

# Refuge and Return

## *The Challenges of Transition for Guatemalan Women's Organizations*

BY ERIN K. BAINES

*Cet article examine comment les réfugiées guatémaltèques ont occupé l'espace politique qui leur a été offert dans les camps au Mexique et comment elles ont organisé leur plan de retour en identifiant et en modifiant les obstacles qui s'opposaient à leur transfert.*

In the early 1980s, between 100,000 and 150,000 Guatemalans fled the brutal counter-insurgency tactics of the Guatemalan army and crossed the border into Mexico where they sought refuge. The terror of the war was profound and will never be forgotten by those who endured it. Yet, at the same time, exile and refuge in Mexico provided Guatemalan women an opportunity for reflection and change (Worby). Refuge opened new political spaces in which Guatemalan women could organize and assert their rights to land, an education, work outside the home, reproductive choice, and to be free of domestic violence (Baines). While significant progress was made in Mexico toward gender equality, the process of return poses serious challenges to women's organizations. In particular, the end of the Guatemalan civil war has signaled a return to "normalcy" marked by a reversion to traditional gender roles. Yet, women's organizations are determined that their homecoming is not "to return to a life they had before exile" (Vasquez 3).

### **Refuge: organizing to make change in Mexico**

At the height of the 37-year civil war in Guatemala, hundreds of highland villages were targeted by the Guatemalan army in a brutal attempt to quash guerrilla activities. Scorched earth tactics, forced conscription, kidnapping, disappearances, torture, and rape forced highland peasants to flee from their homes (Falla). Between 1980-1985, 50,000 to 75,000 Mayan peasants were murdered and 440 highland villages were completely destroyed (Krzrnic). In total, over a million were internally displaced from their homes (Krzrnic). Most of the refugees settled in the Mexican state of Chiapas in order to remain close to their homeland, although in 1984 the Mexican government relocated many refugees further north (MMQ/CIAM).

All of the refugees had traumatic memories of seeing loved ones raped, tortured, or murdered. Most lost all that they had owned. Despite this, many never gave up the hope of returning to Guatemala. In part, it was this desire

that led to the organization of the refugees under the Permanent Commissions (CCPP). The CCPP quickly became involved in the negotiation of a return process with the Guatemalan government eventually resulting in the signing of the *October 8 Accord* outlining the conditions refugees could return to their country in a safe and dignified manner. The leadership was completely male.

At the same time, refugee women were interested in organizing to support the return, and to improve life in camps. In 1989, 48 indigenous women from Chiapas, Campeche, and Quintana Roo met to form the Organización de Mujeres Guatemaltecas 'Mamá Maquín' (Mamá Maquín or MMQ), which eventually became the largest women's organization of the North West Region.<sup>1</sup> Within a year, the membership of MMQ grew to 8,000 members (MMQ/CIAM). Other women's organizations also formed, including Madre Tierra and Ixmucané, growing in membership and strength over the years.

Founders of MMQ traveled to the different camps to survey over 860 women of various ages and ethnic backgrounds. Women conducting this survey sometimes met resistance from men in the camps they entered. On occasion, men wanted to answer the questions claiming that their wives or daughters do not "know how to talk" (MMQ/CIAM). Despite this resistance, once completed the survey provided critical information about the demographics of refugee women. The results helped guide MMQ's future strategies of work, but also helped legitimize the importance of women's opinions. In addition, the information collected helped support the position that refugee women have particular protection needs.

For example, through the survey, a high incidence of domestic violence and sexual assault were detected in camps and yet few to no incidents had been reported. Between ten and 17 per cent of women had experienced marital violence and around 30 per cent believed their husbands had the right to beat them. Likewise, cultural practices such as the rape and kidnapping of a woman to claim her as a man's bride was considered unavoidable in certain

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cases (MMQ/CIAM). In instances of marital violence, many women thought they brought the abuse on themselves.

The survey also revealed the extent to which women were responsible for and restricted by domestic work. Women worked between 14 and 17 hours a day in refuge, making participation outside the home difficult. The division of labour in camps was clearly gendered. While some men did "help" with women's domestic work, the majority saw certain tasks such as making tortillas strictly

women's work (MMQ/CIAM). Domestic work is not valued across different ethnic groups, nor are women's efforts to supplement the family income by selling fruits or handicrafts. Only 16 per cent of women interviewed had any access to a monetary income (MMQ/CIAM 1994 36).

Yet women were responsible for providing basic necessities to the family, such as health care, food and water:

Women's daily schedule begins before 5:00am and finishes around nine or ten at night. The workday for women increases to 18 hours during plating or har-

vest seasons, when, in addition to housework and caring for their husbands and children, the women also work in the fields, although they do not consider this to be their occupation. (MMQ/CIAM 35)

Most women have children throughout their reproductive cycle, averaging 5.5 children per mother. Many women were married young, and often without choice. Religion and tradition both dictate that women exercise no control over her reproductive cycle, accepting as many children as "God sends" (MMQ/CIAM 46).

