
Circles of In/Equality

WEAVING LESSONS

The first summer I carried out fieldwork in Guatemala, in 2000, I studied the Maya-Mam language and asked women to reflect on their experiences of industrial change. Global economic restructuring in the 1990s, facilitated by numerous international loans to the Guatemalan government to encourage economic development, had ushered in a wave of new technologies. Washing machines, packaged foods, manufactured clothing, and television sets were imported to small mountain communities such as the one where I was living, with an impact on daily routines.

Women in the town were largely uninterested in imported clothing, which they found poorly made and aesthetically unpleasing. All around me, women spent time kneeling in front of backstrap looms, creating beautiful tapestries and blouses called *huipiles* that they wore proudly over the long blue skirt customary in the region. It seemed like a lot of work to me, but they did not describe weaving as oppressive. Instead they saw it as an artistic and creative endeavor that shoddy cotton textiles would not replace.¹

To learn more about the practice of weaving, I decided to take lessons. Another foreigner, a woman named Eliza from the US Midwest, had paused in her travels through Central America, and we decided to take lessons together. Rosa would be our instructor. An elderly woman who had never learned to read or write, Rosa could make complex stories come alive with thread. She was rumored to be a good teacher and had agreed to take us under her wing.

Early on, I found I was not good at weaving. I had little patience with mistakes that would force me to unravel hours of work, and I set low expectations for

myself, wanting a simple scarf by the end of the summer. Eliza, however, devoted herself to the craft and set her sights on the bright red and white pants worn by the community's men. These pants were a widely recognized sign of the town, and backpackers wore them around Central America as evidence that they had traveled to Guatemala's northwesternmost corner. Making one pair of pants would be a feat on its own, but Eliza didn't want just one pair; she wanted two: one for herself and one for her boyfriend.

From the beginning, Rosa advised Eliza to make her boyfriend's pants first. Outside class, Eliza and I noted to each other how often women seemed to prioritize men over themselves. Maria, the mother in the home where I lived, always fed the men in her household before she fed herself or her daughter. Her home's handmade wooden table had just two plastic chairs. Maria never sat at the table. Instead, she stayed at the stove until her father and her boys had eaten, sometimes serving them until the food ran out (her husband had left for Michigan several years earlier, and they were not in touch). She rarely filled a plate for herself but would instead eat from the leftovers as she moved dishes from the kitchen to a bucket of water filled by a plastic hose that continued down the hillside to her small vegetable garden.

Eliza, like me, was from a progressive US family. We knew that men did not, and should not, come before women. Raised with the virtue of gender equality firmly cemented into our worldview, we knew that women were as important as men. So Eliza held her ground and insisted, "I will make my pants first." Rosa clearly disapproved of this decision. When Eliza spoke of her partner, as she often did since weaving was a time for talking about relationships, Rosa sometimes reminded us that she should be making her partner's pants before her own. But as the weavings began to take form and time passed, Rosa dropped the subject.

That summer an organization focused on women's empowerment arrived in the community along with instructors who taught women about self-esteem during hour-long workshops held once a week. "You have value," the instructors repeated to the women who had gathered around a table of coffee and sweet bread in a cold elementary school classroom repurposed for the meeting. The instructors taped a poster on the wall picturing a group of smiling women in Maya dress under the large black headline, "Somos Iguales" (We Are All Equal). Smaller print at the bottom of the poster suggested that women have "igualdad de derechos" (equal rights). The poster seemed at once declarative (you are equal) and aspirational (you should be equal, but you're not), but in either case, the poster left the signifier of what women were equal to unspecified.

Many of the women's husbands lived in the US or Mexico, leaving the women responsible for growing, harvesting, and selling their crops. Women did this while also caring for their children, weaving their clothing, pounding out tortillas from boiled maize, tending to broad or black beans growing beneath the peach trees in

the fields, and engaging in the backbreaking work of doing laundry in a town without a water system, where the river welled at the bottom of steep ravines. It was women who sold produce at the open-air markets held on Wednesdays and Saturdays, where most grocery shopping was done. They were the primary customers at the BanRural or Cargo Express money exchange services. Women managed the money their husbands sent from abroad, and they also managed, at least usually, to get by when their husbands sent nothing.

I watched as a group of roughly a dozen women sat straight-backed on hard benches listening calmly as the NGO staff taught them about empowerment. No one said a word when it came time for questions.

Eliza finished her first pair of pants, the ones she had made for herself, by the time I left at the end of the summer. Some work remained, but she had completed weaving the fabric and stitching it together. It was time to try them on. At first, Rosa and I were speechless. One leg was clearly misshapen, and the other had an obvious hole. Eliza tried to get the pants over her hips, but because of errors she caught her leg in the threads. Rosa made a few cuts, and Eliza finally squeezed into them, but they were loose in one spot, tight in another. It was obvious to us that the pants Eliza had spent her summer making were ugly and did not fit.

Into the space of silent disappointment, Rosa interrupted, “I told you, the man’s pants should have come first.”

IN/EQUALITY NARRATIVES

My story about weaving pants illustrates the shortcomings of representing equality on a universal scale of value. If you read anything about Guatemala from the fields of public health or development, you are likely to read about economic and gender-based inequality. According to the Center for Global Development, “Guatemala is one of the most unequal countries in Latin America” (Cabrera et al. 2015). Although the numbers generated by the World Bank and other accounting agencies tell us that Guatemala has a sizable economy, it has the fifth highest reported incidence of poverty in Latin America, with 59.3 percent of the population living below the poverty line and 23 percent living in extreme poverty (Gargiulo 2017). According to World Bank calculations, more than 70 percent of children under ten live in poverty, with 65.9 percent of Indigenous children chronically malnourished (UN Women 2023).

The same institutions point out that this inequality is further stratified by gender. The UN ranks gender development using a composite score based on life expectancy, years of schooling, and command of economic resources. A score of 0 indicates that women and men scored equally across the measurements, and a score of 1 indicates that women fared as poorly as possible relative to men. Guatemala’s gender equality score is .941 (UNDP 2022), one of the highest—that is, one of the most unequal—in the Americas.

