

**Participatory Action Research – Feminist Trailblazers and Good Troublemakers**  
**Podcast Host Patricia Maguire with Brinton Lykes and Brisna Caxaj**

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Transcript. Host Patricia Maguire with Brinton Lykes and Brisna Caxaj: Participatory Action Research with Mayan Women in the aftermath of genocidal violence (No. 4). Original Broadcast October 31, 2022

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**Patricia Maguire** - Welcome. You're listening to the Participatory Action Research Feminist Trailblazers podcast. I'm Patricia Maguire. I'm a longtime advocate of feminist informed, or as our guest today would say, feminist infuse. Participatory action Research. Our guest today, Brinton Lykes and Brisna Caxaj intersectional feminists, participatory researchers, and human rights activists, and they've been working for, really for decades now, using feminist community-based participatory action research, and in particular, creative art technologies with Mayan women protagonists in post-genocide Guatemala.

So today we'll discuss some of the struggles and the successes that they've had bringing feminist and participatory research values and, and ways of being to projects. Brinton, welcome.

**Brinton Lykes** - Lovely to see you, Pat, and to be with you today Brisna.

**Patricia Maguire** - Brisna welcome to you.

**Brisna Caxaj** - Thank you. I'm also glad to be here with you.

**Patricia Maguire** - I'm going to do a little introduction to both Brinton and Brisna. They've done so much that this is just a short introduction to their work. Brinton Lykes is Professor of Community Cultural Psychology. She's Co-Director of the Center for Human Rights and International Justice at Boston College. And Brinton has decades of anti-racist, feminist activist scholarship that incorporates creative arts and the epistemologies of original peoples to accompany women and children who are trying to re-thread their lives in the wake of racialized and gendered violence and in post-genocide transitional justice processes. She is the co-founder of the Boston Women's Fund and the Ignacio Martín-Baró Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights.

Brisna is a feminist sociologist. She is the Gender Program Director at Impunity Watch Guatemala. She's the president of the Board of Directors of the Unión Nacional de Mujeres

Guatemaltecas or the National Union of Guatemalan Women. She coordinated the team for this participatory action research project that we're going to be talking a lot about today. The project with Mayan women survivors of Guatemalan state-sponsored violence. This project was done in coordination with Boston College, which is Brinton's home institution, and York University.

Brisna's work focuses on women's rights, including sexual violence during the internal armed conflict in Guatemala, and more currently on the connections between really deep-seated racism and transformative reparations.

I want to give a short shout out to Alison Crosby, who's another member of the team who's unable to be with us today. She's the Associate Professor in the School of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies, and former Director of the Center for Feminist Research at York University, which with the National Union of Guatemalan Women and Boston College sort of co-sponsored the particular project that we're going to spend a lot of time talking about today.

So let me get us started - In this feminist participatory action research project, you used creative arts with a group of Mayan women that was in the aftermath of the genocidal violence by the Guatemalan state during that 36-years armed conflict. And it was also during the women's battle for transitional justice and reparations.

So tell us about how did you each get started in this work and, and what brought you together And maybe let's start with Brisna.

**Brisna Caxaj** - Well, I've been a member of UNAMG, the National Union of Guatemalan Women, for quite some time now. This is an organization that is mostly activists, but there was always an interest in promoting research. That it was important that we do research as well from a feminist perspective. So this was a small effort that was just a beginning. We were trying to strengthen that area of work.

And I do want to say that also from some of the work that I had done before in terms of training, I had been using or come close to the use of what we call popular education from Paulo Freire's perspective, which acknowledges initiating each process from the knowledge and experience of the participants. And so Luz Mendez, who was on the Board of Directors, who knew Alison and Brinton -well they had had some conversations about the interest of doing research and our need to sort of strengthen our research capacities.

So yeah, they discussed a proposal and an idea, and that's how I came to work with them. But I, I wanted to mention this about the educational process and the training process because I felt I found a lot of likeness in sort of the perspective used for the research.

**Patricia Maguire** - Brinton, how about you?

**Brinton Lykes** - So I have had longstanding connections in Guatemala, each of us working - Alison working as an activist for a number of years before she became an academic, and I began work during the armed conflict with a health organization located in Chimaltenango where I was particularly engaged with thinking about community-based health work from the perspective of possibilities of working with children whose parents had been assassinated, disappeared, or killed in massacres during the armed conflict.

And in that context, collaborated with a health promoter who helped introduce me to some of the traditions of Mayan communities and some of the ways in which play and drawings and storytelling were characteristic of many of the communities that had been decimated during the armed conflict during the war.

