

Mayan Women and the The Case of the Guatemalan

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L'auteure rapporte les leçons qu'elle a retenues lors de l'instauration et de l'expansion du Forum national des femmes du Guatemala (Foro), un mécanisme qui permettait aux femmes de surveiller le gouvernement trop complaisant face aux Accords de paix qui pourtant incluaient les droits des femmes et leur participation aux ententes.

Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete historical and political practice and analysis. (Mohanty 260)

In signing the 1996 Peace Accord¹ the Guatemalan Government agreed to implement over 300 broad-sweeping reforms in the country's political, economic, and legal systems, including the creation of a Guatemalan National Women's Forum (*Foro*). The *Foro*, as it would become known, was established to provide a mechanism for the participation of women in overseeing government compliance with the many "agreements related to women's rights and participation found in the Peace Accords" (MINUGUA-PNUD 473). Thus, the *Foro* emerged as part of a larger, comprehensive project of nation-state reconstruction whose

nation-wide agenda is oriented towards overcoming the roots of social, political, economic, ethnic and cultural conflict as well as the consequences of the armed conflict. (MINUGUA-PNUD 467)

What's more, I assert that a basic parallel can be said to exist between the creation of a viable women's forum and the overhauling of a nation-state: the challenge of inclusion. The *Foro* was thus designed to represent all Guatemalan women, a diverse population whose most salient divisions have been along ethnic lines. And so, the *Foro*, complete with its 225+ delegates, was officially inaugurated in December 1997 and, in the spring of 1998, began the one-and-a-half year-long process of conducting two nation-wide consultations, the first on women's socio-economic development and the second on women's civic and political participation.

This unprecedented participation of thousands of Mayan women together with *Ladinas* in the *Foro*, albeit wrought with difficulties, has contributed to a reconsideration of what it means to be a citizen in Guatemala.

In this article, I address the lessons gleaned from the establishment and unfolding of the *Foro* for what is most often a theoretical discussion among feminist thinkers about the challenges to working across difference. I draw from the *Foro* experience in order to explore the potential for political unity among women differently positioned in the state in terms of ethnicity, class, and geographical context, i.e., the urban-rural divide.²

This article takes as a starting point the historical exclusion of women, particularly Mayan women, from full participation in Guatemala's socio-political processes (including from the definition and practices of citizenship) and draws upon the *Foro* as one

example of recent efforts to redress such exclusions. It also asserts that the particular significance of this opportunity—to challenge the historical subordinated location of Mayan women in the nation-state—did not go unheeded by Mayan women themselves. I argue that this unprecedented participation of thousands of Mayan women together with *Ladinas* in the *Foro*, albeit wrought with difficulties, has contributed to a reconsideration of what it means to be a citizen in Guatemala. In both obvious and subtle ways, the attempts to work across difference made by Mayan women and *Ladinas* has fostered in them, and perhaps in members of the broader public, the beginnings of an "enlarged mentality" envisioned by Arendt of members in a society that would respect difference. Therefore, in this article I also attempt to articulate some possible directions that future attempts by a diverse political collective such as the *Foro* might take in attempts to work effectively across difference.

Respecting Mayan Women's Specificity: The *Foro* by Design

Mayan people in general and Mayan women in particular have been historically excluded from full participation in the socio-political processes which constitute the Guatemalan nation-state. Moreover, the exploitation of, and discrimination against, Mayan women is perpetuated by

Foro as a Political Collective

National Women's Forum

the use of racist and gendered constructions of their roles within society. In light of this historical oppression of Mayan women, the representation and participation of Mayan women in the *Foro* represents an unprecedented event in this country's political landscape. The *Foro* emerges as a high profile agreement among hundreds contained within the Guatemalan Peace Accords and thus represents an exercise in the creation of an inclusionary nation-state, a principle goal of those Accords. That is, given its fundamental aim of representing Guatemala's differently positioned female population, the *Foro* becomes a microcosm of the larger challenge of nation-state re/construction. I argue that certain insights into meeting this broader challenge may be gleaned through a closer examination of the *Foro* experience.

