

Rest as a Radical Form of Care: IM-Defensoras Activism in Mesoamerica

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In the last decade, the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras) has organized numerous workshops and activities with thousands of women in the Mesoamerican region to provide them with skills and resources to sustain their lives, families, communities, and territories. Due to the multiple layers of violence these women experience as a result of extractivist projects, land displacements, sexual abuse, militarization, and intimidation, the alliances and networks of IM-Defensoras have focused on rethinking self-care, collective care, and healing from a political perspective to produce positive social change. In this fashion, rest is introduced as a “right” that responds to the emotional and material needs derived from chronic and toxic stress and a legacy of exhaustion. Using Tricia Hersey’s and Hannah Drake’s theories on rest and its importance in the Black community, this study argues that, similarly, IM-Defensoras revindicates rest as a radical form of care in support of decolonization, transformation, emancipation, and empowerment.

Palabras clave: ethics of care, feminism, indigeneity, women, Mesoamerica, IM-Defensoras

En la última década, la Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Mujeres Defensoras de Derechos Humanos (IM-Defensoras) ha organizado numerosos talleres y actividades con miles de mujeres en la región mesoamericana para proporcionarles capacidades y recursos para sostener sus vidas, familias, comunidades y territorios. Debido a las múltiples capas de violencia que estas mujeres experimentan como resultado de proyectos extractivistas, desplazamientos de sus tierras, abuso sexual, militarización e intimidación, las alianzas y redes de IM-Defensoras se han enfocado en repensar el autocuidado, el cuidado colectivo y la sanación desde una perspectiva política para producir un cambio social positivo. De esta manera, se presenta el descanso como un “derecho” que responde a las necesidades emocionales y materiales derivadas del estrés crónico y tóxico y a un legado de agotamiento. Al utilizar las teorías de Tricia Hersey y de Hannah Drake sobre el descanso y su importancia en la comunidad afro, este estudio explica que, de modo similar, IM-Defensoras reivindica el descanso como una forma radical de cuidado en apoyo de la descolonización, la transformación, la emancipación y el empoderamiento.

Keywords: ética del cuidado, feminismo, indigeneidad, mujeres, Mesoamérica, IM-Defensoras

Introduction: Organizing for Social Justice

In 2010, a group of regional organizations constituted by women human rights defenders from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador met in Oaxaca at the First Mesoamerican Gathering of Women Human Rights Defenders to share concerns regarding the sociopolitical conflicts affecting their areas and the exhaustion resulting from the work invested toward social justice. From this first gathering, the Mesoamerican Women Rights Defenders Initiative (IM-Defensoras) emerged, representing currently over “2,250 WHRDs [Women Human Rights Defenders] and 300 organizations from diverse social movements and territories in the region” (IM-Defensoras, n.d.).¹ The Initiative arranges workshops and collaborative programs and develops gender-sensitive resources to empower and protect women in dire socioeconomic situations.

In geographical contexts shaped by land displacements, white settler colonialism, patriarchy, neoliberalism, extractivism, criminalization, pillage, and structural violence, women suffer a higher risk of physical and emotional damages and, therefore, those dedicated to social change experience not only intimidation but, in many cases, tragic deaths. As indicated by a Global Witness report for 2023, of the 166 “official” murders of environmental activists, 54 took place in Mexico and Central America. From 2012 to 2023, 2,106 environmental activists were assassinated (Global Witness 2024). As the 2024 report indicates, “Indigenous People and Afro-descendants continue to be disproportionately targeted, accounting for 49% of total murders.” This finding gives just a small context for the perils experienced by environmental activists, since women suffer the most from multiple layers of oppression through physical violence, sexual assaults, and rapes.² In addition, many of these women live in rural areas where they sustain the

¹ The Mesoamerican Human Rights Defenders Initiative (IM-Defensoras) is a local and regional alliance composed of diverse women human right defenders (WHRDs), organizations and networks created in 2010 to address the regional increase of violence against women human right defenders in Mesoamerica. The Initiative is constituted by the Colectiva Feminista para el Desarrollo Local (El Salvador), Consorcio para el Diálogo Parlamentario and Equidad Oaxaca (Mexico), JASS-Mesoamerica, and national networks of women defenders in El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua and Guatemala. IM-Defensoras aims to empower and engage women defenders from the organizations to strengthen solidarity and protection among themselves and to amplify the visibility, acknowledgement, and impact of their human rights work. For the Initiative, a woman human rights defender is a mother who wants justice for her disappeared daughter, a teacher who wants high quality public schools, a maquila worker who wants better salaries, an LGTBQ+ activist, an Indigenous or peasant woman who defends her territory, a young woman who fights for abortion rights, or a journalist who exposes organized crime, governmental impunity, and police corruption. Women human rights defenders mobilize daily for freedom, equality, and justice in a context of violence and discrimination. Source: IM-Defensoras (n.d.).

² In an Urgent Action Fund publication from 2016, activist Laura María Carvajal explores the extractivist model in Latin America and its negative impacts, particularly on the lives of women. According to her, extractivist projects restructure the local economy, disrupting previous forms of social reproduction, and producing the masculinization of labor for the corporation in charge of extracting natural resources in territories surveilled by the military. Thus, women are exposed to sexual abuse, rapes, and patriarchal violence (32). The privatization of water and the commons contribute to the precarious conditions of women who must walk longer distances to access water and take care of family members suffering from soil

livelihood of their family members being dramatically exposed to environmental degradation caused by extractivist projects.

