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Immigrant Women Organize For Justice: A Listening Project

Sandra Catalina Nieto

SIT Graduate Institute, sandra.nieto@mail.sit.edu

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IMMIGRANT WOMEN ORGANIZE FOR JUSTICE: A Listening Project

Training Course-Linked Capstone
Sandra Catalina Nieto
PIM 69

A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Social Justice in Intercultural Relations at the SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

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Advisor: Ryland White

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ABSTRACT

Over nineteen million immigrant women live in the United States. Each one of those nineteen million women carries with her a powerful history. *Immigrant Women Organize for Justice: A Listening Project* is an attempt to capture a breath of those histories, in particular the histories of four *mujeres luchadoras*: immigrant women who are organizing communities surrounding them and devoting much of their life and their work to the *lucha* (struggle or fight) for a more just and equal society.

Immigrant Women Organize for Justice: A Listening Project is a two-part project. The first section is devoted entirely to remembering the voices and struggles of immigrant women organizers throughout U.S. history and providing a much deserved space to three new voices into our collective history. The second part encompasses an in depth analysis of the listening project from a trainer practitioner lens, following a Listening Project guidelines learned during the Training for Social Action class at SIT Graduate Institute.

Keywords: Immigration, Immigrant Women, Organizing, Listening Projects, Training for Social Action

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INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Over nineteen million immigrant women live in the United States, according to the Immigration Policy Center's 2008 report. Each one of those nineteen million women carries with her a powerful history: a history of why she migrated, a history of her family, of her land, of her ancestors, of her work, of her decisions, of her dreams and fears; a history of her multiple *luchas*; as women in a patriarchal society, as immigrants in unwelcoming lands; a history of the struggles of her homeland; a history of growing, of building, of constructing, of moving, of adapting.

Immigrant Women Organize for Justice: A Listening Project is an attempt to capture a breath of those histories, in particular the histories of four *mujeres luchadoras*; immigrant women who are organizing communities surrounding them and devoting much of their life and their work to the *lucha* (struggle or fight) for a more just and equal society.

Immigrant Women Organize for Justice: A Listening Project is a two-part project. The first section is devoted entirely to remembering the voices and struggles of immigrant women organizers throughout U.S. history and providing a much deserved space to three new voices into our collective history. The second part encompasses an in depth analysis of the listening project from a trainer practitioner lens, following a Listening Project guidelines learned during the Training for Social Action class at SIT Graduate Institute.

As an immigrant woman living in the United States, it was of great importance for me to engage in a process of understanding and learning about our collective history as immigrant women in this country; and as a woman activist and organizer, it was crucial for me to take the time to remember and learn from the voices of other immigrant women activists throughout history and to bring new voices to this collective history. I am originally from Bogota, Colombia. At the age of 19 I had to migrate to the United States with my family. It wasn't a matter of choice for me or for my family. The economic situation in Colombia was dire, and my parents viewed moving to the U.S. as the only possibility for economic stability for us. Migrating to the U.S. was one of the most difficult experiences I've had to endure. I wanted to be anywhere else but in the U.S. At the same time, I believe that migrating was the number one reason why I began to expand my political consciousness and began to analyze more deeply the world around me. Becoming from one day to another an immigrant, a minority, a person of color, a person without documents, was shocking and traumatic. In a way, I believe that I had no choice but to

get involved in my community and in social justice efforts. I was seeing and living racism and inequality first hand, and noticing that it was not an individual issue but a structural one. Shortly after I began going to college, I got involved with different Latino/a groups on campus. I worked on campaigns to pass the Dream Act (a law that would allow undocumented youth to go to college and begin a path of citizenship), I mentored high school students, and I helped lead and facilitate leadership summer camps for Latino/a youth, among other things. I went on to study sociology, which also had an immense impact on deepening my understanding of the economic, political and cultural system under which we live, and the way it has grown out of the oppression of people and people's labor. I read books about the history of Latin America from a perspective of the colonized, rather than the colonizer, and books about resistance struggles in El Salvador and Nicaragua, among others. In 2007 I went to work with an immigrant rights organization in Tennessee and began to expand on my experience as an organizer. The south of the United States has a particular history of oppression that continues to this day. In the past fifteen years, many states in the south, including Tennessee have seen a rapid growth of immigrant communities. These sudden demographic changes have brought about a lot of tensions and racism reflected many different ways: an increase of anti-immigrant bills, racial profiling by police and employers, increased raids in workplaces with high concentration of immigrants, hateful media articles and hateful environment in general against immigrants. I lived first hand some of the oppressions of the system and the culture around me. For example, I received hate e-mails where I was told that people who looked like me shouldn't be here, I was told that immigrants had to be killed while crossing the border, and I was told that I was a criminal. This is just one example of experiencing first hand such oppressions. But I also began to learn how to build collective campaigns to bring about change and build a powerful movement from the bottom up.

This praxis, a collection of education and experiences, has formed me as an organizer. At the same time, throughout much of my organizing experience, I found myself surrounded by a lot of white people, and involved in groups where the main focus was on educating middle and upper class people about the different issues. Whether it was working for the immigrant rights movement or with the Latin American solidarity movement, I noticed the same patterns. As an organizer, I began to desperately want to connect with other immigrant women organizers, and find spaces where the focus was on building power among immigrant communities and working class communities. *Immigrant Women Organize for Justice: A Listening Project* grew out of that

need to connect with others like me and to find inspiration and empowerment through listening and learning from other women's histories and experiences. It also grew out of the need to create and put in writing our own history, by us and for us. Lastly, I was also motivated to pursue this particular project after engaging in a similar listening process with my mom during the Training for Social Class. I learned that creating the space to listen to others is powerful in it self, both for the listener and for the person talking. In a time and a culture where we grow more and more disconnected from each other, listening to others and sharing our personal stories with each other is a revolutionary act.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Engaging in an academic research process brings a lot of questions and concerns. Historically, research has been used in many instances as a colonizing tool and as a tool to take ownership of other people's knowledge and lives. Linda Tuhiawai Smith (1999) explores in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, this particular point. "From the vantage point of the colonized, a position from which I write, and choose to privilege, the term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism" (pp. 1). As I engaged in this capstone project, it was very important for me to be aware and acknowledge the dehumanizing historical dynamics involved in research. For this reason, I have intentionally made my best attempt to engage in this process in a way that doesn't recreate some of the historical research practices that deny people the right to determine their own history, their own culture, and their own future. As an overall conceptual framework for this capstone project, I follow some of Smith's (1999) suggestions of decolonizing methodologies where at the core is "the survival of peoples, cultures and languages; the struggle to become self-determining, the need to take back control of our destinies" (pp. 142).

The two main ways in which I follow Smith's decolonizing framework is by centering my capstone project on women stories and following an oral history tradition. In first place, my capstone project is focused on the tradition of story telling and oral history. According to Smith (1999), "story telling, oral histories, the perspectives of elders and women have become an integral part of all indigenous research. Each individual story is powerful... These new stories contribute to a collective story in which every indigenous person has a place" (pp. 144). As an

immigrant woman, I have seen the need to listen to other immigrant women's experiences and learn from them, and in turn, be able to write and share those powerful stories with others. I see this as a way to keep our own history alive and reclaim a history that has been dominated by the male Eurocentric experience.

“Stories are ways of passing down the beliefs and values of a culture in the hope that the new generations will treasure them and pass the story down further. The story and the story teller both serve to connect the past with the future, one generation with the other, the land with the people, and the people with the story... Intrinsic in story telling is a focus on dialogue and conversations amongst ourselves as indigenous peoples, to ourselves and for ourselves” (Smith, 1999, pp. 145).

In addition, my capstone project is centered on the experiences and analysis of immigrant women, therefore seeking to engage in the process of *gendering*. As Smith (1999) points out in her book:

“Colonization is recognized as having had a destructive effect on indigenous gender relations which reached out across all spheres of indigenous societies. Family organization, child rearing, political and spiritual life, work and social activities were all disordered by a colonial system which positioned its own women as the property of men with roles which were primarily domestic... Indigenous women would argue that their traditional roles included full participation in many aspects of political decision making... A key issue for indigenous women in any challenge of contemporary indigenous politics is the restoration to women of what are seen as their traditional roles, rights and responsibilities” (pp. 151).

For this reason, I put particular emphasis in incorporating immigrant women's voices throughout this capstone paper, by devoting much of the space for the histories of immigrant women organizers themselves, whether it is from previous documentation or from my particular listening project. The immigrant women's voice is the central piece, and it is my hope to revive the voices from the past and add new voices to our collective history.

In addition to a 'decolonizing' conceptual framework of research, the other overarching framework for this capstone project relates to bringing a training practitioner lens to the entire

process. As experiential trainers, it is our goal to design and facilitate workshops where people can feel safe to share their experiences, knowledge and analysis of an issue, a topic, a community, etc. It is also our goal to facilitate processes of knowledge creation, skill building, behavior and attitude change, the rising of awareness and understanding of language, among others. One of the principles of adult learning is that adult learners come to learning with a wide range of previous experiences, knowledge, self-direction, interests, and competencies. (Schneier, et. al., 1994). This diversity must be accommodated in the training room. Having this principle in mind, and valuing the wide range of competencies that adults come with to any space, one of my goals with the listening project was to provide that important space for women to share their own experience and knowledge about organizing as immigrant women in the U.S.

One method within the training field that was used for this capstone connects with a method learned during the Training for Social Action (TSA) class: Listening Projects. The goal of the Listening Projects is to gain depth of awareness of social issues and of people behind the issues. Listening projects help us as students and trainers develop greater insight into the complexities of social issues and even greater insight into ourselves and the skills in listening to understand. The concept of listening to understand was introduced to me in the book *Heart Politics* by Fran Peavey (2000). Born from the desire to learn more about the nuclear threat, Peavey (2000) engaged in a journey to talk to people from around the world “and find out how they felt about the future in general, and the nuclear situation in particular.” (pp. 147). She sat in park benches and other public spaces with a sign that said “American Willing to Listen.” In the process of listening to hundreds of people from all over the world, Peavey (2000) realized that while listening to people, she “began to learn how each individual was puzzling out larger issues from her own vantage point” (pp.152). According to Peavey, listening is not a passive act. It requires us to be actively connected with the person in front of us. “I would listen to the person as openly as I could, trying to get a glimpse of the world through his eyes. Usually, when the conversations lasted long enough, I would start to feel the soft stirrings of a connection – some uncovering of our common root system.” (pp. 154). The practice of listening helps move us from the limitations of our own social context and the boundaries of our hearts (Peavey, 2000, pp.167). Listening Projects are both about listening and being heard. They are about listening to people who want to speak for themselves and not be heard through the distorting medium of outside “experts”(Slim and Thompson, 1993). I follow the Listening Project guidelines as those

provided to us during the TSA class where we were asked to engage in a reflection process using questions exploring the areas of: Overview to the Listening Project, Timeline and Logistics, Challenges and Joys, Lessons Learned and Best Practices and Application.

PART I: IMMIGRANT WOMEN ORGANIZE FOR JUSTICE

A. We Are Walking in the Footsteps of... *Remembering some voices of immigrant women organizers in the U.S.*

Literature Review

Immigrant women have been at the very heart-beat of liberation movements in the United States. From working class Italian anarchist and socialist women organizing some of the most historically significant labor strikes at the beginning of the twentieth century; to Mexican and Mexican American women as the rank-and-file organizers in the labor movement in the south of the country in the 1930s. From Jewish women working in garment factories organizing strike after strike demanding a fifty-two hour workweek, overtime pay and union recognition in 1909-1910 to Chinese, Korean and Mexican sweat-shop women workers organizing themselves to create their own workers' centers and shake up the whole structure above them. Below are just a few highlights of this powerful history and voices of immigrant women at the forefront of some of the most significant organizing efforts for worker's rights, women's rights, immigrant rights, and civil rights in the United States.

