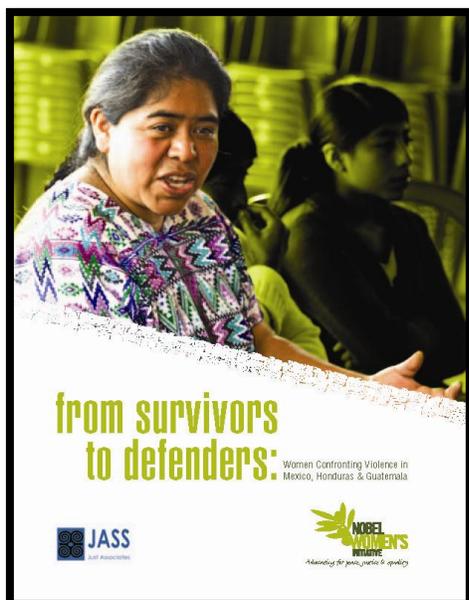


Voices of Women Human Rights Defenders

Written by Jessica Kuhn, SIF Graduate Fellow



On June 6, 2012, in Washington DC, the Nobel Women's Initiative and JASS presented "Amplifying the Voices of Women Human Rights Defenders: 2012 Delegation to Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala." The presentation was in cooperation with Representatives Jim McGovern, Jan Schakowsky, and Sheila Jackson Lee.

It was an honor to be present at this hearing to see the faces and hear the stories of women human rights defenders from Mesoamerica. It is essential that their voices be represented to Congress in such a forum to encourage and reinforce USG's commitment to shedding light on these abuses and implementing policy solutions.

Lisa VeneKlasen, Executive Director of JASS, and Laura Carlsen of the Center for International Policy opened the presentation with startling facts regarding abuses against women in Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala. In Honduras, femicides rose 257% between 2002 and 2010. 685 women were assassinated in Guatemala in 2010, compared to 213 in 2000. Moreover, more than 95% of crimes in the region are never punished.

Bringing context to these alarming statistics is the fact that during this period of increasing violence against women, US military and police aid to the region has increased twofold. During JASS' ten-day fact-finding mission throughout the region in January, they noted a similar story being shared by hundreds of testifiers: increasing militarization and police repression under the guise of the war on drugs has led to more violence overall and more frequent attacks on women.

The panelists at the hearing included three human rights defenders from Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras, respectively: Blanca Martinez, Walda Barrios-Klee, and Gilda Rivera. All three women spoke of both the dramatic increase in violence against women in the region and the complete lack of justice for victims. The good news, according to these courageous women: women are organizing and collaborating with grassroots organizations to raise their voices and speak out against these abuses. Women are no longer victims of abuse; they are powerful agents of change.

Three Representatives from US Congress were present at the hearing: Reps. Jim McGovern, Jan Schakowsky, and Sheila Jackson Lee. Rep. McGovern spoke eloquently about the significance of being

able to put a human face to the statistics of violence in Mesoamerica, and he thanked the women human rights defenders for coming to testify in Congress. Rep. Jan Schakowsky expressed the importance of empowering women to raise their voices, stating “Women hold the key to peace.” Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee expressed her solidarity with the panelists and encouraged her fellow Congressmen to call a Congressional Delegation on the issue of VAW in Mesoamerica to make a statement “loud and clear that we will not tolerate this violence.”

In a recently released report ([From Survivors to Defenders](#)), the Nobel Women’s Initiative and JASS shared findings from their fact-finding mission to Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala. At the presentation, the panelists shared some recommendations from that report:

- Prioritize human rights and women’s rights in foreign policymaking, international cooperation, and citizen diplomacy.
- Support women and women’s organizations at all levels in these countries to help bring an end to violence.
- Cease USG funding to abusive security forces, and channel aid instead to social programs that strengthen basic human rights and democracy.

Seattle International Foundation supports JASS’s regional initiative to strengthen the leadership and capacity of women human rights defenders and indigenous women in Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, through workshops around communication, technology, effective advocacy, and legal issues. More information regarding JASS can be found at www.justassociates.org.