Paredes and Sierra, 2010), but also by their solidarity-based strategies of support. In this light, we examine the Honduran women's experiences with coup-related insecurity and security-enhancing solidarity. With a view to prioritizing women's voices, we reflect on the ethical implications of the research methods employed. We then present the women's own accounts of their coup-related struggles, as well as their own reflections on the benefits and limitations of the solidarity-oriented efforts in which they engaged in order to overcome their multiple insecurities.

### **Conceptualizing 'Security through Solidarity'**

#### *"Solidarity is Our Security"*

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Nevertheless, Honduras had been making gains in governance since it had become an electoral democracy in 1982 (Barahona, 2010); thus, as nascent and fragile as Honduras' democracy may have been, the coup was inevitably destabilizing for 21<sup>st</sup> century Hondurans.

<sup>4</sup> The government of President Manuel Zelaya, ousted through the coup, was recognized for advancing socio-economic reforms that led to the increase of minimum wage and the reduction of the public deficit; yet he was accused of corruption and constitutional infractions that were thought to be fundamentally affecting the country's political structure (FEHR, 2009:6-7).

<sup>5</sup> Roberto Micheletti led the interim government that ousted President Zelaya. The subsequently elected President, Porfirio Lobo, took office in January 2010.

<sup>6</sup> See Mejía and Fernández (2010) for a comparison of the current human rights situation with that of the Cold War.

<sup>7</sup> It is understood that many Honduran women, including those of varied urban and rural, as well as impoverished and privileged contexts, did not oppose the coup, nor the currently ruling government.

(Inter Pares, 2009:1)

Solidarity is a broad social justice principle that implies unity, fellowship, harmony, common goals and mutual responsibility. Solidarity has been central to feminist projects and women's movements as both a means of, and an objective towards inclusivity, equality, diversity, affirmation and accountability (Mohanty, 2003; Steans, 2007). According to the Canadian feminist social justice organization, Inter Pares (2009), solidarity is an essential approach to achieving security and advancing social change. While raising a critique against the exclusionary implications of state security and in recognition of the potential of human connections, Inter Pares (2009: 1) contends that "*our security lies in our solidarity with each other.*" To this end, Inter Pares (2009: 4) promotes solidarity that is based on equality, respect, authentic collaboration, diversity and innovation as the means through which the erosion of human rights is challenged, the paralyzing effects of fear are overcome and the pursuit of peace, justice and freedom is undertaken – all of which are considered vital to our security.

In this light, we examine the proposed relationship between solidarity and security from the standpoint of Honduran women whose lives have been profoundly destabilized by extensive political violence since the coup d'État in mid-2009. While Inter Pares' proposed solidarity-security symbiosis was envisioned as one of alliance-building among civil society<sup>8</sup> organizations (Inter Pares, 2009:4), we adapt it to experiential levels among people, and in so doing, we are attentive to the micropolitical<sup>9</sup> contexts of the Honduran women's struggles and strategies (Mohanty, 2003:223). We contend that the potential of that symbiosis is particularly relevant to individual and interpersonal pursuits of 'security' in times and spaces of political repression.

To this end, we invoke wider conceptions of both solidarity and security. In an effort to avoid the application of Western theorizing to the women's experiences (Fox, 2009), we integrate the participants' own conceptions and articulations of solidarity and security in later sections. Nevertheless, it is essential to clarify the conceptual considerations upon which our reflections are based. In this light, we draw upon the aforementioned elucidation of solidarity by Inter Pares, Mohanty and Steans to reflect an all-encompassing notion that enables the women's own diverse understandings, feelings and experiences of solidarity-based support and reliability to be foregrounded.

Similarly, with a view to maximizing comprehensiveness as we consider what 'security' may entail when it is generated through solidarity, we draw on the broader concept of 'security' put forth by the human security agenda. Human security encompasses the widespread contexts and personal experiences of economic, health, physical, social, food, environmental and political security (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 1994; United Nations Commission on Human Security [UNCHS],

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<sup>8</sup> By contrast, Ferreira-Pereira and Groom (2010) have explored the complex implications of solidarity-based alliances among nation-states in the realm of security and defence. While they shed light on solidarity as a contested concept, their emphasis on security is state-centered, which is precisely the level we are attempting to move beyond by concentrating on 'human' security.

<sup>9</sup> We acknowledge that through their involvement in the popular resistance movement, the participants are also engaging in a form of solidarity that is aimed at a macropolitical level against state repression and corporate exploitation (Mohanty, 2003:114). However, our focus remains on the micro context of the women's personal feelings of, and outlooks on security as they perceive it to be associated with solidarity.

2003). The human security approach's prioritization of individualized<sup>10</sup> accounts is also relevant to the women's own articulations of both the 'insecurities' they endured as a result of the coup, and their complex experiences of solidarity-based security.

### **Participants, Methods and the Ethics of Solidarity**

Our analysis draws upon data collected among forty-eight women who completed sociologically-oriented, qualitatively-based written questionnaires<sup>11</sup> with open-ended questions<sup>12</sup> at a community education centre in a municipality<sup>13</sup> in north central Honduras in May 2010. The women were affiliated with the aforementioned workshops on women's rights at the centre since 2005 and had become organized in local, regional and national feminist networks in order to improve their individual and collective safety and well-being as Honduran females. A life-giving sense of solidarity developed among the women and as a result, the workshops yielded life-changing impacts for them in the areas of self-esteem, education and domestic safety (Gervais, 2010). This article explores the implications of the women's application of the workshop-based knowledge and corresponding strategies of solidarity towards their evolving pursuits of democracy and equality since the 2009 coup d'État.

