

Faces of Courage



CARLOS A. GUEVARA - PROGRAMA SOMOS DEFENSORES

Land rights defender under threat wears a bullet proof vest in the Las Pavas community, Middle Magdalena region of Colombia.

What is Courage?

Courage. Sometimes it is a choice. Sometimes the situation just demands it of us. But courage has many faces. The people with whom Inter Pares works demonstrate profound courage, in their patience, persistence, fearlessness, motivation – and faith that the world can and should be a more just and equal place.

We see courage in the earnest university student who defies harsh government edicts to demonstrate for the right to free speech in Sudan; the young mother who approaches a

family planning clinic in the Philippines for the first time; the stalwart village leader in Burma who protests a development project that will not benefit their community; the determined young woman in Colombia who gets an education and then a job when society tells her that independence of this sort is not hers to claim; the activist who has worked toward the same social justice goal for a generation but believes in it fiercely despite the exhaustion and personal threats.

Some of the organizations with [PAGE 4 ▶](#)

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Human Rights Defenders: Creating Safe Conditions for Their Work



ORLANDO SIERRA/GETTY IMAGES

Protesters gather in Tegucigalpa to demand justice after the murder of Berta Cáceres.



PRENSA LIBRE

Mayan Ixil nurse and activist Juana Raymundo was one of 18 Guatemalan human rights defenders killed in the first eight months of 2018.

BY BILL FAIRBAIRN, LATIN AMERICA PROGRAM MANAGER

I will never forget the chill that ran down my spine the first time I saw Francisco, a Colombian labour activist and dear friend, casually reach into the closet for his bullet proof vest so that he could accompany me on a short walk in the Bogotá neighbourhood where he worked.

In Colombia, and many parts of the world, women and men who defend human rights face incredible risks to their physical safety. According to Michel Forst, Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, attacks against human rights defenders (HRDs) are on the rise everywhere. “This is not random violence... but concerted attacks against those who try to embody the ideal of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

Attacks come in many forms, but all are designed to impede the work of HRDs while intimidating communities and organizers into silence. HRDs suffer physical assaults, written or verbal death threats, arbitrary detention, judicial intimidation, smear campaigns, stigmatisation and criminalisation. Targeted assassinations are on the rise: a June 2018 report by Front Line Defenders documented a 100% increase in killings of HRDs over the past four years. The risk is especially high in four countries where Inter Pares collaborates with local counterparts: Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala, and the Philippines. The majority of people were targeted for protecting land, environmental or Indigenous peoples’ rights, often in remote rural areas.

Inter Pares remains vigilant to threats against our local counterparts overseas and has joined with allies in calling for Canada’s embassies abroad to effectively implement the Voices at Risk guidelines adopted by the Canadian Government in 2016. These provide directives to better protect and support local HRDs, including those who are challenging the impact of the overseas operations of Canadian corporations.

We also support Project Accompaniment Quebec-Guatemala (PAQG) and the Maritimes-Guatemala Breaking the Silence Network (BTS) which provide accompaniment to local activists and communities under threat. As international accompaniers, they document intimidations, threats or acts of violence, and quickly disseminate that information through national and international networks. The intention is to help deter violent action and create a space in which human rights defenders can continue to speak out.

Human rights activists, like my Colombian friend Francisco, know that bullet proof vests are not the solution. Together with these courageous defenders, we work for the day when the promotion and protection of human rights is supported and understood as a basic civil right and a public good. 

In Sudan, Courage Means Women Who Persist

The #JusticeForNoura campaign started in Sudan, but echoed around the world earlier this year after Noura Hussein was condemned to death by the state. At 16 years old, Noura was forced into marriage by her father. She was raped by her husband, and killed him in an act of self-defence. The campaign brought international attention to Noura's case as well as Sudanese laws that allow child marriage and marital rape.

Every day and through every stage of life, the rights and freedoms of women in Sudan are compromised. Inheritance laws reinforce systemic, life-long discrimination against

Sudanese women envision a future in which women can live full lives, contribute to society, and exist safely within it.

women, and family laws subject women and girls to violations of their rights, including child marriage. Public order laws restrict women's movement and travel, as well as what women can wear. Our counterparts in Sudan, the Sudanese Organization for Research and Development (SORD) and SWRC, are part of the courageous women's rights movement that fights these laws and supports women as they experience and resist this ubiquitous social control. They have persisted in this work for decades.

The pain created by these laws is emotional and physical. Rania, a young woman who is a member of SWRC, was arrested, jailed and eventually flogged – 40 lashes for having a conversation with a male friend in a car near her home. The public order laws, like those applied against Rania, are enforced aggressively and frequently. Punishment includes flogging and a fine – a horrific way for the state to generate income.

The women's rights movement in Sudan has a long and vibrant history. Generations of activists have fought this struggle and continue to do so, despite a relentless



Participants dance during a SORD workshop on feminism.



Khansa Ahmed Adulraheem, a staff member at SORD, poses in front of Khartoum office.

trajectory of ever greater restrictions on women's rights over the last generation. Still, creativity and courage abound. With support from Inter Pares, SORD runs a legal aid program to provide representation, advice and accompaniment to women who have experienced violence and discrimination, particularly in the context of family law. It is staffed by inspiring lawyers, most of whom are women. Across the country, young activists organize around events like International Women's Day and harness the power of online solidarity – as seen with the #JusticeForNoura campaign.

It takes courage to persist in this work, but with our support Sudanese women, and the men who support them, continue with hope and determination. They envision a future in which women in Sudan can live full lives, contribute to society, and exist safely within it. 

What is Courage?

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Members of the Colectiva Feminista march to protest gender-based violence and demand support for women's sexual and reproductive rights.

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which Inter Pares works tackle taboo issues that are surrounded by social stigma. Issues like women's reproductive health and bodily autonomy. It takes a special kind of boldness and tenacity to openly discuss sexuality, a woman's right to choose, or sexual violence. To speak out and act in defiance of social stigma takes courage. Inter Pares' counterparts in Peru, El Salvador, and the Philippines understand this well.

Between 1995 and 2000, the government of Alberto Fujimori in Peru sterilized an estimated 300,000 women and 20,000 men. Many were poor and Indigenous, coerced or manipulated into surgery. Inter Pares' counterpart DEMUS has been at the forefront of the struggle to expose the truth of what happened and to hold the Peruvian state accountable. DEMUS' work has led to the creation of a national registry of victims, and legal proceedings against high ranking officials.

El Salvador has one of the world's most restrictive anti-abortion laws, which penalizes abortion under any circumstances and criminalizes poor women disproportionately. Resorting to illegal and unsafe procedures

puts their health and lives at risk. Women have been imprisoned for miscarrying. Our counterpart La Colectiva Feminista has been central in the struggle in El Salvador for reproductive rights, despite being viciously labeled as immoral by opponents in the country.

Likhaan Center for Women's Health successfully campaigned for a national reproductive health law that includes universal access for women in the Philippines to modern contraception. Currently, they are advocating for women to have access to the full spectrum of reproductive healthcare options including abortion, in a national context that is still dominated by anti-choice religious values. It is an uphill and sometimes ugly battle.

What does courage look like? We see it in the faces of the people that come together in organizations such as DEMUS, La Colectiva, and Likhaan. The people we accompany, and who inspire us each and every day, are courage personified. In turn, they bring us the stories of those who inspire them. It is a thread linking us around the world.

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With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequalities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

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