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Gender Workshops for Men Seek to Question Cultural Patterns at Heart of Guatemalan Machismo

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The men from the village of Piedra Parada, in the eastern department of Chiquimula, made their way to the community hall. Byron Chivalán, the young academic who had been waiting for them since the early hours of the morning, thought it was strange that they should loiter outside rather than entering the hall.

The men eyed Chivalán with deep suspicion, and, suddenly, one of them inquired aggressively. "Why do you have long hair? Men here don’t have long hair. In this village, to be a man you must have a scar."

Chivalán realized that he had broken a cultural norm, and a man who appeared to be disguised as a woman summoning them to receive a workshop about masculinity just seemed like a bad joke.

The workshop had been organized by the Colectiva para la Defensa de los Derechos de las Mujeres en Guatemala (Codefem), a Guatemalan nongovernmental organization (NGO) that focuses on empowering women and involving them in development projects for their community. Codefem had talked to women about gender equality, rights, and citizenship, but the women had often pointed out that knowing that they had rights was pointless if their husbands and partners didn’t allow them to get involved in community politics.

Thus, Codefem decided to try a different approach and organize gender workshops, where the talks would be given by men for men. In 2011 and 2012, Codefem organized "masculinity workshops" in 12 municipalities in the departments of Huehuetenango, Quiché, Sololá and Chiquimula, attended by over 500 men and adolescents.

It became clear, however, that changing cultural patterns that have been passed on from one generation to the next would not be easy.

Masculinity in rural Guatemala

Once the initial hostility had been overcome and the men agreed to take part in the workshop, Chivalán asked the men how they would explain to a Martian what a man was. "What are their characteristics?" he asked. They quoted a number of traits that they associated with masculinity such as courage and responsibility.

Then, Chivalán asked them to draw a man and point to the most important parts of a man’s body. Some pointed to the hands, as a farmer uses his hands to grab his machete and other tools. Others said that hands were important so that they could beat their children and "educate" them. Chivalán seized the opportunity to discuss the issue of domestic violence (NotiCen, July 19, 2012) and ask them if beating a child was really the best way to teach him or her right from wrong. Then, they watched a video about a father who takes his teenage son to a bar to get drunk as a part of a "coming-of-age" ritual.
Chiquimula is the department with the county's highest murder rate per 100,000 inhabitants (NotiCen, Dec. 17, 2009) followed by Escuintla, Zacapa, and the central department of Guatemala, according to Central America Business Intelligence (CABI).

In Piedra Parada, violence is closely tied to alcohol abuse, and the most popular drink is chichi, a homemade liquor made from fermented corn. "My father used to beat us. He used to get drunk on bootleg liquor. He used to beat my mother. That’s scary for a child," said Arturo Interiano, 40. Violence emerged as a cultural pattern that sons inherited from their fathers.

One of the main causes of pain and frustration in their lives was their inability to fulfill their role as breadwinners. The men had been taught that paternity was an essential part of being a man and that being a good father meant providing for the family. However, in a municipality where 82% of the population lives below the poverty line, men are often incapable of fulfilling this role, and the men often vent their frustration through acts of violence.

However, Chivalán warns that NGOs often make the mistake of establishing a correlation among violence, poverty, and illiteracy, thus reinforcing the stereotype that domestic violence is "a problem that only affects the poor."

Psychologist Sandra Luna, of the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala (UVG), conducted research about masculinity in urban Guatemala, based on interviews with men aged 27 to 49, all of whom had university degrees, and she concluded that being a breadwinner, giving their children a good education, and being a role model for their children was a fundamental part of their identity.

"One of the main sources of conflict within a couple occurs when the man loses his job and starts to lose his sense of identity. This can generate mental problems, depression, anxiety, and alcohol abuse," Luna says.

Although the men allowed Chivalán to proceed with the workshop, they made it clear that they didn’t trust a man with long hair because they associated this hairstyle with homosexuality. When asked whether there were any gay couples in the community, Silverio Martínez, 27, replied. "No, thank God." The men interviewed by Luna also talked about homosexuality as something that could be "caught" or "transmitted" as if it were an illness.

The men who took part in Codefem’s workshops in Piedra Parada and other communities talked about sexual initiation as a traumatic rather than enjoyable experience. "In [the municipality of] Cuilco, in [the department of] Huehuetenango, a man said that, when he was 14, his uncle had paid a prostitute US$0.60 so that she could 'make him a man.' Far from experiencing pleasure, he felt full of hatred and frustration," said Roberto Landaverry, one of the experts in gender issues who provided the workshops together with Chivalán.

They also talked about persisting myths surrounding virginity, and in some rural communities "stealing a girl," where a suitor practically abducts a young woman and on some occasions sends her back to her family’s home because he believes that she isn’t a virgin, is still seen as acceptable.

Chivalán admits that "you can’t solve everything with a workshop." Nevertheless, the experience provided valuable insights into how masculinity is constructed today in rural Guatemala.