

Breaking the silence in Guatemala



Historical inequalities and the combined effects of poverty, racism, gender discrimination and violence have effectively silenced the voices of indigenous women in Guatemala. However, Raising Her Voice is enabling rural, indigenous women to know about, speak out about and claim their rights to education, health care, and protection from violence and exploitation.



Background

Guatemala has the highest level of inequality in Latin America, which impacts on indigenous communities generally and on women in particular. According to the government, more than 75 per cent of the indigenous population – which comprises 39 per cent of the total population – lives in poverty. Indigenous women face double discrimination, as racism and institutionalised discrimination against ethnic groups is rife. State services and institutions only function in Spanish, the official language, despite there being a law on languages, thus failing to respond to Guatemala's multilingual diversity. Around 60 per cent of indigenous women do not speak Spanish, limiting their access to services and ability to understand and enjoy their basic rights.

While there are laws and policies that guarantee women's rights, authorities and the public are largely unaware that they exist, and the government lacks the will and resources to ensure implementation. Women have little voice in their own communities, let alone in local or national government. The media serves the

interests of the white, male-dominated, Spanish-speaking elite and tends to ignore the plight of women and indigenous people. Raising Her Voice is working to break this silence by enabling women's organisations to be heard – by the public, the media, local authorities and the government. Raising Her Voice partners are also working with other women's organisations to make women aware of their rights.

Objectives

Raising Her Voice is being implemented in two regions of Guatemala – Quiché and Petén – where Oxfam has worked for several years. Oxfam is working in partnership with three rural, indigenous women's groups – Ixqik, Ixmucané Petén and Ixmucané Quiché – to run a Rural Women's Campaign. This aims to:

- Ensure that women's organisations have the necessary skills, information and resources to communicate effectively about women's needs and rights, in order to improve the quality of life of rural, indigenous women.
- Increase the presence and legitimacy of women's organisations as political actors capable of influencing public opinion.

"I have participated in workshops on how to speak out in public and how to encourage other women to speak out. Before I was afraid to do so, but now I will answer any question I'm asked."

Eulalia Silvestre, Ixmucané Petén

Achievements

Raising awareness of women's rights

The project works in a context where rural women have little or no access to information from newspapers or television. A series of workshops and discussions on various forms of gender inequality, including communication, health and human rights, and ending violence against women has helped raise awareness among a core group of activists and gain women's support. Being organised into supportive groups has been crucial in enabling women to understand their entitlements and influence decision-makers. Training sessions in, for example, public

speaking have increased women's self-esteem and led them to believe that they have a role as social actors. Previously, the key dates that commemorate women were only celebrated in urban areas but now, as part of the campaigns organised by the project, they are celebrated in rural areas, which has raised the profile of women's issues, and particularly those of Mayan women.

Claiming a space in the media

The project has provided training for women's groups in communication skills, including radio, press and television journalism. As a result, many rural, indigenous women are now able and willing to speak to reporters and in public. Positive results have motivated the women to expand their knowledge further. Women who previously had no voice now have the capacity to be spokeswomen, to prepare radio programmes and adverts, to interview and be interviewed, to claim public spaces previously denied to women, and to voice their rights and demands as women.

For example, Ixmukané Quiché is training indigenous women communicators in their own languages and, with the support of another Oxfam project, has established the first radio station for women. Similarly, more than 20 journalists have taken part in training courses, with the aim of increasing coverage of indigenous women's issues, and combating sexist and sensationalist reporting of violence against women. Campaign activities have had good coverage in local media, although national media interest remains low.

Building links with public officials

There have been several positive meetings with senior officials from hospitals and health centres in Quiché to discuss the needs of indigenous women. Congresswomen attended a conference organised by the project for indigenous women to raise their concerns about lack of access to health services, and committed to discuss the issue with the Minister of Health. Ixmukané Quiché participated in the inauguration of the national monitoring body, the 'Reproductive Health Observatory', where its members took the opportunity to advocate for the health rights of indigenous women.

Lessons

- Workshops and discussions for indigenous women are more relevant, engaging and effective if they can be related to ancestral traditions and culture, to help them make sense of gender equality in the context of their own belief system and reinterpret their culture.
- Carrying out campaigns on specific dates, such as International Women's Day, has been an effective way of raising awareness of issues and gaining media attention. The project partners still meet with some resistance from the media, particularly the written press, to covering women's issues but a large-scale, newsworthy event is impossible for them to ignore.
- The campaign activities have prompted the project partners to establish a local network. In this network, team work, joint planning and transparency in the management of financial resources of each organisation has been strengthened, making it possible to increase impact, give women greater participation and build a common front to search for solutions to women's problems.
- The project has successfully linked rural, indigenous women with decision-makers and the media. However, this has largely been done by bringing rural women to urban centres, and most project activities have taken place in the regional capitals, in keeping with the deep-rooted model of centralisation promoted by the State. The project has been less successful at reaching rural women in their own communities, and linking them with grassroots decision-making structures.

"I have participated in workshops on women's health, speaking out, human rights as well as 'radio spot' development and recording. Through information dissemination campaigns involving posters and radio spots, information is reaching local communities. Ixqik's work has been widely accepted and also received recognition from the media, cable television and the press."

Argentina Osorio, Ixqik

Raising Her Voice is a five-year programme which promotes the rights and capacity of poor women to engage effectively in governance at all levels. This is to be achieved through enabling their voices to be heard and increasing their influence, and by making institutions more accountable to women.

Working through local partners in 17 countries, Raising Her Voice has significant funding from DFID and is co-ordinated by Oxfam GB.

