

Whitney Jameson  
North Polk High School  
Alleman, IA, USA  
Guatemala, Population

### **Guatemala: Empowering Women Through the Use of Small Businesses**

In many cultures, women are valued as less than men still today. Although some countries have made minimal improvements on this front, most developing countries are failing to adjust their attitudes and policies. Not only are these countries outdated in gender roles, but they are also falling behind in the race to put an end to hunger. To combat this, many nonprofit organizations have been developed over the years, however, these organizations have hardly solved the issue at hand. The solutions proposed by organizations have only pacified the issue for a small length of time. What would be ideal are new resolutions that can actually solve a problem, and one way for doing that is finding a way for women to be a part of the idea as well. Somehow, people neglect to acknowledge the fact that women still have limited access to education, as well as choices basic humans should have the right to make. A developing country like Guatemala, has an enormous population of 17.25 million people; half of which, about 48.56%, live in ruralized areas (Guatemala Population). Though it is possible for women to become successful in urban Guatemala, they still face job discrimination and sexual harrassment, which deters them from staying in the workforce. (Balán). In rural areas of Guatemala, women are at an even bigger disadvantage. Women have little to no access to education, as young boys are usually sent to school for longer than girls (Guatemala). Once a typical family can no longer afford schooling for a girl, she is usually trained on how to cook, clean, and maintain a family, as unlearned women usually have little access to jobs in developing countries (Harnessing The Talent).

Because women in households often obtain no income, the men are regarded as the head of the household. However, these men are unable to completely support their family. Most men and young boys rely on small farm operations in order to achieve their income. Other men are employed as day laborers or construction workers. This rigorous work, combined with the unsatisfactory pay rate, results in families becoming impoverished. According to the Global Press Journal, a 2013 institute showed that 54 percent of the Guatemalan population live under the poverty line (Balán). This means the monthly household income for a family of five is under 3,236 quetzales or about \$420.00. This income figure has stayed constant through decades, condemning more and more families each year to poverty. Even with multiple small incomes in a single household, there still is not enough money for a family to thrive (Guatemala). A typical family's survival depends on the head of household, the father figure or husband. With little money to go around in a typical 5 family member household (cite), a customary rural Guatemalan family suffers. A recent UN report shows 60% of the population lives in poverty less than two US dollars a day; and 27% in extreme poverty: about 1 US dollar a day. Of the indigenous population, 93% live in poverty and 91% in extreme poverty" (Ending Poverty). This statistic is extremely disheartening; it shows how many people are impacted by severe poverty, especially marginalized populations, like indigenous people. Because of this, The Guatemala World Food Programme informs that, "Almost half the population cannot afford the cost of the basic food basket. As a result, the prevalence of stunting in

children under 5 is one of the highest in the world – and the highest in Latin America and the Caribbean” (Guatemala World Food).

Currently, there are many smaller-scaled solutions that were created in order to address hunger. However, each system for solving hunger has its downsides. For example, an organization by the name of Unicef Sprinkles has come up with a technical solution for hunger, as it has provided Guatemalan children with micronutrients that aid their growth and development (Borgen). This solution has helped a sizable amount of kids-- about 35,000--however, the fact of the matter is that the organization only reaches a small fraction of the community (Borgen). Unicef Sprinkles, in addition to many other nonprofit organizations that are similar, share a key quality that makes their efforts unsustainable -- almost all organizations such as these are unable to reach enough people, or actually solve a problem. These organizations fail to sustain hunger indefinitely. With the aid of a new organization, hunger and poverty can ultimately, over time, begin to decrease and affect less and less.

