

*Qnaab'ila b'ix Qna'b'ila*, Our thoughts and our feelings: Maya<sup>1</sup>-Mam women's struggles in San Ildefonso Ixtahuacán

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## **Introduction**

In 1996, the Guatemalan state opened a new era in its history by signing the Peace Accords with the *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca* (URNG), the leftist group which had been fighting the state for justice and equality for 36 years. As part of the Accords, the Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples was also signed. The Agreement had an historical importance because indigenous people's identity was being discussed and taken into account by the Guatemalan state. It was also important because it strengthened indigenous people's participation in various contexts, a struggle that indigenous leaders had started before the worst years of the war (1980s).

Mayan people used the Agreement on Identity and Rights not only to strengthen their ethnic identity but also to create and expand the conditions and opportunities regarding indigenous people's participation. Indigenous people in San Ildefonso Ixtahuacán<sup>2</sup> were not the exception. Mayan people in Ixtahuacán have been politically active, specifically since the 1970s. One example of their activism was the march that miners organized in 1977 to protest against the labor conditions with the mining company

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<sup>1</sup> Besides the Maya, in Guatemala there are other three Pueblos: Xinca, Garífuna and *Ladino*. The Mayan movement has defined "Pueblo" as: "un grupo de personas que viven en un país dado o localidad, que poseen una raza, religión, idioma y tradiciones propias y que están unidas por la identidad de raza, religión, idioma y tradición en un sentimiento de solidaridad, con el propósito de preservar sus tradiciones, de mantener su religión, de asegurar la instrucción de sus hijos de acuerdo con el espíritu y las tradiciones de su raza para darse asistencia." (Cojtí Cuxil, 1996:28) Esta definición se relaciona a la de la Corte Internacional de Justicia (Indian Law Resource Center, 1984, pp. 20-24).

<sup>2</sup> Ixtahuacán is a Mam community located in Northwestern Guatemala. This region is known as *la frontera noroccidental* (the "northwestern border"). *La frontera noroccidental* is occupied by seven distinct but related Mayan Peoples: Mam, Popti', Q'anjob'al, Chuj, Akateko, Teko, and Awakateko.

that had been operating in Ixtahuacán since the 1960s<sup>3</sup>. Unfortunately, many of these leaders were persecuted and killed during the war.

The war in Guatemala is known as the longest conflict in Latin America. During the war, an estimated 200,000 people lost their lives, 80% of which were Mayans. Most of the killings took place in a period of two years (from 1981 to 1983) under the dictatorship of Efraín Ríos Montt, when the army carried out its “scorched earth” campaign, mainly in the highlands of Guatemala. Also, during these years, about one and a half million people migrated to México (CEH, 1999).

Therefore, the Agreement on Identity and Rights gave indigenous leaders a tool to strengthen their activism within their communities and to focus on issues such as indigenous peoples’ rights to their ancestral lands, their culture, language and history. Thus, many local organizations began working “legally” as GOs or NGOs even though their work had begun before the signing of the Peace Accords. Before 1996, many of these organizations, including women’s organizations, were “clandestine” and were doing their organizing work without going public mainly because of fear of state repression. They started working publicly when it was “safe” for them to work in the communities or when they were “legally” registered as an association. One of the issues that have concerned indigenous people in Ixtahuacán, especially women, is the issue of gender and indigenous women’s rights.

The signing of the Peace Accords seemed to have paved the road to a new Guatemala. However, since 1999 and particularly since the *Frente Republicano*

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<sup>3</sup> The mining company in Ixtahuacán has been working for more than 40 years. However, the poverty rates have not been reduced and people and their communities have been affected directly or indirectly. For example, several people have passed away due to respiratory diseases that they obtained while working at the company. One of this is silicosis, a respiratory disease that is caused by inhalation of silica dust.

*Guatemalteco* (FRG) came to power in 2000 and gained control over congress, the Guatemalan state has not been willing to give Mayan people room for participation (the FRG's leader was Efraín Ríos Mont, the general who was head of state during the worst years of the violence in Guatemala in the beginnings of 1980s). With the FRG in power, many activists, researchers and community leaders were the target of state violence, threats and even physical elimination. Other strategies used also included the “assimilation” of Mayan and/or community leaders into the structures of the state in order to silence the population—mainly Mayan—regarding Mayan participation within state institutions. During the FRG administration, several Mayan leaders occupied important positions such as the Ministry of Culture and Education. The FRG lost power to the right wing political party *Grupo de Acción Nacional* (GAN). GANA is not interested in including indigenous people's issues within its agenda either and, as the FRG did, it has responded violently against Mayan communities that oppose its neoliberal policies.

