

International Exchange in Mesoamerica: Exploring the Power of Transnational Movement Building to End Violence Against All Girls and Women Around the World

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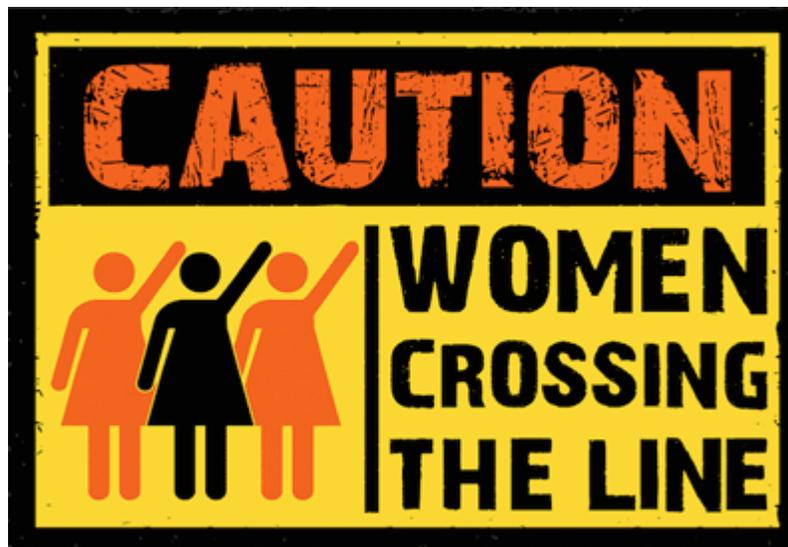


Image Courtesy of JASS

[This blog was authored in partnership with [Daisy Yamileth Flores Hernandez](#) of JASS and MEV.]

For this cycle's International Exchange Move to End Violence, a program of the NoVo Foundation, is honored and excited to be partnering with [JASS](#), an international movement-building support network that strengthens the voice, collective organizing power and safety of women activists and movements. The International Exchange is a crucial part of the Move to End Violence (MEV) program to steep ourselves in the power of transnational movement-building to address the root causes of violence against girls and women around the world.

Later this month, the [current cohort of MEV Movement Makers](#) will spend 10 days building cross-border connections and learning with a group of Guatemalan and Honduran women activists with whom JASS works. Read on to learn more about JASS, its approach to feminist movement-building, and this exciting learning exchange.

“Women Crossing the Line” is a phrase that JASS uses to describe women who are challenging the borders and boundaries of discrimination, and inequity and coming together in solidarity and collective action. This idea is at the heart of the upcoming exchange between the current Move to End Violence (MEV) cohort and women activists in Guatemala and Honduras with whom JASS works.

At a time “when we are witnessing extreme intolerance and a lack of compassion and humanity in the face of the Central American migration crises,” as Ana Perez, a core member of MEV’s facilitation team put it, it feels hopeful and important to be crossing borders and “challenging the logic that isolates us and makes us separate entities.”

JASS equips and accompanies Guatemalan and Honduran women activists as they organize in contexts of political repression, racism, patriarchy, and violence. Both countries mirror the long history of a region whose democracies are undermined and communities devastated by an extractive economic model driven by transnational companies and local elites.

“The women activists with whom JASS works,” explains Daysi Flores, part of the JASS facilitation team, “are part of social movements that not only resist that model, but envision and create alternatives that allow us to live in more harmonious ways with one another and the earth.”

There is a clear affinity between JASS’ work with activists who tackle many issues – including land and territory protection, human rights, women’s/LGBTQ rights, economic justice – and the goals and focus of Move to End Violence. MEV supports leaders of social movements in the United States working to eradicate violence against women and girls by helping leaders clearly visualize the change they wish to create, try on liberating practices, imagine new strategies, and develop the capacity needed to implement those changes.

JASS and MEV have been building on this affinity and working together to build a collaborative learning exchange that will bring together Mesoamerican women and U.S.-based women of color from transformative social movements to share their stories and strategies of resistance in diverse and adverse contexts and to dream together as a way to unleash profound synergies and solidarity.

Through the exchange of methodologies, histories, and strategies as the basis for a safe, generative, and catalytic exchange among activists, JASS and MEV staff and partners have been working closely together to envision and create a space where these women, across multiple languages, can see the resistance, resilience, and dreams they share. The exchange will incorporate movement, art, stories, reflection, rituals, self-care, co-constructed histories of struggle and resistance, visual sharing of ideas, and community visits.

It is our hope that this exchange will support these women in stepping back from the tensions and challenges of their day to day movement work, to build relationships, to connect energetically, spiritually and creatively, and to find resonance across borders, stories, organizing experiences, and movement struggles —and, return to their homes and work full of the inspiration, resilience and strength they discovered. As Rosa Chavez, part of JASS’ Mesoamerican team, described it, “it is like when you drop a small stone in the water and the circles it makes keep getting bigger and bigger.” Here we are creating circles of trust and learning across cultures – learning from our survival as women and that of our people – learning helps us grow together and strengthens us in our work for social transformation.

