

# From Discovery to Dissidence: Honduran Women's Conceptions and Claims of Human Rights

By Christine Gervais<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract<sup>2</sup>

In recognition of the profound benefits of women's engagement with their rights, this article presents an experiential account of how Honduran women comprehend, articulate, experience and advocate human rights and gender equality through non-governmental educational initiatives. Through the triangulated analytic among human security, post-victimization and citizen-based advocacy approaches, the article traces the women's journeys from their moments of discovery of human rights towards instances of dissidence. In so doing, the women's demonstrations of empowerment, agency, resistance and solidarity are brought to the fore. By featuring their voices, this study demonstrates how Honduran women are able to shape their own expectations and experiences of human rights. This study further emphasizes how a supportive and interactive educational introduction to the conventions, declarations and constitutions intended to promote and safeguard human rights, as well as an opportunity to dialogue safely and creatively about those rights can open up incredible possibilities for self-realization, liberation, ambition and innovation among women.

*Keywords:* rights, grassroots education, empowerment, agency, solidarity, dissidence, Honduras.

## Introduction

*"Without these workshops, I would not have been awakened. I feel more human."*  
- Workshop Participant from 2005-2008

In recognition of the life-changing advantages of women's own engagement with their rights, this article presents an experiential account of how Honduran women understand, experience and advocate their human rights through non-governmental educational initiatives. Through the women's own voices, the article traces the women's journeys from their moments of discovery of human rights, through their discernment and towards instances of dissidence.

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Gervais holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from Carleton University and she is an Assistant Professor in Criminology at the University of Ottawa in Canada where she is a member of both the Interdisciplinary Research Laboratory on the Rights of the Child and the Laboratory on Justice Studies and Research. Her areas of expertise include children's and women's rights, international development and education in Latin America, crimes against humanity, social justice, human trafficking and feminist spirituality.

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The article begins with an overview of the human rights workshops in which the women participated. Then I present the multi-layered analytic among the human security, post-victimization and citizen-based advocacy approaches employed to examine the women's pro-human rights journeys. After outlining the methodological approach, I briefly explore the women's experiences with violence within the context of Honduran patriarchal society. Then I analyze the women's own journeys of discovery and dissidence in relation to human rights through the conceptual lenses of empowerment, solidarity, agency, resistance and resourcefulness. In so doing, this article sheds light on the actions that the women have undertaken in pursuit of their human rights.

### **Context of the Study on Women's Human Rights in Honduras**

The participants in this study<sup>3</sup> took part in a series of human rights workshops that were based out of a community education centre in a town<sup>4</sup> in north central Honduras between 2005 and 2008. The workshops were initiated by a small group of local Honduran women who sought the cooperation of human rights research and advocacy groups in the region. The curriculum and activities were set by the women, with the women and for the women. Thus, both the content and the processes of the workshops were established in an inclusive and empowering manner. The original workshops in 2005 were led by Honduran professionals and volunteers with expertise in human rights, law, health, education and psychology. The workshops held between 2006 and 2008 were also carried out by several of the women who were trained as leaders in the original workshops. The trainees replicated the workshops in seven urban and rural neighborhoods with schedules ranging from weekly to bi-monthly gatherings.

The workshops aimed to raise awareness about, and encourage engagement with women's human rights. The workshop modules addressed domestic, street and political violence, human rights, gender equality, health and labor rights, self-esteem, access to justice, community resources, globalization, as well as legal instruments, declarations<sup>5</sup> and conventions. The workshops also provided training in leadership, community activism, supportive accompaniment, conflict resolution and peace-building.

In an effort to ensure that the workshop content was accessible to the participants, the information was disseminated through various means including presentations, documentaries, team-building and self-esteem building activities, creative arts<sup>6</sup> and critical analyses. These activities were carried out through supportive and dynamic social interactions that helped the women to feel included in both the consumption and the production of the knowledge that was being shared in the workshops. In the case of more complex information, such as the language of legislation, conventions, declarations and

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<sup>3</sup> This study is part of the author's broader research project that explores women's and girls' engagement with human rights in Bolivia, Honduras and Nicaragua.

<sup>4</sup> The names of the centre and town are withheld to protect the identity of the participants.

<sup>5</sup> The women became familiar with municipal, national and international rights-based mechanisms including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Honduran constitution and other national human rights laws, among others. In addition to working directly with copies of these instruments, the facilitators spent a lot of time simplifying the language of the texts so that they were accessible to, and therefore understood by the women.

<sup>6</sup> The creative arts gave the women valuable esteem-building opportunities to draw, sing, dance and make crafts.

constitutions, various efforts were made and much care was invested to simplify the texts through the use of visual images, paraphrasing, relevant examples and creative interactions. Since the workshop facilitators were aware of the participants' varying comprehension abilities and that the workshops were based on relations of parity, they ensured that the professional experts<sup>7</sup> involved in disseminating the complex information were informed not only of the need to simplify the content, but also of their presence as part of a non-hierarchical team of equals who were all contributing to the advancement of women's rights with diverse talents and aptitudes. Such efforts were essential to ensuring that the women's educational experience was genuinely empowering rather than one that furthered potentially alienating sentiments of the 'other/self' divide that may occur through a power-knowledge dynamic between professional instructors and students.