As we saw before, the situation and the conditions of the Mayan communities remain almost the same as before the signing of the Peace Accords. Mayan people still do not have access to the main services that ought to be provided by the state such as drinking water, health centers, a justice system, education or even bilingual education designed for Mayan communities. It is still a colonial state where indigenous people are invisible and are considered second or third class citizens. This is because they are not taken into account even when the state considers itself to be a multicultural and multiethnic state.

Furthermore, Mayan women in Ixtahuacán add to this analysis by saying that indigenous women have suffered the most with the violence that prevails in Guatemala.

In many cases, violence has become part of indigenous women's lives because they see it in their homes or outside their homes, in their relations with the *ladino* population<sup>4</sup> and state institutions.

### **A note on my dissertation research**

I consider this paper a work in progress. I intend it to be a dissertation chapter where I will include a broader analysis on Mam discourse and gender relations (using women's own words I have recorded). In general, my dissertation argues that locally-oriented movements and struggles play a crucial role in the formation of indigenous people's identities and in grassroots political processes that are aimed at effecting political changes at the national and trans-national levels. My dissertation shows that Mayan culture and identities are created and reproduced through giving new meanings to practices that come from elsewhere. One of the key issues in understanding these processes, which also serves as a key site of resistance against the state and global institutions, is the Mam concept and institution of local community, called *kojb'il*, which is maintained and transformed by these processes. *Kojb'il* is the loose translation for community in the Mam language.

As part of the cultural dynamics of *kojb'il*, the following two examples show how community formation involves struggles over meanings: 1) Mam religious leaders criticize attempts made by the Catholic Church to gain more followers, which they see as a threat to Mayan religion. However, they also recognize that the Mayan religious system continues to be practiced in the communities but that has not been kept "pure" or "authentic" as the dominant society, the state and even some Mayan leaders would like it

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<sup>4</sup> *Ladino* is the term used for mestizos or the non-Maya people in Guatemala.

to be. 2) A similar dynamic can be seen when Mam people participate in state projects or interact with other agents. In doing so, they criticize aspects of programs that divide the community or reproduce racist stereotypes about Mam community and culture.

These dynamics result in a series of struggles not only about community matters but also about other issues that affect indigenous people throughout Latin America. They also show the complex relations between the Mam people and the state and *ladinos*. These groups tend to view indigenous people's communities, culture and identities as backward and incapable of autonomous governance. One of the key actors in these processes are Mam women who have played a crucial role in the struggles that are taking place in the community; however, they are not taken into account by local policy makers, especially when talking about community development programs. In spite of this, Mam-women have been able to organize themselves and from these spaces, have been critical about the oppressive society in which they live.

### **Research Objectives**

The main objectives of this research are:

- 1) To broaden my understanding on gender relations and identity formation in Mayan communities.
- 2) To understand Maya-Mam women's roles in changing the ways Mayan men, *ladinos* and the state view their struggles particularly in their quest to change the ways communities are viewed by these actors.
- 3) To contribute to the theoretical understanding of how power works and how it is maintained, particularly in relation to gender and race.

## Research methodology and obstacles

### Methodology

I used two methods: participant observation and interviews. My interviews were carried out in Mam and I visited each person in her village. The interviews lasted between one hour and two hours. The interviews were open so people would talk about all sorts of issues but I guided the conversation. I also used a notebook to write my observations and/or questions that I had either for myself or for people I was going to meet.

In Ixtahuacán, I worked closely with members of a women's organization called the *Asociación para el Desarrollo Integral de Mujeres Mayas Ajpitx* (ADIMAJ). ADIMAJ became “legally” registered in 2003. As mentioned before, women were active in various organizations since the late 1980s. Some were active in their own communities such as Nan Siik<sup>5</sup> who is now the president of ADIMAJ. As Nan Siik tells her own story, she became active in her own community when she and other women organized themselves in order to survive during the war. In their community, they cultivated the land in order to have food for their families, they raised animals (most commonly chickens) and sold them at the local market in order to have some extra cash to buy fertilizer and other devices to harvest corn. They did this while their husbands were busy patrolling as members of *Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil*—PAC<sup>6</sup>. From that organizing experience, a cooperative was found and it still works in the village now.