So on the one hand, I brought some of these commitments from that experience and the other hand, which I also think is really probably important, as a community psychologist who worked during the armed conflict in rural contexts, I too was marked by the experiences that people were living through.

And I worked with an anthropologist by the name of Margarita Melville, who was working with refugees in Mexico. She was documenting the survivance of children there, and I was documenting that in Guatemala. As I returned to the United States and began to transcribe the stories that I had been told, I vacillated between rage and complete and total sadness and, sort of found myself not particularly able to integrate these experiences of being with these communities and children.

At the time I worked, I spent some time in Argentina and encountered a social psychologist there who had been working with creative resources with children of the disappeared. And I had the great opportunity to collaborate with something called the Solidarity Movement and mental health in Argentina, and to get trained in psychoanalytic psychodrama with a man by the name of Eduardo Pavlovsky, who had been in exile in Cuba for many years and was back in Argentina. And it was there that I think I really sort of resonated with the multiple ways in which, as the community psychologist Joseph Gunn said, that the vast majority of people in the world don't talk about things that have happened to them. They don't go to a therapist to look for, but they rather express themselves in a variety of ways in which they've been expressing themselves for centuries.

And so I think that I was very much drawn to the creativity as a possible resource in doing exactly what Brisna described. That is in starting with the experiences of in their communities that they have survived. So Alison actually recruited me for a brief piece of

work earlier and, in that context, which was working with women in Colombia, Peru, and Guatemala around sexual violence during their respective armed conflicts.

And that's where I met Brisna and got to know UNAMG better. And so it was a, a really a fortuitous opportunity that I think brought us with these differing experiences that we had, some things in common, and also deep political commitments.

I think that that's an important dimension that UNAMG brought to the table that was critically and longstanding. Brisbane kind of mentioned that she had been affiliated. She, she's really talking about a long time. That is, this is an organization that has a deep history and she's been deeply involved in that history.

**Patricia Maguire** We're going to come back to some of those issues that you brought up about long-termness and political work but let's keep with the participatory action research creative processes a little bit. Somewhere along the line in your collective writings, you said that the PAR creative process generated alternative spaces for a form of telling that illuminated Mayan Women's collective protagonism.

And it seems that in your speeches, your discussions, your writings about this, you've really focused on the term "*protagonist*" instead of victim or survivor. Talk about how that term *protagonist* in the context of this PAR process has really been important.

**Brinton Lykes** - I'll briefly talk about sort of how I tumbled onto the term, which really came out of my experiences working with African American communities in the United States and with the notion of a call and a response. That is, that this notion that we're all in relationship with each other and we can only work together I think if we can, I mean, I don't know, Pat, I've often dug into your work to try and find the phrase "just enough trust" because I feel like I took it from you. But I do think that when I first went to Guatemala, it was very clear to me that Guatemalans and Mayan indigenous communities had no reason to trust me.

I was coming from the United States. The United States was supporting the military government that was part of the destructive force within the country. And what I think I began to discover is one, people who have a clear political analysis and clarity about the role of the United States, also have clarity about what connections they can make and can't make or want to make or don't want to make with people from the United States. And I think in that context, it has to do with this notion that Mary Watkins writes a lot about *accompaniment*. It has to do with people who are able to suspend their doubts enough to be willing to walk together with each other in a process. I felt strongly, and it's very contradictory as a human rights activist, in order to push for holding perpetrators accountable, the justice system requires that people present themselves as victims. And yet the survivors of this horrific brutality are clearly people who are taking actions to seek

redress, to seek justice, and, and Brisna can talk more about that because she is deeply involved in that work continuously with Impunity Watch but has been with us.

We felt like the term victim, which needs to be used in the justice system as it's set up in Euro American legal traditions, which has given space for the notion of survivor, the recognition that people who are pushing for justice have survived. And there's very interesting discussion and debate among indigenous scholars about the notion of survivance. That is, it's not just surviving, but it's actually proactively. So I think we landed on the term protagonist to try and capture that, which is not to say that people haven't been deeply wounded, that people's stories are not horrifically traumatic, that people haven't experienced ways in which collectively their relationships were attempted to be ruptured.

And individually they were marked in very particular ways by whatever it was that happened to them. But it is to acknowledge and recognize that they are so much more than that, and that they are taking actions, making moves, walking, getting up in the morning and putting one foot roughly in front of the other and moving roughly forward in the midst of horrific challenges. That despite the fact that the Truth Commission, that there were negotiated accords that ended the worst of the armed conflict, there is still horrific violence that people are living in and enormously persistent ruptures of people's lives in Guatemala today, despite what we talk about as some kind of moment in which there were some incredible victories. justice seeking process.