At the time the questionnaires were administered, the study's participants ranged in age from 19 to 66. Their civil status revealed a variety of relationships: 13% were single without children, 45% were single with children, 30% were married with children, 8% were in common law relationships with children and 4% were widowed with children. Regarding their cultural identity, 96% self-identified as Mestiza<sup>14</sup>, 2% as Garifuna<sup>15</sup> and 2% as Caucasian. With respect to education, 49% had studied at the primary level; 32% had studied at the secondary level and 19% had studied at the post-secondary level. In terms of employment, 68% claimed to be unemployed, but many proudly identified themselves as housewives. The remaining 32% were variously employed as teachers, health care professionals, social workers, researchers, domestic servants, merchants, and as irregular employees in the informal economic sector.

Our efforts to ensure that the women's voices were central to this study are located in feminist scholarship that acknowledges women's own standpoint and experience as significant and accurate sources of insight and truth that shed light on complexities that women identify as relevant to their subjectivity and identity (Charlesworth, 2007; Fox, 2009; Harding, 1991; Smith, 1987). Our efforts further reflect Mander's (2010), Madlingozi's (2010) and Pittaway et al.'s (2010) approaches to view a study's participants as more than research subjects or statistics, but rather as real, living, capable people and genuine research partners who deserve to be listened to, respected and included fully in the research process.

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<sup>10</sup> See Bunch (2004) and Denov (2006) on the limitations of the human security approach's consideration of individualized and gendered experiences.

<sup>11</sup> For safety reasons, in-person interviews were not conducted; the ethical limitations are explained below.

<sup>12</sup> The responses were translated from Spanish to English.

<sup>13</sup> The names of the centre and town are withheld to protect the identity of the participants.

<sup>14</sup> Mestiza is the female version of the term mestizo that refers to people of mixed Native American and European descent.

<sup>15</sup> Garifuna refers to people of mixed West African, Arawak and Carib descent who were displaced from Caribbean islands in the late 1700s and who settled along the Atlantic coast of Central American countries.

It is with these considerations in mind that we integrate solidarity in this article not only on a conceptual level, but also as a fundamental facet of our methodological approach. Thus, in response to a participant's aforementioned request to "*Help us bring to light the extent of the femicide*", we have sought to serve not merely as conveyers of the women's accounts, but rather as collaborative researchers who are facilitating the participants' contributions to the processes through which their experiences and expectations become known (Fox, 2009).

To this end, and with the intention of co-producing knowledge out of respect for the dignity and capacity of the participants (Madlingozi, 2010; Pittaway et al., 2010), we worked collaboratively with the workshop coordinators and participant-leaders who were trained to support the participants in the research process (Gervais, 2010). The coordinators and participant-leaders were involved in the co-creation of the research instruments by providing input<sup>16</sup> into relevant content and accessible language based on their own coup-related experiences and their fellow participants' feedback. More specifically, they helped to formulate and revise questions, to decide on the design, format and length of the questionnaires, to identify safe research locations, to recruit inclusively and safely, to administer, store and transfer the questionnaires securely<sup>17</sup> and to ensure that follow up support was provided to participants in need of counselling. The women's involvement in the decision-making process to inform the research goals, design and topics is consistent with feminist participatory approaches that not only empower participants and improve the authenticity of the knowledge produced, but that also signal more genuine solidarity-based cooperative partnerships between participants and researchers (Fox, 2009:119).

However, we recognize that the extent to which we have been able to maintain the ethics of care, accountability and solidarity, as advocated by Fox (2009), Mander (2010), Madlingozi (2010), Mohanty (2003) and Pittaway et al. (2010), has been curtailed by safety concerns related to the ongoing<sup>18</sup> repression in Honduras. While none of the participants have been harmed as a result of their involvement in this study, in consultation with the workshop coordinators and participants, we decided jointly to take additional precautionary measures to maximize the participants' safety. Due to security concerns based on known<sup>19</sup> state surveillance, increased political violence and death

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<sup>16</sup> This gave the women an opportunity to identify what was significant to them in the actual framework of the research project and not only in the form of responses (Fox, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Additional precautions were taken to protect the participants. While all the women affiliated with the human rights workshops were invited to participate in the study, the date, time and location of the questionnaire sessions were not advertised publicly. Information on the study was shared discreetly through oral communication among the workshop coordinators and participants. Considerable care was taken to ensure that the completed questionnaires with non-identifying information were stored safely in Honduras and then transferred securely to Canada.

<sup>18</sup> We acknowledge that the study was limited at the outset because, due to safety concerns for both the participants and the researchers, written questionnaires were administered instead of in-person interviews. Interviews, focus groups and visits to participants' homes and work sites would have constituted more engaged research into the women's realities and they would have enabled the women to be more authentically and democratically involved in the study (Mander, 2010); they would have also led to more comprehensive understandings of the women's lived experiences since the women could have demonstrated their contexts more clearly themselves (Mander, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> The details of what is known about the surveillance are withheld to protect the participants and researchers.

threats<sup>20</sup> against some of the workshop participants, the human rights workshop activities have ceased<sup>21</sup>, as has email communication between the Canadian researchers and the Honduran workshop coordinators and participants since September 2010; phone communication has since been utilized cautiously and rarely. Consequently, our plans<sup>22</sup> to go beyond the co-generation and co-collection of data and to also engage in inclusive co-analysis with the study's participants have now been thwarted due to the limited communication (Fox, 2009). This lack of meaningful consultation with the participants has posed ethical dilemmas for us as solidarity-oriented researchers because we now feel that the women's agency<sup>23</sup> in relation to their own stories has been compromised (Fox, 2009; Pittaway et al, 2010). As a result, the representation and analysis of their voices and experiences may not be considered as authentic as our participant-researcher team intended (Fox, 2009; Madlingozi, 2010).

