

Maria Choc: The Ongoing Struggle for Land, Justice and Indigenous Rights in Guatemala

GHRC Fall 2011 Speaker's Tour

Biography



Maria Cuc Choc is a 32 year-old Guatemalan Q'eqchi' woman who, at great personal risk and sacrifice, accompanies indigenous farming communities in their struggle for land and justice.

The youngest of eight siblings, Maria grew up in a poor household where self-interest and personal comfort took a back seat to working for the greater good. Maria's father, Manuel, was a community organizer who helped subsistence farming communities defend their land and their rights. Unfortunately, during the internal armed conflict this was seen as a subversive activity and he was constantly targeted by the army. He spent much of his life on the move, and his family was also lived under threat of attack. Yet, despite these inherent

dangers, Manuel's passion and commitment to human rights work served as an example and an inspiration to his children.

Maria struggled as a young woman to raise her four children, work, and study all at the same time. It was difficult, but over time her confidence grew and so did her sense of solidarity with other women struggling against poverty, discrimination, and violence.

She began to accompany her older siblings, Ramiro and Angélica, as they organized communities against the encroaching threat of land-grabs and forced evictions by large landowners and international mining companies. As Maria became more aware of the historic struggle of the indigenous communities for access to land, her commitment and participation grew even deeper. But soon she became aware that walking in solidarity with the oppressed can often come at a very high cost.

Her brother Ramiro spent years accompanying the Maya Q'eqchi' people of the Izabal region in their ongoing struggle for land reform. In 2008 he was arrested on trumped-up charges and condemned to six years of prison in a sham trial designed to put an end to his work and silence him as an activist. Despite being eligible for parole in February of this year, he remains imprisoned in El Pavón, one of Guatemala's most notoriously dangerous jails.

Her sister Angelica was married to Adolfo Ich, a school teacher and community leader. In September of 2010, security guards belonging to a nickel mining company (CGN-Hudbay) attempted to forcibly evict the farming community of Las Nubes, El Estor from their land. When the families protested the illegal eviction, they were met with gunfire. Adolfo, worried for the

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safety of the children, approached the head of the security forces pleading for an end to the violence. He was shot in the neck and beaten with machetes. He died shortly thereafter.

Instead of intimidating Maria or breaking her spirit, these events only served to solidify her solidarity with the communities. Maria stands with, and gives voice to, the most the disadvantaged population imaginable: indigenous women living in isolated rural villages, largely illiterate and non-Spanish speaking, enduring extreme poverty, and who find themselves in a struggle against unimaginably powerful economic interests.

One of Maria's most profound commitments is to the women of Lote 8, a remote village in El Estor. In January of 2007, hundreds of soldiers, police, and CGN security guards arrived at the community to carry out an illegal eviction. Homes were destroyed and the families -- from grandparents to newborns -- were forced to flee into the surrounding mountains. All of their belongings, including clothes, bedding, food, cooking implements, etc. were destroyed or stolen. One week later the forces returned, this time while male residents were away from the community. Police, soldiers, and security guards gang-raped 12 female community members. At least two of the victims were pregnant at the time and lost their babies. Another victim, a newlywed, has been told that she cannot have children due to the violent rape.

Maria accompanies these women as an activist, translator, counselor, and friend. Despite the financial, physical, and emotional toll, and despite the enormous risk to her own safety, she can see no other path to travel. "My family has led me to this life of solidarity," she affirms. And then, with a smile and a sigh, she adds: "These communities are my life."