Apart from conjectures about the *Foro's* long-term effects on Guatemala's "social (and political) imaginary" (Monzón), this much can be said: "It was the first time that Mayan women have participated as representatives of their people and that is taken as a success" (Monica).³ Moreover, this was the first time that Mayan women were recognised collectively by the state as political protagonists in their own right. I suggest that Mayan delegates took their representative role seriously and, in effect, were able to convert the *Foro* into a space in which they could make their unique ethnicized and gendered claims as *Mayan women*. Mayan women leaders put much effort into crafting and ensuring the adoption of a design for the *Foro* along linguistic community lines.⁴ Ingrid captures the sentiment shared by everyone interviewed about the absolute necessity of such a linguistically-defined space:

We [Mayan women] no longer want women who don't know our history, women who aren't from the community to continue speaking about us. That's the way it has been ever since the [Spanish] Invasion.... It was time that all the indigenous women, that is, the wives, the elderly, the traditional healers

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and midwives put forth their proposals—that they state their needs in their own languages.

In turn, the design became an invaluable foundation for the *Foro's* capacity to respect the specificity of Mayan women's self-ascribed socio-political identities. By providing—although not without some contention—separate representational spaces in the form of linguistic community structures, the Forum displayed a commitment to the principle of respecting Mayan women's political selfhood. I suggest that providing such representational spaces is one of the first steps towards working effectively across difference.

The *Foro* Experience: An Historical Enjoining of Difference

As a space of consultation, discussion and collection for the proposals and demands of the diverse sectors of [Guatemalan] women, the Forum constitutes an unprecedented exercise in Guatemala's history. This space permitted the organization of new groups and opportunities for participation at the regional and local levels. It generated an ample mobilisation at the national level and promoted activism in rural areas. (Mayén and Reiche 47)

The *Foro* structure and process together clearly constitute a unique moment in Guatemala's history, according to a recent report commissioned by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

Moreover, in addition to providing a novel participatory space for Mayan women, the *Foro* presents an example of an attempt to work across (historically entrenched) difference in Guatemala. For the first time in history, Mayan and *Ladina* women gathered together to fashion unified, national proposals regarding the realities of Guatemalan women.⁵ These documents were completed and presented to the government and, much of their content has been included in the government document com-

monly referred to as the Equity Plan (Gobierno).

The *Foro*'s two consultative processes, particularly at the local levels, actively engaged thousands of Mayan (and *Ladina*) women in a reflection about their needs as women and as Mayans. The *Foro*'s consultative process and associated preparations have had profound effects at the local level. Not least, as Monica describes, is the enhancement of some Mayan women's knowledge about women's and indigenous rights and an associated assertiveness:

I think [the *Foro*] has benefited them because they now know their rights, they know about [their right of] participation ... you see this strengthening effect on women in some communities where [Mayan women] have managed to get projects approved ... they also claim their rights, speak about these rights ... [and] no longer allow themselves to be discriminated against, not even by their husbands.

Such rural, local level activism, spawned mainly by Mayan women, includes the launch of new organizations, voter registration projects, and successful fundraising endeavours for local development projects (D'Arcangelis; Mayén and Reiche; MINUGUA).

Similarly to Monica, Irene describes an "interest in organizing that was awakened in women" by the *Foro*. This is not to say that indigenous women have not been organizing themselves for some time. However, as Monica explains, the difference this time is that indigenous women (and women in general) have been *recognized by the State* as protagonists in their own right:

For the first time in I don't know when, the Government of Alvaro Arzd has promoted the participation of [indigenous] women at the national level.... There were protests by women and children before the signing of the Peace Accords, but they weren't publicly recognized. But since [the *Foro*] is part of the Accords, making sure it happens reflects well on [Arzd], although he didn't do anything, the women did! Maybe that's why the UNDP arrives at such a grandiose conclusion; because this really is the first time women have been able to add their voices [to the public debate] and have a say about their problems.