The educational significance of the workshops for the women was two-fold. First, for many of the participants, the workshops represented a first opportunity to be educated and to receive a formal certificate in recognition of that education. Such was the case given that 9% of the participants never attended school, 23% did not complete primary school, 38% completed only the primary level, 14% attended, but did not complete high school and only 16% completed high school. Thus, given that for many of the women the certificate<sup>8</sup> obtained from the workshops was the only one they had, the workshops were quite meaningful for them.

The second way in which the training was educationally significant is related to the fact that the workshops represented the first occasion that all the participants had to be informed about their rights as Honduran and global citizens, and particularly as women. For most, it was the first time that they were educated visually, orally and textually on their physiological and reproductive make-up – knowledge undeniably essential to the effective protection of their own bodies.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the workshops constituted the first opportunity that the women had to share about their life experiences as women, particularly about the violence and oppression that they had endured – the significance of which was manifested most often on the first day of each set of workshops when the women would break down in tears of gratitude for the chance to share safely for the first time about past abuses and current challenges. As I explore later, the sense of solidarity felt among the women in their collective space was profoundly life-giving and as a result, the workshops overall became momentarily life-changing for the participants.

### **A Human Security Approach Inclusive of Women's Voices**

In this article, the women's journeys from discovery to dissidence are analyzed through a multi-layered lens that integrates elements from the human security approach

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<sup>7</sup> There was only one incident with an expert in the early stages of the workshops in 2005 that was problematic. He was a very active and well published local human rights lawyer who cared deeply for the plight of the women in his country and community, but whose explanations during his presentation were considered incomprehensible by the women. Based on that experience, the facilitators and participants worked even harder to ensure that their workshop space was inclusive and accessible to all.

<sup>8</sup> Many women lost their school documents in the floods of Hurricane Mitch in 1998.

<sup>9</sup> The women referred to the protection of their bodies as a very significant matter; they identified 'the respect for their body' as one of the main human rights that was least respected in their lives. The health education was provided by local female Honduran doctors and human rights experts who ensured that the content was relevant to the women's specific cultural contexts.

(United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 1994), as well as orientations that are rights-centered and promote post-victimization resistance (Faulkner and MacDonald, 2009) and citizen-based advocacy (Mathie and Cunningham, 2009).

The impetus for such an inclusive analysis is to move beyond state-centered views about women's rights. Much academic attention has scrutinized State parties' compliance with international law including human rights conventions and declarations through assessments of coordination mechanisms, as well as legal and institutional reforms (Charlesworth et al., 1991; Santos Pais, 2008). While the monitoring of legal advancements that improve women's lives is essential, women's own understandings of, and experiences with human rights are often less present in this type of reporting. The actual discovery and use of domestic and international human rights instruments by the very individuals whose lives these standards were originally intended to protect and enhance can be a life-changing learning process filled with affirmation, anticipation and activism. Such an endeavour – listening to the voices of women and respecting their right to be heard – is imperative to the protection of women's rights.

It is also essential to recognize that women's awareness of, and engagement with, human rights occur across a myriad of personal, political, social, cultural and economic spaces. Documenting where and how women discover and address their human rights can shed important light on the effective and sustainable endeavours that can be accomplished in far-reaching non-state locations and non-legal domains among individuals and groups who act on their own initiative. In other words, this paper explores what the women in this study have done with, and how they feel about, their discoveries of human rights in their own daily lives. This approach to women's human rights is consistent with the broader movement by leading feminist legal scholars who have sought to move beyond the constraints of male dominated international law and to genuinely include the voices and experiences of women in legal reforms, human rights practices and democratic transitions (Charlesworth, 2007; Charlesworth and Chinkin, 2000).

The human security framework is an appropriate lens through which to acknowledge and integrate individualized and experiential accounts of human rights 'from the bottom up' because the approach de-emphasizes state security and actually prioritizes individuals' personal experiences of [in]security (Hoogensen and Rottem, 2004, p. 161; United Nations Commission on Human Security, 2003, p. 4). The human security approach is particularly relevant to the analyses of the non-governmental initiatives under analysis because the framework recognizes that "*affirmation of human rights and related activities of advocacy*" are effective even when they are not officially legalized (UN Commission on Human Security, 2003, p. 9). Such a people-centered acknowledgement lends credence to this article's inclusion of women's voices, who explain in their own words, the human rights progress that they have experienced.

Another aspect of the human security framework pertinent to this study is its emphasis on both the plight and empowerment of women and girls (UNDP, 1994, p. 31; UN Commission on Human Security, 2003, p. 11). In recognition of the stifling impact of gendered inequality and insecurity throughout the world, the human security agenda has identified empowerment as one of the key strategic components that enable people to gain "*freedom to take action on one's own behalf*" and to thus develop their own

resilience to challenging circumstances (UNDP, 1994, p. 31; UN Commission on Human Security, 2003, pp. 10-11).

Through its emphasis on empowerment, the human security agenda aims to strengthen peoples' individual and collective abilities to enhance their own and others' potential to make choices, to demand respect for their dignity and to participate fully and actively in all spheres of life (UN Commission on Human Security, 2003, pp. 131-133). The agenda's support of people's and communities' own abilities also implies "*providing education and information so that they can scrutinize social arrangements and take collective action*" (Ibid, p. 11). Since the workshops reflect closely the human security agenda's strategies of empowerment, then the women's experiences therein constitute very relevant cases to be examined through such an inclusive lens.

