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**Martín-Baró Initiative for Wellbeing & Human Rights at Grassroots International**

A Partner of Boston College Center for Human Rights & International Justice

## Exploring the Crossroads of Liberation Psychology and Healing Justice: Ignacio Martín-Baró Initiative at Grassroots International

M. Brinton Lykes

The convergence of World Mental Health Day and Indigenous People’s Day on October 10, 2022, is fortuitous for The Martín-Baró Initiative for Wellbeing and Human Rights (MBI) at Grassroots International. Multiple crises today due to structural racism, white supremacy, ongoing climate disasters, patriarchal violence, and the catastrophic effects of the COVID pandemic have contributed to increased anxiety and depression—widespread symptoms that are all too often referred to as a “mental health crisis.” The dominant psychological and psychiatric communities urge an increase in clinical services, including the enhanced availability of web-based or teletherapies, in response to overflowing waiting lists of those needing help.

In contrast, the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, and *Scientific American* have all recently published critical articles confirming what many of our partners in the Global South have known for generations, that is, as psychologist Sanah Ahsan writes, “I believe we’ve been told devastating lies about mental health.”

In another piece, Danielle Carr argues further that “[a] fight for mental health waged only on the terms of access to psychiatric care...risks pathologizing the emotions we will need to harness for their political power if we are going to win solutions.” These sentiments echo what Ignacio Martín-Baró said more than

thirty years ago: we are depoliticizing human distress and labeling multiple individuals suffering from the humanitarian and societal crises identified above, rather than focusing on the need for structural, transformative change.

Grassroots International and the Martín-Baró Initiative have collaborated since 2019 in a journey that draws on the liberation psychology of the late Ignacio Martín-Baró and the healing justice work of social movements with

whom GRI partners. As Martín-Baró’s multiple legacies have unfolded in the wake of the horrific assassinations of 1989 at the José Simeon Cañas University in San Salvador, MBI seeks to extend our support for community-based grassroots organizations responding to the multiple effects of war, extractive industries,



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## Our Mission & Values

Through grant-making and education, the Martín-Baró Initiative fosters psychological well-being, social consciousness, active resistance, and progressive social change in communities affected by institutional violence, repression, and social injustice.

### OUR VALUES

- ◆ We believe that the scars of such experiences are deeply seated both in the individual and in society.
- ◆ We believe in the power of the community collectively to heal these wounds, to move forward, and to create change.
- ◆ We believe in the importance of developing education and critical awareness about the oppressive policies and practices of the United States and of multinational corporations.

### OUR GOALS

- ◆ To support innovative grassroots projects that explore the power of the community to foster healing within individuals and communities that are trying to recover from experiences of institutional violence, repression, and social injustice.
- ◆ To promote education and critical awareness about the psychosocial consequences of structural violence, repression, and social injustice on individuals and communities, while educating ourselves and the wider community about the community-based responses of grantees in their pursuit of social reparation and a more just and equitable world.
- ◆ To build collaborative relationships among the Initiative, its grantees, and its contributors for mutual education and social change.

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and gross violations of human rights, and for social movements working on similar issues through a lens of healing justice. Healing justice reflects a set of beliefs and practices articulated through the lived experiences of multiple traditional communities and the praxis of social movement activists (e.g., Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective), both within the U.S. and beyond our borders. Informed by our MBI grantees, we are building new understandings about the intersections of liberation psychology and healing justice and making the road as we go.

As we have written in the MBI newsletter over the years, Martín-Baró was a social psychologist who lived and worked in El Salvador during its armed conflict in the 1980s. He was a university professor, a parish priest, and a prolific author whose writing challenged fellow psychologists to rebuild an understanding of wellbeing from the base of the experiences of *el pueblo* (the people), not the liberation of a single individual.

Martín-Baró argued that Latin American psychology needed to focus on the needs of the “majority population” rather than its scientific and social status. The action-reflection processes of the majority population generated a “new epistemology,” that is, truths of a popular majority constructed “from below.” They similarly generated a “new praxis,” in the form of transformative actions whereby community groups and organizations are developing a psychology that contributes to the liberation of the people. Those accompanying these communities had, according to Martín-Baró, three tasks through which they could contribute to these action-reflection processes: recovering historical memory, de-ideologizing everyday experience, and utilizing people’s virtues (Martín-Baró, 1994).

