

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

Voices for a dignified life

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Guatemala is a country characterised by its long civil war, pervasive violence, especially against women, and economic misery. Against these adverse circumstances, women fight to make themselves heard in a society dominated by men. In alternative media, they have found a way of expressing themselves and creating awareness of their issues, thereby promoting the human development of their society.

Human development is about increasing people's capacities to protect their rights and liberties. Being informed and educated is essential to building these capacities. Marginalised groups of society, however, are often excluded from central information channels.

"Silence is the best ally for perpetuating the abuses and inequalities women are subject to throughout the hemisphere", wrote the Organisation of American States in 1998. In Guatemala, women have been silenced in many ways: by denying them access to education, by viewing their schooling and academic advancement as unnecessary, by policies that exclude them from development, by hindering their access to decision-making offices and by rendering their contributions to the economy, culture, politics and history invisible.

Women are the ones who suffer most from the miseries of Guatemalan society. The country's population has endured long lasting dictatorships as well as a 36-year civil war. Even though peace treaties were signed in 1996, the levels of poverty, social exclusion and violence are still increasing. Between 2001 and 2009 more than 4,000 violent deaths of women have been attributed to the results of domestic violence or even organized crime activities, committed with ever increasing brutality. Annually 35,000 girls aged 10 to 18 give birth, often as a result of rape, and only less than half of them receive medical care. Not even half of working-age women are employed, the rest try to survive in the informal economy. And women are even excluded politically, where they make up to only 12% of the members of the congress and local governments.

"The media are a platform for discussing and building knowledge that transforms lives. When women become aware of their reality, they can participate as well and transform their own lives", according to a female journalist in Guatemala. Women have made great strides in breaking the silence so they can be heard in the public sphere.

In search of their own spaces

To make themselves heard "with their own voices", women have been entering the realm of alternative media since the democratic transition in the mid-eighties. This means that their programmes have evolved as part of communication projects with social agendas. During the last decade, women's media were significantly strengthened and diversified.

Broadcasting was one of the media activities women turned to first. Radio programmes such as "The Woman at Home" and "Women in the Community" marked the starting point. Here women still defined themselves as housekeepers, as the programme names indicate. More recent programmes testify to an increase in the self-esteem of women with such names as "At the Top of our Voices" (A toda voz) or even – proudly referring to their indigenous roots – "the Voice of Garífuna Women" (the Garífunas are Guatemala's Afro-Caribbean population) and "Women's Voices from Ixcán" (Ixcán is a municipality inhabited primarily by indigenous Maya descendents). The first feminist radio station "Voices of women" (Voces de mujeres) was founded 18 years ago.

Many of the programmes are produced in one of the 22 Mayan languages spoken by the majority of the population or even in the Garífuna language. "Speaking our language builds confidence among our listeners and even allowed us to talk about condom use on a Catholic radio station", explains Palacios Dilia, who produced the first Garífuna radio programme.

Once the CERIGUA news agency incorporated female reporters as department correspondents, women's voices began to be better heard. Networks of women in media emerged soon after. Again, local cultural initiatives were founded, like the Association of Mayan Nutzij Female Journalists. The "Women Creating Development" association even created a TV programme called "Women Breaking Barriers". The publications of all these women's media associations were transmitted on local cable channels, by community radio stations often situated in multilingual areas, and by the Women and Media Observation Centre. Nowadays, there are even some feminist media such as the "La Cuerda" newspaper and several radio stations like "Voices of Women" or the public university's radio station for women. Via telephone link, "Voices of Women" and "Women taking new paths" ("Mujeres Abriendo Caminos") even broadcast a weekly programme produced by female migrants living in Los Angeles.

The changing names and the multitude of programmes reflect the levels of empowerment that women have reached over time. The participants in these media channels are women from as many different backgrounds as Guatemala has to offer: they are poor peasants and leading personalities, human rights activists, health advocates and teachers, survivors of violence and NGO workers, academics and migrants. They are indigenous, Afro-Caribbean and Mestizos, young and old, rural and urban residents.