Another approach that echoes the people-centeredness of the human security agenda and which is relevant to the women's experiences is Mathie and Cunningham's (2009) promotion of the empowerment potential inherent within the transition "from clients to citizens." The workshops' initiatives and the women's corresponding journeys reflect Mathie and Cunningham's (2009) reinforcement of the ability of citizens to act on their own initiative and to draw on their own leadership and solidarity to achieve their own goals. Mathie and Cunningham's (2009, pp. 2, 8, 368) lens contributes to this article's emphasis on the women's capacities to utilize their social connectedness to act as agents, rather than as beneficiaries, and to thus improve their quality of life by claiming their rights, by building their own base of security and by negotiating relevant opportunities.

Similarly, Faulkner and MacDonald's (2009) emphasis on the capacity of women to move beyond victimization through resistance is useful in contextualizing women's experiences of violence and thus in overcoming an omission in the human security approach. While Bunch (2004, p. 32) concedes that the human security approach is effective at gender integration, she criticizes the agenda for not addressing women as a specific subject and for not adequately exploring the complexities of bodily integrity and violence against women that women themselves consider critical to their intimate security. Bunch (2004, pp. 32-33) thus advocates for a woman-specific and woman-authored approach that reflects their comprehensive realities. In this light and in recognition of Bunch's (2004, p. 31) assertion that "*[r]ights are about the voice and agency of citizens who are not just passive objects with needs*", this article seeks to fill the aforementioned gap in the human security literature by including centrally the women's own narratives to ensure that their experiences with human rights as women are defined by them rather than being interpreted for and about them (Amoah, 2008). It does so mindful of Faulkner and MacDonald's (2009) declaration of 'victim no more' and their related insistence on exploring the moments of agency, resistance and growth beyond victimization.

## **Methodology**

The analysis draws upon sociologically-based field work conducted by the author in 2008. Data was collected in Spanish and translated into English from thirty in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews, fifty-eight written questionnaires and three focus group sessions with one hundred and fifteen Honduran women. Inclusion in the research was based on involvement in the human rights workshops; all workshop participants,

regardless of the frequency and length of their participation, were invited to participate in the study. At the time of the fieldwork, the women ranged in age from 19 to 73; their civil status reflected a spectrum of relationships: 36% were single mothers, 26% were married, 27% were in common law arrangements, 4% were single, 2% were widowed and 5% were separated or divorced.

In order to move beyond state-based assessments of women's human rights and to ensure that the voices and experiences of the women were central to this study, I undertook a grounded and inclusive approach to data collection and analysis. With a view to co-generating knowledge inclusively out of respect for the dignity and potential of the participants (Chevalier and Buckles, 2008), the research team<sup>10</sup> worked collaboratively with the workshop coordinators and participant-leaders who were trained to support the participants in the research process. Prior to the fieldwork, the coordinators and participant-leaders helped to co-create the research instruments by providing input into relevant content and accessible language based on their own and their fellow participants' experiences in the workshops. Their involvement improved the relevance, accessibility and authenticity of the knowledge produced through the research instruments.

The coordinators and participant-leaders also contributed to the administration of the interviews, questionnaires and focus group sessions by assisting with recruitment for the study, note-taking, the clarification of questions and the facilitation of focus group sessions. Throughout the data collection, the combined Honduran-Canadian research team also engaged in what Chevalier and Buckles (2008) refer to as 'creative expression' by animating innovative and energizing activities<sup>11</sup> that facilitated teamwork, grounded learning and problem-solving. They also hosted the field visits to workshop locations, affiliated daycares, micro-credit projects, participants' homes and to the women's municipal office. Involving the participants in this inclusive, participant-centred and solidarity-oriented approach reinforced and grounded this research as being on women, by women and for women.

### **Women's Experiences of Violence and Oppression**

The women in this study have suffered extensively within Honduras' machista<sup>12</sup> culture. A total of 74% of the respondents claimed to have been victims of some form of violence in their lifetime. The varying levels of physical, sexual, psychological and political violence experienced by the women were oppressive and stifling – an actuality reinforced by over 90% of the women who expressed a need for psychological counselling<sup>13</sup>. The human rights workshops provided the participants with a pivotal opportunity to reflect upon their own experiences of victimization. As such, the women were better able to distinguish and analyze the abuses they had suffered.

While this article emphasizes women's resistant capacities beyond victimization (Faulkner and MacDonald, 2009), it nevertheless recognizes how important it is for the

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<sup>10</sup> The Canadian research team consisted of the principal researcher and a research assistant, both whom were Spanish speaking.

<sup>11</sup> The creative expression activities carried out during the data collection phase included the songs, storytelling, humour and physical exercises that were already a central part of the workshops' empowering processes.

<sup>12</sup> "Machista" is a Spanish term that refers to sexist and chauvinistic attitudes and actions.

<sup>13</sup> The research team helped to make psychological counseling available to the women in the study.

women to have their 'victimhood' acknowledged, understood and addressed – an undeniably significant step in their healing.. As such, I invoke Stringer's (2009) application of McLeer's (1998) complex and flexible conception of the victim that recognizes multi-layered experiences and reinforces the 'fact' that victimization *does* indeed occur. In so doing, I emphasize that women are entitled not only to the moments and feelings of shock, grief, devastation, despair and even disempowerment associated with their victimization, but also to the corresponding support that they identify as needed to overcome these struggles. In this sense, the intention is not to reinforce women's suffering and helplessness, but rather to demonstrate the need for political intervention and social change in support of women's transformations (Stringer, 2009, p. 26), particularly in Latin American 'machista' cultures where these rights are most often dismissed and denied. Thus, bearing in mind female victims' status as rights-bearers and their capacity as self-governors, the Honduran women's own articulations of their experiences of victimization are presented below through interview and survey data.