USAID's 2018 Gender Analysis report for Guatemala summarizes the situation as follows:

Guatemala is a patriarchal and male-dominated society, characterized by the historical exclusion of indigenous populations in general and women in particular. Gender inequality gaps are present in all sectors and domains, with broad impacts on decision-making at the household and community level, political and social participation and leadership, access to assets and resources, and the distribution of domestic and reproductive work and time use. Traditional gender roles prevail throughout the country; women are primarily responsible for domestic work and care activities, and men for generating income and managing household resources. This gendered division of labor is particularly notable among rural indigenous women. (Landa Ugarte et al. 2018, 12)

Global institutions' descriptions of inequality serve to justify humanitarian interventions to make women's lives better—including the Window of 1,000 Days intervention that is the focus of this book. In this chapter I suggest that the overwhelming repetition of what Eve Tuck (2009) calls “damage narratives” fails to encompass women's rich and diverse skills in a way that does them further harm. Tuck, an Alaskan Native who has spent years studying community development projects, uses the phrase “damage narratives” to describe the all too easy, one-dimensional framing of her people as depleted, ruined, and hopeless. “Even when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that—so much more that this incomplete story is an act of aggression,” she writes (416).

Tuck's critique informs this chapter's analysis of gender in/equality narratives. I connect the terms “inequality” and “equality” to emphasize the conjoined fight *against* gender inequality and *for* gender equality that is a driving force in maternal health science and policy. In/equality narratives serve as a core organizing value that motivates many health workers to do the work they do. In/equality narratives are also, I suggest, a kind of damage narrative that elicits an incomplete story, frequently casting Indigenous women as “broken and conquered,” thereby devaluing their experiences and expertise. In/equality narratives failed Rosa and other Guatemalan women and thereby failed the broader communities in which they lived.

A critique of efforts to combat inequality is delicate to make in Guatemala, where only 260 families lay claim to 56 percent of the country's considerable wealth and where patriarchy and misogyny are deeply embedded in institutions such as the army, the church, and the education system (Gargiulo 2017; Cofiño, cited in Santamaría 2021). To be clear at the outset: patriarchy, misogyny, and the exploitation of all people are punishing and destructive—things to be rallied and organized against. Yet the problem I point to lies in how in/equality narratives solidify “equality” as an ideal, allowing the capitalist and patriarchal value of equivalence to spread outward to encompass aspects of life over which they do not, or should not, take hold. As I show in this chapter, women's in/equality narratives, while

perhaps well intentioned, frequently undermine Maya-Mam women's reproductive autonomy and community connections, exacerbating the exclusions they face.

The historian Mary Poovey (1998) has argued that capitalism gained its efficacy, in part, from its ideological force. Its trick was to act as if everything could be valued on a countable, numerable scale (price), then presenting unlike objects as if they were equivalent. She gives the example of the double-entry bookkeeping that underpinned mercantile trade. These records presented an appearance of evenness and balance that conferred authority and virtue on merchants who were, in fact, involved in gruesome violence and theft. More broadly, capitalism took hold by paying laborers less than their labor was worth while presenting the exchange as even. If laborers are well organized they might successfully demand a higher wage. It is harder, however, to question the foundational virtue of equality on which capitalism is based. According to the stubborn myth of capitalism, other economic systems trap people in the submission of hierarchy, while in capitalism people can obtain equality and at last become free.

This myth of equality is especially pernicious for those involved in the unpaid labor of social reproduction entailed in caregiving (e.g., Bhattacharya 2017). The USAID report cited above points to "traditional gender roles" as a culprit for inequality. In contrast, María García Maldonado, a Maya-Mam lawyer and translator who often accompanied me on my visits to San Juan, was quick to insist that there was nothing "traditional" about the brutal exploitation that women in San Juan faced. This brutality was instead, she argued, an effect of imperial history. Wealthy landowners had forced Indigenous people into subservience while claiming that the meager payment they received for their labor made the exchange fair. Her point was that capital relations, not Maya traditions, perpetuated inequality.

María wanted me to see how a common narrative of overcoming gender inequality further traps those hoping to resist. The capitalist virtue of equality compels people to aspire to equivalence rather than learn to cherish valuable social differences. The feminist philosopher Eva Feder Kittay (1999, 6) writes, "A conception of society viewed as an association of equals masks inevitable dependencies." The goal of equality frequently rested on a view of the autonomous liberal subject, perhaps espoused most famously by the English philosopher and political theorist John Locke (1632–1704). As Locke explains this concept of liberal personhood, the individual was enclosed and self-possessed, his equality a virtue of his independence (see Macpherson 1962). Yet this vision of personhood is not, in fact, a universal ideal. Equality may seem a laudable goal, but it too often rests on an impossible standard of white male similitude that most people cannot—and, more to the point, do not want to—achieve.

This chapter analyzes two very different projects targeting the Window of 1,000 Days operating in San Juan Ostuncalco. One was a large-scale USAID-funded intervention that enrolled thousands of pregnant or nursing mothers across the highlands. The second, run by an independent researcher, involved a few hundred

pregnant or nursing mothers and was located only in San Juan. Though different in scale and orientation, both worked to fight inequality and both, at least initially, had equality as a goal. I describe how the gender in/equality narratives driving the projects undermined the care they provided. The push to equality isolated women who relied on broad social support, prioritizing the fetus or infant child while leaving the needs of their communities unmet.

In critiquing in/equality narratives, this chapter aims to add conceptual richness to discussions of hierarchy, asymmetry, expertise, and skill. Conceptual richness may seem a lofty goal, but narrative framings have consequences that are pragmatic and concrete. As we learn from Tuck's analysis of damage narratives, health care systems that present women as predominantly vulnerable, victimized, at risk, lacking, or damaged further disadvantage Guatemalan women. The related focus on achieving equality imposes a normative standard on women that is in conflict with the lives they want to live. In my rejection of flattening, incomplete stories, I hope to enrich the vocabulary we have to discuss differences and, in so doing, expand possibilities for cultivating a livable and nurturing world. One concrete argument that emerges from this chapter is that practitioners in the Global North who want to combat inequality in the Global South need to attend to the values that animate life in the places where they work. The broader argument is that the fight against the injustices of capitalism requires the capacity to think and act outside of the false and abstract promise of equality, to instead learn about what people want for their lives in terms that are their own.

COUNTRYMAN

In 2012, USAID awarded a six-year grant of roughly \$48 million to a Guatemala-based division of the international NGO Save the Children to implement food security programs throughout the western highlands. The grant was funneled through Programa de Acciones Integradas de Seguridad Alimentaria Nutricional del Occidente (Western Program of Integrated Food and Nutrition Security Actions), commonly referred to as Paisano, which means "countryman" and conferred a sense of locality on the development project, whose mandate and implementation strategy so clearly came from afar. Over the next six years, Paisano carried out food security projects in thirteen highland municipalities, all selected because their reported rates of chronic malnutrition were among Guatemala's highest. As stated on a USAID (2012) website, Paisano's mission was to "ensure gender equality, mitigate environmental consequences, and influence behavior change." It brought education, nutrition supplements, and health monitoring to 189 communities and 26,500 households, focusing particularly on improving nutrition and health outcomes through intervention in the "first thousand days."