“It is time that we also agitate and organize, to prove to the world that accuses us, that we too are capable of something.... Men say we are frivolous, that we are weak, that we are incapable of supporting the struggle against this intolerable society, that we cannot understand the ideal of anarchism... But they are the cause of our weakness, our undeveloped intellects, because they restrict our instruction... and ignore us.”

-Maria Roda-

Maria immigrated to Paterson, New Jersey from Italy in 1893. A self-described anarcho-socialist at a young age, she entered the silk mills as a child upon the death of her mother and found solace in the local anarchist scene. Her commitment to revolutionary activism only deepened as she grew older. At the age of nineteen, just after migrating to Paterson with her father and three sisters, Roda joined the Gruppo Diritto all'Esistenza (The Right to an Existence Group), a local anarchist group formed by other textile workers from northern Italy. Soon thereafter, she and several women in the movement formed a Gruppo Emancipazione della Donna (Women's Emancipation Group). They did so, Roda stated (in Italian) at the time, “because we feel and suffer; we too want to immerse ourselves in the struggle against this

society, because we too feel, from birth, the need to be free, to be equal.” (Guglielmo, 2010, pp. 10). News of the Paterson women’s group circulated across the United States and beyond in the popular Italian-language anarchist newspaper *La Questione Sociale*. The solution she proposed was for women to educate and mobilize themselves in their own autonomous groups. (Guglielmo, 2010, pp. 10)

Italians like Maria were one of the largest groups to migrate to the United States during the mass migrations from Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. Hundreds of thousands of Italian immigrant women also participated in and led some of the most historically significant labor strikes of this period. In the article *Transnational Feminism’s Radical Past: Lessons from Italian Immigrant Women Anarchists in Industrializing America*, Jennifer Guglielmo (2010) examines the activism of working-class Italian immigrant women anarchists in the United States. At the beginning of the twentieth century, many Italian immigrant women workers in the United States entered political activism through labor militancy. “Italian women were pivotal to workers’ movements. As a result, the Italian-language radical press that chronicled these developments described them as *“le più ardenti nella lotta”* (the most passionate in the struggle)” (pp. 17). Guglielmo (2010) explains how Italian immigrant women rarely held formal positions of leadership in unions or strike committees during the time, but “their ability to organize coworkers and neighbors often proved critical to winning labor struggles, especially in the clothing, textile, and cigar making trades where they outnumbered men in the rank and file” (pp. 141). It appears that women were especially active in groups that were explicitly radical: the socialist and anarchist political circles and social studies circles. “...these groups sought to create a radical counterculture to the religious, patriotic, or apolitical societies, and established libraries, schools, food cooperatives, theater troupes, and presses. It was here that Italian immigrant women created spaces for feminist activism, especially in the years prior to the First World War.” (Guglielmo, 2010, pp. 142)

“I am a working girl, one of those striking against those intolerable conditions... I am tired of listening to speakers who talk in generalities. What we are here for is to decide whether or not to strike. I offer a resolution that a general strike be declared – now.”
- Clara Lemlich -

Clara Lemlich, a teenage Jewish woman declared in Yiddish on the night of November

22, 1909 at a meeting organized by striking women at the Cooper Union in New York (Takaki, 2008, pp. 278). The following day, over 20,000 garment workers walked out of hundreds of workshops in New York. Jewish immigrant women were the overwhelming majority, with Italian women constituting about 6 percent (Takaki, 2008, pp. 278). U.S. unions of the time, organized in the American Federation of Labor (AFL), were based on skilled, male workers and believed unskilled workers were “unorganisable”. The demands of the strikers included a fifty-two hour workweek, overtime pay, and union recognition. (Takaki, 2008, pp. 278). Jewish women workers were at the forefront of organizing and leading the strike that lasted through the winter. By February, more than 300 firms in New York had been forced to make some kind of settlement. Immigrant women workers initiated a decade of labor unrest in the garment industry. “Between 1909 and 1920 a wave of strikes and mass organizational campaigns swept through the garment trades, changing a largely unorganized industry into a union stronghold... By the end of World War I clothing workers were among the best-organized members of the American labor force.” (Glenn, 1990 as cited in Takaki, 2008, pp. 279)

The capacity of young, migrant women workers, with all the odds against them, to stand firm for months and force concessions from powerful employers is a beacon of inspiration for all those fighting back today. Organizing efforts by European immigrant women workers played a crucial role in labor movements for years to come, but it is important to be aware of the fact that such struggles also comprised many of the oppressive and racist elements of the cultural, political and economic system of the time. Yoon Louie (2001) notes in her book *Sweatshop Warriors: Immigrant Women Warriors Take on the Global Factory*:

Before immigration from Europe was restricted in the 1920s, many Jewish, Italian, German, Irish, and other European immigrant workers organized themselves along ethnic lines. Immigrant workers’ organizations often fused radical political traditions from home with new organizing currents in the United States. Anti-racism was not necessarily one of those traditions and some of the crafts-oriented, European immigrant-based unions attacked workers of color whom they saw as competitors, for example spearheading campaigns to exclude Chinese immigrant and newly emancipated Black workers. (pp. 197)

While European immigrant women were taking part on the labor struggles in the northeast of the

country, Mexican and Mexican American women were leading crucial struggles in the south.

It was a combination of being a Texan, being a Mexican, and being more Indian than Spanish that propelled me to take action. I don't think I ever thought in terms of fear.

It's the women who have led. I just have a feeling, a very strong feeling, that if ever this world is civilized, it would be more the work of women.

-Emma Tenayuca-

Grass-roots activism brought Mexican and Mexican-American women to the forefront of labor struggles as rank-and-file organizers, and many of the women comprised the main ranks of some local unions. In the 1930s, Mexican-Americans fought their first major battles for worker rights and racial equality when they joined the revitalized labor movement.

Such acts of solidarity transformed their lives and consciousness, just as gender, racial-ethnic, and class identities, in turn, shaped the various working-class movements that unfolded among the larger Mexican population... Tejana worker leaders played leading roles in Depression Era organizing in San Antonio. For example Emma Tenayuca emerged as the leader of the 1938 pecan-shellers' strike, which included over 10,000 strikers and was the largest strike in San Antonio's history and biggest community based labor struggle among the nation's Mexican population during the 1930s. (Vargas, 1997, pp. 555-556)

Emma Tenayuca authored a 1939 list of party demands in her work with the U.S. Communist Party: an end to economic discrimination and extra low wages, educational and cultural equality (including Spanish and English languages in public schools), support for the struggle to link "the negro people and an end to Jim Crowism," and a fight against repression—the leading role falling into the hands of the proletarian base of the Mexican population (Buhle and Georgakas, 1996, as cited in Chacón, 2006). An unashamed, interethnic struggle promoting cultural as well as wage rights for workers was clearly on the agenda in 1939.

Immigrant women have continued to follow on the strong history of organizing from our ancestors. Miriam Ching Yoon Louie (2001) documented the experiences of Chinese, Korean, and Mexicana immigrant women leaders active in five independent community-based workers' centers in New York City, El Paso, Texas, Oakland, California, San Antonio, Texas, and Los Angeles, California. Using interviews as the primary source material for her book *Sweatshop Warriors: Immigrant Women Warriors Take on the Global Factory*, Yoon Louie documents how

immigrant women workers on the bottom of the industry pyramid are organizing themselves, creating their own workers' centers, and shaking up the whole structure above them. (Ching Yoon Louie, 2001, pp. 15). According to Yoon Louie, the older organizers were often radicalized during an earlier stage of the global economic restructuring, which precipitated the birth of the Asian and Latina/o radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s, linked to and cross fertilized by the civil rights, Black power, Native American sovereignty, labor, women's, lesbian and gay, anti-war and other movements of the period. (Ching Yoon Louie, 2001, Pp. 15)

[t]he painful, yet liberating process through which they changed from being sweatshop industry workers to sweatshop warriors. They transformed from women exploited by the subcontractors and elites to women who clearly understood where they fit into the "big picture"... And in standing up for their most basic rights, the women confronted entrenched relations of class, gender, race and national privilege not only within their industries, but also within their families and their communities... The very act of speaking their minds, these women workers have challenged multiple layers of oppression... (pp. 13)

Yoon Louie (2001) talks about the importance of collecting and documenting the experiences of immigrant women organizers. Grassroots immigrant women have and continue to be agents of change and they are at the very heart-beat of the labor and anti-sweatshop movements. "By highlighting the experiences of women on whose backs sweatshop industries have been erected, these stories can narrow the divide between grassroots activists on the one hand and scholars on the other. By documenting a slice of Asian and Latina/o movement history, our young bloods can claim this bit of their activist heritage and use it to advance these and kindred movements. (pp. 7)

In the oral history tradition, STITCH, a network of women in the United States and Central America, gathered histories of six Central American immigrant women and their experiences in the U.S. labor movement. In the publication *The Other Immigrants: Women Workers in the U.S. Labor Movement* (2008), immigrant women from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala associated with unions, worker centers and organizations in Florida, Mississippi and California share their experiences as immigrant women workers and as immigrant women activists in the United States. The following is one of the women's voices highlighted in this particular project:

You see so many injustices, many things that happen. People who are fired just like this, thrown away like a beggar. I would ask, “Why were you fired? That’s no reason to be fired. Aren’t there laws here for workers, aren’t there laws about employers, unions or something?” “No, here they’ll never allow unions.” And I was like, “Of course they’ll have to allow unions! Of course unions can come in!” Wages are too low; it’s a night shift. Night shifts are supposed to be better paid. “Why do we make so little? Haven’t you done anything about it? You haven’t met together and gotten the courage to say, ‘Okay, let’s do something for ourselves.’ If we do something all together, it’ll be harder for them to fire us. I’ve always felt the desire to do something, not only for myself but also for my co-workers. It’s not fair that we have suffered all these injustices, all the abuses that we all bear, and the fact that we receive no benefits and had no hope of getting a better wage.” (pp. 9)

- Maria Isabel Galindo, from Honduras, organizer with South Florida Jobs with Justice-

Learning from history and from those who have come before us is a powerful tool. As social justice activists, we have a lot to learn from previous struggles for social change around the world. Even more powerful it to learn from the histories of those who have challenged the dominant powers, even when so much has been against them. As women, as women workers, as immigrant women, we have been at the center of many forms of oppression. At the same time, we also hold a strong and long history of resistance to those who have oppressed us. Any work that we do today makes part of a larger collective struggle, and we would not be where we are at today, if it wasn’t for the tireless activism of those women who came before us. As social justice women organizers, we are walking of the foots steps of Maria Roda, of Clara Lemlich, of Emma Tenayuca, of Ching Yoon Louie, of Maria Isabel Galindo, and the many more *luchadoras* and *luchadores*.

B. IN THEIR OWN WORDS:
Immigrant Women Organizers in the U.S.

After revisiting the past and learning from a few of the voices and struggles of immigrant women in the US, I dedicate the following section to bringing three new voices of immigrant women organizers into our collective history.

A trainer lens note

As experiential trainers in a training room, one of our goals is to create the space for participants to share their experiences and knowledge with others, in a way that collective knowledge can also be created. Adult learners come to a learning space with a wide range of previous experiences, knowledge, self-direction, interests, and competencies. This diversity must be accommodated in a training and learning space. As I analyzed the following interviews I realized that each woman had an amazing and rich history, experience, knowledge and analysis to share. For this reason, I have decided to devote the following entire section to the direct voices of three of the four women organizers who participated in the listening project.