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### Grassroots International Vision Statement

We envision a world in which a universal commitment to the health and well-being of the earth and all its peoples, fueled by successful global movements for social, economic, and ecological justice, has transformed production practices, consumption patterns, and economic and social relations to ones based on sustainability, equity, and dignity.

**Contributing authors and editors:** Antonio Mata and Heather Brennan; Dorothy Burlage, Patricia Goudvis, Meredith Hawkins, Kayla Hernandez, Trina Jackson, Timothy Karcz, Joan Liem, M. Brinton Lykes, Serena Meyers, Maggie Russell-Ciardi, and Christina Schiavoni. **PLEASE SUPPORT OUR WORK.** Contributions can be made on-line at: [grassrootsonline.org/mbi-gift](https://grassrootsonline.org/mbi-gift) or by check made out to Grassroots International, noting on the memo line that it is for the **Martín-Baró Initiative** and sent to **Grassroots International, 179 Boylston Street, 4th floor, Boston, MA 02130**. Checks payable to Grassroots International are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by the IRS code. For questions or comments, please email us at [info@martinbarofund.org](mailto:info@martinbarofund.org).

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These ideas informed my work with Maya women during and in the wake of their experiences of gendered racialized violence and genocidal harm. I was privileged to accompany them in their response to situations of “normal abnormality” and embodied suffering. Drawing on local traditions and beliefs grounded in Mayan cosmovisions, we incorporated resources from the creative arts and Latin American pedagogies (e.g., Paulo Freire, Augusto Boal). Performing and multiplying their lived experiences of suffering and loss through collective drawings, collages, dramatizations, and testimonies, and then reflecting upon them, these women generated experiences through which they restoried multiple harms of genocidal violence. They noted the value of “being together” and identified these group processes as resources for healing as they continued to thread new relationships and rethread community, both as a geographic place and as a psychosocial experience “among women.”



Just as importantly, together the women worked to project their stories beyond the local community into national and international venues towards truth-telling and transformation of state silencing and impunity (Women of Photovoice; Tribunal of Conscience). In the small group’s creation and the broader community recognition of what had been created, Maya women played with forces that had previously constrained and oppressed, gaining some small degree of relief and control while reconnecting to their Maya traditions and developing additional resources for resistance and participation in wider community organizing efforts and national-level social movements. They reported increased “self-esteem” in the wake of the creative workshops and demonstrated persistence and protagonism in their multiple community-based actions (Women

of PhotoVoice/ADMI & Lykes, 2000). These experiences interweave traditions of healing justice and a praxis of liberation psychology and are also captured in the oral history of Maya Ixil, Nery Brito Ramírez, staff of the MBI grantee Center Bartolomé de las Casas: “I am a multicolored thread in the cloth of Ixil memory” (see p. 4).



Through these experiences, we are learning more about the language of healing justice, which does not originate in the university or in psychological training programs, but rather in the everyday practices of traditional communities and communities of color. They point away from state justice towards ancient wisdom, “an articulation of an imagination, paradigm or world-view where healing and justice are one” (Sawatsky, 2009, p. 45). Earlier articulations are complemented by contemporary social movements that emphasize that

a core strategy of healing justice is survivor-led and prioritizes collective care rather than individualistic “self-care” practices embedded in dominant psychological theories and neoliberal capitalism (and often driven by consumerism).

Drawing from the work of many of the partners of Grassroots International—whose healing work has been complemented by the MBI grantees over the past two years—we are learning from social movements’ lived experiences of healing justice. Through these experiences, they are addressing generational, collective, individual, and communal trauma from systemic violence and oppression as they center the spiritual, emotional, physical, and environmental wellbeing of their communities.

