

Project Title: *Espacios de Autocuidado*: Awareness and Healing for Women in Iztapalapa, Mexico City

Project's location: Mexico

Sponsoring College: Lewis & Clark College

Project Leader: Daniela Zamora Alcaraz, Mexico, Lewis & Clark College, UWC Mahindra College

Project's Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/xochicalli.floresiendounidas/>

Section I: Narrative

About Espacios de Autocuidado

In response to the violent killing of women in Mexico, the presence of normalized gender-based violence and, thus, the deprivation of women's freedom, security and access a peaceful life; this project sought to promote self-care spaces in the municipality of Iztapalapa in Mexico City. The project's goal was to prevent gender violence against women and girls (VAWG) in young women through the creation of self-care spaces to (a) spread awareness about the root causes of VAWG and effective tools to prevent it and (b) promote healing through community building, art expression and empowerment through self-defense.

This project emerges from a deep concern about Mexican women's safety in relation to VAWG. I was born and raised in Mexico, a place where every day 10 women are violently killed for the sole reason of being women; a place where women live in constant fear and feel insecure. Studying abroad thanks to different academic scholarships (such as United World Colleges and later, the Davis Scholarship) motivated me to prepare both professionally and personally to one day, contribute back to my community. Therefore, this project is very personal to me and my community because it represents my first grain of sand. My experience participating as a parliament member in the first Women's Parliament in Mexico City and as an intern at a feminist fund that supports feminist grassroots organizations, alongside with my college academic research centered on the violent killing of women (also known as femicides), allowed me to identify a gap in Mexican public policy that had not been addressed yet: the prevention of VAWG in youth communities.

I chose the municipality of Iztapalapa as my host site for several reasons. First, it is one of the most marginalized municipalities in Mexico City, with the highest rates of poverty and overall violence. Second, given that it is also one of the most densely populated municipalities, resources are scarce. Third, unfortunately, most efforts tend to look away from this part of the city because it has long been stigmatized. Lastly, it is the place I proudly call home. To bridge this gap, this project was directed to young women in marginalized neighborhoods in Iztapalapa.

Espacios de Autocuidado's development

Working in Iztapalapa was an incredible learning opportunity. Despite overcoming several challenges, the project was able to accomplish its objectives. *Espacios de autocuidado* was carried out as a hybrid (in-person and virtual) three-week summer course for 50 girls aged between 12 to 18 years old. One of the Project's first accomplishments was the creation of strong working relationships with the local government, local feminist grassroots organizations and collectives. Regarding the collaboration with the local government, since the beginning, I was convinced that I wanted to collaborate with them to make sure that this effort was institutionalized. Collaborating with the local government was not easy, especially during a global pandemic where VAGW prevention is not at the forefront of their priorities. Although I found it very challenging to speak to the local authorities to win their vote of confidence, I was able to establish a successful collaboration. Initially, the local government seemed skeptical about (i) how the community would react to a summer course focused on the prevention of VAWG, as they assumed that the community would be apprehensive about this issue, (ii) the possible lack of interest from the youth, (iii) possible COVID-19 outbreaks. Fortunately, after a series of meetings with different authorities; the mayoress of Iztapalapa approved the project and committed to supporting the project by (i) recovering and adapting one of the most important community centers for my target community; and (ii) helping with the promotion of the summer course in the nearby neighborhoods.

Regarding the collaboration with local feminist grassroots organizations and collectives, I was able successfully work with a wide range of young women from national and international universities; local feminist organizations that work creating awareness about VAWG in the city; and passionate activists and artists. These collaborations were particularly important given that the organization that had initially committed to working with the project in the planning phase, was no longer available in 2021 and notified me with very short notice. This was a very stressful event where I doubted about future of the project. After

the organization cancelled, I started reaching out to different feminist networks and the UWC community. I was very impressed by the number of local actors that were interested in my initiative and were excited to be part of it. Although this represented more work than I anticipated, it turned out to have a positive effect on the project, because most of the people that participated were very experienced, came from different contexts and realities, were experts on their subjects and were ready to work with the girls in Iztapalapa.

A second accomplishment of this project was the creation of a holistic curriculum that explored five pillars: community building, self-care, self-defense, art expression and feminist theory. The classes imparted were: (i) Mexican folkloric dance with gender perspective, (ii) musical expression with gender perspective, (iii) women's circles, (iv) body exploration, (v) self-defense, (vi) cinematographic appreciation, (vii) female rivalry awareness circles and (viii) personal development and vocational orientation.

A third accomplishment of this project was the community's response. Going into the project, I had some reservations about the community's response to the project given that the feminist movement and overall feminist initiatives had not been seen a good light in previous years. Therefore, I implemented very careful marketing strategies. The project received positive comments from both the participants and their parents. During inscriptions and the final feedback sessions, I was pleasantly surprised to hear from most parents expressed "this is what my daughter needed", "she needs to learn how to take care of herself, especially in the moments our country is going through". From the participants, most of their comments included that they felt grateful about the community they created, that they felt safer than before, that the project provided an opportunity to explore feminism through different artistic disciplines.

