

A Blanket for Human Rights Defenders

By Rosa Borrás

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A *cobija* is a blanket, and *cobijar* means to give shelter, to offer refuge, to protect someone. It's a verb, an action. That's the reason I like to make blankets from fabric scraps: making a blanket has a very symbolic meaning to me. And that's why I decided to make one as a response to the project *Navigating Risk, Managing Security, and Receiving Support* at the University of York. It also has a double meaning: human rights defenders protect us, but we also need to protect, shelter and take care of them. We need to show 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. This blanket contains pieces of clothing that belonged to defenders in México, from the cities of Puebla and Monterrey, and that's the hidden content in it.

When I started I didn't know exactly how I would go about making the quilt. I knew I would embroider words or fragments of writings, that it would be made with recycled materials, that it would contain gender as a subject and that my friend's presence would be there through their clothes.

Early on Juliana and Alice sent me poems, transcripts of the interviews and other research materials. I found them very moving and I started embroidering some of the words and poems, choosing them for their power, their beauty and their universality. I chose fabrics that related with the words and their message.

Once I finished them, I thought the best way to build the piece would be to make nine fabric square modules of about 23 x 23 inches each (60 x 60 cms) on top of which I would make nice compositions and arrange the embroideries as the central piece.

At the same time, I carved some linoleum little prints, like stamps, to print on different fabrics to give a visual unity, rhythm and other graphic references and to visually integrate all the squares.

When I finished the arrangements on 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 put them together with the sewing machine.

Then I laid the backing fabric on my studio floor, put the padding over it, and finally the patchwork on top. I basted everything, made a border and sew all together with my machine.

The final and most important stage was to make the knots that hold together the three layers to avoid it from coming apart or moving. Only at this time I invited two friends (one of whom is a defender and donated two t-shirts) to help me sew little squares I cut out of all the clothes the defenders gave me. We held them to the fabrics of the blanket with strong, colorful knots. To me this was a very symbolic gesture and maybe the most important in the whole process – human rights defenders hold us together, support all of us with their work and commitment.

Cloths

About the activists that participated through their clothing:

O.V. Is the director of a NGO in Puebla dedicated to gender identity and LGBTI rights, as well as defending the rights of people living with HIV. He donated a beautiful shirt made especially for him years ago. He wrote to me about it: "Its a *manta* shirt that I wore during the march 'The color of our land' in 2000 and ended at the Legislative Congress with the "*comandanta*" Esther speech. Since then I have been involved in human rights defense. The *EZLN* and *Neo zapatismo* were, and still are, my inspiration to do the work I do. This shirt was made by a woman (*artesana*) in Cuetzalan, Puebla. If you pay attention, you'll see it's very well made. I should not avoid telling you that I felt like giving up an object full of meaning and warm memories. But it was packed away and no one could see it, or know about its story. With your work it will live again".

N:A has worked in sexual and reproductive rights and now directs an NGO with many projects, including training in gender subjects in Puebla. She donated a t-shirt that was designed by her and her Friends for one of the "*Marcha de las putas*" (SlutWalk) in Puebla.

M.A. is a journalist and co-director of an independent news web page, one of the most critical and sentient of Puebla and Mexico, and with a gender perspective. She donated a white blouse that she used during 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 to write about sexual diversity and human rights of LGBTI and transgender people. He donated a t-shirt that he wore to many Pride marches in Puebla. He explained to me that purple is the gay pride colour.

V.R.A is co-director of a NGO that Works for reproductive and sexual rights and women's health. They also give seminars and workshops about feminism and gender, as well as 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 march about Aids.

C.F.P. is a teacher with a specialty in intercultural education and has worked in gender issues as well. She donated a *manta* blouse, the first one she 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 human rights policy design and enforcement. 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 wore on many marches alongside with these families.

G.C. is a *lesbofeminist* actress and is the director of an independent theater company. She produces Theater of the Opressed (OT) and brings them to the distant and poor communities in the State of Puebla. She donated a t-shirt designed for a “*Marcha de las putas*” (SlutWalk) in Puebla

Embroidered words

Regarding the embroidered writings and words, they are based on some of Johanna’s poems as well as on interview fragments and other research materials.

Dust on Paper

It’s a question of trying to survive.
To fall a thousand 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.

This blanket is part of the project ‘Navigating Risk, Managing Security, and Receiving Support’, which focuses on the experiences of human rights defenders at risk in Colombia, Mexico, Egypt, Kenya, and Indonesia (securityofdefendersproject.org)