### References

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# "I am a multicolored thread in the cloth of Ixil memory"

By Nery Brito Ramírez

**M**y name is Nery Brito Ramírez. I am 38 years old, and Maya Ixil. I am from the municipality of Nebaj, one of the three municipalities that are part of the Ixil region which was affected by the civil war that Guatemala suffered for more than 36 years, and was subject to a genocide against the Ixil people, whose perpetrators remain in impunity. I am the son of Maya parents who are speakers of the indigenous Ixil language, and am the fifth of their children who survived the civil war; from a very young age I have inherited the struggle for human rights from my mother and father. I am currently a human rights defender, a farmer, and a translator and interpreter of the Ixil language to Spanish. I enjoy giving training and orienting adults and children so that they have an understanding of their rights, and can exercise them when they feel their rights have been violated and when they are being excluded from decision making processes.

Since my training in the area of masculinities that began in 2014 thanks to the Bartolomé de las Casas Center (CBC), I have been working with masculinities for social justice and gender justice involving males, including youth and adults. Initially it was difficult for me to understand what masculinities and gender justice were, but throughout the training the CBC staff accompanied me and I began to understand, and then specialized as a facilitator of these processes that I now carry out in the area where I live. I am now a man convinced of the urgency to work on a permanent basis on building a culture of care that includes the care for memory and a respect for all that our Ixil people have suffered. I am aware of how difficult it is to make these understandings a reality and to translate these understandings to our Maya Ixil cosmivision. I have learned to relate my understandings in gender and masculinities to collective memory, ancestral knowledges and promotion and protection of human rights.

Through the accompaniment processes and following the CBC I am more involved, and a fruit of that is that I am now the legal representative of the CBC foundation in Guatemala. I feel proud of that, because only in that way, little by little, we go planting our kernel of maize to eradicate a culture of racial discrimination and patriarchal domination.

Every time I am giving a talk or facilitating a workshop I feel proud of what I am doing; I feel that I am planting a kernel of maize that will in the future bear its fruit, step by step. I am conscious of my power as an Ixil man, of the legacy that has been handed down to me by my father, a tireless advocate for the rights of indigenous peoples. I also feel that I have the great opportunity to know a little bit more about the history of my people through the life story of my mother, who is still alive, and with that to be able to transfer that memory to the current generations of young girls and boys. I feel that I am a multicolored thread that strengthens the social fabric of my people and I am now sharing with others in Central America.



## "Soy un hilo multicolor del tejido de la memoria ixil"

**M**i nombre es Nery Brito Ramírez de 38 años de edad, soy maya ixil, del municipio de Nebaj, uno de los municipios que conforman la región ixil, afectado por la guerra interna que sufrió Guatemala durante más de 36 años y de un genocidio contra el pueblo ixil que aun está en la impunidad. Soy hijo de personas indígenas maya hablantes del idioma ixil, soy el número cinco de los hijos que sobrevivimos de la guerra interna, desde muy joven heredé de mi padre y madre la lucha por los derechos humanos. Actualmente soy un defensor de derechos humanos, agricultor, traductor e intérprete del idioma ixil al idioma castellano, me gusta capacitar y orientar para que las personas adultas y jóvenes tengan conocimientos sobre sus derechos y exigirlos cuando ella/os consideren que han sido violentados y están siendo excluidos en algún espacio de toma de decisiones.

Desde mi preparación en temas de masculinidades que fue desde el año 2014, gracias a la formación de la Fundación Centro Bartolomé de las Casas (CBC) desde en eso entonces vengo trabajando las masculinidades para la justicia social y la justicia de género involucrando a hombres, jóvenes y adultos. Al principio me costó entender qué son las masculinidades y qué es la justicia de género pero durante todo el acompañamiento del personal de CBC fui entendiendo y especializando como facilitador de procesos que ahora realizo en mi región. Ahora soy un hombre convencido de la urgencia de trabajar de manera permanente en la construcción de una cultura de cuidados que

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incluye el cuidado de la memoria y el respeto a todo lo que sufrió nuestro pueblo ixil. Soy consciente de lo difícil que es llevar los aprendizajes a realidad y traducir todos los aprendizajes a nuestra cosmovisión maya ixil. He aprendido a relacionar mis aprendizajes en género, masculinidades con la memoria colectiva, los saberes ancestrales y la promoción y protección de los derechos humanos.

