

# WOLA

Advocacy for Human Rights in the Americas

## ANNUAL REPORT 2018



A migrant family from Honduras leaves a shelter in Chiapas, Mexico

AP Photo/Moises Castillo

# WOLA

## COMMITTED. COURAGEOUS. CONNECTED.

WOLA is a leading research and advocacy organization advancing human rights in the Americas.



WOLA Director for Defense Oversight Adam Isaacson (right) and Director for Mexico and Migrant Rights Maureen Meyer meet with a migrant advocate near an informal border crossing in El Ceibo, Guatemala.

In 2018, the Trump administration demonstrated not just a lack of concern for human rights in the Americas, but also contempt for the very notion of human rights itself. From the family separation policy, to announcements of a “military option” in Venezuela, to open approval for corrupt leaders in Central America, to ambivalence toward Colombia’s tenuous peace process, 2018 saw a dramatic and alarming reversal of two decades of human rights progress in the region. In this challenging context, WOLA worked as a crucial counterbalance to the worst rhetoric and policy proposals coming from Washington.

In areas where significant progress has been made in recent decades—like the U.S. embargo on Cuba and the anti-corruption campaigns of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG)—the policy reversals have been particularly challenging and heartbreaking. Authoritarian tendencies have swept across much of the Americas, following the cues given by the Trump administration. New populist leaders rose to power and pushed the bounds of their executive privileges, democratic elections were marred by irregularities and repression, and civic space continued to close. Indeed, the future of democratic governance faces existential threats across our hemisphere.

Migration crises continued and increased as millions of Venezuelans fled their home country in 2018, while a humanitarian crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border extended throughout the year. Regional cooperation and national-level policies failed to protect the rights and lives of many vulnerable migrants. Perhaps no policy epitomizes this failing more dramatically than President Trump’s 2018 family separation policy, which tore migrant children away from their parents and put kids in cages. WOLA played an important role in the pushback that ostensibly ended the brutal policy. Through our multifaceted *Beyond the Wall*

*Campaign*, we ramped up our coordinated effort to expose migrant abuse, protect the right to asylum, advocate for human rights-focused immigration and border security reforms, and combat the Trump administration’s falsehoods.

WOLA’s advocacy made a critical difference on many fronts. Once again, our communications work rose to new heights as WOLA became an important voice in the media’s coverage of hemispheric events—countering false narratives on Venezuela, creating clarity on the administration’s brutal approaches on the border, and truth-telling on President Trump’s retrograde Cuba policies. WOLA’s teams also deepened critical relationships with partners on the ground, supporting the work of a network of regional organizations pushing for a peaceful, democratic solution to Venezuela’s crisis; protecting vulnerable Afro-Colombian and indigenous groups; and engaging in consistent collaboration with hundreds of partners throughout the region.

WOLA’s trusted experts put their deep relationships and advocacy skills to the test with their ability to push beyond *denuncia* to *propuesta*, putting actionable policy proposals on the table for policymakers in the United States and the region.

As we look toward the future, we find hope in WOLA’s continued strength and partnerships. Across the region, countless advocates and organizations are tirelessly pushing for human rights, democracy, justice, and peace. WOLA has a crucial and unique role in supporting and magnifying regional civil society’s work. In the face of mounting repression, this work is more essential than ever before.

We thank you for your own efforts on behalf of human rights over the past year, and your support for WOLA.

Best regards,



**Steven Bennett**  
Chair of the Board of Directors



# WHAT WE DO

RESEARCH, EDUCATE, ADVOCATE.

**We envision a future where public policies protect human rights and recognize human dignity, and where justice overcomes violence.**

WOLA tackles problems that transcend borders and demand cross-border solutions. We create strategic partnerships with courageous people making social change—advocacy organizations, academics, religious and business leaders, artists, and government officials. Together, we advocate for more just societies in the Americas.

## WOLA PROGRAMS

- Central America
- Colombia
- Citizen Security
- Cuba
- Defense Oversight
- Drug Policy Reform
- Mexico
- Migration and Border Security
- Venezuela

**WOLA President Matt Clausen, Director for Defense Oversight Adam Isacson, and Representative Jim McGovern meet Afro-Colombian leaders in Santander de Quilichao, Cauca, Colombia.**



WOLA Assistant Director for Venezuela Geoff Ramsey took this photo at the Simón Bolívar bridge between Venezuela and Colombia, where thousands of Venezuelans cross each day.