Over 63% of the respondents reported having been sexually abused at some point in their lifetime; of these, 24% were sexually abused as children, 39% as adolescents and 37% as adult women. The main perpetrators were identified as relatives, step-fathers, neighbours, partners, and in some cases, brothers-in-law, fathers-in-law and strangers. The extent of the sexual abuse varied among the respondents. One woman described a childhood incident: *"When I was a girl, my mother's husband groped my private parts; I was only 6 years old."* Another respondent explained a traumatizing adolescent ordeal: *"When I was 13 years old, a man that I did not know stalked me, threatened me and then kidnapped and raped me and that affected me psychologically for a very long time."* After the girl escaped and hid, the man went in search of her and threatened her grandmother at gun point and claimed ownership of the girl by stating that he was *'her first.'* Another woman, who had never revealed to anyone before about the sexual abuse she suffered until her interview in this study, explained that *"I have been marked by sexual violence and since then I have felt dirty; I feel embarrassed, sad and angry when I look at myself in the mirror because my brother, brother-in-law and a family friend all abused me; I never said anything because they always threatened me; I need psychological help."*

In this study, 67% of the women reported having been physically abused at some point in their lifetime; of these, 43% were physically abused as children, 28% as adolescents and 46% as adults. Many participants broke down in tears when recounting their childhood memories of physical abuse at the hands of parents, step-parents, grandparents and other relatives. One participant recalled abuse by her father: *"he struck me with a machete and from the pain I urinated instantly."* Another woman recounted tearfully: *"as a child, it was a very sad life with our step-mother; she beat us; I suffered bitterly with my step-mother. I remember it like it was yesterday. Even now in my old age I dream about it and when I wake up I cry. Imagine that and I have grandchildren now."*

While respondents experienced less physical abuse as adolescents, it seemed to have increased significantly for women in their adult years in marriage or common law relationships. Some participants recalled having had abuse-free childhoods and noted that the first time they had ever been mistreated was when they were married or partnered. One woman reinforced the extent of the degradation she suffered: *"It was a very hard experience, I endured too much. He insulted me and beat me. One day he left*

*me with a swollen eye, another time he pushed my head in the toilet bowl when I was only fifteen days away from having my baby.”*

One particularly fragile participant suffered endlessly at the hands of an aggressive and alcoholic partner. She recounted numerous traumatic experiences. She began by explaining *“I suffered family violence for 17 years with my partner; I would like to know how to erase this trauma that remains in me and my children. I need help for my children and I to recover.”* She pointed out various scars including her nose which is no longer in its original place, as well as a shoulder weakened and marked by beatings with a machete. She recounted the multiple blows she received when trying to hide money for food instead of giving her own salary away to his drinking binges. In a shocking incident when she was trying to protect her son from abuse, her partner severely cut two of her fingers. She recalled: *“the last time when he cut these fingers, here I have the scars, he cut them with a machete, I don’t know how he did not cut them totally off and there with my fingers almost off my hand, he continued to threaten me ... then he took 200 lempiras and went to the canteen to drink.”* The participant clarified that this incident, along with the support from the workshop, was a key turning point in her separation from her partner.

Nevertheless, in the period immediately following the separation, she recognized the extended grip he continued to have on her life: *“I was not yet free from him.”* She tearfully recounted a post-separation incident as one of the most distressing episodes because it involved abuse against her mother: *“He came in the back door of the house ... he grabbed me and forced me into the bedroom where he was going to rape me, and in this my mother arrived and he beat and kicked her and left her all purple in the legs.”* The participant was quite visibly devastated as she told this story as she was consumed with guilt for the pain afflicted against her mother.

While the physical violence was traumatizing, the psychological abuse that the women suffered was also paralyzing. Over 76% of the participants reported having been psychologically abused in their lifetime; for 51%, it occurred during their childhood; 45% experienced it in adolescence and 76% claimed to have been victimized by it as adults. The main perpetrators of psychological and verbal abuse identified by the participants included parents, step-parents, siblings, step-siblings, schoolmates, teachers, spouses, employers, fellow employees, children mothers-in-law and brothers-in-law. One participant perceptively recognized how in her own case, psychological abuse replaced physical abuse as she transitioned from one stage of life to another: *“In my childhood, I suffered violence from my dad because the punishments that he imposed were so brutal, but in adolescence, he mistreated me psychologically.”*

Another woman’s testimony revealed multiple forms of abuse including the emotional confusion associated with a forced marriage at a young age. After having been sexually harassed as a child by her mother’s boyfriend, at the age of fifteen she was forced into a marriage with an older man. She recounted through uncontrollable tears that *“when I did not want to go to his house the day of the wedding, my mother said go where he is because he is your husband now, if not he’ll come to get you with the police; but I did not want to be with him.”* Crying more profusely, she related that *“when I felt him touch me, it was a horrible thing.”* In that marriage, the participant suffered extensive physical, sexual and psychological abuse.