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<sup>5</sup> All the names have been changed either because the person asked me to or because I want to take precautions, especially after several incidents involving threats to several indigenous leaders in Guatemala in the past year. Many of these leaders have been killed. In Ixtahuacán, the most recent case was in July of this year against Wa'ys, a Mam activist who writes songs in Mam and has performed both in Guatemala and abroad.

<sup>6</sup> The PAC was created in 1982 and it was perhaps one of the most damaging and insidious aspects of the war. As a paramilitary group, the PAC instilled confusion, fear, and terror among the population. It also

ADIMAJ works in 14 communities of Ixtahuacán (I did not have time to visit all of them this time). All the members speak Mam and most of them only speak a few words of Spanish. Almost all of them did not have (Almost none of them had) the opportunity to attend school mainly because, as one of them said: “our parents only sent boys to school. School was for men only and women were not allowed to do other things outside their home” (Nan Siik). Before ADIMAJ had funding to carry out projects in the communities, each month several representatives from various villages would meet monthly to discuss common problems or topics that concerned Mam women in their communities. At the same time, they were developing ideas of what topics to work on for the future. Until May of 2006, they had been focusing on various discussion groups where members would meet in each community to present a topic and discuss it in groups. Topics included issues such as women’s rights, Mayan people’s rights, Mayan spirituality and worldview, etc. According to one of ADIMAJ’s members, all the presentations and discussions were in Mam, except for one.

Women who I interviewed were conscious of the importance of their identities both as women and as Mayans. There is no word for identity or Maya in Mam but the whole concept is enclosed in the idea that “we are people” and “we have common ancestral roots” (referring to their Mayan ancestors) or *qxjaal qiib’ b’ixtzun at qxileen, at qoklen, b’ix junx qxe’chil*. Most importantly, they remind their members that their goal is to foster a collective identity as women and as Mam. This is based around the notion of building a community that rejects all forms of discrimination—racial, gender, class. As

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focused on community control as well as on creating tensions and conflicts that have enhanced divisions within communities. Not only did the PAC have psychological effects on the population, but it also broke apart the social organizations of the communities. It furthermore, created for the first time a direct link between the communities and the military command structure.

Nan Siik told me, *il ti'j tu'n tok qjuunan qiib' b'ixtzun tu'n tok qipumal* (“it is important to organize ourselves and strengthen our identity”).

ADIMAJ's struggles and demands have been much broader. In their group discussions, they have emphasized the formation and revitalization of their identities as Mayas and as women—even though the word “Maya” is not part of their discourse. It has been one of their organizing strategies—to focus on the formation of a collective and ethnic consciousness.

### **Challenges and obstacles**

My plans did not work exactly as I wanted. First of all, I planned to work with the president of ADIMAJ. However, I could not do that because she was going through some very difficult times<sup>7</sup>. But, since I had lived in Ixtahuacán for a year and half until July 2005, I had already met several people who I contacted to carry out my interviews. But even this was hard to do because, since there are no telephones, I would go to a village and did not find the person I wanted to interview. A few times, I could not get the interview done because they were busy.

I had originally planned to interview people from the *Secretaría de Obras Sociales de la Esposa del Presidente*—SOSEP, but no members of SOSEP were available in Ixtahuacán. Right now, they do not have an office in Ixtahuacán.

I also planned to interview women whose husbands or partners are in the USA. However, this was hard to do because women and people in general are cautious about telling an unknown person in the community, like me, who has relatives working abroad.

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<sup>7</sup> First, her sister passed away unexpectedly. A few days later, her father passed away. Her father had been diagnosed with cancer at the end of 2005. It was hard to be at her father's funeral and see the pain she was going through.



This is because they have had cases of robberies in various communities usually because there is the idea that people working in the USA have more money, have more electronic devices, etc. and women are the targets of these robberies. I could only have a general idea of which communities have more people abroad—or who has been abroad—mainly by looking at people's houses or other properties.