The ongoing work done by IM-Defensoras in the last decade has been essential not only to protect women and their territories, but also to provide them with information, education, and resources otherwise inaccessible due to their marginalized positions in countries whose institutions have historically effaced and pushed away women, as well as Indigenous, and Afro-descendent populations. As a result, activism and the formation of social movements and regional alliances promote platforms of sustainability for these women to live life with dignity and self-worth, while working toward social justice and personal and collective healing. The arduous commitment to keep their territories safe, free from rapacious transnational corporations, and to fight against daily patriarchal violence has augmented emotional and physical drainage. Exhaustion comes primarily from their cultural, political, and socioeconomic legacy marked by institutional abandonment and by exclusion.³ Moreover, the sacrifices and compromises made in activism similarly cause feelings of burnout, tiredness, and fatigue. Testimonies on exhaustion and burnout led the IM-Defensoras to center self-care, collective care, and healing as primordial practices to strengthen, empower, and emancipate women's bodies and minds to improve their lives, their communities, and their territories.

Many years of sharing ideas related to these topics have contributed to the production of broad ranges of knowledge and contacts with ancestral cosmologies. Meetings held over this past decade also provided the education to handle lawsuits against local governments for impunity and corruption in cases of militarized territories, forced disappearances of social movement Indigenous members, and the killing of activists.⁴

pollution due to extractivism (32). According to Maristella Svampa (2015), the commons refer to elements such as seeds, water, natural goods, and spaces of collective life and the ecosystem (76). In the Global South, environmental activism has introduced a strong interest in the commons as a response to overexploitation of the land and the dismantling of resources by transnational corporations and extractivism.

³ Hanna Samir Kassab and Jonathan Rosen (2019) refer to Mexico and Central America as fragile and failed states characterized by structural and institutional violence due to authoritarianism, governmental corruption, militarism, and impunity. In addition, US security aid in the last decades has dramatically contributed to the violence in the region, given the militarization of zones dedicated to extractivism and narcotrafficking. In *A History of Violence*, Oscar Martínez (2016) defines Central American society as a “cauldron of oppressive military governance” resulting from failed peace processes after the “dirty wars” (138). Furthermore, Central America experienced two centuries after independence that were dominated by the Europe-oriented elites in the nineteenth century known as the “second conquest”: “a new export economy based on coffee and bananas pushed peasants off their land and forced them into plantation labor” (Chomsky 2021, 112). Aviva Chomsky also emphasizes how, by the end of the nineteenth century, and during the twentieth, Central America's economies depended on US investments followed by US political and military intervention (2021, 113).

⁴ After the assassination of Lenca environmental activist Berta Cáceres in Honduras, her daughters Berta and Laura hired The International Advisory Group of Experts (GAIPE) composed of lawyers Rosana Altholtz, Jorge E. Molano Rodríguez, Dan Saxon, Miguel Ángel Urbina Martínez, and Liliana María Uribe Tirado “to conduct an independent analysis of the investigation, prosecution, and, if applicable, punishment of those responsible for the March 2, 2016 murder of Berta Isabel Cáceres Flores and the

In prioritizing self-care for sustainability and sovereignty, IM-Defensoras are effectively resemantizing and reconsidering this controversial concept co-opted by neoliberalism in the form of the wellness industry that designs more productive bodies in consumerist-driven societies. However, a non-Western appropriation of self-care would seem to highlight rest as a radical form of care.

In viewing rest as the potential for resistance and healing, this essay examines Margareta Asp's (2015) study of the lived experiences of a wide range of participants whom she interviewed to understand empirically how to better approach clinical care by prioritizing patients' needs. Listening to and understanding individuals' specific circumstances resembles the work done by Black activists Tricia Hersey (2022) and Hannah Drake (2022), whose thoughtful reflections on rest are based on their daily life experiences and those of members of the Black community. Rest emerges as essential not only in empowering the lives of IM-Defensoras and the thousands of women they represent, but also in sustaining activism more democratically. Revolutionizing self-care involves rest as a priority not a luxury. Similarly, IM-Defensoras' discourses and experiences of exhaustion and mental distress explicitly call for spaces of healing and respite to imagine new, fairer worlds, or to invent practices to strengthen social movements.

This research first explores a rethinking of self-care that both contests its neoliberal cooptation and presents new horizons of hope that emphasize interconnectedness, relationality, and collectivity conjoined with an innovative approach to rest grounded in reflections on Asp, Hersey, and Drake. The significance of rest as part of the self-care/collective care dynamics for healing is then analyzed in the work produced by IM-Defensoras during the last decade.

Reconsiderations of Self-Care and Rest from Non-Western Perspectives

Contemporary discourses on care have been co-opted by neoliberalism through the "wellness industry" in an attempt to shape more productive and effective subjects. In her interviews with eleven social workers in their worksite environment on the Australian eastern seaboard, scholar Michelle Newcomb (2022) concluded that workplaces tend to encourage employees to focus on self-care activities to cope with exhaustion and burnout. However, organizations such as theirs, which promote activities from the "wellness industry," remain completely disconnected from the social workers' well-being and

attempted murder of Castro Gustavo Soto" (Altholtz et al. 2017, 7). Despite governmental impunity and corruption surrounding the assassination, local, regional, and international actors are critically involved in searching for justice, unserved to this day.

feelings, as many of the participants in this study suggest, concerned only in ensuring that “social workers were able to work productively” (229). In fact, all of them felt that the rhetoric of self-care as an individual responsibility detached from the workplace prioritizes “neoliberal demands of productivity and effectiveness” (230). The lack of interest in their emotional well-being and in nurturing a positive team culture confirms the concept of self-care in the service of profit and greed. So-called popular “self-help therapies” and the consumption of big pharma drugs respond similarly to neoliberal demands by benefitting the interest of corporate elites and socially privileged groups (Rimke 2020, 41).

