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## CASE STUDY

# The Challenge of Women's Political Participation in Guatemala

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To speak of women in Central America often means talking about discrimination and historical exclusion. In most countries of the region, women are absent from politics, which is considered the exclusive domain of men. Stereotypes persist and continue being inculcated in the home and at school, according to which the predominant place for women is in the home and in their reproductive role.

In Guatemala, women's participation in public affairs is very recent. There are popularly elected posts, such as president of the republic, for which, according to the majority, women are not suited. It was not until the 1950s that women first assumed posts involving the direction and management of public affairs, yet their participation in politics is still incipient.

This study will analyse the structural causes and norms that limit women opting to seek elective office, especially in the Congress. In Guatemala, a large segment of the population suffers the rigours of socio-economic inequality, which is a serious impediment to human development. This situation is exacerbated among women, highlighting how gender exclusion in Guatemala goes beyond discrimination on grounds of social class or ethnicity.

Existing inequalities can no longer be tolerated, and should be the subject of in-depth analysis and an effort to come up with solutions, since only to the extent that they are addressed and resolved will it be possible to fully develop a framework of social justice and truly consolidate democracy in Guatemala, with the participation of more than half of the population.

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## **National Context**

Guatemala is situated in Central America. It has a population of 11 million, of which 51.7 per cent are women.<sup>1</sup> Half of the population is indigenous, there is a small Garífuna population, and 2 per cent of European extraction in whom political and economic power are highly concentrated. The rest are mestizos or *ladinos*. Some 56.7% of the population is living in poverty, and extreme poverty affects 25.5 per cent.<sup>2</sup> Illiteracy is 36 per cent, yet reaches 51 per cent among indigenous women. In some areas, where the majority of the population is indigenous, illiteracy is as high as 90 per cent. The situation of Guatemalan girls is also precarious. In education, dropout rates are as high as 81 per cent in rural areas and 51 per cent in urban areas.<sup>3</sup> Only 17 of every 100 girls complete primary school, and in rural areas 66 per cent of them drop out of school before completing the third grade.

Female labour is not always recognized. To this day it is considered alongside child labour in the Labour Code. Domestic tasks are incumbent upon women, without any acknowledgment of such work in the form of remuneration. Only 27 per cent of titles to landed property belong to women, although land is the main source of subsistence for peasant and indigenous families; often it is the woman who works the land, in addition to bearing the burden of the domestic obligations.

In summary, these figures highlight the existence of two Guatemalas in terms of gender, offering a picture of the situation of girls and women, especially those who live in the rural and peasant areas, and indigenous women.

## ***Political context***

In the last half-century, Guatemala has experienced a long internal war, military dictatorships, the absence of political alternatives, and democracy only since 1986.

Women were very much present in this historical context, in which citizen participation was basically restricted. Since the early 20th century, Guatemalan women have participated in mutual aid societies and unions, where they struggled for a more just workday. In 1925, women had already participated in the first strike.<sup>4</sup> That same year, communist and anarchist political parties were formed in which some women played a major part, but never in leadership positions. The 1945 constitutional reform granted women citizenship for the first time, and women gained the right to vote. Nonetheless, a literacy requirement was imposed, so it was not until 1965 that illiterate women won the right to vote.

During the period of greatest repression and intolerance, Guatemalan women played a key role bringing about respect for fundamental human rights. During the military dictatorship in 1984, it was a surprise to see a group of women come forward demanding to be told the whereabouts of their family members who had been detained and disappeared by Army forces. Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (Mutual Support Group), known by its Spanish acronym GAM,<sup>5</sup> an organization of relatives of persons illegally detained and disappeared, was the first such organization, created by women, wives, mothers and daughters of the victims of these human rights violations. GAM came forward offering invaluable support for defending fundamental rights, which were being violated at that time.

The signing of the Agreement for a Firm and Lasting Peace in December 1996 put an end to the armed conflict, which had dragged on for more than 36 years. In order to begin the search for consensus on a national agenda, and in the context of the peace negotiations, the Assembly of Civil Society (Asamblea de la Sociedad Civil, ASC) was established in early 1994. It encompassed 12 representative sectors of society, including, among others, women.<sup>6</sup> It was formed around demands related to women's most pressing needs. The peace agenda had already suggested a chapter on the situation of Guatemalan women outlining proposals to change their situation. Similarly, the peace accords addressed key issues such as employment, land and access to education and health, and mentioned the need for women to participate broadly in building democracy through the full exercise of their civil and political rights.

The democratization of Guatemala has been a priority for many Guatemalan women. Even so, it is notable that there has been no improvement in their status. The results in terms of Guatemalan women's access to education, employment, management positions in the private sector, and political participation are poor. Nowadays, women's political participation is negligible, although there has been a considerable improvement with respect to the period prior to the 1986 democratic transition.