**Patricia Maguire** – Brisna, you probably have some things to add on there and what I want you to, when you add on to also talk about this: it seems that the project moved from conceptualizing, treating the women participants as victims to protagonists. But you also had this incredible shift where instead of this retelling again of their, their stories of sexual violence, there was a shift to telling about their conception of what did reparations mean for them. Maybe you could speak to that. It was a shift to really talk about reparations.

**Brisna Caxaj** - Yeah. I think it's important to also mention that the work that we were doing with survivors of sexual violence had already started for quite a while, and there had been a team that did magnificent research which we could say it was like another, it was a compliment to the Truth Commission report, which exactly what happened in the three regions that we were working in. So I think that there, there had already been that process where the woman had already told what had happened to them, the causes of the sexual violence, and the impacts that it had in their lives. And there had been the use of arts as well, but mostly from a perspective of, maybe psychosocial healing process, not so much into as a research method, which I think we will sort of talk about a bit more later. But what I want to say is that there, there was already sort of this process of them becoming or being survivors - sort of shifting from that idea of, of victims.

Now like Brinton said, there, there is some sort of I guess moments of tension we can say because some of the women did want to go forward in the justice system, like the legal justice system, and that does require for that construction of the victim to present to the legal system. And, and there is very high emphasis on the impact and how they are victimized. So I would say that along all these years, it's, it's been like a, it hasn't been like a linear process. It's been back and forth.

But definitely I think all of the women are protagonists in the sense that they have decided that first they want to tell their story. They wanted to tell their story. They want people to know what happened to them, and mostly that this was not their fault. But I, I think the other thing that is really important that has been like a thread throughout time is that they don't want this violence to happen again to them, but also to their children, their grandchildren, and other women and girls in their community.

So they are quite actively involved in trying to stop that from happening again. The living conditions that they are in continue to be quite precarious and very difficult. So some of them have also been involved at their community levels trying to get answers at the community level to sort of address what happened to them, but to demand reparations and redress measures. But I think that one of the groups that mostly continues to do that is in the Sepur Zarco in Q'eqchi'

due to the case that they won. They achieved a guilty verdict in this legal system. Because there was a guilty verdict, they are allowed some reparations. But I think that this, this process that we did, this research process allowed us to identify more deeply what redress means to them beyond that notion of like the government giving you something or either through the National Reparations programs, which in the end didn't really comply with what they were supposed to do, or if by a sentence given at the judicial system, So I think this was like the biggest contribution in terms of understanding from them what redress means.

**Patricia Maguire** - Let's get into some of the details of the participatory action research project, because I think beginning participatory action researchers who I hope are listening, you know, they always want specifics about strategies and research methods. And so you used creative arts, you used dramatic arts, you used something you called embodied practices, Mayan storytelling and rituals.

Give us some examples of what did that look like. I mean, Brisna, you said many of those techniques, of course, came over from popular education and the Freirean approach to consciousness raising. Tell us about what some of these strategies look like as you use them in your groups.

**Brisna Caxaj** - Well, one of the things that was, has been very important is using the Mayan Cosmovision, which is like the way they see life, because that was very important to them, in giving them strength.

So using the reference, for example, to the energy of the day in which we were doing a workshop or an activity and highlighting what that day is important for and how that links to what we were doing and using the different colors and candles, in that sort of ritual in the beginning in trying to create an environment as to the sort of things that we want to discuss about. Like each day in the Mayan calendar has a different energy and it's good to do different things or discuss different things, whether things relating to justice, to health, to whatever. So we would link whatever the discussion that we wanted to have to that. So I think that that was really important. But the other thing was using techniques like in the theater, allowing them to sort of move their body and express themselves/

We would do exercises like that so that they would get comfortable so that at the moment where we would do a certain activity, that they would reflect on what something meant for them, that they felt more comfortable in using their body. And it's just different techniques like these, or collages, drawings, the using of the picture.

But I think maybe the creativity is also in, in sort of layering the analysis. They would produce something, do something. We would discuss like what the other groups or people saw and interpreted, but then we would do another go-through to see what the others thought of what the people were saying that they were interpreting.

So for me it was also a learning experience in sort of how to apply those techniques that maybe I had used before, but not in that layering sense of also going back sometimes to things that had been done before. Reflecting on that.