Heidi Rimke and Deborah Brock (2012) use the concept of “psychocentrism” to describe the therapy culture that constructs neoliberal subjects. Instead of incorporating individuals within a larger societal context, neoliberalism blames individuals for any sense of defeat or failure. Western subjects are never well enough and, hence, the uninterrupted consumption of self-help manuals and psychological therapy. According to these researchers, sciences centered on the psyche deem humans responsible for their own individual deficiencies or pathologies: “productive subjects have to be healthy, upstanding, obedient, and efficient—in one word, self-governing—in order to sustain neoliberalism in the face of a weakening and quickly shifting economy” (198), while simultaneously entering the profitable wellness industry. Psychocentrism frames human problems as innate pathologies, thereby detaching human experience from the environment. As Rimke (2016) claims in her introduction to “Mental and Emotional Distress as a Social Justice Issue: Beyond Psychocentrism,” a social justice approach to the emotional and mental life needs to be considered from a socioeconomic and cultural context to first tackle environmental conditionings (5).

Similarly, scholar Brianna Bivens (2021) criticizes the concept of self-care’s dualistic construction, which limits the contours of humanity and reinforces a decontextualized sense of exhaustion due to individual failures. In order to resignify a politics of care, she proposes an emergent ontology focused on *care for the relation* where care signifies “to steward the health of a capacious world and an expansive definition of the human” (105) disinvesting itself “from neoliberalism’s supply myth of individual industrialism” (105), and distributing it more broadly to require “a radical rethinking of the economy, the community, and the role of government” (105).

Likewise, Joan C. Tronto (2015) closes her book *Who Cares? How to Reshape a Democratic Politics* with a chapter titled “Making the Caring-With Revolution Happen.” Examining Western societies, Tronto envisions a politics of care at the center stage of political and social institutions with the focus on the citizen. She calls for changing individuals’ attitudes toward care by recognizing “the diversity and ubiquity of different caring needs” (34). Once individuals are in tune with other peoples’ needs, they would

demand institutional changes to reflect upon care practices and close the gap between governments and societies. While this centralization of care might work in democratic societies, how can we foresee a translation of this emergent ontology in colonized nations where many individuals, groups, and cultures are deprived of humanity and citizenship? How can we collectively care for those bodies that have never mattered due to their historical dehumanization? What alternatives are left if, considering Rimke and Brock's analysis, we abandon a psychocentric approach to mental distress within a context of societal precariousness and vulnerability? Can we rethink practices of self-care and collective care within a social justice framework?

These critical views of care and self-care have also resonated with other Western thinkers such as Andreas Chatzidakis et al. (2020), who in their care manifesto, or Care Collective proposal, decry the "industry which relegates care to something we are supposed to buy for ourselves on a personal basis" (2). For these intellectuals, the boom of the self-care industry or "wellness industry" undermines "our communal care resources and caring capacities by implanting market logics into traditional non-market realms, including those of health and education" (12). As seen in current theoretical and practical debates on care, self-care has been exclusively limited to a neoliberal paradigm that responds to global economic demands, self-responsibility, and individualism. From this viewpoint, self-care is indeed a product of market-driven forces based on accumulation by dispossession, using somewhat similarly David Harvey's (2004) expression on the logic of land grabbing, white settler violence, and accumulation by dispossession. Self-care becomes an elite practice of consuming resources at the expense of poor and disenfranchised groups. If this neoliberal cooptation of self-care promotes inequality, discrimination, and unfairness, how does it have so much power and value within the narratives of the IM-Defensoras in Mesoamerica? Why do we often encounter the need for self-care in these non-Western regions?

The urgency for self-care originates in these geographical contexts out of absolute institutional and governmental neglect. In societies notoriously shaped by a history of colonialism, authoritarianism, militarism, and contemporary neoliberal regimes, self-care is and must be an imperative, as predominantly shown in all the projects, workshops, and practices toward decolonizing the bodies of women and empowering their communities. In defying Western views of self-care and thinking from regionally situated experiences about how local realities affect peripheralized subjectivities, we fathom an appropriation of self-care that deconstructs dualistic conceptualizations of the human and traverses the individual bodies of women toward collectivity, relationality, and interconnectedness. When antagonized by structural violence and forces that destroy indigenous cosmologies and women's bodies, constructive interventions on self-care do need to be re/imagined because care fundamentally responds to the needs of both a precarious self and communities. Such a framework examines the topic of care from an

intersectional perspective across gender, sexuality, race, class, earth beings, and the commons.⁵

Scholars Deva Woodly, Rachel H. Brown, Mara Marin, Shatema Threadcraft, Christopher Paul Harris, Jasmine Syedullah, and Miriam Ticktin (2021) provide alternative views through a critical exchange on the politics of care. They revisit care within a wide range of contexts and experiences highlighting that “a 21st-century approach to the politics of care must aim at unmaking racial capitalism, cisheteropatriarchy, the carceral state, and the colonial present” (891). The outcomes explored by the authors challenge the autonomy of care and its supposed feminine virtue beyond liberal and neoliberal approaches while emphasizing “its inherently interdependent survival strategy, a foundation for political organizing, and a prefigurative politics for building a world in which all people can live and thrive” (891). These reflections mirror the activism carried out by networks and alliances such as the IM-Defensoras for whom self-care becomes an act of political warfare instead of a neoliberal trap.