The word *desigualdad*—inequality—came up frequently in my interviews with program staff in Quetzaltenango and Guatemala City. Paisano's administrators

quoted World Bank statistics that showed Guatemala has one of the poorest economies in Latin America and one of the highest indicators of social inequality in the world (World Bank 2022). The target of gender equality was at the heart of Paisano's activities. The project saw itself as fighting inequality by lifting up "rural and vulnerable" pregnant and nursing women.

San Juan Ostuncalco was one of the municipalities chosen for Paisano's work. The San Juan communities, located in a majority Maya-Mam region, are in the department of Quetzaltenango, about 80 kilometers from the Mexico border and roughly 8,500 feet above sea level. The seventeenth-century Guatemalan poet Francisco Antonio de Fuentes y Guzmán described San Juan Ostuncalco as an open plain at the intersection of three hills "where a mountain stream known on the coast as the mighty Samalá River is born" (cited in España 2003).

The written history of San Juan tells a story in which politics was stratified by altitude, with plantations on the coast serving as a site of colonial domination and the mountains as a site of Indigenous resistance. In 1616, shortly before Fuentes y Guzmán penned his description of San Juan, Spanish landowners had established a *mandamiento*—forced employment—system that promised to provide welfare for Indigenous people in exchange for their labor. "Welfare" may sound compassionate, but this was but a means of securing a workforce. Over the following three centuries, Indigenous people on the coast were held in conditions of agricultural serfdom, indentured servitude, or outright slavery (McCreery 1986). Most men from San Juan were forced into hot and often deadly coastal plantation labor and allowed to return to their mountain homelands for only a few months of the year.

The end of indentured servitude under the presidency of Jorge Ubico in 1933 did not end forced labor in San Juan. Ubico had presented himself as a reformer who overturned Indigenous slavery, but backing his presidency were plantation owners who wanted bodies to run their farms. Antivagrancy laws passed in 1934 required men between the ages of eighteen and sixty to work or face jail and fines. William Parsons (1967), an anthropology student who carried out fieldwork in San Juan in the 1960s, writes that if men could not show proof of owning more than 10 *cuerdas* (0.9 acre) of land, antivagrancy laws required them to seek employment for at least 150 days a year. At the time, most of the 8,000 men in and around San Juan Ostuncalco owned patches of land where they grew subsistence maize and vegetables for their families, but only 238 men met the minimum land requirements (Parsons 1967). The rest were conscripted into seasonal labor in coffee or sugar plantations, where they earned less than 30 cents a day. As Parsons notes, "In actuality Ubico had established a more comprehensive form of exploiting the [Indigenous] labor force while appearing to do just the opposite" (6).

The years following Ubico's so-called reforms gave rise to an organized land redistribution movement, ultimately prompting US military intervention to end agrarian reform through the overthrow of President Jacobo Árbenz, described in chapter 1. In the second half of the twentieth century, Guatemala's Indigenous

communities experienced armed conflict, scorched earth campaigns, and citizen disappearances. The twenty-first century saw the rise of drug wars, punishing economic trade agreements, and climatic catastrophes resulting in widespread crop devastation (see Galvez 2018). Through it all, a centuries-old history of forced migration has continued to shape the San Juan countryside, with families still compelled to migrate—now to the US or Mexico, in addition to Guatemala’s coastal plantations—to survive. Reported rates of emigration in and around San Juan are consistently among Guatemala’s highest. A 2015 USAID assessment wrote that the Mam-speaking western highlands were characterized by “social exclusion and inequality . . . that functions for the few and marginalizes the majority. . . . Local residents live in chronically precarious social conditions, in many cases among the worst in the country” (USAID 2015, 4).

The San Juan city center is today home to a bustling daily market, a modest regional health center, assorted restaurants, and small family-run stores that specialize in pesticides, textiles, baked goods, or motor parts. At the city’s west end, microbus drivers pass through a lot pockmarked with potholes calling out which route they take to the twenty-one San Juan communities that surround the city center. For 1.25 Guatemalan quetzales (GTQ) (a rate negotiated with the transportation union and widely respected; no one ever overcharged me), drivers zoom their passengers—four or more to a seat, plus kids piled on top of adults—back and forth along bumpy mountain roads where pine forests are interspersed with plots of potatoes, cabbage, onions, and maize. The census identifies 35,000 of San Juan’s 50,000 residents as rural, but many of these rural residents have complex migratory experiences entailing seasonal or extended employment across regional or international borders.

Staff of development projects arrive in San Juan to “build capacity” of people they see as “living in a prior, primitive state,” as the anthropologist Paige West (2016, 65) has described the rhetoric that helps justify global intervention. Development professionals who live in Xela or Guatemala City commonly describe the rural San Juan communities as provincial and their inhabitants as impoverished and uneducated. In fact, the twenty-one San Juan communities hold rich, cosmopolitan life as well-traveled residents return from time away with a diversity of languages and cultural knowledges. Imagery of state and national US flags is frequently woven into people’s clothing, a signal of the strong connection community members have with Texas, California, Oregon, Minnesota, Ohio, and so on. Cellular technology has boomed in twenty-first-century Guatemala, facilitating connections between those who have emigrated and those who have stayed. Whereas census data reports low-levels of literacy, social media literacy has blossomed in recent years, with families swapping and sharing phone plans to document their experience and stay in touch with relatives abroad.²

Most San Juan communities that Paisano served have their own elementary schools and a mix of evangelical churches along with the lone Catholic square



FIGURE 11. Women wait for their turn at a health monitoring station established by the USAID-funded health organization, Paisano. Photo by author, 2017.

characteristic of Guatemalan towns. A typical household has electricity and some access to water (aid organizations suggest that it be filtered or boiled). People sell chips, soda, and pocket candy from their windowsills. Several women run small pharmacies from their homes, where they sell their neighbors painkillers, antibiotics, vitamins for stress, and chemical elixirs to treat a wide range of illnesses, including diabetes and hypertension, or maladies without an easy English translation such as *nervios* or *susto*. No community has an official health clinic, which is where the Paisano project came in.

Paisano used a portion of USAID's food security funding to train a group of men called *técnicos* to run their rotating services for pregnant and nursing women. Once every three months, at a minimum, *técnicos* arrived at each San Juan community enrolled in the Paisano project to gather anthropometric data from those participating in the intervention. The organization subcontracted *promotoras* to disseminate information, recruit women to participate, and check on whether participants had questions and were following program recommendations. The *promotoras* generally lived in the communities where they worked. Several were local midwives, who had access to new mothers, most of whom give birth at home. While all community health workers were first-language Mam speakers, they were also able to converse in Spanish, making them an especially valuable asset for the work of cultural and linguistic translation required of development projects.

