

Women Who Inspire



ALFREDO MELGAR

Rita Morbia (third from right) with members of a community women's organization supported by Likhaan in Quinapondan, Eastern Samar, the Philippines.

What Does it Mean to Be Feminist?

BY RITA MORBIA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The word “feminism” is politically in vogue as never before.

As a feminist organization run by feminist staff, we're pretty thrilled... I think. It hinges on what it means to be feminist.

If it means more people, more groups, and more government institutions are thinking about the world through the lens of power – who has it, who doesn't, who wields it, and how – then that's a good thing. Acting to challenge inequality is even better.

My personal feminism was born of witnessing events around me: as a student in Montreal when 14 women were murdered at

École Polytechnique; as a friend and family member to women who experienced violence at the hands of those claiming to love them; as a young teacher outside of Canada, where my brightest female student got married too young with no choice in the matter. Patriarchy, it seems to me, is embedded in the very architecture of human relations everywhere.

What I understand now, more than ever, is that women's bodies, lives, and aspirations are political battlegrounds for power. And that feminism, ideally, challenges domination in all its forms. **PAGE 4 ▶**

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MESOAMERICA

CATHLEEN KNEEN:
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Flor Salvador: Witness to struggle and triumph in Mesoamerica

BY GUILLAUME CHARBONNEAU, PROGRAM MANAGER

The oldest of nine children, Flor de María Salvador grew up near Guatemala City, helping her mother sell tortillas in order to support her siblings. She learned about the importance of solidarity and commitment very early on.

In 2001, Flor started working for Project Counselling Service (PCS), Inter Pares' main counterpart in Latin America, in their office

for Central America and Mexico – a region known as Mesoamerica.

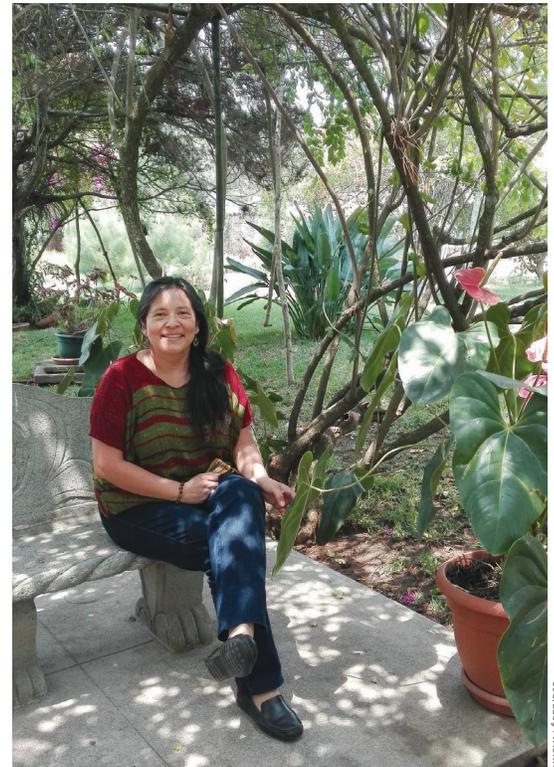
Starting as a secretary-receptionist, she has become a program officer and a key person for PCS and its grassroots partners.

When Flor joined PCS, the peace accords in Guatemala were still

quite new, and her colleagues were supporting organizations led by women who had been displaced by war. Flor learned that the return process was only one of the many steps to reach true peace. She saw the struggles of women survivors of sexual violence, and how the sustained, long-term accompaniment they received from women's organizations enabled some of them to demand justice. The more Flor worked with grassroots organizations from Chiapas to Nicaragua, the more she realized how violence is a strategy used against communities that have been organizing to claim their fundamental rights and to prevent the plundering of their natural resources.

Flor also realized how the entrenched racism and *machismo* she witnessed echoed her own personal story, being of Mayan Kaqchiquel and Pocomam descent. These days, she views her role at PCS as working to

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Flor de María Salvador

change the structures of oppression that she has seen in action. Whether it is with Indigenous women, who face sexism compounded by ethnic and linguistic discrimination on a daily basis, or undocumented migrant women, who are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence, women's needs are often unacknowledged and unaddressed. This is why PCS creates spaces for their voices to be heard.