As scholar Inna Michaeli (2017) aptly affirms in her article “Self-Care: An Act of Political Warfare or a Neoliberal Trap?,” the ways in which mainstream society has internalized and thus performed self-care is radically different from theories and practices on self-care rooted in antiracist, queer, and feminist thought and activism, which promotes moving away from the neoliberal frame to allow for new imaginings and discourses (52). According to Michaeli, what makes self-care an act of political warfare is its political and deindividualistic nature, because feminist legacies and conceptualizations of self-care and well-being “are rooted, I believe, in distinctively feminist analysis of the relationship between self and collective, between personal and political” (53). Furthermore, the self in geographically contextualized areas is not generic but rather “grounded in particular political histories and present situations of violence and vulnerability” (53). Michaeli continues by precisely resignifying traditional conceptualizations of the human and its hierarchy of bodies that matter and those that do not, underlining the revolutionary character of self-care in a world that denies you care. In this sense, self-care means “revolting against the unequal distribution of life and death, health and illness, well-being and suffering, of care-giving and receiving roles, as fixed by patriarchy, white supremacy, global capitalism, and other systems of domination and exploitation” (53). It is in this revolutionary capacity that self-care finds spaces and horizons to truly expand notions of humanity and to empower precarious bodies by making them matter.

⁵ In her book *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds* (2015), anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena analyzes the significant role of nature in Andean Indigenous communities, proposing alternative modes of living based on an intimate connection between all natural elements and humans. In prioritizing and centering the natural world, de la Cadena frames the surrounding landscapes as earth beings, highlighting the agency of mountains, animals, bodies of water, trees, forests, and insects. Thus, she uses the term “beings” to question and dismantle the traditional hierarchy constructed through Western paradigms of differentiating between human beings and nature.

Michaeli's reflections on the importance of self-care echo Ana María Hernández Cárdenas and Nallely Guadalupe Tello Méndez's (2017) analysis of self-care as a political strategy. Hernández Cárdenas is a member of the management team and founder of the Consortium for Parliamentary Dialogue and Equity Oaxaca, and she is responsible for the self-care strategy planning of IM-Defensoras. Tello Méndez is a member of the same consortium and coordinator of the self-care group of the National Network of Women Human Rights Defenders in Mexico. Previously, in 2013, these two activists published the results of their findings as "¿Qué significa el autocuidado para las defensoras de derechos humanos? Diálogos entre nosotras" (What does self-care mean for women human rights defenders? Dialogues among us). This document was the first written report focused on multiple perspectives of self-care and its role in women's lives. One of the main emphases across the various testimonies is the reconceptualization and appropriation of self-care as a transgressive and subversive political tool through prioritizing women's material and emotional needs. Self-care, then, involves the vindication of joy, pleasure, renewal, and resignification for themselves, their collectivities, and the earth (9). Moreover, in contesting the sacrificial meaning of care—traditionally viewed as a female responsibility toward others—women underscored the importance of developing self-care practices in a collective setting, not only to empower themselves but also to strengthen each other. It became the foundation for many recent reflections delving more deeply into issues of self-care, collective care, and healing. In all their work, the topic of rest is mentioned in detail, indicating an accumulation of exhaustion within and outside of activism, as will be explored.

In 2017, Hernández Cárdenas and Tello Méndez published an article on self-care as a specifically political strategy, using data gathered from working with many of the women defenders who participate with IM-Defensoras. They concluded that from 2010 to 2012, eight out of ten defenders suffered from illness, and five out of ten were not satisfied with the time spent with their partners and children (172). In addition, their interpretation of the data showed that women tended to neglect their daily lives due to excessive work for the causes they defend. As a result, approaches to self-care became "an indispensable element for providing full protection to women human rights defenders from a feminist perspective" (173), because in making the personal political, they see themselves as "political subjects who do for ourselves what we want for others" (176) and assert their right to pleasure and to enjoy their own bodies, which have historically suffered from structural and patriarchal violence.⁶

In situating the self-care strategy geographically, IM-Defensoras address the chronic stress experienced by women, Indigenous groups, and other marginalized subjects whose

⁶ My translations from the Spanish throughout.

bodies and territories are constantly targeted and constructed as threats. The constant experience of non-rest dialogues intrinsically with the need for rest, as analyzed by Asp. In her article, “Rest: A Health-Related Phenomenon and Concept in Caring Science” (2015), she points to the interdependent relationship between these two phenomena as human experiences mobilize across the duality between rest and non-rest (4). In analyzing her interviews with sixty-three participants regarding patient care, Asp enumerates two distinctive but interconnected stages of harmony and disharmony that affect human beings as she conceptualizes specific meaning constituents: “being in a rest rhythm, letting go in confidence, being accepted without judgment, dwelling in calm and peace, perceiving pleasurable sensations, strained between limited resources and demanding expectations, and perceiving disinclination and/or ennui” (4). These last two encapsulate disharmony and non-rest, leading to the need for the first five constituents. Asp structured her interviewees’ narratives within these states, arguing that humans’ actions meant to be restful should fit their specific conditions, thus personal, community, and societal contexts are necessary to understanding care for a successful healing outcome. Her clinical analysis underscores situationality and positionality as fundamental considerations for a scientific care approach.