We must nevertheless acknowledge that despite the modifications to our research process, we have been able to maintain some of our responsibility to the women and their stories in two relevant ways. First, we cautiously planned for the workshop coordinator to join us in an international women's conference<sup>24</sup> in 2011 where she co-presented the research findings based on the participants' input. Thus her presentation constituted a means through which the participants were partially involved in the analysis and dissemination<sup>25</sup> of the research results, and thereby are now potentially able to benefit from any resulting feedback and networking (Fox, 2009).

The second means through which we are remaining responsible to the participants is by the ongoing provision of resources that are contributing to the women's empowerment and well-being (Fox, 2009; Madlingozi, 2010; Mander, 2010). The

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<sup>20</sup> Such death threats resulted in one workshop participant and her spouse going into hiding for an extended period of time starting in July 2010. She and her spouse had been actively involved in anti-coup resistance. At present (July 2011), they are no longer in hiding, but nor are they participating in resistance activities.

<sup>21</sup> The cessation of activities and communication should not be interpreted as an abandonment of the participants by us as researchers in life-threatening situations (Mander, 2010: 268). Rather, it is a reasonable and expected response indicative of our responsibility as researchers to the safety of the study's participants.

<sup>22</sup> Since 2008, we had been engaging in "*ethical and caring dialogues*" with the Honduran team in order to enable them to integrate their insights into this research project (Mohanty, 2003:106). The participants have been involved in the co-generation of the research since the project's inception; since the original data collection in 2008, we had been working towards their greater involvement in the analysis and dissemination phases and we had planned return visits to facilitate the co-analysis process. However, the risks posed since 2009 have curtailed those plans at least in the short-term; yet it is important to note that the women themselves were part of the decision-making process that led to the temporary cessation of communication and activities.

<sup>23</sup> This limitation is noted despite the inclusion of the women in the preparation of the research instruments and data collection. It must also be mentioned that some of the women have spoken openly in public demonstrations and during investigations by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights in 2009. Thus, while they are speaking out for themselves elsewhere, and thus owning the communication of their experiences (Madlingozi, 2010), and taking "*charge of the trajectories of their own transformations*" (Fox, 2009:124), we have elected not to place them at greater risk through further affiliation with our study.

<sup>24</sup> Details of the conference are withheld to protect the identity of the coordinator and the women.

<sup>25</sup> In an effort to increase the participants' access to the research results, we have provided them with copies of the previous article (Gervais, 2010), this article and the conference presentations; we are facilitating the Spanish translation of the documents.

psychological counselling and educational opportunities<sup>26</sup> to which we helped the women gain access after our last in-person research-based gatherings in 2008, have not only been maintained, but they have actually increased after the 2009 coup, and again after the administration of the 2010 questionnaires. Thus, despite the constraints on the research process, our ethical obligation to care, and the associated steps we have taken to link the research participants with programmes that support their health and empowerment, have not been completely stifled by the political repression (Mander, 2010:268).

Our critical self-reflexive exercise has enabled us to reflect that our duty is not only to adhere to ethical standards and to faithfully represent the women's voices, and not [re-]produce them as victims, but it is also to consider responsibly the implications of power relations, both political and academic, that impact the participants' experiences in life and in research (Madlingozi, 2010). We have acknowledged that the interruption to our research due to the ethical management of risks associated with post-coup state repression has disconnected<sup>27</sup> the participants from an interactive research process. In this way, the steps we have taken to protect the study's participants, while essential and indisputable from an ethical standpoint, have actually compromised other levels of ethics related to accountability, inclusivity, solidarity and care, at least at the present<sup>28</sup> time (Mander, 2010; Madlingozi, 2010).

It is with all of these complexities and limitations in mind, that we now turn to the women's experiences. Although we are "representing" them in this article, it must be noted that we are not diminishing their humanity by [re]producing them as hopeless victims (Inter Pares, 2009:9; Madlingozi, 2010: 226). While we illustrate the harms and insecurities they have faced, we have prioritized their testimonies on solidarity in order to respectfully [re]present them as people fully capable of expressing and exercising their agency towards rights and citizenship and their activism towards personal and collective safety, as well as social and political change (Mander, 2010; Madlingozi, 2010; Pittaway et al., 2010). It is by emphasizing the women's everyday accounts of humanity-filled and hope-filled solidarity that we are also enhancing our solidarity with them because, as Inter Pares (2009:4) contends, the awe-inspiring stories are essential to challenging fear and effecting change.

### **Fear and Insecurity: The Coup d'État's Immediate Effects**

The women's overwhelming sense of insecurity was rooted both in the widespread repression against the entire Honduran population and in the violence targeted specifically against women. The initial news of the coup evoked profound confusion among the women<sup>29</sup> in this study as many admitted that they did not even

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<sup>26</sup> In interviews and questionnaires administered in 2008, the women revealed their need for psychological support and education.

<sup>27</sup> In light of Mohanty's (2003) feminist solidarity perspective, we acknowledge that our privileged and safe position as Western researchers enables us to carry this research forward, whereas the participants' current circumstances have limited their ability to collaborate as research partners with a foreign research team. Nevertheless, in writing this article, we are attempting to remain true to our solidarity-based commitment to the participants.

<sup>28</sup> When it is deemed safe, we will resume direct consultation so that the participants can re-engage as co-analyzers of their own experiences.