There is a more complex challenge that has to do with carrying out research in a community that I belong to. I just point out some of the issues here to open the discussion because, wherever we do research, there are always issues of power, privilege, class, etc., that must be taken into account and that we must be aware of. I am not from Ixtahuacán but I am a Mam speaker and know a lot about the history and the implications of being Maya in a country like Guatemala. I also lived through the worst years of the war and witnessed the activism that many of the women talked about. At the same time, I considered myself a middle-class person (by Guatemalan standards), educated and now studying at a US university. When I tell people that I am studying at a US institution, my identity becomes complex and questionable because of the history of the US involvement in the war in Guatemala. Thus, we have to question our power positions and how our privileged position influences the results of our research.

### **Some notes on the community of Ixtahuacán**

Ixtahuacán is located in the department of Huehuetenango, Guatemala, in the northwestern part of the country. About 90% of its population is Maya-Mam and speak the Mam language (with a high degree of monolingualism in Mam). The rest are *ladinos*, the non-Mayan population, who live mostly in urban areas although some villages are

recognized as “*ladino* villages” by people who live nearby or within the community. Because of its geographic location (close to the border with México), Mam people have crossed the border to work in the Mexican *fincas*—coffee plantations or cornfields. Furthermore, Ixtahuacán was one of the townships that were mostly affected by the violence during the war and became a center for military operations, both by the URNG and the Guatemalan army. Because of this, thousands of Mam people fled their communities and sought refuge in México.

Indigenous people in Ixtahuacán have engaged in various political activities that redefine their ethnic identities, their rights, and self-determination. In so doing, they also seek to reconstruct their communities, especially after the war, and intertwine this effort with their own understandings about what community involves. Historically, the community of Ixtahuacán has faced economic and geographic marginality due mainly to colonialist policy, the capitalist economy and “modernizing” policies implemented by the state. In spite of the segregation and fragmentation suffered by the community, Mam people’s organizing activities have increased in Ixtahuacán, especially after 1977.

In 1977, several hundred people (Mam and non-Mam) working in the antimony and tungsten mine in Ixtahuacán made national headlines when they organized and marched to Guatemala City against low wages and poor labor conditions (*Centro de Documentación de la Frontera Occidental de Guatemala*—CEDFOG, 1999). However, as the state became increasingly militarized in the late 1970s and 1980s, Mam people had less political space to mobilize and attempts to organize brought harsh military and paramilitary repression. In the last years, Mam participation in local politics as well as the presence of governmental programs and NGOs have shaped Mam people’s identities.

Indigenous women have been part of these processes. They were already organizing against military and paramilitary forces—before the signing of the Peace Accords. They fought against military repression in the 1980s, specifically against the *comisionados militares*, and the *Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil* (PAC) so that their sons and/or their husbands would not be forced to serve in the military. These struggles eventually made the military leave the community and the PAC stopped taking young Mames to serve in the army. Therefore, not only have women leaders taken a role in shaping community politics, they have also pushed people to action and have inspired hope among the members of the community through their struggles.

Like many indigenous people in Guatemala, indigenous people in Ixtahuacán live mostly in rural areas although a small percentage lives in the urban area. The ones who live in town are, for the most part, middle-class professionals or are owners of a small business. Some attended high school in town and work now at a local NGO, teach at the schools, or attend the university in the city of Huehuetenango. Most of the professionals are teachers and some have obtained their bachelors degrees in education.

The *ladinos* believe that indigenous people in Ixtahuacán have had more access to education than they have. This is one of the many reasons that *ladinos* give to justify the differences and ethnic divisions that exist nowadays. *Ladinos* think that way because in 1952 the Catholic Church created an elementary school where all their students were Mames. This school became famous not only because it brought Mam students from across the region but also because many students went to bigger and more prestigious high schools and universities elsewhere after they had finished their schooling in Ixtahuacán. Some of these students became priests; others became teachers and were

active in the implementation of the program called “*castellanización*” that the government created in the 1960s.

This does not mean that they have had more access to education, as the *ladinos* believe. Most of the Mam people who studied at the Catholic school kept studying and they are the ones that make up the professional class of Ixtahuacán nowadays. It is important to point out that many of these professionals were considered “dangerous” by the state during the war. As a result of this, many were killed; others were threatened and migrated to a big city in Guatemala or fled to México in order to save their lives. Unfortunately, in order to survive, many had to hide their true identities, their language, culture and worldview.

