

This series looks at the work of EPES in Chile.

No 24: November 2020

WOMEN WEAVE CHANGE IN LATIN AMERICA: COURSE EQUIPS WOMEN WITH CAPACITIES TO TRANSFORM THEIR COMMUNITIES

Between November 2-20, Coady International Institute, in partnership with EPES, held its first leadership course for Latin American women, bringing together 24 grassroots leaders from 13 countries. Originally planned as an in-person seminar in Santiago, circumstances of the pandemic compelled an online format.

Participants in this vivid expression of Latin American diversity—students, indigenous women, community educators, feminists, rural leaders and urban activists—shared two salient characteristics: all were women and all were striving to transform their respective communities.

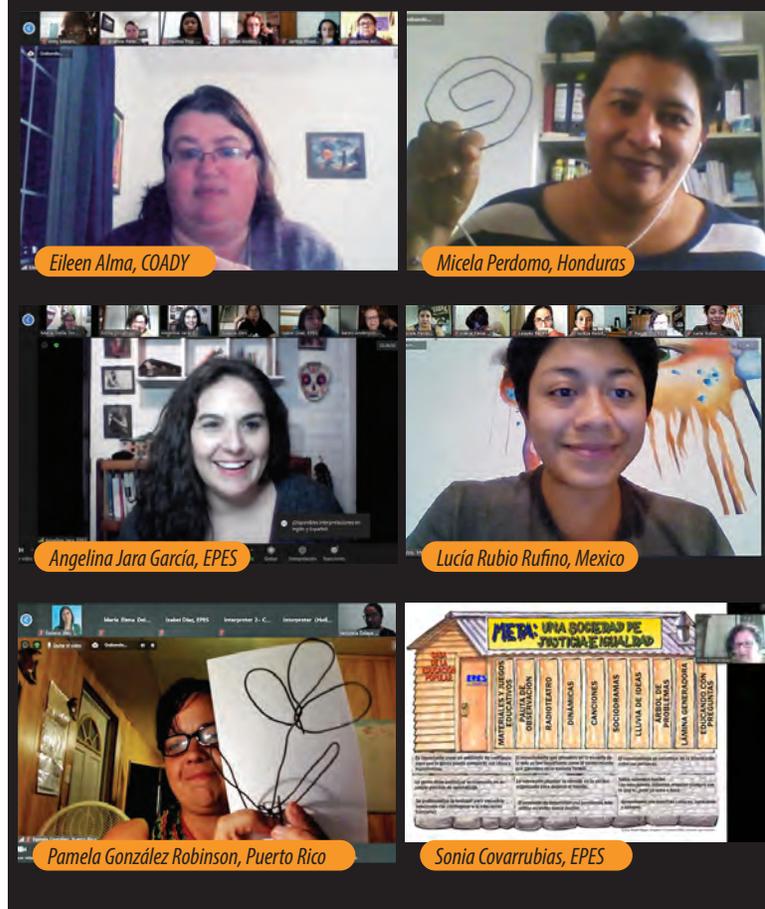
Founded in 1959 at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, Canada, the Coady International Institute empowers community leaders, particularly women, with methodological tools that help them effect local transformation.

The idea to jointly design a course for Latin American and Caribbean women took root three years ago, when EPES educator Angelina Jara García, a psychologist, traveled to Nova Scotia in July 2017 as a fellow to participate in the Leadership for Global Change Program. Angelina's outstanding performance as a student prompted the Coady International Institute to invite her to return a year later to co-facilitate a community development leadership course for African and Asian women.

Following that experience, Angelina became the coordinator of the course jointly organized by Coady Institute and the EPES Foundation, recently held in November. The 3-week workshop generated a space for learning, reflection and analysis, while also strengthening women's capacities for social and community work, from a gender and human rights focus. An additional objective was to promote construction of networks to foster the skills, participation and capabilities of women in public life.

Transmitted on EPES' YouTube channel, the program included forums on gender violence, community leadership, and food sovereignty in Latin America. It also offered the workshops "Popular education, gender and feminism," "Trajectories and challenges of the women's and feminist movements in Latin America," "Mobilizing strengths for community development in the pandemic" and "Leadership, self-care and collective care."

One participant Lucía Rubio Rufino, a legal advocate for Mexico's Consumer Power, was inspired by her fellow participants. "I immensely liked the diverse experiences of these women and the chance to share with them. Although it would have been wonderful to meet them in person, just to meet them was a joy." The tools she acquired, Lucía said, "will help bring forward new ideas horizontally, from us as a collective," in the organizations she works with.



24 Women from 13 Latin American countries participate via Zoom in a seminar designed jointly by the Coady International Institute and EPES.