## ***Women's Political Participation***

In 1956, for the first time a woman was elected deputy to the Guatemalan Congress. In 1995, the left participated in elections for the first time, and 12 women won seats in the Congress. Since then, although there was an increase in the number of deputies because of population increase, the number of women members of Congress has not climbed; to the contrary, it has declined.<sup>7</sup> This may be caused by the scant encouragement of women's political participation, and the strong hold of a conservative party over both the Executive and the Congress.

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It was not until 1991 that women made their first significant strides in Congress, such as having a woman elected to serve as President of the Congress. This occurred again in 1994 and 1997. In the 1999 legislative elections, of the 960 candidates for Congress, 133 were women, and only 10 were elected in a lower chamber that has 113 seats. So despite clear progress, in 2002 women made up 8.8 per cent of the members of Congress. Guatemala, along with Paraguay, Honduras and Brazil, has one of the lowest percentages of women legislators in Latin America.

The recent history of Guatemalan women's participation in other popularly elected positions is not very encouraging either. In 1999, two women competed against 20 men, unsuccessfully, for president and vice-president. Of the 331 *municipios*, or local jurisdictions, in 2002 only three were governed by women. This exclusion is accentuated in the case of indigenous women. Only 3 per cent and 2 per cent of the candidates for the district and national elections, respectively, were indigenous women. Regarding high-level positions in government that are not elective, only six women were appointed as governors. This was secured largely by the alliance bringing together various sectors of civil society, such as Kuchuj, Voz Ciudadana, Coordinadora Sí Vamos por la Paz, and the women's sector of the Assembly of

Civil Society, who pooled their efforts in a massive lobbying effort to influence the president's decision.

A comparative analysis looking at other Central American countries and women's political participation in key positions in the legislature, judicial and executive branches shows Guatemala clearly lagging behind. In 1999, Guatemala had only 11.3 per cent, while Costa Rica had 19.3 per cent and El Salvador 16.7 per cent.

Finally, with regard to electoral participation, women in Guatemala have traditionally gone to the polls in smaller numbers than men. This significant absence of women in electoral decision-making is closely related to the lack of basic knowledge of their civil rights, their lack of identification documents, and profound apathy when it comes to exercising a right that doesn't appear to be borne out anywhere in day-to-day life, in improvements in the quality of life of the common citizen.

It is estimated that in the 1950s, 35 per cent of registered voters were women. By 1985, this figure had climbed to 40 per cent. In 2001, of 4.6 million registered voters, women accounted for 1.9 million (43%), for a three per cent increase in women's share of the total. In the last general elections, held in 1999, of the total number of voters, less than 37 per cent were women.<sup>8</sup> This is worrisome, as the trend indicates that in many countries women are beginning to participate more at the ballot box.

### ***Obstacles to Women's Political Participation***

In general, structural factors have restricted and continue to restrict the full exercise of citizen rights by women. In Guatemala, these factors were exacerbated by the internal conflict and by the breakdown in democratic equilibrium, which wiped out the capacity of civil society to respond, and reduced women's opportunities for development and political participation. In the country's democratic life, these factors should be overcome so as to ensure basic minimum conditions for governability, and to make the country viable.

**Several of the factors that block women's political participation are as follows:**

- Patriarchy and exclusion persist as the bases of societal arrangements, in which values are gauged through macho and racist socio-cultural standards that discriminate against women's participation. This negative model and norm also perpetuates itself in the family and in interpersonal relations.
- The high levels of illiteracy and women's disadvantageous situation in terms of human development constitute a serious limitation to women's access to politics.
- The group of women organized around gender issues is very small compared to the total number of Guatemalan women. The typical woman has accepted her circumstances and playing "her role". The typical woman is not interested in participating in politics, as she does not consider it important.<sup>9</sup>

**With regard to the effective participation of women in Congress, other factors work against them:**

- First, the discredited state of the political parties is a disincentive to citizen political participation, especially by women, who are joining in smaller numbers. It is difficult to find women in leadership positions in the political parties, and it was not until 2001 that a woman became chairperson or general secretary of a political party for the first time.<sup>10</sup> Although by law political parties are open to men and women on an equal footing, in practice this is not the case. Political exclusion is more obvious in rural areas than in the cities. In order to secure the support of women's groups and their possible vote, some parties currently address the question of women's representation by pushing women's inclusion on political party lists. Nonetheless, women are given only marginal places, making it very difficult for them to win a seat in the legislature, given the Guatemalan electoral system, which was designed to benefit the traditional parties, which are better funded.
- Second, although the peace accords propose ways of encouraging electoral participation, no specific mechanisms were recommended for promoting the equitable political participation of women in the Electoral Law. Accordingly, Guatemala has not embraced temporary quotas as an affirmative action measure.
- Third, there is a lack of support by organized women for female political party activists. The communication between the two sectors is limited, making it more difficult to implement a gender agenda in the absence of a social base of support for it. The women's agenda is considered secondary: women political party activists fear they will run up against a lack of support and possible discrimination by their own parties, as the women's agenda is not linked to a more general one.
- Fourth, and as a result of the previous factor, the initiative to promote women as candidates for Congress is basically in the hands of the political parties, not the women's organizations. As a result, there are relatively few women in Congress, and the gender agenda lacks strong impetus. This factor, added to the women's limited presence in numerical terms, seriously impairs their ability to impact on decision-making.