In Ixtahuacán, power relations have been historically uneven and racially marked. *Ladino* people are the ones who control the economy of the town. This was also the situation even after they lost power when a *comité cívico* won the elections in 1972. *Ladinos* are the owners of the land around the plaza and the best land in the community, they are the owners of most businesses—hotels, comedores, drugstores, cantinas, bakeries, the main transportation service, etc. Before 1970, when the *ladinos* were still in power, indigenous people did most of the hard work in town (almost like slaves): they built public buildings, roads, streets and bridges, and even planted corn so *ladinos* in power would have enough food to eat. People still remember these days and there are landmarks that people point to. For example, when you first enter town, you enter on a cobblestone street, which was built by Mam people who had to do what was called “community service.” There are few other streets like this one in Ixtahuacán as well as a bridge, the remains of an “*horno*” used to produce lime, etc.

Another contentious issue in Ixtahuacán is indigenous people's access to land. Access to land is not only racially determined but also gendered. The best land is possessed by *ladinos* even though some have been recuperated by indigenous people in the last 20 years. For example, the community of Q'asa'q was part of the *finca la Esperanza*, which was owned by a *ladino* from Ixtahuacán in the past. Indigenous people from Aq'al, the neighboring community, and other communities have been buying the land back and have gradually expanded their properties. Indigenous people in this *finca* used to plant and process sugar cane. The owner also raised animals in his farm and had more land in other communities/villages as well. The land itself is big by Ixtahuacán standards. The *finca*, as it was known to many, does not exist anymore, but a house stands on top of a hill from where I interviewed one of the people who still works for the *ladino* family that once owned the land.

Furthermore, women's access to and use of land is determined by men who decide whether to give land—as *herencia*—to their daughters or not. Usually, only the sons get land from their parents. One member of ADIMAJ told me that her father did not give her any land and that the land that her father possessed was distributed among her brothers. Even though women are less likely to own land than men, they are, however, expected to work the land with her father or her husband. And when production is large, men decide on the production, distribution and even marketing of the products.

The other main problem that women have to struggle against is that of racism. Mam people still experience extreme expressions of racism and it is still reproduced by the actors involved. It is known in the literature that Guatemala is composed of *ladinos* and indigenous people (including Xinca and Garífuna). For more than a century, the

*ladino* state and society has struggled to create a Guatemalan nation based on one homogeneous people—the *ladino*. In order to achieve this goal, indigenous people have to become *ladinos* by going through a process of *ladinización* that included learning Spanish, wearing *ladino* clothes, acquiring Western values and being “modern”. The dichotomy *ladino* vs. indigenous people is prevalent and it is the way Guatemala is thought about nowadays even though it has been widely criticized in the anthropological literature. Even though the dichotomy is considered erroneous, the idea that indigenous people are pre-modern, uncivilized and rural is still reproduced in Guatemala by the state and the *ladino* people. As we will see below, some of the state projects that are taking place in the community and the actions taken against Mayan people in recent years are based on preconceived notions and beliefs that they have about indigenous communities, people, their culture and their language.

### **Theoretical background**

Before turning to more specific points, I want to point out that I build my arguments on several bodies of theory, mainly the ones that focus on identity politics and the state particularly about how hegemonic practices operate (Brow, 1990; Comaroff, 1992; Hale, 1994).

In this study, it is important to think of “...identity as ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Hall, 1997:51). The process of identity formation is, then, historical and cyclical and belongs to the past and the future of a community. Identity construction is about processes of becoming and difference (Hall 1996) and “a process of continuous creation”

(Adamson, 1980:174, in Comaroff 1991). In the process of becoming, rather than being, people engage in dialogue with other people and other kinds of representation.

At the same time, the neoliberal state wants to create its own subjects by teaching them how to be part of the society it wants to imagine. The state that we live in now promotes the idea that we live in a multicultural society, that there is political equity and democracy for all Guatemalans and that, economically, the country is doing much better than in the past (Lipschutz, 1998). In relation to this, other theorists on the state have pointed out that the state is present in almost every aspect of our lives to the extent that it can take control of our lives (Aretxaga, 2003, Trouillot, 2001). As such, the state seems to be less and less violent and more open to the way people live (Aretxaga, 2003).