Flor is in touch daily with women working all across Mesoamerica for equality and change. She supports the groups' organizing and planning, as well as their members' development. Her accompaniment strengthens these networks, during both their struggles and triumphs. We at Inter Pares have also learned from Flor, and we look forward to future years of collaboration.

¡Gracias, Flor! ☺

Cathleen Kneen: Our big sister

BY ERIC CHAURETTE, PROGRAM MANAGER

“Hello, little brother,” Cathleen would say as she greeted me and gave me one of her characteristically long hugs. We would then plunge right into our work – although calling it *work* does not really reflect how it felt. Over ten years, we travelled to Mali to meet with farmers and allies from across the globe. We worked together on the People’s Food Policy. And after years of chairing Food Secure Canada, Cathleen passed that torch to me.

It was a sad moment during a Food Secure Canada staff and board retreat that we learned of Cathleen’s passing due to pancreatic cancer. Being with so many people who had been touched by her brilliance and generosity was both moving and comforting. We placed a candle in the center of a large circle, and shared stories of her.

Telling stories is one of the many things Cathleen did so remarkably well. She listened to people’s tales and shared them in the hope of helping people find meaning and solutions in their

tireless organizer and a courageous activist and feminist. Her chosen movements included nuclear disarmament, women’s shelters, and food sovereignty, first as a farmer and then as an organizer. Moving from St. John’s to Toronto, to Pictou County, Nova Scotia, to Sorrento, British Columbia and finally to Ottawa, Cathleen mentored people of all



Cathleen Kneen engages panelists at Inter Pares’ 2009 AGM.

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struggles. “Oh, you should talk to so-and-so,” she would often say, knitting new friendships among people from different geographies, cultures, and world views.

Alongside her very full life as a loving wife, mother, and grandmother, Cathleen was a

ages. She built bridges among non-Indigenous and Indigenous people, and among rural and urban activists.

Reflecting back on her work, she said: “If I’ve achieved anything in all these years it’s been the development of important relationships – which are incarnated in organizations, but the organizations are really there because the people who created them believe in what they’re doing.”

Many of us had the privilege of working and learning with Cathleen. She is very much among us still – in our politics and analysis, in our work, and in our hearts. Thank you, big sister! 

Find out more about Cathleen and her stories in this interview: <http://interpares.ca/cathleen>

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At Inter Pares, our feminist approach can be seen in our structure, our programs, and in the way we work.

In Inter Pares' co-management structure, all staff receive the same base salary and make management decisions by consensus. As Executive Director, I am just one voice out of many around the table, with specific representational and administrative responsibilities.

Our programs strive to promote women's agency, and the voices of some of the most marginalized people around the world. This includes women's organizations and activists who are building movements for change and campaigning for policy and legislative reform so as to advance women's rights globally.

To name just two examples, Dr. Asha El-Karib of the Sudanese Organization for Research and Development works to end entrenched legal and political discrimination against women in Sudan. And Khushi Kabir from Nijera Kori in Bangladesh ensures her work with landless people includes a strong women's rights component, such as access to girls' education.

Inter Pares' feminism also means a commitment to process, not just outcomes. Facilitating learning opportunities and collaborative work are core programming activities. I have had the privilege of helping



(L-R): Inter Pares board member Amanda Dale, Khushi Kabir of Nijera Kori in Bangladesh, and Inter Pares Executive Director Rita Morbia.

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to organize some key learning moments to advance women's movements. For example, in 2002, Inter Pares organized an exchange between women's groups in Guatemala and

Burma on the experience of conflict, exile, and return. A decade and half later, Burma's women's rights movement continues to draw lessons from what the Guatemalans faced before them. In addition, Inter Pares works collaboratively as a member of over a dozen coalitions, an expression of our feminism that also ensures a greater and more cost-effective impact.

We sincerely hope the recent popularity of the term "feminism" will translate into more allies in our work for social change, concrete progress in public policy, and greater success in our collective efforts to make the world a better, more equal place. 

INTER PARES

221 Laurier Avenue East, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6P1 Canada

Tel: 613-563-4801 • Toll free: 1-866-563-4801 • Fax: 613-594-4704 • info@interpares.ca • www.interpares.ca

With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequalities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

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