About the listening interviews

The following are the oral histories of three immigrant women organizers in the U.S. In order to protect their identities, I have omitted their names and use two letters to identify each of them. All the listening interviews were conducted in person. Three of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. One interview was done without recording, but notes were taken. For this reason, I will only reflect on the fourth interview during the analysis from a trainer lens. The interviews with CC and ES were conducted in Spanish, and I translated the transcript from Spanish to English.

I began each listening interview with a similar question: *What moved you or what motivated to get involved in organizing/political work?* I didn't have a list of questions, yet the focus was on active listening and asking questions based on what the women were speaking about.

1. IN HER OWN WORDS: AI

What moved you or what motivated to get involved in activism/political work?

There were a few confusing things that happened when I was a kid, that made me question stuff. Like there was this thing called the Mandre Commission that happened in Delhi, and going to school, people were throwing rocks at a bus and it was strange. There were people who were setting themselves on fire as protest, and we were like: 'What is going on? What is happening?' But it was basically these people who were fighting, who were against affirmative action. They didn't want affirmative action and they were setting themselves on fire, to be able to get into colleges. And that was a little confusing to me and then I feel like living in, especially being in Delhi, there was so much going on all the time. Kind of D.C., it's a capital city and stuff like that, so there was all these things going on. My mom was an activist when she was younger, working on the buses, [with] the street harassment stuff, so working on stopping street harassment in public busses in Delhi... I feel like there were always very obvious income disparities, and class differences, you know, when I was growing up. I went to a socialist high school, but even before that, in middle school, everybody was supposed to do social work. The social work was basically collecting old newspapers and we had different groups, and whoever collected the most number of newspapers would get points, you know? And then we would recycle them, get money for the recycling and then that would be donated. And then medicines, and you know, charity work at a Catholic school, there is a lot of that stuff that happens all the time. Then I became president of my social work club in school and then in my other school, president of the environmental club, like you know, those kinds of things. But nothing that was like one moment where something was clear. I think the nuclear tests were also a big thing when I was in high school. Talking about the nuclear tests and increasing globalization because India [was turning into] the capitalist way in 1991, right when my teenage years started.

All these things helped you build political consciousness, where there any examples of moments where you transformed that into action?

So one example, there was the Balis [which] is a festival of lights and there is a lot of fire crackers that people put. That entire industry is serviced by laborers who are 8 to 10 years old, you know. So then we called for a boycott of fire crackers. And then there is also the pollution

that it creates, horrendous. You can't see your hands in front of your face. Everybody puts crackers, it is not like a display that happens somewhere. Like putting a ban on, boycotting fire crackers, things like that. Like going and doing tree planting, or going and protesting when developers wanted to take the playground in our neighborhood. Things like that, small things that were like neighborhood associations or school kind of stuff.

What was your role in these different actions?

... There must have been some leadership that I was taking but I don't remember being that. I would go for school debates, I would be very vocal when people were dating each other and the dude wasn't behaving. You know, those kind of things. And also I went to an all-girls school for four years so I think that really nurtured the feminist aspect of things. My math teacher in middle school was really a ledge. He would [make] all these comments to my friends, and people would go to his house after school for tutoring, for extra help or whatever and he gets paid for private tutorials. He would say stuff and look at you funny and all of that kind of stuff. So I basically brought that up to the sisters who loved him and thought I was a trouble-maker because I was from the north and we were in the south and all that identity stuff. Anyhow, I felt like there was a lot of pressure. Oh! And then they had an election, a school election, and they wanted me to be the head of the student body. The students did, but the sisters said that I couldn't be the head of the student body and then they put somebody else on...It was an interesting space to be in, and having to deal with this treacherous man, against the teachers... so I guess that was definitely, like I knew I was right and I didn't have a doubt in my mind that I was right. So I guess that sowed the seed...

You already had this experience boiling, once you got here how was it to continue getting involved here? What were some of the things that you did?

...I didn't want to come to the U.S. I came because my mom's family is here, like her parents and everybody. Things weren't that great between my parents in India and having my grandparents and my dad actually moved into our house and that was making my mom miserable. I knew my mom didn't want to leave India either, I knew that because we were very close, and I knew that she would leave only if I left. So she actually came with me and ended up staying here working while I went to college, but in different cities. She was in Boston and I was

in Atlanta. In school, I had a merit scholarship, but they don't cover your living expenses, so it was insane. Like my living expenses were the amount my dad had earned all together in like 5 years. A five-year salary was like my living expenses for a year. And I was like, the disparity was huge, so I had to take a loan and I was working 3 jobs... And it was also very confusing being in the south in Atlanta where it is like: you are in the dining hall and there is white students, and black students, and the rest of us who are international students, kind of hanging out together, and saying 'what the hell is going on?' you know. My first year I just hanged out with international students, I did more like community building stuff, not realizing I was doing community building stuff. It was more to do with, we would do awareness, raised the Palestinian issue, or things like that, awareness building on campus. Or if there was a flood that happened in Bangladesh, we would collect money. Things like that but not outward activism. Or like helping people out with their taxes, getting people underground jobs, that kind of stuff was basically my activism in college. And then there were things that I was realizing; I was learning a lot about American racism. I mean not in my classroom but through what was happening on campus and between my friends. There was a living wage campaign going on for the workers in the cafeteria and I didn't take a leadership role in that, I was supportive... I didn't have time really. And then September 11 happened, you know what I mean, the twin towers got attacked, and I was like 'oh shit' and a lot my friends on campus were hijab Muslim women, so that became a huge moment of rallying around. Even before September 11, 2001 I guess... Before that, I joined the Muslim student association, I am not a Muslim, just so that we would have enough numbers to show the student body that we have to exist, we can exist. They have to have at least like 50 or 60. Certain number that was ridiculous because the whole school was like 1000 people, so we would just join. And so during Ramadan, like during the month of fasting, you have to all go to the dinning hall and people said that because we were fasting, they would allow us to have the meals at a certain time. But it was so annoying, it was such a Christian school, a Presbyterian school. And then they would put a Hanukah candle outside and that would be their religious plurality stuff. So after September 11, we had to do a lot of like: 'What is under the hijab?' and a lot of education and awareness building. We had like this southern bell, who came from this right wing conservative, like Georgia small towns, next to these Atlanta city lesbians and it was all in the same place. And then you have the hijab Muslims and it was like, it was a mess. More than that we didn't do anything.

...I was working at CNN when the war broke out, when the U.S. attacked Iraq, and in that sense I was doing a little bit of getting information from the inside to the outside because people were protesting outside CNN. Then my boss basically asked me to pass off all these stuff that was Afghanistan footage as Iraq footage and you know, 'We have half an hour to go on air and just do it! Just do it!' and I was like: 'I can't do that, it's wrong,' and then we had a whole argument and then I quit. I tend to do that a lot, quit. Then a lot of the anti-war stuff was shocking to me, the lack of. I think that was the moment when I actually came in contact with like the U.S. outside of my campus. You needed a car to get around, so I really didn't have access to too much, but I realized that there is no movement in the U.S. In the sense [of] the anti-war movement, or things like people would be talking about. I went to these meetings and people were: 'okay mobilize.' You know? Anti-war stuff. But I realized that they didn't have any strategy and everybody just 'show up to this protest and there is going to be music,' while the U.S. is bombing Iraq. To me there was no direct action and planned act, we had huge protests, we took over the streets but that was about it. So yeah, that was like my transition to the U.S. I think.

When you say that there were not good strategies or actions, can you elaborate more on strategy and tactics that have been successful, back in India or here? What could be done instead if the strategies used weren't good?

Well this is right after school, I am in my last year of school, and I am going to these meetings where they are, whatever, 'not in our name' and all this stuff is happening. It's kind of 'let's all do protest' and like I mentioned to you, when I was 10 years old I watched all these people light themselves on fire in terms of direct action to protest something... Its just like a huge difference, cause I was just like: 'this protest thing, wait you have a permit to go protest?!' You know? It's kind of like you are putting on a party. To me that is kind of stupid, there is something to be said about opposing something and then making sure that these images are getting out there and like not everybody in the U.S. is in agreement but I was like: 'this is silly.' I went to this meeting where they talked about how they were going to have newborn babies dripping with oil. I mean, like plastic figures, and the whole conversation was about that. And I was like: 'there is a war about to start, can't we go take over something, the Pentagon or I don't know...' I didn't know anything of how things worked here so I was a little confused as too that stuff. But

I didn't stay in the anti-war movement after that, I moved to Boston, and started working with anti-violence stuff within communities, and sexual assault, domestic violence stuff.

What have been other experiences organizing after school? What has been your role in all of that?

After I left college I moved to Boston, I was working in the film industry. And pretty much all I did in Boston was work with the south Asian queer community. Just even creating the space for people to be queer and south Asian. But I worked pretty long hours at a very physical job so like lifting equipment and things like that. I didn't have necessarily any energy or time. It was also like a very confusing period of time, I realized the difference between myself and my classmates because I didn't have any connections in the country to other people who would give me a job and finding a job was hard and things like that. And things weren't really great at my house and then I left the country for 6 months and I came back to D.C. and then I started working on the PP campaign and [an NGO] and I was volunteering in [a] center. I was president of the South Asian queer organization, I was doing a lot of mostly anti-violence stuff, but I was realizing that what is considered left movement in D.C. or in the U.S. doesn't incorporate sexism. Doesn't incorporate anti-violence stuff. Like anything that women do, like any of the work that I was doing wasn't considered political. Like you have to be in a march or doing workers rights, you know. So that was confusing because that is not the case back home, so it was like a little confusing why these things were separate here.

In the work that you have been doing here, have you been able to incorporate the gender lens?

Doing intersectional work, which is to do it mostly around class and gender, and that's very important to me. So working with immigrant women who are mostly undocumented, or in violent relationships... Like working with folks where there is not a lot of organization. And the whole thing around the non-profit industrial complex and the whole political structure being taken over by big money from unions or from specific foundations makes it hard to have a movement, or even have mass place to organize and slowly overtime realizing what is going on here. A lot of my work is on trying to center that intersection and analysis and center people of color, poor people, queer folks as the center for the organizing, not like: 'also let's reach out to

these people and include them in things,' you know? And that is, and also, more like a transformative justice lens, not just being against something, but the real belief that as individuals, if you are able to reach our most honest selves, then things will collectively change for us. So having a collective structure that we all join to, but also having a space to do individual work. Now I am focusing on doing individual work with people, and helping in creating a structure for them to be able to realize their dreams that are community related, and doing workshops with them and also like helping them have a support group with each other, so on the one hand there is that, especially people of color who are, because a lot of activist positions are taken over by white people, and even though this is not a white city and this whole non for profit industrial complex, is a lot of white people who had experiences in college, where they had the time, they didn't have any job, they had the time to like, students for democratic society, like all this too, and they had this moment in college where they are radicalized, you know, where they suddenly saw the truth... I actually have friends and comrades who I think are like that's a really great place to have developed their analysis and we are in the same place now, but it is also like this thing of taking over so much space in local and national organizing, that there is no space for people of color activists, to actually manifest their dreams. And so part of one project that I am working on is actually just to be able to do that, and I am part of the POC (People of Color) SONG colleges, it is like this meditation space, but it's POC centered. It's a gathering that happens every month, it's a space for people to actually take care of themselves and a lot of people who come are activists in the city and to take care of themselves and get perspective on what is going on to deal with the violence that they are seeing every day. I am part of that and take leadership on that, and then I am also working with a queer organization in Virginia which is like a mass based organization that is fighting anti-immigration bills and is also building community, and also has this transformation justice kind of lens. But it centers working class people, it centers immigrants, it centers people of color, so their model of, they don't just go in and organize around a campaign and then say, 'ok, by.,' They are not money driven like that, they are not like campaigns that are like that. There is nothing wrong with campaigns, but like the campaigns that are some big unions run campaigns and put in a lot of money into a community, you know, like a 2 year period just to get a campaign going and then they would pull out after, there is no like long term investment in the space.