Day 1 of the International Exchange: Getting Grounded

Priscilla Hung

CO-DIRECTOR
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We opened Cohort 4's international exchange the way we always begin work that requires us to show up whole, take risks, and be present: we got grounded.

Our Guatemalan sisters in the room, led by Rosa Chávez of the JASS team, welcomed everyone with a powerful ritual grounded in Mayan tradition and in honor of the Mayan land we are on, territory that they have had to continually defend. They constructed a beautiful altar in the center of the room, made of local herbs, fruit, seeds, grains, and greenery. They invited us to bring in our energy through collective breathing and movement. They made music and sounds using traditional instruments. They introduced us to the Mayan calendar and nahuales, or spirits, and shared the significance of today's nahual. They opened up the center circle so that sisters from the United States and Honduras could join in the candle-lighting ceremony.



*Altar Put Together By Our Guatemalan Sisters in the Room, Led
by Rosa Chávez of the JASS team*

The ritual grounded us deeply in the cultural and historical context of being in Guatemala without requiring words or explanations. It recognized the cross-border connections already between us without needing to know where we are each from. It dropped us quickly into our bodies and spirits without needing to think or analyze. And it demonstrated the powerful leadership of Guatemalan women activists who are leading the fight to defend their bodies, lands, and communities.

This moving opening laid the groundwork for the forty women in the room to introduce ourselves to each other. Our roots span five continents, with some stewarding land their family has been on for generations, while others mourn histories that have been lost due to slavery and colonization. We are poets, organizers, mothers, human rights defenders, protectors of the earth, healers, barrier breakers, and system changers. Our passions to end violence in all of its forms – including patriarchy, capitalism, and racism – run

people and women of color, putting our lives on the line to be true to our values, and moving forward with the strength of our ancestors and our communities. Our desire for connection, solidarity, shared strategies, and learning were expressed over and over as we went around the circle. As was our conviction that dialogue, dance, art, and joy would be the ways for us to build relationships over the next several days.

Because language is an essential part of the way we communicate and share, it was important to also start with a framework of how we hope to practice language justice during our time together. Beyond just making sure that we can understand each other, language justice is a belief in the right of everyone to communicate in the language in which they feel most comfortable. It is an acknowledgement that colonization, racism, and genocide have made it punishable to speak one's native tongue, and that thousands of Indigenous languages have been lost as result. It is a collective practice and commitment, not something we simply rely on our interpretation team for – but having a skilled and robust interpretation team does make a huge difference. One lesson we have already learned in practicing language justice is how important it is to invest in the orientation, team-building, and sustainability of interpreters.

These elements together on this first day didn't merely plant a seed for what might be possible during our time on this Intercambio exchange. It has already sprouted leaves of connection around shared struggles, ideologies, and movements. We go to bed tonight full of positive energy and eagerness to dive in more deeply tomorrow.



[.Read more about the purpose of this international learning exchange.](#)

Day 2 of the International Exchange: Confronting Anti-Blackness

Priscilla Hung

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“I recognize and embrace Guatemala – and I recognize and embrace Guate-Black.” – Joanna Wetherborn

Anti-Blackness exists everywhere, including in our movements to end violence against cis and trans girls and women and those who are gender non-conforming. The only way to build successful, powerful anti-violence movements is to recognize and confront the anti-Blackness in ourselves and in our work. To help us ground in the context of Black women’s experiences in Mesoamerica, JASS invited [Glenda Joanna Wetherborn](#), a Guatemalan Creole journalist and communications specialist, to join us for the day.



Photo Caption: Joanna Wetherborn (center) in dialogue with Patricia Ardón of JASS and Monica Dennis of MEV.

Joanna candidly shared that Blackness has been erased in Guatemala – “People think I’m from anywhere but here” – and when they do acknowledge her, they assume she is Garifuna. The Garifuna community, a Black Indigenous community along the Atlantic Coast of Central America, has received a lot of well-deserved attention for their successful community organizing to defend the territory and

like herself who have been living in Guatemala for several generations, is indicative of their invisibility and a broad unwillingness to interrogate stereotypes. One of her missions is to break down the myth that the only explanation for Blackness in the region is due to slavery. She and other Black women have been advocating for the Guatemalan government to adopt the term “Afro-descendant” in the census and other governmental processes that impact public priorities and budget allocations.

Many experiences Joanna shared resonated deeply with Black Movement Makers, such as Black women and girls being frequent targets of sexual aggression and violence and at younger ages, not being believed when they share experiences of racism and sexism or having their experiences minimized, hyper-sexualized attitudes toward Black bodies, and no recognition of their work and expertise. She also shared that even though she has called herself a feminist since a young age, she doesn't see herself in a feminist movement that historically has and continues to center white women.

Indigenous women in the Intercambio, including Mayan women from Guatemala, also saw clear connections in their experiences, including being exploited by elected officials for votes and cultural tourism without any actual investment in their communities, being seen as cheap labor, and having to change the way they dress and the languages they speak for their own safety. Many wondered how Indigenous and Black communities could be better allies and see themselves as part of a common struggle.



Joanna named some clear ways that she helps build power for Black communities in the region. At the top of the list are creating autonomous spaces for Black women to connect and support each other, consistently naming the contributions that Black people have made, and always bringing her perspective as a Black woman to any dialogue – “I make all the spaces I occupy Blacker.”