Following Asp’s theories, I argue that IM-Defensoras practices of self-care become necessary to achieve a rest rhythm, confidence, acceptance without judgment, calm, peace, and pleasurable sensations within a context of limited resources or demanding expectations. Asp’s conceptualization of rest as context-specific leads to the framework of chronic and toxic stress experienced by marginal groups inhabiting a “legacy of exhaustion” as used by Tricia Hersey in *Rest is Resistance* (2022). For Hersey, a history of marginality, exclusion, effacement, and displacement creates inherited exhaustion that haunts the bodies of those deemed less than human. Hersey states that “a legacy of exhaustion resides somewhere in all of us, but specifically resides in the bodies of those who have melanated skin. To those who are descendants of plantation labor and those marginalized, this exhaustion is deep” (18).

Inherited exhaustion is still much alive through implicit bias, racism, discrimination, and micro-aggressions, as can be traced in the analysis of the relationship between the health care industry in the US and African American communities. Linda Villarosa (2022) has extensively explored the racist attitudes of health care workers toward Black populations and, more specifically, toward Black women. The legacy of exhaustion parallels the toxic stress she refers to in its negative effects on the bodies of Black pregnant women, such as premature births and a high rate of infant mortality (64). South of the US-Mexican border, we witness a similar pattern regarding marginalized groups such as rural women, Indigenous, Afro-Latin Americans, Afro-Indigenous women, and LGBTQ+ communities. The legacy of exhaustion mirrors the legacy of colonialism that is highly visible currently in social conflicts, land concessions, and neoliberal governments.

Hersey's theory demands caring actions such as self-care and collective care to respond to limited resources and demanding expectations and to inhabit a rest rhythm, confidence, acceptance, calm, and peace through the creation of spaces to imagine pleasurable sensations. Specifically, Hersey's commitment to rest as a tool of resistance is a very personal, political, and collective one. She started to imagine the possibilities rest can offer, not only for her own survival and dignity, but also for the well-being of the Black community in the US. Deeply affected by non-rest and disharmony caused by the toll of capitalism on Black bodies, she posits rest as a resurrection from her "desperation to find relief from my own exhaustion via curiosity, experimentation, and self-preservation" (Hersey 2022, 5). The ways in which Hersey thinks about rest contests the "wellness industry" and the neoliberal conceptualizations of self-care since, instead of using resting time or space to recharge energy and model a more productive worker, rest allows for reimaginings to heal marginalized communities and to envision new ways to sustain activism. It is, consequently, "a form of resistance because it disrupts and pushes back against capitalism and white supremacy. Both these toxic systems refuse to see the inherent divinity in human beings and have used bodies as a tool for production, evil, and destruction for centuries" (7). In revindicating the power of rest, Black women also take ownership of their own bodies as tool agents for change and as sites of liberation (12) instead of vehicles for profit. Rest, as a rethought self-care practice, empowers and repairs their bodies and allows for multiple stories and experiences to be told while deprogramming themselves from grind culture and creating new relationships and alliances that expand the concept of humanity. Hersey claims rest as a collective experience that strengthens the community, becoming a political and social justice movement to challenge capitalism.

Black writer, poet, and activist Hannah Drake published an essay in the *Today's Woman* magazine, which had designated her a "2022 Most Admired Woman." Her "Rest is a Revolutionary Act" (2022) resonates with some of Hersey's reflections, as she vindicates the power of rest for those bodies living with constant stress. Drawing from personal experience, Drake spent several months after Breonna Taylor's murder in 2020 writing and giving countless speeches about racism and antiracism, feeling exhausted because "there was never time for a break. Injustice and racism never take a day off, which meant neither could I" (Drake 2022). After a friend sent her to a retreat center to focus on health, wholeness, and wellness, where she watched a documentary about Toni Morrison, *The Pieces I Am*, she realized her own depletion was craving healing and allowed herself to disregard everything expected of her to focus on sleep. As she reflected, "For Black women to be whole, rest is needed for restoration. This nation is never going to freely give Black women the option to rest. We must take it. My advice to Black women is to do like Toni Morrison and make your list and then go lie down. Use rest to reclaim, refocus and recenter yourself. Rest because you deserve to rest with no excuses needed. Rest without feeling guilty."

As I argue is true for women human rights defenders in Mesoamerica, Drake says: “Rest for Black women is a radical act. Understand that Black women were not brought to this country to rest. We were brought here to work, serve, always be available, to say yes and live a backburner existence. Living this way has contributed to our early demise. There is no reward for being tired, overworked, and overwhelmed” (Drake 2022). Similarly, the bodies of women human right defenders have been territories conquered for natural resources and reproduction. In the IM-Defensoras work, narratives of rest and the need to forge spaces of acceptance, calm, peace, and pleasure are prevalent throughout the testimonies and experiences of women who participated in the studies conducted through the Initiative. The following section examines the role of rest in conjunction with self-care, collective care, and healing as a disruptive practice for the decolonization, emancipation, and liberation of the bodies of the women defenders in Mesoamerica.

