

Global Solidarity Retreat

with Sandra Moran, Artesana

September 26-28, 2014; ongoing solidarity into 2015 and beyond



Photos by Kass Cordero

Overview

The Artesana Global Solidarity Retreat, held Sept 26 – 28th on Gambier Island, provided an opportunity for people from the Lower mainland to explore issues related to international solidarity with feminist, artist and activist Sandra Moran from the Guatemalan women’s rights organization Artesana. Sandra is also the representative for the Americas for the World March of Women. The retreat was coordinated by CoDevelopment Canada.

A diverse group of 11 women gathered to build relationships between each other and Sandra, build understanding of the work of Artesana, deepen understanding of global solidarity, and make plans for how to work together over the next 6 months. We shared delicious meals and thoughts on solidarity, went swimming / kayaking, learned about Sandra’s work, played in the night-time phosphorescence, sang songs around a campfire – and made plans for ongoing work with Sandra Moran and Artesana.

Retreat Goals

The following goals were established prior to the retreat by co-facilitators, in collaboration with staff at CoDevelopment Canada:

- Build relationships between participants and Sandra Moran
- Build understanding of and/or commitment to the work of Artesana

- Deepen understanding of global solidarity in the current context
- Make plans for how to work together for the next 6 months
- Enjoy Gambier Island, in beautiful Howe Sound

For more background on the work of Sandra Moran and Artesana, see Appendix A.

Artesana Global Solidarity Retreat 2014

Who participated?

There were a total of 11 people in attendance, ages 18 – 60+. Four of those participating were supporting the overall project: Sandra (co-facilitator), Kathi (Canadian contact and co-facilitator), Carmen (interpreter), and Mali (supporting facilitator).

The other seven participants were from a wide variety of backgrounds. Two were teaching at universities (Capilano and Vancouver Island university), one was a nurse in the downtown eastside. Two participants were students – one high school and one undergraduate – and one participant brought along her 1-year-old son. Participants, all living in British Columbia, came from Mayan, Guatemalan, Chilean, Scottish, Korean, and German heritage. All of the participants learned of the event through their networks: three through CoDev’s networks; two through Capilano’s Global Stewardship program; and one through Amnesty International’s listserv.

What happened?



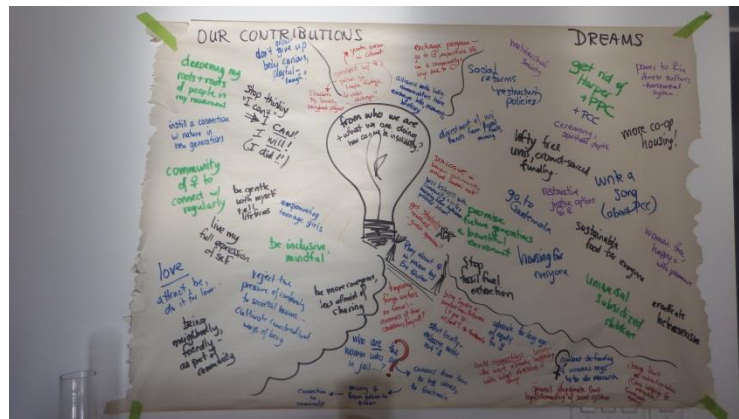
Friday the group arrived by water-taxi (40 minutes late!). Once settled in, we gathered for just over an hour. We opened with Mayan ceremony and talked about peoples’ hopes for the weekend, and what would make the experience a ‘retreat’.

Saturday morning we opened with Mayan ceremony and group agreements, and then shared individual & collective understandings of solidarity. Sandra then shared a compelling overview of ‘patriarchy, capitalism,



and colonialism' as a context for Artesana's work.

After lunch, we briefly shared pieces that inspired us before heading off for our respective outdoor adventures – kayaking and swimming (We learned that Sandra has an impressive tolerance for cold water!).



Saturday afternoon, we gathered again to build an 'alfombra' – a Guatemalan tradition that involves taking pieces of nature to build a natural carpet. We shared our reflections on this process as it might connect to our ongoing work together, and then came inside to share collectively some hopes and dreams for our solidarity work together.

Sunday morning, we began again with a Mayan ceremony and by revisiting group agreements. We heard first from Sandra, who reflected on the hopes and dreams we had shared in relation to Artesana's work and her own. We brainstormed tangible ways of working in solidarity and asked participants to choose to work a bit further on one of those ideas – in the end, three ideas were fleshed out further and shared back with the groups. After lunch, we then gathered as a circle to identify which project ideas those in the room are willing to invest time and energy into.



The facilitation Friday and Saturday was led primarily by Sandra and Kathi, with Mali taking visual notes.

Sunday was facilitated by Mali with support from Sandra and Kathi. Carmen inserted seamless interpretation when needed during Sandra's presentations or during group conversation.

Plans for Solidarity

By the end of Sunday, participants had come up with a long list of ways they aim to continue to work in solidarity. Some of those plans include meeting again as a group, building collaboration with women's groups around Dec 6th and March 8th dates, planning fundraisers with the Vancouver Mayan community, setting up an art project exchange, and supporting Artesana's research priorities in Guatemala. In addition, there were several individual or one-off projects that were identified, including a grant opportunity, coffee sales, union resolutions, document translation, selling of art projects, and being prepared for urgent action calls. For each of these group and individual initiatives, a point person was agreed upon during the weekend.