A través del acompañamiento y seguimiento de CBC me fui involucrando y fruto de ello actualmente soy el representante legal de la fundación CBC en Guatemala y me siento orgulloso de ello, porque sólo así poco a poco vamos sembrando nuestro granito de maíz para la erradicación de una cultura de discriminación racial y dominación patriarcal.

Cada vez que estoy dando una charla o facilitando un taller me siento orgulloso de lo que estoy haciendo, siento que estoy sembrando el granito de maíz que dará su fruto, poco a poco. Soy consciente de mi poder como hombre ixil, del legado heredado por mi padre luchador incansable de los derechos de los pueblos indígenas. También siento que tengo la gran oportunidad de conocer un poco más la historia de mi pueblo a través de la historia de vida de mi mamá, que aún vive, y con ello poder transmitir la memoria a las actuales generaciones de niñas, niños y jóvenes. Siento que soy un hilo multicolor que fortalece el tejido social de mi pueblo y ahora compartiendo con otras personas en Centroamérica.



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**“Uno se siente libre un ratito de las cargas que lleva y se siente bien porque se libera y retoma energías positivas”.**

Josselin, participante en un taller del proyecto  
Connecting With Life en Santa Marta, El Salvador

**“You feel free for a little while from the burdens you carry and it feels good because you free yourself and regain positive energy.”**

Josselin, participant in a workshop held by the  
Connecting With Life project, Santa Marta, El Salvador

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## Projects Funded in 2022

### Comissão Pastoral da Terra-Maranhão, Brazil



Photo: <https://rightlivelihood.org/the-change-makers/find-a-laureate/comisso-pastoral-da-terra-cpt/>

The Pastoral Land Commission (Comissão Pastoral da Terra – CPT) will continue their initiative from the previous year, *From Banzo to Healing: Facing Pain through the Eyes of Women*. Over one hundred women from eight traditional communities accompanied by the CPT in Maranhão are participating in this initiative. The latter is a caretaking process that embodies and extends the CPT’s healing and transformative work, strengthening women’s community, autonomy, and resistance. As COVID continues to affect families in the territory, it is important that psychosocial health workers and healers support women facing violence with compassion and without judgement and with respect and knowledge for the collective lived experience.

CPT accompanies peoples of the land and waters of Maranhão, Brazil as they engage in collective struggles for land, territories, and human rights through sustainable food production and organized resistance. CPT supports the communities’ political formation by centering participants’ motivation, values, and spirituality, and celebrating their successes in struggles against injustice.

### Buena Semilla, Guatemala

Buena Semilla describes itself as a grassroots organization that supports the “social and human rights challenges faced by Indigenous communities in Guatemala, especially women, by supporting social mobilization, self and collective empowerment, the reweaving of the social fabric, reclamation of identity and voice, and increased ability to recognize and challenge gender-based violence in its many expressions.” The group will continue to expand upon its longstanding commitments and ongoing work. They note that they are growing a “sustainable and easily multipliable grassroots model of our Women’s Circle intervention – paving the way for ongoing and broader multiplication within and beyond Guatemala.” To that end, they draw “from lessons learnt over the last 10 years, on women’s desire to reconnect with the land and strengthen entrepreneurship, and on ancestral knowledge and local Indigenous identity and practices” to support current Circle leaders in their implementation of Women’s Circles in their communities. They also plan to mentor and train 10 youth as Circle leaders, to co-create and lead youth Circles. These development efforts allow for an amplification of justice across identities, communities, and the country and “directly support communities’ wellbeing in all its dimensions—mental, emotional, physical and spiritual—and at both an individual and at a collective level, by promoting safe, collective spaces for women to become agents of change in their own lives, families and communities, improve their self-esteem, agency and wellbeing, decrease their experience of anxiety and depression symptomatology, and increase social cohesion and mobilization around women’s wellbeing and agency.”