The Role of Rest in the Construction of Self-Care, Collective Care, and Healing in the Work of IM-Defensoras

In 2014, IM-Defensoras published *Travesías para pensar y actuar: experiencias de autocuidado de defensoras de los derechos humanos en Mesoamérica* (Pathways to consider and act: Experiences in self-care by human rights defenders in Mesoamerica) (Burgos et al. 2014), based on the knowledge and experiences of some 360 women defenders who built awareness of the importance of self-care and its complexities. The book consists of two parts explaining and contextualizing self-care through different strategies and the ways it is implemented regionally. *Travesías* highlights the reconceptualization of self-care from a non-Western, antineoliberal perspective as being fundamentally subversive and antipatriarchal, since it is used to sustain not only activism but also the physical and mental health of women (16). Self-care is similarly represented as a political action that allows for self and collective acknowledgment and legitimacy, providing defenders with knowledge about their boundaries, their desires, and their dreams of new possibilities for change transcending toxic stress and exhaustion (22). Self-care entails recognizing their individual needs within the collective, uprooting self-care toward the sustainability of their bodies and their social movements. For these reasons, self-care is intrinsically a collective responsibility (23). Some of the self-care resources provided by the Initiative include psychological support for those defenders personally affected by human rights violations or who are living through extreme violence and on hostile grounds, or financial support to care for children or family members.

In articulating the different strategies for nurturing self-care, narratives of rest become particularly significant, evoking “the right to rest” by visiting friends, family members, taking days off, or practicing care (Burgos et al. 2014, 24). According to IM-Defensoras, resting helps social movements to engage in solidarity and love while supporting women’s

well-being (24). Achieving a rest rhythm symbolizes, using Asp's methods, confidence and knowing that they are loved. One of Asp's interviewees mentions how experiencing harmony meant security in knowing that deep down: "I am loved, valuable, this inviolable dignity that no one can take away from me. This is a deep rest" (Asp 2015, 4). IM-Defensoras define their personal and collective needs similarly to Asp's findings in her deeper clinical approach to the meaning of rest.

The section in *Travesías* focused on self-care practices carried out regionally also underscores the need to rest to empower women as activists and as citizens, so they are accepted and live without judgment. Specifically, in Honduras, the Red Nacional de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos (National Network of Human Rights Defenders) has taken action to provide health care access, such as regular checkups, dental treatment, and mammograms along with improvements in the quality of rest for their bodies (Burgos et al. 2014, 50). This form of self-care and collective care aims at centering the bodies, its energies, and emotions on healthy food habits, resting, sharing, making time for themselves, enjoying sexual pleasure, leisure time, and working out (50). For this healing to occur, the Network has created safe spaces where women can listen to each other, bond, and be open about their feelings, struggles, and motivations (43). The creation of spaces of rest has become determinant in the healing processes of the bodies of women human rights defenders. To dwell in calm and peace, Asp explores narratives of rest connected to the importance of the environment or the place where, according to one of her participants, "one can dwell and experience harmony concerning one's feelings, action, and motivation" (2015, 5).

Echoing this idea, the Honduras network of IM-Defensoras describes the need for "creating spaces for rest and renewal of our view of reality that allow us to breathe, reflect, and return with internalized elements for everyday use that transform our lives so that we are in better shape to continue our activism—this is key to sustaining organizational life and, especially, that of the defenders" (Burgos et al. 2014, 52). These spaces that allow for the construction of renewed perspectives resonate with Hersey's recommendation to create spaces to dream characterized by joy, freedom, and rest (2022, 106). For her, not only you can find rest in these spaces created for healing, but also rest itself is a space that serves as "an antidote to the hidden rage present in an exhausted body" (113). Like Hersey, and influenced by Audre Lorde's politicization of self-care in her 1970 book *A Burst of Light and Other Essays* (2017), Alicia Garza (2020), cofounder of the Black Lives Matter movement, discusses the value of self-care in activism and in the daily life of those diminished and dismissed by white supremacy because it allows time to dream (308). In giving herself permission to have that time to think and to dream, she was able to create the Black Lives Matter movement (309).

In the same way that the women defenders in Honduras prioritize restoring the bodies and their territories, Hersey claims that “our bodies and souls want to be well, to heal, to be rested, and to be free from the hold productivity has over our lives. . . . We are worthy now of rest, care, and space” (2022, 123). The concerns theorized by Hersey regarding the toll colonialism, capitalism, and neoliberalism have taken on marginalized bodies are shared by IM-Defensoras, who emphasize self-esteem as part of the self-care strategy (Burgos et al. 2014, 58). The idea of self-esteem seems to also compare to the narratives of acceptance and lack of judgment articulated by Asp’s interviewees. The experiences gathered in the regional networks of Guatemala, El Salvador and Mexico similarly mention resting as one of the material needs for women dealing with personal and political crisis.