She also expressed a desire for more accomplices in this work: “I’m not tired of fighting. I’m tired of fighting alone.” She challenged us to think about our responsibility to interrupt anti-Blackness including when Black people aren’t in the room. She named the unlearning we all need to do around Indigeneity and Blackness, and called for more opportunities to come together.

Joanna joining us early on in the Intercambio has created a crucial opening for deeper dialogue around anti-Blackness in our movements, greater openness of those who identify as Mestiza to name their Black ancestry, and stronger interest in building cross-racial alliances. We are deeply grateful to her for moving us further along a powerful path of exchange.



Day 3 of the International Exchange: Landscapes of Memory

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The defining event in Guatemala's modern history is the brutal 36-year internal armed conflict that ended in 1996, sparked by a CIA-sponsored coup of Guatemala's democratically elected president because the agrarian reforms he was promoting threatened the business interests of U.S. companies, namely the United Fruit Company (owner of Chiquita bananas). Over 200,000 people died and the U.S.-supported and trained military acted out a policy of genocide against Mayan communities.

Even in the face of such pervasive U.S. imperialism, cross-border solidarity between resistance and revolutionary movements in Mesoamerica and U.S. peace and justice advocates has thrived since the late 1970s. Students, labor, progressive church groups, political activists, and academics created solidarity networks to pressure U.S. policymakers. Indeed, [JASS](#), our local partner on the Intercambio, grew out of deep political and personal connections between Central American and U.S. activists who worked side by side during this period; JASS formed to continue cross-border organizing and movement-building in the region and beyond.



Within this context, it was extremely humbling to be invited by the [National Commission of Guatemalan Widows \(CONAVIGUA\)](#) to visit their memorial for victims of the forced disappeared and to take part in a ritual and invocation. Called "[Landscapes of Memory](#)" is located on the plot of land where 53 mass graves were found. It is a beautiful monument to the thousands of people that were disappeared and their families' relentless wish to find them.

The ritual was led by two of the most prominent Indigenous human rights leaders in the country – Rosalina Tuyuc, co-founder of CONAVIGUA, and Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú Tum. Along with over 30 women and children from the community Rosalina and Rigoberta led us to a small clearing among the pine trees just steps away from the memorial. We encircled a fire pit surrounded by flowers and petals, as they called out prayers and reflections in Kaqchiquel Maya and Spanish.



Rosalina Tuyuc [*Photo Credit*](#)



Rigoberta Menchú

Tum Photo Credit: [Nobel](#)

[Women's Initiative](#).

It was a profoundly generous process that reinforced the connections between us regardless of where we come from, what languages we speak, or how the country we call home has violently impacted theirs. They would add to the fire every time they invoked a part of the land, a plant, or a spirit, and amidst this naming of things that they are intimately tied to, they invoked each of our family names (we had over 45 people in our group), and would add a small candle to the fire after each name. It was deeply moving to be included in that way. Several times, everyone taking part in this ceremony were invited to come up one by one to the to add an item, whether it was seeds, a candle, or raw cacao. Indigenous people in our cohort brought tobacco that was also shared and added to the fire.

Rigoberta and Rosalina reflected frequently on our collective need to restore equilibrium to the world – equilibrium between each other and between people and the earth. In the presence of that place and of the power in these two women leaders, it was impossible to ignore the devastating consequences of being out of balance. Thousands of parents, siblings, and children were killed or disappeared. Thousands of women and girls were raped and tortured. Thousands of Mayans were and continue to be forcibly displaced from their ancestral lands to make way for large-scale resource extraction projects (often dams and mines owned by U.S.



to future generations.

It is clear that our charge is to repair and heal this disconnection not only within ourselves and our own communities, but also in solidarity with other communities. We are intimately connected, whether we realize it or not, and our actions can have profound impact on others. We will be reflecting on this powerful experience in the days to come as we decide whether and how to answer that call.

Day 4 of the International Exchange: Following the Youth

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MOVE TO END VIOLENCE

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We entered the school yard greeted by the sound of marimbas mixed in with children's voices. We spent the day visiting [K'astajib' Educational Center](#), which provides a decolonized, liberatory education based on Mayan culture. They welcomed us with a beautiful backdrop and a full morning of presentations for us by the students, from very young children to middle school youth, and we were immediately blown away.



Students playing the marimba, the school has 4 different classes for marimba

Marta Matzir, the school principal and a participant in the Intercambio, opened the morning explaining to all of the students, parents and teachers why they were using gender inclusive language in Spanish and how to work with interpreters. They welcomed us in three languages – Kaqchikel, Spanish, and English. Most of them wore traditional Mayan clothing and they encouraged us to also wear clothes that had cultural significance for ourselves. They shared their school's nahual, Ix, which represents feminine energy & the power of women. And they dove right into why it's important to end violence against women with the moving words, "I don't want to feel courageous when I go out on the street; I want to feel free."



Students performing a traditional song and dance

Watching the children play music, sing, dance, and perform was a needed uplift after the solemnity of the previous day, but it wasn't

myths of Ix-chel, the Mayan goddess of the moon, is a passing down of ancestral knowledge that also centers women.