- Fifth, politics is designed so as to hinder women's participation. The schedules of the Congress and the parties are arbitrary. In this context, women who are mothers and heads of household must grapple with the question of whether to participate fully in public affairs at the cost of neglecting the duties traditionally assigned to them in the home.

### ***What Can be Done to Address this Situation?***

The following tasks can be pursued as part of the national political agenda to bring about greater and more effective participation of women:

- Encourage women's participation in public affairs so that women understand the importance of having a voice in all spheres of national life, especially in the Congress.
- Support substantive reforms to the Electoral and Political Parties Law, so as to facilitate the involvement of women in political life. This means adopting temporary quotas for political participation that facilitate the involvement of women and that force the parties to include women on the lists as a matter of law.
- Bring about the conditions for creating a bloc of women legislators with a common agenda for reforming all those statutes that discriminate against women: the Civil Code, the Criminal Code, the Labour Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure, the Electoral and Political Parties Law.
- Ratify international conventions and treaties related to gender, since women must be on an equal footing with men before the law, and efforts are needed to foster the genuine rule of law.
- Foster the civic and political education of the citizenry. A culture of democracy is not rooted in the population, which only partially exercises its citizenship when voting and does not have any means of keeping a check on government or overseeing the acts of those in government.
- Promote massive voter registration campaigns for women, especially in rural areas, and particularly for indigenous women, who often are not even on record as citizens, much less registered to vote.
- The state needs to take the initiative to provide the tools needed for fostering internal democracy within the home, encouraging the sharing of domestic work and child care, casting aside the stereotypes that reduce women to the home.
- Oversee the proper distribution of government resources for primary, secondary, and university education, ensuring that females as well as males get schooling, and that gender issues are addressed in the curriculum. Education contributes to the well-rounded development of individuals and determines productive, employment, and political opportunities.

Work to advance these proposals should be coordinated among the cabinet ministries in the social sector, the Foro Nacional de la Mujer, the Secretariat for Women's Affairs, the Office of the Ombudsperson for Indigenous Women, and women legislators themselves, to give impetus to a joint effort at the national level.

### ***Conclusion***

Women's participation in politics leads to more complete insights of the needs of the population, and injects healthy competition and quality in citizen political participation generally. The situation of Guatemalan women in this regard is still precarious despite the work of the sectors who have struggled for equality between men and women. The effort has not yielded all the desired results. This is largely due to the disinterest on the part of women themselves in getting involved in politics. Nonetheless, the absence of any will on the part of the political parties to foster the presence of women in politics and in their party structures has been an important factor. This has also resulted from the isolated and individual manner in which women have struggled to gain a presence, generally allying themselves with ideological or other interests, but not based on gender identity.

At this time, women have an effective yet limited presence in the Guatemalan Congress. In the Committee on Women's Affairs, established in 1994, however, efforts have been interrupted and there has been backsliding, so much so that in 2002, for the first time in the history of this committee, it has come to be chaired by a man. Ever since, political work on behalf of women has deteriorated in the Congress, the most important branch of government.

In the Central American context, the women legislators of the region have forged a common space for debate through the respective committees on women's affairs in each of the national legislatures. These fora have been useful for identifying common agendas including issues such as domestic violence, sexual harassment and quotas of political participation.

Experiences such as these need to be given impetus within Guatemala with a view to advancing a national agenda that

incorporates women's participation. In this regard, the Congress should be accorded top priority for mobilizing and promoting the greater participation of women.

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> National Statistics Institute. 1991. "Census 90". Guatemala: Ediciones INE. p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> Foro Guatemala. 2001. *Propuesta para la Reactivación Económica*. Guatemala: Foro Guatemala.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Mission in Guatemala. 2001. "Los desafíos para la participación de las mujeres guatemaltecas". Guatemala: UNOPS. p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Asociación de Estudios e Investigaciones Sociales. 1991. *Más de Cien años de Movimiento Obrero Urbano en Guatemala*. Volume I. Guatemala: Asociación de Estudios e Investigaciones Sociales. pp. 331, 338–339.

<sup>5</sup> GAM was founded in 1984, during the military dictatorship, by the author.

<sup>6</sup> After heated discussions within the Assembly of Civil Society, the women's sector was established in May 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Montenegro, Nineth. 2001. *Análisis Jurídico sobre la Discriminación hacia la Mujer en el Código Civil, Desde la Perspectiva de Género*. Guatemala: Editorial Servicios Integrados. p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> International IDEA. *Voter Turnout by Gender*. Available on the internet at <http://www.idea.int/gender/turnout/guatemala.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the Foro de Mujeres, created by mandate of the Agreement on Socioeconomic Issues and the Agrarian Situation, has reached considerably into the rural milieu.

<sup>10</sup> Alba Estela Maldonado was elected General Secretary of the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca political party in July 2001.

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