Can you be more specific of how you have done some of the work of incorporating all the different intersections of oppression and integrating people of color and queer people into the larger work?

So the domestic violence that I was working with is set up non-hierarchically, so there are no positions of power. It didn't rely on huge money to provide services. A lot of services agencies are like: 'we are going to provide these services,' and creates again this power dynamic, and this: 'yes we are going to be there and listen' but it is going to be people in one community, not necessarily people you know. Like providing language access to folks who didn't speak English and that it didn't matter if they spoke mandarin, which is very widely spoken in the DC area, or if you spoke like a really, like a language that was not known at all, like a very small percentage of people speak in the area. Like you were equally important, it didn't matter if you were an immigrant who spoke a language that is more easy to find and to train people within communities to actually be advocates for their on communities. So it wasn't based on this step down model of: 'you can come and get this from us,' but it was step up. And the training was set up to be a transformational process, for people to actually go through this process where they would come in and then slowly deal with the roots of violence as oppose to like, 'this is where the court house is,' or sending people through the criminal system; but actually learning about where does violence come from and how can we even in our language, culture create a kind of culture that would be change things in the future. So just like, you know, hundreds of people went through this programs that we did. And that has had a huge impact within that community. That is one example, doing work with inside. So the group that I am trying to work now in Virginia is doing, so in Georgia with the anti-immigrant stuff, so they are part of the coalition that is planning the boycott and is a queer organization. So on the same call you have catholic charities, you have this queer organization. Its kind of cool because it is not looking at LGBTQ issues as marriage, which is very upper class, for the most part if you ask most middle to low income queer people, what they want is not marriage, that is not the issue, the issue has more to do with safety and jobs. So basically like what I am saying is that there is so much money that it is being put into the marriage stuff, and gay marriage stuff, which is not what the focus is for a lot of people. And then if you say that you are not for gay marriage, then its just read as being homophobic when you are just saying: 'no' actually, this giant listening project that was conducted all across the south for a queer people of color in the south and people where like:

'no actually we want jobs, I want safety at my job, I want to be able to be out at my job, I want to be able to interact with my family ok, I want my immigration status to be ok.' Like have a clear idea of that's what people were saying. They weren't saying that they wanted to get married. It's just like such an upper class campaign strategy which again goes back to the non for profit industrial complex, where all the queer organizations are dominated by those folks, you know and are predominately white.

You have a whole lifetime of experience in building your consciousness, but thinking long term, doing work with other people, with youth, trainings. What would you say has been crucial in your life to build this political consciousness and experience that would be important to share with others. Anything... from books that you have read, classes, actions?

I don't really have books that I feel like are super, I mean I read Long Home to Freedom, back in high school, you know, was a big deal. I guess [I] studied south African movement for a long time, one because we were a socialist school who sent cards to Mandela throughout, all of that stuff. There were a lot of linkages between the movement and our school but more than that, I mean I just felt that that was something that happened recently that I had access to information. But honestly I think that it is just experiences, I think I mean, people who are, I think that as queer immigrant person of color like you get to be in an incredible space of modernization but you also get to be in an incredible space of intersection where you can be part of so many different communities at the same time and see things that its hard sometimes for individuals within different communities to see. And I think that that kind of drives me in being able, like just being able to see stuff, like how trans folks may not necessarily be understood in the immigration rights movement, you know, like those kind of things. Like how a lot of times I have noticed organizers connecting with the people across classes but using sexism, right, like saying 'oh look that woman is so hot or whatever.' Like an upper class person who is an organizer for low-income folks, or men working, so I see that kind of stuff happen a lot. And the black-brown stuff that happens in DC and being able to actually have a foot in all of these different communities and connect them, that's exciting. But I think if folks were really listening and really looking, especially at this moment in history, like you don't need a book to really know what is going on, even if you were reading mainstream news you could still [see that] something is off, like

something is gianormously off. When a corporation that got bailed out and not paying any taxes [while] everybody else is dying, literally. I don't know. Or that there is something really weird about being asked for your papers on the street. That kind of, we have seen that before, it has happened before, it's not that hard.

2. IN HER OWN WORDS: ES

What are your first memories of why you decided to get involved in community organizing? What motivated your change in consciousness?

Maybe I should begin by saying that I migrated in 1980 because the Salvadorian government was accusing me of teaching 4 to 6 year old children to be guerrillas and I got to the United States in October of that same year. The first two years were more than anything trying to survive because I came to the United States with my three small children of 6, 4 and 3 years and we got to New Jersey. Apart from surviving, I also wanted to manage the language to be able to play another role, because I learned at that time that not managing the language was a limitation in terms of being able to share the reason why I had to leave my country. When I initiated the process of getting political asylum, I was also able to learn more about immigration laws, and unlike many people, I had the privilege of coming with temporary immigration status, because I came with a tourist visa that then expired. I can't remember if we were given a few days to stay as tourists and then stayed without status and solicited political asylum in 1981. Every 6 months we had to go to immigration offices to get our worker's permit extended, but in 1983 I received a letter from immigration saying that our political asylum was rejected and that we had to leave the country within 30 days. At that time I was working as a teacher's assistant in a daycare center in Roadway, the city where I was living at, and I was the only bilingual staff. I told the director: 'look, this is the situation, so you have 30 days to find someone to replace me' and she said 'no,' that she was going to talk to the daycare's board of directors to see what they could do. By then I was already searching for a lawyer because the lawyer that represented us in the political asylum case didn't do work contracts. She suggested that that was an alternative and we had to look for another lawyer that understood labor laws and immigration laws. This lawyer told us that we had to talk and present the situation to the director to see if she would be willing to go on with the process and she said she was interested in presenting it to the board. The board said that they wanted to do it and we began the process. We didn't have status from 83 until October of 87 and it is a very long process that didn't begin with immigration but with the department of labor and you have to wait until they approve your contract and then initiate the process with immigration.

During this time there was a great necessity for the community to know about what was the situation with the war in El Salvador and we were able to go in 87 and come back with permanent status. There was a new director at the daycare and she gave me the opportunity to work as a teacher but without the same salary and benefits of a teacher. So I told her, 'well, I want the benefits.' It is true that the organization sponsored me, but I paid for everything, they didn't invest money, just their name to be able to have the work contract. So she said 'no, you have to wait, we don't have the funds yet.' So I said 'ok,' since I was already learning more about the process, and I also saw the situation in El Salvador and that pushed me to take a different role. Well, so I returned in October with permanent residence and in December I told to her: 'well, it's a new year' and thanks to the opportunity of being a teacher, they were giving me a percentage of money to go back to the university to study early childhood education. They were paying me to be a teacher but not recognizing my work, because the salary and the benefits weren't there. I had the support of other women that said, 'well, now you can do something else.' And I had the contact of an organization of a Central American center for refugees in Plainfield that was looking for a director so I applied for it and they hired me. I left the daycare and went to work there. I started working as director of the organization in April. It was because of my work at this organization that I had to leave education and begin focusing on learning more about the situation with the immigrant community and share my own personal experience. [I also had to learn] how to fundraise and how to organize the immigrant community. The first effort was to get Salvadorian people to be recognized as refugees, because even though we were running away from war, the fact that the U.S. government supported the government of El Salvador, denied us the possibility for the political asylum. Some people who were deported were assassinated or disappeared, so it was something that we had to do. So I participated at a national level in the Salvadorian National Network, organizing lobby visits with congress members and senators at the local level, doing protests against the Salvadorian embassy in New York and educating the North American community about the reason why we were migrating. Also organizing the community about the fact that just because we are immigrants doesn't mean that we don't have rights and we also have to organize to ask for the halt of military aid. This is how I also learned about CISPES, the Committee in Solidarity with the People of el Salvador and I participated with them. When the peace accords are signed in 92-93, by that time we had already created a sister city project in New Jersey with a rural community in el Salvador, in

Chalatenango, Los Amates, and from 92 to 93 leading delegations, participating in taking delegations [to El Salvador] so that people could see not just what we were telling them, but see with their own eyes and experience first-hand the situation and conditions [in El Salvador]. And part of me also wanted the life conditions to be better here and there and trying to build a bridge between both situations and supporting not only the efforts of the immigrant community but also women's efforts. We need to be recognized, not just for being immigrants but also for being women and it is a bit difficult because as immigrant women we have to, almost always, carry the responsibility of the family and the time that we can dedicate to community organizing is more limited.

But thanks be to God, when my daughter and sons were little I would take them everywhere. They went to the marches and to the demonstrations with me. Everywhere they could participate, so that they could be part of the effort and for them to see, to learn, so that they wouldn't forget where we come from and why we had to come. So other than working as a director of the refugee center from 88 to 94, in 94 I had the opportunity to work for the organization Sister Cities between the U.S. and El Salvador, and coordinate that effort in the U.S. and maintain the relationship. This is an organization that is celebrating 25 years this year. At that time it played a very important role saving lives when we did campaigns to send faxes to the north American embassy, to different government agencies in El Salvador, the police, the president, to say 'well, we know this is happening, we are supporting this community' and this effort saved lives. So that was between 94 and in 96 my mother was sick and I returned to El Salvador. I was there for almost 2 years and I was able to work with an organization that was giving Spanish classes to international people that went to work in El Salvador and with an organization of mothers that were demanding the food quota. So this experience gave me a different view about community organizing, it was there where I saw that organized people can have an impact in a different way. When I came back in 98, I wasn't focused on the immigration issue but focused on organizing the community, and immigration was one step but making a difference by organizing was another step.

Could you expand on what was it that you saw? What changed? What did you begin implementing when you came back?

In El Salvador, because of economic limitations, people get organized, the mothers whose compañeros or husbands had migrated and had forgotten to help them. There was a process, like a treaty with the U.S. to make sure the mothers were receiving help. There was a process to make that happen, to pass a treaty so that the mothers that migrated and left their sons or daughters in El Salvador, that they would be responsible, to make them be responsible. A law was passed that made the treaty between the U.S. and El Salvador so that a food quota could be implemented. It was a very long process but it was accomplished. Being able to see these women who were the least educated, with the least opportunities, the least resources, to be able to get organized, that was what inspired me and motivated me. 'Ok, them, with such limited resources had been able to get organized, why not use part of their methodology when I get back to the U.S.' The methodology was popular education, where we all have, as human beings, something to contribute, and not necessarily just because you are a teacher, you can say what we have to do, or not. The community says which are the alternatives, this is what we can do. This is what made me come back with a different vision. And trying to make sure that the communities in the U.S. learned or wouldn't forget where they came from. This was one of the instruments that I was able to use when I had to work with the Honduran and Nicaraguan community that received TPS and Salvadorians trying to make connections with their country to see what projects to help with. The vision that resources are important, but human resources can also make the difference. First we have to educate about the war and what is causing it. But then, as human beings, how can we get organized to make a difference and make sure that we can all participate if we want. We can all contribute in our own capacity.