# OUR IMPACT

## BUILDING AN INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO THE VENEZUELAN CRISIS

As Venezuela sank further into a humanitarian and political crisis, WOLA mobilized a coalition of major human rights organizations from around the Americas to shape the regional response. In keeping with our recommendations, countries in the influential Lima Group have supported a peaceful and democratic solution to the crisis, and some governments have taken measures to help Venezuelans forced to flee their country amid economic collapse.

WOLA has emphasized the need for robust, multilateral diplomacy, and our work in 2018 helped lay the groundwork for the still-tentative steps toward dialogue seen in the first half of 2019. We were influential in strengthening the regional consensus around the need for a return to democracy in Venezuela that rejects both military intervention and measures that deepen the suffering of the Venezuelan people.

## PUSHING BACK AGAINST INCREASING MILITARY POWER IN MEXICO

WOLA's advocacy helped defeat Mexico's proposed Internal Security Law, which would have put human rights at risk by expanding and legalizing the military's role in public security. We issued several commentaries and statements about the law throughout the year and submitted an Amicus Curiae brief to the Mexican Supreme Court, contributing to their deliberations and determination that the law was unconstitutional. As the new administration in Mexico begins to roll back this crucial progress with the newly created National Guard, WOLA continues to advocate for civilian police forces and strong accountability mechanisms for Mexico's federal security forces.

# BRINGING WAR CRIMINALS TO JUSTICE IN EL SALVADOR

WOLA's advocacy in the U.S. Congress supported victims and their attorneys and advocates in the El Mozote case in El Salvador, the first case of its kind to make its way in that country's justice system after a 25-year amnesty law protecting criminals of war was overturned in 2016. More than 1,000 civilians were massacred in El Mozote by Salvadoran troops in 1981; the battalion that led the massacre was trained by the U.S. military. In February 2018, WOLA led a delegation to the site, including staff who work on the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee and who advise members of the Appropriations Committee. On the delegation we met directly with the El Mozote community, the courageous lawyers pursuing their legal case, local organizations supporting the case, representatives at the U.S. Embassy, the Salvadoran Attorney General, and others who can help improve justice and increase accountability in the region. Through three additional visits to El Salvador over the year, WOLA continued to reinforce congressional interest in the El Mozote case, which has become a test of judicial independence and an indicator of whether the country can reckon with the grave violations of human rights carried out during the brutal civil war.



**WOLA Vice President for Programs Geoff Thale at the El Mozote Massacre memorial with Dorila Marquez, a survivor of the massacre and President of the El Mozote Human Rights Association.**

# FIGHTING TO SAVE COLOMBIA'S FRAGILE PEACE PROCESS

WOLA spearheaded efforts in the United States to protect Colombia's peace process from crumbling under the new administration of President Iván Duque Márquez. We emphasized to U.S. officials the importance of sustaining political and financial support for the peace accords and pushing back against the Colombian government's attempts to derail it. WOLA helped to protect activists by shining an international spotlight on the surge of assassinations of social leaders, particularly Afro-Colombian and indigenous activists. By protecting these leaders and their communities we allowed the Truth Commission, established under the peace process, to conduct the consultations needed to piece together what really happened during the half-century of armed conflict.

# MOBILIZING FORMERLY INCARCERATED WOMEN TO FIGHT MASS INCARCERATION IN THE AMERICAS

WOLA and its partners have led the charge against the growing rates of incarceration of women in the Americas. The disproportionate sentencing and incarceration of women has had a devastating effect on large numbers of families and communities. Yet the stigma of serving time has prevented affected women from speaking out until now. In 2018 WOLA helped to connect activists from the United States with a newly-forming group of formerly incarcerated women in Argentina to learn from each other and inspire an increasing wave of activism to bring a halt to these injustices.