It would seem that despite the many limitations to participation at all levels of the *Foro* (most prominent among them being financial and time constraints coupled with the *Foro*'s increasingly centralized, overburdened, and at times unresponsive Co-ordinating Commission), the *Foro*

has brought together Mayan and *Ladina* women from across the country and has positively impacted the lives.

(Historical) Context and Working Across/Respecting Difference

The kind of respect for difference sought for by Mayan women in the *Foro* (and in other sites of resistance), must be understood in historical terms. The data suggests that the position of Mayan women is not to reject broader attempts to work across difference, but rather to seek redress for the historical limitations to participation they have faced and to shatter the hegemonic discourses regulating their marginalized position in the nation-state. Theirs is a struggle based on historical power imbalances, that is, on their lived experiences (and collective memories) of systemic injustices in the social, economic, political, and cultural realms. The political relevance (indeed, the necessity) of a collective identity, that is, of "Mayan women" is validated within such a historical context. As Alicia notes,

"Even after all these years of struggle for the recognition of Mayan rights, the idea still exists that women are second-class citizens and, that Mayan women, because we are indigenous, are third-class citizens."

Even after all these years of struggle for the recognition of Mayan rights and of demands made in the name of gender, the idea still exists that women are second-class [citizens] and, that Mayan women, because we are indigenous, are third-class [citizens].

The movement for the recognition of difference on the part of these women (within and beyond the *Foro*) channelled through the socio-political identity "Mayan women" develops precisely *because* their particular difference has been subject to high levels of repression by and within the Guatemala nation-state.

Towards Practical Theory: Lessons from the *Foro*

But what of the manifestation of those historic power imbalances of the Guatemalan nation-state within the *Foro*? Were *Foro* delegates able to challenge the stereotypes of Mayan women associated with and perpetuated by those imbalances? What are the theoretical implications provided by the *Foro*'s creation and unfolding in terms of the facilitation of working across difference? What vision of the relationship between "unity and diversity" (e.g., a coherent narrative of the self and its composite, often conflicting, identifications) is revealed by Mayan women's perspectives on their interactions with *Ladinas* in the *Foro*? What are the implications for the debate on the usefulness of the category "women"?

These Mayan women tell stories of complex, inextricably interrelated social and political identifications replete with elements of gender, ethnicity, class, and geographic location, among others. These tales bear out many aspects of Weir's and Benhabib's (1999), models of self and social identity, particularly in terms of the mutually constitutive relationship between self and community. These stories depict the existence of a stable, yet flexible self, formed in socially mediated contexts through language—thus, the insistence that the *Foro* design reflect linguistic realities at the local level.

And, in fact, it seems that the *Foro* was reasonably successful in its attempt both to respect Mayan women's socio-political identifications and to facilitate their public emergence in the State. Alicia captures the sense of coherence that can exist between ethnic and gendered identifications, while signalling a central feature of the Forum's success, its respect for Mayan women's specificity:

I think the *Foro* has in fact strengthened [my identity] in two aspects, in terms of being a woman, that is, along the idea of gender, and in terms of belonging to a Mayan group because of the fact that in its very design, [the *Foro*] created space for all women. There was room for everybody who was a woman; and then, there were the different levels, local, regional and national ... on top of that, there's the Mayan element, the fact that there were other Mayan women participating from their level, from a position where they could make valuable contributions.

Moreover, Mayan women seem to have done Weir's kind of "identity work"; they seem to have fashioned coherent narratives of the self and the collective while being conscious of the historically based need to do so. In fact, they might well argue that the emergence of a coherent narrative of the self/collective is imperative for making political claims. On the other hand, in their recognition of discrimination based on class and gender, they display an understanding that identity categories are not mutually exclusive and thus defy rigid definition (i.e., *Ladinas* can be poor). For example, Yanet gives this account of power imbalances between classes:

In all the years I've been working in development, we've gained a certain clarity that problems of discrimination, poverty and many others faced by women aren't just caused by men, for example, but stem from existing structures in our country, from the domination of certain sectors by an elite group.