So this is what I can say. I left New Jersey in 2007 to go to Georgia. That was completely different and I was able to see that it is not very easy to initiate something in a community that is not as friendly and where they are not as informed. Things were much more difficult and I was only able to do voluntary work with the Catholic Church but we were never able to organize for different reasons and because the environment is more difficult. And I came to North Carolina, Asheville one year ago. It is more liberal and I have been able to find opportunities to do more work and now in Nuestro Centro, well it is one of the channels where I can contribute with my experience. With the language, English, it hasn't been easy. I haven't been able to dominate it 100%. I always have my accent and it is not that I don't feel proud, but it is part of who I am. I say if English becomes my language, I am taking away part of my roots and it is a struggle to

preserve not just my language but also my customs. So I try not to fit in completely, so that my voice as an immigrant... sorry if sometimes they can't understand me when I try to speak English, but they can identify better if they see that I am trying to speak English to communicate. Sometimes people have more questions or don't understand my English. I am willing to explain the situation, but I think that as immigrant women, we need to preserve our values and share our experiences and our values.

What are those values?

Well for me the values are that, okay, you are a woman, you have dignity, you have an identity, and just because the community where you live at is changing doesn't mean that you are going to stop being for example, a believer, that doesn't go. I was born and grew up believing that faith has helped me get through the thunderstorms in my life. So I am not going to change, but I am not going to close myself either, to say 'oh no, if such person is not catholic I wont work with them.' Far from that, I think that enriches me, to be able to say, 'welcome, if you identify with this cause' not say 'oh no, to work with us you have to be a believer.' So those are the values that I believe we should share in an open manner, that if others want to, they are welcomed, but you don't have to impose on them, because that would also mean not respecting the dignity of the other. I believe that values such as respect for dignity, you have to take that with you no matter the circumstances or the place where you are at. I too feel like, maybe this is not the right word, but proud, but to say that 'well, I have been able to open my mind and my heart to different areas and situations where life has taken me' and to be able to have the right and the freedom to say, 'no, that is not within my principles or my values,' that I am here but I don't have to necessarily accept it, but not impose on others either. That is part of who I am, of my life.

What is important in educating new generations of organizers, young people, and elevate their political consciousness. What was important for you to become a better organizer and elevate your political consciousness that would be important to share with others?

Look, I think it is important to know history, and not just our own history but the history of the struggle in this country. That makes you see that there have been others who opened the

way, and that we can also have an open mind to learn and also to recognize that we can learn from the past so that we don't make the same mistakes as in the past. I also think that what you are doing is important, to make history, because who is taking the time to write and document what has happened before and as immigrants, we lack that history. So it is necessary to document it. And also to motivate young people not just to move ahead, but before moving ahead, to learn what has been done already so that you can do it better or to be able to place and motivate yourself. The situation during the '80s is not the situation of 2011 but that doesn't mean that what happened is not valid in this moment so I think that is very important. And to recognize that it doesn't matter what is the color of your skin, but if you want to support the cause, to awaken and to give credit to those who deserve it. Everyone is welcomed, 'come on,' it doesn't have to be an immigrant necessarily to work on the cause, but to be clear that you are not going to guide, but to accompany. We also need to be conscious that it is necessary to be in solidarity with each other and not necessarily to guide but to be next to each other sharing your ideas because your ideas can motivate others to participate, your experience so that that participation can be more of a long term. And solidarity is not just something that is cool to do right now, but a commitment that you have to make for yourself and not just because of the times, or 'oh, students are doing this, oh women are doing this' but because you are convinced that you want to invest in it and it is not just for the time being but it is a life commitment.

Do you have any ideas on how you think it will be important to share these histories?

Well I think that as I told you I am also working on something similar, but it is not women from all over, but Salvadorian women. But I think that it is very important to make this public and you are doing this in this moment, but do not leave it behind, and maybe in a few years, see who is participating, where are they and how they think, because that is the continuity of a process to educate and inform. It has to always be an active process and it is not just history that stays still. So the more people that can have access, the more possibilities there are for this being useful to someone else at another time or to initiate a process, and well. It doesn't mean that everyone who reads it is going to change because they read it, but it is an instrument that can be there so that others can use it. That is important, not just for one person but for the collective that you are sharing.

In terms of the process, I am also observing what is the process like for you. How did you feel by talking, and being listened to? Did anything come up for you?

Well, years have been passing by and I hope that no matter how old I am I hope to continue improving my points of view and be able to give more to the movement and as I said earlier, to be able to see beyond the points of view as immigrants but as human beings. Because I believe that it is necessary not just because of the color of your skin or because of the place where you were born, but for the fact of living in this planet that we can do things better for everyone. I hope something good comes out of this, who listens to it, who reads it, that it is useful to them and that is my goal by telling you, to pass it on, that there are others, not just women, but other generations, other people to share this with. I hope it can be useful to others. Thank you, for the opportunity to share.

3. IN HER OWN WORDS: CC

Do you remember some of the first few times when you began to get involved in activism, in Colombia or here? What motivated you or moved you to get involved?

...Well I always questioned things that didn't seem right. For example, I didn't understand why the domestic workers had to eat in the kitchen, and we ate separately. Why did they have some girls of more or less our same age in our house working and we couldn't play with them. Things like that, I always thought that was strange. And why we couldn't play with such or such boy. Well I don't know, I would go out to the street to play and I liked to play with all the kids in the street. But we were told we couldn't play with some kids and I didn't understand why. So all this comes from a very long time, all these things, but when you are little, well you ask questions but you don't really question further.

...I wanted to be more independent so I entered the SENAP, the National Learning Center. It's like a school that has many technical careers, everything, art and all that. I studied Human Resources and I wanted to have a job that would pay me somewhat well to be able to continue with the university.

There I met a really incredible professor who taught us lots of things, to be very autonomous and to be respectful of things... One Saturday he took us to a university that was very progressive, like everything was done as projects, very, very cool. I met a group of people there... and they were very progressive, and we talked about a lot of things, about everything that was happening at the time, about all the strikes, about all the injustices. I really liked what they were talking about and I began to understand why I didn't like many things that I would see in my family, I began to understand what was the class struggle... I began to see many things that they talked about that day in the conference.

That day I met T, an amazing person, a woman who is now 82 years old and continues to work for justice, she still goes to the neighborhoods in Colombia to give workshops. That day I met her and after finishing the workshop, as we always do in Colombia, we went to have a 'tinto' [coffee] and talk. Then we went to a house, ended up in a party and then T invited us to her house and there I met her son M and I began to talk to him. They had a lot of books that I had never seen before, Marx, Lenin. I didn't know who they were and I began to ask about the books and he began to explain what was each thing, and we stayed till 6 a.m. talking about those

books. He then gave me my first book which was 'Religion, the Opium of the People' and another book by Marx. And I began to read and began to go to the neighborhoods with them and see all the things that existed in Bogota. Well I knew there were poor people but I had never gone to those neighborhoods. We began to go and met a lot of people, and we began using liberation theology...

Then I went to the University...called the 'Universidad Cooperativa Endesco,' where all the sociology professors from the National University had been transferred because the faculty had to be shut down, so I went there and began to study sociology and we began to connect ourselves with all the movements going on. If there were strikes, we would go work with the people on strike, I got involved with the student movement. Then, many of my friends, with the 'Estatuto de Seguridad' [Security Law], were arrested. So I began to get involved with the movement of political prisoners. And then T's family, T, her husband and her son, became political prisoners and a friend of mine. We would go to the jail every Sunday to visit the prisoners and on Saturdays to visit the women. I learned a lot there. When we would go to the jail, there was a large group of people, we talked and sang protest songs and many prisoners would come closer, with us, and well, that was the work that was done in Colombia. And then new movements began to flourish like the Movement of the Families of Prisoners, the committee of prisoners already existed because the first human rights group that I met in Colombia was the Permanent Committee, then the Prisoner's Committee came into existence, and slowly, there were more and more groups and some complicated security situations happened. My sister offered me to come here but I didn't want to, because what was I going to do in this country, the empire. So I went to the jail and told my friends, my friends who were political prisoners, that my sister was inviting me to go and they said: 'well go, because things here are getting bad and you never know.' So well, 'what am I going to do?' 'Well go, if you don't like it, come back.' I said 'Okay' and I left for a bit, not too convinced. After that is when the 'Consejo de Guerra' [War Council] began for these 'compañeros' and we knew that the treatment of prisoners was always terrible and there was the War Council and they told them at 4 p.m. 'Tomorrow is the War Council.' There are relationships that form in the jail and networks are formed, and we had a network, so one of the jail guardians who was our friend got the news out, and called one person, and that person called another person and we created a phone tree and the lawyers and everything and the following day we were all outside the jail at 6 a.m.

The War Council was going to take place at a battalion, close to the military club, and the men who were at the Modelo prison were brought walking and handcuffed from the jail. And we were already organized and were there. We were walking with them and some people took photos. When we got there the army wanted to take away our camera, but we passed down the camera person by person and someone left running with the camera and took it to the alternative magazine. Photos were published of how they were taking the prisoners through the streets, it was horrible. And then the guards didn't want to let E in, who was defending one of [the prisoners], and the guard got really mad and hit him, but finally they let him go into the War Council. So we planned that we would take turns to be there to see what happened. They didn't let us in... we were sitting in front of the school, we were sitting on the floor, on the sidewalk, when we see that a group of armed soldiers is approaching, like 4 or 5 I think. They point their arms to us and tell us to go inside. And we were like 'but why?' 'That the commander wants to see you.' And we were, 'but we are not doing anything.' So they took us inside, but the War Council was on recess and P saw that they had taken us inside and got really scared because according to him, it was through there that they would take them to torture them. When they first detained them, they held them there before taking them to jail. So P was very scared, they took pictures of us, they put a number on us and said that we had links to the ELN and that we were going to attack the base to release the prisoners. So we said 'We are fucked' and P came over... With the director of the War Council and said, 'Take these people out of here right now! They are families of the detained, why are you doing this?' 'Because the base Coronel said.' 'They are family members. They have a right to be here.' So they let us go, but they had charged us, we were with a 3 month old baby girl, we didn't even have a nail clipper and they said that supposedly we were going to take over the base. They made all of that up. They let us go and the soldiers told us: 'Sons of bitches, we don't want to see you here again or we will kill you.' We left, we went to the alternative magazine, talked about what had happened and that story came out.

After that I was convinced that I had to leave, because at that time they had a tactic of parking an army car in front of your house and they wouldn't say anything. That's when I was convinced that I had to go, and told my sister that I was coming. I was so afraid because that day they were telling us that we were going to attack the base and my sister was coming from Washington. 'What did I get myself into?' But well, one is so innocent, but I haven't done

anything, they can't do anything to me, but they made all of that up. Then my sister came and I told her I was coming to the U.S. and we began the paperwork and came over.

When I got here in 1980, well I didn't know how anything worked here, and I was living with my sister and I began to go to classes. At that time the school was called Gordon Center, today is Carlos Rosario, and it was by Georgetown... That was the school for people who came to learn English, but back then there were a lot of classes and they paid us \$100 for studying there. I studied English and helped my sister. So I began to meet people there. I met EB, who makes videos for independent media. He introduced me to other people and I began to get involved with the solidarity movement and discovered that there was a huge movement of solidarity with Central America. I began to get involved with them and then I became friends with all of them and ended up living in a group house with people from CISPES in Adams Morgan and I began to say: 'all the things they talk about El Salvador and nobody knows about all that is happening in Colombia.'

I was very moved because I would hear that they would torture compañeros, but I was very moved because they had tortured M so much and they had also killed his 'torture partner.' It was with M that I talked so much and he gave me the books and the programs to listen to, and then when his partner O, who was one of the first people to be disappeared, she was with M when he was captured in Barranquilla and then they accused M of killing the Coronel. I can't remember the name. They gave him so many different charges, so I was really scared, they made up all these charges for M, and they were making up all these charges to us too, so that's when I made the decision to come.