## ACCOMPANYING COUNTRIES IN THE PROCESS OF DRUG LAW REFORM

WOLA's drug policy team supported civil society partners and governments in the Americas in developing reforms that prioritize human rights, health, and development and that challenge approaches based on criminalization and repression. Even though the UN drug treaties expressly forbid it, one of the most important drug policy reforms now underway is the regulation of cannabis for non-medical use—pioneered with Uruguay's 2013 law, which WOLA has accompanied since its inception. As Canada prepared to become the second country in the world to legalize and regulate cannabis for adult use, WOLA Director for Drug Policy and the Andes John Walsh testified in the Canadian Senate about the lessons from Uruguay's experience and ways that countries opting to regulate cannabis can be sure to align their domestic reforms with their obligations under international law.



**WOLA Director for Drug Policy and the Andes John Walsh testifying in the Canadian Senate.**

# WOLA'S BEYOND THE WALL CAMPAIGN

*WOLA's initiative to defend human rights and migrants in the Trump era*

Over the past two years, we have seen an unprecedented attack on migrants and incredibly harmful rhetoric and policies that will have impacts for generations. WOLA has been fighting back at the border, on Capitol Hill, and with partners throughout the region. Here are a few of the ways that our innovative and multi-faceted Campaign has made a difference:

## • SUPPORTING MIGRANTS' ASYLUM APPLICATIONS

Asylum seekers with an attorney are five times more likely to be awarded asylum in the United States, and attorneys need detailed research and expertise to effectively make the case for the thousands of vulnerable families and children requesting asylum. With that in mind, WOLA partnered with Temple University's Beasley School of Law to create a series of annotated reports describing the harrowing conditions people are fleeing in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, thus providing attorneys with information that otherwise would have been too burdensome or difficult to document. The first round of reports was finished late in 2018. Within the first month of them being made public in early 2019, over 1,200 attorneys and advocates had accessed the first iteration of these materials, and the information will play a crucial role in winning cases for asylum seekers.

# • COMBATING THE ROOT CAUSES OF MIGRATION IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Despite the rhetoric and lies coming from the White House, we know that families are fleeing Central America due to its high levels of violence and lack of economic opportunity. For many migrants coming to the U.S. border, staying in their homes is simply not an option, and the circumstances forcing them to migrate can only be resolved if there are functioning police and judicial systems with effective commitments to protecting the safety of their citizens. This is why WOLA has doubled down on its efforts to help establish and support anti-corruption efforts in Central America, working with partners on the ground to defend the rule of law and hold those in power accountable. Our advocacy with key officials in Washington, DC, the press, and the international community mobilizes support around the globe for important anti-corruption initiatives.

A key part of this effort to promote institutional reform involves robust, effective, and conditioned aid to Central America from the United States. WOLA is a key advocate for this type of beneficial assistance, and we work to ensure that aid is transparent. In 2018, as part of our Central America Monitor—a groundbreaking WOLA project that tracks U.S. assistance to Central America and measures progress on over 100 key indicators related to rule of law, corruption, the effectiveness of justice sectors, and human rights—WOLA launched a first-of-its-kind, searchable database tracking U.S. assistance to Central America. The database provides information to help journalists, policymakers, and citizens gain a clearer understanding about where U.S. aid to Central America is going and what kind of programs it supports.

# • SHINING A LIGHT ON THE REALITY OF THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

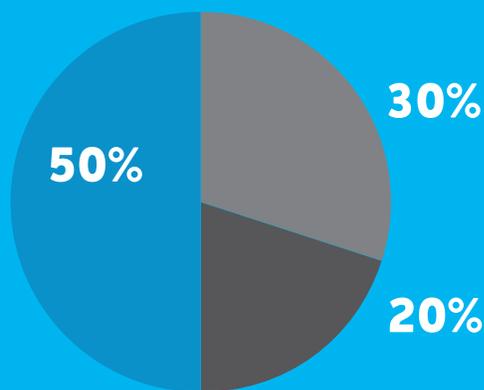
As the Trump administration declared a “national emergency” in attempts to justify draconian, anti-immigrant policies and divert funding to construct a border wall, WOLA’s experts were on the ground gathering facts on what was really happening along the U.S.-Mexico border. Our reports from multiple trips to different sectors of the border in 2018 described how U.S. policies—such as the so-called “zero tolerance policy,” family separation, massive detentions, moves to undermine the right to asylum, increased deportations, or efforts to force migrants to remain in Mexico—are not deterring migration, but rather creating chaos and cruel conditions culminating in a humanitarian crisis. WOLA’s reports, podcasts, videos, and on-the-spot analyses kept up with the rapidly-changing situation and helped the media, advocates, and congressional offices penetrate the propaganda and counter harmful policies and rhetoric.