The women's desperate plight is often further compounded by the state-based denial and denigration of their circumstances. As one<sup>14</sup> participant recounted, "*Our rights are violated for simply being a woman. Here you go to the police to denounce something and they laugh out loud saying 'who is going to take this woman, women are troublemakers, they are crazy' so they do not value our rights as they should.*" Such institutional tactics exacerbate women's victimization. As I show below, given the lifelong devastating implications of these oppressive conditions, feminist-led opportunities to learn how to both articulate and resist victimization can yield transformative effects (Stringer, 2009, p. 26).

### **The Women's Discovery and Discernment of Human Rights**

In light of the suffering endured by the participants, the workshops provided the women with a pivotal space in which they could comprehend their plight, be informed of, and address their rights. The following narratives highlight how the women have expressed these realizations with greater confidence and ingenuity.

In this study, 96% of the respondents confirmed that the workshops accomplished their objectives of helping them to understand and address their human rights. For most of the participants, the opportunity to learn about their human rights represented 'epiphanic' moments of discovery. The women repeatedly and excitedly noted such basic realizations as "*I have rights as a woman; I did not know anything about these rights before,*" "*I have the right to express myself,*" "*I have the right to decide for myself*" and "*I have the right to defend myself.*" Others discovered that "*I have the right to value myself as a human being and as a woman*" and "*I have the right to an identity, dignity and a decent life.*"

In some cases, becoming aware of the importance of legal safeguards related to human rights was both compelling and consoling; one participant shared: "*I now know about the laws that protect and benefit women and where to denounce violations against women's rights.*" Another woman explained: "*I learned a lot about my rights because now I know how to defend myself; before I did not know and I felt trapped. But now I feel that I am becoming liberated knowing what my rights are as a human being.*" These examples are indicative of the empowering impacts of knowledge shared through supportive consciousness-raising activities.

### **Empowerment and Personal Changes**

The extent to which the expressions "*I value myself as a woman*" and "*my world has changed*" were variously repeated by the women is a reflection of how significantly the workshops helped them realize their self-worth and capacities. The profundity of such progress was articulated meaningfully by two women whose lives changed considerably as a result of their training:

*"The workshops have helped me a lot. Before, I felt like I was worth nothing. I felt so small walking with my head down because I felt ugly. Now I have discovered that I am strong and I feel that the affliction I suffered no longer overwhelms me like before. I feel more worthy as a woman and now I can*

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<sup>14</sup> This concern was raised by several participants.

*walk without lowering my face. I don't feel unappreciated like before.*" (73 year old participant since 2005)

*"I feel that my self-esteem is higher. I lived with domestic violence for 17 years. I am now separated from my husband; before I thought that my life did not have meaning. Now that I have received the workshops I feel that my life is worth a lot. I am free to live and to move forward with my children."* (37 year old participant since 2005 and mother of three)

As the first quotation conveys, discovering one's self-worth for the first time at the age of 73, while conceivably sad, can be quite beneficial. The transformation conveyed in the second quotation was liberating indeed; when asked if and when she could participate in an interview in 2008, this participant replied with a smile saying: *"Anytime, my time is my own now, I am free."*

Some women articulated their empowerment as positive losses such as, *"I lost my fears," "I lost my doubts" and "I lost my pain."* The women's removal of such obstacles enabled them to achieve new self-enhancing gains which they variously expressed as *"I love myself more," "I respect myself" and "I feel more secure in myself."* Another participant illustrated other self-strengthening advantages in the following words: *"I have succeeded to improve my inner peace, my self-esteem, to have patience, tolerance, to give and to respect my space and my rights first as a human being and then as a woman and as a mother and wife."*

Greater levels of confidence and conviction among the respondents are also found in the following assertion: *"I changed radically in expressing myself better. Before I felt a lot of pain to speak in front of others but now I do not. Now I am a new woman."* Decision-making constituted one of the areas where the women realized their improved capacities the most: *"This workshop has given me the strength to decide no when I need to say no and equally to decide what I want and what I do not want."* Others conveyed their greater certitude and ownership in this regard: *"Yes I feel more capable to make my own decisions and to confront whatever problem comes up; I feel freer."*

While the women have made noticeable gains, it is important to acknowledge that some have struggled to fully embrace the changes generated by their empowerment, due in part to their own personal issues, as well as to the unwillingness of those around them to support the anticipated changes, including barriers on familial, community, cultural and political levels. One participant explained her own challenges against sexist conditioning: *"Because of the way I was raised with such a controlling father, at the beginning of the workshops, it was very hard to get the machismo mentality out of my head; I had to learn to unlearn."* Another woman admitted her difficulties in asserting agency: *"The workshops helped me especially to deal with domestic violence and my rights as a woman; but sometimes I lack courage and strength to act."* While these statements reflect the obstacles that women face within themselves, they nevertheless reveal that change, as nascent as it may seem, is still taking place.

### **Solidarity through Social Dynamics and toward Citizenship and Social Change**

In their journey from discovery to dissidence, the women have learned to recognize and negotiate the various powers 'over, within and with' them that influence

their gender-based experiences (Doerge and Burke, 2005, p. 37). In the section on victimization, the women's subjection to the sexist *power over* them was brought to the fore. In the section on empowerment, the women's *power within* was exemplified through their growing inner strength and self-determination. In this section on solidarity, I explore how the women's *power with* each other has enabled them to draw upon their 'power within' to overcome the patriarchal 'power over' them.