And I was seeing all these people working on El Salvador, saying things, doing this and that, and all the people in Colombia, all they have suffered and nobody here knew. So I began talking to people, 'look, in Colombia this and that is happening,' and on May 1st, they did an activity in a community center called Wilson Center. So the compañeros from El Salvador told me, 'okay compañera, present something there about Colombia.' I only had 3 or 4 things to present cause it wasn't like now-a-days with internet. I would go to buy El Tiempo on Columbia road. Every 2 Sundays El Tiempo would arrive, to see what was going on, and I was always on the phone with people but that was all. I met with another friend and told her about the presentation so we took pictures of all the magazines we had and we made a presentation about the working class in Colombia. And we met more people there and began to work in forming the

Colombia Human Rights Committee. We talk to people from Amnesty, from Human Rights Watch (although it wasn't called like that back then)...

We began doing radio programs, talk to people, with the people from El Salvador who supported us a lot. So we established the Committee, we would meet every Saturday... And began to strategize about what to do. I went to Colombia and met with people that I knew, with the Prisoners Committee, with the office of EM, with the Permanent committee and had them send us information, but by mail, so we were always behind on the news. And we began going to congress to talk to people there and little by little put Colombia in the agenda of several organizations... Human Rights Watch did a delegation in Colombia and made a really good report... we also did an 'Encuentro' (meeting) in '82. People came from NY, Chicago, San Francisco, Mexico and Canada... each year we had an 'Encuentro' we gathered. Unfortunately people didn't know how to distinguish that it was human rights work, not partisan work. Some people used the committee as a space for partisan work, but those committees disappeared, because once the group was 'unfashionable' there was nothing else to do. And it was only a few groups who were objective. We maintained a broad spectrum, that's why we have lasted so long, we have always been objective and we have focused the work on human rights.

We still do many speakers tours. We began bringing people from Colombia for them to see what was happening here. It was extremely complicated because people didn't want to come to the empire, 'what in the world are we going to go do there?' And we would say 'but it is there where they decide our lives, in the Congress, it is from there that the military aid comes from...' and little by little we convinced people to come. We also began doing small delegations to Colombia with people from here. And the work began to grow... and every time someone from Colombia came we would take them to the State Department, to Congress. But back then everything was so new, people would hear what was going on in Colombia and they couldn't believe it. But little by little we put Colombia in the agenda. We began to lobby [solidarity organizations] to take delegations to Colombia.

Could you expand on some details about your experience with tactics, examples of tactics or actions that you feel had a great impact?

The first thing that had a huge impact was to bring people from Colombia... and take people from here to Colombia. That is why we insisted so much from [solidarity organizations]

to do that work, because one group can't do everything. If there are people that have the logistics and the experience and have done that work before, we would insist for them to do delegations to Colombia. Another really good thing were letters to congress.

We had really great actions here in Washington.... 'Mobilizacion por Colombia' (Mobilization for Colombia). It was excellent. We had workshops, people came from all over the country to attend the workshops, then we had a mobilization with presenters, then a civil disobedience action and marches attended by more that 3000 people...

Another really great thing is when we work in coalition with other groups... I think that is very effective. And as I said before, giving a voice to Colombian people to come speak, not just the human rights defenders, but bringing people from different regions. We bring people so that they can have their voice. The last person we brought was the mother of one of the 'false positives.' The department of state told her 'It is so sad that she has to come here to be heard.' Give voice to the victims. We also work with the youth of sons and daughters for the memory against impunity. They are the sons and daughters of people who were assassinated by state armed forces or paramilitary groups. We have given voice to these young people... they want to keep the memory of their parents and search for new paths and new ways for action.

You mentioned the important of reaching out to more people, creating a larger base and that we are a bit stuck. What do you think we have to do?

...when organizations bring speakers, it would be great to have a coalition and have the speaker go outside of our own circle, take the speaker to talk to Hispanic media, because there's a lot of people from Latin America living here, a lot of people from Colombia who don't know that these speakers come here, and that this is happening in Colombia. We have found people for the committee who didn't know this was happening in Colombia, and they say 'How is this possible, I didn't know,' and they get involved. So that, and we need to open the fan, we can't keep things just to ourselves, we have to be loud when [speakers from Colombia] come here... do events that are easy access to the public in general, educate people that have no idea, but that once they hear we can win them. But it has to be a collective effort...

You as an activist and doing this political work, what have been some of the things that have helped you form your political consciousness and form you as an activist?

From Colombia, it was very helpful for me to see the injustices when I lived in Colombia and then I met people that helped me. My career of sociology helped me form as an activist, but what helped me the most was to see the example of the 'compañeros.' To see them fighting, even when they were prisoners, they continued to fight and doing work, writing.... Seeing what was happening in Colombia, to read and study... The example of the 'compañeros' it's what helps me the most and what inspires me and what continues to inspire me to move forward, even when sometimes one wants to give up and say no more. Because sometimes you hit walls, but when you see people who like F, the Mothers of Soacha, when you see people like the people from Sucre, with all their family members in mass graves, to see people like the human rights defenders, defending so many people, that doesn't let you give up, because one says 'any little thing we can do, a grain of sand that we can put here, bringing people to have a voice here, that helps.' And if we come together and broaden this work, I think that the grain of sand would be bigger.

And thinking about long term, in forming a social movement and a strong base, especially in teaching and forming new generations of activists. What do you think is necessary to teach them?

...to do all of those activities like the Colombia Mobilization, workshops, or work in coalition, use the space to do teach-ins... the problem is that when you are doing this work as a volunteer, many times you don't have time to follow up... It is important to do follow up after the teach-ins. I think that education is the best tool... To show the realities in Colombia, and show, many times we just show the role of the victim, but we don't show that the victim is a courageous person, it is a person who is fighting, someone who has the name of victim but doesn't stay as a victim because she continues to fight and doesn't give up...

And I also want to say that I have been able to do this work because of the support of my husband... He has supported me with everything, when the kids were little he would take care of them and when we traveled to other cities for events, he would come with me to take care of our son but he would also participate, we would take turns. But I haven't stopped this work because he has always supported me... In all of this work and when this house is full of people he never has a bad face, he is happy, he is helping and he says that in the place where he has learned more about Colombia is in this house, with all the Colombians that come through here... That has been beautiful, where this house has 10 to 12 people and it is very beautiful to be part of that

solidarity work and to be part of the work, the meetings, but we can't forget about the human side, we have to love them, for them to feel safe, that they can walk down the street in Washington without bodyguards and that they come to a house where they can find love, I think that is fundamental.

PART II: THE LISTENING PROJECT

A. Reflection about the Listening Project from a Trainer Practitioner Lens

Overview of the Listening Project

The overarching vision for this Listening Project was to remember our collective history of social action as immigrant women living in the United States and adding new voices to such collective history. Several of my personal and professional goals reflect that vision. On one side, I wanted to connect with other immigrant women organizers at a deeper level and create the space for them to share their knowledge, experiences, challenges and opportunities within the context of social justice work and as immigrant women living in the United States. I also wanted to create the space to bring these new voices of immigrant women engaged in organizing into our collective history and make sure that we are writing and creating our own history.

In addition, as a training practitioner, it was my hope to continue my growth and practice of key training skills and knowledge in the areas of active listening, strategic questioning, and analysis and knowledge of the role of a trainer in the context of social action. Enhancing my active listening and questioning skills has become an important personal and professional goal to strengthen my work as a trainer and organizer. In particular, to practice listening without judgment, and listening to understand a person's story, to truly understand what is important to them, their ideas and values, without interrupting or judging.

It was also my hope to give the gift of listening to other women engaged in a very difficult and high anxiety arena. After engaging in a listening project during the Training for Social justice class, I learned that taking the time to listen to others is a powerful act. I wanted to engage in this powerful and revolutionary act of listening with strong *luchadoras* who give so much to others every day.

Immigrant Women Organize for Justice: A Listening Project comes from an oral history tradition. The project involved four immigrant women organizers in the U.S. AI is from India, CC is from Colombia, ES is from El Salvador, and PN is from Nepal. I had interacted with CC, PB and AI in my own organizing work in D.C. and Tennessee, but never in much depth. I met ES at a non-violence action camp in North Carolina. All four women work as organizers, two of them as their paid job, two of them on their own personal time. I chose to conduct the listening interviews with these particular women because all of them are actively engaged in

organizing in their communities but with different emphasis. I also wanted to see if there were opportunities for us to build a stronger relationship. I conducted listening interviews with CC and AI first, but realized that they were two women who I had more familiarity with. For this reason I decided to interview PN and ES, since I knew little to nothing about them, and thought it would be important to interact with others who I didn't feel as comfortable.

Timeline and Logistics

The listening interviews took place during the months of May to August of 2011. I met with each woman one time, anywhere from 30 minutes to 1 hour and forty-five minutes. All the listening interviews were conducted in person. Three of the interviews were recorded and one was done without any recording device, only note taking. I informed the participants about the details of the project (via phone, in person and/or e-mail) when I approach them to see if they would be interested in participating. I followed up with an e-mail, sending the Informed Consent form. I began each listening interview by informing once again the four women about the goals and purpose of the project. For the three interviews that I recorded, I sent the transcripts via e-mail for approval. Throughout the whole process, I informed all four women that they could decide not to continue with their participation at any point and that they could let me know if there was any information that they didn't want to be published. I also decided to use letters rather than their names, in order to protect their identities and create a safe space for them to be able to share fully.

Challenges and Joys

This project was full of joyful moments and lessons. I really enjoyed conducting the actual listening interviews. It was very powerful for me to be able to sit down with four amazing women and take the time to listen to their histories. I believe it was also powerful for them to remember their own histories, their own struggles and successes, and be able to see how much they have grown. PN shared with me at the end of the interview that in organizing, we are so busy and engaged in so much work that it is hard to take time to sit down and reflect on all of our accomplishments. The process of the listening interview was very valuable for her because she was able to realize how much she has done in the past years. She told me that she has shared her story many times, but that this time "I realized how much I've grown." ES was also very

thankful for the opportunity to share and she mentioned that it was helpful to talk about her points of view and notice how they continue to change and improve “...years have been passing by and I hope that no matter how old I am I hope to continue improving my points of view...”

Another joy was reading over and over again the transcriptions of the interviews. I was able to, each time learn something new and be inspired time and time again. I realized how each of us carries an amazing wealth of experiences and views on the world and issues affecting our communities. It was very impressive and inspiring to see how each woman brought so many different levels of analysis and understanding about issues of oppression, social action, solidarity, organizing, among others.

I experienced many points of connection with all four women. I particularly enjoyed listening to another Colombian immigrant woman engaged in organizing around Colombian solidarity. In less than two hours I was able to learn an immense amount about the history of my own country and the history of the Colombian solidarity movement in the U.S. I also realized that we had a lot in common in terms of our own class background and the way we were brought up. It is truly an empowering process to learn from others who have gone through a similar path.

It was also exciting to take the time to intentionally listen to others and to practice active listening and listening from the heart. If it wasn't for this project it is very likely that I wouldn't have ever engaged in such deep conversations with these four women. And one of the biggest joys is that I have now developed a particularly strong relationship with two of the four women that participated in the project, and we have been engaging in community organizing projects together.

