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OF SOJOURNERS

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Short Takes

SIX QUESTIONS FOR...

Gilda Larios

Bio: Helps local women's groups in Central America, Mexico, and Haiti start and run grant-seeded community lending pools. *Website:* www.maryspence.org

1 How has your life journey led to your current work? I grew up in Guadalajara, Mexico, and currently live in Mexico City. For many years I worked with refugees from Central American conflicts. More recently, I have spent 14 years working with women in poor rural communities in Mexico and Central America. Currently I work for Mary's Pence: I meet with women as they consider starting an ESPERA Fund lending pool, and accompany them as they get it going and make decisions about making loans within their community. (ESPERA Funds, a project of Mary's Pence, are community lending pools for women.)

2 As you think about participating in the body of Christ, what's your biggest passion? My entire upbringing has been in an ambiance of the mystical body of Christ, an ambiance not only Catholic and Christian, but deeply Mexican. We are a people inescapably embedded in the future and indebted to the past. The power of ancestors and totems—ancient rock, mottled corn, and cactus pear—is alive in us. We live in communities of belonging. This mystical presence, however submerged for a time, has always been a part of me. It is the only love I've never questioned.

3 How does Mary's Pence differ from individual-focused microcredit? One of the aspects that makes me appreciate the Mary's Pence model of lending is that the women themselves, not an organization or the bank, own the process and the money; the whole community receives benefit. When a woman starts a business raising chickens, she buys from other local women selling eggs. The women don't think in terms of accumulation, but of the circulation of the money and goods locally.

4 What concerns you? Globalization is changing remote rural communities' way of life; money to spend for personal and family needs is perceived as the savior. The land and its vitality have been spoiled [in pursuit of] export profit. Most



Katherine Wojtan

families have an economic refugee—a son, mother, or father that has emigrated, often without documents, to support his or her family. Very little of what once fostered culture has been conserved. There is less and less to barter; the threat of even less moves communities to unsustainable life choices.

At first, the ESPERA Fund was seen only as a tool for women to accrue capital. This perception changed gradually. The projects empower women as active participants in their communities' stability and culture.

5 What in your work has really surprised you? I've learned to be patient and follow the lead of the women. They come from a culture where men have all the resources and women have little voice. We have to provide experiences that help them gain confidence in their abilities and a greater understanding of their rights and power.

Easing the stress and work of their daily lives creates a space for focusing on their cultural wisdom—connection to nature, community, past and future, and the mystical. I've learned that "small" is beautiful—sanctifying even.

6 What gives you hope? The women involved in ESPERA Funds gain strength to live their daily lives, moment by moment, eager to learn, always coming up with diverse ways to help their families survive and to foster vibrant communities. It has been a surprising grace.

—Interview by Elizabeth Palmberg

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Faith in Action for Social Justice

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BY MICHELLE ALEXANDER