**Brinton Lykes** - Well, I think Brisna has identified for people who might want to think about how do you engage co-participants or co-researchers in data analysis, data interpretation, because exactly what Brisna said was a strategy of inviting people either through a collective collage or through a collective drawing, or even through a dramatization to present it, but not to tell people what they wanted to say, but to listen to what people saw.

And very interestingly, sometimes people saw things that the group itself did not have in mind, but really resonated with like, "Oh, that's what you saw. Let me play that into a next iteration." And then public saw something else and then the group that had done it, got to present what it originally had thought about. And so they entered into a dialogue. And so we had a wonderful opportunity because we had some resources to tape record those engagements, to take notes on big newsprint, and to then be able to sort of transcribe that afterwards.

And the three of us would talk with each other about what we saw. And sometimes, as Brisna said, we would bring it back to the next workshop. And we were able to both learn, they learned more about these things, but we learned more about how they saw each other, but also how they saw us. That is, we had this wonderfully interesting drawing that one group did in one of the workshops, and there was a very tall person in the drawing.

And when the people watching said, you know, people had a lot of it, different ideas about who they thought it was. It was the military, it was the president, it was local tac. And it was always, no, no, no. From the group that did it. And then they were asked, "Well, who was it?" "Well, it was you all," meaning us, the intermediaries, those of us who thought we were facilitating something, participatory processes. And there we were, these big, this big figure in the middle. So we had to become more critically reflexive about exactly what was going on in the process.

And so this iterativeness that Brisna was describing of the participatory process, The other thing I want to say, which for me was incredibly impactful as a process was there were three organizations that were working with these women. There was UNAMG which is our connection, was through UNAMG.

There also is another group of psychologists, ECAP, who's a group that I had known for many years, and another group of lawyers, MTM, and in each of those groups there were mostly women. Although there were some men periodically who were in some of these organizations and many of them had been engaged in participatory processes prior to this work. For example, the lawyers at that time, one of them is a poet and had enormously creative resources to bring to the table. But she had not done anything with those resources for a long time because she was a lawyer. Now she was in her head, right being a lawyer. So we did part of the work that we did together. We facilitated workshops with the staff, not just with the women, because the staff wanted to, as Brisna said, strengthen their research skills, strengthen their understanding of participatory research. And what we were able to discover in that process was what some of our implicit assumptions were.

Because when people had to draw, when they had to get out of their heads and project onto paper in drawing, you know, the response was what it is everywhere. "I don't know how to draw." Or you know, "who's the one person who knows how to draw? Let's let them do." So as professionals, we together experienced getting more in touch with our own assumptions and how they converged, but how they diverged and then being able to talk about them more.

And also being able, I remember one of the psychologists said in one of our early workshops, I've been facilitating participatory workshops for a long time, but I actually haven't been - I've been really telling people what to do, and I haven't known why to pick

this exercise rather than that one, or why I would do. So we helped each of us lift up for ourselves, you know, how do we choose to do a participatory theater, or why do we choose a collective drawing or why a collage? And what can we learn from each of these strategies and how do we learn? So I think it gave us, and it also, I feel, was an opportunity sometimes to lift up feminist assumptions that we didn't all agree with each other about, particularly feminist understandings of sexual violence and of racialized and gendered sexual violence. And we discovered that we had entered our understandings of women's lives from different routes, and we didn't always think the same way about these. And so it was a, it was the creative resources became a resource for ourselves as well as for the work we were doing with the women.

**Patricia Maguire** - I want to come back to this notion of feminist assumptions, but before that, part of what you're each describing is how participatory methods - that create collages, that create drama, that they create knowledge, they create data, if you want to use research terms. And that knowledge and data get shared, and then you've described that, so it goes beyond just a participatory process.

It's using a participatory process to create information, knowledge, data, that then the group collectively analyzes. Because that in part, becomes part of the research process is that you take that knowledge and you analyze it and you see, "Oh, I thought it meant this," or, "Oh, I looked at it and I saw that," or, "Oh, I thought this was, you know, the generals" but it's a picture of the facilitators. And so you move around that cyclical process of creating knowledge, analyzing it, and then what? Well then what did you use those analyses for? Let's keep going. I mean, you have these participatory processes, you, collectively the women, and the facilitators, and who you describe as the intermediaries - you're analyzing this. Then what happens with it?

**Brinton Lykes** - Well, I can give one example. As Brisna mentioned before, that among the things that some of the women in this group were pushing for was a complex understanding of redress and reparations. They were very clear that you don't repair in any way from these kinds of experiences that they, these experiences are always part of the human story.

