



# ***ALUNA ACOMPAÑAMIENTO PSICOSOCIAL / ALUNA PSYCHOSOCIAL ACCOMPANIMENT***

## **Political Document<sup>1</sup>**

*Aluna Acompañamiento Psicosocial / Aluna Psychosocial Accompaniment* (henceforth, Aluna) is a Mexican civil society organization created in 2013 by a group of mental health and human rights professionals; it draws from its founder and director's nearly 30 years of experience in psychosocial work in contexts of violence. The systematization of our efforts and the team's constant reflection has allowed us to create a collective accompaniment model; accordingly, when we refer to ourselves as "we," we are referring to the people at Aluna, both women and men, who have created a psychosocial accompaniment model.

Aluna directs its efforts toward assisting **political subjects**<sup>2</sup> in incorporating the **psychosocial approach** into their human rights defense projects and/or demands for justice as part of organizational strengthening, so that they can continue their work and contribute to social transformation in search of a dignified life.

In Mexico, the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been marked by a context of widespread violence that intensified and grew exponentially with the so-called "War against Narco-Trafficking," which was instigated by Felipe Calderón's federal government and whose militarization of the national territory and mass violence against civilians—considered as collateral damage in governmental discourse—continued during Enrique Peña Nieto's six-year term, along with the increase in human rights violations, the criminalization of human rights defenders and organizations as well as journalists,<sup>3</sup> and the consolidation of a system that is characterized by impunity, corruption, and repressive policies.

The regime change that came with the arrival of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), with the so-called Fourth Transformation in 2018, has meant multiple paradoxes in matters of violence, human rights, territorial rights of indigenous peoples, militarization, freedom of expression, and government relations

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<sup>1</sup> Published in October 2020.

<sup>2</sup> At Aluna, by "political subject" we refer to those actors that, from a critical perspective of the context and of power relations, seek social transformation and emancipation from different forms of oppression. This definition encompasses a wide variety of actors. For example, social organizations, collectives, journalist organizations, communities that resist neoliberal projects, collectives of the family members of victims of disappearances and people who have been arbitrarily tortured or detained.

<sup>3</sup> According to the 2019 [Front Line Defenders](#) report, Mexico is the fourth most dangerous country in the world for those who work in human rights defense.



with civil society. While the federal government led by López Obrador cannot be defined as leftist, it is the first time in recent Mexican history that the federal government has driven initiatives and policies to address some of the most serious problems that are wreaking havoc on the country, such as corruption, thus affecting the interests of central economic and political sectors. Furthermore, progress has been recorded surrounding the federal government's recognition of the seriousness of the crisis of disappeared persons; yet, the challenges have not been overcome due to institutional inertia.

Despite this progress and the fact that the federal government explicitly identifies with democratic values, the human rights violations and the attacks on human rights defenders and journalists continue, even if they are not part of systematic, repressive policies driven by the federal government. The militarization of the country will continue, on the one hand, with the deployment of the National Guard—with military members and civil command in all the municipalities and states reinforcing their presence, particularly along the northern and southern borders, as part of an immigration control policy due to pressure from the U.S. government resulting from free trade agreement negotiations—and, on the other hand, by granting an important role to military members in the construction and management of several public works projects, such as the new international airport in Mexico City.

Moreover, megaprojects that violate the autonomy that indigenous peoples and communities hold over their territories have carried on, intensifying historical socioenvironmental conflicts to the detriment of defenders of the environment, land, and territory, although some communities in regions of the country acknowledge the financial support they are receiving; ultimately, the president has contributed to the polarization of civil society and the media under a discourse that calls out the conservatism of all political, social, ideological, or cultural projects that contravene the official programs.