Learn more about WOLA’s *Beyond the Wall Campaign* at [www.wola.org/beyondthewall](http://www.wola.org/beyondthewall), and get involved.

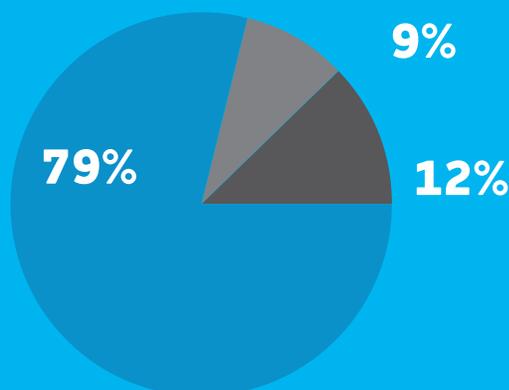
# OUR IMPACT

SMART.  
STRATEGIC.  
STRONG.

## INCOME



## EXPENSES



## 2018 BUDGET \$3.6 MILLION

**WOLA's communications team punches above its weight. Our communications impact in 2018 was well above the industry benchmarks.\***

In 2018 WOLA reached over 670,000 people through Facebook and made 2.7 million Twitter impressions.

WOLA was mentioned in the press over 1,000 times, including by top news organizations like the Associated Press, ABC News, *The Atlantic*, BBC, Bloomberg, CBS News, CNN, *The Economist*, Forbes, *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Mother Jones*, NPR, *The Nation*, NBC News, *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, PBS, Reuters, *USA Today*, Vice, Vox, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.

\*M+R Benchmarks 2018 Study of nonprofit digital advocacy, fundraising, social, and advertising. The organizations that participated in the M+R study on average have 5 times the budget of WOLA.

# RESEARCH & ADVOCACY

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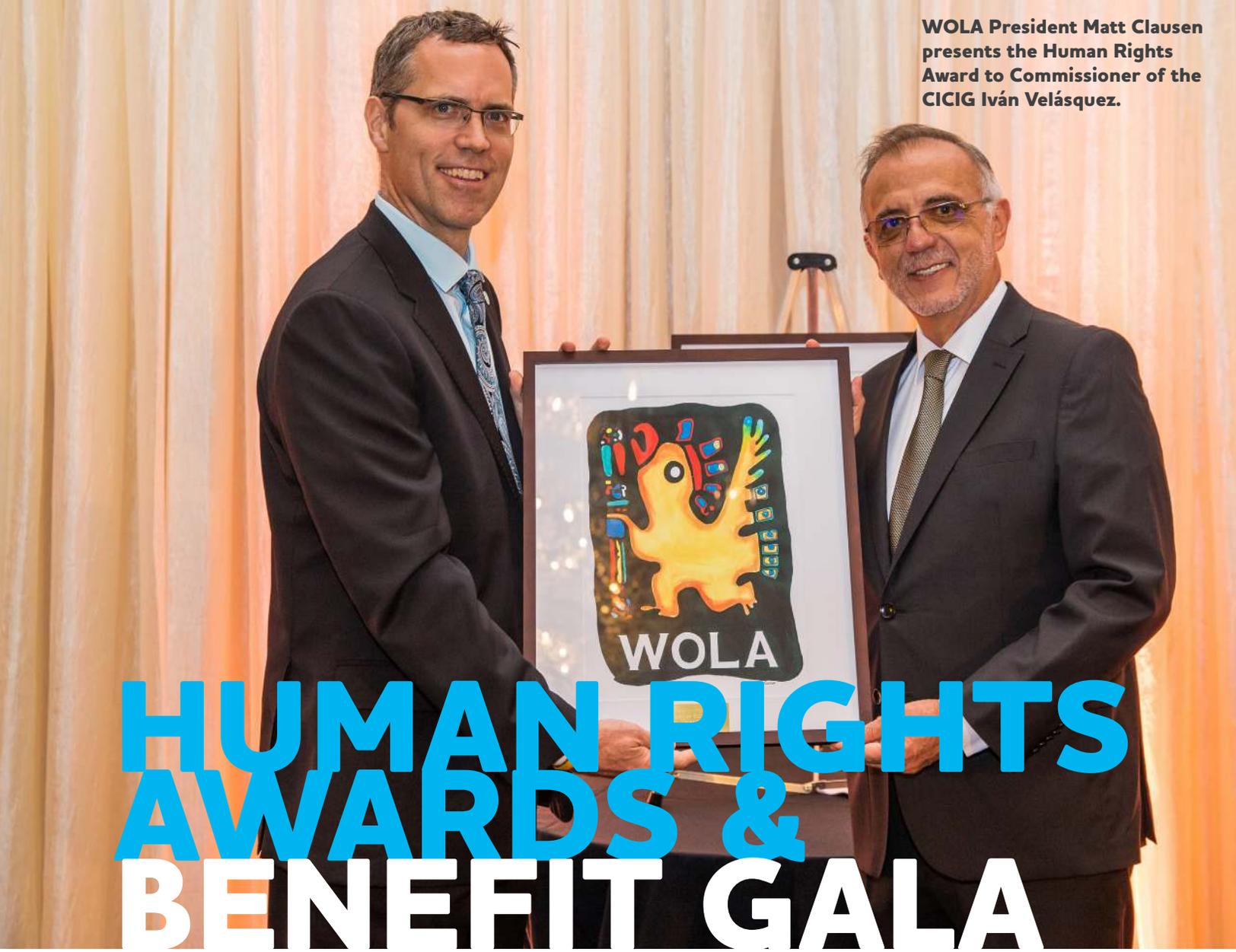
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WOLA President Matt Clausen presents the Human Rights Award to Commissioner of the CICIG Iván Velásquez.



