

# “FOR ME, BEING A HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER IS REWARDING, BUT IT IS ALSO AN ACT OF COURAGE”

• *Interview with Indyra Mendoza* •

By Maryuri Mora Grisales

**Sur Journal** • Tell us a bit about yourself. Who is Indyra Mendoza?

**Indyra Mendoza** • My name is Indyra Mendoza Aguilar. I am from the city of La Ceiba, Atlántida, which is on the Caribbean coast of Honduras. The customs of the traditional cuisine of our region and the characteristics of the people from the coast are deeply rooted in me, even though I currently work in the city of Tegucigalpa and live in the municipality of Santa Lucía. I am fortunate to have grown up in a family in which the defence of human rights (maybe it wasn't called that back then) and art have always had a role. When I say part of the family, I mean that my grandparents were people who defended human rights in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century – the rights of the men and women workers on the banana plantations. For years, they wrote and created art and poetry on this subject. As they were constantly denouncing what was going on, they were about to be executed by the government at the time and they had to organise their own defence.

It's interesting because even though there has always been talk in my family about defending others, standing up for ourselves and following the precepts of decent work for men and women, we were taught to love art. This is very important because CATRACHAS, our organisation, is completely full of art – not only its walls and murals, but all the publications that we produce have a section on art. It doesn't matter what it is: if it's a report, there has to be art in it; if it's a book, one with art; if it's a presentation, with art. We love art and this environment allows us to get through the hours of working at the office on such difficult

issues as defending the human rights of LGTBI people in Honduras. Honduras was not only the most violent country in the world, with the most violent cities in the world a few years ago, but it is also the country with the highest murder rate of LGTBI people in Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>1</sup> So, it is this combination of bringing out the historical roots of not only the defence but also art, which emerged over time in my family, that I have been able to install in CATTRACHAS<sup>2</sup> and have inherited. Many of our comrades also like art and have begun collecting art and enjoying it – enjoying life and defending human rights at the same time.

**Sur** • How did you get involved in the fight for LGTBI rights?

**IM** • With human rights. It was back in the mid-1990s, when I realized I was a lesbian. I only came to realize I was a lesbian when I was 28. I know that the people who have known me all my life always say, “But how can that be? You’ve been a lesbian ever since you were little”. I know. They’re not going to believe it, but I had never met a lesbian in my life before then and so, I didn’t know how to identify what I was. I didn’t really understand it. Obviously, I liked women. I have always been attracted to women, but this was a new phase, a new life. I have never been in the closet, but because I found myself so late in life, right? It’s incredible! But back then, when I started meeting many lesbian and gay people (because back then, we were all lesbians and homosexuals; there were no other labels in our world), I began to realize that when the media spoke badly of lesbian or gay people, homosexuals or called us “inverts”, “degenerates”, “freaks”, etc., it was up to me to do something. So, in response to an article written by a man in Honduras, I prepared a right of reply for the newspaper and I answered him. The article was called “Homosexuals, lesbians and other herbs” – I still remember it well and I responded with “my other herbs”. I wrote something that I don’t remember anymore, but it was the first time I had done an act of activism directly as a rights defender, in the year 2000. Obviously, after five years of meeting tons of people and going to bars that were also kept secret because before, if journalists found out where there was a hangout, “an ambiance” as they called it here, they would go there and want to stick their cameras over the fences and walls to see who was there and force them out of the closet. There was a lot of homicidal violence, but not as much as there was later, after the coup d’état.<sup>3</sup> And that is how CATTRACHAS was born.

**Sur** • Tell us a little about the situation in Honduras in relation to the work you do.

**IM** • My daily life. You know, different things happen in this country every day. Now, for example, during the quarantine, a 20-year old woman gave birth to her child in one of the country’s public hospitals with her partner, a lesbian, and a social worker told her that they were going to take her son away because she was incapable of raising him. This inspires me because no one can, no one has the right to mistreat us, say whether or not we are good enough to raise a family, or whether or not we have the right to study or not, to work or not or to have access to education. This motivates me – knowing that we will never allow them to continue treating us however they want because we’re not back in a time when we had no voice. Now, there are many voices in Honduras, many voices defending the human rights of LGTBI people.

Thus, when this kind of violation occurs, it gives me energy to fight discrimination and stigma. Even if it means working on a case-by-case basis, though we do want to change discriminatory laws, because one of our greatest achievements is having reached the Inter-American Human Rights System. Not only with Leonela's case.<sup>4</sup> We have the case of Vicky Hernández versus Honduras,<sup>5</sup> which is at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. We have several cases: five cases in the System, a petition at the Constitutional Chamber in Honduras on same sex marriage. There is also the case on sex changes and all the lawsuits that we have launched in the last 10 or 11 years (since the coup d'état) as strategic litigation, which have to bear fruit.

