

HIV/AIDS, Women and Violence in Chiapas

Presentation of the book "With Faith Eroded" and Discussion with author Dr. Margarita Aguilar Ruiz

Reviewed by Caitlyn Vernon

On October 4th, 2004, hosted by CERLAC and the Canadian Chiapanecas Justice for Women, Dr. Margarita Aguilar Ruiz spoke about her novel "With Faith Eroded", which charts the struggle for survival amidst the transmission of HIV/AIDS in Chiapas. As a medical doctor, social activist, journalist and author, Dr. Ruiz has worked for 10 years on AIDS prevention in the Mexican context both within government and with non-governmental organizations. She views her writing as her current activist focus and hopes to be able to do her doctorate in Toronto.

The book speaks through the voice of Lucia, an indigenous girl living within the context of social problems who is diagnosed with AIDS. It identifies how cultural, political, religious and social situations can impact on public health and expose women to conflict. The formation of women through the church is seen to affect their health in both positive and negative ways.

Women from around Chiapas shared their stories with Margarita, trusting her confidentiality since the novel format doesn't link personal stories to specific people. She was told many stories of sexual abuse in childhood that led to a feeling amongst adult women that they don't have the right to put limits on the behaviour of their partner. Their feelings of guilt from the childhood abuse cause them to consider

themselves as second-class citizens with no rights. So they don't speak up when their husband has extra-marital affairs with other women and men.

Margarita made it clear that it is not enough to address AIDS with just medicine and condoms, but that there is a need to start instead with social problems. Medicine to treat AIDS is free in Chiapas, but this is not having a significant impact on the epidemic. She stressed the need to look at the relationships between people and to start with education. It is necessary to educate children and adolescents to create a culture in which negotiation of relationships is possible.

Questions from participants led to a discussion on a number of related issues.

Responding to the question about what can be the role of foreign women in this situation, Margarita said that it is important for women in Chiapas to know that they have the international support, to know that their voices are being heard and echoed despite efforts within Chiapas to silence them. There are possible roles for women to do social work in Chiapas, or to share the experiences of immigrants to Canada with Mexican people. As well, Margarita was very welcoming of the possibility of students conducting research in Chiapas, and in conjunction with the Canadian Chiapanecas Justice

for Women they are improving their capabilities to receive students in the future. Specifically related to HIV/AIDS, the next international AIDS conference will be held in Toronto in 2006.

Plan Puebla Panama* and militarization are seen to affect the spread and distribution of HIV/AIDS. The building of highways and the incursion of both the military and factories are causing the relocation of indigenous peoples. There is a corridor of transmission leading from San Pedro Sula in Honduras to Chiapas. Female immigrants to Mexico from Central America often use sex to cross the border. This combined with the prostitutes used by the military make the border a place with a high incidence of HIV/AIDS.

Infection rates in Chiapas are lower than in some other parts of Mexico, however Margarita emphasized that what is most important is not the number but the social impact. AIDS is spreading amongst rural areas of Chiapas, and it is seen to have a higher impact in these types of areas. The highest rate of infection is seen amongst housewives, with the hidden bisexuality of men identified as a major cause.



The book "With Faith Eroded" was originally published in Spanish, and has just recently been published in English. Copies of the book are available at the Toronto Women's Bookstore and from Barbara Williams (bjwilliams@look.ca). To reach a wider range of people in Chiapas, the book is currently being translated into Tzeltal, an indigenous language and dramatized for the radio.

For more information on the topic of HIV/AIDS, women and violence in Chiapas, you can contact Dr. Margarita Aguilar Ruiz directly at brida_2003@hotmail.com, or contact the Canadian Chiapanecas Justice for Women.

The **Canadian Chiapanecas Justice for Women** is a network of individuals and member organizations in Canada and Chiapas committed to building links among women's anti-violence, education, health, human rights and indigenous organizations in Canada and Chiapas in order to learn from and support each other's work. To get involved, or to learn more about upcoming events, contact Barbara Williams at (416) 203-8879 or bjwilliams@look.ca or visit their website www.justice4women.com that is to be launched November 1, 2004.



* Plan Puebla Panama is a mega project underway between Southern Mexico and Central America to create the infrastructure (highways, electrical lines, and "development zones") that facilitates the development of the petroleum, energy, maquiladora, and agricultural industries. The cheap labour force, high biodiversity and exemption from national labour and environmental laws attract private foreign investment to the area. Problems include lack of public consultation, lack of environmental impact assessments, mass migrations of the population to maquiladora zones where they work for unlivable wages, and fragmentation of rural communities.



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