# HUMAN RIGHTS AWARDS & BENEFIT GALA

**On September 20, 2018 WOLA presented its prestigious Human Rights Awards to four brave visionaries who have had a tremendous impact on the fight for human rights and justice.**

WOLA honored two key leaders of the anti-corruption movement in Guatemala: Commissioner Iván Velásquez of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and former Attorney General of Guatemala Thelma Aldana. With vision and commitment, Velásquez helped Guatemalans effectively tackle corruption and hold those at the highest levels of power accountable, despite personal attacks and active attempts by the government to dismantle the CICIG. As Attorney General, Aldana prioritized the protection of indigenous peoples, children, adolescents, and women, and she strengthened the ability of the Public Prosecutor's Office to investigate and prosecute corrupt leaders, including an investigation into President Otto Pérez Molina, which led to his resignation.

WOLA also honored Joe Eldridge and Maria Otero for their pioneering contributions to human rights in the Americas and their lifelong commitment to supporting the human rights community, including mentoring generations of activists. Joe was WOLA's Executive Director during its founding era and has been a leading advocate and educator for decades. Maria has championed the cause of human rights, gender equality, and inclusive economic growth worldwide, including as the State Department's first Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights.

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Senator Tom Harkin (left) presents Maria Otero and Joe Eldridge with the 2018 Human Rights Award.



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Former Attorney General of Guatemala Thelma Aldana speaks at the 2018 WOLA Human Rights Awards Ceremony.



Photos: Kaz + Zen Photography

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**“The arc of WOLA’s agenda has been found in walking on both sides of the border—and witnessing and documenting—on behalf of the most vulnerable. . . . We are here to celebrate a community who wrapped imagination and tenacity around an idea that there can be more human rights and more justice in Latin America and that U.S. policy can either nurture or impede those ideals.”**  
**- Joe Eldridge**

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## THE SALLY YUDELMAN INTERNSHIP PROGRAM: SHAPING THE NEXT GENERATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCATES

WOLA's Sally Yudelman Internship Program is named after the late chair of WOLA's Board of Directors for her enduring commitment to shaping the next generation of human rights advocates. In 2018, her legacy lived on as WOLA welcomed 21 qualified, passionate, and diverse student interns. The program offers one of the most thorough, engaging, and formative human rights experiences in Washington, D.C.

WOLA's 2018  
Summer interns  
meet with WOLA  
founder Joe  
Eldridge.





Advocacy for Human Rights in the Americas



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