A fourth accomplishment of this project was unveiling a pressing need in Mexican public policy, the focus on VAWG prevention in youth. As I mentioned earlier, the local government seemed skeptical about the project as they had never explored these topics with youth. The local government acknowledged that through this project they discovered that there is a "forgotten need" by most of their social programs. Currently, they have expressed that they want to focus on a similar project that can be expanded to other areas in Iztapalapa, increase the project's impact and I have been invited to collaborate with them.

The previous accomplishment leads me to the last one, the creation of the civil society organization *Xochicalli: Floresiendo Unidas* (*Xochicalli* comes from Nahuatl language and means "house of flowers", and *Floresiendo unidas* means flourishing together). As part of the project's sustainability efforts, I am in the process of legally registering *Xochicalli* as a civil society organization. I wish to continue with this project's initiative given that I reside in Mexico City and my professional career centers around VAWG prevention. Projects for Peace represented an incredible opportunity to consolidate and align my career with this project's initiative.

COVID-19-related challenges

One of the biggest challenges of the project was the COVID-19 contingency. It was very challenging planning an in-person summer course given the unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 health emergency. By the time I was planning the project, the number of cases had decreased and it was expected that activities were going to reopen. Nonetheless, safety was a top priority. First, I looked for a venue with appropriate ventilation and access to open spaces. Second, during inscriptions, I established a condition to access the summer course, the commitment to following the COVID-19 protocol with mandatory use of masks, temperature screening and a health questionnaire. Thus, participants, participant's parents, volunteers, staff members and workshop facilitators signed a letter of commitment.

Another challenge that I faced was creating a welcoming and loving space for the participants after almost a year and a half of confinement. For most participants, it was the first time they left home after the lockdown, most of them had experienced a loss due to COVID-19 and at the beginning seemed fearful of interacting among each other. However, as days passed, we saw the participants feel more comfortable. This taught me how resilient humans can be to adapt and have fun even under harsh circumstances.

The last COVID-19 related challenge was the transition to an virtual format due to the increase in cases in Mexico City. Going into the third week of the project, Mexico City hit the third wave of COVID-19 pandemic and in-person activities were cancelled. This was the second moment where I doubted about the project's future. The order to cancel activities was very abrupt and I had to restructure the project's activities to migrate to Zoom. It was a very stressful moment given that there is generalized fatigue with virtual activities. Logistically speaking, this transition was very difficult, but my team and I managed to successfully hold the last week of online sessions. The project's in-person closing ceremony where the local government and *Xochicalli*

award diplomas of participation is still pending. We expect to hold a big event where participants can share with their families what they learned in the summer course. We expect to hold this activity on October.

Definition of peace

I define peace as freedom. Many women in Mexico are prisoners of fear of being killed for the sole reason of being women. For me living at peace means feeling safe, capable, empowered and accompanied by other women. I believe that my project contributed to peace in the short term by providing safe and loving self-care spaces for young women to explore new ways of interacting with women, to understand feminism and apply it in their everyday life, to understand how violence is normalized and how we can combat it and to freely explore art expression and body exploration. This is particularly relevant for the context of Iztapalapa, where these spaces are not common due to the lack of resources and even awareness that they are needed. Moreover, I believe that this project contributed to peace in the long-term by creating awareness in the local government about the necessity of these spaces and by supporting the creation of a civil society organization that wishes and expects to have a positive impact in Iztapalapa. This experience changed the way I saw the world. I feel more connected to my community and to the girls that participated in the project. This experience motivated me to continue looking for opportunities to create more spaces for young girls in Iztapalapa, and I expect to accomplish this through *Xochicalli: Floreciendo Unidas*.

Personal statement:

“I learned that peace means freedom, self-care, community and love. *Espacios de autocuidado* or self-care spaces are not only necessary for personal growth but also for setting the building blocks of a supportive community. I learned that no matter how harsh the circumstances could be, young women can flourish together when opportunities are available.”

Daniela Zamora Alcaraz
danielazamoraalcaraz@gmail.com

Section II: Project's photos

Photo	Description
	<p><i>Participants from Group B (15 to 18 years old) warming up for their body exploration class in the second week of classes.</i></p>
	<p><i>Fernanda Ixchel and Lluvia Cristal creating a rap song for the musical expression class.</i></p>
	<p><i>Some participants from Group A (12 to 14 years old): Andrea, Akane, Diana, Zoé, Fernanda, Guadalupe, Itzel, Jocelyn, Kamila, Karen, Estrella, Laura, María Fernanda, Marissa Sofía, Mónica, Naybe, Shiory and Vanessa; and project leader Daniela Zamora</i></p>