

Submission to the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Development

Input for the 2025 Reports: Nexus between Gender Equality and the Right to Development

Center for Gender & Refugee Studies
University of California College of the Law, San Francisco

April 14, 2025

The Center for Gender & Refugee Studies (CGRS) is grateful for the opportunity to contribute this input to inform the thematic reports of the mandate, which will be presented to the Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly in 2025. Our submission focuses on Part A of the call for input, which addresses the "nexus between gender equality and the right to development."¹

This submission draws upon the following resources, which provide analysis and information relevant to the call for input.

- CGRS, *Root Causes of Migration: Climate Disasters and Environmental Degradation in Honduran Asylum Claims: Expert Declaration by Donald Hernández Palma* (October 24, 2024) [hereinafter, Factsheet]. A copy of this resource is included in the Annex.
- Declaration of Donald Hernández Palma, Expert on Climate Disasters and Environmental Degradation in Honduras (Sept. 18, 2024) [hereinafter, Hernández Declaration].² The document is not attached, but it is available via this [link](#) for general research purposes and upon request to advocates working on fear-of-return claims for Honduran nationals through [CGRS's Technical Assistance Library](#).

¹ The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Call for input for the 2025 reports (accessed on Feb. 19, 2025), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2025/call-input-2025-reports>. Question No. 3: "What additional law and policy reforms should be introduced to achieve substantive gender equality in both private and public spheres? How to bring effective changes to existing patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes?" and question No. 8: "What should be done to deal with differentiated and disproportionate impacts of climate change, conflicts and new technologies on girls and women?"

² Donald Hernández Palma is the Executive Director of the [Honduran Center for the Promotion of Community Development](#) (CEHPRODEC), a leading organization advocating for human rights and environmental protection in Honduras. As an agronomist and human rights attorney, he has worked on these issues for over three decades.

- CGRS, [Honduras: Climate Change, Human Rights Violations, and Forced Displacement](#) (December 20, 2023) [hereinafter, Report]. A copy of this resource is included in the Annex.

The sections below detail the challenges and vulnerabilities faced by Honduran women in the context of climate change, disasters, and environmental degradation, and measures to address them. Part I highlights systemic inequalities and risks faced by women human rights and land defenders. Part II explores the disproportionate impacts of climate change on women and the lack of adequate protection from authorities. Finally, Part III provides recommendations to strengthen protection for women.

I. SOCIAL NORMS AFFECTING WOMEN IN HONDURAS

A. Societal Context in Honduras and Risks for Women

In Honduras, there are deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and rigidly defined gender roles. Due to *machista* norms, women are often believed to be inferior to men, which negatively impacts various aspects of their lives. For example, the Hernández Declaration explains that women represent less than 20% of landowners. Even when women own land, men are usually the ones who make decisions about its management and resources. This reinforces power imbalances between women and their partners, limits their economic independence, exacerbates poverty, and puts them at risk of gender-based violence. It also makes sexual extortion more likely. In some communities, particularly for single women, local leaders have demanded sexual favors in exchange for access to land.

B. Women Land Defenders

In Honduras, human rights and land defenders are committed to safeguarding the right to a safe and healthy environment by protecting ecosystems and lands from harmful extractive industries that threaten their communities. They face strong opposition from corporate and political actors behind these industries, who label them as “criminals,” “vandals,” “squatters,” or “invaders.”³ As a result, Honduras remains one of the most dangerous places for land defenders,⁴ where they are systematically criminalized and targeted with violence, torture,

³ José Luis Espinoza, *Monitoreo de Medios Sobre la Minería en Honduras [Media Monitoring on Mining in Honduras], July 2018 to July 2019*, CEHPRODEC, (2019), <https://cehprodechn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/MONITOREO-DE-MEDIOS-MINERIA-PARA-IMPRESION.pdf>.

⁴ Graciela Martínez González, *‘Están Esperando que nos Rindamos’: Activistas que Defienden los Ríos de Honduras Sufren Acoso y Asesinatos [They Are Waiting for us to Give Up: Activists Face Harassment and Killings]*

disappearance, forced displacement, or even murder. In 2022, Honduras recorded the highest number of land defenders killed per capita globally.

However, within this group, women land defenders are particularly vulnerable to severe forms of violence, including physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Our Report documents how extractive industries use sexual and gender-based violence as a tool to seize territory and quell community resistance. These industries are often acting through corrupt State authorities, private police forces, and even criminal organizations, as illustrated in the Hernández Declaration.

Women land defenders are also commonly targeted by defamation campaigns, aimed at discrediting their efforts and reputation. These campaigns often involve falsified personal misconduct allegations and misogynist slurs.⁵

Women land defenders, who oppose the large-scale projects or harmful environmental policies are at a heightened risk of femicide. For instance, in 2016 Berta Cáceres—a Lenca activist who fought for environmental and Indigenous rights—was brutally killed for opposing the construction of the Agua Zarca Dam on the Gualcarque River, as documented in the Hernández Declaration. This environment of violence, threats and defamation makes it very difficult for them to protect their communities and the environment.