At the end of *Travesías*, the writers include a diagnostics questionnaire inquiring about self-care practices at home, at work, and in the social movements. This questionnaire was given to women human rights defenders in the Mesoamerican region in 2012 and mirrors IM-Defensoras strategies to promote and increase self-care as a political tool to provide protection, safety, and the sustainability of the social movements in which these women participate (Burgos et al. 2014, 86). “Rest” was one of the sections composed of multiple questions, and responses indicated that 50% of the women did not get enough sleep, and 12% took sleeping pills. When asked about time off, 41% responded that they went on vacation less than a year before writing their responses, 21% had not taken vacations in more than a year, 10% had not taken vacations in more than three years, 22% did not remember when their last vacation was, 2% never took time off, and 3% did not respond. Unfortunately, many of the defenders consider time for themselves and “rest” a selfish act, according to Janny Barry and Jelena Djordjevic (cited in Burgos et al. 2014, 101). In addition, they take care of others if they do have some time off, but most cannot find resting time due to work.

These compelling answers prompted the IM-Defensoras to continue their emphasis on the right to rest as part of the self-care strategy program. Limited resources and demanding expectations create the need to build a rest rhythm of calm, peace, pleasurable sensations, confidence, and acceptance. Along with the practices carried out, the Initiative published two books in 2022 that gather the learnings, experiences, and strategies employed by all the women who participated in the different workshops organized to develop tools and resources to protect women human rights defenders and to respond to the legacy of exhaustion and burnout caused both by structural violence and the high demands of activism.

Released in 2022, *Between Fresh Water and the Tides: Ten Years of Construction and Learning about Care and Healing among Women Human Rights Defenders and Their Collectives* traces the origins and history of the Initiative regarding topics of self-care,

collective care, and healing with an emphasis on the construction of physical spaces of rest to respond to the defenders' needs. This publication, as the coordinators indicate, is "a pause on the journey that the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras) embarked upon over a decade ago, seeking to safeguard not only the defense of human rights but also the dignity of women human rights defenders . . . who contribute every day to the construction of more just worlds" (López Cruz et al, 2022, 1).⁷ With this introduction, the book itself embodies a moment of rest, pausing to reflect upon the various activities conducted in the last years to continue improving the lives of marginalized communities in the future.

One of the most successful achievements was the creation of physical spaces across the region to provide moments of respite and theorize self-reflection regarding issues of care. In fact, collective care is itself a "form of place making," where care is horizontally distributed, standing for "a site of mutual aid, consciousness raising, and political organizing" (Woodly et al. 2021, 893). In the last years, IM-Defensoras has been creating "spaces to breathe, renew energies, and heal" (López Cruz et al, 2022, 18). In 2015, they organized various stays, including a package of methodologies and therapies developed by Consorcio Oaxaca with positive results, which led to the creation of the space Casa La Serena in Mexico for "healing and rest" (36). Since then, they expanded with Casa La Siguata in Honduras and a beach house that some of the women defenders rent in Nicaragua, the shelter La Marianela in El Salvador, and El Abrazo in Mexico. These are spaces of calm, peace, love, pleasure and healing where women connect with their ancestral wisdoms along with implementing programs focused on the needs of women human rights defenders. Some of the methodologies used include "somatic experience, Pranic Healing, and bodywork, . . . Bach Flowers, Ayurvedic massage, lymph massage, relaxants, and other specialized therapies" (75). The Nicaraguan seaside house represents a space "for women defenders and activists who experience high risk in their lives and have been subjected to high levels of stress" (75). In Casa La Serena, the IM-Defensoras integrate bio-dance as "a body movement that helps us reconnect holistically with ourselves" (75). In the summary of the work performed regarding care in the different countries of the region, women defenders identify the need to nurture conditions of wellness and calm against adversity and to address and recognize moments of respite to connect with their ancestors.

The latest book published in 2022, *The Pact to Care among Ourselves. 2010–2021: IM-Defensoras' Approach to Feminist Holistic Protection in Mesoamerica*, addresses the

⁷ This book is a collaboration between Marusia López Cruz (IM-Defensoras), Ana María Hernández Cárdenas (IM-Defensoras/Consorcio para el Diálogo Parlamentario y la Equidad Oaxaca), Itzel Guzmán Reséndiz (Consorcio para el Diálogo Parlamentario y la Equidad Oaxaca), Nallely Guadalupe Tello Méndez (IM-Defensoras/Consorcio para el Diálogo Parlamentario y la Equidad Oaxaca), and María Estela López Deloya (IM-Defensoras).

harmful impacts of COVID-19 in the region, which exacerbated the social crisis experienced by the women defenders. In the introductory section, Marusia López Cruz theorizes the trends that shape the women's realities and mentions five specific contexts. These women belong to communities on the edge of survival “with little perspective for a life with dignity on the horizon” (2022, 12) due to extractivism, land dispossession, the cooptation of national governments by transnational corporations, authoritarian governments, and hate speech. Surrounded by an overwhelming violence, women defenders continue their struggles to “dream and make other worlds possible” (23) through care practices as analyzed in their previous publications. Specifically, López Cruz argues that by the end of 2020, the extreme level of exhaustion prompted them to focus on pressing needs such as work-hour limits, addressing emergencies, periods of rest and disconnection, and temporary leaves or healing stays (46). The damaging contexts that place women in largely vulnerable positions have forced the networks to focus on protection and safety, which entail care practices, mutual aid, and rest. The physical spaces function for self-care workshops, accompaniment for organizations and communities, training processes, etc. (73). Listening to their bodies and verbalizing the negative impacts systemic violence has on them have become resources practiced in the houses, convening necessary infrastructures for healing. At the end of the book, López Cruz includes a section on the origins and activities at the houses for healing and respite.