They may be storied differently through different experiences, such as the ones that these women have had. But one of the things, one of the contributions that feminists have made in the human rights arena I would argue over many years, is to heighten the awareness and insist upon the focus on sexual violence as being used explicitly in armed conflict against women

And there has been through the United Nations and through many other efforts, this increased capacity to recognize violence against women as sexual violence. And as Brisna

mentioned, the Sepur Zarco case is unheard of in many ways until it happened. That is, being able to hold some of the perpetrators responsible through a court system within the country in which the violations took place.

But from the collages, for example, that these women did in multiple occasion, they often visualize violence against women as a burden women carried. So there's a picture in one of the collages of a woman carrying a huge load on her back. And I might look at that and say, "Oh, she's being asked to carry something that's heavier than she can." No. They looked at it and said, "That's sexual violence." That is one of the challenges I think that we've faced in thinking about sexual violence is increasingly focusing on violence against women's bodies, which is one way in which- and rape - that violence took place. But there's also been what some anthropologists and some others, including Alison and I at least referred to as the hyper-visibility of sexual violence.

That is, not recognizing that women are burdened in many other ways in addition to those experiences. And so in that sense, the knowledge that's generated from this process, one of the ways of thinking about violence against women was to broaden the ways of thinking about it, and to insist that it is critical the contributions that feminists have made to heighten awareness of this. But also, we can't lose track of the multiple ways in which, and women widowed left to fend for themselves and their children by these horrific experiences. In many, many ways, one of their major demands is they want the lands that their husbands were killed for. They want their land. As Brisna said before, they don't want these experiences to persist, but they also want their kids to be able to get an education, to have healthcare and their grandkids.

And so the, that knowledge is, it's not that nobody's thought about it before, but it got somewhat displaced with this push for another set of issues. And then the other dimension, which I think is one that we discussed a lot, was that this was racialized, gendered violence. That is the particularities of the attacks on Mayan women cannot be overlooked in understanding what's happened in Guatemala, what continues to happen in Guatemala. And that's also not something that's particularly well described in some of the early feminist literature and discussions of armed conflict. In fact, it's often ignored. And they pushed this to the center of what was knowledge. I would argue-

**Patricia Maguire** - The women did?

**Brinton Lykes** -Yes. The women pushed that.

**Patricia Maguire** - It would seem to me to go back to something you were raising earlier about feminist assumptions, that one of the most radical things, if you will, that your collective work did is that you really reframed sexual violence. As not an ahistorical

individual event that could happen to any woman any time that it was homogenized, and you shifted that theoretical reframing to this was racialized, gendered. It was a weapon of war. It was related to colonialism. It was related to deep-seated racism against Mayan women. So there was a historically-specific, historical context with specific women, and you reframed how you look at sexual violence. Brisna, so you want to jump in on that?

**Brisna Caxaj** - Yeah. I think that one of the biggest contributions of doing this research is, well, generating that knowledge in terms of documenting it and having articles or books that reflect and share these insights and, what the women were. I do think that there is an, there had been a knowledge that this is a historical problem and it is related to colonialism, but I do think that in Guatemala, there is a lack of opportunity to do research and to write and to produce. And I think that there hadn't been enough written, you could say, or documented in that sense from the perspective and the voice directly of the women, but more from a more traditional sense of coming to observe, extract information, and produce it sort of outside. And I think we were very much aware of trying to also give back that information. Sort of, okay, this is what we analyze. This is what we sort of came up with. So I think in terms of the understanding and the theoretical analysis, that has definitely been a contribution.

There's still a challenge, I think, in any type of research on how the lives of the women actually change or not and, and that is still something that doesn't necessarily come from the research process. But I do think that it does have an impact on the women themselves and how they begin to also understand things in a better way.

And our maybe making that heavy weight a bit lighter, you know, in terms of how they understand it and how they see it, and how this was a weapon of war.

**Patricia Maguire** - Well, it seems that one of the things that you all discussed is that the Mayan women came from multiple communities in different linguistic groups. So you had various Mayan languages, you had Spanish, and yet somehow out of this process, women's community and relationships developed, which I think gets to Brisna, what you're talking about. So what else did the women get from it? I mean, they got to be able to discuss and impact what reparations might look like, what redress might look like. But what about the creating women's communities?

**Brinton Lykes** - Well, two things. One I wanted to say in terms of the issues Brisna was raising also is, we were heavily dependent on the interpreters. You mentioned the women from different linguistic groups and UNAMG had a longer history of working with women who served as interpreters, and Brisna can tell us a little about that too.