C. Female Spouses or Relatives of Male Land Defenders

Repression and violence in Honduras extend to the female family members of male land defenders, as a means of targeting and silencing their resistance. The Hernández Declaration highlights the unique challenges faced by the female spouses of land defenders in Honduras. When their partners are detained, these women often endure retaliation, sexual harassment or violence, and are left without means of support. They are also intimidated by threats of violence against other family members, children, and property.

Unfortunately, as detailed in Hernández Declaration, gender-based violence is highly stigmatizing in Honduras and women feel ashamed to report any incidents. In fact, reporting

In Campaign to Protect Rivers In Honduras, Amnesty International, (Jan. 27, 2024), <https://www.amnesty.org/es/latest/news/2024/01/activists-harassment-killings-protect-rivers-honduras/>.

⁵ CEHPRODEC, *El Rol de las Empresas y Los Estados en las Violaciones Contra los Defensores y las Defensoras de los Derechos de la Tierra, el Territorio y el Ambiente [The Role of Companies and States in Violations Against Land, Territory, and Environmental Defenders]* 40 (Oct. 2015), https://cehprodechn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Civil-society-organization-joint-reoprt_defensoras-del-medio-ambiente_2015.pdf.

sexual violence can result in retaliation. But even in the cases when women do report, State authorities often do not provide appropriate support or investigate their claims.

II. THE IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION ON WOMEN

A. Environmental Degradation and State Policies Endanger Women

The climate crisis in Honduras has led to widespread violations of the right to life, health, personal integrity, and cultural identity. These conditions often drive the displacement of vulnerable groups, particularly women and girls. Our Report documents that, even though women and girls hold specific rights and guarantees under both Honduran law and international and regional human rights frameworks, they are at heightened risk due to the effects of environmental degradation and the impacts of climate change.

Widespread environmental degradation in Honduras is deeply intertwined with development policies that favor large-scale industrial projects, which are largely State-sponsored. Our Report documents that these projects, including large-scale agriculture (monocultures), mining operations, and hydroelectric projects, have significantly contributed to the climate emergency, with disastrous consequences for the environment and local communities.

The State has facilitated the rapid destruction of the environment by allowing corporations to seize vast areas of land, granting permits without proper consultations with local communities, and repressing opposition. Our Report also documents how these mega-industrial projects exacerbate floods and droughts. For example, palm oil plantations damage riverbanks, while mining contaminates water supplies and depletes local resources. The State's failure to enforce environmental regulations is at the root of the country's environmental crisis.

Our Factsheet shows that a key consequence of environmental degradation is water contamination. Mega-industrial projects significantly reduce access to potable water. The Report provides an example of the mining industry contaminating the water of a community with toxic heavy metals, such as lead, mercury, and cyanide, which led to severe health issues among the locals.

B. Water Insecurity, Health Risks, and Gender-Based Violence

Water contamination disproportionately impacts women, particularly in rural areas. Due to existing social norms, women are expected to manage the household, including gathering water. Their increased and prolonged exposure to contaminated water raises their risk of developing serious conditions such as cancer, skin diseases, and miscarriages. Moreover, as industrial activities exacerbate droughts and deplete local water sources, women must travel farther away from home to collect it. This journey significantly increases the risk of being kidnapped, sexually assaulted, or raped.

In addition to the health consequences, disasters such as hurricanes or droughts—which are increasing in intensity and frequency due to climate change—heighten the risk of gender-based violence. Our Report details how in the aftermath of Hurricanes Eta and Iota in 2020, women and girls were coerced into exchanging sex for emergency aid by State authorities and relief workers and faced sexual violence in emergency shelters. There were reported cases of girls being pressured into entering early forced marriages and unions following the hurricanes.

Honduran authorities fail to incorporate a gender-sensitive approach in disaster response and routinely neglect to investigate or prosecute gender-based crimes. This impunity fuels the ongoing violence, exploitation, and discrimination against women and girls, particularly in crisis situations.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

The widespread violations of women’s rights and the disproportionate impacts of climate change in Honduras—documented in this submission—reflect a broader pattern of gender-based violence and inequality. Women, especially those defending land, face heightened risks of violence and forced displacement. Furthermore, women and girls in rural areas experience worse health outcomes due to the environmental degradation surrounding them.

In light of these challenges, which are not exclusive to Honduras but are prevalent throughout the Americas, this submission urges the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Development to consider the following recommendations in his report. These measures, to be adopted by States, aim to strengthen protections for women in the developing world:

- Ensuring that post-disaster relief efforts are inclusive and gender-responsive by integrating protections against gender-based violence into emergency response plans and guaranteeing access to essential services for women and girls.
- Funding comprehensive protection programs for land defenders and their families, including accessible and safe reporting mechanisms that ensure confidentiality, protect against retaliation, and provide legal support for those facing criminalization.
- Addressing the root causes of gender-based violence and human rights violations by dismantling discriminatory policies, promoting women's land rights, and ensuring the prosecution of perpetrators of sexual violence.
- Enforcing and strengthening existing legal frameworks to protect women and girls, ensuring that laws against gender-based violence are effectively implemented rather than merely symbolic.
- Collaborating with local communities and civil society organizations to develop and implement policies that reflect the lived realities of women facing displacement, violence, and environmental harm.