### Jíbaros Mutual Support Centers, Puerto Rico



The MBI is providing another year of funding to the Jíbaros Mutual Support Centers (CAMS), part of a larger network of mutual aid and support centers within Puerto Rico. Born in the wake of Hurricane María in 2017, the grassroots project seeks to establish conditions that provide long-term autonomy for vulnerable local communities.

With funding received last year, CAMS conducted workshops regarding local autonomy in four key areas: medical, economic, political/organizational, and food. The workshops’ approach centered

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on recovering ancestral practices in these areas and seeking pathways to livelihoods outside of the dictates of an exploitative international capitalistic economic system.

With the new funding received for this coming year, CAMS will focus efforts on bringing comprehensive health services to rural communities, which are often isolated and underserved due to a lack of available transportation options. To this end, CAMS will purchase a van to be able to better reach and serve these areas. Services to be brought to these communities will include acupuncture clinics, herbal medicine preparations, seedlings for home gardens, primers on ancestral holistic medicines, and workshops on medicinal plant cultivation and use. CAMS also anticipates being able to incorporate political organizing of the people as part of these workshops.

### Centro Bartolomé de las Casas, El Salvador and Guatemala



The Bartolomé de las Casas Center and Foundation (CBC) works to heal communities of survivors of armed conflicts in Chalatenango, El Salvador and Quiché, Guatemala who were affected by political, social, and historical trauma. This initiative has facilitated Nuku Yolb'e, a dialogue between survivors within those two groups, which has supported the affirmation and inclusion of intercultural and ancestral practices. This has linked the two communities together in exploring and redefining collective memory by strengthening mental health, supporting resilience, and centering human rights. This year, the project aims to enhance the intergenerational exchange between these communities to diffuse memories and

knowledge to their descendants and other social actors. By hosting weekly radio programs before the general population, social organizations, churches, and government entities in Quiché and Chalatenango, they will engage in documenting dialogue between spiritual leaders and community actors on ancestral wisdom and integrating culturally appropriate psychosocial support.

### CURCUM Collective in collaboration with the Lajee Center, Palestine

The Martín-Baró Initiative at Grassroots International is providing a second year of funding to the CURCUM Collective in collaboration with the Lajee Center to further their development and use of a training guide for Palestinian Community Health Workers (CHWs). The collective is a coalition of indigenous Palestinian activists, social workers, psychologists, CHWs, and leaders of local grassroots organizations and the Lajee Center in the Aida Refugee Camp. Funds from last year enabled the collective to hire a psychosocial supervisor/healing justice practitioner to provide weekly in-person support for the CHWs. Weekly healing justice circles enabled CHWs to reflect upon and deepen their understanding of the colonial conditions and psycho-political circumstances affecting their own well-being and that of the families they serve. Funding also facilitated the completion and printing of a first iteration of a workbook focusing on healing justice for use by the CHWs.



Funding in 2022 will enable the CURCUM Collective and the Lajee Center to provide five months of intensive training using the workbook that they have developed, training that will enable the CHWs to help refine the workbook to better meet their needs. Funding will also allow CURCUM to print copies of the revised workbook to share with partners in Gaza and with other refugee camps in the West Bank.

## Projects Funded in 2022

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### Domestic Workers United, Brooklyn, NY, USA

