

Making a Difference
Citizen's and their organisations and networks contributing to change
OWA PPA 2008-9: Case study 17

Title of Case Study:	Women and Politics in Guatemala - The work of Tierra Viva
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1. PPA partner name	One World Action
2. Countries highlighted in case study	Guatemala

Tierra Viva works with indigenous women and mestizo (people of mixed European and indigenous ancestry), to strengthen their participation in local development. Over 60% of Guatemala's population is indigenous and mestizo.

Indigenous women especially face a difficult situation in political participation in Guatemala because of "triple discrimination" - they are women, indigenous



and wear distinct traditional clothing. One of the most marginalised sectors of society, their participation in Guatemala's political life is rare.

Guatemalan women in general suffer from high levels of poverty and violence, low levels of education, lack of access to health care, lack of political representation and lack of awareness of their rights.

"Profound racism and sexism (is) rooted in Guatemala, which does not permit the integral development of women. This is reflected in many Guatemalan communities", says **Esmeralda Judit Alfara Joj of Tierra Viva.**

Tierra Viva grapples with a situation in which few women hold positions of power. Only a few are in government, Congress or serve as municipal mayors. Only eight out of the 361 mayors in Guatemala are women. For many years the government has promoted practices that have facilitated political inequality.

The group stresses that while women's participation in government does not guarantee that women's rights will be prioritised, without more women in power the possibilities of those rights shaping public policy are much reduced.

Progress

There has been progress on paper. Important gender laws and policies have been approved, notably the "Plan on Equity and Public Policies for Women". The Guatemala government, like other governments in the region, has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and is signatory to other important international agreements, including the Beijing Platform for Action and the Inter-American Convention to Prevent, Sanction and Eradicate Violence against Women.

There are however obstacles to the implementation of such initiatives. The country's Social Development Law, mandates state promotion of gender equity, and specifies that funds should be assigned for its implementation. But this provision is yet to be respected, four years after approval.

The results of the electoral process in 1995, 1999 and 2003 demonstrate that democracy in Guatemala excludes women. The low level of women elected to office is not only due to the will of the electorate, but also due to the position that women are assigned by their parties in the electoral lists.

"There exists a very sharp pyramid for the political participation of women because their roles are reduced in positions of power and in the electoral lists", says Esmeralda Joj. "For women it is a challenge and intense battle to ensure that when reforms are being proposed to the Electoral Law, they are able to put forward their proposal for obligatory percentages for the participation of women in politics to be made. This is with the aim of opening up the opportunities for women to participate. However, we don't doubt that exclusion will continue, but we must continue strengthening and deepening citizens' rights and creating a strong organised women's movement".

Tierra Viva makes good use of radio to reach people in and rural areas. It has worked with the Guatemalan Federation of Radiophonic Schools to transmit

campaign messages in 10 indigenous languages, with the potential to reach three million listeners.

Achievements

Tierra Viva's work has been successful with training courses to help women participate in politics, in strengthening women's leadership, helping to overcome stereotyping, and in expanding mechanisms to implement politics.

“You cannot afford to work only at the grassroots level to promote women's rights. You also have to work within the political structure. That means training and supporting women to participate in local and national politics and to represent the views of poor women, especially indigenous women, who are marginalised from the decision-making process” , says Esmeralda Joj.

With the HIV/AIDS epidemic becoming increasingly feminised - women account for one in three Guatemalans - infected with HIV - Tierra Viva has begun work to create local groups which promote sexual rights and reproductive rights. It is one of very few organisations in Guatemala campaigning openly for abortion rights.

Challenges

Tierra Viva is demanding the fulfillment of the Peace Accords which reiterates the necessity for women's ample participation in the country's democracy. It is pressing for change in the political participation of women through the implementation of participation quotas which would guarantee the equal participation of men and women.

One of the challenges it faces, however, is that women from isolated areas have little knowledge of their rights and few opportunities are at present available to them.

Tierra Viva wants women to be able to exercise their civil and political rights with equality and equity. Guatemalan women participated forcefully in the process leading to the signing in 1996 of the country's Peace Accords between the government and the guerrilla group Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity.

“Guatemalan women aspire to have and live in a country that respects our rights as citizens and human beings without sexism, racism or violence”, says Esmeralda Joj.