

A BLANKET FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Rosa Borrás

1 • Introduction

In Spanish, a *cobija* is a blanket, and *cobijar* means to give shelter, to offer refuge or to protect someone. It is a verb, an action. That is why I like to make blankets from fabric scraps: for me, making a blanket has a great symbolic meaning. And that is why I decided to make one in response to the *Navigating Risk, Managing Security, and Receiving Support* project at York University¹ with a double meaning: human rights defenders protect us, but we also need to protect, shelter and take care of them. We need to give visibility to the work they do, as well as the risks they face and the way they deal with them.

The definition of blanket in Spanish includes the idea of containing something that is not manifest or visible to all, that is covered up. This blanket [whose images are part of the selection of artistic works for *Sur 30*] contains pieces of clothing that belonged to defenders in Mexico from the cities of Puebla, Teocelo and Monterrey (located in the states of Puebla, Veracruz and Nuevo León, respectively), which are the content hidden in it.

When I started, I did not know exactly how I would go about making the quilt. I knew I would embroider words or fragments of writings on it, that it would be made with recycled materials, that gender would be its core issue and that I would incorporate defenders' presence by using their clothes.

Early on, Juliana Mensah and Alice Nah² sent me poems, transcripts of interviews and other research materials. I found them very moving and I started embroidering some of the words and poems, which I chose for their power, their beauty and their universality. I embroidered them into pieces of fabrics that I felt were related to their messages.

Once I finished embroidering them, I decided that the best way to build the piece would be to make nine square fabric modules of about 23 x 23 inches each (60 x 60 cm). I would then use the modules together as the basis for making nice compositions, with the embroideries as the centrepiece.

At the same time, I carved some little linoleum prints to stamp images onto different pieces of fabric to create a sense of visual unity, rhythm and other graphic references and to visually integrate all the squares.

When I finished the design for each square, I started sewing and embroidering by hand all the scraps and pieces of fabric and the embroidered poems. Once I finished the nine squares, I sewed them all together with the sewing machine. Then, I laid the backing fabric on my studio floor, put a layer of quilt padding over it and finally, the patchwork on top. I basted everything, made a border and sewed it all together with my machine.

The final and most important stage was to tie the three layers together to stop them from coming apart or moving. It was only then that I invited two friends (one of whom is a defender and donated two t-shirts) to help me. We cut little squares out of the clothes that the defenders had given me and used coloured thread to sew them to different parts of the blanket. For me, this was a very symbolic gesture and maybe the most important one in the whole process: human rights defenders holding us together and supporting all of us through their work and commitment.

2 • About the activists that participated via their clothing

O.V. is the director of a NGO in Puebla dedicated to gender identity and defending LGBTI+ rights and those of people living with HIV. He donated a beautiful shirt made especially for him years ago. He wrote this about it: “It is a manta shirt that I wore during the march “The colour of our land” in 2000 that ended in the Congress with *Comandanta* Esther’s speech. I have been involved in the defence of human rights ever since. The EZLN [Zapatista Army of National Liberation] and *Neozapatism* were, and still are, the inspiration for the work I do. This shirt was made by a woman (*artesana*) in Cuetzalan, Puebla. If you look carefully, you’ll see it’s very well made. I must admit that I felt I was giving up an object full of meaning and fond memories. But it was packed away and no one could see it or knew about it. With your work, it will live again”.

N.A. has worked on sexual and reproductive rights and now heads a NGO with many projects, including training on gender issues in Puebla. She donated a t-shirt that was designed by her and her friends for one of the “Marchas de las putas” (SlutWalks) in Puebla.

M.A. is a journalist and co-director of an independent news website, one of the most critical and sentient ones of Puebla and Mexico with a gender perspective. She donated a white blouse that she had used in her daily life for several years. Today, journalism is one of the most dangerous professions in Mexico.

T.D.F. is a journalist and has devoted his work to research and writing about sexual diversity and human rights of LGBTI+ and transgender people. He donated a t-shirt that he had worn to many Pride Marches in Puebla. He explained that purple is the Gay Pride colour.

V.R.A. is the co-director of a NGO that works on reproductive and sexual rights and women's health. They also give seminars and workshops about feminism and gender and provide legal assistance for minorities at risk. She donated two t-shirts, one of which was designed for the "1ª Marcha de las Putas en Puebla" (the first ever SlutWalk in Puebla). The other one was designed for a demonstration on AIDS awareness.

C.F.P. is a teacher specialised in intercultural education and has worked on gender issues as well. She donated a manta blouse, the first one she had ever embroidered when she started working with the women of her community, Teocelo, in Veracruz, México. These women taught her to embroider.

C.R.R. is a teacher, writer and feminist activist. She works both independently and with government institutions on the design and enforcement of human rights policy. She is part of a collective group formed by the families of missing persons in Monterrey, Nuevo León. She donated a t-shirt that she had worn on many marches with these families.

G.C. is a lesbian feminist actress and is the director of an independent theatre company. She produces Theatre of the Oppressed (OT) plays and brings them to remote and poor communities in the state of Puebla. She donated a t-shirt designed for a "Marcha de las putas" (SlutWalk) in Puebla.

Regarding the embroidered writings and words, they are based on some of Juliana's poems as well as excerpts from interviews and other research materials. Some verses from these poems read as follows:³

Dust on paper

[...]

*It's a question of trying to survive.
To fall a thous and times
and get up.*

[...]

Greater than Love

*Pain
absence,
greater than love
some people do not know
what is to see a chair or a bed
that will never be occupied
by your daughter.
[...]*

Safety instructions for women human rights defenders

*[...]
Touch vulnerability
To strengthen people,
and not the opposite.*

NOTES

1 • “The Security and Protection of Human Rights Defenders at Risk,” Homepage, Security of Defenders Project, 2020, accessed July 16, 2020, <https://securityofdefendersproject.org/>.

2 • See Alice M. Nah and Juliana A. Mensah’s contribution to this issue of *Sur*, “Making the Invisible Visible: Foregrounding the Emotional Journeys of Human Rights Defenders through Artistic Practice” (p. 139 - 143).

3 • Juliana Mensah composed these poems from the transcripts of interviews with women human rights defenders who participated in the research project entitled “Navigating Risk, Managing Security, and Receiving Support”, which focuses on the experiences of human rights defenders in Colombia, Mexico, Egypt, Kenya and Indonesia. See Security of Defenders Project, 2020, <https://securityofdefendersproject.org/>.

**ROSA BORRÁS** – *Mexico*

Rosa Borrás is from Mexico City, where she was born in 1963. She studied graphic design at the Escuela de Diseño del Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (EDINBA, or School of Design of the National Institute of Fine Arts, Mexico City, 1981-86) and visual arts at Massachusetts College of Art (Boston, 1989-94). She graduated in cultural administration from Universidad Iberoamericana (Ibero-American University, Puebla, 2008). She is a member of the Museo de Mujeres Artistas Mexicanas (MUMA, Mexican Women Artists' Museum). She has held 23 solo exhibitions and participated in 49 group exhibitions both in Mexico and abroad. She has been the creator and promoter of independent and self-financed cultural projects such as Puebla-Cholula Open Studios and Embroidering for Peace Puebla (Bordando por la paz Puebla) since 2012.

Received in June 2020.

Original in English.



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