The curriculum taught at K'astajib'äl has a very clear political analysis focused on reconnecting with Mayan values, recovering Mayan knowledge, and standing strong in the defense of human rights. Several students prepared rousing speeches that touched on the legacy of defending their existence and land from colonization, to explaining the economic injustice that fuels immigration and the subsequent risks, to the devastating impact of water and resource extraction, to the problems of discrimination against women from systemic level down to the individual.

The speech that brought us to our feet and to tears was a young woman decrying the State's criminalization of Indigenous peoples. She reflected on how vital land and water are, their mountains and rivers, and that defending their land is a duty, not a crime. She called on the urgency of social and political participation from everyone to fight resource extraction. She shared that her father has been imprisoned for fighting for their rights and the toll it takes on her to not have him with her, forced to instead rely on her memories. She declared that it is illegal for the State to criminalize and prosecute those who defend human rights, invoking Martin Luther King, Jr, Nelson Mandela, and Mahatma Gandhi as political leaders who were wrongfully imprisoned while speaking truth.

The power, clarity, and brilliance of this young girl is indicative of what [Ixpop](#) is fighting for. The school is a program run by the [May Uk'u'x B'e Association](#) and they, along with [JASS](#), are a member of Ixpop, a collective working to raise the visibility of Indigenous women's rights as part of a larger vision where the contributions of all women are recognized. Key members of Ixpop shared their active campaign to get a [General Recommendation for Indigenous Women](#) approved by [CEDAW](#) in recognition of the specific form of violence that impact Indigenous women, such as the impact of resource extraction on their reproductive rights, the lack of investigation into crimes committed against Indigenous women, a lack of bilingual and bicultural education, invisibility in statistics and research, the right to intellectual authorship over traditional weaving and medicines, and many more. Recognizing the inadequacy existing international tools to fight for their cause, they are calling on allies like ourselves to help them connect with other Indigenous communities and to advocate for the inclusion of this recommendation.



Members of Ixpop sharing about their work: (left to right) Ixchel Guorón of Tik Na'oj, Letitica Tay of Uk'u'x B'e, and Intercambio participant Sara Mux of ECAP

We left deeply inspired and nourished. We experienced what is possible when liberated spaces are created for our communities, especially in the midst of so many challenges. We saw the leadership of young people shine. We felt the deep connectivity among of us.

Day 5 of the International Exchange: Love in Action

Priscilla Hung

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MOVE TO END VIOLENCE

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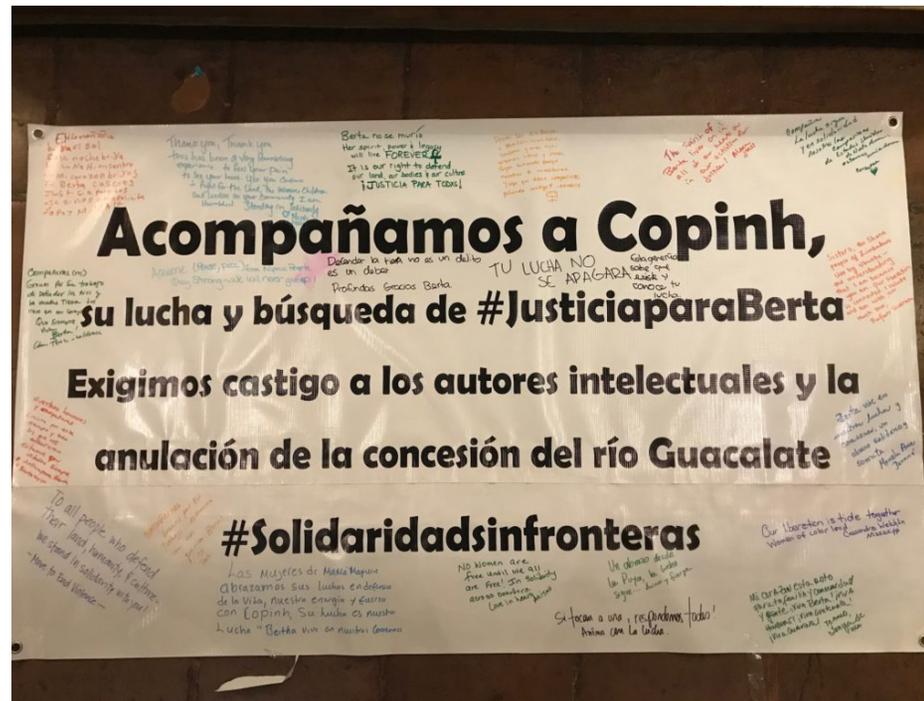


Today marks the three-year death anniversary of Berta Cáceres, a fierce internationally-known leader from Honduras who defended Indigenous territory and peoples from resource extraction. She was murdered on March 2, 2016, and a court ruling last November found that it was orchestrated by executives of a company that received international financing to build a hydroelectric dam on a sacred river that Berta and the members of [Copinh](#) were forcefully protesting. It is also the anniversary of her birth, March 4, 1971.