Monica is more explicit about the link between some *Ladina* and indigenous women due to a mutual experience of poverty; she notes,

There are poor *Ladinas* as well. In Guatemala we live in social classes, not only in cultures; I think when someone is poor, they feel humiliated and devalued, but when someone is rich, they feel privileged. They've been educated, [they feel as if] they have the capacity to do anything. [Like a poor Mayan woman] a poor *Ladina* doesn't have anything either.

The Mayan women interviewed seem able to simultaneously embrace their difference and similarities with *Ladina* women, most notably regarding class and gender affiliations. They recognize the common plight of impoverished rural *campesinas*, be they Mayan or *Ladina*. Thus, one theoretical implication for working across difference suggested by these stories is that such work is possible, if difficult. The inherent dialectical relationship between self and collective identities coupled with our capacity for critique means that we may be able to forge new political identities, or, in the

"The mere fact of being indigenous limits our abilities to better ourselves; a *Ladina* can be just as poor as an indigenous woman but experience less discrimination because of ethnic identity."

words of Benhabib (1996), "identity-transcending group solidarities," under the right circumstances. Moreover, the relevance of class oppression as a bridge between ethnicities (and genders, for that matter) suggests that any attempt at "creative political action" (Benhabib 1996) between differently positioned participants should include an analysis of systemic or structural power relations.

While Mayan women's processes of identification leave room for an affiliation with *Ladinas*, that is, a concern for broader societal gender relations, they stress that this concern is couched in terms of their identity as *Mayan women*. In this sense, class can be simultaneously a point of convergence and divergence between Mayan women and *Ladinas*:

Mayan women are not just discriminated against by Mayan men, that is, from the point of view of gender, but also because of class. [Class oppression] greatly affects us as Mayan women since most of us have few economic resources. Furthermore, the mere fact of being indigenous limits our abilities to better ourselves compared to that of *Ladinas*; a *Ladina* can be just as poor as an indigenous woman but experience less discrimination because of the whole question of [ethnic] identity. (Carolina)

Again, a crucial point is brought to the fore: the

importance of acknowledging historical power imbalances between differently positioned members of a collectivity.

Although Weir stresses that openness to difference is fundamental for the generation of “new meanings” (i.e., in the realms of social and linguistic norms), she is referring to the process we would employ to make sense of, as Benhabib (1996), might say, difference as a normative reality. However, for these Mayan women, “difference,” while not conflated with inequality, becomes closely associated with it. They argue that, in the course of their historic marginalization by dominant powers for over 500 years (since the Spanish Invasion), their “difference” as a people has been oppressed and constructed as inferior. Yanet explains that:

It's one thing to be considered different, a distinct human being; the Mayan population and Mayan women are distinct. But, this difference is not always seen as good, as simply different from something else, but rather is considered inferior. There's an element of inferiority and superiority. The other situation I see behind this is a problem of power ... it's as if [*Ladinas*] feel threatened; they are afraid they will lose space when that moment finally arrives in which differences don't matter, when we see each other as equals regardless of skin colour or clothes.

This emphasis on the historically determined difference (i.e., marginalization) of indigenous people in Guatemala points to the need, theoretically speaking, to avoid conflating difference (of the kind associated with questions of identity), with inequality (of the kind instituted by power discrepancies). How could the relationships between inequity and difference be discussed in order to ensure equitable participation of the differently positioned members of a collective? In this case, it seems important for Mayan women to be able to articulate their difference as an entry point into a conversation about historical power imbalances, not as an exercise in identity politics of the separatist sort. This would seem to be an argument for the kind of “transversal politics” advocated by Yuval-Davis. In addition, by focusing on the history of their oppression (i.e., their historical specificity) in a dialogue with *Ladinas*, Mayan women would be advancing the practice of a “politics of engagement” as discussed by Mohanty (1997: 69). It follows that another vital step towards respecting the self-ascribed identities of differently positioned women (or groups) in a collective (in this case, Mayan women) would be to address-and redress-any historical power imbalances that might have resulted in the construction of difference as deviance.

