

Photojournalist visits a Plan community in Jalapa, Guatemala

Paola Gianturco photographs and interviews the women who staff the child-protection hotline



To learn more about Paola Gianturco, please visit www.paolagianturco.com.

Around the world, women are working together to find solutions to some of their communities' most serious problems—including domestic violence, poverty, illiteracy, inequality, and disease.

In January, photojournalist Paola Gianturco visited a Plan-sponsored community in Guatemala to document the lives of women who staff a child-protection hotline. Every afternoon, women volunteers answer calls on the “Child Rearing with Love” hotline, helping parents work through

stress and develop healthy relationships with their children.

The hotline is part of a child-protection project that Plan has spearheaded in Jalapa since 2005. The women identify cases of mistreatment and work with the government and community organizations to combat child abuse and neglect.

Paola chronicled, through images and words, the contributions of these Guatemalan women who are tirelessly working toward change.

What inspires you as an artist and as a journalist?

My photography and writing are both inspired by the effective work that women worldwide are doing to improve the future for their families and communities. They may have little by way of material resources, but they have creativity, energy, and determination—and they are making impressive progress. I have documented low-income women's work and lives in 55 countries in Asia, Latin America, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. These women are my heroes; over time, I am convinced, their work will change the future for all of us.

Why did you travel to Guatemala?

I wanted to photograph and interview the women volunteers who operate Plan's child abuse hotline in Jalapa—and who teach parents how to build supportive, caring family relationships, instead of violent ones.

What was the most memorable part of your trip?

As our car drove up to the last house where I was to conduct an interview, firecrackers exploded in the street—and the neighbors whom our hostess had paid to ignite them scurried away. She had covered the cement floor of her house with fresh pine needles and put bright welcome posters on the walls. She gave us a party even though she had little—except a husband who beat her and a son with epilepsy. I was touched to tears by her generosity and honored by the value she placed on our conversation. She reminded me how important it is for people to be witnessed: to be seen, to be heard.

What is something surprising that you learned during your journey?

I was surprised by the women who wept when I asked them to tell me about their lives. These women had, themselves, been abused. Their suffering not only gives rise to special sensitivity and understanding, it fuels their urgent determination to halt violence against children. I admire the passion with which these women approach their important work. They are resolute in their determination to spare children the experiences that they, themselves, were forced to tolerate. Their work enriches their lives with meaning at the same time it benefits the next generation.

Clearly, you have a passion for documenting the lives of women around the world. Where did this passion come from?

You're right: I'm working on my fifth book about women around the world. What inspired this focus?

First, I'm a woman. I find it galling that women are discounted in so many countries. I want the truth about their power to be known, understood, and acknowledged. I feel fortunate to have the skills that may help make that happen.



Photo by Paola Gianturco

Second, I graduated as the 1960s women's movement began. I've always been a women's rights activist. For example, I was on the board of AWID...Association of Women's Rights in Development; taught executive institutes on women and leadership at Stanford University; was a principal in the first women's ad agency in the United States.

Last, I have two dreams about my work. First, that it will help explode the arbitrary, limiting assumptions about gender roles that constrain women around the world. Second, that it will help people understand each other more completely. I'm convinced that understanding is the necessary precursor of collaboration to tackle the problems that beleaguer women and their families everywhere.

What was the most important take-away from your trip?

Plan's work on child protection in Jalapa is crucially important even though its current financial situation is fragile.

Paola Gianturco is the author and photographer of four books: "In Her Hands: Craftswomen Changing the World" (2000), "Celebrating Women" (2004), "¡Viva Colores! A Salute to the Indomitable People of Guatemala" (2006), and "Women Who Light the Dark" (2007). All of her books are philanthropic projects. Paola donates her royalties to carefully selected nonprofit organizations that relate to each book's content.

Paola's work has been exhibited by the United Nations, UNESCO-Paris, United States Senate, Field Museum in Chicago, Smithsonian Folklife Festival, International Museum of Women and the Museum of the African Diaspora, San Jose Museum of Art, and Norton Simon Museum. Paola is also an accomplished lecturer, having spoken all over the country, including at the American Craft Museum, Peabody Museum, National Museum of Women in the Arts, and Smithsonian Renwick Gallery.