In this Intercambio are four JASS partners from Honduras, representing powerful Indigenous organizing in Lenca and Garifuna communities. They held today's opening ritual and dedicated it to Berta, a relentless fighter who supported and inspired them. It was powerful, emotional, and painful. Through tears, they shared remembrances of her and the struggles she supported them through, making many of us realize the enormity of their sacrifice in spending these important days with us rather than with their communities. But they chose to do so because they knew that the Intercambio would be a place for them to continue carrying out the work that Berta lost her life for – building solidarity across borders.



Maria Felicita López of Movimiento Independiente Indígena Lenca de la Paz Honduras (MILPAH) tends to the altar dedicated to Berta Cáceres.



A banner several of us signed pledging our solidarity with Copinh to demand justice for Berta and to protect their sacred river.

In honor of Berta and on the last day of this part of the Intercambio, where we have been in intense multi-day exchange with local partners, it was fitting that our theme for the day was “Love in Action”. Now that we have built connections of understanding and trust, how are we going to put that into action? Given the extreme conditions in Honduras that are forcing people to leave the country and the escalation of harmful immigration policies and a militarized southern border in the United States, immigration was a good place to start.

Participants from Honduras described the violent push factors causing thousands to leave, including Hurricane Mitch, the coup deposing President Zelaya, a neoliberalism economic model anchored by resource extraction, drug and gun trafficking, human rights violations, and more. They described the pain of family members disappearing, abandoned homes in emptying communities, extreme poverty, being forced off their land, and endangering loved ones by staying and fighting. The United States, including former President Obama, is implicated in all of this.

To share more about what happens during the journey to the border and after, MEV cohort members [Isa Noyola](#) of [Mijente](#) and [Monique Nguyen](#) of [Matahari Women Workers' Center](#) led a teach-in, challenging us to ask ourselves, “Where are we in this journey?” and how can we make intentional connections in our work between ending gender-based violence and immigrant rights and detention. Using the lens of migration and all that it is connected to, we dove deeper into making links between our work

At the end of the day, we wound down to reflect on the last several days of the Intercambio and what people are taking with them that can continue to bear fruit. We asked ourselves more questions: How can we approach all of our work with the same love, care, and generosity that we extended to each other during this exchange? How do we use the huge collective power of women working together to deepen our strategies? How do we make the impact of these new insights and relationships bigger than just the people who were in the room? What is possible now because of our choice to be here in this Intercambio? What do we need in order to care for each other and call each other's names even when we are not together?

And then we answered our own questions. By sharing heartfelt gifts from our communities, tangible ones like handmade Native American medicine bags but also spiritual ones like connection circles. By sharing appreciations, inspirations, and learnings. By singing "His Eye is on the Sparrow" together in English and Spanish. By dancing the night away at [Frida's](#), a locally- and queer-owned restaurant in Antigua. Giving and receiving. Truly seeing each other. Connecting hearts, bodies, minds. Having hard conversations. Practicing collective joy. Being in solidarity.

For Berta. ¡Presente!



Day 6 of the International Exchange: Practicing Spaciousness

Priscilla Hung

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We all know the importance of spaciousness, that rest is not something that happens in spite of the work but is actually necessary work to happen well. Not taking intentional space to reflect and recharge denies us the opportunity of coming to deeper insight and increases the chances of tunnel vision and burn-out.

We took a day off in Antigua to mark the end of our first week of the exchange. The movement partners of JASS from Honduras and Guatemala who have been with us for several days headed home, and we will be transitioning to a week of guest speakers, community visits, and reflecting on how the experience has affected us and our approach to our work.

Antigua is a beautiful colonial city frequented by tourists and is the former capital of Guatemala. With its beauty, charm, and visitor appeal comes all of the expected consequences – a high cost of living, the majority of businesses owned by foreigners, the commodification of culture, and a painful history of colonization. JASS chose this city for its safety and accessibility, and as a site it would be a place of restoration for its local partners as well. To continue moving in a values-aligned way in this many-layered place we tried to be thoughtful in how to use this free time.

Several people in our group wanted to purchase fair trade gifts for themselves and loved ones. Gift-giving is an important practice that allows us to economically support local people while sharing some of our experience with people at home and having a souvenir that brings us joy and memories. Through the [Women's Association for the Development of Sacatepéquez \(AFEDES\)](#), we invited Mayan women weavers to come sell us their textiles, all of whom are part of a national collective with an active legal case to protect their designs as intellectual property, which have been co-opted in the past by U.S. designers without fair recognition or compensation.

Other members of our group participated in a women's cleansing ceremony in a temazcal with a Mayan healer and spiritual guide. The temazcal is a stone-heated steam bath, akin to a sweat lodge, where participants engage in a physical and spiritual cleansing with the aid of local traditional plants. This is part of a series of traditional healing and wellness practices that we have offered throughout the week, including Mayan massage, group healing through movement and dance, and a Mayan sunrise ceremony. We have strengthened our commitment as a program to create restorative and healing spaces for women of color that help us practice community and self care, that draw on our ancestral knowledge, that provide spiritual nourishment, and that are seen as integral to our work rather than separate.

And others simply slept in, walked around town, visited local markets, had leisurely meals, and sat in the sun. Even these simple pleasures can feel like a luxury when tasked with the work of ending gender-based violence, but they are essential for our joy, humanity, and capacity for connection.