The **sociopolitical violence**<sup>4</sup> that is experienced in Mexico, based in a capitalist, neoliberal, and patriarchal system, brings about harm with socioaffective costs that have a high impact on political subjects. This harm results from numerous factors that are intertwined, among them: working in a context of violence, accompanying victims of human rights violations, and facing a high risk when carrying out this work and being the object of aggressions such as intimidation and harassment, smear

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<sup>4</sup> At Aluna, we understand sociopolitical violence to be the strategy, whether subtle or open, that the State uses with the aim of controlling the population in order to impose political-military, economic, or ideological interests. This violence is exercised by State agents through action, omission, or complicity with non-state actors that serve power groups on a structural and economic level. Regardless of which actors exercise this violence, from a human rights focus, the State is the actor that is responsible for putting an end to its upholding and reproduction.



campaigns, threats, physical and digital threats, arbitrary detainment, criminalization, torture, disappearance, displacement, and murder.

Sociopolitical violence is characterized by the intensity and destructive power that attack the subject. The combined harm that it brings about is what we call “**psychosocial trauma**,”<sup>5</sup> which is the harm inflicted on a person from a violent circumstance and whose causes and consequences are not only located on a personal level but also on a collective and social level. Among political subjects, the psychosocial trauma expresses itself in **impacts**,<sup>6</sup> such as fear, guilt, fatigue, powerlessness, and the rupture of bonds, in detriment to their physical and emotional health and the negative effects on their life plans and projects. The psychosocial impacts are made evident in different dimensions (personal, family, organizational, community, and social), and different expressions and constructions of the human being (emotions, thoughts, knowledge, work, symbolisms, and even in the body).

In the same way that “negative” or painful effects are observed, there are other effects that allow individuals to face the sociopolitical violence and that are activated in order to counter it, both for individuals and for organizations; we call them **coping mechanisms**.<sup>7</sup> Some examples are: social mobilization and coordination, legal and human rights training, development of new legal and political strategies on national and international levels, sharing of information and communication on social media, and cultural expressions for collective memory.

We believe that integrating the psychosocial approach into organizations’ strategies helps them resist violence and confront it; likewise, it contributes to coping with the crisis that was brought about by the current COVID-19 pandemic, as it makes it possible to create new ways of working, to collectively reorganize, and to design other accompaniment strategies; it strengthens coping mechanisms and seeks to reduce the impacts and make the processes and social struggles for human rights defense sustainable.

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<sup>5</sup> A concept developed by Ignacio Martín-Baró, a Spanish psychologist and Jesuit priest, founder of Liberation Social Psychology.

<sup>6</sup> With this concept, we refer to the set of tensions, losses, changes, and harm that are provoked in individuals who are objects of aggressions, threats, or, for example, who are also affected by the work that is done in these contexts of political violence.

<sup>7</sup> To understand the impacts of sociopolitical violence and the related coping mechanisms in greater depth, see Aluna Acompañamiento Psicosocial A.C. / Aluna Psychosocial Accompaniment (2019). *The Psychosocial Approach: A contribution to accompaniment work in contexts of violence*. Publication pending.



## The organization

**Vision:** A Mexico free of sociopolitical violence where political subjects have contributed to constructing truth, justice, and dignity.

**Mission:** We are a civil society organization that, from a psychosocial approach, contributes to strengthening individuals and organizations that have been affected by sociopolitical violence so they will continue their work of defending human rights in Mexico.

**Overall objective:** To strengthen political subjects in their human rights defense projects with the psychosocial approach by creating psycho-emotional, political, and security tools that allow for reinforcing their collective dynamics so they can continue to develop their work despite the contexts of political violence.

## Strategies

**Psychosocial accompaniment in crisis and emergencies:** We support people and collectives whose physical and emotional integrity is at risk because of the work they do; this is done by creating conditions of emotional stability and security that allow them to face the emergency.

**Psychosocial accompaniment for organizational strengthening:** We contribute our experience to the processes of recognizing harm and to the joint construction of strategies of resistance through tools in the political, psycho-emotional, and security fields and in their internal operations.

