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Inter Pares
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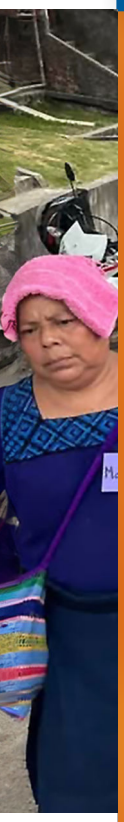
bulletin



Transforming health care

What is feminist health care? Our counterparts show us what this means every day: community-based care with autonomy, dignity and rights at its core. In this bulletin, you will meet women in rural Guatemala bringing care for survivors of violence closer to home; health workers in the Philippines ensuring sexual health care is accessible to all; and, a doctor from Burma helping to build an inclusive, federal health system. They are strengthening health care through courage, solidarity and collective action—we are honoured to accompany them in this vital work.

ROMI members organize and participate in local marches to promote women's rights and inclusion in decision-making spaces. | Photo: ROMI

Bringing holistic care to survivors of violence in rural Guatemala

For survivors of gender-based violence in Ixcán, Guatemala, the road to care and justice is long—literally and figuratively. To access health-care services, survivors must travel hours from their remote municipality, on poorly maintained roads.

But instead of accepting the status quo, women have spent the past decade fighting to bring services closer to home, through the Asociación Red de Organizaciones de Mujeres del Ixcán (ROMI). ›››

ROMI is organized into an administrative committee and coordinating board that meet to plan activities in their communities. | Photo: ROMI

For more than 20 years, ROMI, an alliance of women's groups—mostly Indigenous Mayan women—that we have worked alongside for decades, has been the local resource for women who have experienced gender-based or sexual violence.

ROMI centres women's dignity, autonomy and rights in their care. The organization supports survivors to triage their health needs, navigate the legal system and offers mental health and emotional support—sometimes providing safe places to stay. ROMI members accompany survivors to distant health or medical centres, police stations and courtrooms.

Ten years ago, cases of gender-based violence began to outpace ROMI's capacity—and survivors were still forced to travel hours away for adequate treatment and support. Ixcán needed its own services. With Inter Pares support, ROMI started advocating for a *Centro de Apoyo Integral para Mujeres Sobrevivientes de Violencia* (CAIMUS) in the municipality: a government-funded centre where ROMI could expand their work and survivors could access holistic care services closer to home.

The services would be for women, by women from their own communities.

To this end, ROMI engaged in advocacy with the national government to approve the project, lobbied male-dominated municipal committees and held community demonstrations to voice their demands.

> "We made clear that a CAIMUS would provide better attention to women victims of violence," recalls Ángela González, a member of ROMI's leadership.

In 2024, ROMI's advocacy paid off: the Guatemalan government approved their request for a CAIMUS.

The journey is far from over, but ROMI has already transformed the experience of survivors in Ixcán. And thanks to their perseverance over the past 10 years, local holistic feminist health care is just around the corner: care that meets women where they are and restores the safety they often have been denied.

Ángela González (centre) sits with ROMI members during a meeting with Inter Pares staff in 2025. Photo: Nathalia Santos Ocasio / Inter Pares

Building an inclusive health system in Burma: Interview with Dr. Lian

Public health in Burma has deteriorated since the coup in 2021. Meanwhile, decades of dictatorship and patriarchal norms have limited who has access to health care and who shapes health policy.

Dr. Lian sees these challenges first-hand as health secretary for Chinland, a self-declared autonomous state and traditional homeland of the Chin people in western Burma. In the wake of the coup, Dr. Lian helped develop Chinland's first-ever health policy.

In September 2025, we brought Dr. Lian, and other health leaders from Burma we support, to Canada to meet with health organizations—including our counterpart, Canadian Health Coalition. They exchanged ideas on inclusive approaches to care that now feed into our Burma counterparts' efforts to build health systems from the ground up.

What are your takeaways from visiting Canada?

In Burma, the health system has been very top-down. Authorities don't understand the context of different peoples, geographies or genders. In Canada, each province has its own health policy that reflects its culture, geography and population. Instead of authoritarian mandates, there are negotiations and discussions to find better solutions.

My main takeaway is that there is no perfect public health system. Public health is a long process of finding the best solutions through learning and adapting.

What does a more inclusive approach to health look like to you?

I grew up in a very patriarchal society where most leaders and breadwinners are men, and many women don't know their rights when it comes to their own health. Too often, a man decides about a woman's health. For example, a wife has to ask permission from her husband to use family planning. That is really sad, and it is one of the reasons I advocate for women's health.

I work with many young Chin women, and each time we sit together, their perspectives often change our plans for the better. Our health minister is a woman. Her leadership style and mediation skills are very effective in a conflict-sensitive situation. She is not only shaping public health planning but also becoming a role model for many young girls and women in Chinland.

Dr. Lian, Health Secretary for Chinland, visited Ottawa as part of a counterpart health tour in September 2025. Photo: Participant in the tour

What gives you hope for achieving a fairer, more inclusive health system in Burma?

Our Chinland interim health policy is one step toward a fair, inclusive, minority-representative health system and toward federal practice in the health sector. As I learned in Canada, it is a long process of negotiation: staying firm on the principles of federalism, human rights, equity and diversity.

It also has to be a huge team effort: well-planned and well-coordinated across sectors. The journey to a federal, inclusive health system is long, but step by step, if we all jump in together, I believe we can reach it.

Reshaping sexual and reproductive health care in the Philippines

A patient receives care at one of Likhaan's clinics in the Philippines. Photo: Likhaan Center for Women's Health

> "We broke the mold by paying women from the community to do health work, even without formal qualifications. Inter Pares backed us when others wouldn't—and that support made something groundbreaking possible."
>
> - Dr. Sylvia "Guy" Estrada Claudio, Likhaan Center for Women's Health.

In the Philippines, restrictive laws and religious conservatism limit everyone's access to sexual and reproductive health care. Meanwhile, the country's public-private health-care system means urban poor communities often can't afford basic services. Further barriers to access exist for young women and LGBTQI+ people.

But for 30 years, Inter Pares counterpart Likhaan has sought to break these barriers and reach the most marginalized by building a community-based health-care system: one with autonomy, dignity and rights at its core. A feminist approach to health.

Likhaan is rooted in the communities it serves. Many staff, educators and organizers live in the same neighbourhoods Likhaan's clinics serve. The organization seeks input from local women's groups to help shape their services and advocacy—ensuring what the clinics offer reflects community needs. Likhaan clinics are spaces where women and adolescents speak openly about sexuality, relationships, contraception and safety without judgment or shame.

Likhaan's nine clinics provide holistic support for sexual and reproductive health: contraceptives, antenatal and postnatal care, cervical cancer prevention and treatment, sexually transmitted infection testing and treatment, post-abortion care and support for survivors of gender-based violence. Likhaan's community outreach, education and advocacy mean people can make informed decisions about their bodies and lives. Most importantly, Likhaan offers free services so that anyone can access high-quality care—based on need and not ability to pay.

Inter Pares has supported Likhaan since its founding in 1995. Three decades later, we are honoured to continue our partnership with Likhaan—with renewed support from Global Affairs Canada. Together, Likhaan and Inter Pares have shown how long-term relationships and stable funding make it possible to advance a shared vision of feminist sexual and reproductive health. Global Affairs Canada's new seven-year funding commitment will help Likhaan continue building a feminist health-care system: one that is publicly accessible, community-driven and grounded in rights.

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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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