The women identified memorable interactive activities, stimulating group dynamics and supportive facilitators as factors that they considered instrumental to their enhanced sense of solidarity. The deep significance of that solidarity was explained by one participant:

*"After my participation in the workshops, my sense of solidarity is when I can feel the need of the other woman, when she speaks and I am listening, I feel that her problem is my problem and then my tears come quickly because I feel with her and for me that is the most heartfelt sense of solidarity, that what happens to another woman in the group, I feel it at the core of my being."*

It was this profound sense of solidarity that enhanced both the individual empowerment and the mutual support among the participants. By extension, the women's collective identities and reciprocal responsibilities as fellow citizens grew considerably. As a result, the greater sense of solidarity and the corresponding citizenship-based duties yielded multiplying effects that enabled the women to break the chains of solitude, violence, shame and assumptions of incapacity. As I explore in the subsequent sections, this solidarity became a source of the women's resourcefulness as it served as a means through which they supported each other in their pursuits of safety, equality, dignity, justice, education and employment. As one participant explained while crying profusely, it also enabled them to assist each other in seemingly small, yet significant ways within the workshops themselves:

*"When I first started to attend the workshops I did not have shoes to go. I remember last year we had a meeting and I could not go because I did not have shoes, when I was going down the steps my shoes split ... I cried all afternoon because I could not go to the workshop ... Later my friend gave me a pair of shoes when she knew what happened so I could go to the meetings. She then asked if I needed work and I started to cook the snacks for the workshops ... by selling tamales, I was able to buy my shoes."*

The women also showed considerable ingenuity in their efforts to transform their solidarity into action for the purpose of education and employment. First, their successful replication of the original workshops in outlying neighbourhoods reflects their concern for the plight of other women and their hope for change. The expansion of the workshops further enabled the women to disperse their leadership and to establish wider networks of solidarity in pursuit of gender equality (Mathie and Cunningham, 2009, p. 359). The women have also informally created awareness<sup>15</sup> about women's human rights

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<sup>15</sup> As supportive and empowering as awareness can be for the women, it is understood that information sharing does not translate automatically into a decrease in violence.

by sharing the workshop information with their spouses, children, their daughters' husbands, as well as with neighbours and other oppressed women. Secondly, their establishment of a cooperative daycare in one barrio has enabled many of the women to help each other with desperately needed child care services so that they can study, work, attend human rights workshops and engage in community activism<sup>16</sup>. Thirdly, many of the women helped each other to organize micro-credit<sup>17</sup> projects so that they could increase their income to support their families. Such endeavours demonstrate the women's capacity to collaborate to remain informed and to meet new opportunities (Mathie and Cunningham, 2009, pp. 357, 363).

The aforementioned examples of solidarity in action reflect how the women have intertwined both their rights and responsibilities quite resourcefully as fellow citizens (Mathie and Cunningham, 2009, p. 361). In supporting each other out of a sense of mutual responsibility as fellow female citizens, they have enabled each other to claim their rights to education, employment and civic engagement. As such, and as I explore more closely below, solidarity has enabled the women to participate more fully in their communities as active and engaged citizens and to experience their citizenship-based responsibilities and rights while contributing simultaneously to greater social change in Honduran society.

### **From Discovery to Dissidence**

The women's discoveries of their human rights have enabled them to reach greater levels of awareness and empowerment as they strive to exercise their rights more actively. The resulting optimism and preparedness has translated into many dissident-based actions through which the women have begun to challenge the patriarchal practices in their personal lives and in public domains. As I examine both individual and collective examples below, the women's dissidence was expressed through words and actions, manifested through agency and resistance, and enabled through solidarity and resourcefulness.

### **Individual Resistance**

Dissidence within the women's own personal lives was most often exhibited through verbal challenges against patriarchal control and spousal violence whereby the women refused to accept their partners' constraining or abusive behaviours. While 100% of the participants claimed to feel more secure in their families and more assertive to stand up to men, 57% reported feeling more capable of actually resisting violence and oppression. While some were concerned that "*violence cannot be resisted*," the majority of the women variously asserted "*now I do not let him humiliate me or walk all over me*" and "*I was able to defend myself from my husband*." Another participant clarified how solidarity has strengthened her resistance: "*... my husband wants to continue to mistreat me psychologically but I do not allow him ... I have the women who support me 100% and I am therefore FREE.*"<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The women take turns caring for the children when they participate in marches (to be discussed later in the paper).

<sup>17</sup> The micro-credit project included mainly the selling of food, hygiene products, crafts and clothing.

<sup>18</sup> Given that such claims are based on self-report data, it is important to recognize that the actualization of the claimed decrease in violence cannot be confirmed. More in-depth longitudinal ethnographic research

The fact that 74% of the women reported that domestic violence decreased<sup>19</sup> since their participation in the workshops is a testament of the effectiveness of their nascent resistance against patriarchal oppression. In explaining how and why the violence decreased since the workshops, some of the women claimed “*I do not let myself be silenced*”, “*I make sure I am respected now that I learned that I am worth a lot*” and “*I do not permit my husband to yell at me nor to come home drunk or in the middle of the night knocking on the door.*” Another participant described a resulting decrease in sexual violence due to her new-found ability to resist it by articulating and claiming her rights:

*“With the second father of my children, he would take me forcefully to have sexual relations with him when I did not want to have sex with him. So I am grateful that the workshops happened because it was the first time that I became able to defend myself from him. Now I always tell him, ‘if you take me by force or beat me because you want to have sex, I have been told that it is a violation of my rights and you will be put in prison.’”*

Many women further mentioned that the violence decreased because by teaching their husbands, sons and daughters about the workshop content, they had created greater understanding and more peaceful communication in their homes. Two women explained proudly that “*it has changed my partner too; he shares more with me*” and “*he is now more understanding and I feel more secure to explain things to him.*” By contrast, four percent of the participants experienced more absolute decreases in violence because they proactively ended relationships with abusive partners. Still, for other women, their increased sense of security was somewhat circumstantial. One woman shared with a noticeably confident intonation: “*The domestic violence ended because thanks to God my husband died.*” When asked if violence had decreased since the workshops, another woman similarly exclaimed humorously and emphatically, “*I do not have a husband!*” She then clarified that her singlehood was an intentional choice to avoid the problems of domestic violence.