We recognized in this work that these women were key to the process, even though we used a lot with the creative arts, in order for them to be able to reflect across the experiences, we needed and we often needed interpreters who could interpret three and four languages, not just two languages. And I think one of the things that Alison and I regret, which I think is a part of actions that are really important to talk about and that is that we felt like we didn't have the time and space to document as much as we wanted to about the role of the interpreter.

Because they were being kept so busy constantly, and many of them themselves are survivors, right? And they had to interpret not just linguistically, but they had to interpret linguistically when there's not the Mayan, or different Mayan languages don't use the same word for some of the processes. Those words didn't exist in the Mayan language, in some Mayan languages. They were imposed by the Spanish in some ways. And then the Mayan women had to explain back to those of us who spoke only Spanish and English, which was no use whatsoever. And so they were having to juggle a variety of really complicated issues. And so that too, I think is a critically important aspect.

And I'm not really sure to what extent in popular education we see a lot of attention to this, and yet it's so completely relevant as we pay more and more attention to the ways in which who we are in the world is yolked to how we understand the world, how we envision, Brisna talked about Cosmovisions before, how important those are.

And they're linguistically connected, right? And so they can be performed in some ways, but they also need to be interpreted in some really important ways.

**Brisna Caxaj** - Yes. I think that for us, when having to work with different communities with different languages, it was important to have staff that was not only conceived as interpreter or translator in the sense of like just knowing the language and being able to translate, but they had to be women who also understood the problems and the history of the Guatemalan conflict. And also understanding the use of the violence, not just sexual violence, but all the different forms of violence that occurred during the, the armed conflict.

So there was a training process also as well, so that these interpreters could also understand what we were discussing and talking about, and also be able to translate in a better way what the women would be saying in the different, in different aspects. A lot of them had participated in different capacity-building processes as mental health promoters, also learning more about women's rights. So it wasn't just people that were hired or part of just as a moment that needed translated. They were part of the staff and they were involved in all the activities that we did in UNAMG.

And also during the legal process, for example, it was also important for them to understand some of the legal terms because some of these, this vocabulary was not part of the Mayan languages, so it was definitely very enriching. It's still a challenge. There's been moments where, for example, if maybe one of our colleagues could not be in a workshop, somebody else was contacted, you could see how it made a difference in how the women would speak and say. They also created a trustworthy relationship with the interpreters. They trusted these women to say what they were trying to say, to transmit what they were trying to say, and if, if that trust is not there, they're not going to speak as well. So that was also very important.

**Brinton Lykes** Just another comment about your question about community and Brisna, let me know if you've experienced this also. I think one of the things that we noted towards the end of the project in reflecting with women about the experience, that there were two very different issues around community, and some of this dates back to the earliest work that Brisna was describing that other women had done before this project.

There is enormous localism within Guatemala that is not just linguistically or ethnically identified, but what part of the country are you from, or which village attached to which town, attached to which department, et cetera, and in many ways, when this first project was undertaken. There continued to be a lot of threats for women to talk about these issues in their own communities. Many women were treated as if they were proposing their own bodies to soldiers as opposed to being raped. Many women had children from these rapes that there was huge silence and shrouded in. And so there, there was this notion that it was impossible to do a kind of psychosocial work or even a participatory process in their local geographic communities.

But that was still a lot of how people identify themselves and understand who they are in the world. So they were invited to come together outside of those communities. In many ways, I think in the beginning for security reasons, and it was also not easy to travel. Sometimes they had to travel long distances, and when it was the rainy season, it was harder to travel, et cetera.

One of the things that we saw over time was that being together across these diversities, differences, they created community of women. They talked about experiencing connections with each other. And so community took on another dimension to it. That is, it was articulated in at least one, if not multiple other ways through the process, which is a very interesting thing to think about.

Now, reading back the community because as Brisna pointed out initially, in terms of the reparation struggles, a lot of it has been with the women at Sepur Zarco and in the Q'eqchi' region. And there have been different ways in which different groups of women have

articulated their practices now. So there's this, multiplicity of understandings of community I think that that came out of this.

**Patricia Maguire** - one of the things, somewhere along the line, I think in some of your transcripts of things that the women had said was that, and, and Brinton, you just referred to this, is that in many instances is the women, the men in the community or that they were in relationship with, didn't want them to participate in this project because they didn't want them to talk about these things.

And I think somewhere along the line, you might have used the term, "the right to participate." I mean, you could have a participatory project, but if people don't feel like they can participate or people in their lives don't want them to, you know that that cuts things down. So how did you, how did the women and how did you deal with this resistance from either men in their communities or that they were in relationships with or in organizations that really didn't want this topic being talked about?

