

Good morning brothers and sisters. My name is Patricia Montes, I'm an immigrant from Central America and I'm the director of Centro Presente, an immigrant Rights organization that has been working with the Central American immigrant community since the 80's.

We are living times in which we need a lot of reflection, solidarity and love. Thank you for opening the doors of your sanctuary for me and for the members of my community.

I was born and raised in Honduras. Honduras, my country, is the second most poor country in Latin America;

- The country that was the original Banana Republic - its economy and political life controlled by US corporations with the help of the US government;

- The country where the paramilitary group THE CONTRAS were trained by the U.S. during the 80's to invade Nicaragua.

- The country where a coup d'état, TOOK place in June of 2009, which the US State Department under Secretary Hillary Clinton supported.

Honduras is also one of the MOST dangerous countries in the world for environmental activism. According to Global Witness, more than 120 people have been killed in Honduras since 2010 for standing up to multinational companies that grab our land and trash the environment. Honduras is one of the most dangerous countries in the world for ANY kind of activism and we have the high murder rates of human rights attorneys, labor leaders and other activists to PROVE it.

I'm from a very poor family in Honduras. I was born and raised in a small town with no electricity, drinking water, sometimes no food. When I was a child I did NOT understand WHY we were poor. But when I went to high school and college, I formed my understanding of the politics of my country and I learned that more than half of the population of my county was living under the same or worse conditions. And there was an economic and political system in place in order to maintain that situation.

I moved to the US 14 years ago, and since then I have been working with the central american immigrant community. This community came to the US during the 80's as a result of the civil conflict of that time. NOW Central America, is again facing a CRISIS, a CRISIS that has been invisible in the news coverage and also within the discussion about immigration in the US.

In all these years living in this country I have realized that many people don't know the real reasons that make people migrate.

Yes, people migrate because poverty, wars, hunger and violence, but none of these situations fall from the sky. There is an economic system, a world order that is designed to keep a few with power and privilege, and maintain the majority of the people in misery.

We need your support helping us to inform more people about what are the real structural reasons behind forced migration.

Structural Violence, Corruption and impunity, Lack of employment and work opportunities, Structural Poverty, GENDER OPPRESSION, the implementation of economic policies like 'free' trade agreements like: The Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). are some of the real reasons behind forced migration.

Structural Violence is the number one reason why immigrants are coming from countries like Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. Honduras has the highest homicide rate in the world; the situation of generalized violence forces thousands of people to leave the country. Violence is provoked by gangs and organized crime, as well as by other actors, including state actors.

Violence is connected with the current high levels of impunity in Honduras. According to statistics 80% of the the crimes committed in the country are not being reported to the authorities. The Honduran population does not have faith in its public institutions.

Lack of employment and work opportunities. In Central América, labor conditions are getting worse. Wages are low, there is little job security and few social benefits. **In the name of development, US corporations go to our home countries in search of cheap labor. They tell us that it is to support our local economies but in fact they are looking to make more profits.**

Structural Poverty. Honduras has a population of 8.4 million people, and more than 6 million are poor with 4.6 million living in extreme poverty. That is more than half of the population living in extreme poverty. ***According to the United Nations, living in extreme poverty is when a family lives on less than one dollar a day.***

And poverty and violence affects women particularly hard. As a woman of color it is very hard for me to see, the difficult situation that many Central American women are facing.

GENDER OPPRESSION is endemic at this point. Since 2014 Centro Presente, has been receiving a growing number of women and children from Central America. All of them were interviewed and most of them expressed that they made the decision to leave their countries because violence. ***Escaping the gangs that wanted to recruit, rape or kill them.***

Honduras has some of the highest femicide rates in the world. According to the Center for Women's Rights (CDM) in Honduras 1 woman is killed every 16 Hours AND Members of the LGBTQ community, particularly transwomen, are at especially high risk.

In El Salvador, 90% of child victims of rape are girls and 90% of cases that are reported go unpunished.

According to Amnesty International more than 25,000 women leave Central America every year escaping violence.

These conditions exist in many of our countries of origin for different reasons. We never talk much about the role of the United States government in contributing to these conditions through its policies and 'development' programs.

Development programs like the 'free' trade agreements. The Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) an economic agreement between the US and five Central American COUNTRIES (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica and Nicaragua), and the Dominican Republic.

AND The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) THESE FREE TRADE AGREEMENTS are only FREE FOR CORPORATIONS AND THE CORRUPT ELITES IN OUR COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN. THESE ECONOMIC STRATEGIES, have been destroying local economies in migrant sending countries and generating forced migration.

But what happens if people manage to get to the United States? So we ask a lot of questions and one of them is: Is America Still a Nation of Immigrants?.

For twenty years we have been waiting and advocating for some sort of immigration reform. Not just guest worker programs and temporary protections for certain classes of people. Now in these days of Trump it feels we are very far, from any sort of legislative action on any topic, much less immigration. But if something were to pass, what do we want to see? How should our immigration system work and what implications are there for what it means to be American? Now that so many immigrants are not white, are we still willing to consider ourselves to be a nation of immigrants?

I don't think that I have the answers to all these questions, but I think it is urgent that we create spaces and that we collectively find the answers.

I grew up with the idea that I already was American, because America is a continent that means more than just the United States. But here in the U.S. "American" is an identifier that is a political term, connected with privilege and race.

After 14 years of living here I am a citizen but I will never be seen as a "regular American" because I am not white. I am not part of the dominant culture. But given our immigration trends, for how long will the dominant culture be white? What will people like Trump do to fight that trend and keep the dominant culture white? Will we see more limits of specific groups of immigrants - like the Muslim ban - will it be extended to other groups? Will they propose to remove birthright citizenship in the name of preventing anchor babies?. These are questions I hope you will keep in mind when you follow the immigration debates that will be coming in the near future.

But not everything is negative. I find much hope every day, in the mothers who seek help for their children and do not give up, in the young people who continue to struggle, in migrant children who despite their situation have a smile on their faces. I find a lot of hope here today with you, because we are gathering together to find solutions.

You can use your privilege of being white and take a proactive role in this struggle and help us to create a more humane, just and democratic society.

In these times of searching for freedom and true democracy, it is URGENT to use your privilege and demand changes in the structures of power. Use your power and your privilege to demand that the US government focus its foreign policy on addressing root causes of migration—in order to improve the living conditions of vulnerable populations, reduce impunity and increase respect for human rights in our countries of origin, as well as here in the US.

Use your power and privilege to demand a real immigration reform NOT the implementation of a program that is going to create a second class of citizens with only the right to work without enjoying all the fundamental rights that every society must guarantee.

We can educate more people about the challenges of immigrant populations, we can create more spaces of dialogue. Instead of building walls, we can build bridges between our communities.