Refuge presented a number of cultural challenges to refugees. Women wear *huipils*, a traditional indigenous dress woven by women. Each ethnic group (and within each group, each community or region) wears a distinct form of dress which distinguishes their culture and language. Mexican employers refused Guatemalans work unless they shed their traditional dress. Poverty also forced many women to adopt commercialized clothing. Languages of Mam, Jacalteco, and Kanjobal were threatened in Spanish-speaking Mexico, particularly as the younger generation of Guatemalans began to learn Spanish first. Traditional marriages within the same ethnic groups also began to break down. All of these threats to Indigenous lifestyles placed additional strains on refugee women who played a central role as educator of their children in the traditions and religion of their ancestors.

Of the total population, 84 per cent of the women in

camps were from different indigenous groups, including Kanjobal (57 per cent), Mam (ten per cent), Chuj (ten per cent) and Jacalteco (seven per cent). Each indigenous group has a different language and the majority of refugee women were monolingual. This meant communication—and therefore organization across ethnic groups—was difficult to facilitate. In practice, most Guatemalan women are denied access to an education, as they are not thought to need one for their future roles as mothers and wives. Refugee women had a high illiteracy rate, up to 90 per cent amongst women over the age of 35 (Lozano). As one refugee woman explains: "Women study less because later they are going to get married" (MMQ/CIAM 35). However, the survey also presented the position that women—occupied by domestic work—do not have time to go to school (MMQ/CIAM).

Mamá Maquín and supporting NGOs established education as a priority for refugee women and girls. Together they trained a "literacy" team who in turn started classes for women in camps. Literacy classes also included a component to discuss women's rights. The results were mixed. On the one hand, a large number of women were able to attend classes and reported an increased sense of self-esteem. On the other hand, mixed groups of men and women sometimes formed with the result of silencing women. Likewise, child care continued to prevent women from fully participating in classes (Lozano).

In order to reduce the amount of hours women spent working, the women were provided with common clothes washing basins, mechanical corn grinding mills, tortilla presses, and fuel-saving stoves. For the most part, these tools and equipment were successful in freeing up some of the women's time. However, the structural barriers still prevented women from fully controlling the equipment and, after a time, many of the mills were taken over and managed by men.

Refugee women founded a radio program to reach a wider audience. The programs addressed questions of domestic violence and rape and emphasized the fact that women did not have to endure these forms of human rights abuses. Following a series of public education campaigns, the number of gender-related cases reported increased from zero per cent of all human rights cases to 40 per cent between 1992 and 1994 (Morel). The Mamá Maquín considered these public denunciations a symbol of the advances Guatemalan refugee women have made in terms of being aware of and demanding their rights. Special medical clinics and a safe house—*La Casa de la Mujer*—provided support and a private space for women seeking to escape violence (Sayavedra).

By the time the *October 8th Accord* came into effect in 1992, MMQ had successfully realized the election of several of their members as representatives on the CCPP. The negotiation of the return included specific details on the right of refugees to regain or secure land, including the government's promise to obtain land for all landless adults

by providing a special credit agreement. In Mayan cultures, land plays a pivotal role in providing sustenance. While women play a critical role in the cultivation and harvesting of land, they are not considered “farmers” in the sense that men are and therefore, they have not been included in the ownership or control of land. For example, ancestral land is usually passed through the generations to male children, although occasionally women do inherit land. While fully supportive of the CAPP and their negotiation of the return, Guatemalan women recognized it was necessary to ensure that women’s interests were protected with regard to property titles.

Legally, the *October 8th Accord* acknowledges that women and men are entitled to own land and access credit (Worby). However, in practice, the distribution of land titles favoured the male head of household. This was disconcerting given the relatively high numbers of widowed women or women without partners. Married women who wanted to return without their partners were seriously affected by this practice as well. Thus, women’s organizations began to insist on the inclusion of their rights to be co-owners of land until eventually this became an accepted part of the negotiation process.

A priority of Guatemalan women’s organizations was to raise women’s self-esteem regarding the value of her work, and as a woman. In an interview I conducted with a leader of Madre Tierra, the fact that women had to constantly prove to others the value of their organizations in dollar terms frustrated her:

What we do can not be “quantified” it is qualitative and should be measured in terms of women’s self-esteem. What is important for us is how each one of us has begun to change in our own [personal] development. We can not work toward “quantitative” results, it would not be a women’s development project otherwise. (personal interview)

Often women did not perceive themselves to be capable of participating in meetings or economic projects and this self-perception, coupled with machismo, was a great obstacle to their involvement. At first,

many women began this process [of understanding their rights] illiterate and often prisoners of their own homes and husbands, they left their homes only to wash their clothes in the river. (García 6)

Yet some women came to view Mexico as a time of learning, likening it to a school (Madre Tierra).

