

Rachel Zumbach
North Linn High School
Troy Mills, Iowa
Guatemala, Factor 15: Human Rights

Guatemala: Working Women

As seen in history Guatemalans emigrate both legally and illegally to Mexico, the United States, and Canada because of a lack of economic opportunity, political instability, and natural disasters. Poverty has been brought on in rural Guatemala based on the infrastructure and remote locations that the Indigenous people live; who are often excluded from the social, economic, and political mainstream. “More than half of Guatemala's population lives in rural areas. Poverty is deeply entrenched in rural communities: the rural poor account for more than 70 percent of the country's poor population” (Rural Poverty Portal). These Indigenous people are left out, forgot about, and in need of help because of the terrain that separates them and the urban civilization.

Not only do families work as day laborers but they also operate their own family farms to satisfy their hunger needs and feed their families. “Family farming is the prevailing form of agricultural business, with around 70 percent of the area under cultivation devoted to the basic grains (maize, sorghum and beans) that conform the food staples” (Rural Poverty Portal). With the significant amount of forest, mountains, and other rugged terrain many locals are left to planting their crops on slopes because of the little land available for farm use. These slopes erode and the crops receive only rainfall for irrigation. Farmers in Guatemala cannot grow enough crops efficiently and lack resources to better their lives. These are only some of the barriers regulating what the poor can do. Others include the unfairness of getting loans which require a significant amount of information and paperwork unavailable to them at hand (IndieDocInc). Having such a terrible system that doesn't allow for them to prosper and get the help they need the Indigenous people are left to forming their own cooperatives which will be talked about further into my research.

“Because of rural overpopulation, the urban areas have swelled with migrants. Many of these people live in illegal squatter settlements, or shantytowns. Peasants mostly live in two-room, dirt-floor adobe structures. The roofs are made of palm leaves, straw, or tiles. Their small farm plots may be several hours' walk away” (Guatemalans). Reading this quote I hope you can envision the lives of what these poor, Indigenous people face every day. A typical rural Guatemalan family consists of a mother, father, and nearly six children per a woman.

Guatemala's population outcomes to almost 15 million people, 35.57 percent of which are the ages 0-14. These youth face a dependency ratio of 62.6 percent. From my understanding this shows the different working age groups (Central America and Caribbean : Guatemala). If 62.6 percent of youth are working how are they attending school? They are not. In the rural areas because of the lack of food many of these children are forced to become day laborers in order to help feed their younger siblings and make the money for them to attend school. Fathers often try to plant their own crops near the house on a small patch of land that can be rented. Because of droughts, erosion, and the lack of attending to them these crops potentially will not make it through and will be unable to be sold or eaten. Women must work as day laborers as well unless there are children that need to be looked after. In this case they may try and start their own business such as weaving or splitting firewood (IndieDocInc).

Day laboring is a job many rural families can obtain. Farmers and other employers are always looking for more work. However, this job does not provide a steady income for those willing to work it. Payment can range from one dollar to nine depending on how the work is doing and the weather. I say the weather because if there is a flood or a storm a day laborer may be out of work. Many families have started to

move into the city to avoid this problem and to get a job with a steady income they can count on (IndieDocInc). But for now, having little money, these families must eat a very slim amount in order to save for other needs and only one-third of the population has access to an adequate health care service. In most cases these families cannot even afford to be seen by a doctor let alone receive treatment being that they live on less than one to two dollars a day (Guatemala). Malnutrition and other diseases are causes of serious problems in one's health in a rural community. Many poor people lack the appropriate amount of calories for their body weight every day and only eat when food is available. Many diets contain black beans and other foods that can be grown or bought at the local market such as bananas or squash (Guatemala). Prices of foods at the market are very high due to the drought and lack of crops that are growing at a steady rate.

Now that you understand the economic state and lives of these people we will move onto the research proving one of the biggest problems in their society. Human Rights, specifically the rights of Indigenous people, women, and children. Not only do human rights of women and children affect household income but so do the human rights of the Indigenous people as a whole.

If women receive less payment than men for the same job how does that not affect household income? Think of this scenario: Family A could be made up of five children all of female gender and a similar family, family B, could be made up of five male children. Family B would be better off just based upon their gender. Receiving more income based upon their gender they would be able to provide healthier and more food for themselves. They also could gain the tools and have access to more resources to better their lives by renting their own land and being able to receive loans easier than women. Now, let's add another family into the ratio. Family C is a family of five boys all NOT of Indigenous descent. If family B was made up of all indigenous boys and Family C is not and they had the same job who would gain the better pay? Family C. Seeing this I hope you understand how far down the totem pole women of Indigenous Descent, or just in general, are compared to men in Guatemala.

Not only are women paid less they also succumb to a high sexual assault and violence rate. This is a daily occurrence now but was prevalent during Guatemala's Genocide. In Latin America it is common for men to have a sense of dominance over women and have great respect unlike women. With this women are seen more as objects versus individuals capable of the same things as men. Guatemala has had a long history of dictatorships and oppression. More than two hundred thousand victims died in 1982 and 1983 during the genocide resulting from Guatemala's civil war; 83% of these victims were Mayan, some of whom were women, children, or elderly (Genocide). This just shows women and children, especially of Indigenous or other native descent are discriminated against. The genocide lasted two years and was commonly known as "the Silent Holocaust." Buildings and crops were destroyed, water supplies were tainted, livestock was killed, and religious and culturally significant areas or symbols were violated or destroyed because of the scorched Earth policy (20th). Children and women faced the worst during this horrific time in Guatemalan history. Kids were commonly beaten, beaten against rocks or trees, and raped. Women often experienced rape as well. Also, to ensure these women would not become pregnant men would beat them until they would abort their child. Thousands of rapes were committed during the genocide and 75% of Mayan women admitted to being raped (Genocide). The history of genocide and discrimination shows the tragic lives these citizens once lived and continue to as the government has done little to give women and children human rights.