Paisano had recruited its promotoras from the pool of women who had been involved in the now-defunded maternal health extension programs operating during Álvaro Colom's presidential administration. Paisano also frequently made use of the same building that the health extension programs had vacated. At the Paisano community checkups, women and their young children enrolled in the programs gathered in clusters outside, while inside the técnicos organized and distributed the monthly ration of foods. This included eleven pounds each of rice, beans, the corn-soy powder supplement to be mixed into boiling liquid or food, and two liters of vitamin A–fortified vegetable oil—all produced and imported from US surplus. At several of the distribution sites, the técnicos had hung a poster with a USAID logo that showed images of food aid. The poster read, “These foods are a contribution from the people of the United States for families who *work* to improve their health,” the word *work* conspicuously underlined. Whether an echo of Ubico's historic vagrancy laws or the US government's own tradition of shaming people who draw on social welfare as undeserving and lazy (Dickinson 2020), the message was clear: women's value was contingent on their economic labor.

One of the técnicos would sit inside the building behind the project laptop, while another operated the scale. Together, they collected and recorded the anthropometric data for children enrolled in the project and handed the bags of foodstuffs to the waiting mothers. Técnicos would also run education courses for women who were waiting their turn for monitoring. People in San Juan called Paisano a “women's project,” but all its técnicos were men. The prohibition against hiring women for these roles was not explicit, but the ability to drive a motorbike was a prerequisite—a clearly gendered skill in this part of Guatemala. When an otherwise well-qualified woman friend of mine approached Paisano for employment, offering to do all necessary community outreach by bus, she was told that traveling by bus would take too long and the moto requirement was non-negotiable. When I relayed concern about exclusionary hiring to an administrator at the central offices of Save the Children in Guatemala City, the administrator told me it was not safe for women to travel to the communities on their own. When I reported this back to my friend, she dismissed it as clear-cut sexism and further evidence of the sham of “women's equality.”

The men working for Paisano, many of them in their early twenties, were in a position of instructing women about intimate details of reproductive health, such as how to stop a vaginal hemorrhage in childbirth. They also advised women about how to shop for, prepare, and consume nourishing food. The técnicos would gather the women outside the buildings and convey the information in a serious and professional tone. Women tried to keep a straight face, though sometimes the ridiculousness of young men teaching women about topics they had been learning about all their lives would become too much and they would erupt into laughter.

Sara was one of Paisano's early participants, having enrolled in 2012, when the program began and she was pregnant. She shared a house with her in-laws, another brother-in-law and his wife, and several children. Their food was largely grown on

their land: corn, potatoes, beans, and other vegetables. The planting, harvesting, drying, grinding, boiling, and patting out of the tortillas that sustained them was often joyful, purposeful work—but it could also be exhausting and relentless. Sara appreciated the backup food aid given to her by Paisano, especially oil and rice, which otherwise had to be purchased from the store with money her family did not have to spare.

The técnicos had advised Sara, as they did all the women in the program, to guard the food rations for herself and her infant child. But this was an impossibility since the stews and porridges at the heart of her family's meals were cooked and shared communally. At one meeting of global health professionals, I heard the nutrition scientists suggest that food aid for pregnant women should be branded as medicine and not food. It would be easier to individualize consumption if women thought of the food as akin to a pill, the scientists conjectured, especially since women tended to feed others in their family first.

The técnicos sometimes gently scolded women for distributing the foods and supplements designated for them and their babies among their older children or other family members. But, with resignation, they told me that distributing food among kin was inevitable. Even if much of the foodstuff intended for pregnant women and their babies ended up being eaten by other members of the family, the developing fetus/child might still get some of the benefit. In Sara's case, while she may have shared her rations with her extended family, she had hung up the USAID recipe calendar the técnicos had given her near the kitchen woodstove that kept atole or water warm through the day, and she faithfully attended Paisano's supplement distribution days and education meetings.

A few years earlier Sara's teenage son had left for the United States in search of employment. He had promised to send money back, but she knew he was struggling and understood when it did not come. In 2017, her father died from pneumonia, leaving another hole in her family. When I visited with her shortly after his death, she told me his death was easily preventable, and she was angry they had not been able to find care for him. Her father's absence compounded her family's instability, and, for the first time, she was seriously considering picking up her family and leaving for the US. She had become pregnant again, but this time she wasn't involved in Paisano.

After Paisano's midpoint evaluation in 2015, conducted with the assistance of a Catholic Relief project,³ the central offices had recommended "refining the beneficiary targeting strategy," so Paisano narrowed the window of enrollment. The justification, influenced in part by Guatemala's Human Capital study, was that targeting even earlier fetal or child development would give more "bang for your buck" when it came to ending inequality, to quote one English-speaking policy maker with whom I spoke.

When the program began in 2012, it was open to all pregnant and nursing women and children under five. By 2017, only women in the thousand-days

window were eligible. Women with children outside the window were still invited to attend the educational classes, but they inevitably stopped participating when they no longer qualified for food rations. While Sara's pregnancy made her eligible, her cousin, whose youngest child was three, was not, and Sara did not want to attend without her cousin's company. If there was a future good to come from the intervention, Sara would no longer benefit.

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There is an obvious critique to be made that Paisano's focus on equality was a vacuous claim. Much as plantation owners had used the protection of Indigenous people to justify their slavery or Ubico's "reform" served to legalize exploitation, we can think of Paisano's in/equality narratives as a farce—a "nonperformative," in Ahmed's (2006) sense, in which the performance of equality work obscures inequalities, thereby holding them in place. Nonperformativity helps explain why a program espousing women's equality would be run by men, refusing to employ women in decently paid positions: equality was powerful rhetoric but not meant to come to pass.

Yet the critique I want to offer is not only that Paisano was duplicitous in aiming for equality, but that the very aim of equality was often undesirable in women's lives. Eliminating inequality may be a crucial goal when it comes to economic purchasing power, but equality may become a harmful goal as it spreads into the social domains of institutional hiring or household management practices, where holding particular experiences or skills may matter greatly. In the Paisano projects, "equality" denied some women their expertise and skill while pushing many new mothers toward an individualizing, normative standard that they would never achieve—and that they did not want.

A poster hanging in Paisano's office in Xela diagrammed the pathway of intervention with a series of descending arrows. At the top was a regional officer who would train several *técnicos*, who would then train the *promotoras*, who would then train the community. The assumption reflected in the image was that knowledge about healthy living could originate outside of the communities and then travel to the communities, unchanged. The ideal of equality helped justify the idea that young men could effectively teach women about their reproductive health. After all, they were thought to be mere conduits of information. That they were inexperienced in childbirth themselves was not supposed to matter, although of course it did, as indicated by the women's laughter at the *técnicos*' lessons and the fact that they did not find the information in the lesson useful and stopped coming without the material compensation of cooking oil or rice for their time.