What spurred Pamela González Robinson, president of the Isla Nena Composta organization of Vieques, Puerto Rico, to participate was the opportunity to share knowledge and connect with Latin American sisters, as well as the chance to acquire skills to harness in her community work. "This was popular education in action!" she remarked. "The workshop structure fostered invaluable sharing and reflection, and deep bonds were formed. It transmitted optimism, inspiration and confidence that we can and shall continue to weave change."

Eileen Alma, Director of Coady's International Centre for Women's Leadership, noted that the course was intended "not just to identify the problems or challenges faced by women of various backgrounds, but also to celebrate their innovations and successes." She added, "We know that empowered women lead to improved quality of life for everyone. This course helps us contribute to this goal in a way that recognizes the unique circumstances facing women in the region, together with an incredible local partner institution with a deep history and shared commitment."



Reflections from Pastor Lisandro Orlov

In the midst of these tests of faith, when there is much suffering among the team, we have to ask how that suffering has transformed us. What has it produced in us and how can we interpret it?

There is never a single answer. The Gospel explains that often it can be a John the Baptist, it can be a prophet, it can be Elijah. In other words, people have a diversity of views about us, but we ask ourselves how we want people to see us. Are

we going to stay fixated on pain or can we transform it? How can we give meaning to our tears? How can we give meaning to goodbyes during the pandemic?

I think this gathering itself has deep meaning for these questions.

One of the symbols that we often see in cemeteries is a torch lit downwards, which some dramatize as a representation of death but I interpret as the light that continues to shine in the midst of pain and death. At this moment I invite each one to raise a candle, as a sign of commitment to life, a sign that our commitment is still strong in the midst of tears. We confess darkness will not defeat us, for our light is stronger than everything that has happened to us.

EPES has always deliberately chosen the hardest road.

The community, the EPES team, wants to be seen as a space of communion, solidarity and light. We want our families to see us with that light of hope; not with a superficial hope, but the hope that is built by promoting dignity. You have always worked with groups and individuals that society has marginalized and you stand alongside the stigmatized. Not only do these vulnerable people illuminate the EPES team, but also EPES mirrors the light of their shared dignity, which has been obscured by society.

We too are a vulnerable group. We are not all-powerful.

When I learned of the losses and pain members and friends of the EPES team had experienced, I thought about how we can overcome it by looking beyond the present to the future. Our tears and pain must not block our hope, or our commitment to the light.

COLLECTIVE CARE DURING COVID-19

Solidarity and a sense of empathy with others characterize EPES' mission and the vocation that unites our staff. During the trying months of the pandemic, we have reached out to health promoters and immigrant families. Yet, as it turns out, EPES itself is not immune to hardship, or even COVID.

Between the months of April and August, several EPES staff members lost close family members to COVID or other illnesses. These were, and continue to be, especially difficult moments of loss and pain due to the social distancing limitations imposed by COVID.

Who then do we lean on for support?

During the past 30 years, Argentine Lutheran pastor Lisandro Orlov, who teaches in the EPES International Training Course, has been by our side in moments of celebration and grief. Once again, we turned to him. We asked Pastor Orlov to accompany us in a virtual gathering, which brought our team together in a time of sorrow, offering grace and consolation. We wish to share his reflection with friends of EPES, as you may also find comfort in his words.



CHILEANS VOTE TO REPEAL THE CONSTITUTION INHERITED FROM THE PINOCHET DICTATORSHIP

October 25, 2020 will go down in Chile's history as the day the country took a first step towards drafting a new Constitution, categorically rejecting the legacy of the Augusto Pinochet

dictatorship, which in 1980 enacted a de facto charter privatizing social rights.

On that day, Chileans voted decisively (78%) for the "Approve" and "Constitutional Convention" options. Election of delegates to the constitutional convention will take place April 11, 2021. The Constitutional Convention mechanism calls for gender parity (50% women and 50% men) and currently elected officials cannot serve as delegates.

This significant democratic advance comes about as a result of widespread mass protests that began in October 2019, calling for an end to abuse, inequity, and injustice and cornering the government on these gripping issues.

The October social explosion, the largest popular revolt in Chilean history, brought hope for building genuine social justice in the country. But it came at the very high cost of systematic human rights violations committed by police, following orders from the government of President Sebastián Piñera. The international

community repudiated acts of police violence that left hundreds injured and hundreds more in prison—political prisoners in democracy.

Despite pandemic restrictions, the electorate turned out in record numbers to cast their votes. With ballots cast by more than 50% of eligible voters, the referendum reversed persistent low voter turnout starting in 2012, when voting became voluntary.

It will be the first time in Chile's history that a constitution is drafted by an assembly elected by the people and with gender parity. Observers note that the social movement must maintain public pressure and remain organized, mobilized and visible. As expressed in countless banners, the mobilization must continue: Until dignity becomes a habit!