**Training:** We contribute the psychosocial approach to human rights organizations and social movements—in Mexico and in the Latin American region—in order for them to incorporate it into their organizational projects and into the accompaniment of other victims; the training is done through educational processes that include methodologies, theories, and practical tools. Being geared toward the comprehension and practical incorporation of the psychosocial perspective, the training spaces allow for creating processes of prevention and strategic reaction in order to reduce the consequences of the fatigue that is brought about by their work.

**Advocacy:** From the psychosocial approach, we document, research, and create visibility around the situation of political subjects in Mexico who face sociopolitical violence. Through exchange with national and international organizations, we



promote Aluna's psychosocial approach and accompaniment model as a tool for political subjects in the interest of upholding their political projects.

### Aluna's psychosocial approach

For Aluna, the **psychosocial approach** is a way of seeing, interpreting, and understanding the personal, collective, and social harm that become evident in contexts of sociopolitical violence in order to establish strategies and methods for treating this harm through political, psycho-emotional, and security tools and strategies.<sup>8</sup> The development of this perspective began in the 1980s in Latin America and came about as part of the resistance to devices of domination in the Global South.

At Aluna, we recognize that unraveling the underpinnings of pain and harm in situations of violence is essential, as this is what makes it possible for political subjects to act autonomously, in accordance with their individual and collective conditions, needs, and abilities. Therefore, we think it is important to contribute to integrating what has been unstructured, to recreate visions that construct alternatives in situations of oppression, to resignify painful experiences in order to resist in a dignified manner, and to continue mapping out paths of hope amid pain and powerlessness.

Theoretically and epistemologically, the psychosocial approach has three pillars that support the accompaniment process: the first is the conceptualization of **sociopolitical violence** that is the contextual framework from which political subjects carry out their activities; the second is that of **human rights**, as a framework from which to demand a dignified life and a starting point for analyzing the action of power actors; finally, the **mental health** perspective allows for mapping out horizons of political subjects' well-being within this context.

From the psychosocial approach, we believe it is essential to analyze the type of violence that we are facing; in our work with political subjects, we find that sociopolitical violence is the type that has the greatest effect. To characterize it, it is important to underline that **sociopolitical violence** is upheld by a capitalist, neoliberal, and patriarchal system that, at the same time, creates a structure of forms of violence that complement each other and whose harm becomes evident in different

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<sup>8</sup> At Aluna, we have developed an accompaniment model that allows for addressing impacts and strengthening coping mechanisms in a comprehensive way. Our model includes a theoretical-epistemological basis, a method, and a methodology. See Aluna Acompañamiento Psicosocial, A.C. / Aluna Psychosocial Accompaniment (2017) *Modelo de acompañamiento psicosocial Aluna [Aluna Psychosocial Accompaniment Model.]* Mexico: Aluna. Available in Spanish at: <https://bit.ly/2jT8yN4>





ways according to the specific contexts. For example, patriarchal violence—which is characterized, among other things, by the imbalance of power relationships, the stigmatization of diversity, the control of bodies, sexual violence and torture, the confinement of women to private settings and their invisibilization—exacerbates forms of violence against women (because they are women), against people with non-heteronormative identities, against dissidents, and against any other expression of gender that subverts the established binarist<sup>9</sup> order.

Regarding the framework of **human rights**, we base our work on a definition that refers to all the conditions and prerogatives that are sustained by human dignity. Human rights have been demanded on a cyclical basis throughout humanity's recent history; in Latin America, the recognition of human rights and their inclusion in a legislative framework, on both international and national levels, is the result of a historical struggle of the people. At Aluna, we believe that the human rights perspective lays the foundation for the struggle of the people and that it is the counterpart of individual and collective needs, which allows us to have an ethical framework for social struggle and develop tools and mechanisms in favor of victims.

