

Vanessa Siliezar, addressing women's rights in Honduras

By: Vanessa Siliezar, Honduras, GOJoven. November 9, 2011.



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Vanessa Siliezar is one of ten iLEAP [2011 International Fellows](#). Vane is a part of the Central America Women's Leadership Fellowship, a program developed in partnership with iLEAP to equip and inspire women's leadership in sustainable social change throughout the region.

My name is Claudia Vanessa Siliezar Turcios. I work as a teacher at the [UNITEC/CEUTEC](#) School of Law in La Ceiba, Honduras. I am an activist for women's rights on issues of gender violence and am also the Honduran Country Representative for [GOJoven](#), a program created to strengthen the skills of young leaders in Guatemala, Honduras, Belize and Quintana Roo, Mexico.

The LiderazGO Joven youth leadership program in sexual and reproductive health is an initiative lead by the [Public Health Institute](#). Six years ago, I began leading the coordination of this wonderful program, which has changed the lives of many young people throughout the Mesoamerican region. The goal of empowering youth is based on the fact that the majority of our communities are comprised of young people, women and men with great aspirations and a sense of innovation and infinite creativity.

Honduras is one of the few countries in Central America that does not have an exclusive policy on the issue of sexual and reproductive health -- there are only health policies that are in the hands of operators in the area of public health which means that access to adequate information on issues of reproduction, family planning, STIs and HIV / AIDS, are not in the hands of all young people.

Central America has experienced a growth in the number of teen pregnancies. The population believes that the disproportionate impacts on the environment are clearly evident, Central America being a region vulnerable to tropical storms and hurricanes that hit every six months. Overpopulation and climate change are strongly linked to the issue of reproduction.

The human rights issue plays a big role in the empowerment of young people in rural and remote communities and in the development of large cities in our countries. Although they are little, the youth denote the great inequity in access to healthcare, education, justice, employment, social and political participation, etc. Despite the international conventions signed by Honduras (CAIRO, CEDAW and Belém do Pará), the laws are unknown to the population and hence their rights to access to adequate information about planning methods and dignified treatment are diminished because it depends largely on the level of awareness that the health or justice operator may have, especially if we're talking about issues of domestic violence or physical assaults, which have now increased due to drug trafficking in our region.

My experience with [iLEAP](#) has been a surprising journey; I'd say the beginning of an incredible journey. As a women leader I have understood that only by knowing our personal legends we can open our hearts and best intentions to our community and the countless people we work with. It is by investing in these programs that we discover our true calling and thus our work is clearer. Maybe I'm just one woman, but working alongside me there is a huge amount of young people and women who will benefit from this training.

In the fellowship we talk about communication, technology management, and about who we are; we share our personal stories, which I must confess are beautiful and transformative. Within our community of fellows, each has a strong commitment to his/her country and community. We have years of years of experience and have developed a great passion for what we do and the people we serve. The program affirmed that my commitment to change starts with ME, accepting that it is from our weaknesses and failures that we grow and are able to do our work, because each leader has the right to make mistakes.

The topic of Networking is something new for me as a Latin American woman who is used to not interacting more than what is socially acceptable. Breaking that mental barrier has been a challenge. Interacting in American culture has been not only refreshing but also very enriching to learn about the naturalness of the people in Seattle, a city with a climate so different from the humidity and warmth of my coastal country. It makes me appreciate each day of rain and cold in this beautiful city.

We are women who work with inland communities. I am grateful for having been elected as a Fellow of this program, because they have chosen the ideal people to participate in this training. I am committed to sharing all the information and inspiration that I received in Seattle. I had the opportunity to do my shadowing with Serena Cosgrove, a professor at Seattle University who knows very well the reality of Central America. Dr. Cosgrove is an amazing woman; her simplicity and humanity have allowed me to see more clearly the work that surges from the voice of women, who have enormous courage and are the ones that build up our societies from their experience and strength as women. Serena Cosgrove has a book that I recommend to everyone, *Leadership from the Margins: Women and Civil Society Organizations in Argentina, Chile, and El Salvador*. She has been a great inspiration during this fellowship and again, iLEAP is responsible for the crossing of my professional path with the personal path of this great woman, with whom I share much in common around various passionate topics.

I want to thank everyone who made this program possible with the quality that characterizes it. It is not just a training program; it is a life lesson that encourages us to continue working with passion and strength in our communities. Thank you to the entire iLEAP team, our home-stay families, sponsors, EarthCorps, the Seattle International Foundation, our friends in Seattle, and to you for reading about this time in my life.