Fundación EPES actively participated in social mobilizations and in disseminating the people's demands through its social networks, the right to health being one of the most deeply felt after the pandemic dramatically revealed the critical state of Chile's health care system. EPES prepared materials to promote participation in the plebiscite, providing information on the ballots, the differences between proposed mechanisms for drafting the new Constitution, and the stages of the constituent process. They also provided information about health measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Two members of EPES' Santiago team were poll watchers of this historic referendum.



DISTRIBUTED
2680 MASKS

to community leaders, health promoters and their families in Santiago, Concepción and Valparaiso



DISTRIBUTED
594
BOXES OF FOOD

or money transfers of equal value to purchase food locally



DISTRIBUTED
89 BOXES OF FOOD
to **Haitian** immigrant families in **El Bosque**

Helped **Haitians** launch a soup kitchen providing

4320
MEALS

July and August

EPES COMMUNITY OUTREACH DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC



DISTRIBUTED
25 BAGS OF SOIL AND
525 SEEDLINGS

and 19 varieties of seeds to health promoters and staff to start family gardens



7 SOUP KITCHENS

in Santiago and Concepción provided approximately

28,800 MEALS

between June and October



144 PEOPLE PARTICIPATED
IN WORKSHOPS

on bread baking, family gardens, preserving food, yoga, managing stress, connecting via phones, etc.



EPES was created in 1982 to promote health with dignity for the poor through empowerment, mobilization and collective action. It began as a program of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile (IELCH) and maintains close ties nationally and internationally with the Lutheran church and is an ELCA Global Mission supported ministry. EPES became an independent, non-profit Chilean foundation in 2002.

CONTACT EPES

EPES Santiago:
Fundación EPES
Phone: (56-2) 25487617
Fax: (56-2) 25486021
E-mail: epes@epes.cl

EPES Concepción:
EPES "Gastón Toledo" Popular Education Center
Hualpén, Concepción, Chile
Phone: (56-41) 247-0570
E-mail: epesconce@epes.cl

SUPPORT EPES

To contribute to EPES, make a tax-deductible donation online at www.actionforhealth.org, or mail your contribution to:

Action for Health in the Americas
c/o Prince of Peace Lutheran Church
4 Northcrest Drive
Clifton Park, NY 12065-2744 USA

Make checks payable to: "Action for Health in the Americas" (AHA) a non-profit North American partner of EPES.

USE THRIVENT CHOICE DOLLARS TO SUPPORT THE WORK OF EPES!

Go to www.thrivent.com/thriventchoice, or call 1-800-847-4836 to designate your Thrivent Choice Dollars to AHA.

LEARN ABOUT OTHER EPES ACTIVITIES AT:

www.epes.cl or Action for Health in the Americas (AHA): www.actionforhealth.org or Chile Libre de Tabaco: www.chilelibredetabaco.cl On Facebook: EPES Fundación; Action for Health in the Americas; Red Chile Libre de Tabaco.



During this critical time, your generous donations will keep EPES' work going to support women and families and to fight for justice and equity in health.

TO DONATE: Mail your check in the enclosed remittance envelope, or donate online at: www.actionforhealth.org



The EPES staff is gradually preparing to return to the office in December, rotating in small groups and following strict COVID-19 guidelines. In the photo above, EPES staff members Karen Anderson, Héctor Reyes, Erika Salazar and Marta Acuña are outside the EPES office in Santiago.



Action for Health in the Americas

c/o Prince of Peace Lutheran Church
4 Northcrest Drive
Clifton Park, NY 12065-2744

PRESORTED
FIRST CLASS MAIL
US POSTAGE PAID
OWATONNA MN
PERMIT NO 41



COMMUNITY GARDEN PROJECT – SOWING HOPE AND CULTIVATING SOLIDARITY

During the cold, harsh months of autumn and winter during the lockdown in Santiago, EPES initiated a home vegetable garden project with the health and nutrition promoter groups. After five months of turning their patios and balconies into small-scale container vegetable gardens, this group of women gardeners is embracing all the knowledge they've acquired and shared cultivating at home, to create a collective space for reconnecting with one another in a hands-on learning process in a community vegetable garden in the Sede Auco, home to the David Werner health promoter group. In late October, the health promoters donated their seeds to share with the others to plant seedlings to later bring to the community garden. On November 14, the group of gardening health promoters met in the Sede Auco to collectively build the vegetable garden and plant the first seedlings of the season. This marks a symbolic step, reuniting the health groups after many months of isolation and reconnecting with the earth that gives us strength and nourishment. Although the community garden project in its initial stage is educational, it sets the stage for the creation of alternative local food systems that promote food justice and strengthen the active role of the community in local food production.