<sup>29</sup> We recognize the heterogeneity of Honduran women and that the experiences emphasized herein are unique to this study's participants whose interpretations of the coup may have been shaped in part by the



know what a coup d'État was and credited the human rights workshops for having educated them about it. Immediately after the coup, the women reported having felt *frightened, distressed, nervous, alarmed, panicked, defenceless, impotent, frustrated, furious, indignation, discouraged, sad and abandoned*. One participant described her initial reaction as a *"fatal 'uuh' since for me it was terrible to see how mistreated the people and women were"*. As other participants articulated, the climate was stifling: *"one of the greatest challenges has been the insecurity that we live, the terror of being in the streets and in public spaces"* and *"now we cannot walk freely nor talk about the coup without fear because if we talk they kill us."* The anxiety seems warranted given how the participants observed that *"every day dead people appear and journalists are being persecuted and killed."* As we explore later, beyond the immediate alarming effects, the women have been enduring multiple forms of insecurity and human rights violations since 2009.

### **The Women's Application of Workshop-based Knowledge after the Coup**

Prior to examining the women's experiences with resistance and solidarity, it is instructive to highlight how the women applied their workshop-based knowledge and skills to their post-coup activities. Many respondents conveyed that in relation to the coup, they found the workshops helpful in gaining confidence and strength since they learned *"not to remain silent"*, *"to realize that it is necessary to demand justice"* and *"to be organized"*.

The workshops also enabled the participants to realize and reinforce their citizenship-based roles, rights and duties:

*"[I learned] to assume my responsibility as a citizen and not to wait for others to decide for us"*.

*"With the knowledge I acquired, I know that I have the right to fight so that my rights prevail."*

The women also claimed that one of the main ways that they applied their workshop-based knowledge to the post-coup circumstances was by raising awareness. For some women, the impetus was educational: *"we must inform those who do not know what a coup is"*. Others were engaged collectively and systematically in *"training women in the communities and giving them knowledge to help them understand the reality that we are living"* and by *"participating in the elaboration of a strategic plan."* Given how integral education and knowledge are to civil society movements, the women's awareness campaigns must be recognized as significant contributions to the ongoing attempts to overcome repressive post-coup conditions. Yet, as we explore below, their educational efforts constitute only one among many workshop-based strategies that they have been employing as they negotiate their post-coup conditions.

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workshops' human rights content. The women's views may also be influenced by their struggles as rurally-based impoverished citizens. Thus, while this study has not collected data that would enable a comparison of reactions and experiences between women living in urban versus rural contexts, as well as financially privileged versus impoverished circumstances, we appreciate the complexity of factors that shape Honduran women's varied experiences with, and differing interpretations of the 2009 coup.

### The Women's Involvement in 'the Resistance' Movement

In response to the coup and its associated injustices, 72%<sup>30</sup> of this study's participants joined what one woman described as

*“a unified movement that is called «The Resistance», it is the rapprochement of many neighbours and friends who support the resistance and we women are a large part of it. The resistance is feminine.”*

The latter claim is consistent with Paredes and Sierra's (2010) findings that indicate that Honduran women make up at least half of the participants in public protests. The women in this study have become organized in regional and national feminist networks that oppose the coup, including, but not limited<sup>31</sup> to, Feministas en Resistencia in the south and central zones of the country and to Mujeres en Resistencia de la Zona Norte in the north, as well as to Las Petateras<sup>32</sup> through the Observatorio de Transgresión Feminista. Such initiatives are indicative of the extent to which local feminist movements were established immediately and widely after the coup, and they are further testament to the participants' conviction in collective strategies intended to transform their daily realities (Fox, 2009; Mohanty, 2003). As one participant explained, the women are proud to be engaged collectively in solidarity-based activism: *“after the coup we are more united in the resistance, the women, we are the ones who participate, this solidarity has resulted in us being more organized and not staying in our houses doing nothing.”*

The main resistance strategies in which the women engaged include coordination meetings, training sessions, poster campaigns, petitions, marches, sit-ins, rallies in parks, negotiations, radio forums, retreats, theatrical performances, fundraisers, the preparation of food and the distribution of water for protesters, as well as boycotts against pro-coup media and multi-national fast food and beverage companies. In all these activities, the women have demonstrated their organizational capacities to build the necessary connections to courageously resist against the coup-related injustice and repression (Inter Pares 2009). Nevertheless, as we explore below, their engagement in the popular resistance movement has placed them at greater risk of harms and has left many struggling with various forms of insecurities.

### Direct Harms Resulting from the Post-Coup Resistance Movement

While the majority of the women in this study have been highly motivated to participate in the resistance movement, and despite the peaceful nature of their protests,

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<sup>30</sup> The remaining 28% did not participate in anti-coup efforts due mainly to fear of being threatened and beaten – a testament to the paralyzing effects of the insecurity stemming from state violence. Some non-participants were not involved because of health reasons or due to responsibilities with child and elderly care. One non-resister refused to participate for political reasons: *“I do not believe that to walk in the streets defending one single person who I know has committed crimes is the best way to express my nonconformity.”* Such a response reveals the differing opinions even within the tight-knit workshop group. It should also be noted that the majority of the women in this study were not Zelaya supporters; many were critical of his government's corruption and irregularities. Thus the women have sought to distinguish their activism from Zelaya's projects and to associate their efforts rather with the defense of democracy.

<sup>31</sup> The names of some organizations are intentionally excluded to protect the identity of the women.

