



# *Stories of Hope*

2019-2020

*Women Leaders, Strong Communities*





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## ***Introduction***

Dear friends,

Around the world, UUSC is proud to work with women leaders whose experience and imagination embolden communities and inspire lasting change. Did you know that half of our partner organizations are led by women?

This year, UUSC’s Guest at Your Table theme is **Women Leaders, Strong Communities**. I am delighted to introduce you to four inspiring women leaders from UUSC partner organizations. Pelenise is responding boldly to climate change, Marta and Wai Wai are advocating for women in the face of hatred and violence, and Monica is using the arts to bolster resiliency and leadership among migrants. These women, and so many others UUSC has the privilege of supporting, are transforming what freedom and justice look like in their communities.

You can be part of bold, brave, creative social change with UUSC and our partners by sharing these stories and participating in our Guest at your Table program. Please support this year’s “guests” and the thousands of individuals UUSC and our partners reach by contributing online at



uusc.org/guest or by using the reply form at the back of this booklet.

As Toni Morrison said during her 1979 address at Barnard College, “The function of freedom is to free someone else.” May we use any measure of freedom that we enjoy for the sake of the freedom and dignity of others.

In fellowship,



Rev. Mary Katherine Morn  
President and CEO

**Visit [uusc.org](https://uusc.org) to learn more.**



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## **Story 1**

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### **Pelenise Alofa**

*“We all have challenges, but the climate change challenge is global.”*

Made up of low-lying islands in the Pacific Ocean, the small nation of Kiribati (pronounced Kir-e-bas) reaches an elevation of ten feet above sea level at its highest point.

Being so low to the sea, the people of Kiribati are already being severely impacted by the climate crisis that they did little to create. They experience coastal erosion, salinization of fresh water sources, and damage to infrastructure. Now, with the rapid acceleration of climate change impacts, many fear they may have to leave their homes for good.

The possibility of having to leaving home is deeply felt by families who have lived on Kiribati for decades, some even for centuries. There is an intense fear of being displaced because it means losing the ancestral connection that



many feel to the islands. “We are people of the land, so it’s very hard for us to think about moving,” Pelenise Alofa, a human rights leader from Kiribati, explains. “We want to adapt and stay.”

Making matters worse, the people of Kiribati often lack the support they need to make the necessary adaptations. Instead, adaptation funds are primarily used to protect public property, leaving the majority without support or funding to look after their homes. “There is funding for us to protect public property, but not individuals,” Pelenise explains, referring to local efforts to construct makeshift sea walls to protect houses from the ever-increasing flooding. “If you want to protect your lands and your home, you have to build it yourself.”

Through her work as the director of **Live & Learn Environmental Education Kiribati**, Pelenise has stepped in to meet this need. Live & Learn Kiribati, one of UUSC’s six partners responding to the climate crisis in the Pacific, travels to meet with communities in person, hearing about the issues they are facing and providing direct services.

During these site visits, Live & Learn Kiribati staff install water tanks to increase access to clean water, help individuals build sea walls on their properties, and advise them on how to advocate for their rights at the local

level. They also collect stories to inform national advocacy efforts so that the government’s response can be better informed by community experiences. Throughout these activities, Live & Learn emphasizes the importance of education and community-led programs. Pelenise explains, “they need to know they have a right to clean water, to food, and to protect their land.”

As Pelenise helps communities access their rights, UUSC helps connect her with others facing severe climate impacts and amplify community-led solutions. For example, Pelenise attended the First Peoples’ Convening on Climate-Forced Displacement, which UUSC organized in October 2018. To her, “The beautiful thing about the convening was to bring us together, to bring our voices together – and we became stronger.”

With UUSC’s support, Pelenise is now traveling to four outer islands of Kiribati that Live & Learn had not yet reached, conducting programs on health, waste management, and how to plant mangrove trees to mitigate sea level rise. “We’re in the third phase now, and it’s growing bigger,” says Pelenise. “Our voices are bigger here in Kiribati.”

### **Go deeper and take action:**

- Learn more about the climate convening organized by UUSC at [uusdc.org/first-peoples-convening](https://uusdc.org/first-peoples-convening).