Day 7 of the International Exchange: Strategies for Solidarity

Priscilla Hung

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MOVE TO END VIOLENCE

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Our first week of the exchange in Antigua was marked by building deep bonds of connection and grounding in the Mesoamerican context. The start of this second week is focused on getting more immersed in strategies of solidarity. We were lucky to have two powerhouse international leaders join us today in dialogue.

Congresswoman Sandra Morán is the first out lesbian in Guatemala’s Congress and a longtime leader in Sector de Mujeres, a movement building network of 33 organizations, and in the World March of Women. She shared her journey from being a resistance leader to stepping up to governance, and, with the many challenges of elected office, keeping herself grounded by always centering her dignity. “You can bring the revolution and feminism to anything you do. You have to walk in the mud, but you can still walk with dignity.”

That dignity partly comes from the recovery of her spirituality. She felt pressured to deny her religious roots when she first joined the revolution, but she later realized that spirituality is her anchor and inner strength. “We need spaces that open spirit” because that is our connection to each other and to the earth. She also shared the importance of unlearning and that it is something for all of us to do.



Sandra Morán (third from left) with the [JASS](#) team.

She pointed to a global shift toward conservatism and fundamentalism, where women like her are seen as the enemy because they challenge patriarchal power. A shift to an era where democracy is weak and organized crime is so systemic that organized crime networks are successfully running candidates for president. She remembers times in the past that felt similar and that solidarity is the way they survived. “Sometimes we don’t need great ideas. What we need is to put humanity at the center.”

As one of the few voices in political office who is consistently challenging the existing political structure, she says, “You have to show up. You have to be in the photo, you can’t just be the photographer.” Her outspokenness as a woman and as a leftist leaves her vulnerable to many threats, but she is clear that power is built in collectivity and anyone in governance has to be rooted in community. “The future is in community, not organizations. Let’s study how our ancestors built community. We all come from community. The answers are there.”

Laura Zúñiga Cáceres is a different kind of leader than Congresswoman Morán, only in her 20s and an activist in her own right who was thrust into the spotlight after her mother, the prominent activist leader Berta Cáceres, was murdered three years ago, but her message is similar: violence is systemic, we have to stay strong in the struggle, and solidarity is key.



Laura Zúñiga Cáceres (center) in dialogue with Daysi Flores of JASS and MEV cohort member [Ana Orozco of Grassroots Global Justice Alliance](#).

Laura shared that part of the power of Berta's leadership was that she was not just a woman defending a river; she was very strategic and constantly challenging power to achieve her ultimate goal of reclaiming Honduras from the grassroots. "She would ask how do we want to create our country. She was a leader who thought seriously about the future of Honduras and was taking steps toward that."

Last November, seven men were convicted of her murder – employees of Desa, the company building the hydroelectric dam that Berta and her organization Copinh had been long battling, and the hitmen that were hired. Getting this conviction was partly because of international solidarity and pressure, but Laura knows that the men found responsible are actually not the ones with real power. She and Copinh are waging a fight against impunity, including against the Atala Zablah family, one of the most influential families in Honduras and wealthy investor in Desa. She also holds the U.S. responsible for its role in resource extraction and militarization of the region.

She is well aware that the fight ahead will be long, difficult, and dangerous. But there are many things that keep her strong and focused. With the ongoing criminalization of territory defenders, this is not the only case where people fighting for their community's survival are being wrongfully targeted, and wins in Berta's case can support others. Also, the State wants people to forget about the case, so she sees it as her duty to keep up the pressure. "They are not going to have our silence." She challenged us to talk about human rights in Mesoamerica, to put pressure on U.S. lawmakers, and to raise visibility for their struggle. And she focuses on the many successes along the way. "Continuing is a victory. People rising up everywhere saying 'I am Berta!' is a victory. The dam not being built is a victory."

Through her passion for the campaign and discussing strategy, Laura is still a young woman whose mother was taken away from her due to greed and impunity. She acknowledged that "not everything is peace and love, anger is legitimate." But she takes solace in the fact that "we have planted Bertas in many places."

Day 8 of the Intercambio: Solidarity in Action

Priscilla Hung

**CO-DIRECTOR
MOVE TO END VIOLENCE**

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We had a full day of inspiring speakers yesterday and, to see some of the concepts they shared in action, we visited the community of La Puya, which is marking their seventh anniversary of maintaining a permanent blockade to stop a U.S.-owned gold mine on their territory. Starting March 2, 2012, the community has been actively defending life, water, and their land. It is located between two municipalities – one that is Indigenous and one that is Mestiza, and they have built a strong alliance, with the Mestiza community adopting the Mayan cosmovision as a critical part of their work.



Through strong leadership, international solidarity, and savvy media work, the community has garnered a lot of attention. Their dedicated leader, international award winner Miriam Pixtún, welcomed us to share more about the history of the resistance and the strategies they use. It is an intergenerational effort, with elders, young people, and children all participating. Through Keme Producciones, the youth produced a short video that they showed us, “Somos Semillas”, featuring the children of the community sharing why they have the right to protest and what they are fighting for. One of the youngest children in the video says, “Yo quiero futura libre” – I want a future that is free.