<sup>32</sup> For more information, consult: <http://petateras.org/observatorio.htm>

many have suffered adversely as a result of their involvement. Women's bodies have been targeted physically and sexually by police and soldiers during the repression of protests, the enforcement of curfews and the execution of night raids (FEHR, 2009: 8). In this study, 29% of the participants reported having been victims of repression-based physical aggression. While many were pushed, shoved and beaten, some found other aspects of the state-based coercion overwhelming and physically harmful:

*"I was a victim of the soldiers on August 14th, they threw tear gas bombs at me and they damaged my skin, they outran me with tanks and they chased me and I have been affected psychologically."*

Other respondents faced serious risks as a result of repressive tactics:

*"On the 15th of September at 4 in the afternoon we were in a march in the street in front of [name] and the police and military commandos fired real shots at the crowd to disperse the protest."<sup>33</sup>*

*"We have been victims of police and military violence, they have beaten us, persecuted us, they have tried to silence us, the same soldiers have used all the armaments they have against the people."*

None of the respondents disclosed personal incidents of sexual violence; however, many reflected on it as a collective concern and referred to the implications for other women. For example, a young woman shared that

*"What has impacted me personally is to know that people close to me and that I cherish have been going through difficult moments being victims of military violence, they were not only brutally beaten and treated disrespectfully but they have also been sexually assaulted simply for being women."*

Another participant recounted an assault against her sibling:

*"[D]uring a protest, my sister was aggressively groped in her intimate parts and she was beaten on her breasts and buttocks with a stick and it left her purple and black for months after. It was cruel."*

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [IACHR] (2009), *Feministas en Resistencia Honduras* [FERH] (2009) and Paredes and Sierra (2010) have confirmed the sexualized targeting against activist women's bodies. Their investigations documented hundreds of women's testimonies relating to numerous forms of post-coup related sexual assaults that included groping and beatings of breasts and vaginas, threats of sexual violence, intimidation tactics with explicit sexist insults, as well as gang rapes<sup>34</sup> by soldiers and police during post-protest detentions, curfew sweeps and night raids in

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<sup>33</sup> The name of the location is removed to protect the organization and the identity of the women.

<sup>34</sup> Gang rapes were executed against women who were picked up alone as well as in groups (FERH, 2009).

homes. In light of the extent of the systematic sexual violations in post-coup Honduras, it is important to note that while none of the participants in our study divulged any sexual assaults against themselves directly, a workshop coordinator has shed clearer light on the women's silence:

*“Almost all the women who were attacked in protests were touched in a sexual way because the beatings against women were always against intimate body parts, their breasts and private areas. If they did not share directly about it, it is because they are embarrassed about it.”*

While this study's self-report data limits our ability to ascertain all aspects of the women's experiences, based on what they have revealed, it is evident that their distress over coup-related sexual violence against all women has been overwhelming.

### **Indirect Harms and Collateral Insecurities**

As we have just noted, while some participants may not have been harmed directly by the political violence, they were all invariably traumatized by it, particularly out of concern for fellow women in the struggle. For example, some participants shared that

*“I was not a victim of violence but I saw many other women who were beaten, raped and I even saw some killed and I feel bad for not being able to do anything.”*

*“I have not been a direct victim but yes we have been affected by the violence because since the coup d'État there have been many more deaths of women.”*

The fearfulness associated with the post-coup increase in the deaths of women is consistent with statistics monitored by the Fiscalía Especial de la Mujer<sup>35</sup> in Honduras that show an increase in femicides from 252 in 2008 to 405 in 2009 (Feministas en Resistencia, 2010: 9). It is also significant to note that over 50% of the femicides recorded in 2009 occurred in the three months immediately following the coup with a noticeable peak in July at the height of the popular resistance (Ibid: 8; FERH, 2009: 18).

In addition to the concern over violence against women, the participants have also been affected by harm perpetrated against other fellow citizens. For example, some women were distressed over neighbours: *“I personally did not experience any violence but my neighbours were sent to prisons and we are scared and worried”* and *“one of my neighbours had his head crushed with a rock, what is happening in our country is deplorable, there is no security.”* Similarly, another participant related the multiplying effects of the risks and the feelings of powerlessness: *“my brother as a radio announcer has suffered threats and all the family is scared of what can happen, the impotence and the insecurity is weighing us down.”* Such explanations are indicative of the paralyzing

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<sup>35</sup> This attorney's office focuses specifically on women's issues. As with all statistics, they represent recorded incidents and do not reflect the totality of actual occurrences. Femicide refers to violent deaths against women based specifically on gender (Feministas en Resistencia, 2010: 9).

way in which fear has affected the women even in the absence of direct violence against them.

In addition to the preoccupation with their own victimization and other's suffering, the women in this study are enduring other repercussions as a result of their participation in the resistance. For example, some live in constant fear as a result of intimidation tactics: *"I have had phone calls of death threats against me and my daughter"*. Other women have suffered emotional stress as a result of divisions and discrimination within their families and among friends over the coup and the resistance movement. Some participants shared that

*"It affects me a lot because in my family there are different viewpoints on the subject and that creates a lot of conflicts."*

*"My family, my mother, my son object when I walk in the resistance marches."*

*"Some of my friends are golpistas, that makes me feel very sad."<sup>36</sup>*

*"I have been discriminated against by friends for being part of the resistance."*

Such tensions within the women's personal relations not only demonstrate the pervasiveness of the coup's consequences, but they also reveal the additional obstacles they face as they attempt to improve their collective well-being.

The disrupted economy resulting from the coup has also left the participants in financially destabilized circumstances. All the women in our study identified economic insecurity as one of their most serious post-coup concerns because they are struggling with devastating financial losses due to interrupted employment and increased unemployment. One participant conveyed emphatically a recurring preoccupation among the respondents: *"there is no work and no money to maintain our families."* Another woman explained that *"the curfews affected my work schedule, I could not work for eight months."* In addition to the ensuing financial insecurity that they faced within the precarious post-coup economy in Honduras, many of the women can also no longer rely on the usual support from relatives' money transfers due to the global economic crisis. As one participant explained, *"the economy has affected me, help from my children abroad no longer arrives, they have stopped helping me because they have less work."* The extent to which the coup has left these already impoverished women struggling with *"more poverty"* serves as another example of the coup's extended repercussions into so many vital realms of the Honduran women's lives.