From the perspective of Mayan women in Ixtahuacán, the hierarchical relations between the state and *ladino* people with the Mayas are also reproduced at different levels of their lives. On the one hand, the state wants to strengthen a homogeneous identity where Mayan women would be part of the Guatemalan nation. For example, *ladina* women working in the local NGOs do focus on the formation of an identity without paying attention to the racial, cultural and historical differences that exist between *ladinos* and Mayans. This is consistent with the western idea that all women have suffered the same types of oppression and therefore are the same and have to struggle together to overcome oppression. However, like the cases of *ladina* people working with indigenous people in Ixtahuacán, they do not realize that there are cultural, racial and historical differences that must be taken into account.

Several Mayan leaders have pointed out that to be a Mayan woman in Guatemala is to be the object of three forms of discrimination and oppression: race, class and gender.

As one woman in Ixtahuacán said: “*nim n-ikx qu’n tu’ntlaj xu’j qo. Nqo b’aj mooyin tu’n tlaj meb’ qo. Nqo b’aj mooyin tu’n tlaj ju’nxe qo kin. Nqo b’aj mooyin tu’n tlaj xu’j qo*” (nan Yan) (We suffer a lot because we are women. They deceive us because we are poor. We are discriminated against because we are Mayans and because we are women.) The majority of the women I interviewed point to these forms of discrimination and exclusionary practices in Ixtahuacán. And, many are struggling to make changes because, as another woman said, “*jaka qo anq’in junx qa qaj*” (Nan Siik) (We can live together—Mam and *ladinos*—and live in a different society if we want to).

In Ixtahuacán, women and some organizations are becoming aware of the importance of women’s participation and the roles that they have to play within the society. At the same time, women are opening more spaces of participation, struggle and analysis from which they can strengthen their identities. However, gender inequalities are still prevalent and there is no women’s representation in several spaces and key positions. The more women organize themselves, the more they question their lack of participation and representation in politics, education, justice and other forms of social and political life.

As mentioned before, women were active organizing against the military before 1996 when the Peace Accords were signed. They had created their own spaces of reflection, struggle and resistance. For example, many participated in the different projects or activities that leftist groups would carry out in the area from taking direct participation in the left’s military structure—now the URGN—to working in the communities with people to raise consciousness about the conditions under which indigenous people lived. Mam women also participated in various “popular” movements



in late 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. These movements mobilized against the army that had established a military base right outside of town. Women and people in general marched and eventually made the army leave. They also organized against the PAC, a paramilitary and civil group that had been organized by the army in each community.

However, women's participation has been limited because of their ethnicity and gender differences. As Nan Yan Tis stated "*nti' ntzaj q'o'n amb'il qe tu'ntlaj b'ala nlay b'ant kyu'n, b'ala chi*" (our participation has been limited because the men think that we are not able or are not capable of doing our job). These hierarchical relations were also reproduced by the URNG after the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996 and even after 2000 when it came to power in Ixtahuacán. It was the same *compañeros* whom women had helped come to power and who were not allowing them to fully participate within the party. Many indigenous women who had struggled to achieve the URNG's goals were now displaced or were not taken into account, for example, by the URNG party that won the elections in 2000.

In spite of their experiences in organization, there is a lack of women's participation in all levels of the community's political life. And those who do participate do not hold key positions or are conditioned by men or by *ladina* women.

Mam women also point out that one of the serious problems they have to struggle with is racial discrimination. The women I interviewed mentioned several cases of racism that they have confronted both because they do not speak Spanish well—the "official" language—and because they are Mayas. They are discriminated against not only by *ladinos* who live in town but also by *ladinos* who work in various state organizations such as schools, the health center, etc. and/or in non-governmental organizations.

Unfortunately, this also happens within organizations that are considered “progressive” and work for the cause of women. In these organizations, *ladinos* or *ladinas* consider themselves “more capable” in taking leading roles and work in the office. The opposite is thought about Mayan women who are given low-paid jobs and are the ones who have to go to the field or hold the less important positions in the organization.

These types of unequal relations also create an uneven society where Mam women have to struggle almost daily against gender, racial and class oppressions that affect their lives. Even though the Guatemalan state claims to give more participation to women through its programs such as the *Secretaría de Obras Sociales de la Esposa del Presidente*—SOSEP—, which started its work in Ixtahuacán in 2005, in reality what is going on is the formation of more groups “that divide our community” (Nan Siik). And, Mayan women are critical about these programs. In Ixtahuacán, the women I interviewed not only criticize SOSEP because they are too naïve about indigenous people’s issues and romanticize their communities and culture but also because they deny the racism inherent in many of their projects or their actions towards indigenous women.