In other words, it is not only a matter of fighting every battle, but also engaging in battles to change all these discriminatory laws. But there is still much to be done. Obviously, there is a lack of education, a lot of education. Not only in the formal part, but also in the cultural part and this will take some effort, but we have to start doing it.

**Sur** • How did CATTRACHAS come about and what have been its main challenges and victories?

**IM** • It was created to respond to the media. It was born with the intention of monitoring the media and then using the right to reply to respond. In the beginning, in the year 2000, we called ourselves Red de Respuesta Lésbica CATTRACHAS (the CATTRACHAS Lesbian Response Network). Why did we call it a network? It's not that we're a huge network with a ton of organisations or a lot of lesbians. We called it a network because everything we did back then was done on the phone (remember that back in 2000, we didn't have Internet like we do today, nor social media and all that). So, we were a telephone network. Back then, we began using our right to reply and monitoring everything that was going on, like we did for print newspapers. We would check the newspaper every day. Four people would do that and not only women; some gay men helped us do this. We would take the VHS and the news was on at 6 p.m. – so every day, from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m., I would watch the news with the remote control in my hand. As many people get morbid pleasure out of anything related to LGTBI people, the news channels would announce coverage of these issues in advance. So, we already knew what we were going to see on the news. I didn't record everything, but when they were about to report on it, 'Click!', I'd hit 'record', listen to the report and then stop recording. That way, we had proof of what they were saying and we sent in responses using our right to reply. This worked well for the right to reply. In the CATTRACHAS' archives, we still have a right to reply that I faxed to some people on an advertisement for beds in Honduras (there was a whole radio and television campaign to sell beds that used a prejudiced comparison between a "real blond" and a "transvestite blond"). Surprisingly, they responded saying that they were going to withdraw the campaign from all of Central America. It was all over Central America! They did pull the campaign and this gave us another major boost. Then, 2004 came, which was when Spain legalised same-sex marriage and also, at the same time, three LGTBI organisations (well, organisations of gay men and one of trans women) requested legal status from the Government of Honduras. This generated

an enormous wave of hate. The ripples of this wave can still be felt today. Through religious fundamentalism, Confraternidad Evangélica de Honduras (the Evangelical Brotherhood of Honduras) managed to get the national congress to amend the Honduran Constitution to define marriage as being between men and women who are born that way and prohibiting same-sex couples from adopting.

What happened in 2004 was impressive: they gave legal status to organisations only to work on the issue of HIV – that is, they didn’t even mention that they were LGTBI organisations or anything like that. That was really when CATTRACHAS’ great work and great story began, in 2004, not only because we [openly defended LGBTI rights], but also because we started conducting campaigns in the newspapers – real campaigns! We also went to Geneva and began taking the cases of the deaths much further. Several trans women were killed. One of these cases is that of Leonela, which currently appears in a background report of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights as the victim of this first wave of religious fundamentalism. Then, we began to work harder. In CATTRACHAS, there has always been only a few of us in the organisation. In the past, there were four of us and now, there are eight of us – twice as many, 20 years later. This enabled us to preserve all the information that we’ve been keeping since then. Thanks to all this, CATTRACHAS has a spectacular documentation centre because we have been able to keep track of religious fundamentalism from that time onwards, of violent deaths since 1994. We have a wonderful historical source of documentation. The observatory – through which CATTRACHAS does it – is now stronger, more active and during the coup d’état in 2009 (which was another hallmark in the history of LGTBI people in Honduras), we were able to record and gather evidence on not only what was going on in the streets with the resistance, but also what happened in the media and everything that the perpetrators of the coup were doing. This information on the streets can be watched on CATTRACHAS’ YouTube channel.<sup>6</sup> The point is that this was when the organisation was born and was strengthened. We have long-standing, life-long allies in our organisation – allies who have always been there for us and it’s great because it has strengthened us and allowed us to focus definitely on what we want to do.

One of CATTRACHAS’ major accomplishments is that we have forced the state of Honduras to recognise us. Although they do not want to recognise our rights legally, there isn’t a space related to human rights mechanisms left where they do not have to talk about LGTBI people. We have over 100 recommendations from the various mechanisms – both regional and universal ones of the United Nations system and on human rights related to LGTBI people – and this is thanks to the shadow or alternative reports that CATTRACHAS has produced. Therefore, the fact that now, the state has to recognise that we exist at all times and in every step that it takes is a huge victory!