Such debilitating permeation was variously echoed by all the participants in this study. But one woman's summary of the multiple challenges that she and her fellow Hondurans must now confront was particularly telling:

*"After the coup we have to face problems with lack of education, unemployment, abandonment from foreign countries, poverty and hunger"*

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<sup>36</sup> 'Golpistas' is an unofficial Spanish word that refers to the planners, implementers and sympathizers of the coup d'État. There is no English equivalent.

*and effects on our health, we are persecuted and the police have files on us.”*

Such co-existence of cultural, economic, food, health, emotional, physical, as well as local and global insecurities also constitute violations of domestic and international criminal and human rights laws (IACHR, 2009; Mejía and Fernández, 2010; Paredes and Sierra, 2010). As we explore below, in light of the deep fears and concerns associated with such prolonged devastation, the respondents have offered incisive interpretations of their insecurity.

### **The Women’s Critical Reflections on Insecurity**

The women’s own critical reflections on the subject of security further reveal the extent of their struggles with insecurity. Some women’s disparaging critiques revealed ironies and anxieties: *“the security that the government offers is fictitious, it does not exist, we are more unsafe than before.”* Other participants variously related how they felt about the implications of unreliable and even injurious criminal justice officials:

*“We live with insecurity because there is no trust of the police.”*

*“We feel like an orphaned child, unprotected.”*

*“Now what we have is citizen insecurity, legal insecurity, now the police do not guard, protect; now they beat, persecute, chase and kill the people.”*

Other women have similarly criticized that Hondurans now live in a climate of *“fatal insecurity”* and the *“only security we have is that we will be assassinated at anytime for claiming our rights.”*<sup>37</sup> The women’s interpretations of their own insecurity reflect their noteworthy capacity to analyze political, institutional and experiential constraints and contradictions (Mander, 2010); they further serve as the impetus upon which they have built their solidarity-based activism.

### **Solidarity as a Source of Security**

Through the women’s own words, we explore how they understood and experienced security through solidarity within the context of the coup. As enabled within the human security framework, we invoke a wider interpretation of security that includes perceptions of protection and emotional well-being (UNCHS, 2003). Regarding solidarity, we draw upon Inter Pares’, Mohanty’s and Steans’ aforementioned explications, and we further emphasize how solidarity, as a source of strength, unity and mutual aid, serves as both a means and an end in the context of security (Scott and Marshall, 2009: 722). After demonstrating how the women’s sense of solidarity helped

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<sup>37</sup> The participants and other activists have critiqued the recurrence of repression as having set Honduras back by decades (Feministas en Resistencia Honduras, 2009:14; Mejía and Fernández, 2010). However, we did not systematically collect data that would enable us to compare if the participants’ experiences of violence, fear and insecurity were similar to, worse than, greater than or less than how Honduran women felt during the political instability of the 1980s. We encourage subsequent comparative studies that situate the contemporary circumstances in a broader context.

them overcome their fears and provided emotional comforts, we examine the women's own perceived limitations regarding what they deemed achievable through solidarity.

### ***Overcoming Fear and Insecurity***

As noted above, the coup and the ensuing state control instilled profound fear among Honduran citizens. While the fear had paralyzing effects on the women, many were able to overcome them at various moments through the solidarity that they felt with the women from their workshops<sup>38</sup> and in the larger resistance movement. For example, one participant shared that

*“The fear, it is a challenge that defeats our participation in different marches. At one time I was in a march but I did not realize it would end at night and with the curfews they expose us to everything but thank God we were together and when we are united we lose our fears.”*

This testimony further reinforces how for some participants, their individualized perceptions of security were contingent upon collectively generated protection. Another respondent related a similar experience where, in the face of repression during protests, she felt that she benefited from the support of fellow women:

*“One of the challenges was to be in the struggle and to see so much abuse because I saw myself surrounded many times by soldiers and police and it scared me but my female companions in the struggle were my strength.”*

As another woman imparted, the solidarity she felt with women both near and far helped her overcome intimidation:

*“We have received solidarity from the women in my class, by women's groups and other international organizations supporting the dispossessed and enslaved and thanks to it I lost the fear of the weapons and the golpistas.”*

In addition, given that the violence, kidnappings and assassinations have been occurring in both public and private spaces (FERH, 2009), the women have also felt the need to protect each other in their homes and communities. One participant conveyed the benefits of direct support to each other:

*“The solidarity between us women has grown stronger and has succeeded in uniting us more and in taking more care of one another ... In my community we as women we help one another and we watch each others' backs.”*

Another respondent summarized the overarching effect of the solidarity-security symbiosis: *“All the ones from the resistance feel more secure because there has been*

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<sup>38</sup> As noted in Gervais (2010), solidarity was integral to the women's workshop experiences and it had sustained them through many personal challenges; as the subsequent examples demonstrate, in the post-coup context, their dependency on solidarity evolved in its meaning and intensity.

*solidarity.*” This construction of security through solidarity as being affected by one’s involvement in the resistance movement sheds additional light on a significant<sup>39</sup> dimension of the solidarity-security symbiosis. Overall, these accounts demonstrate the women’s collective capacities to strategically overcome their fears, mitigate risks and manage insecurities by finding “*new courage in reaching out to others, building trust and mutual support*” (Inter Pares, 2009:1). By extension, they have been able to continue to challenge the violations against their rights and to reclaim democracy.