Equality also underpinned the scrutiny on pregnant women's bodies. Paisano's education programs offered the goal of improving nutrition during pregnancy as a pathway to future gender equality. Its staff taught women that investing narrowly in the growing body of the fetus—always referred to as "baby" in program

pedagogy—would make a significant impact on future health and well-being. Its services and pregnancy supplements were meant to be a protective measure for women and their babies. When it came to the Window of 1,000 Days, fathers, grandfathers, uncles, and teenage sons were all but irrelevant.

It seemed the attention that the program paid to pregnant women might help them and their children overcome disadvantage so they could eventually become equal to others. But the principle of equality was also used to deprioritize Sara's bodily autonomy, aligning with conservative antiabortion interests that made fetuses equal bearers of human rights—at women's expense (see Colom 2015). This was not a recognition of different support needs of pregnant women that resulted in meaningful care. Instead, treating all pregnant women as if they were responsible for their children's future equality left them further burdened.

Meanwhile, for Sara, the well-being of her pregnancy was not something that could be achieved while also ignoring the broader needs of her community. From her vantage, feeding her fetus while letting her father die or offering nutrition to her infant child while failing to provide resources for her teenage son made little sense. The future child would suffer without a grandfather or without an older brother; nutrient supplementation during pregnancy would not make up for this loss.

To understand the dissonance between what her community needed and what it was offered by USAID, we might consider that the term “target” comes from warfare, with military targeting seeking to destroy or disrupt. While targeting may be an effective strategy for destabilization, the very act of aiming narrowly at a certain category of bodies might have the effect of destroying the relational logics on which Sara's life, and the life of others in her community, depended. When it comes to nourishment, the practice of building up, undertaking repair, and achieving community stability may require a different conceptual tool kit—not focusing on a targeted individual, but acting expansively across a web of relations. Equality individualized, when it was entire communities that needed support.

As I show next, describing a second maternal health program in San Juan, in/equality narratives that presume and compel everyone toward equality can negate the variations in people's experience and expertise, undermining the execution of development projects and the good they claim to do.

LOS CÍRCULOS

At the same time that Paisano was setting out to measure babies and deliver supplements, another women's equality project started up in many of the same San Juan communities where Paisano was run. This second, smaller project entailed empowerment circles for pregnant and nursing women initiated by a doctor from a North American university who I will refer to as “Dr. Z.” I use an obviously partial name to remind readers that my analysis is also partial: the descriptions

in this chapter do not wholly represent Dr. Z's work or her project. I also use an initial rather than a name because the critical analysis I develop is not directed at a particular person but rather at the in/equality narratives that were so common in maternal health. As I elaborate below, I am interested in how even well-intended efforts to better women's lives ended up reproducing harm, but I am also interested in where learning and transformation occur.

Dr. Z, a soft-spoken but tireless advocate for maternal health, had previously carried out epidemiological research studying stress that expecting mothers experienced during the first thousand days of life. The hypothesis driving this research was that malnutrition relates less to what is eaten than to the social conditions under which metabolic activity takes place. In contrast to the prevailing interest in nutrient supplementation, Dr. Z was interested in stress ecologies. Toward the end of her research, she initiated an organization to support women's circles and kept them going after her study concluded. Dr. Z saw women's circles, locally referred to as "Los Círculos," as a way to strengthen solidarity, reduce stress in women's lives, and ultimately improve maternal health.

Though her work to improve health during pregnancy and breastfeeding was clearly different from that of Paisano, both projects were founded to address gender inequality. They both used the framework offered by the Window of 1,000 Days agenda, taking this time in which the child eats via the mother's body as a key period to target. During her research in San Juan she had confronted ways that women were disempowered through physical violence and the patriarchal social order that placed decision making in the hands of men. The women's circles were meant to be an antidote to this gender inequality. As described in the program manual, their purpose was to empower women in the rural communities of San Juan, providing tools for health promoters to care for the mental health of mothers of reproductive age and for the health of their children, "always emphasizing the mothers with children under the age of two." In a magazine article that circulated among Guatemala's English-speaking expat and tourist community, Dr. Z elaborated, "Our organization combats inequality and integrates mental health programs into community health programs, prioritizing respect for the local culture" (cited in *Entremundos* 2018).

She conceived the circles as an equitable space for expecting and new mothers to share their experiences with one another. "Women's Circles are community-led support groups to improve participating women's agency, psychosocial health and wellbeing, and impact the health of mothers and children across generations," promotional materials about the circles affirmed. Referred to as a "holistic intervention," because of their focus on integrating emotional and physical health, they were meant to be spaces where women would work collaboratively and through principles of shared values to lift each other up. The project's website quoted one of the participants: "I used to be very sensitive. I thought that others with more studies or money were worth more. But I realized that no one is worth more than

anyone else and that we are all equal. The Circles have helped me a lot to raise my self-esteem.”

The Circles drew inspiration from Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* ([1968] 2014) to emphasize how those who are marginalized must play key roles in their own decolonization. Versed in languages and practices of “bottom up” and “community based” projects, Dr. Z emphasized a model of research based in “participatory action.” As explained in program materials: “PAR [participatory action research] is not so much a research method as an orientation to research that emphasizes equitable engagement of all partners throughout the research process, from problem definition through data collection and analysis, to the dissemination and use of findings to help effect change.”

Dr. Z was critical of how often aid creates cycles of economic and political dependency, in which Indigenous communities become forced to rely on external resources. In contrast, it was important that her project fostered Indigenous autonomy. It was her goal that “local communities would be empowered to be agents of their own change.” As they would be the beneficiaries of the circles, they were also meant to be in charge of them. Accordingly, Dr Z worked with the women in the communities in the design of a twelve-class curriculum, with each class focused on a different theme. The classes, called “circles,” were meant to last roughly two hours and to occur roughly every fifteen days.

Dr. Z offered trainings for the San Juan women she recruited to lead the circles, paying for their travel to the nearby city where these workshops were held. The hope was that they would become proficient in each theme in the curriculum and that they would then return to their communities, lesson manual in hand, to guide other women through the lessons. In Xela, where Dr. Z had lived when she did her earlier research, she hired two Indigenous women with graduate degrees from the nearby university to coordinate the project from a central office.

