

Marin alcohol watchdog targets Mexico gender violence



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An activist with a San Rafael nonprofit traveled to Mexico this week to examine the nexus of alcohol and violence against women.

Mayra Jimenez, advocacy manager for Alcohol Justice, visited an area in Chiapas controlled by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. She was among about 3,000 women attending an international forum advocating for women's safety.

Like the Zapatista women's first congress in March 2018, the spark for the second event was the disturbing rate at which women in Mexico and Latin America are murdered. No men were allowed to participate in the congress.

Jimenez said her organization, which monitors the practices of the alcohol industry, is particularly interested in the role that the consumption of alcohol might play in this violence, and the culpability of corporations marketing alcohol in these countries.

"What we as an organization look to address is recognizing alcohol as a disinhibiting substance," she said. "It's not the source of violence, but it is very often directly connected to violence."

"The big thing for us," she said, "is breaking down who are these major corporations that are at the head of this market."

Formed in 1987 as one of the original projects of the Buck Trust, Alcohol Justice advocates for changes in alcohol corporations and alcohol policies to keep youths and communities safe and healthy. In 2019, \$1.2 million of its \$1.5 million budget came from the Buck Trust.

Michael Scippa, a spokesman for Alcohol Justice, wrote in an email, “The rapacious, exploitative nature of Big Alcohol’s marketing activities creates millions of victims annually around the world.”

“Since our founding here in Marin in 1987,” Scippa said, “our public health-driven mission has been global as well as local, from our early work with the World Health Organization, up to our current work with the Global Alcohol Policy Alliance.”

According to the World Health Organization, at least 400 women have been murdered during the past decade in Ciudad Juárez on the U.S.-Mexico border. In 2018, 3,580 women and girls were killed in Mexico, according to government reports.

There are various theories about what is leading to the violence against women. The prevalence of violent gangs in Mexico and much of Central America, and competition for factory jobs, are two possible explanations.

Jimenez said that three large corporations, all headquartered in Europe, control much of the world’s alcohol sales: AB InBev, Heineken and Diageo. She said the mass impact these European corporations are having across the world is “reproducing this new type of colonial experience.”

All three corporations have initiated projects they described as efforts to increase women’s empowerment and reduce gender-based violence.

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation, whose ranks by some estimates are one-third women, staged an armed rebellion and occupied San Cristobal on Jan. 1, 1994, the day that Mexico signed the original North American free trade agreement. The Zapatistas were concerned the accord would undermine the subsistence agriculture relied upon by indigenous communities and increase inequality.

The Zapatista Army has never disarmed and claims to control much of the state of Chiapas. The Zapatistas, however, have been nonviolent since the 1994 uprising, and the Mexican government has not challenged them. Political decisions are made in community assemblies.

Alcohol Justice’s suggestion that there may be a connection between violence against women and alcohol is not a novel idea for the Zapatista women. When they created their Revolutionary Women’s Law in 1996, one of its 10 tenets was a ban on alcohol and other drugs, such as cannabis, heroin and cocaine. The women burned down some bars prior to adoption of the law.

Jimenez said attendees of the gathering were notified in advance that no alcohol or drugs would be permitted, and she said the ban was enforced.

On this score, the Zapatista women have something in common with the American women who played such a large role in the adoption of Prohibition in the United States in 1919. Temperance advocates asserted then that alcohol abuse was leading to domestic violence and poverty.

Scippa wrote that Alcohol Justice is not advocating for an outright ban on alcohol, “Just higher taxes, reducing availability and minimizing advertising.”

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