### ***Comforting Security***

In addition to the benefits of solidarity in the midst of political violence, some of the women have felt an underlying sense of emotional security through their solidarity with each other. Such solidarity has been affirming and life-giving. For example, a participant pointed to the importance of kindness in the face of uncertainty: “*the solidarity of the women has been stronger and yes at times one feels scared but when one feels the warmth that we give to each other then it is when we move forward.*” Another respondent echoed the securitizing advantages of emotional reinforcement: “*I feel more secure because we can shoulder our problems, within so many situations we feel so much support.*” Yet another woman explained the collective processes and benefits of combining education and solidarity:

*“The women, we are strong and more united in the struggle because it is the only way we can attain security. There is unity plus trust plus freedom to express opinions, I think about this solidarity from which we are educating ourselves to be able to claim and live our rights, it has resulted in us getting better, there is more communication and yes I always feel secure because I know what my rights are and I feel supported.”*

This explanation sheds light on how significant solidarity is as a base for trust, education, freedom and support which together contribute to the women’s feelings of security that are both empowering and comforting. By extension, another participant explained the depth and dynamics of the support:

*“All the women we have been supportive in solidarity, we have been family and the pain of one has been the pain of the other and the joys of one have been my joys, I believe that we have succeeded in knowing each other more as women, we have been friends, sisters, if a woman has been beaten, we are not silenced before anything or anyone, we defend her and help her.”*

This participant points to the degree to which the profound solidarity felt among the women generates impressive courage that enables them to bear witness to injustice despite the dangers (Inter Pares, 2009). Furthermore, as another woman articulated, the security derived from such solidarity-based confidence also nourishes the sustaining optimism that change is possible:

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<sup>39</sup> While this proposed solidarity-resistance symbiosis merits further exploration, it is beyond the scope and space of this article.



*“The solidarity has strengthened, the solidarity is needed ... Before the coup there was less solidarity, there is more security because united we have more hope that through our struggles, our dreams will be realized.”*

The aforementioned testimonies demonstrate how, in the face of the Honduran state that not only fails to ensure the safety of its citizens, and that actually exacerbates their insecurities, the women have created their own security-generating networks that sustain them in their daily struggles. Such an accomplishment was articulated effectively by a participant who conveyed the women’s pride and their critique against the state simultaneously: *“Security is what we have by our own acts but we should have it by our police.”*

### **Limits to Solidarity**

Despite the sense of security and support that the women feel from the solidarity they share amongst themselves, it is important to recognize that the reassurance it provides is far from absolute because many of the participants remain constrained by fear due to the pervasiveness of the risks associated with the ongoing political violence. Two participants’ accounts point to that undeniable reality:

*“There is a lot of solidarity, although one knows that today more than ever we are unprotected, every day there is more violence, more deaths of women, children, youth, we are terrified to go out of our houses.”*

*“The solidarity between women is mutual. We unite because being united is our strength, we are struggling for a better life. But I think that now no one is safe and we feel impotent with so many women who have suffered in the struggle.”*

Without diminishing women’s long-established abilities to both survive and thrive through solidarity, these testimonies are important reminders of the terrifying realities of coup-related state control (Paredes and Sierra, 2010). Torture survivors from previous repressive regimes in Central America have similarly related that the security derived from solidarity is a subjective psychological sentiment; and while it may be compelling and sustaining, it is limited by the prevailing insecurity maintained by the all-pervading repressive apparatus (Gervais and Felices-Luna, 2010). Furthermore, contrary to the aforementioned claims of increased solidarity, other participants’ sense of security through solidarity has been inhibited due to perceived divisions<sup>40</sup> among women’s groups. As one woman explained:

*“the women are more participatory and expressing what is happening in the country but I see that there is not a lot of unity in the groups, there are always people who protect their side. Solidarity for me is to be united and to love your neighbour and when there is a true solidarity yes I would feel more secure.”*

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<sup>40</sup> See Mohanty (2003) and Weldon (2006) on the implications of, and solutions towards divisions among women and women’s groups in solidarity movements.

Such a criticism is an important reflection on how the degree of security experienced is contingent upon the level and authenticity of the solidarity established, the latter of which is understandably difficult to build amidst stifling state control. For example, as another participant emphasized, despite the advancements, obstacles remain:

*“Yes we have been successful in having solidarity between us but I think that we still need a lot more solidarity because there are women in the same workshops who are indifferent to the problem that we are living, there are many who have preferred to withdraw from the workshops when we touch on the theme of the coup d’État.”*

While differing political opinions may appear to be inevitable factors that hinder<sup>41</sup> solidarity, one must recognize that some women are so completely fearful of repercussions to anti-coup efforts that they remain totally silent and disengaged in order to protect themselves and their families. So while perceived by some as anti-solidarity or anti-resistance behaviours, non-participation in and non-association with solidarity-based activities may actually constitute some women’s intentional solution to their own security. For example, one woman demonstrates that while she is in fact in favour of the movement, she is strategically remaining disconnected from it for safety reasons:

*“I have not participated in the resistance because I am afraid of being beaten but it is worth to go on fighting so that one day there will be democracy, justice, equality of rights for every Honduran.”<sup>42</sup>*

This support of, yet lack of participation in the resistance reinforces the complex context of the women’s engagement in solidarity towards their security. In their entirety, the quotations above demonstrate that while the quest for security through the approach of solidarity is undoubtedly a worthy, and arguably an essential pursuit, it is one that remains fraught with obstacles and risks. Without undermining women’s capacities to achieve security and advance social change through solidarity, the enormity and complexity of the political, economic, social and patriarchal challenges they face cannot be overlooked (Denov, 2006). The quagmire seems overwhelming because it is the same repression-producing structural impediments that render the ‘security through solidarity’ approach so indispensable as an alternative, that also seem to be impeding its full realization by the control and dangers they pose. Yet the fragility of the women’s circumstances seems to have intensified some of their desires to propel the progress made thus far. As a participant recommended, the momentum must be sustained:

*“Now there is more solidarity, more unity, more identifying with each other; but now we have to maintain these alliances, we cannot lose them.”*

<sup>41</sup> For a discussion on how diversity and difference can be acknowledged and integrated into solidarity-building, see Fox (2009) and Mohanty (2003).