**Brisna Caxaj** - I think this is a challenge that has been throughout most of the time, but I think sort of diminished through time. I think one of the things that is really important is that we need to always think about the safety of the women and not putting them at risk. I think some of them independently of that sort of limitation, they still wanted to participate and they participated.

But the other thing I want to say is that in some of the workshops that we did at the regional level, and then some other ones we had like an encounter meeting, with representatives from the different region and those one where they maybe had to travel more. It was all of the women. It was some of the women that were participating in these spaces And it was always depending on their availability and willing to participate. I mean, nobody was forced into participating if they couldn't or didn't want to. There was also sometimes health reasons why they wouldn't be able to travel, for example. The other thing is they would always travel in at least a pair or groups so that nobody would be traveling alone.

Some, and not necessarily in this project, but in other spaces, there was some visits and works with family members or trying to find maybe a daughter or somebody closer who would be more willing to accompany and support the idea of the woman participating.

**Brinton** - I think another issue which we did not take up in this project particularly, but you could see it unfolding in the Sepur Zarco process after the decision, the court decision. They'd also formed their own organization, and men did become a part of that process. I think it's very challenging. It has always been challenging to me. In many instances, the population was often defined by a significant number of widows. Not everybody was a widow, but there was a large number of women whose husbands had been killed. Which

meant that it was almost a natural alliance to work with women. It wasn't only defined by our commitments to gender and feminisms. But I know in my own work, particularly up in Chajul, I am self-critical about the challenges of working with women without working with men and about the, particularly today as there are new, younger generations and through some other work I do in Guate and beyond, there are small organizations, some of which are incredibly talented, that are addressing issues of masculinities and also questioning this polarized notion of gender and recognizing that we are living in a different historical moment.

And in rural Guatemala, there are people who don't identify as being a woman or being a man, but they identify in some way as two spirited or in some other flexible understanding. And so I think sometimes, not in terms of what we did, but in terms of next iterations of the critical importance of thinking through the challenges of masculinities if we're really going to attack violence against women, is sort of, why is it that this happens the way it does?

I think it definitely was beyond the scope of this project, but I do think it's a challenge to think about and also to recognize, again within the complexities of Mayan communities, there are also divergent understandings of what the relationships are, within and across these issues.

**Patricia Maguire** - I can imagine community activists or grad students or beginning scholars who are listening to the two of you describe what was a very long-term project nested in your very long-term personal work on these issues and, and feeling a bit overwhelmed.

And so I wonder what would you tell beginning participatory action researchers? Insights or some lessons. What would you say to beginners who are listening to this?

**Brisna Caxaj** - I think one of the most important things is to have an open and sincere discussion with the participants in terms of what the expectations are. What as a researcher you are hoping to achieve or discuss, but also what they would be interested in discussing in trying to have like a consensus or a common ground in terms of that. I also think trying to use tools or artistic expressions that are very much linked to the cultural aspects of the group.

I think that is something that can only help in terms of doing that process. And the other thing is, I think also the giving back of the information. I do remember in one of the activities we were trying to make, take some pictures. And one of the women said, "You know, you always take pictures, but you never give us any pictures."

And that's also something like, I think it's those things that are important that are said. So, as a project we did sort of give everybody a picture of that event of the group so that they

also have that with them. So I think trying to always be open to what is important and significant to them, I think is something that can't be lost in the process.

**Brinton Lykes** - Yes, I think that's critically important. I think I would also say that so much of this is possible only through relationships. Relationships take a long time to build. They can't happen overnight, and I'll speak at least for people who come from the United States. I think we have a fixation on thinking we can change things from one day to the next, or we can make transformations in very short periods of time.

And to the extent to which PAR is about not just participation, but it's about action. And it's about action that's targeted towards change. It's partly targeted towards personal changes, but it's mainly targeted towards the materiality of life. The feminist physicist, Karen Barad talks about what she calls ethico-onto-epistemologies and she tries to pull out a commitment for knowledge production processes to focus on the ethical, on the ontology. That is the being. And the being in this case, she argues is material. It's materiality. Matter really matters. And then the epistemologies, and she says that in, in sort of Western European thinking we separate these ideas. We think ethics is in one place, and sort of understanding what is in another place and understanding how knowledge is generated is another place. And she argues, no. Not only are they not disconnected, but they are connected to all living systems. And I think one of the things that I myself have only much later in life begun to understand. I don't think understand is the right word. Appreciate, I guess. Because I'm not sure I do understand it, is the fact that we humans are just a tiny blip of a huge set of living systems. And that within native communities, indigenous communities, communities that have been deeply colonized, there are some of these understandings of these interconnections, and I think that if one is going to accompany, participate with, try and take actions with, walk alongside of, the variety of ways of trying to think about PAR in this sense.