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## Story 2

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### Marta Velásquez

*“We have faith that it can be different.”*

Marta Velásquez became a feminist organizer in Honduras when she was twenty years old. “I have always been a leader,” she shares. “That helped me a lot in the work of organizing.”

Now a well-known human rights defender, or *Defensora*, Marta leads an all-volunteer feminist organization several miles north of San Pedro Sula. “We started to build community feminism from the grassroots,” she explains, “[to make] women empowered and aware of their rights.”

Marta’s organization is able to expand its reach and impact on women’s rights by joining efforts with other *Defensoras* in Honduras. Through participating in a platform of women’s organizations called **Foro de Mujeres por la Vida** (Forum of Women for Life), Marta’s

group collaborates with other organizers around the country. Together, they work to empower women and eradicate gender-based violence, which is prevalent in Honduras and one of the primary drivers of migration from Honduras to the United States.

Founded in 2003, Foro de Mujeres supports and connects feminist efforts, providing services for victims of gender-based violence and bringing organizers like Marta together for convenings and trainings. With UUSC’s support, Foro documents abuses against women, provides legal and humanitarian support for women who have faced violence, and supports families who have experienced a femicide – the murder of a woman because she is a woman. “This is the only platform of its kind doing this type of work,” Marta shares. “[Foro] supports our activities, all related to violence and femicides because that is the key issue in the region.”

Foro has a significant impact on women’s rights in Honduras – and on Marta personally. “It has been, for me, the best feminism school,” she explains. “It gives me hope to support other women who can use some of our strength to break out of the roles that have been imposed on them, to keep seeking strategies of resistance that deconstruct the patriarchy.”

While Foro and the *Defensoras* have



made great strides, Marta shares that the situation in Honduras has been deteriorating since the 2017 presidential election. Widely viewed as fraudulent, the election led to ongoing protests that have been met with ruthless violence and increased militarization. “The Government has given orders to the military: shoot to kill,” Marta explains. Given the increased militarization and violence against those who express dissent, UUSC is also supporting Foro as they help organizations like Marta’s to improve their security and ensure the safety of their *Defensoras*.

In the face of these challenges, including the recent dangers, Marta feels confident that the work of Foro and the *Defensoras* will continue to bring about change. “We could have disappeared a long time ago, but we are still standing against so many adversities,” Marta shares. “We will continue to fight for dignity and justice.”

### **Go deeper and take action:**

- Read UUSC’s recent report about human rights in Honduras at **[uusc.org/honduras-report-2018](https://uusc.org/honduras-report-2018)**.
- Learn more about journeys to Honduras with the UU College of Social Justice at **[uucsj.org/honduras-por-la-vida](https://uucsj.org/honduras-por-la-vida)**.
- Take action to support human rights in Honduras at **[uusc.org/action-center](https://uusc.org/action-center)**.



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## **Story 3**

### **Wai Wai Nu**

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*“I wanted to change the narrative.”*

Along with her entire family, Wai Wai Nu was imprisoned in Burma (Myanmar) at the age of eighteen. Even though they had committed no crime, Wai Wai’s family was held in squalid conditions for seven years because her father was a politician with an opposition party.

While in prison, Wai Wai met others who had been arrested unjustly and listened to their stories. Noticing that the women prisoners in particular lacked legal support and felt hopeless about their futures, she began to develop a passion for women’s rights. “Just because they are women, they have less access to justice,” Wai Wai explains.

Because of these experiences, Wai Wai planned to become a lawyer focused on women’s rights upon her release at the age of twenty-five. “I thought I should



help these women to have dreams,” she shares. Shortly after she was released, however, the eruption of ethnoreligious violence caused Wai Wai to alter her plans.

Wai Wai and her family are Rohingya, an ethnic minority group that practices Islam in the predominantly Buddhist country. Ethnic and religious minorities in Burma have long suffered violence and discrimination, including through a citizenship law put into place in 1982. The law recognizes a set number of national ethnicities as full citizens, other ethnicities as partial citizens, and, in the case of the Rohingya, no citizenship status at all.

Six months after Wai Wai was released from prison, violence erupted against the Rohingya in Rakhine State, the region where Wai Wai grew up and which has the highest population of Rohingya people. The government and other groups were sharing Islamophobic propaganda targeting Rohingya men, who they portrayed as violent threats to the country. It was then that Wai Wai noticed the propaganda focused only on Rohingya men, and the response from the Rohingya community was male-dominated as well.

