

Woven History Empowering Women in Guatemala

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Indigenous women in Guatemala have long bared the burden of discrimination, violence and lack of access to education. Opportunities for financial success become attainable for indigenous women in Santiago Sacatepequez, Guatemala when they have access to micro-credit loans provided by a local non-profit organization called Asocian Fémina en el Desarrollo en Sacatepéquez (AFEDES). With participants' determination and the help of the International Development Exchange (IDEX), AFEDES expands the sell traditional wears.

"Guatenicanole," this is how I pronounced Guatemala when I was seven, unsure how to tackle the word when first seeing it written in front of a display of artisan crafts for sale in 1986. At the time, my view of the world did not stretch beyond the confines of my household. I knew little of that country in the middle of a civil war, which ended ten years later. I was attracted to the colorful display. A nun from my hometown who worked in Guatemala had brought a variety of handicrafts to sell as a fundraiser to profit families struggling to provide for their children. During the war, venturing to the market to sell goods for a merger profit was dangerous, since violence was common and undiscerning. The sellers of the items in front of me were fortunate to have a connection outside of their usual market.

The handicrafts for sale intrigued me. I bought a detailed painting of a woman in indigenous clothing. She was wearing a multicolored shirt, a blue skirt and carrying water in a jar on her head. Her attire was different from anything I have seen before. It was painted on a piece of cardboard the size of a baseball card. At age seven, I understood little how my purchase would assist its maker. I knew nothing of the country, its inhabitants' resilience and enterprising spirit.

Looking at the painting now, I could tell you that the woman depicted in it is standing in front of Lake Atitlan, Panajachel, but due to the design and color of her traditional clothing, she is from a town twenty minutes away called Sololá. As a child I adored the painting, but I did not understand the subject matter until traveling to Guatemala with the Peace Corps to work with indigenous women trying to better their economic standing through business ownership in the town of Santiago Sacatepéquez.

From 2003 to 2005, I served as a Rural Youth at Risk Volunteer with the Asocian Fémina en el Desarrollo en Sacatepéquez (AFEDES), which is a micro-credit organization founded in 1993 by a group of Mayan Cak'chiquel women seeking to improve their economic situation. The agency evolved from an existing agricultural credit organization called Cuatro Pinos. Like the Grameen Bank, AFEDES evolved as a way of assisting impoverished women through small loans to stimulate enterprise. As a Graduate of Clark University's, Masters of Art's in International Development and Social Change, I had mixed feelings regarding micro-finance. I felt that while micro-finance allowed individuals who could not attain credit elsewhere the ability to borrow money to begin their own businesses, it also forced debt on already impoverished families.

During my first year with AFEDES, the organization gave loans to twenty-six women's groups totaling eight hundred and fifty members. Each member used her money as she desired to begin agricultural, livestock, weaving and sewing projects. The women's groups met monthly to pay back installments of their loans and receive training to help make their businesses stronger. For many of the women, participation in the groups offered an escape from the difficulties in their lives and gave them hope for how to provide for their family. While the civil war ended in 1996, gang violence in Guatemala has continued plague business growth. Women chose projects that they could accomplish from the safety of their home.

In 2005, AFEDES decided to promote their participants' greatest asset, the creation and sale of traje. Traje is a traditional woven outfit worn by Mayan women. Indigenous women have been weaving them for hundreds of years. When the Spaniards arrived, they were amazed by the brightly colored dress of the Mayans. The Traje consists of a guipil, a traditional embroidered blouse and a corte, an ankle length woven skirts worn wrapped around ones waist and fastened with a faja or embroidered belt. The guipil is an individual work of art which, whether woven or embroidered, it takes months to complete. Distinguished by its design, style, pattern and concept, the style of the guipil varies according to region and individual creativity or taste. The corte, which is woven on a treadle or foot loom, is composed of about five yards of material that is wrapped several times around a woman's lower body. It also differs by region in construction, design and colors (Nim Po't, Centro de Textiles Tradicionales, Antigua, Guatemala, 2003).

With the help of the International Development Exchange (IDEX), AFEDES received money to start a traje initiative. AFEDES coordinated 14 training workshops on how to adapt conventional patterns of blouses, skirts and handbags into new styles that are more marketable to contemporary indigenous women and for the international export market. A total of 32 women, including seamstresses, weavers and embroiderers, participated in these workshop sessions. Forty women completed training in Santiago Sacatepequez and the accompanying village of Santa Maria Cauqué. Help Guatemala Women Launch a Clothing Business (IDEX, December 2006 Progress Report).

AFEDES started a series of workshops to teach foot loom weaving to women who did not previously have knowledge of the skill because it was traditional done by men. Foot loom weaving is less time consuming allowing higher profits for the participants. The trainings evolved from the interest of women from Santiago Sacatepéquez who expressed a high level of desire to participate in the new design trainings, but lacked weaving skills. AFEDES did not want these enthusiastic women to miss out on an entrepreneurial opportunity. They recruited skilled weavers in the community to facilitate a series of workshops for these novice weavers. Help Guatemala Women Launch a Clothing Business (IDEX, December 2006 Progress Report).

AFEDES featured the sale the traje their members produced in a store the organization opened in 2005 called TUPUEDES, or "you can" in English. The store sold raw materials, such as thread, to weavers at cost and featured finished guipiles and cortes for sale at fair trade price. Traditional wear has long been a closed market, with sell of goods evolving amongst neighbors. Since each region had its own style and design, trajes were traditionally not sold outside the territories in with they were made. With the expansion of indigenous pride, indigenous women have begun experimenting in wearing the trajes they liked from other areas of Guatemala. Due

to the growing interest in buying trajes from other regions, AFEDES used part of the grant given by IDEX to train members how to produce outfits from various regions of Guatemala to sell at TUPUEDES. Receiving the training on how to produce clothing not easily found, but valued in Sacatepequez allowed member a distinctive advantage in their expanding market.

Looking back on my experience in Guatemala, I have come to the conclusion that poverty can be changed through enterprise by giving women the opportunity to determine their own futures. My former ideas about micro-finance lending leading to debt have changed. IDEX's grant made it possible for AFEDES to display its participants' work and teach them how to develop new fashions that were easier to produce and yield more earnings for their makers in their community.

While Traje is indicative to the indigenous culture in Guatemala, it remains a profitable business venture for members of AFEDES who choose to continue the tradition, while adapting styles to meet contemporary market needs. In 2006 AFEDES grew, giving loans thirty-one women's groups totaling thousand members. Women who have taken loans with the organization have gained additional knowledge in business management and have not only paid back their loan, but provided a profit to supplement their families income. Additional income earned, have been used to finance the education of their children.

Now that I have returned to the United States, I am always excited to see American women wearing purses made from Guatemalan trajes in Connecticut. While visiting my son's Magnet school for the first time, I saw embroidered wallets from Guatemala decorating his soon-to-be music room. When visiting my sister in Astoria Queens, NY, I found quilts made from used guipiles for sale in a local boutique. Many of the owners or sellers of these goods probably do not know the origins of the products they display; rather, much like the painting I bought when I was seven, they were attracted by the object's color and unique presentation. The story of the maker and understanding of the objects' original use is often lost. The women making these objects continue to benefit and their traditions are being conveyed far beyond their country to a new market. My goal is to share AFEDES's story of success despite the challenges of violence, discrimination and lack of access to education facing indigenous women in Guatemala.