The small groups where we began to participate with time grew to larger groups. These [groups] became our own spaces where we talked to and listened to each other, where we began to come to our fears, where we began to know our rights, and to speak

about our necessities as women. [*translation mine*] (Vásquez 2)

Back in Guatemala, we would never have been able to gain that learning. [Before the violence], women could not participate, or perhaps we could participate but our culture didn’t support it, we ourselves devalued ourselves in our activities. By contrast, in Mexico we received help from NGOs, so we began to receive courses, many things. (Taylor 40)

The accomplishment of raising women’s self-esteem and awareness can not be underestimated for its mobilizing effect. For example, some refugee women found new ways to negotiate workloads and responsibilities with men in their communities. In the border camp of El Porvenir, midwives organized and networked with international agencies to receive not only official training and recognition of their skills, but to build a place of their own, *La Casa de la Mujer*. The midwives originally encountered resistance from the men in their communities but, through a process of compromise and negotia-

tion, were able to solicit the help of the men in the actual construction of the building. In the process, Kathleen Sullivan argues, everyone involved learned more about gender relations. *La Casa* has come to represent a place where women can meet to discuss issues of importance to them and, what is more, has established their participation in public issues (Sullivan).

However, not all of the experiences of refugee women and the field workers who supported them was positive. Amongst refugees, the organization of women was often perceived as a threat to a man’s position in society, and his masculinity:

If our wife goes out, if we help her in the house, later other *compañeros* come and criticize us. They say, “you look like an old woman. That’s woman’s work.” (CONGCOOP 6)

The reluctance to accept women’s changing position then, remained a formidable obstacle in camps. Resistance to women’s organizations themselves deepened during the return process when a number of economic obstacles weakened refugee women’s organizations as the following section demonstrates.

#### **Return: transitional challenges in Guatemala**

The final *Peace Accords* were signed on December 26,

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Erika Simon Gottlieb, "Faces," pen and ink drawing, 1989.

1996—ending the thirty seven year civil war in the country. On the one hand, coordinators from "Mamá Maquín," "Ixmucané," and "Madre Tierra" were able to establish a national presence in newly emerging democratic structures (see López). For example, refugee and displaced women are represented in the Women's Forum, a space established under the *Peace Accords* in order to monitor the implementation of the *Accords* with respect to women's issues. Both "Madre Tierra" and "Mamá Maquín" opened offices in Guatemala City in order to maintain pressure on the government to fulfill its obligations to the returning refugees. On the other hand, women's organizations encountered difficult conditions upon return, including less stable economic environments and closed political spaces in their newly established communities, identified in the following sections.

### Physical dispersment

In Guatemala, women who had worked together closely in Mexican camps are now physically dispersed throughout the country. In Mexican camps, women lived in close proximity to one another, facilitating their communication and attendance of meetings. Returns to Guatemala were staggered, occurring at different times over a six-year period. Women returned to different communities located all over Guatemala. Many of these communities are

located in densely forested highlands or jungles not accessible by road. Indeed, it may take up to several hours to hike into any one community and this may be an arduous journey, stymied by mud, ravines, and challenging paths. Even within some communities, women may be separated from each other by a half-an-hour or more walk. Without electricity or telephone, walking to carry a message may be the only means of communication.

Physical dispersion has a number of disadvantages. For women still reluctant to participate in meetings, the support of friends they had in exile is greatly missed. For women in leadership positions, contact with the "base" becomes a real challenge. For instance, in order to make a democratic decision, leadership would be required to visit each of the communities they represent—a task that takes a substantial amount of time and resources. In addition, coordinators of women's groups still have considerable domestic responsibilities, and sometimes must travel with their children as there is no daycare provided at home.

### Machismo

A second major challenge women have encountered is a resurgence of *machismo*. It is important to note that male leaders are more likely to support women's organizations in Mexico for political reasons: male leadership recognizes the potential funding women's organizations attracted, in addition to the powerful image women's demands make to the international media for their cause. Upon returning home, this role was perceived to be no longer necessary and many men insisted that women reassume traditional gender roles. This involves focusing completely on domestic "duties" and leaving public spaces.

In some cases, men's insistence that women return to "traditional" ways has been extreme; for example, in one case, men expected women to abandon the mills and tortilla presses obtained in Mexican camps, to go back to the labour-intensive and time-consuming process of making tortillas by hand. Women have also encountered violence or threat of violence which prevents them from participating. For these reasons, Madre Tierra has begun to emphasize the importance of educating children from an early age about equality between the sexes and raising the consciousness of everyone—especially men—about the value of women's work within the home, and her right to participate outside it (Vasquez).