Recognizing the lack of groups sharing the stories of Rohingya women, Wai Wai decided to start her own. She founded **Women Peace Network**, an

organization that works to uphold the rights of women and minorities through advocacy, trainings on international law, peace-building education, and organizing meetings of Burmese civil society organizations. “Our strategy is to find commonality within the country and build solidarity and resilience among the people,” Wai Wai explains. She also notes that, although it will take time, society is “starting to realize the enemy is not the Rohingya.”

With UUSC’s support, Women Peace Network advocates for human rights in Burma, conducts leadership trainings, and brings together leaders and youth from different religious and ethnic backgrounds to build solidarity across divisions. Throughout its work, the group also works to ensure that the perspectives of Rohingya women are heard in the public sphere. “I was able to bring the face of Rohingya women to the public,” Wai Wai shares.

### **Go deeper and take action:**

- Read more about UUSC’s work in Burma at [\*\*uusc.org/burma-updates\*\*](https://uusc.org/burma-updates).
- Take action to support human rights in Burma at [\*\*uusc.org/action-center\*\*](https://uusc.org/action-center).
- Make a donation to UUSC today at [\*\*uusc.org/givetoguest\*\*](https://uusc.org/givetoguest).





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## Story 4

### Monica Curca

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“It helps to be the loudest activity happening in a space,” Monica Curca shares, referring to her portable boombox. “I carry that everywhere!”

Monica is the founder and director of **Activate Labs**, a DC-based organization that brings art, music, and storytelling into spaces migrants pass through on route from Central America, such as food kitchens, shelters, transit points, and border walls. Art supplies and boombox in hand – “ingredients for joy,” as Monica calls them – Monica and her team from Activate Labs travel to these politicized and often-violent spaces with the goal of bringing peace and healing.

Before founding Activate Labs, Monica often found that creativity and self-expression were low priorities for other organizers, who focused more on policy change. “One thing I always wanted to

bring in was the arts and storytelling,” Monica remembers. “There was always a major push back against that for some reason. It was like, ‘that’s the silly stuff.’”

Far from being seen as frivolous, creative spaces are recognized by Monica and her team as being essential to meeting universal human needs. “We need joy, creativity, art, and self-expression to return us to ourselves, and regain what the trauma lost for us” she explains, “because you can just get lost in the sorrow.”

Monica can speak to this personally. When she was five years old, she came to the United States as a refugee from Romania, where her parents experienced persecution under the Communist regime. “We lost a lot of ourselves in the process,” she recounts. “We didn’t have a lot, but what we did have was our stories.”

This is why, at fraught locations like the border wall, Monica’s team uses the sound system and art supplies such as paint brushes and banners – not to lead an art lesson or share a message in the loud speaker – but to help people share their own stories in whatever way they choose, whether it be dance, song, painting, or participatory video making. “We’re just bringing the ingredients, and they’re creating it,” Monica explains.



For example, with UUSC's support, Activate Labs is currently working on a participatory video project, which was initiated and is being led by a group of Salvadoran migrants. Activate Labs trained, provided the equipment, and accompanied the group from Mexico City to the Tijuana-San Diego border, as they documented their experiences and recorded advice for others seeking asylum. Now, the group is documenting their experience of being held in immigration detention for more than six months. Once they finish the video, it will be screened around the U.S. and used to help future asylum-seekers gain a better understanding of the migration route and asylum process.

Given her own experiences as a refugee, accompanying the group to the border also had a personal impact on Monica. Reflecting on her time with the Salvadoran migrants, she shares that she was "redeeming what was lost in a way [she] never thought [she] could."

### **Go deeper and take action:**

- Explore immigration justice study resources at [\*\*uucs.org/immigration-justice-resources\*\*](https://uucs.org/immigration-justice-resources).
- Get involved in sanctuary and solidarity efforts to support asylum-seekers at [\*\*uus.org/tools-for-taking-action\*\*](https://uus.org/tools-for-taking-action).
- Make a donation to UUSC today at [\*\*uus.org/givetoguest\*\*](https://uus.org/givetoguest).



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