Feedback from participants

Overall participants were very positive about the experience. While only 3 out of 6 feedback forms have been collected to date, following are some comments on the experience overall:

"Excellent organizing - good promotion, amazing registration process, incredibly well facilitated"

"It was a good energy among the group. Excellent organization"

"Conversations were well-managed, creative and inspirational"

"Sweet to have a chance to connect socially as well as intellectually"

"Open, close trust building through vision work and talking about moving forward"

The highlights were food, Sandra's piece (introducing Artesana's work in broader context), the 'doodling'. Participants were surprised by the opening rituals (a Mayan candle ceremony), and by the "creative style of coordinating dialogue and generating the plan for action". They were also surprised by the diversity of the group.

Key learnings from the participants included learning about Artesana, "a very important organization doing critical work" and about Guatemala overall. They learned about epistemicide (a concept discussed as part of Sandra's overall presentation). They appreciated hearing other peoples' stories. They came away with self-reflections on being comfortable with others, and saying that solidarity work can be achieved, that that "I'm not alone!".

One participant suggested that the balance of structured/free time was 'satisfactory', but didn't elaborate. Another participant suggested 2 hours of programming Saturday after dinner, giving 2 more hours to enjoy daylight / free time. One participant suggested that it would be nice for participants to connect in advance of the weekend. The venue & food received rave reviews when mentioned.

Preliminary Learnings and Future Possibilities

Overall, it seems the structure and process of the weekend worked well – moving from big-picture visioning on Saturday into action-planning on Sunday. Some aspects of this retreat are unique to the context: a relationship of more than 20 years between Sandra and Kathi; Sandra's strong English

language ability, meaning interpretation needs were minimal; and multiple strong relationship between Sandra and solidarity work in British Columbia. In addition, Sandra and Kathi both have previous experience facilitating such retreats, and were able to build connections between participants effectively. There were serendipitous happenings that also made the weekend special – the group ended up being entirely female, and the weather was summer-like even at the end of September.

Framing the goals and objectives of the weekend in the context of the complex and substantial pre-existing relationships that Sandra holds with organizations in Vancouver is one element to consider in ongoing work. The September 26-28 retreat was framed as building solidarity in a general sense with Sandra's work, rather than supporting the work of any one organization. CoDev took the lead on making the solidarity retreat happen, has a 15-year relationship with Sandra and Artesana; other groups also connected include the Highlands United Church and BC-CASA. The intention of the solidarity retreat is to build solidarity with three potential outcomes – solidarity directly through CoDev, through BC CASA, or independently of either group. As it turns out, all three of these avenues are being pursued by the current group. Finding a way to ensure participants are familiar with significant and existing solidarity work underway, as well as ways that participants can become involved in this work, is an important area of focus for the current group and for future solidarity retreats.

Building on the energy of this weekend, there are several initiatives emerging – as noted above – and those will take shape in the months to come. There is a strong likelihood that Sandra will be able to return to Vancouver area in 2015, allowing a 'reunion' retreat, if desired, and/or another type of retreat or opportunity for connection. In addition, conversations are emerging around the possibility of trying the process of a 'global solidarity retreat' with another group, for example centring around a teacher Nicaragua who have been involved in developing non-sexist pedagogy.

In future retreats, whether with Sandra or in other contexts, a similar format might be useful. Taking into consideration the desire for more time outdoors on Saturday afternoon could mean a Saturday evening session time, if desired, and perhaps a slightly longer day on Sunday to allow time for action-planning. A future retreat may include both men and women. A more substantive presence from CoDev, or the organization involved, would be beneficial to participants and the organization.

Concluding thoughts

While recognizing that the ongoing process of being in solidarity has just begun, this Retreat was a manifestation of the ideas that many of us have been talking about for some time now. The combination of a remarkable group of women, skilled facilitation, and an idyllic getaway made for a truly remarkable weekend. While the goals of the retreat will be realised only as solidarity work continues over the next months, the ideas shared and relationships built are a foundation for ongoing solidarity not only in the months but in years to come.

Appendix A: Sandra Morán and Artesana: Background

Sandra Morán is one of Guatemala's most prominent feminists and performance artists. She is Guatemala's representative on the World March of Women, a spokesperson for the Guatemalan Women's Sector (an alliance of 33 Guatemalan women's groups), and a member of the Artesana collective.

As a representative of the Women's Sector, Sandra was the driving force behind the National Women's Forum, a body that generated participation and proposals for women's public policy after the signing of the Peace Accords.

She joined the Guatemalan human rights movement at fourteen and during the 1980s became involved with Guatemala's renowned rebel band Kin Lalat.

Sandra's human rights and musical activism made her a target for the death squads and by the late 1980s, she was forced into exile in Nicaragua, Mexico and Vancouver, Canada to escape the violence. During her years in exile, she participated in solidarity work and became involved in the Canadian women's movement. Sandra returned to Guatemala City in the mid-1990s to continue her work for women's rights. Upon her return, she came out as a lesbian, and has also been active in promoting GBLTQ rights in Guatemala.

She continues to perform percussion and poetry, and in 2011 helped form the band "Centro-America Feminista," made up of prominent women singer-songwriters from several Central American countries.

Sandra says she is "committed to understanding systems of oppression from different points of view." She believes that, to create positive social change, activists must confront internalized beliefs of racism, homophobia, and other prejudices while addressing external systems of oppression.



Artesana

The Artesana Collective pressures the State to create and apply public policy in order to prevent crimes against women, support the rights of detained women, and stop social discrimination. The Artesana Collective works to contribute to the recognition, respect and exercise of women's rights through art, sports and other forms of creativity. The Artesana Collective is formed by feminist women, defenders of human rights, artists and professionals.

Sandra speaks (in English) about the work of Artesana: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huNjSAP3XOc>