Creating development opportunities

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Guatemala, certain factors are relevant for a society's human development: People need to be able to stay in tune with their socio-political environment, to exercise political freedom and to participate.

Women who exercise their right to communicate through alternative media participate in these processes and thus foster human development in their societies. They influence the transformation of their environments on several levels:

1. They generate and disseminate information

Women's media report on:

- Issues of national interest such as open-pit mining, violence and discrimination, human rights, health, education, political participation, the reconciliation process and the management of authorities
- Economic issues, including compensation payments to victims of the internal armed conflict, free-trade agreements, adoption of new laws or amendments to old ones, referendums on megaprojects and climate change
- Issues that concern women, like caring for families, raising crops and livestock, women's entrepreneurship, sexuality, self-confidence, abortion, equal rights, domestic violence, access to justice, political participation, art, literature and the feminist movement.

2. They foster autonomy of thought and mobilise people

By addressing these issues, women generate currents of opinion and social pressure. They make other women realise that they have rights, so that they can develop more independent thought and a critical approach to forming an opinion. Women will then dare to make their own decisions both in the public and private sectors much more often. Critical reflection mobilises them to take action in order to achieve a decent standard of living, both on a personal and on a community level. Furthermore, they will monitor those who are responsible for ensuring that their human rights are respected. According to Juliana Julajú of the Communicators Association Nutzij Maya, their job as journalists is "to be vigilant

and denounce miseries such as domestic violence. Doing this by radio or video removes the people's fear of speaking out loud on these topics."

3. They give more weight to issues facing the marginalised and create political pressure

Women's media make realities visible that used to be viewed as private matters. They have succeeded – to name just one example – in ensuring that the media coverage of cases of violence against women has increased. This in turn has put pressure on the authorities and the justice system. They have had to accept that their actions are monitored by the public through the media.

Civil society organisations appreciate alternative women's media because the messages transmitted reach out to historically marginalised parts of society. They therefore consider cooperation with such media channels essential for choosing and organising projects. Even state institutions, especially at the local level, often address female communicators. They try to train journalists to cover issues from the authority's field of work in hopes that they will communicate them to the public.

4. They develop their own personal viewpoints and open new working fields to women

Journalists in women's media develop the courage to express what they think and stand up for what they believe. This creates self-confidence and the ability to act competently in different areas and make suggestions. Female journalists become interesting sources of information for other media and organisations as well because of their profound knowledge, their contacts to other social actors and leading personalities, as well as their proximity to the lives of women. Their experience in journalism gives them access to new employment opportunities.

5. They promote and support civil society activities

Their social mission is to promote civil society activities related to:

- Women's labour conditions
- Women's health and immunisation campaigns
- Support for referendums
- Approaches to sexual diversity
- Rejecting the exploitation of natural resources in indigenous territories by transnational corporations
- Stopping child abuse,
- Regulating prices for basic services
- The demands of peasants
- Monitoring the use of public resources
- The initiatives of community organizations
- Preventing the risks caused by natural phenomena
- The challenges of migration

6. They influence political processes

Women's media have also had an impact on political elections. They explain the election process, motivate women to vote and moderate forums with candidates for elected offices. Carmen Benito of the Poqoman Mayan communities explains: "Through our radio women know that they can participate, elect and be elected. Now many are already registered and participate in elections." The media also

act as electoral observers – following up on politicians' promises during election campaigns and supervising the elected officials' performance. This makes them intermediaries between the citizens' demands and the authorities. They can even influence local agendas by ensuring that issues facing the socially marginalized are on them.

To sum up, information generated by women in the hands of other women enables women to critically reflect on their own living environment. Informed citizens are more likely to feel a sense of certainty about where they are and take a stand on matters that affect and interest them.

For women working in alternative media, it is "a personal development process", as one journalist noted. "Through multiple links with people and different realities, I become aware of the value of my participation and its impact on society. I can contribute and change something. It is a responsibility and I am a product of that process."