

Las Mujeres de La Hacienda Colima

By Harriet Mullaney

With my Spanish class from El Centro de Intercambio y Solidaridad (CIS), I met members of the women's cooperative at La Hacienda Colima in El Salvador. It was an opportunity to listen to their stories, see how they live, discover their hopes, and begin to understand the reality of their circumstances.

About an hour's bus ride from San Salvador, the hacienda is beautifully situated. The tract of land was expropriated and divided up among community members during the land reform of 1980. A cooperative was formed but, like so many others in that situation, the community lacked the resources to make it a going concern on their own. A mission effort of the Presbyterian Church supports and manages the project to this day. They market and sell the crafts made by the women and the unrefined sugar that they package. They are also developing an eco-tourism business that hopefully will provide more employment opportunities for the community as it strives for self-sufficiency.

It is clearly a community that is struggling as the work for the women is seasonal and dependent upon the limited marketing trips by mission personnel. But the women are wonderful in spite of the difficulties! They were so happy to have us visit them. In the beginning, we sat in a circle and introduced ourselves. More than once they thanked us for our presence, our interest and our willingness to share. One woman said, "dan golpe", i.e. these things "hit" me or have a good effect for me. It was easy to tell how much our company meant to them. (And when I told them that I would share this experience with members of the Denver Justice and Peace Committee, they really became excited!!)

After the introductions, we were given a cook's tour of the community. We visited their homes across the road from the hacienda, which are very small and clustered together for communal living. Kids seemed to pop out of every corner and beautiful gardens abounded, both adding to the feel of a friendly, welcoming place. The sugar packing takes place on their patios and we were given a demonstration of how the sacks are decorated to make for attractive packaging. We continued our tour back at the hacienda in the crafts workshop. The women mostly make jewelry and the featured items of the day were lovely beaded necklaces.



Just chatting, it became apparent how present the war still is for these people. One woman told me that things in the countryside were better before the war when they could feel more productive. She was also very aware of how great a problem thieves and gangs had become in the cities. She said that she voted in the elections but that the parties seemed pretty much the same to her. This would come as startling news to members of the ARENA and FMLN parties, respectively on the right and left ends of the political spectrum!

But the thing that touched me the most was hearing one mother tell of her hopes for the small daughter hanging on her skirt. She wants her to be able to “grow robustly”. She wants her to have a good education, although the opportunities now are very limited. She wants her to have access to better health care than is available. She hopes that she will be able to realize her dreams, but she has no false illusions that her little girl will remain in Colima. Ultimately, she wants the same things for her daughter that moms everywhere want for theirs tempered with the bittersweet understanding that they will have to be separated for this to happen.