The Domestic Workers United entered their first year of funding with the Martín-Baró Initiative at Grassroots International (MBI at GRI) in 2021. This NYC-based group is a grassroots collective of workers, women of color, and immigrant women of primarily Caribbean, Latina, and African background working to “build power, raise the level of respect for domestic work, establish fair labor standards in the domestic work industry, and build a movement to end exploitation and oppression for all.” The group was funded by the MBI in 2021 to support their efforts toward “health, healing, and recovery” that they had begun at the onset of the pandemic. Their main initiative connects speakers with expertise in healthcare, finance, and economics, with access to benefits available to workers, to join the collective and allow worker leaders and members of DWU to continue to recover from the hardships of the pandemic as they relate to illness, fear of illness, losses of family members and friends, job loss, and housing and food insecurity. The group states that over the last year the “MBI funding helped DWU keep [their] members and their families fed, less socially isolated on a weekly basis, more informed about available benefits and sources of economic relief, and more aware of how to acquire primary medical care in New York City.” With their funding, the group was also able to produce a podcast on “24 Hr Live-In Caregiving as Modern-Day Slavery,” organize weekly gatherings and organic food distributions, partake in eight DWU town-halls and one retreat day, and provide nearly a dozen workers with pandemic relief through the Excluded Workers Fund. Throughout the course of these presentations, and given the developing concerns around the changing nature of the pandemic and the continuous trauma of loss that it carries, DWU discovered other areas for expansion of support and reflection for the coming year. They hope to conduct more retreat-style gatherings with the new cycle of funding—including opportunities for massages for members! The group ultimately intends to dedicate these new funds to more intensive discussions and activities that target these challenges, allow for respite, and uplift the voices of and advocacy for the rights of domestic workers, their families, and their communities.



### Colectiva Actoras de Cambio, Guatemala



The Actors of Change Collective, founded in 2009 in Guatemala, works to empower Mayan women faced with sexist, racist, and classist violence to regain their autonomy and live a fuller life. The methodology of their most recent project, titled “Healing Action for the Recovery of Powers and Lives for the Construction of Territories Free of Sexual Violence,” consists of a series of healing training processes with leaders of local women’s organizations including Colectivo Poder y Desarrollo, Local CPDL and more. The networks developed have continuously put women’s lives at the center, thus building supportive communities free of sexual violence and grounded in restorative and healing justice.

The Actors of Change Collective will continue to elaborate on their collaborative strategies of action between diverse local, regional, national, and international

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levels to expand their reach to more women. Their previous projects have been met with success in creating safe, intergenerational communities of action to empower women to take ownership of their voices. Women from the Mayan networks have also reported an increase in agro-ecological activities, including improved ancestral knowledge for organic cultivation and sustained vegetable and medicinal plant gardens, despite being faced with challenges of water scarcity. Moving forward, Colectiva Actoras de Cambio will continue to implement training grounded in relationship-building healing strategies in order to foster communities of autonomous women affected by sexual violence and racialized gendered violence.

## Kebetkache Women Development and Resource Center, Nigeria



The Kebetkache Women Development and Resource Center is a grassroots organization founded in 2003 working in Nigeria and the West Africa subregion to promote women’s rights and environmental justice through education, advocacy, and community action. They support and mobilize women in the region to speak out against violence and injustice specifically in the highly militarized Niger Delta.

As a follow-up and extension of their work last year, the Kebetkache Center will hold a Feminist Health and Economy Retreat for 40 women who are environmental justice campaigners and human rights defenders. Their specific objectives are to strengthen the women’s self-esteem, promote trauma healing, mitigate the impact of violence and human rights abuse of women, and promote the emergence of a feminist economy in the Niger Delta.

The retreat will provide a feminist space so that the women—some of whom are survivors of violence—can freely discuss and share their concerns; get and offer counseling; and engage in physiotherapy and psychosocial interventions. The retreat’s goal is to re-energize the participants and their work as human rights defenders and environmental justice campaigners, as well as to strategize about building a feminist economy. Through this work, they strive to empower and strengthen the women’s movement.

## KOURAJ, Haiti

Since the Martín-Baró Initiative first partnered with KOURAJ in 2021, the situation in Haiti generally and for LGBTI individuals in particular has only worsened. This group of *masisi* activists continues to fight against discrimination and stigmatization of LGBTI individuals in Haiti. *Masisi* was originally a derogatory term used by Haitians against LGBTI people, but it has been appropriated by the group and used to unite LGBTI people by turning the insult into a source of identity and pride. The overriding goal of KOURAJ is to fight against discrimination and stigmatization of LGBTI people by changing the attitudes and behaviors of all Haitians toward them. KOURAJ uses awareness sessions, trainings, and focus groups to further this aim.