Finding women in the San Juan communities to run the circles was easy, at first. Dr. Z had chosen San Juan as the site for her research in part because the community had an established network of women who were trained to be intermediaries between families and development projects. The same women who had worked as vigilantes for the earlier health extension project and who now helped Paisano as promotoras could also help her with her research. They could map who lived where, who was pregnant, and who had children, and they could help recruit and monitor participants. Roughly once a week, she paid the women 50 quetzales, or roughly \$8, for a day of coordination work. This was an amount similar to what other development projects paid to men and was considered a decent wage for a day’s work. For the women involved, it was an amount that was both material and symbolic. The women could hardly survive on this funding, but it helped, and it mattered greatly to the women involved that they were paid.

In talking with the promotoras in 2016, I heard a lot about how Dr. Z’s program was different from those run by large-scale development organizations such

as Paisano. The women cared that Dr. Z spent time with them and knew their children's names. Many women repeated an anecdote about scales. They wanted me to know that whereas the other NGOs working in the region kept the equipment in their own facilities, Dr. Z gave scales to women in the communities to manage. They pointed to the scales as evidence of her commitment. They were excited about the circles she was starting and hopeful about their possibilities.

• • •

When I visited the circles in 2017, some women's attitudes had changed. Dr. Z was no longer in the San Juan area. She was trying to publish her research, writing grants to obtain more funding for her projects, and had a newborn herself. She had come to see the circles as a way of creating low-cost, community-led possibilities for maternal health programs that could be scaled up, and she was now working to expand the idea of women's circles elsewhere in the country. As a result, she needed to stay closer to the capital, where most Guatemalan policy makers she wanted to influence lived. In her absence, she had handed off the organization of the circles to the communities and assistants in Xela, as was her original plan.

The grant-based funding that supported the projects in previous years had run out. Several promotoras were frustrated that their pay had stopped. Other development projects they had worked for had previously assured them they would eventually get back pay, but they never saw it. Eventually they were paid—a priority for Dr. Z—but they did not have confidence that they would be paid at the time I spoke with them. The wait triggered memories of the historical injury of forced Indigenous labor that the people in San Juan had suffered through for generations. Self-sufficiency had been an aim of *Los Círculos*: the work was supposed to be valuable enough to the communities that women would want to keep the circles running regardless of pay. But without income, some promotoras felt that they were once again contributing free labor that would benefit someone else.

Several women also expressed resentment about the organizers in Xela, who were still receiving pay (for a time after her grant funding ran out, this pay came directly from Dr. Z). Dr. Z was proud to have hired Indigenous women in organizing roles, and the women she employed were well educated and talented. But like many university graduates in Xela, they were K'iche' Maya, a Maya group that has held more economic and political power in the region than the Maya-Mam communities.

Some San Juan promotoras understood Dr. Z's predicament. They knew that she was doing her best—that she was facing pressures as a new mother while trying to make her vision for the circles intelligible to Guatemalan policy makers. These particular promotoras had stepped up to run circles in other San Juan communities than their own, replacing promotoras who had dropped out. But this also introduced an element of frustration for all involved. After all, while the dozens of communities surrounding the San Juan city center have much in common,

Espumpuja is not Las Esperanza, Las Esperanza is not Los Romero, and so on. The small, identical black dots on the map identifying the communities rendered invisible their many differences.

I attended a handful of women's circles during the time that Dr. Z was absent. It was clear that the women who arrived enjoyed the opportunity to gather with one another. One of the women in attendance had even traveled from a neighboring department. She was the only participant who was not from San Juan and did not speak Mam, but like the other women in attendance, she had small children and wanted extra support. Yet it was also clear that leadership was lacking. When women gathered they were often uncertain about what they should be doing, and participants were generally lackluster about the formal twelve-week lesson plan.

Given my book's focus on nutrition, I will describe in detail a lesson from the curriculum organized around the theme "I am a woman; I am a mother: my nutrition." On the day I attended, the women met in an abandoned cinder block building once used by another development project. To open the meeting, the designated circle leader read from the spiral-bound manual outlining the session activities, instructing the other eight women in attendance to sit in a circle holding hands and repeat an affirmation: "Welcome to this new session. Today I feel better than yesterday." A second woman then taped two large sheets of white paper against the wall, drawing a picture of a woman's body on one of them.

I could see in the instruction manual that the day's main exercise was meant to get women talking about nutrition. It advised breaking into two groups and spending fifteen minutes filling in each silhouette with the woman's recommended diet according to her age. Upon finishing, the promotora was to bring the groups back together through a discussion about community nutrition with prompts such as, "Why is the diet of the girl, adolescent, woman of reproductive age and the pregnant woman important?" or "Do mothers in your community teach their daughters about the importance of their diet?"

Departing from the lesson plan, the woman who drew the silhouette instead asked the women to list, "What foods are healthy?" She then wrote down their answers for all to see: herbs, fruit, vegetables, taking vitamins, vaccinations, beets, carrots, lettuce, potatoes, and so on. The women in the group tossed out suggestions, but there was not much enthusiasm for the exercise, and they quickly dropped it, leaving one of the posters almost entirely blank on the wall. Instead, they spent most of the time discussing embroidery tricks, such as how to knit a pattern in the shape of a flower and attach it to a woven hat to give it extra flair.

Across the street from the building where we had gathered lived a woman who did not attend the women's circle, even though her young baby made her eligible. Instead, she had joined up with a small company based out of Xela that was working to export Maya women's handicraft skills internationally via internet markets. When I asked those attending the circles what they thought about the business for exports, they responded with enthusiasm. "We need money more than this," one



FIGURE 12. Women in San Juan used the time at the nutrition circle to build camaraderie and teach each other crocheting techniques. Photo by author, 2017.

of the women in the room told me, nodding at the silhouette illustration and the list of “healthy” food.

The circles were designed to counter economic and political dependency. “They engage women through processes of reflection, conscientization, problem solving and skills strengthening, supporting women in becoming agents of change in their own lives and families,” the website reads. But without an income, the participants would remain dependent on their husbands or find themselves with no choice but to move away from their communities. Even if the circle were to help them gain a degree of independence, they were facing a broader political system designed to keep Guatemalans reliant on the United States and women reliant on men.

The circle was meant to conclude with two songs: a maternal affirmation and an affirmation made directly to the women themselves. In the first, they were to hold their babies up in the air over their heads, singing to them, “I love you and I will take care of you, because you are going to be a healthy and strong child.” Then they were to form a circle with one another, hold hands, and sing a song to the tune of the popular song, “Yo Soy Puro Guatemalteco” (I Am Pure Guatemalan). The lyrics offered in the manual were, “I am a beautiful woman; I like to participate; I am very strong and hardworking; And I am the change I want to achieve.”