At a monthly meeting I attended this summer (organized by the Community Development Council—*Consejo Comunitario de Desarrollo*—COCODE), a *ladina* woman presented her new project that she was going to carry out in some communities in Ixtahuacán. One of the men participating in the meeting raised his hand and started by saying that “*nosotros respetamos su trabajo, señor. Le agradecemos.*” Then he went on to say that “*nosotros en nuestras comunidades tenemos mucho trabajo y si en realidad va a llegar a hacer su trabajo, le vamos a pedir que respete el tiempo de las mujeres. Porque muchas veces las mujeres esperan y esperan y nadie llega. Otras veces, muchos han*

*venido a ofrecernos cosas pero siempre vienen con intereses.* “Además”, he said, “*las capacitaciones son en castellano y muchas compañeras no entienden...*” (tat Lixh). The *ladina* woman was not working with SOSEP but she did work for the government on health issues.

Tat Lixh’s words point to various problems such as lack of respect towards indigenous women, political interests behind the state’s projects (which has divided the community), and the use of a foreign language (Spanish) in a context where the majority speak only Mam. This was not the first time I heard this criticism. Several women in ADIMAJ had made similar points, except that it was not at a public meeting. The issue of language has come up again and again and it has many other consequences that *ladino* people do not notice. Therefore, *ladinos* and *ladinas* must pay attention to Mayan women’s concerns, particularly the ones pertaining the use of the “official” language in a setting where more than 95% of the participants speak Mam. From previous observations, I noticed that meetings organized by *ladinas* who work in different organizations in the communities are also held in Spanish. There were times though when they sought someone’s help to translate but that depended on whether there was one among the group that could translate from Spanish to Mam. But *ladinos* or *ladinas* pay little or no attention to the issue of language and they do not know whether meaning is being conveyed when their *capacitaciones* are in Spanish.

Using Spanish as the only means of communication has other but related racial forms of significance for Mam women in Ixtahuacán and for indigenous people in general. I will mention two cases that women also talked about.

The first one has to do with the health center where Mam women are racially stigmatized and are not treated well by the *ladina* nurses and doctors. Even in emergency situations, Mam women have to wait in line while a *ladina* woman or man can easily go in without waiting her or his turn. Because of language barriers, Mam women sometimes do not understand what is going on with their child's health (usually what they go in for) and end up giving whatever amount of medicine or do not give the child medicine at all. Others prefer not to go to see the doctor or the nurses because "they are not nice" and because "they do not understand our language". The second case of language barrier occurs in the municipal court house (*juzgado municipal*). At the *juzgado*, the judge is a *ladino* and speaks only Spanish. Women also said that, when for example there are cases of domestic violence, they prefer not to go see the judge because 1) they could not communicate in Spanish and 2) they were threatened by their husbands if they went and pressed charges against them. I further develop the issue of violence below.

Therefore, women are also affected by the language used within state institutions that are supposed to be helping the community. The use of Spanish is not only complex but it is also racially determined. I argue that when *ladinos* use Spanish as their only tool of communication, they are not only imposing a worldview that is based on Western values but they are also racists against the Mayan population. Historically, it is known that the Guatemalan state is not interested in using or promoting Mayan languages except as a transitory tool towards Spanish and towards westernization. The language used in schools is mainly Spanish and the methodologies used in the only three years of bilingual classes are inadequate. The issue that concerns me here is that of racism and the ways indigenous communities and people are viewed by the state and the *ladino* society.

In the past, the state has used language to assimilate indigenous people into the *ladino* society. And during the state violence, the speakers of Mayan languages became the target because Mayans were considered the enemy of the state. Even though the war is over, the state's intention to assimilate indigenous people to create a homogeneous nation is not.

Mam women face these forms of discrimination and they feel that they are not been respected as women and as Mayas. It is a form of discrimination that they are critical about and talk about in group. And it has been discussed in the literature as a form of state violence because the state considers women as dangerous (see Stern, 2005). Or, as in the case of Ixtahuacán, state agents see women as apolitical, disorganized, backward etc. and in need of being taught how to do things. However, Mam women reject these notions and they have created their own spaces from where they can struggle, resist and maintain their own identities.