Their first year of funding from MBI was used to provide mental health support and know-your-rights trainings to LGBTI individuals who had been discriminated against, denied their basic rights, or who were HIV-positive. In 2022, KOURAJ will extend that work through organizing human rights trainings with community police so that they can better understand and support the rights of LGBTI individuals. KOURAJ also hopes to set up a system to track and record cases of homophobic acts against LGBTI individuals, as well as work with other human rights organizations to accompany victims of homophobic violence as they seek justice.



## Projects Funded in 2022

### Connecting With Life, El Salvador



Connecting with Life plans to continue with the activities initiated last year to promote the mental health of survivors of the armed conflict in Santa Marta and their families. Through their radio project, Connecting with Life will increase the general population's awareness of mental health and promote the commitment to cultivate it. They will develop two self-help groups to encourage the reconstruction and re-signification of the most difficult events that occurred during the war in order to strengthen survivors' resilience and self-esteem.

The organization will continue with workshops designed to be self-care and self-help spaces specifically for women who experience stress, anxiety, or depression as a result of the war, domestic violence, or gender-based violence. For men with a history of domestic or gender-based violence, they will promote new skills, behaviors, and thought processes that will allow these men to inter-

act with women using principles of equality and non-violence both inside and outside of the home.

All Connecting with Life's activities are designed with a psychosocial focus—that is, to influence the individual in the context of their interpersonal relationships, both of which are impacted by trauma. In this way, people can recognize that although their traumas mark them in particular ways, they are sustained by certain social, political and cultural structures.

### Afaq Jadeeda, Gaza, Palestine

Afaq Jadeeda (New Horizons) was founded in 2000 and was among the first group of Martín-Baró Initiative grantees at Grassroots International. The project is located in the Nuseirat Refugee Camp in the middle of the Gaza Strip and is one of the most densely populated camps in Gaza. It is home to tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees and has been the victim of constant siege since 2007, having endured five military offensives by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Afaq Jadeeda's mission focuses on community sustenance and development by providing supportive services to children and women who are suffering from the violence under Israeli occupation and attacks.



The grant provides assistance to Afaq Jadeeda for projects addressing the psychosocial wellbeing of over two hundred children from ages ten to sixteen who are traumatized by the daily shelling and continual overhead presence of menacing drones. Afaq Jadeeda engages children in creative and recreational activities including crafts, hobbies, drawing therapy, and writing therapy. The children are encouraged to express their feelings while the families, teachers, and community members are educated about how to physically and psychosocially support them. One hundred mothers are trained on how to help the children when there is an Israeli incursion or long-time military offensive against Gaza and the camp. Afaq Jadeeda develops models to integrate these healthy practices into the camp, thereby helping to sustain the community despite the adverse conditions imposed by the Occupation.



# Forgiveness in the Aftermath of Tragedy in the Balkans

By Antonio Mata

While studying abroad in Zagreb, Croatia during the Spring of 2022, I learned about war, peace, and reconciliation from the interdisciplinary courses that I took at the European Center for the Study of War and Peace. I was intrigued by the concept of forgiveness and the cyclical nature of revenge, as articulated by the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf, which I encountered in a course titled “Philosophy of Peace and Hospitality.” Wanting to acquire more insight regarding forgiveness in the aftermath of tragedy, I was able to interview Boston College Professor of the Practice Joshua Snyder, who wrote his PhD dissertation on transitional justice.

The Bosnian War in the 1990s exemplified how violence can lead to large-scale tragedy. With the Yugoslav/Serb army’s complicity and the support of “irregulars from Serbia,” Bosnian Serbs began a process of systematic ethnic cleansing after Bosnia declared its independence (Regan 2013, p. 200). By April 14th, 1992, the Bosnian government had reported widespread massacres inflicted by the Serbs (Regan 2013, p. 200). Not only did the Serbs lay siege to Sarajevo, but they also established detention camps where Muslims were raped, tortured, and killed (Regan 2013, p. 200). Although seemingly unimaginable in the wake of such atrocities, signs of forgiveness have since been observed in the Balkans.