How do we fix these horrific incidents of women being downgraded, especially those of Indigenous descent? The answer is Indigenous women cooperatives, support groups, and publicizing the Grameen Bank.

A cooperative between women can be a powerful movement. A cooperative is "a farm, business, or other organization that is owned and run jointly by its members, who share the profits or benefits" (Google). In

this cooperative women would each pool in a specific amount of money each month. For this experiment we will use \$10 and 10 women. After the money is pooled together we have a grand total of \$100. This \$100 would then be distributed to one woman in the group each month. This would allow for the woman to gain a bigger lump sum at one time in order to purchase something that costs more or start their own business.

Cooperatives would run similar to a club and be formed in smaller communities. Each cooperative would elect a responsible member to be in charge of the distribution of the money. This only works with a huge amount of trust towards one another and respect of others hard work. With that said, it would be suggested that cooperatives be formed within families or small groups of friends. The smaller the group the less risk, but also the less amount of lump sum in money.

Through these cooperatives many women would gain support from one another. In a country where women are thought of more as objects rather than individuals it's important to boost their esteem. With confidence and the knowledge of their actual rights women can be a powerful force. With this support group they would be better able to confide in each other and stop the violence and abuse of the female gender.

Another way Guatemalan people can get loans for starting a business is through Grameen Bank. Ordinary banks are very difficult to get a loan from because participants have to be able to show copies of their electric bill, a NIT number, the amount of money they are currently making, and bills from the last three months (IndieDocInc). On top of that a citizen wanting a loan would also need two people to sign for them and be able to sign their own name. Knowing that many of these items are highly unlikely to get copies of the Grameen Bank is a more suitable option for Guatemalans in need of a loan. All one needs to get a loan here is the deeds of their land or house and a photocopy of their ID (IndieDocInc). These things are easy to get and the Grameen Bank has helped many in need with this system.

With a loan of just 200 dollars Rosa Coj Bocel, another friend of the American students in a video titled "Living on One Dollar a Day" who was unable to finish school, was able to start her own weaving business and make enough money to pay for an education in nursing (IndieDocInc). Many others in this video, including Doña Maria, Lusía, Rosita, and Maria, opened stores, sold wood, created farms, and made a better home for their families with their loans from Grameen Bank. When someone asks for a loan from Grameen bank they also open up a savings account in which they can build up their financial standings through savings and investments. If this wonderful Grameen bank was more publicized women all over Guatemala, of Indigenous descent or not, would be able to start their own businesses. This would help families financially and produce more food as some women create their own farms.

Throughout the last fifteen years of operation the Grameen bank has helped millions of people gain loans, but they aren't the only ones. Grameen bank works with many volunteers through the Bankers Without Borders foundation. These business professionals share their stories, talents, and help mentor in order to help organizations all around the world.

The Grameen bank offers so much more than just loans though; they are able to spread resources in the agriculture and health industries. Publicizing these benefits would be a great way to start improving the quality of life in Guatemala. Word of mouth is one way to do this along with posters and fast loan stands at farmers market where these indigenous people go to sell and purchase their produce. The more convenient these benefits are the easier and more likely people will seek them out.

I believe that these three simple steps: building cooperatives among Indigenous women and women in general, starting support groups for women to become aware of their rights, and publicizing the Grameen Bank which gives out loans, would be an effective way to start solving the human rights issue in Guatemala. As seen with the many scenarios mentioned previously women and children have been brutally

beaten, left out, and discriminated against and they need to know they have rights. As this research clearly shows this discrimination has gone on for far too long and needs to end now.

Works Cited

- "Central America and Caribbean : Guatemala." Central Intelligence Agency.
Central Intelligence Agency, 2016. Web. 14 Mar. 2016. <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/gt.html>>.
- "Google." Google. Web. 17 Mar. 2016.
- "Guatemala." Adoption Nutrition RSS. © 2016 SPOON Foundation.
Web. 16 Mar. 2016. <<http://adoptionnutrition.org/nutrition-by-country/guatemala/>>.
- "Guatemalans." -
Introduction, Location, Language, Folklore, Religion, Major Holidays, Rites of Passage. © 2016 Advameg, Inc. Web. 17 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Germany-to-Jamaica/Guatemalans.html>>.
- "Genocide Watch." Genocide Watch. Alliance Against Genocide, 1 Jan. 2014.
Web. 20 Mar. 2016. <<http://genocidewatch.net>>.
- IndieDocInc. "Living on One Dollar (2013) A Must Watch Documentary." YouTube.
YouTube, 18 June 2015. Web. 12 Mar. 2016. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmQujWTMuC8>>.
- "Rural Poverty Portal." Rural Poverty Portal.
Web. 16 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/country/home/tags/guatemala>>.
- "20th Century Genocide." 20th Century Genocide.
Web. 14 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.ppu.org.uk/genocide>>.