The houses host family members and children as well, in case women defenders want to rest with them. They offer levels of security and protection due to their extreme vulnerability and are geographically set in nearby locations to avoid cultural or geographical uprooting. The houses also provide political engagement and the assemblage of alliances with different organizations (López Cruz 2022, 77). According to the testimony of a Salvadoran woman defender, her stay at Casa La Serena was a process of self-awareness and intimacy with her own body, revealing the sacrifices she had endured during her activism:

It was only when I found myself at La Serena that I notice that my body is ill, tired, exhausted, and I begin to question myself as a feminist—what am I doing to this territory? Ah! Here I am defending the forest, defending environmental struggles, Mother Earth; but I don't defend my first territory. Or, how do I care for it? . . . That is when I adopt two tools: self-care and spirituality, which for me have been the strongest tools that have helped me transcend from individuality to collectivity, to believe that other *compañeras* can also do it, to delegate tasks, to believe that they will do it well, to unburden myself from work. At the same time, they are developing capacities or building experience in what I have been doing. Yes, La Serena marked a before and an after in self-care... “ (López Cruz 2022, 78)

The spaces created to heal the bodies of women defenders are crucial for their personal and collective growth, self-esteem, and empowerment. Cultivating spirituality and self-care also implies unburdening themselves by focusing on their bodies disentangled from capitalist violence, forces, and demands, because as Hersey highlights, “spiritual deficiency occurs when you are tied to a system like capitalism in any way” (2022, 83). The creation of houses where decolonial and antineoliberal forms of care are practiced is one of the many activities and programs IM-Defensoras have developed in the last decade to protect women defenders and to ensure their survival and dignity. Rest as a radical form of care has become increasingly more important to challenge patriarchy, racism, and neoliberalism and to work toward social justice.

Conclusions

Confronted by multiple layers of violence and oppression in geographical contexts that are characterized by legacies of colonialism and overwhelming state and institutional violence, women human rights defenders have organized alliances, networks, and social movements to ensure protection and safety through tools and resources to mitigate the precariousness around them. Similarly, thousands of women in the Mesoamerican region are constantly affected by the criminalization and militarization of their territories, land dispossession, sexual assault, and racial and gender discrimination, which leads to mental and physical exhaustion. In addition, chronic and toxic stress derived from burnout is experienced in “activism’s culture of sacrifice” (López Cruz 2022, 13).

Under the initiative known as IM-Defensoras, which includes social organizations from Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, women defenders have centered self-care, collective care, and healing as vital to their solidarity and mutual aid programs. Furthermore, their efforts to rethink care address the material and emotional needs not only to survive but also to lead a life of dignity and self-worth. IM-Defensoras propose a renewed perspective on self-care that contests its neoliberal cooptation and its connection to the wellness industry. It is precisely in the work of the IM-Defensoras where we find some critical answers to Rimke’s proposal to imagine “alternative approaches to dominant biomedical discourses and practices as a public health issue and basic human right” (2016, 14). Although IM-Defensoras do not enjoy the privilege of living in a system of sustainable public health, becoming the producers and receivers of their self-care and collective care practices challenges the neoliberal productions of subjectivity that construct humans as passive consumers of the wellness industry.

In the context of Mesoamerica and Latin America, caring for oneself, as a political strategy, an emergent ontology and as an act of political warfare, implies the decolonization, agency, empowerment, and emancipation of bodies targeted as bare lives and disposable by the governments. A new approach to self-care nurtured through

interconnectedness and relationality opens spaces of hope and of new imaginings to conceive of social change and to reconsider activism “by looking around us, paying attention to ourselves and each other, offering accountability for ourselves and for each other. By taking a breath together” (Michaeli 2017, 56). As women defenders mention, their alternative approach to self-care is subversive and transgressive in challenging patriarchal demands of self-sacrifice. It is also constantly being redefined due to the different perspectives and voices expressed by women. Likewise, self-care practices developed focus on self-awareness, self-knowledge, spiritual connections with their ancestors, listening to their bodies and to each other, sharing private and public concerns, collective care for healing, and, last but not least, rest. Responding to limited resources and demanding expectations due to particular social circumstances of discrimination and oppression, constant experience of non-rest implies the need for rest, for acceptance, confidence, calm, peace, and the experience of pleasurable sensations. In this respect, the conceptualization of rest responds to Asp’s analysis of the phenomenon for a successful caring approach to it.

Listening to the voices of the protagonists who are suffering from neglect and from a legacy of exhaustion, we can better access caring practices to help in the process of healing. In acknowledging the crucial value of rest, women defenders encourage an engagement in activities of rest such as prioritizing time to think, pause, reflect but also to dance, to enjoy, to sleep well, to exercise, or to eat healthy; that is, to build pleasurable sensations. In promoting rest, the creation of healing houses becomes a priority.

Consequently, rest stands as a right, not a luxury; as a radical form of care and a political tool of resistance because, as Drake (2022) mentions, “rest is needed for restoration”; it is “rooted in self-love and loving self is revolutionary,” and, as we have shown, rest is a formidably transgressive way of self-care. IM-Defensoras are paving a way to social transformation, justice, and restoration by attending to rest, self-care, collective care, and healing, allowing their struggles to continue and their lives “not to be silenced by violence” (López Cruz 2022, 97), so that they finally start to matter.

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