Weaving a Future, a newly envisioned type of business solution, would not only address the challenge of hunger and poverty in a sustainable way, but it would ultimately affect the lives of many women in Guatemala for the better. The organization would loan money-- gained from donations-- to women in rural Guatemala so that they would be able to start a weaving business of their own and in turn, make money, eventually become more successful, empower them, in addition to providing an extra source of income for their families. The loan would be given to these women to pay for the starting supplies needed for weaving. Some of these materials could include various colors of fabric, as well as a loom. Weaving a Future will bring back culture in the form of businesses, so that women are able to become more successful and will bring more prosperity to their community, and to Guatemala. Empowering women will help the economy as well as break the cycle of poverty and stigmas concerning successful women in Guatemala’s culture. A similar type of solution using microcredit was tested in Malawi where it was found that, “women’s access to microcredit improves 0–6 year old girls’ long-term nutrition” (Hazarika and Guha-Khasnabis). The study by Hazarika and Guha-Khasnabis yielded the conclusion that as women’s access to microcredit grows, so does their ability to provide for their families, thus diminishing food insecurity in Malawi. By giving women a similar opportunity through the means of a more approachable method, the success of women in Guatemala is unmeasurable.

Traditional weaving has been used by women since the ancient Mayan civilization. Journalist Petra Godesa, who traveled to Guatemala and witnessed the exquisite culture writes, “Versions of huipiles were worn by ancient Mayan priests and emperors back in the forgotten past. Though the fabric has changed, the form stayed the same” (Godesa). Huipiles are traditional garments made and usually worn by women that are still relevant in present-day Guatemala (Godesa). Because clothing is generally expensive, mothers usually make clothes for their family by using techniques that have been passed onto them for generations. The various colors and patterns are incredibly symbolic, as they reveal the origins of the maker’s family as well as the indigenous culture of the creator (Godesa).

In the ancient Aztec culture, weaving was “..so extremely valued” to their civilization (Toby-Evans 215). An article from the organization, Mayan Hands, notes, “Gender identity wasn’t based on intrinsic physical qualities, such as genitals or secondary sexual characteristics. It was based on dress and the instruments of work” (Weaving and Culture). For example, Aztec men would wear a simple cloth

covering their genitals to show masculinity, whereas women wore dresses with complicated and exquisite designs to show their innate ability to weave (Variation in Huipils).

As weaving is extremely important to the culture of the women in Guatemala, it is important for Weaving a Future to, in a way, tap into this. This way, the organization would give a sense of home and familiarity instead of stranger organizations making them feel as though they need charity. Empowering women is one of the strongest values prevalent in Weaving a Future, because self-empowerment is important to happy and successful individuals. In addition, another important aspect of Weaving a Future is to acknowledge the societal benefits concerning disabled Guatemalan women. The ability of Weaving a Future to accommodate women from all backgrounds with varying levels of education is why the business has such potential for success. Since the cultural tradition of weaving has been passed down from generation to generation, women who may have mental disabilities, or who have not received any education, are not necessarily at a disadvantage. All women physically capable of weaving have something that they can take out of the business to better their future. If some women had physical handicaps, they could potentially mentor other women with disabilities in order to empower them. Women incapable of weaving could also perhaps help with broadcasting the successes of Weaving a Future or by handling the day-to-day operations of the business.

In order to lead and finance Weaving a Future, donations from individuals would contribute to a small part of the money needed to build the organization, but sponsorship from other corporations and businesses would offer the most money needed to finance and grow the organization. A business with a similar goal in mind is Maya Traditions, run by Buena Onda partner. This business provides funding to empower women artisans (Maya Traditions: Weaving). With a potential partnership with Mayan Traditions, as well as other organizations with similar goals in mind, the opportunities of growth of Weaving a Future is unlimited. Through some advertisements on social media, in local towns and businesses, as well as other forms of small advertising, the necessary funding would be accomplished. The donations would only be needed once, so that Weaving a Future can get its start. Once it attains the necessary funding, Weaving a Future would be able to, as well as representatives from the organization, travel to small rural villages in Guatemala, to distribute the loans to a few women. Grace periods, in addition to low interest rates, would give the women enough time to pay back the loan. The money gained back from the loans would go directly back to the organization, so that, over time, Weaving a Future would be more profitable, resulting in an increase in the number of women it could impact. Once the business begins to grow and continues to help more of Guatemala's women, the larger it becomes. Once this occurs, the organization could hire representatives of the business to be located in Guatemala. These representatives and employees would focus on growing the organization, as well as handling the day-to-day operations.