La Puya leader Miriam Pixtún sharing about their resistance

In the face of the community’s resistance and resilience, the mining company and the Guatemalan government have embarked on active campaign of aggression, criminalization, defamation, and stigmatization. The activists at La Puya are clear that their resistance is nonviolent, and Miriam shared that they prepared for it through workshops and watching videos of nonviolent leaders like Mahat Gandhi. They know that they are being deliberately provoked in order to justify a violent police and security force response. Instead they sing hymns and songs and ring church bells. Women are key leaders in the movement, and they strategically place themselves on the frontlines hand-in-hand when law enforcement arrives to show the strength of their non-violence and because they know m



The risk they all face is serious. Three members have been sentenced to nine years in prison for crimes they didn't commit, hundreds of thousands of dollars in fines have been levied, one leader was shot, and several have been injured. In acts of psychological warfare, helicopters drop fliers into the town with threats and harassment to discourage people from participating. But they are very clear about the purpose of their work. "This isn't just about La Puya or even Guatemala. Humanity at large is at risk."



Community member Feliza Murrolles sharing about her experience

As part of our visit, they held a women's circle with us to discuss gender issues. Because of the urgency, anyone who shows up to support the resistance, regardless of gender, is put to work. This has created an "equality born out of necessity." One community member shared that even though she has a lot to do to take care of the home and family, she participates because she has learned so much through the resistance. "Learning nourishes us. I've learned to question things. That helps me grow as a person."



Members of the resistance greeting us while we sang happy birthday to mark their 7th anniversary

Patriarchy is used as a tool to create divisions within the community, with women who participate being denounced as whores and men being criticized as not being able to control their wives. The harsh impact has created a need for healing practices. Prayers, ceremony, and spiritual energy are critical and they make sure children have time to play. They have noticed that men are less likely to come to the healing sessions and workshops and are not accessing the same level of psychological support, “their wounds are open.” They also called on women to see their shared struggle, “we need to stop judging each other so much.”

After the women’s circle we drove to see the tailing pond for the mine, this huge structure cut into the earth and filled with contaminated water. The community is clear that they have a right to defend their territory and the land and water they depend on survival. They are using all of the strategies they can, whether it’s the permanent blockade, legal strategies such as proving that the company did not have the proper permits and did not consult the community in advance, and the media. They show no signs of backing down despite the fact that there is no resolution in sight, “we have to continue maybe the rest of our lives; we know when started, but we don’t know when it will end.”



*MEV cohort member Saida Agostini of YWCA and
FORCE sharing appreciations*

When asked how they have the strength to keep going, Miriam responded, “Our grandparents, who didn’t know how to read or write defended this land. We know how to read and write and we are not going to give it up that easily.”

Day 9 of the International Exchange: Curious Conversations

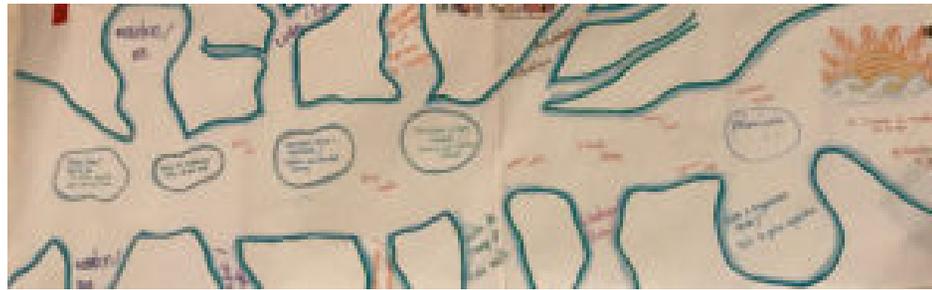
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MOVE TO END VIOLENCE

Originally Posted March 14, 2019



When we started this journey, [Mariela Arce of the JASS team](#) described it as a river. We all come from different sources and ecosystems, and during these ten days of the international exchange, we will converge and flow. We will encounter currents and sometimes the rhythm will move quickly and other times it will move slowly, but no matter the speed, we are constantly moving. We are near the end of this journey, but before we separate off into different streams, we paused and reflected on what conversations were bubbling up. Today was spent in open space to allow those conversations to happen in different forms and groupings.



The depiction of our shared journey as a river.

Learning about Systems in Guatemala: Some had the opportunity to visit the Guatemalan youth court to learn about their juvenile justice system and they noted key differences with the U.S., namely in creating an environment that is less aggressive and intimidating. The woman judge was in regular clothes and simply sitting at a table, there was no law enforcement in the room, the adolescent defendant was not shackled and was allowed to have his dad sit with him, and juvenile offenders are never tried as adults. Even just these small differences reminded us of the power of treating people humanely.

Indigenous Culture Exchange: Others did a healing and spirit exchange between North American Indigenous and Mayan peoples. They shared songs, instruments, and stories as part of healing processes. Cohort members talked about healing sexual violence while the Mayan participants talked about healing the ancestral memory that has been lost due to colonization and war. One of the songs cohort members taught is deliberately one without words, just vocals, which is also part of practicing language justice. One cohort member reminded us that when our songs are lost, we can create new ones and they can become the songs of our people.