### Political struggle for control

A third factor which has significantly affected the transition from refuge to return has been the increase in political tensions and struggle for power and influence within return communities. Decision-making has changed from broad and inclusive structures promoted by the UNHCR in Mexico, to authoritarian and hierarchical structures completely composed of men (Worby). At times, the

struggle for control has had violent outcomes. In early 1997, leaders in communities of the Ixcán region accused "Mamá Maquín" of being supporters of the guerrillas thought to be interfering with community life. Under the direction of village authorities, an angry mob tore down and burned the meeting place of MMQ, erecting a wooden cross on the ashes to symbolize the death of the organization. As Worby argues, these accusations were ironic given the same male leaders had previously supported the guerrillas. That MMQ contested political power within these communities is more likely the cause of the attack. Later that same year, members of the MMQ were threatened, robbed, and assaulted by supposed bandits on their return from their yearly assembly in the same region. MMQ felt this attack was also politically motivated, as assailants made specific and demeaning comments to Coordinators they knew by name.

### **Economic hardship and lulls in international support**

A fourth factor that must be taken into consideration is the harsh reality of economic survival in return communities. In Nueva Esperanza, women are intent on continuing their work in MMQ, but the energy they arrived with has declined as they face exhausting days collecting firewood, water, cleaning cloths, caring for gardens and crops, shifting and cleaning beans and corn, making tortillas, taking care of animals and children, weaving and making goods to supplement their income, and so on. Indeed, many women in this community feel their participation in MMQ hinders their ability to maintain their families' needs (Davis). As Davis explains, assistance from the UNHCR (such as food aid and economic projects) in camps have helped ease this burden, freeing women's time and ability to participate. In part, the ability to survive economically in the absence of international aid relies upon women's return to traditional gender roles.

Economic instability helps explain why so few women opted to be co-owners of land upon return to Guatemala, despite the work of women's organizations and the UNHCR on this issue. Traditionally, co-operatives were founded on the principle that each member pay dues. Women were concerned they would not be able to pay their dues given their relative lack of access to monetary income. Further, women were afraid of being overburdened by fines imposed on persons who failed to attend meetings. Responsible for child care, women also miss more meetings than their male counter-parts (Worby).

This leads to a final challenge of transition identified here—the lull in international funding and support to return communities. At times, the reasons for this lack of funding would appear to be due to the difficulties encountered in reaching some of the more hard to reach return communities. Presently, MMQ, "Madre Tierra" and "Ixmucañé" are at various stages of becoming legal entities

under the Guatemalan constitution. Official legal status will enable them to apply for funding and manage their own economic projects, in addition to giving them greater legal footing in which to lobby the government. However, women's organizations are still painfully dependent on international funding and guidance. For instance, many women do not have experience writing or managing economic projects, necessary skills for securing international funding independent of NGOs.

### **Conclusions**

The capacity of women's organizations to adapt to their new, demanding, and often hostile environments will depend on their ability to negotiate gender relations within their communities and to communicate with one another. While the transition has closed spaces once opened in exile, Guatemalan women have also returned to find a new era in the women's struggle in their country. On International Women's day in 1997, thousands of women marched in the streets and shouted "*Somos Aquí*" ("We are Here"), reminding civil society and the state that they plan to remain visible in peacetime. This movement was at once made stronger by the return of thousands of refugee women. It is in the years to come that the real accomplishments of their work will take root and grow.

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<sup>1</sup>MMQ derives its name from a courageous Q'eqchi woman who was murdered along with 100 other *campesinos* during a peaceful demonstration to regain their appropriated lands in 1978.

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These and other useful resources can be found at the Women in Conflict Zones Network website, <http://www.yorku.ca/research/cfr/wicz/>

African Gender Institute — <http://www.uct.ac.za/org/agi/>

Association of African Women Scholars — <http://www.iupui.edu/~aaws>

Autonomous Women's Center Against Sexual Violence, Belgrade — [www.womenngo.org.yu](http://www.womenngo.org.yu)

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Etre femme d'Haiti — [www.deja.com](http://www.deja.com)

Human Rights Watch Report 2000 (including the Women's Commission on Refugee Women and Children — <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k/>

North-South Institute — <http://www.nsi-ins.ca>

Rape is a War Crime — <http://www.icmpd.org/women/>

Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict — <http://www.suffolk.edu/law/ihrhlp/docs/biblio5.html>

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Transitions Online (TOL) <http://www.tol.cz>

Truth and Reconciliation Commission — <http://www.truth.org.za/>

UNHCR/CEDAW Reference Page — <http://www.unhcr.ch/refworld/welcome.htm>

Virtual IFY — [www.vifu.de](http://www.vifu.de)

Women, Law and Development International — <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k/>