### **Limits to Resistance and Partial Progress**

Despite the noteworthy advancements in the women’s lives since their discovery of human rights, it would be misleading to imply that their progress has been complete<sup>20</sup> and uni-directional. It is important to acknowledge that some of their journeys towards

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that complements this initial study will help to determine the extent to which and the ways in which the women are actually diffusing violent situations. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that based on the information shared in the focus group sessions, many of the women confirmed the accomplishments of their fellow participants as some of them had been involved in domestic situations as close neighbours; in this sense, some of the claims were validated by witnesses.

<sup>19</sup> The significance of this statistic is further reinforced by the fact that the remaining 26% reported that they did not suffer violence prior to the workshops. Thus, all the previously abused women in this study experienced a decrease in domestic violence after their participation in the workshops.

<sup>20</sup> Despite the claims of decreased violence presented above that seemed to have occurred within or relatively soon after the workshop sessions (although some women had benefited from four consecutive years of workshop support), it is understood that the process of translating the learning through awareness into related concrete changes can often take a considerable amount of time, in some cases close to a decade. Thus, it must be recognized that the claims mentioned above reflect rather unique accomplishments of some of the participants, but not all of them.

equality have been incomplete or fraught with struggles and set-backs. One woman described partial improvements: *“Before the workshops my life was hell because I did not know how to defend my rights. Now it is not glorious but I do not let myself be humiliated.”* Another participant revealed how she still has to manage her spouse’s anger because he resists her emerging assertiveness:

*“Now I feel that I can stand up to him and tell him many things because before if I did not say anything it was because I believed he would give it to me worse but now I know how to defend myself not only from beatings but I tell him about the things that I learned. He does get upset though because he does not like when someone comes to learn things because it is against him.”*

Some of the women also experienced intimidation by spouses who tried to control their participation<sup>21</sup> in the workshops. One participant recounted what she told her husband in a confrontation in 2005 in the early stages of the workshops when he tried to forbid her from attending a meeting:

*“I am warning you if you do not allow me to go through that door and to attend my meeting, I will make a telephone call and I assure you that in twenty minutes you will have here twenty women and the police!” So after these words, he let me go.”*

While this same participant explained that her husband had been more respectful since that time and had even come to the aid of a female neighbor who had been abused on one occasion – a testament to the progress being made among the women’s partners - she has nevertheless suffered as a result of a violent relapse. She recalled: *“Since I took the workshops in 2005 there has not been violence but in 2008 I received a good beating on April 29<sup>th</sup> but I denounced it to the police and now things are under control.”*<sup>22</sup> In that same incident, the participant recounted tearfully how as an intimidation tactic, he tore up her workshop diploma that she had displayed so proudly in their home. Despite the set-backs and the associated risks, she and her fellow workshop participants persevere in their pursuit of respect, safety, equality and freedom. The women’s resilient commitment to self-determination was echoed by a very involved participant whose response to her husband’s complaints about the time she had been spending supporting other women was: *“I have started a process and I am going to complete it.”* As I explore below, similar persistence at the collective level has yielded multiplying effects.

### **Collective Dissent in Pursuit of Human Rights and Gender Equality**

The women in this study have been empowered to organize collectively to ensure their survival and to demand their rights, an advancement supported by the fact that

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<sup>21</sup> It is imperative to note that male partners challenged the women on their participation in the workshops themselves, but not regarding their participation in this research project. The research team dialogued with the women before and after the interviews, focus group sessions and questionnaires to ensure that the participants were not placed at greater risk as a result of their participation in the study.

<sup>22</sup> This statement does not imply that the local police are now systematically defending women and intervening routinely in domestic violence cases. In this particular case, the involvement of the police seemed to have helped to diffuse the immediate situation.

100% of the women claimed to now feel stronger and more prepared to advance social changes. Through their mutual pledge of ‘safety through solidarity,’ they have stood up and intervened as a group against abusive spouses in the very midst of domestic crises to rescue their fellow participants. They have also organized an accompaniment program for which they have undertaken legal training to assist abused and marginalized women to access the justice system and other relevant resources in their pursuit of safety. Through these initiatives, the women have demonstrated their remarkable capacity to mitigate risk through collective effort (Mathie and Cunningham, 2009, p. 364).

Beyond the support given in personal and familial contexts, the majority<sup>23</sup> of the workshop participants have also been actively organized in manifestations of dissent against state institutions and multi-national companies in their main quest for greater recognition of human rights and gender equality. To this end and under the banner of “*united in one same fight*” they have organized and participated in peaceful “*marches in the streets and sit-ins in the plaza*” as well as radio forums and vigils to raise awareness about women’s rights, to speak out against femicide<sup>24</sup> and to oppose labour-related injustices.