Migration Solidarity Discussion: With immigration being a very clear and highly politicized link between our countries, one group reflected on how the movement to end gender-based violence could stand in stronger solidarity with the rights of people who are migrating, knowing that many of those people are women who are vulnerable to and victims of sexual violence, reproductive injustice and trafficking. They reflected on how Indigenous people and Blacks who were brought here as slaves, as the two peoples in the United States who are not immigrants, could connect with migration through their own histories, such as the Great Migration and the Trail of Tears. They discussed the push factors that force people to leave their home countries and what we could do to highlight their struggles and make staying in their home countries an option, such as supporting local businesses and standing against co-optation of handmade goods and crafts that are essential to women's economies.

Building Stronger International Networks: Two members of our cohort are part of La Via Campesina, the International Peasant's Movement working in 81 countries. They met with local members of La Via Campesina to strengthen relationships, discuss gender dynamics within the network, and to create a shared analysis on the current political moment in the region. Many organizations working to end gender-based violence are not part of international networks and global issues are often not on their radar. Connections like these can help expose U.S. groups to the possibilities of how these kinds of networks can serve as a vehicle for shared visions, struggles, and strategies across borders.

Addressing Anti-Blackness: Non-Black people of color in the cohort gathered for a discussion on anti-Blackness as part of an ongoing commitment to name and address it, with the recognition that getting to authentic discussions on shared strategies for liberation cross-race hinges on this. They shared how they each perpetuate it in their own lives and how it shows up in their organizations as an acknowledgement that all of us are steeped in anti-Blackness because of white supremacy, and that it's everyone's responsibility to not just interrupt it but to also reflect on what we can do to be pro-Black.

Black Brilliance: Black folks in the cohort spent an evening focused on joy and laughter, celebrating each other and lifting up each other's strengths. It's important to make space for this as humans, and especially as humans that are being constantly scrutinized and policed. In a country like Guatemala with very few Black people, it was very powerful to go out together as a highly visible group and lean into their joy and community.

Day 10 of the International Exchange: Learnings and Pivots

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Originally Posted March 15, 2019 Share:



We spent our final day on the Intercambio reflecting on some of our learnings, knowing we are only just beginning to metabolize the rich and intense experience. Many collective conversations will undoubtedly be needed to deepen our understanding and make re our commitments. But the seeds that have been planted are already starting to sprout.

Seeds of Learning

“For some reason we don’t believe we are the same people in the same fights – we are just on different sides of the border.”

“Central American revolutionary movements are still visible and vibrant.”

“We think we know what people need, but we need to listen.”

“In the U.S. we individualize and intellectualize our fights – but the passion and hope are the same, what we want is the same.”

“Safety doesn’t have to mean separation.”

“It was powerful and painful to be welcomed with open arms regardless of our proximity to the harm the U.S. has done here.”

“We have to transform ourselves before we can transform others.”

Pivots — Personal, Organizational, and Movement-Level

These reflections helped spur cohort members to identify personal, organizational, and movement-level pivots that they want to integrate and advocate for, including:

- No longer equating America with the United States and recognizing that our country is not the only America
- Investing more deeply in language justice and seeing it as something that all participate in, not just as access that goes one way
- Including and centering Afro-descendant people in our work with meaningful representation
- Supporting Black women to be in leadership positions and following their lead
- Using existing international networks like Grassroots Global Justice and the fight to have Indigenous women's rights included in CEDAW as ways for local organizations to connect with global issues
- Centering sexual violence as a global tool of oppression
- Challenging the gender binary
- Integrating immigration interventions into all our movements for the inclusion, protection, and safety of immigrants, regardless of which movement we work in
- Describing our U.S.-based work in a way that connects to a global context. How might we re-frame work we are doing on gentrification and environmental racism as land defense? How might refugee communities that have been removed from their land participate in land defense wherever we build community?
- Building stronger links and shared struggle between Black and Indigenous communities, including having conversations about land and reparations that unite, rather than divide, us
- Doing intergenerational organizing across the life span and confronting ageism against young people and elders
- From a global perspective, targeting institutions that are attacking our homelands

Lessons Learned

Our reflection time also surfaced regrets and some lessons on how we could have taken even more advantage of our time in Mesoamerica, including:

- Having a shared collective analysis before arriving about the harmful role of the U.S. in the region historically and currently
- Having collective conversations about the ethics of us as people from the United States coming to this region and examining what is our responsibility to account for the damage the U.S. has done
- Having more time for strategic and tactical discussions between cohort members and local leaders

We know that violence against girls and women is a global problem and that the United States plays a major role in perpetuating violence around the world. We know that the problem is systemic and that lasting solutions also need to be systemic. And we know that none of us are free until all of us are free.

Deep Gratitude

We end this exchange with deep gratitude for our partner JASS and the local leaders who shared their experiences and knowledge with us and with whom we have built relationships over these last ten days. We also have deep gratitude for those at home and work who made it possible for us to be away for several days. And we appreciate ourselves for taking the risk to come, for being open, and for committing to changing our movements so that when we say “all women and girls”, we truly mean it.