With communities that believe in a pluraverse, that is believe in all living things being interconnected. If you don't believe in that and you're not at least open to being exposed to that, then it is very hard to be able to hear what's being said when they participate in these iterative processes. You can document it, but to really listen to it, you really have to do what Raimon Panikkar, the sort of Spaniard- Indian philosopher who I had the privilege of studying with many years ago when I was at Harvard Divinity School. He talks about understanding is "standing under." That is, you have to be able to stand under the realities of other people or listen from zero. And unfortunately, I think I would argue for students that are undertaking this for the first time, especially if they're doctoral students in a university context, there's such pressure on them to speak.

That listening is very hard. It's that they're expected to be able to have the answers. That's what they get graded on. That's what they get their degrees for. And a lot of this work is about being able to exercise a little bit of humility, which is also a virtue that we don't do very well with in higher education, I think, and recognize that, really believe that knowledge is being constructed here.

This is something that I deeply appreciate among the organizations in Guatemala with whom we worked and deeply appreciate in our partnership with Brisna and with whom is. They know that knowledge is in these communities. They have lived it. They have accompanied it. They have struggled to ensure that it doesn't get wiped off the earth in many ways.

I don't know how, how easy it is for people to understand that when they move into wanting to do some kind of work within this kind of a context, I feel as if I keep learning it and I think I've learned it, and then I have to back up and think, "Well, actually I didn't really hear," or "I don't understand. I heard the words, but I have no idea exactly what it meant." And then seek out through these relationships to try and understand what it meant or what it means.

**Patricia Maguire** - So, unfortunately, we have to wrap things up, although there's still so many things to talk about. We'll have to come back with Alison and do a part two. A couple of things that I want to circle back to.

Looking at the global context that we're in - you know, the emergence or reemergence of fascism, white nationalism, violence against women and the LGBTQ+ community, oppressive dictatorships, the pending world recession impacts of Covid, climate migration. I mean, all of these things disproportionately impact women, especially women of color, women in the global south, or women in the south of the north. In that context, why is it even important? Why does it matter to still try feminist-infused participatory action research?

**Brisna Caxaj** - Well, I think that the most important thing is that this perspective of research puts its focus on what the main actors have to say or how they understand the problem. So if we want to think about even solutions for these issues that are so complex and grand, there's so many things that can be said in terms of what can be done, what should be done, but really looking at or listening to the voices of the people whose lives are most impacted is important. And there's also this constant effort from governments or from, I don't know, higher research institutions that maybe are not patient enough to listen or don't care enough to listen. So I think that those of us who can do that, it is important that we continue to do that so that those voices and those points of views and those understandings of the issues also are present.

**Brinton Lykes** - I would agree 100% with what Brisna just said. I think it's also, I think that there's a sense that many of us who have benefited from the systems that you described, that have had nothing but negative impacts on so many people, and as a white person who's highly educated, I certainly have benefited from white supremacy and many of the exploitative practices that have so negatively impacted so many people of the world.

I recently read a book and heard a talk by a woman named Natsu Taylor Saito, who's a retired legal scholar, Japanese American in the US. She talks a lot about settler colonialism and structural racism, and about the inability of many people within the system to recognize that we have not managed very well to do away with exploitation, marginalization, oppression, all the very things that you just described, Pat.

So why not recognize that the system is not working for the vast majority of people in the world? And as Brisna said, the best people to tell us why it's not working are the very people who have been so directly marginalized by the colonization process and the legacies of that colonization. And I mean, maybe the second thing is, is that these processes facilitate the possibilities of walking together among people who might not have many routes for walking together with each other, many opportunities, many moments. It's also, I feel like it's a set of processes that continue to need to be reiterated, For example, as Brisna's working with, different communities there's new opportunities to iterate, Well, what have I learned now from this process that I can build on that process and think about what might make more sense the next time? So we need to think of feminist-infused PAR as reiterating itself. Iterating and reiterating. It's not a static, lived reality. It's an ongoing living, growing way, accompanying communities as they generate new ways of being in the world.

**Patricia Maguire** - Well, there's still so much to talk about. I want to thank you so much, Brisna and Brinton for talking with us today.

For listeners, there's going to be a transcript of today's podcast and a select bibliography of our guests' work and additional information about them on our companion website, [www.parfemtrailblazers.net](http://www.parfemtrailblazers.net)

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