Another important victory, in my view, is that these new generations are no longer born in the closet. They don’t live in any closet, as they have a bit more freedom. Obviously, lethal violence against LGTBI people exists and there is a lot of discrimination. But the closet killed my generation. The closet! They lived in the closet so long that it affected their lives. In fact,

many people were murdered, many died from HIV and many have never even come out of the closet and perhaps are now living unhappy lives and that's bad! It's tragic! I believe it's the worst thing that has happened to us – not being able to tear down the closet in this society because it is still highly discriminatory, stigmatising and violent toward us. This also makes my work as a defender important, not only because we have literally saved many people's lives through CATTRACHAS, but because we have helped many people be happy and this is wonderful. This has really given us a lot of satisfaction. We are brave, very brave because we are aware of the situation in Honduras – a country where there is a lot of migration because of so much violence, so much economic inequality, so much educational inequality.

During this time of Covid, there is “Covid phobia” like you wouldn't believe. In CATTRACHAS, during the Holy Week and in the first weeks of the pandemic and the quarantine, we realized that there was a Covid phobia and we were the first ones to come out with media campaigns to denounce it. Why? Because all these expressions of stigma, hate and discrimination that have been historically directed at LGTBI people are now being directed towards people infected with or affected by Covid. So, all of us could feel it in our bodies. We felt it. Our bodies trembled when we saw the reports saying that they wanted to remove people from their homes, that they didn't want to bury the bodies, that they wanted to set fire to the centres where the people went for testing. This hatred that surfaced – that is Honduras.

There is a lot of hate in this country because our leaders are dangerously ignorant and they are incapable of recognising what things cause hatred, contempt and discrimination. The mainstream media also profits from this hate to increase their ratings and religious fundamentalism has joined forces with these media channels to wield power. The religious fundamentalists appeared in 2004 and they have changed the Constitution and everything else. Since then, they have gained a lot of power. In fact, they have a lot of power because they took on the LGTBI agenda and they want to destroy LGTBI people. Religious fundamentalism is eating away at democracy in this country, but the people don't realize it because it's impossible to speak out against the pastors. It's impossible to speak out against religious fundamentalism because everyone thinks that we are attacking people's spirituality, but we're not. Honduras is a secular country and the other side of a secular state is religious freedom, being free to believe or not. And they are violating all rights, all the rights of all people. So, that is the situation in Honduras. For me, being a defender is rewarding, but it is also an act of courage.

**SUR •** How do you motivate yourself to continue on a daily basis? Do you use individual or collective self-care practices?

**IM •** What do I do to keep from sinking into despair every day? Oh, no, there are many things that I do for fun. I really have a great family. I am into numismatics – that is, I have been collecting coins, bills, tokens and medals for many, many years. I have theme collections. I've written several books. I have story books for girls and boys and I've written lesbian short stories. But I love collecting coins, love it. So, it's something that I fill my day

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with. I mean I can talk about coins, go to numismatic coin conferences. I have friends who are into numismatics. I’m always asking people for coins. I love coins. I also connect a lot of things. I’m a collector – I collect antiques and I also like art and books a lot. I have a collection of radios. So, I like to collect things, but most of all, I love playing with coins.

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*Interview conducted by Maryuri Mora Grisales in July 2020.  
Original in Spanish. Translated by Karen Lang.*



Photo: Indyra Mendoza’s personal collection.

## NOTES

- 1 • “El Prejuicio No Conoce Fronteras: Homicidios de Lesbianas, Gay, Bisexuales, Trans e Intersex en Países de América Latina y El Caribe 2014-2019,” *SinViolencia LGBTI*, 2016, accessed July 21, 2020, [https://colombiadiversa.org/colombiadiversa2016/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Informe\\_Prejuicios\\_web.pdf](https://colombiadiversa.org/colombiadiversa2016/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Informe_Prejuicios_web.pdf), p. 23.
- 2 • Red de Respuesta Lésbica CATRACHAS, Homepage, 2020, accessed July 21, 2020, <https://catrachas.org/index.php/es/>.
- 3 • Raúl Benítez Manaut and Rut Diamint, “La Cuestión Militar. El Golpe de Estado en Honduras Como Desafío a la Democracia y al Sistema Interamericano,” *Nueva Sociedad* 226 (March-April 2010), accessed July 21, 2020, <https://nuso.org/articulo/la-cuestion-militar-el-golpe-de-estado-en-honduras-como-desafio-a-la-democracia-y-al-sistema-interamericano/>.
- 4 • “Informe No. 84/18. Petición 2362-12. Admisibilidad. Leonela Zelaya,” CIDH, July 16, 2018, accessed July 21, 2020, <http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/decisiones/2018/HOAD2362-12ES.pdf>.
- 5 • For more on the Vicky Hernández case, see: “CIDH Presenta Caso Sobre Honduras a la Corte IDH,” OEA, May 9, 2019, accessed July 21, 2020, <https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/prensa/comunicados/2019/112.asp>.
- 6 • Their website is [www.CATRACHAS.org](http://www.CATRACHAS.org) and in YouTube, they can be found at YouTube CATRACHAS, always with a double t.



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