There were many joys throughout this project, but there were also many challenges. When we engaged in the listening projects during TSA class, the process was the main focus of the project. We wanted to practice and strengthen our listening and question posing skills as trainers. It was also about experiencing the powerful act of listening and being listened to. The content itself of what was said in the listening interviews was not necessarily the main focus. In my listening project, I saw the need to focus much more on the content of the interviews, given the amazing wealth of information and the need in our society to have more of our voices in academia as well as in other sectors. It was very challenging to find a balance between the two, and make both the process and the content the focus of the project. This challenge played out in the actual interviews. There were many things I wanted to learn from all four amazing women,

and find a way to share that knowledge with others. At the same time, I wanted to be able to focus in the process and remember that giving the gift of listening was of extreme importance, and listening without having an “agenda” in mind. This challenge is also reflected in this paper itself, and for this reason, I decided to make separate sections and give each focus its own space. I will expand on other challenges related to listening and question posing in the following section. One of the most important ways in which I helped resolve this challenge was by asking the women I interviewed their thoughts on what to do with the information collected. They were all in agreement about the need to document and share their voices and voices of other immigrant women. ES expressed this several times during the interview: “I also think that what you are doing is important, to make history, because who is taking the time to write and document what has happened before and as immigrants we lack that history, so it is necessary to document it.”

B. Lessons Learned and Best Practices for Training and Social Action

The Process

Listening to Understand

Active listening and listening from the heart is always a challenge. Specially as adults, we already come into any learning experience with a lot of formed opinions and behaviors. I believe that one of the most important lessons was to come into the listening interview with the mindset and intentionality of just listening. Knowing that my role was to be the listener and throughout the interview, reminding myself that listening was my main purpose. I wasn't there to give advice or to even engage in a conversation, but to stay present and focused on active listening. I did notice a huge difference between the interviews that I recorded and the one I didn't. I was much more present in the one I didn't record even though I was taking notes. I didn't want to miss anything, because I knew that I would not be able to listen to it again or transcribe word for word what was said. This was very challenging for me because, as with the other interviews, there was such a wealth of information and experiences that PN was sharing, that I wanted to have a record of it. I did notice that this particular one was possibly the most fulfilling for the person who was being listened to.

As a trainer, developing active listening skills is extremely important. After engaging in this Listening Project I learned that being able to truly listen can make all the difference in a

training space. Not only it will help guide strategic questioning, but it will also play a key role in summarizing, generalizing and creating collective knowledge. In addition, I believe that participants can notice when we are truly listening and when we are not. When we are facilitating trainings, there are so many things to keep in mind, that it is very challenging to focus on listening to what participants are bringing up. As trainers, it must be our goal to intentionally listen to participants. I believe that it will have a positive effect on participants feeling that what they have to share is valuable and important.

After engaging in this project, I have come to value even more the skill of active listening to understand. As trainers, we carry with a lot of baggage, judgments and internalized “isms.” There are many things that can trigger our “isms” and emotions. This makes us be in a vulnerable position when we are facilitating a training. For this reason, I believe that listening to understand is a powerful practice. To be able to listen to someone and ask questions about where their ideas and opinions are coming from and how they have been formed is a powerful act.

Active listening and listening to understand takes time, practice and intentionality. It requires a commitment to a life-learning process that will change and evolve. It is important as trainers and organizers, to intentionally engage in the practice of active listening and make it a day-to-day habit. As I mentioned before, I believe more and more that the act of listening is revolutionary. It should be part of our work as trainers and organizers working in the field of social justice.

Strategic Questioning

Active listening made a huge difference in my question posing. I have to admit that even though I wanted to be able to ask questions depending on what I was hearing, I did have some questions in the back of my mind before coming into the interviews, and I found myself asking some of those questions in all of the interviews. It is a challenge to let go of some of the control and be able to go with the flow of the moment.

I did notice that before asking a question, I was summarizing some of what was said to help frame the following questions. As I mentioned at one point in the interview after I summarized and asked a question that I was a good listener. Summarizing is important and it can play an important role in remembering some of the important points made, but also in letting the person know that you are actively listening and understanding what they are saying.

As a trainer, in a training space, question posing is crucial within structured activities and during the debrief of those activities. Strategic questions will play a key role in going deeper into the analysis and understanding of an issue and in the generation of new knowledge. Active listening goes hand in hand with question posing. The better the listening, the better the question posing.

Listening Projects and Social Action

The more I engaged in this listening project, the more I realized that this is a very important tool to use in our organizing and social action work. Whether it is to gain more understanding of an issue, to learn where people are at in their analysis and understanding of our society, whether it is to know what are the needs in a community, what are the challenges and opportunities, or whether it is to learn about what has been done before and place our organizing work within that historical perspective.

As I was engaging in this process, I kept thinking back to my own organizing experience, and how much I, my organization and my community could have benefited from using listening projects. As an organizer coming in to a new organization or community, my work and my understanding of that new community and the work of the organization could have been strengthened if I had intentionally devoted time to engage in such projects. I have seen how many organizations go into different communities with an “agenda” in mind and with a mindset of knowing what is best for such community. Listening Projects and taking time to listen to what people’s needs and ideas of how to get what it’s needed requires a lot of humility from us as organizers and trainers. I think ES said it best: “...where we all have, as human beings, something to contribute, and not necessarily just because you are a teacher, you can say what we have to do, no. The community says which are the alternatives, this is what we can do.”

As mentioned before, I also learned that taking the time to listen and share is a revolutionary act. In a society that is more and more individualistic and puts us constantly one against the other, the act of connecting with each other and people in our community is in many ways an act of resistance. In addition, providing the space and the time for people to have a voice and share their knowledge and ideas, is also an act of resistance. In particular if it is people who have been historically oppressed by societal structures and who don’t have the discourse every day. AI makes reference to the importance of working with people who have been oppressed and

the powerful insight we can bring into any space. "...as queer immigrant person of color like you get to be in an incredible space of modernization but you also get to be in an incredible space of intersection where you can be part of so many different communities at the same time and see things that its hard sometimes for individuals within different communities to see." In the context of social action, it makes sense to intentionally create spaces for listening and sharing within oppressed communities. It serves as an empowerment tool but also as a way to strengthen any space and any social movement.

Listening projects can also be a powerful tool for us, as a new generation of activists, trainers and organizers, to learn our history and learn from others who have come before us. In particular when we know that the ruling class continues to suppress those voices and that history from history books, from school curriculum, from mainstream news, etc. ES also touched on the point of how important it is to learn from history and struggles in the past during her interview: "Look, I think it is important to know history, and not just our own history but the history of the struggle in this country, because that makes you see that there has been others who opened the way, and that we can also have an open mind to learn and also to recognize that we are going to learn from the past so that we don't make the same mistakes as in the past."

The Content

Intersections of Oppression

The histories of immigrant women organizers gave me a better understanding of the theories of oppression and how the many complex dynamics play out in our every day lives and within community organizing work. There were many **levels of oppression and the intersections of those oppressions** that were addressed by all four women during the Listening Project. "The term oppression encapsulates the fusion of institutional and systematic discrimination, personal bias, bigotry, and social prejudice in a complex web of relationships and structures that shade most aspects of life in our society" (Adams, et al, pp. 3). Such complex web of relationships and structures was explored in each of the immigrant women organizer's histories as they shared their experiences and analysis on sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, and oppression because of immigration status, language, religion, and nationality, among others.

"Power and privilege are relative, however, because individuals hold multiple complex and cross-cutting social group memberships that confer relative privilege or disadvantage

differently in different contexts” (Adams et al, pp. 3). This **complex intersection of multiple oppressions** was also a recurrent theme mentioned by all four women. For example, PN shared about some of the first encounters with U.S. racism when she moved to Wisconsin from Nepal. PN’s dad was white and her mom was of color, and she saw how different they were treated. ES mentioned that even though she is in a target position as an immigrant in the United States, she also was in a privileged position because of her immigration status. “I had the privilege of coming with temporary immigration status.” CC shared her early realizations of coming from upper class family in Colombia, when her family wouldn’t allow her to play with certain children or when the domestic workers at her house had to eat in the kitchen. She also shared how much of her early political work in Colombia was by going to poor neighborhoods where she had never been before, and didn’t even know existed.

AI shared many examples of the intersection of oppressions that helped put into perspective this broad topic. AI explored how the systems of oppression around sexual orientation, class and race have played out in the LGBTQ movement in the United States. She mentioned that much of the LGBTQ efforts have revolved around gay marriage and there is a lot of money being put into such efforts and into non-for-profit queer organizations that are dominated by white people. According to AI, the gay marriage issue has been a white, upper-class led issue and it is very disconnected with the realities of poor, queer people of color. There was a giant listening project that was conducted all across the south for queer people of color in the south by the organization SONG (Southerners on New Ground). “People where like: ‘no, actually we want jobs, I want safety at my job, I want to be able to be out at my job, I want to be able to interact with my family ok, I want my immigration status to be ok...’ That’s what people were saying, they weren’t saying that they wanted to get married.”

We live within powerful system of oppression. The four women organizer’s shared an in-depth understanding of the many complexities within this system. Challenging oppression, internally and externally, is an essential part of social justice work. Even some of the most radical and progressive movements have to look deeply into issues of oppression and make it an ongoing part of the work for larger social change. It was eye-opening to listen to AI’s perspective about the **immense opportunity that we have, as oppressed people, to bring a wide range of experiences and views to anti-oppression work.** “As queer immigrant person of color, you get to be in an incredible space of modernization; but you also get to be in an

incredible space of intersection where you can be part of so many different communities at the same time and see things that its hard sometimes for individuals within different communities to see. And I think that that kind of drives me in being able to see stuff, like how trans folks may not necessarily be understood in the immigration rights movement, you know, like those kind of things... and being able to actually have a foot in all of these different communities and connect them, that's exciting." PN also shared how her work as an organizer has been strengthen because she is a queer immigrant, who had to move around a lot when she was young, not only from city to city, or country to country, but also within different social and economic classes. For this reason, she has been able to analyze issues from many different perspectives and a more in-depth analysis of the world.

This was a very important insight for me, because it speaks to the importance of organizing and sharing spaces with people who are most oppressed. Making room for such diversity in experiences and ideas is crucial in order to be able to have a wider view of the world in which we live and a wider view of what alternatives to create that take into account our many dreams and visions for a better world.

Social Action

A key focus of this Listening Project was on social action and community organizing. Since all four women are activists and organizers in their communities, there were many insights about social action all throughout their histories.

One theme that was at the forefront of the four immigrant women organizer's histories was the importance of devoting time and energy on the **long-term building of strong communities**, rather than focusing only on single issues or issue focused campaigns. AI for example expands on this point while sharing about her work with the leadership team of a mass-based queer immigrant rights organization in the south. Their work centers around "working class people, it centers immigrants, it centers people of color, they don't just go in and organize around a campaign and then say, 'ok, bye.' They are not money driven like that, they are not like campaigns that are like that. There is nothing wrong with campaigns, but like the campaigns that are some big unions run campaigns and put in a lot of money into a community, you know, like a 2 year period just to get a campaign going and then they would pull out after, there is no like long term investment in the space." PN also shared her experiences with working in issue-based

campaigns with the United States Student Association and an LGBTQ center in Milwaukee, WI. Even though these experiences taught her skills on organizing, on canvassing, and on electoral campaign tactics, she mentioned that issue campaigns don't focus on building community. PN expresses the importance of building a strong movement that would require working on creating and building our own communities, and on working together across issues and across sectors.

Incorporating a **transformative justice lens** to our work in social justice and movement building was also a theme addressed by AI, PN and ES. According to AI, within a transformative is “the real belief that as individuals, if you are able to reach our most honest selves, then things will collectively change for us. So having a collective structure that we all join to, but also having a space to do individual work.” An example of how she used this lens in her work was by conducting workshops and community building initiatives with victims of domestic violence. And, instead of showing people “where the court house is, or sending them through the criminal system, they would “slowly deal with the roots of violence” and learn “about where does violence come from and how we can even in our language and culture create a kind of culture that would change things in the future.”