As it turned out, the women that day were pulled into discussions of weaving and life. They did not actually ever sit in a circle. A few chose to sit indoors; others with older children with them sat in the outdoor patio or on the steps

leading up to the building. As they chatted with each other, it struck me that they were happy to be there. The circles offered women a relatively safe space to gather, something they could not take for granted given that they lived in a country whose government had recently orchestrated a genocide against Indigenous people for forming collectives. But as for nutrition? The curriculum was supposed to be designed according to principles of participatory action research and in collaboration with the women, but it did not seem that important to them. The group never returned to the topic, and the songs about loving themselves and their babies went unsung.

After the women departed for their homes, I visited a community midwife who lived around the corner from the building where the circle gathering had been held. As a promotora for other development projects, Magda had been involved in Los Círculos when they started up but had stopped working with them months earlier. “The women in the city act as if they don’t need me,” she said, speaking about the project’s K’iche’ staff. A diploma displayed near the front door of her house announced that she had completed her midwifery training at the Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama in the 1990s. But her real credentials came from experience: she had spent decades delivering babies and caring for mothers in her community, where she had deep networks and had lived all her life. She felt this expertise was not recognized or even desired at the circles, and she no longer felt welcome.

We chatted for a while longer. Magda told me that the vegetables in the hillside garden above her house were growing ripe and asked if I would like to take some home. Craning my head upward to where squash and yellow peppers grew among brilliant red flowers in the vertical slopes, I became worried about whether she was safe living there. Global warming’s rising temperatures and wind speeds have caused rainfall to become at once less predictable and more dramatic. Guatemala consistently ranks as one of the world’s riskiest places to live when it comes to climate change, with rural farmers battling both drought and flooding (World Bank 2022). Of particular concern for Magda’s community, entire hamlets in Guatemala have been destroyed by steep hillsides, much like the one looming over her house, that liquify in heavy rains.

As if reading my mind, she told me that one of the projects that came to her community had promised to rebuild adobe houses with cinder blocks as a flood prevention measure. But funds had disappeared partway through the work, and they had stopped construction, leaving many of her neighbors with half-built homes. Magda was proud of her adobe home, with its indoor kitchen and attached clinic for seeing patients. Gesturing to the completed block houses in the valley below us, she said they could only be built because of remittances sent from family in the US. The houses may be more solid, but the family was likely torn apart. She hoped she would never have to leave her community; she had heard too many horror stories. No, she was going to stay and focus on birth.

As our conversation drew to a close and I turned to leave, my arms now full of squash and licorice-flavored pericón herbs for making tea, she asked me if I would see Dr. Z during my time in Guatemala. I was not sure if I would—we were both juggling babies and busy schedules—but I mentioned I could pass along a message.

“Tell her that we miss her,” Magda said to me. “Tell her that we say hello.”

. . .

The circle is a compelling image to emphasize principles of equality. It is a shape with no hierarchies or edges; its radius is identical at any point. Symbolic of holism and unity, the circle is complete and self-contained. Yet all the attention focused on the “horizontal structure” of Los Círculos minimized the crucial differences and places of friction between group participants and their broader communities. It should matter that midwives have expertise in labor and delivery or that mothers, aunts, and grandmothers have generational wisdom about childbirth and feeding to pass along to their daughters and kin. The push to make women equal hinders recognition that equivalence may be an undesirable end.

Dr. Z’s wish to have the circles be community led follows, in many ways, the best practices in her field. It is also, at least for now, an impossibility since the language of “psychosocial distress,” “mental health,” “emotional healing,” and “play therapy,” which was integral to the work of the circles, is not language that women in the community would use themselves. While the circles aimed to reduce stress, in the Mam language that women spoke among themselves there is no direct translation for this term. Sure, women would use the Spanish term *estrés*, and I might also label the way they are forced to shoulder violence as “stress” in my analysis. But this was not a word that arose organically or how they would characterize the problems in their life. While the projects are meant to be “from below,” the manuals and notebooks are written in Spanish, and they need to be, or an entirely different pedagogical approach would have to be employed since people in San Juan do not generally read or write their primary spoken language, Mam, which is dismissed in schools. In other words, it is categorically impossible for a Spanish-language mental health project in the Mam-speaking communities in San Juan to be community run.

This is not to say the themes of “mental health” or “emotional healing” are not of interest to women in San Juan, who are, after all, practiced at translating between different vernaculars. This is also not to say that women should not be educated in theories of oppression or power that originate from outside their communities. They do not need to be shielded from new, transnational alliances of feminism, which San Juan women are very capable of adopting or discarding as they see fit. It is rather to say that Dr. Z’s presence, leadership capacities, and ability to secure funding to pay trainers and find a space for women to meet was key to the success of Los Círculos, and this difference in her positionality relative to the community was not to be overlooked. In letting me know that Dr. Z was missed, Magda was

passing along the implicit message that Dr. Z could not be absent—at least not yet in the life cycle of the circles. Even women who experienced vital and healing camaraderie when participating would have trouble implementing them without external support. Self-sufficiency may be a laudable goal. Dependence may be devastating. But without the outside funding that Dr. Z can access in a way the women in San Juan cannot, the promotoras would find themselves providing free labor once again.

Specificity of place matters; depth of experience matters; deep wisdom accumulated over decades of practice matters; differences in location, language, and access to funding sources matter. Fighting inequality may sound virtuous, but it may be more crucial to focus on how to attend to and value the different kinds of hierarchies and divisions that influence life in San Juan and beyond. Even when the equality imagery of the circles failed the women, there were ways that the circles were expanded and reshaped to include multiple kinds of expertise across multiple generations of knowledge. In women's partial abandonment of the circle, they were also cultivating an approach to maternal health that is responsive to the particularities of people and place.

Health educators often spoke of pregnancy as a window of economic opportunity—a chance for the disadvantaged child to get ahead. Yet in San Juan Ostuncalco, the requirement to work—whether driven by antivagrancy labor laws or the collapsing markets for local food—has long torn families apart. Rather than turn the window of pregnancy and breastfeeding into yet another economic obligation, we might rather see it as a fallow period to be filled with relaxation, rest, and community care. We might also expand this window so it encompasses not only people who are pregnant or who have newly given birth. The Window of 1,000 Days might be refashioned to include entire communities, who find nourishment in companionship and kin.

MEN COME FIRST: AN OPENING

There is systemic cruelty in the fact that most of Guatemala's land is owned by a handful of families; that these histories of dispossession have left so many people with so little purchasing power; that plantations owners have become rich from the labor of Indigenous men while the families of these men are left to starve; and that women in the highlands, unable to secure waged labor, find themselves subservient to men and forced to give birth or forced to migrate north.