Our conception of **mental health** is based on the reflections developed by Ignacio Martín-Baró, who assumed a critical stance against the conceptions that limit it to the absence of psychological disorders or to the proper functioning of the human organism;<sup>10</sup> Martín-Baró advocated for mental health to be understood in broader terms, considering that:

“[...] it is a matter of the basic character of human relations, for that is what defines the possibilities for humanization that open up for the members of each society and group. To put it more plainly, mental health is a dimension of the relations between persons and groups more than an individual state, even though this dimension may take root differently in the body of each of the individuals involved in these relations.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Gender binarism is a social construction that presents the existence of only two sexes: male and female, and two dichotomous genders: masculine and feminine. Bodies, social roles, emotions, and other dimensions of life are interpreted and categorized based on this rigid construction. Binarism is one of the fundamental tools for perpetuating the patriarchy.

<sup>10</sup> According to Martín-Baró, these conceptions of mental health would be the expression of “a limited conception of human beings that reduces them to individual organisms whose functioning can be understood in terms of their individual characteristics and features. Such a conception denies their existence as historical beings whose life is developed and fulfilled in a complex web of social relations. If the uniqueness of human beings consists less in their being endowed with life (that is, in their organic existence), and more in the kind of life they construct historically, then mental health ceases to be a secondary problem and becomes a fundamental one.” From “War and Mental Health” by Martín-Baró, I. (trans. Anne Wallace) in *Writings for a Liberation Psychology*, p. 109. (1994) Harvard University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Martín-Baró, I. (translated by Anne Wallace) (1994). War and Mental Health. Op. Cit.



Finally, we have seen that incorporating the **feminist perspective** into our approach, in a cross-cutting manner, allows us to account for sociopolitical violence in its relationship with the symbolic order of gender, which is part of the structure of violence and oppression that heightens the impacts on political subjects. Awareness of this structure allows for unveiling the codes, meanings, and norms that are based on the distinction of sexes, with this distinction being among the primary ways to signify and legitimize power, which are socially represented in knowledge, practices, and discourses that have the function of organizing social relationships into hierarchies and creating social inequality.

We have a work method that is inspired by Ignacio Martín-Baro's Liberation Social Psychology, Paulo Freire's Popular Education, and Fals Borda's Participatory Action Research.

Methodologically, we address four fields of psychosocial work: psycho-emotional, internal dynamics and relationships, security, and political projects, as we have identified that the impacts of violence are—mainly—made evident in these fields and they make up the structure of work in each accompaniment process.

### **Aluna's psychosocial work**

- Psychosocial work is not neutral. We choose to accompany political subjects that are victims of human rights violations, that are committed to demanding truth, justice, and reparation of the harm caused and pursuing conditions for a dignified life.
- We base our work on critical analysis of reality in order to understand the complexity of the context—we analyze the economic, political, and social relationships that bring about conditions of injustice, inequality, and repression as well as the intents of the violence and, from the human rights perspective, the responsibility of the State (due to action, omission, or acquiescence) so that political subjects that defend human rights can take action in a more comprehensive manner.
- From the intersectional perspective, we carry out an in-depth analysis of the experience of human rights defenders, creating visibility around other dimensions that make their work complex, such as gender,<sup>12</sup> ethnic identity, age, sexual preference, family roles, and social class, among others.

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<sup>12</sup> See Aluna Acompañamiento Psicosocial, A.C. / Aluna Psychosocial Accompaniment (2019). *If not us as women, who? If not now, when?* Mexico: Aluna. Available at: [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/536db9\\_0073efc8ab774165ba576f9338db4d97.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/536db9_0073efc8ab774165ba576f9338db4d97.pdf)



- We address harm in all its dimensions, which allows political subjects to give meaning to their experiences, to be more active, and to form comprehensive responses.
- The methodology we use allows us to go beyond the therapeutic setting, as it does not only aim to mitigate the harm but also to, strategically, strengthen political processes when faced with a worsening context.
- Our accompaniment model allows for seeing and reinforcing alternatives that minimize frustration and powerlessness when faced with impunity and a lack of a response from the State.
- We contribute our experience to the joint construction of psycho-emotional tools and tools for protection so that human rights defenders can cope with fear and feel safer in order to continue their work.

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