Many of the women whom I interviewed have had experiences with all kinds of violence. From the beginning, terror and state violence attacked their communities and families. Many had relatives killed during the war. But the violence does not stop here. Mam women have to deal with other issues pertaining to violence starting from their own homes. Women have to cope with their husbands because most of them are, in many ways, violent against their wives.

For example, men want to control women's actions and expect them to work hard as long as it is inside the home. In the interviews, women were concerned that many could not attend meetings or could not be part of the organization because they were not allowed to leave their houses by their husbands. Nan Siik had told me that many women

did not participate in any organization because they said “they had too much work to do” but in reality, “they are not allowed to participate by their husbands” (Nan Siik).

In one occasion, a woman asked me not to mention her name because of fear that her husband would find out what she had said to me. Another one agreed to meet with me but later told me that she had not told her husband because she was afraid he was going to say “no”. These examples show that women are not allowed to have outside contact or even to make decisions on their own.

The issues of racism and gender discrimination are not separate from each other and women do not view them separately. There are interrelated racial and gender ideologies as well. For example, Mam women are considered “less important” or “lacking values” (*no tienen valor*) by men or by *ladina* women. By looking at how many women work in the municipality, in governmental offices or in some NGOs, we find that Mam women are almost invisible. The majority are either men or *ladinos/ladinas*. In some communities, women are sometimes part of the COCODEs but their voices are almost unheard.

As Nan Siik pointed out, “they (talking about men in political parties) consider us incapable of creating a political party or of organizing ourselves in our communities.” A similar viewpoint was recorded by one woman who criticized the leftist party because “men have forgotten that we were part of this struggle” (Nan Yan Tis).

This ideology of *no tener valor* also relates to the idea of *ser capaz de...* which translates as “being able to...” Thus women’s roles in the community and even at their homes is not taken seriously because they *no tienen valor o no son capaces de hacer las cosas*. This way of thinking is reproduced over and over again and it has become almost

“normal” to think that way in the society. Because of this, the meetings carried out in Spanish carry the connotation that women have to learn the Western values starting with Spanish and that there is no other way around it. I was told by a Mam woman that one of SOSEP projects (the state sponsored organization working with women in Ixtahuacán) was to teach women how to use soaps, mirrors and towels. The idea behind all this is that Mam women are ignorant and dirty—a colonial idea that comes from five centuries ago.

Because of this ideology (of *no tener valor*), only men or *ladinos/as* are “capable” of working in most job positions. As we can see, this notion is related to racial ideas about women and it justifies the hierarchical relations that still exist in the society and that keep Mam women subordinated. This notion of *no tener valor* has taken new forms and keeps changing over time. However, it does not change the way society views Mayan women in Guatemala. This ideology is so powerful that also limits Mayan women’s participation starting from their homes, the community, organizations and political parties.

### **Conclusion and areas for further research**

There are other issues that affect Mam women’s lives in Ixtahuacán. For example the illiteracy rate is high, poverty is alarming, and people’s (especially children’s) health conditions are precarious in the communities. In addition to this, women have to work harder because many lost their relatives—husbands, children, or parents—during the war. Others have been abandoned by their husbands and are left behind with their children whom they have to raise. Their hard work involves weaving, working the land, planting

corn along the border with México, or finding other low-salary jobs. Thus, poverty and high illiteracy rates are other examples of the prevalence of racism in Guatemala.

By denying race and gender discrimination, the Guatemalan state and the society in general are denying Mayan women their rights to be culturally and racially different. These problems also have consequences on women's health and well being. In order to foster a better Guatemala, state institutions must be aware of the cultural differences that exist between Mayans and non-Mayans. At the same time, local organizations must address the issue and create spaces for critical analysis and reflection regarding the issues of gender, racial and class discrimination. ADIMAJ and other women leaders in Ixtahuacán are pointing to that direction.

Perhaps more research is needed in Mayan communities to understand the complexities of gender relations from the Mayan perspective. As I have discussed, many Mam leaders moved away from the leftist movement (now political party) because their voices were not heard and they are creating more spaces and a new movement. Is this a new form of feminism, a Mayan feminism that indigenous women are creating? What is the content of this feminism?



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