Defining forgiveness is challenging, particularly when assessing its presence among individuals like those in the former Yugoslavia who endured devastating acts of violence. Professor Snyder suggests that forgiveness is “the foregoing of the legitimate claim for revenge.” Further, he holds that once one has foregone this claim, what arises may be a desire to move towards benevolence as it concerns the perpetrator, that is, “willing the good” for the perpetrator. I found that Sara Hassan’s (2020) story of Edin Trkjlja exemplifies Professor Snyder’s understanding of forgiveness. Hassan (2020) described Trkjlja as a Bosnian survivor of the war who forwent revenge after having encountered his perpetrator whom he recognized from his life prior to the war. Trkjlja was severely injured by a Serb tank shell in Sarajevo (Hassan 2020). He lost three fingers and a toe and “sustained severe damage to his right leg” (Hassan 2020).

Following the war, at a restaurant in Republika Srpska (Serbian area within Bosnia-Herzegovina), a bartender informed Trkjlja that he knew the man who caused his injuries; this led to a face-to-face encounter between Trkjlja and his perpetrator (Hassan 2020). Trkjlja rejected an offer made by a Serbian friend who volunteered to kill the man in question (Hassan 2020). Instead, Trkjlja invited his alleged perpetrator to have a

drink with him and his friends at the bar, indicating that he had decided against revenge. Exemplifying Professor Snyder’s understanding of forgiveness, Trkjlja did not “wish war on anyone,” believing that it “only brings sadness to good people” (Hassan 2020).



During our interview, Professor Snyder clarified that an acknowledgement of wrongdoing is essential to forgiveness, whether it be in the form of a perpetrator admitting their wrongdoings and apologizing or a survivor having the space to openly speak on their experience of injustice; he also added that his

theological understandings suggest that “to forgive and forget” is “very problematic.” Supporting this position, Professor Snyder argued that “to forget the wrong is actually to perpetuate injustice.”

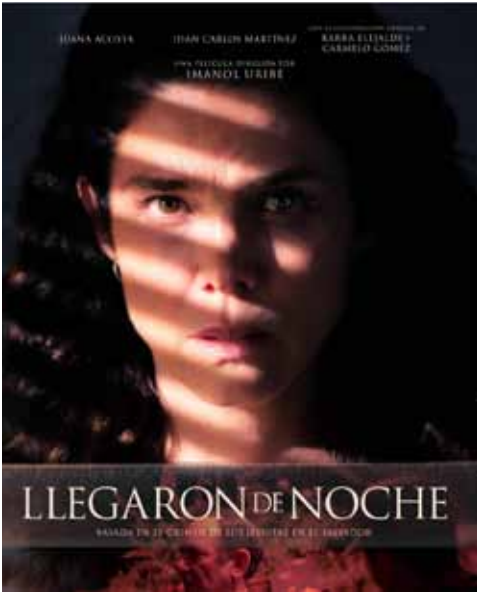
In the Bosnian War’s aftermath, examples like those above indicate signs of forgiveness and acknowledgement of wrongdoing in the Balkans. Professor Snyder specified how forgiveness can be both a healing and damaging

thing. He asserted that forced forgiveness can be “re-traumatizing,” but a survivor-centered approach to forgiveness can be liberating. The *process* of forgiving someone is key to him. He claims that if someone is not obligated but rather given the opportunity to forgive in an environment with mental health support, then forgiveness can be a “huge relief.” Adding to the idea of liberation, he argued that forgiveness—when implemented properly—can also foster the “healing of memory” and generate a “willingness to trust again.” Overall, Professor Snyder’s comments implied that survivors of the Bosnian War should not be obligated to forget their perpetrators’ wrongdoings, though forgiveness might benefit them.

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# Seeking Truth with Justice

Remembering the Martyrs of El Salvador and one of their legacies, the Martín-Baró Initiative for Wellbeing and Human Rights

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**7:00 PM**

**Fulton 230, Boston College**

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**M. Brinton Lykes**, Boston College Center for Human Rights & International Justice & the Ignacio Martín-Baró Initiative for Wellbeing & Human Rights, Grassroots International

*\*Lucía Cerna, housekeeper in the Jesuit Community at the Universidad Centroamericano*

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