Another step which becomes imperative is the recognition of the usefulness of political categories such as “Mayan women” for redressing such historical imbalances. Instead of leading inevitably towards the repression or domina-

tion of difference, the political category “Mayan women” emerges as a potential vehicle for emancipation. A related demand on the part of Mayan women is the need for a relatively unencumbered space in which they could participate in their own language, on their own terms without being subject to further domination on the part of *Ladinas*. Had there been fewer time and financial constraints, the final *Foro* proposals would have included a more accurate description of Mayan women's needs and demands before the state.

However, limitations notwithstanding, the *Foro* did provide an opportunity for Mayan women to reflect on their identities as *Mayan women*, and thus to reinforce their political selfhood. For Irene,

Although ... the [*Foro*'s] principal objective was to prepare proposals for the Government; in a sense, working on these proposals did allow us to reflect on our identity as Mayan women.

Based on her personal experience, the *Foro*'s linguistic community structures, by facilitating participation in discussions about Mayan women's problems, needs and solutions, reaffirmed and

strengthened our identities because [they] took into account the different ethnic groups that exist.... I think the Forum reaffirmed my identity in both ways, as a woman in general and as a Mayan woman.

However, as we have seen, the arguably justifiable need for a separate participatory space did not preclude the possibility of working across difference for these Mayan women.

Conclusions

By most assessments, the *Foro* was a unique political experiment designed to foster greater participation of Mayan and *Ladina* women alike. As I discuss, however, it was a project facing enormous challenges; some endemic to Guatemalan reality, like a colonial history and the urban-rural divide; and others particular to the *Foro*, such as the partisan interests of certain *Foro* Coordinating Commission members. Despite these difficulties, the *Foro* did open up a space for dialogue between Mayan and *Ladina* women, a space that could not have been imagined only two decades ago.

Theoretically speaking, the *Foro* was a space in which differently positioned women were essentially asked to manoeuvre within the illusive terrain of unity/diversity, in this case, where unity refers to a coherent political collectivity, and diversity, to the heterogeneous social locations of its members. As a whole, their stories reveal that these Mayan women were up to the task at hand; they were conscious (or became conscious through participation in the *Foro*) of the need to “make sense,” in Benhabib's

[1999] terms, of the complexities and potential conflicts of interest in their numerous identifications. For example, Yanet classifies the Forum as

a space that allowed us to get closer to the realization of a dream that many [indigenous and *Ladina*] women have had ... [it has been] an opportunity for those of us who always wanted to do something for the female population ... still with our differences, but interested in resolving the problems we face as women.

Her statement implies a belief that pursuance of a common cause or goal (or coherent self, for that matter) by a group of differently positioned women is possible and does not inevitably lead to the eradication or domination of the differences between them.

In effect, their insistence on maintaining the political category "Mayan women" (with its linguistic community subcategories) within the *Foro's* structure represents a kind of sophisticated employment of strategic essentializing. This insistence, rather than reflecting an attempt to create an internally repressive category, points to the existence of deeply politicized identifications, ones which in turn reveal a history of hierarchical power relations in the nation-state.

In fact, the historic exploitation of Mayan women and the deployment of racist and gendered constructions of their roles within society to justify that exploitation show that the concerns of relational, postmodern and poststructuralist feminists need to be taken seriously. That is, attempts to dominate difference in the name of unity will be made and may succeed, albeit temporarily. However, these Mayan women's experiences in the *Foro* indicate that attempts at domination will also be challenged. It is my view that such challenges can occur precisely due to the dialectical relationship between self and other described so poignantly by Weir and Benhabib (1999), among others. In the case study of the *Foro*, "Mayan women" as a category has had at least two different functions, one repressive, and the other liberating. If domination and liberation are both possible, perhaps we would be better off refocusing the theoretical debate amongst feminist theorists to a discussion of how best to provide spaces for the kind of ongoing self/collective "identity work" which seems so necessary for political selfhood.