There is also systemic cruelty in the fact that economic logics of suffering and success have become superimposed on other domains of social life, such that equality as measured by economic indicators becomes the core goal of health projects and their primary motive for advocating for power. At the same time that public health projects should fight against economic inequality, so should they recognize that transposing a universalizing frame of equality onto people's lives is

a misplaced solution. Economic inequality arises from exploitation; its alternative lies not in treating people as if they should be the same but in developing capacities to attend to ways they are not. Deviation from the White male—frequently unmarked but often assumed—signifier does not necessitate that one is damaged, as Tuck also wrote.

Rosa, my weaving teacher, taught me through her practice of making fabric that the terms of subservience and dominance break any easy formula of who is powerful. The opening offered through her lessons was that sometimes things are not what they seem at a distance, on other people's terms. The point is not that men come first on principle or in a generalized way but that normative claims—that is, claims about how things should be—should be made in conversation with the values and life experiences of people affected by these norms. In the case of maternal health projects in San Juan, there is a need to shift from fighting for equality to centering the exploitation that has gripped Guatemala since conquest, structuring not only the landscape of suffering but that of apparent resistance as well.

Dr. Z's research on maternal health in San Juan was organized within a "socio-ecological framework," and it was this framework that informed the planning of her circles. Socio-ecology, as she defined it, brings together "all factors known to affect the vertical transmission of stress" in early life. The image she used to illustrate the definition was a pregnant woman in the center of a circle formed by distress, illness and infection, and poor nutrition. It is a framework that emphasizes holism and interconnection. Paisano had likewise depicted interconnection in the design of its programs, painting the slogan "We Are Countrymen United" on walls along the streets of the San Juan communities where staff worked. Given the stated mission to end inequality, the goal of unity would seem to make sense: "We are all in this together, we are all equal," it would seem to say.

Unity, togetherness, and equality: they are all compelling slogans, but they are also a mirage. Men hold jobs that women will not be hired for because they are women. Guatemalan landowners grow rich from the toil of Indigenous laborers. US officials send Guatemala aid in the form of corn-soy supplements made from surplus US produce, grown by the hands of underpaid Latinx immigrants who they will not officially allow into the US. US farm owners depend on these immigrants, but farm owners will not fight for them to be granted legal status, instead benefiting from the cheap labor that they provide. Some people feast while others are devoured.

And yet. Despite these clear imbalances, in/equality narratives fail to capture the complex depth of life, in which deeply exploited people are irreducible to their suffering. Consider that Rosa, while having no formal schooling, could deftly manage the complex relationships of her community, all while weaving her own clothes. Or that Sara rejected Paisano handouts when they were not also available to her cousin, even as she was so strapped for resources that she was considering



FIGURE 13. My son runs with the daughter of one of the health leaders in San Juan past a sign with a pun that says, “We are countrymen united for a healthy country.” (*Paisano* translates as “countrymen,” and *pais sano* translates as “healthy country”). Photo by author, 2016.

leaving her ancestral homelands for the dangerous borderlands of the US. Magda was determined to stay and bring life into her community precisely because she lived in a precarious place. Inequality tells us that the options are either to be powerful or to be powerless, but, as the Gender Studies scholar Chanda Talpade Mohanty (1984, 344) points out, these kinds of binaries are “ineffectual in designing strategies to combat oppressions.” Public health’s in/equality narratives tend to reinforce the idea that some people are strong while others are weak and that those who are weak should be more like those who are strong. But liberation from oppression should not be dictated by the values of the oppressive system. Instead, political strategies to combat oppression must be able to acknowledge geographic and historical specificities of oppression, as well as how suffering and strength go hand in hand.

The Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers (2005, 192) writes, “Unity always means mobilisation, what was asked of armies having to follow orders in a faithful and immediate way.” Departing from a socio-ecological framework that emphasizes unity, she offers the framework “ecology of practice.” An ecology of practice doesn’t emphasize togetherness, a common language, an intersubjective understanding, or the fungibility of relations. It instead aims to attend to different interests and diverging attachments that will result as people interact.

Ending exploitation, engaging in real—not nonperformative (Ahmed 2006)—transformation, requires cultivating the capacity to live in difference without the false pretense of shared or common ideals. I have not offered a single term as an alternative to inequality, for example, trading the goal of equality for that of equity or even social justice. After all, it would be a shortsighted strategy to change one totalizing grand narrative for another. The challenge is instead to cultivate frames of analysis and action capable of acknowledging and acting against anti-Indigenous racism, femicide, and labor exploitation without presuming to know how this violence works from afar.

In the years that have passed since Dr. Z's absence in 2017, the lessons offered by an ecology of practice are ones she has learned herself by talking with people in the community about the projects, soliciting their feedback, and being open to learn and adapt. She, in company with women in the community, has worked through many of the messy, nonlinear, and trial-and-error lessons of collective work, transforming the circles to make them responsive to community needs.

Roughly a decade after her arrival in San Juan in 2010, in 2019, she returned to be a presence in the communities. The women who run the circles continue to be paid for each day they work. These women no longer call themselves *promotoras* (promoting someone else's ideas) or *vigilantes* (responsible for transmitting community activities to state officials) but *lideresas* (leaders). The term has obvious resonance with neoliberal visions of business efficacy, but the women running the circles have mobilized it to highlight their expertise, training, and skills. Whereas Paisano became narrower at the midpoint evaluation of its intervention, allocating food rations only to women in the first thousand days, Los Círculos have widened to bring men and grandmothers into the fold. Today anyone is invited to attend in the hope of bringing in a rich diversity of experiences (and circles specifically for men have also started up). The circles still have a weekly curriculum shared across the communities, but the intention is simply to give a scaffolding on which to begin dialogue. It is not a problem—but encouraged—for participants to deviate from the course.

Los Círculos are no longer conceived of as spaces of all-inclusive totalities but spaces for collectively honoring their participants' different histories, life conditions, and future desires. After all, we learn from Poovey's historical excavation of capitalism that the fantasy of equality was always a ruse: a way of papering over power differentials, making them harder to overturn. As Dr. Z's project is put into practice today, it is better to make differences visible to learn from them than to erase them or act as if they are not there. Remember that the women never really sat in a circle.

Nearly a decade after she started and after adjustments in the project structure, the circles remained well attended, and many women in San Juan attest to how they have enabled them to build community and companionship with other women. This success is due, in large part, to the fact that their leaders live in the San Juan

communities and have experienced the challenges in participants' lives. The circle leaders cannot be just anyone; here the myth of commensurability at the heart of equality breaks down. As USAID wrote in an evaluation of the Paisano project, women felt that having a strong tie between message and messenger was crucial. "The person sharing a message should be known" a focus group member from San Juan Ostuncalco was quoted as saying (USAID 2016, 55). While many leaders of Los Círculos may not be able to read and write in the Spanish language, they have literacy in community relations that outsiders do not possess. They would know, for example, that you start with the man's pants because the second weaving will turn out better than the first.