Cultural Norms and Visiting Communities

You are going on an international service trip to Guatemala focused on human rights. Before departing for Guatemala, you and the other 11 trip participants have spent the past ten weeks preparing by talking through everything from the culture, history, and social issues relevant to the country. Because the trip is focused on human rights issues, much of the pre-field discussions have centered around social justice issues, and everyone seems very passionate and on the same page in terms of their values and ideals.

During the first week in Guatemala, the group is visiting a cooperative coffee farm in a rural area. As the group is being guided around the cooperative, you and many of the other students begin pulling out cameras and taking photos of the coffee pickers, most of whom are dressed in traditional Mayan clothing and carrying baskets on their heads or backs. You begin to notice as you are taking photos that some of the Mayan workers look very uncomfortable and are trying to hide their faces. The other students don't seem to notice their discomfort and continue taking photos, and a few are even moving closer to the workers for more detailed shots.

- How do you approach the situation with the rest of your group?
- What conversation would you have with the group?
- How can you effectively and respectfully engage with locals in the area you are visiting?
- How can this sort of situation be prevented? What discussions, trainings, etc. can be built into your pre-field course/sessions to address cultural norms, expectations, appropriate behaviors, etc?