<sup>42</sup> The original quotation in Spanish included the female and male version of ‘Honduran’.

## Conclusion

Solidarity among women is certainly not a novel phenomenon. Even one of the study's participants reminded us that: "*The woman is the most conscientious, the one who has been most in solidarity and it has always been that way.*" The Honduran women's early twenty-first century experiences featured herein serve as yet another example of women's collective potential to transfer their workshop-based knowledge, solidarity and organizational skills to unexpected and evolving conditions, and to consequently reshape democracy, citizenship, equality and freedom. In the face of multiple and pervasive insecurities generated mainly by state violence and economic devastation, the women have managed to create some meaningful moments of human 'security', albeit to varying degrees, through their solidarity with each other. While the broader political, economic and social transformation ultimately required is yet to be achieved in Honduras, the ways in which the women's efforts to join together to build connections that yielded meaningful results amongst themselves are testaments that Inter Pares' 'security through solidarity' principle is a valuable<sup>43</sup> approach to pursue.

However, the women's testimonies also revealed the complex nuances of both success and struggle in their pursuit of security and that not all the women were able to fully trade their fear for trust through solidarity (Inter Pares 2009: 1). Thus, despite the idealism, truth and necessity associated with Inter Pares' advocacy for solidarity as a means to security, it is a process that is inevitably fraught with risks and set-backs that must be managed cautiously. Nevertheless, as believers in its imperativeness and potential, we seek to extend Inter Pares' emphasis on the solidarity-security symbiosis by adding what we contend is an essential dimension through the maxim: 'Solidarity is Prevention'. The primary author first read the words in Spanish on a mural at the University of Managua in Nicaragua in 2005. While the mural was attempting to draw attention to the prevention of HIV/AIDS, the obvious potential of an alliance between solidarity and prevention for all human conditions immediately struck a profound chord within her. The prevention of harm is inextricably intertwined with the promise of human security, and when they are simultaneously propelled by feminist principles and practices of genuine solidarity, all world citizens will benefit from the rights to which we are all entitled.

In relation to this evolving solidarity-based alliance on conceptual and practical terrains, we offer a final reflection on our obligations as solidarity-oriented researchers at a methodological level. In light of the profound challenges that the women will continue to face, it is incumbent upon us to continue accompanying them in two interrelated ways. First, in order to illustrate more completely, more responsibly and more respectfully the intricacies of the women's post-coup struggles, we must move beyond self-report written questionnaire data and return to our previous ethnographic approaches that involve qualitative in-person interviews and other inclusive and interactive research activities which explore longitudinally their personal, political and socio-economic conditions in

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<sup>43</sup> Solidarity can also be effective in generating collective security. Solidarity does raise the cost of repression for the repressive regime; the broader and deeper the network of solidarity, the more it costs in political capital (e.g. cover ups, public relations) to repress a larger opposition. In this sense, solidarity may yield a certain level of protection. In this light, the presence of solidarity may impact an individual's risk-benefit calculation whereby the person may choose to engage in resistance activities because they feel protected, albeit to a limited extent, from a sense of 'safety in numbers'.

greater depth (Mander, 2010; Madlingozi, 2010; Pittaway et al., 2010). As Mander (2010: 2690) has implored, we are not going to “*just walk away*” after the data has been collected and published. We are committed to a genuine solidarity (Madlingozi, 2010). When it is deemed safe for both participants and researchers to resume our solidarity-based collaboration without putting anyone at risk, we will fully<sup>44</sup> restore our reciprocal relations and engage in a complete co-analysis and co-production<sup>45</sup> once again.

The second form of accompaniment consists of our responsibility to extend the reciprocity beyond the data collection, analysis and dissemination phases. As Fox (2009:116) has contended, ethnography, however progressive and inclusive it may be, is not the ‘*end point*’ of feminist research. It is essential to fully engage the interplay between scholarship and activism so as to press academic discourse into relevant service that fosters appropriate and life-enhancing social change (Fox, 2009; Wise, 1999). Such an endeavour will inevitably move us beyond disciplinary, geographic, political, social, cultural and economic boundaries and much closer towards the esteemed coalition-building advocated by transnational feminism that ‘responsibilizes’ us all to global citizenship (Fox, 2009; Mohanty, 2003). To this end, we will continue to respond to the women’s aforementioned request to be heard and helped not only through the sharpening and sharing of our joint analyses, but also through the enhancement of our united activism as a gesture of solidarity with them as fellow world citizens.

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<sup>44</sup> As noted before, in the meantime, we will continue to support the women through cautious communication and the provision of counseling and educational resources.

<sup>45</sup> Our effort to include the workshop coordinator as a co-presenter at an international women’s conference serves as a testament to our commitment to solidarity-based collaboration, co-analysis and co-production. We considered this a safe space and significant opportunity through which to maintain our interconnection as a community with the participants (Mohanty, 2003:251).

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