ES also shared her experiences and insights about a community building methodology known as **popular education**. For ES, going to El Salvador and seeing how women, with no economic resources, little formal education and with the least opportunities, got organized and won a campaign to get a food quota from their husbands who had migrated to the U.S. and abandoned them. “The methodology was popular education, where **we all have, as human beings, something to contribute**, and not necessarily just because you are a teacher, you can say what we have to do, or not. The community says which are the alternatives, this is what we can do. The vision that resources are important, but **human resources can also make the difference**. First there was the education about the war, what is causing it, but then, as human beings, how can we get organized to make a difference and that we can all participate if we want and we all contribute in our own capacity.”

Another theme within social action was surrounding the **solidarity movement** with Latin America. It was interesting to hear from ES about the solidarity movement with El Salvador, and how important was the work of doing delegations and education about the war in El Salvador and how military aid from the U.S. was supporting the war. For CC, the examples of the solidarity movement with El Salvador were crucial in developing a model for solidarity work

with Colombia. Delegations, speakers' tours, education, congressional lobby visits, etc. were all a big part of the solidarity movement with Nicaragua and El Salvador during the '80. It was clear from CC that in a way, she was walking in the footsteps of people who came before her and paved the way for the Central and South American solidarity movement in the U.S.

I had the opportunity to work for an organization doing solidarity work with Latin America. I learned quickly that there are many tensions and contradictions surrounding this work. Many people in the solidarity movement in the U.S. had a mentality of 'we know better,' and we 'have to help those poor people.' There is a very paternalistic approach to this work. ES provided a very important insight into some of these contradictions. She addressed the importance of taking solidarity work seriously and instead of taking a paternalistic approach, to stand next to or take the lead from what people and movements in Latin America are doing and asking for. "We also need to be conscious that it is necessary to be in solidarity with each other and not necessarily to guide but to be next to each other, sharing your ideas because your ideas can motivate others to participate, your experience so that that participation can be more of a long term. And solidarity is not just something that is cool to do right now, but a commitment that you have to make for yourself and not just because of the times, or 'oh, students are doing this, oh women are doing this' but because you are convinced that you want to invest in it and it is not just for the time being but it is a life commitment."

Challenges in Social Justice Work

There were many challenges that were addressed by all four women. One challenge that seemed to come to the forefront had to do with the many complexities and contradictions around what AI called the "**non-for-profit industrial complex.**" Both AI and PN had a lot to say about how non-for-profits are hurting the movement and exclude people of color. AI shared the concerns about non-for-profit organizations being taken over by big money from corporations and unions, making it harder and harder to have a strong, mass-based movement in the U.S. I connected with this point in particular, because after working for three different organizations in the U.S. I have seen how the work becomes dictated by foundations rather than by what are the needs in the communities. Most recently, I have been doing organizing work on my own, not as my paid job. It has been interesting to see people's reaction when they ask me for what organization I work for, and I tell them that I am just an activist, and I am doing this work

independently of any organization. Social justice work in the U.S. has become more and more dependant on non-for-profits, and I share AI's and PN's concerns about the non-for-profit industrial complex. PN shared that in Nepal, everybody knows politics. Being engaged politically and engaged in our communities should be part of our day-to-day, and not something that only people who work at NGOs do.

Another challenge that came to the forefront had to do with being a woman in the movement. ES shared how difficult it was to be an organizer while also being a single mother of 3. CC also addressed this issue, but by mentioning how fortunate she was to have a husband who was supportive of her work and helped take care of the children. "We need to be recognized, not just for being immigrants but also for being women and it is a bit difficult because as immigrant women we have to, almost always, carry the responsibility of the family and the time that we can dedicate to community organizing is more limited." For AI, it had more to do with not being taken seriously and her work not being considered political because she is a woman. She also addressed the fact that the left movement in the U.S. doesn't include a strong anti-sexism work.

As organizers, we certainly have to face every day the complexities of challenging the system, while still being in it, and dealing with the internalization of such oppressive system. What these four women have shared is a breath of their powerful experiences and insights on issues of oppression and how they are challenging such systems at the individual and collective level. I feel a great sense of empowerment after engaging in this Listening Project. I also feel a sense of love for humanity and for the long-term path for social justice and self-determination in which so many of us are and have been making part of.

C. List of Best Practices for Training and Social Action based on Lessons Learned from the Listening Project

- Create spaces where people can come in as their full self
- Make time for working and organizing people who have been marginalized by the political, economic and social system
- Do work and analysis focused on the intersections of oppressions, such as class, race, gender, language, immigration, sexual orientation, etc.

- Create analysis and center organizing work on people of color, poor people, queer people. They should be at the center of the organizing, not just some people to reach out to later on
- Work on alternative structures that are not necessarily dependant on big money from unions or foundations
- Use a transformative justice lens within organizing work. "...not just being against something, but the real belief that as individuals, if you are able to reach our most honest selves, then things will collectively change for us" (AI)
- Do individual work with people, and help create a "structure for them to be able to realize their dreams that are community related and [do] workshops with them and also... [help] them have a support group with each other..." (AI)
- In the current structures, there are few spaces for people of color to actually manifest their dreams. For this reason, as people of color activists, it is important to be part and develop projects that are people of color centered. For example: A people of color meditation space, gatherings that happen every month, for people and activists to actually take care of themselves and "get perspective on what is going on to deal with the violence that they are seeing every day" (AI)
- Invest in long-term community building, not just short-term campaigns that will pull out of a community after a short period of time.
- Set up non-hierarchical structures where everyone is equally important
- "Train people within communities to actually be advocates for their on communities" (AI)
- Dedicate time and effort in doing listening projects within oppressed communities as an important first step to engage in organizing and social action work. Create campaigns, projects and efforts based on such listening projects
- Take the time to REALLY LOOK and REALLY LISTEN to the world around you in this moment in history
- Share our own personal stories and experiences with others
- "Organized people can have an impact in a different way" (ES)
- Use popular education as a methodology for training and organizing. At the core of popular education, "we all have, as human beings, something to contribute, and not

necessarily just because you are a teacher, you can say what we have to do, no. The community says which are the alternatives, this is what we can do” (ES)

- Don't forget where you came from and learn about your own roots
- Learn and educate about the issues, but also take time to learn and teach about how, “as human beings, how can we get organized to make a difference and that we can all participate if we want and we all contribute in our own capacity” (ES)
- “...know history, and not just our own history but the history of the struggle in this country, because that makes you see that there have been others who opened the way, and that we can also have an open mind to learn and also to recognize that we are going to learn from the past so that we don't make the same mistakes as in the past” (ES)
- Make history, take the time to write and document what has happened before and as immigrants we lack that history so it is necessary to document it
- Move ahead, “but before moving ahead, learn what has been done already so that you can do it better or to be able to place and motivate yourself. The situation during the 80s is not the situation of 2011 but that doesn't mean that what happened is not valid in this moment so I think that is very important” (ES)
- For solidarity movements and solidarity work, recognize that your role is to accompany and not to guide. “We also need to be conscious that it is necessary to be in solidarity with each other and not necessarily to guide but to be next to each other sharing your ideas because your ideas can motivate others to participate” (ES)
- Solidarity is a compromise that you have to make for yourself and not just because it is the cool thing to do, “but because you are convinced that you want to invest in it and it is not just for the time being but it is a life commitment” (ES)
- Connect your work with the work of other social movements
- Use and work with alternative media. They can be good allies
- Praxis is crucial in social action work. Study and practice
- Study, read, learn from others, take action, be inspired by others.
- “Any little thing we can do, a grain of sand that we can put here, bringing people to have a voice here, that helps. And if we come together and broaden this work, I think that the grain of sand would be bigger” (CC)

- Campaigns tend to be issue oriented. We should focus instead on building a movement and building a strong community (PN)
- Create links and work together with service-based organizations, membership driven organizations, issue-based organizations. Work across issues and sectors. (PN)
- Create spaces to engage in dialogue with others (PN)
- Spend time talking to people and listening to people (PN)
- Radical change requires for us as individuals to link with others in a collective process of transformation. Transformation of our selves and our communities (PN)
- Take time to reflect (PN)

Tactics and strategies mentioned: Demonstrations, marches, protests, lobby visits, letters to congress members, delegations, Sister City Projects, teach-ins, strikes, workshops, trainings, listening projects, presentations about the working class, large gatherings for education and mobilization, take over spaces, boycotts, speaker tours, civil disobedience, coalition building, canvassing, book clubs, collective meditation spaces.

Suggestions for further study: The South African movement, popular education, liberation theology, protest songs, Marx, Lenin, solidarity movements with Nicaragua and el Salvador, Long Home to Freedom (Book), Religion: The opium of the people (Book), history of people's struggles.

CONCLUSIONS

As immigrant women, we have a deep understanding of how the history of colonization and the current structures of capitalism and imperialism have an immense power over our lives and the way we relate to each other. Many of us, immigrant women, have had to leave our countries because of the direct impact of U.S. imperialism in our communities. The challenges for us are endless. But as *Immigrant Women Organize for Justice: A Listening Project* has shown, many of us have, against all odds, worked every day to challenge systems of oppression and find alternative ways of relating and living with each other that doesn't recreate the same systems of oppression. We have a long legacy of powerful *luchadoras* working for social justice and at the forefront of liberation struggles in the U.S. What all of these women, from the past and from the present, have taught me is that social change will require radical individual transformation, as well as radical collective transformation.

Relearning and reclaiming our history was an overarching theme in this Listening Project. Such a process is an individual and collective process of transformation. We have an amazing history to learn from and to provide us with guiding steps on how to break structures that are oppressive. The system of capitalism and imperialism has grown because of the oppression of people and nature. For centuries, groups of people have engaged in actions to bring down such structures and provided analysis on how to engage in such a process. We all make part of that collective history. It is important to place ourselves within that history, and realize that we are not alone in this work. We are part of a collective social movement rooted in the past and the present. There are many examples of change in history and in our present day. We must learn from those examples, and continue the work that has been underway for hundreds of years.

Large-scale social change can only happen by a collective movement. We must join forces with collective struggles going on around the world, and help create the critical mass needed for change to happen. Engaging in collective actions can teach us a great deal about how to relate to each other in a more democratic way as we work to make radical changes in the structures that oppress us. Coming together as a group of people, listening to each other and learning together is revolutionary. Coming together and making decisions together on what actions to take, what strategies to use, how to organize campaigns and community building efforts in a collective manner is revolutionary. Taking collective actions such as protests, civil

disobedience actions, marches, vigils, etc. are also revolutionary acts. As a trainer and an organizer, I have made it a priority to create spaces for people of color to come together to share our knowledge and experience, to teach each other our history and to engage in collectively thinking on steps for action. The experiential training model has been an important model to follow in such spaces and it is a great tool for collective learning and collective action.

I have also learned that denouncing and engaging in education and action to dismantle the oppressive system in which we live is crucial, but hand in hand with that work, we have to also engage in envisioning and practicing the alternatives to the systems that we have now. For such work we also have history to learn from. As a trainer and organizer, creating spaces in which we can collectively think, dream, envision and practice alternative systems is extremely important. Practicing democracy and democratic and participatory decision-making processes in the work that we do is revolutionary. Envisioning and practicing alternative economic and political systems is also revolutionary. It is key to social justice work to share and create spaces and systems that respect our dignity as human beings, that include our collective ideas and suggestions for a better world, and hold up our values of justice, of love for humanity and for mother earth, of the self-determination of people and the need for a better future for generations to come.

I started my path of social justice work with a lot of anger and frustration, but as I engaged more and more with people who hope for a better world, I have began a process of channeling such anger and frustration into action, but more than anything, to make sure that my work and my words reflect the love that I have for people and for this world. AI, ES, CC and PN have shown me how they engage every day in the work of love for humanity, and how radical individual and collective transformation process must come from a place of anger but also from a place of love.

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