Through the use of small donations, individuals would feel as though they made an impact on the women of Guatemala, as well as the world. This strategy would increase the inclination of those wanting to give. Perhaps the organization could even show the effectiveness of the loan towards a woman's success in her community, in order to connect the donator and the person receiving the loan. Usually donations do not contain this quality. One can donate a dollar to an animal shelter or round up to donate to cancer research, but they do not know how their donated money changed a life, or many lives. Weaving a Future would be much more successful if it contained this quality.

The progression of the inclusion of women in Guatemala's society is pivotal towards a restructured economy. Through outreach, these women will become more successful, ultimately aiding the country in the future. By going back to customs long past, women are able to feel accomplished and better about themselves, as they impact their society. Not only will the feeling of accomplishment be prevalent in the minds of these women, but they will know their impact as they can use their success to power dreams they never thought were attainable. These women can ultimately become nurses, teachers, and more importantly, business women, changing the face of Guatemala's male- dominated government and economy permanently.

## Works Cited

- Balán, Norma. "Guatemalan Women Face Sexual Harassment, Discrimination While Husbands Work Abroad." *Global Press Journal*, 30 July 2015, [globalpressjournal.com/americas/guatemala/guatemalan-women-face-sexual-harassment-discrimination-while-husbands-work-abroad/](http://globalpressjournal.com/americas/guatemala/guatemalan-women-face-sexual-harassment-discrimination-while-husbands-work-abroad/).
- Borgen, Clint. "Answering a Question: How to Help People in Guatemala." *The Borgen Project*, Clint Borgen [https://Borgenproject.org/Wp-Content/Uploads/The\\_Borgen\\_Project\\_Logo\\_small.Jpg](https://Borgenproject.org/Wp-Content/Uploads/The_Borgen_Project_Logo_small.Jpg), 16 May 2020, [borgenproject.org/how-to-help-people-in-guatemala/](http://borgenproject.org/how-to-help-people-in-guatemala/).
- "Ending Poverty." *United Nations*, United Nations, [www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/poverty/](http://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/poverty/).
- Godesa, Petra. "The Indigenous Weaving Queens of Guatemala." *Unearth Women*, 13 Aug. 2018, [www.unearthwomen.com/2018/08/13/indigenous-weaving-queens-of-guatemala](http://www.unearthwomen.com/2018/08/13/indigenous-weaving-queens-of-guatemala).
- "Guatemala Population (LIVE)." *Worldometer*, [www.worldometers.info/world-population/guatemala-population/](http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/guatemala-population/).
- "Guatemala." *Guatemala | World Food Programme*, [www.wfp.org/countries/guatemala](http://www.wfp.org/countries/guatemala).
- "Harnessing the Talent of Rural Youth in Guatemala." *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*, [www.fao.org/in-action/harnessing-talent-of-rural-youth-guatemala/en/](http://www.fao.org/in-action/harnessing-talent-of-rural-youth-guatemala/en/).
- Hazarika, Gautam, and Basudeb Guha-Khasnobis. "Women's Access to Microcredit and Children's Food Security in Rural Malawi." *Journal of African Development*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2012, pp. 27–46. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jafrideve.14.1.0027](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jafrideve.14.1.0027).

“Maya Traditions: Weaving Empowers Women across Generations.” *Buena Onda*, 11 Sept. 2020, [buenaondavolunteers.org/maya-traditions-weaving-empowers-women-across-generations-preserves-culture/](https://buenaondavolunteers.org/maya-traditions-weaving-empowers-women-across-generations-preserves-culture/).

Toby-Evans, Susan. “Concubines and Cloth.” *Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History*, by Anne Walthall, University of California Press, 2008, pp. 215–230.

“Variation in Huipils.” *Sam Noble Museum*, 21 Mar. 2018, [samnoblemuseum.ou.edu/collections-and-research/ethnology/mayan-textiles/pitzer-collection-of-mayan-textiles/regional-variation-in-huipils/](https://samnoblemuseum.ou.edu/collections-and-research/ethnology/mayan-textiles/pitzer-collection-of-mayan-textiles/regional-variation-in-huipils/).

“Weaving and Culture.” *Mayan Hands*, [www.mayanhands.org/pages/weaving-and-culture](http://www.mayanhands.org/pages/weaving-and-culture).