The women have also organized collectively to express outright opposition against gender-based injustices in specific cases. In one instance, a group of forty-five participants organized a sit-in at the municipal labour office to protest the wrongful dismissal of a fellow participant who was laid off from her government position due to pregnancy. The women’s collective dissent was deemed vital to the successful restoration of the woman’s employment. They organized similar rallies against multinational factories in the region to assist fellow participants with maternity rights and injustices related to workplace injuries. The women’s courageous push for fairer treatment by both state and private sector institutions is a further testament to their evolving capacities to experience their citizenship more fully by engaging in counter-hegemonic tactics to exercise their rights (Mathie and Cunningham, 2009, pp. 8, 362; Carroll, 1992). As such, the women’s public protests reflect their attempts to gain access to, and benefit from the state-based rights to which they are entitled which is an undeniably significant and essential intersection since the state is ultimately responsible for upholding the rights accorded through conventions and other international and national frameworks.

Since the political coup on June 28, 2009 that ousted President Manuel Zelaya, the workshop participants have been challenged and motivated to shift the focus of their citizen-based advocacy and collective dissidence beyond their original pursuits of gender equality and onto the terrain of democracy. The majority<sup>25</sup> of the women have been

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<sup>23</sup> 73% of the respondents reported feeling more prepared and actively willing to stand up to their government to demand their human rights.

<sup>24</sup> The participants expressed great concern over the increasing number of women whose lives were lost in domestic violence cases not only in recent years but in the weeks immediately before the interview sessions in 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Given the safety risks inherent to the current political instability, it is not possible to carry out the fieldwork necessary to determine an exact count of the workshop participants engaged in the anti-coup protests. General updates have been obtained through email and telephone correspondence with the workshop facilitators and some participants. Formal research on the women’s activism against the coup will resume once it is possible to ensure that their participation in the study poses minimal or no risk to their safety.

active in the resistance movement and have participated in numerous protests denouncing the anti-democratic coup. In this volatile context, the women are reported to be feeling enraged and impotent yet encouraged by the strength and hope of their fellow Honduran citizens; as a result, they are not prepared to surrender. A follow up to this study will explore how the workshop participants have been utilizing their new-found knowledge and skills and engaging their unique identities and rights as Honduran female citizens to overcome the recent political challenges.

## Conclusion

*“Clearly my capacity has improved because what we have learned from each other has served us quite a lot, as the song says “the flight must soar.”<sup>26</sup>*

This participant-centered study has explored how non-governmental and solidarity-oriented human rights education has enabled a small group of Honduran women to transform their discoveries of human rights into effective dissident-based activism. In so doing, it has drawn attention to their emerging yet remarkable capacities to articulate and claim their human rights as adult women. By extension, it has shed light on the potential of female citizens working in solidarity as co-actors, co-organizers and co-defenders to successfully change the course of their own individual and collective lives (Mathie and Cunningham, 2009, p. 357; Faulkner and MacDonald, 2009, p. 17).

The women’s manifestations of empowerment, agency, resistance, resourcefulness and solidarity are a testament to the value of rights-based education delivered through a nurturing, creative and socially dynamic atmosphere in non-legal and non-state domains. While the integration of international human rights standards into Honduran legal and institutional reforms that safeguard women’s rights is ultimately desirable, the personal experiences of human rights education that bring comfort, instil confidence, enhance dignity, enable self-realization and build capacity are equally relevant because they too can generate significant life-changing and enduring progress in people’s daily lives. The desirability of the human rights training was articulated by one woman as her dream: *“That the workshops be more intensive in every corner of our country because there is violence as much in the cities as in the little places.”*

Despite the noteworthy advancements, the Honduran women featured in this study continue to face formidable challenges, not only broadly in the post-coup context, but also in their personal spaces as they reshape their lives amidst the complexities related to their desired post-victimization and activist selves that must constantly renegotiate with and against enduring and systemic ‘machista’ forces. The emotional, financial and temporal obstacles that the women encounter in their daily struggle for survival particularly as mothers and spouses are extensive and endless. The daunting and enduring impediments posed by patriarchal control and neglect were evident in the concern of one participant: *“One of my greatest challenges is to get my partner to change.”* Another woman expressed a similar yet broader worry: *“Being a woman in a country like this is very hard, being unprotected and dispossessed is not easy.”* Yet

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<sup>26</sup> The participant is making reference to the emancipation-oriented lyrics of Ana Belen’s song “Desde Mi Libertad” which has become an anthem of empowerment for the participants.

despite the extent of the obstacles, the women remain committed to persevere and they are now better informed, equipped and supported to do so.

By highlighting the women's voices, this participant-centered study has underscored how the women's own accounts are indispensable to understandings of their engagement with, and experiences of human rights. The women's demonstrated competency to pursue and benefit from their own human rights further reflects their potential to contribute to program and policy initiatives that seek to advance women's rights in their local, national and international communities. Educational, political, legal and social spaces must be granted to enable them to do so. Such spaces must consist of safe and inclusive opportunities for their participation so that their compelling voices and essential input can be integrated appropriately within human rights protocols, policies and programs. Instead of presenting women in dialectical extremes as either victims of structural patriarchal forces or informed agents of change, future research should observe the interconnectedness of structure and agency in women's lives as it is often manifested by women's use of their agency to effect constructive changes at the structural level (Maclure and Denov, 2006). Such research should also be participant-driven so that it reflects authentically the experiences of women, by women, with women and for women.

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