

A New World Opens for Haitian Women in Santiago: Spanish class for immigrants does more than teach a language

Claudine didn't dare venture out alone without her husband. Clerina's 11-year-old son went everywhere with her to interpret for his mother. Like many Haitian immigrant women, they were apprehensive and felt vulnerable in the strange and sometimes hostile land of Chile.

That was five years ago.

Today, Clerina, who grew up in a rural household of eighteen people, firmly declares, "*Ya no necesito traductora*" (I don't need an interpreter anymore) and dreams of becoming a lawyer. Claudine who also grew up in the Haitian countryside, imagines opening a pharmacy some day.

What changed their outlook—and their lives—is a Spanish language program developed three years ago by the EPES Foundation, which has close ties with the Lutheran church nationally and is an ELCA Global Mission-supported ministry. The language program is based on the popular education methodology that is the organization's hallmark. It is said that communication opens doors, but this program, designed with Haitian women in mind, does much more than teach a language: it empowers.



Clerina and Claudine are two of twenty-five participants in the current cohort. Both participated in last year's course and are now enrolled in the advanced group that meets simultaneously with beginners in a one-room schoolhouse style. A cacophony of voices fills the hall, adorned with colorful banners hailing "*Migrar es un derecho*" (Migration is a right), "*Niños con derechos sin fronteras*" (Children have rights with no borders), and "*Las personas migrantes tienen el derecho a la salud*" (Immigrants have the right to health).

The EPES Foundation has more than forty years of experience training community health monitors to advocate for the right to health in low-income communities across Chile. Working with immigrant communities or offering a language class had not been in their plans before 2019. Government rhetoric saturated with discriminatory views towards immigrants in general and Haitians in particular prompted EPES to examine how that policy affected access to health care. The study concluded that public health facilities are permeated with cultural bias, and that the language barrier is a major factor shaping the care that Haitians receive.



Working together with municipal immigration and health services offices of the municipality of El Bosque, EPES produced informational materials in Haitian Creole to explain health care rights to the Haitian community. Some residents were unaware that neighborhood clinics provide free services to everyone, regardless of immigration status.

EPES made what its executive director Sonia Covarrubias describes as “a political decision” to work with Haitian communities because profound cultural and language gaps compounded by racism leave them particularly susceptible to abuse. The focus on Haitian women emerged upon ascertaining that many remain at home, dependent upon their male partners who arrived in Chile years earlier and are more fluent in Spanish.

From the outset, the EPES team proposed to offer far more than a Spanish language class. Each weekly session is divided into two parts. The first half focuses on vocabulary building, grammar and pronunciation. After a break for healthy refreshments, the second hour involves conversation circles that strengthen spoken Spanish while exploring various broader subjects: What is it like to be a Haitian woman in Chile? What are your dreams? Participants have also taken field trips—riding public buses to learn the routes—to various municipal offices to become acquainted with available services.

Consistent with EPES’ view of popular education, these women learn to analyze and to reflect on the challenges they face both individually and collectively in their daily lives. They acquire tools that extend beyond the Spanish language, building self-confidence and enabling them to envision their future in Chilean society. It is an integral learning model that differs from many language courses designed for immigrants.

“The immigrant experience entails much emotional pain,” Sonia Covarrubias notes. “You are far from your country, your culture, your family. The popular education methodology creates trust that enables immigrant women to gradually feel at ease.”

“Bonjou! Koman ou ye?” (Good morning! How are you?) So, EPES staff member Macarena Villaroel greets participants one Monday morning in early June. After practicing verbs in the past, present and future tenses, the women are divided into four groups. During the next hour, they plan imaginary business ideas or work projects, prepare a group CV, and role-play job interviews.

Three weeks later, members of Alma Negra, an Afro-descendant pride organization, arrive carrying a large bag of bright scarves, soon transformed into headwraps and turbans on the heads of every participant. Commonly worn in rural Haiti, these headwraps are here reclaimed as powerful symbols of cultural identity. Rooted in the Ghanaian, Nigerian, and Senegalese heritage of enslaved women, the various different turban styles of folding and wrapping the scarfs around their head represent subtle gestures of resistance.



These activities reflect the two complementary dimensions of the EPES approach: integration without assimilation into a cultural melting pot, and the development of the confidence and skills needed to navigate Chilean society, while remaining assertively conscious of their rights. After graduation, participants may return to EPES for a well-being program that continues to strengthen both their Spanish fluency and self-confidence.

Also central to this process is cultural facilitator and EPES staff member Pharayoub Borgello, who arrived from Haiti in 2017. “Without Phara, this course, with its intercultural challenges, would have been impossible,” Sonia says. Phara interprets between Spanish and Creole while also helping to define the course’s pace and suggest subjects for group discussion.

Having traversed a similar path herself, Phara understands from personal experience the difficulties Haitian immigrant women face—and she also knows that with persistence they can be overcome. She has become a role model for the Haitian women she supports, yet she insists, “I learn so much from these women. All of us have become aware of the rights we have. EPES has opened a new world for me and every woman in this program.”

The session has flown by. Before stepping back into the streets of Santiago, Clarina, Claudine, Phara and their friends remove their headscarves, but carry their heads high with a new dignity.



EPES was created in 1982 to promote health with dignity for the poor through empowerment, mobilization and collective action. It began as a program of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile (IELCH) and maintains close ties nationally and internationally with the Lutheran church and is an ELCA Global Mission supported ministry. EPES became an independent, non-profit Chilean foundation in 2002.

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