Furthermore, a focus on the processes of identification, rather than identity outcomes per se, might tell us more about the realities in which subjects are embedded, whether exploitative or liberatory. And, as we saw in the *Foro*, such a focus might also lead to recognition of how subjects from seemingly different social locations are, in fact, similarly positioned (e.g., class). Perhaps then, a focus on processes of identification would help us to avoid engagement in the extremes represented by identity politics on the one hand, and of universal understandings of the self on the other,

both of which deny difference altogether. We might stop attempting to answer questions about the identity of the "other" (or to interfere with its construction), and start looking at why and how certain identity claims are made. In so doing, we might remain open to difference, as Mayan women and *Ladina* women have attempted to be in Guatemala.

Despite its setbacks and weaknesses, the *Foro* remains an unprecedented attempt in Guatemala's history to promote the representation of Guatemalan women in all their specificity in a national, participatory project which necessarily involves the goal of effectively working across differences between Mayan women and *Ladinas*. What value does the notion of "working across difference" have for broader questions of peace-building in Guatemala or elsewhere? This analysis of the *Foro* has shown that when opportunities exist for, in this case, Mayan women to articulate their stories and be heard by their *Ladina compañeras*, new meanings can be generated that serve to expose more clearly historical stereotypes of difference, thus moving citizens towards greater respect for one another. For example, when Irene is asked if the *Foro* had helped to establish or strengthen solidarity between *Ladinas* and Mayan women, she responds by saying that

somehow the *Foro* made both *Ladina* and indigenous women conscious of the fact that we are equals, but, that lamentably, there is a system of preferences in place that creates inequality.

Yanet would agree:

I think one way to increase solidarity amongst women even with all our differences, is to learn about them, to come to know and understand that we are distinct, but that we suffer problems that, if not the same, are similar. I think this consciousness can be acquired through learning about each other's realities.

In the final analysis, true respect for difference (as defined by the 'other'), in addition to involving the application of skills like dedication, patience, and hard work over a substantial period of time, requires addressing and ultimately altering those systemic power imbalances which have so often turned difference into bad thing. I end with the powerful words of Monica, who proposes that the kind of understanding which comes from working across difference may very well be a necessary step towards creating a truly peaceful society:

I think these processes have to run their course, because these [discriminatory] practices didn't develop overnight, but over the course of 500 years. As a result, it's not easy to [understand and respect these different] experiences, our ways of being on the earth; it's going to be difficult for us to truly unify ourselves

... although it's not the fault of anyone, not of the [Ladinos] living now and not ours, but rather a question of [historical] circumstances ... it's as if we must yank out the roots and plant something new ... [in the *Foro*] even though we've been able to understand one another, these root causes must be resolved before we can truly unite.

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¹The final *Peace Accord* signed in December 1996 represents the end of over ten years of negotiations between the Guatemalan government and the armed rebel forces of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). The UN Mission MINUGUA was established to verify compliance with the Accords.

²I decided to limit the discussion to what seem to be the most salient markers of identity in Guatemala.

³Monica is a pseudonym for one of the six Mayan women from Guatemala whom I interviewed in Spanish. To ensure each woman's anonymity, I reveal neither their real name or particular linguistic community.

⁴After months of debate, the Coordinating Commission approved the *Foro's* design. Guatemala was divided into eight regions and 56 (later, 57) local committees, representing different sectors and the 24 linguistic communities. The sectoral committees were conceived of as spaces for *Ladina* representation, although indigenous women were sometimes elected as sectoral delegates.

⁵At the local level, the *Foro's* linguistic and sectoral committees acted separately. That is, in the consultation process, the local delegates from each linguistic commu-

nity and sectoral structure held their own community-based workshops on socio-economic issues, and later, on civic and political participation. At the regional level, the linguistic and sectoral delegates joined forces to draft regional proposals. Two national assemblies were held (in '98 and '99) where all delegates met to formulate and approve national proposals on these broad themes.

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