

The Role of Machismo in a Guatemalan Village

By Amy Rodriguez

When I first began this project, I was focusing on women's rights and roles in society. Women's rights interested me not only because I am a female, but also because I care about people's rights. In Guatemala, women have several roles, but these roles vary in different parts of the country. Some women are midwives, others are shop owners, but the majority are homemakers or housewives.

I interviewed seven different people: two tour guides, a teacher, a leader of a women's group in a cooperative, a doctor, a midwife, and the mayor of Santiago. During the first five interviews I noticed that the answers to my question led in one-way or another to machismo. I felt that people had something to say about machismo, yet I discovered that they all took different perspectives on it. Machismo is an aspect of life that exists in the household and in politics, and is a type of relationship between a man and a woman in which the power and control are centered on "the man." The idea of Machismo is deeply imbedded in the parallels of political life in our society. The government is the one who is in control and the people are the ones who serve it. The government, or man, wants to keep the people or women down because they know that if they rebel, they will overcome them. Given that machismo has an influence on society, how does it affect women's roles?

I went on the internet to research women's rights in the law, but was strongly disappointed by my findings. All the articles I discovered pointed out a man's point of view, and were also written by men. I then found a website that showed women have only two rights, which are, to go to school, and marry at the age of 14. I also found that the majority of the people in the Guatemalan Congress are men; the ratio being close to 100: 1. There have

been instances where Congresswomen have wanted to take stereotypical comments about women out of textbooks, but failed. I asked questions such as, “Why don’t women have many jobs in politics?” When I interviewed the tour guides, Cesar Castellanos and Norbert Nunez, I asked them these questions. “Women can do several things and have rights to do them, but they have limits, “they limit themselves.” Those were the words of Cesar when I asked for his opinion. In a way, that is true, some women are raised thinking that their only purpose in life is to serve their husbands. Therefore, women don’t know the capacity they have to succeed and to be as important as men are in society. “Women that come from rich families are usually the ones with jobs,” added Norbert. But is it really a woman’s fault that 87% of them come from rural areas?

When I interviewed the mayor of Santiago, I was expecting to see an elderly man with a beard and piles of paperwork on his desk but, I was quite surprised to find that my assumptions were false. He was a younger man and had two assistants and one secretary, which happened to be a woman. I tried to interview the secretary, but she was too busy. The mayor was really pleasant when we came in offering seating to my colleague, Sonia, and I, then we began the interview. On my first question I asked why he had thought women in Guatemala did not advance in society, he responded with, “Women want the glories of having money and a good job, but they don’t want to work for it.” I asked him about his wife, she has her own sewing factory in their home, earns her own money, and takes care of their children. When I asked him if he would let his wife work outside the house, he got tense and said it would depend all on if she wanted to. Then the topic of machismo came up, and he started speaking to his helper in their language

and both seemed really nervous. He finally gave the short answer of, “Yes, machismo does exist.” I then tried to further his response to the topic.

Many of my own family members have suffered from machismo and I have seen the horrible effects it has on people. Domestic violence is something very common in countries like Guatemala. Since machismo is so prevalent in Guatemala men think violence is one of the resources of their disposal and, there are very few laws protecting women from this kind of violence. One in specific says that if a woman tells the authorities that her husband hit her, and she has evidence, he could be arrested and put on trial. The problem with this law is that many women are too afraid to tell anyone they are being beaten. “I don’t hit my wife, I just hurt her,” Norbert told me during our interview, she would “learn her lesson” he told me. He also said “hitting a woman isn’t right. If it is for a reason, then its ok, but if it is because a man is just aggressive, then that is bad.”

When I interviewed Elena Castillo, she gave me a very short response to this topic of machismo. She is the leader of a women’s group in a co-op of people who have survived the war. She organizes fun activities for the women to keep high spirits. Elena told me “there are men that come home drunk, but there has never been a case where a drunk or sober man has hit his wife. There has never been a bruised or cut woman due to a beating, and I don’t think there will be.” I asked her to explain and she said that the people in the co-op had a certain level of trust that people will not hurt each other, these people have seen the horror of war and knows how terrible violence is. “I don’t think they want to see that type of violence again, especially in their own home.” Stress could become especially strong if a man is drunk, but it seems that bad conduct does not exist in the co-op.

I also touched on this topic of machismo when I interviewed a gynecologist named Miguel Aguirre. He had light skin and looked somewhat European, but was from Guatemala. I asked him what worried him most in regard to women's health and he responded by saying that he worried about women in rural areas because many of them weren't allowed access to birth control. I asked who forbid them from using birth control, "their husbands don't let them use birth control because of their own machismo," he responded. They seem manlier if they have more kids, and family planning is strictly prohibited.

Who are the people that create laws that allow men to dominate women and to treat them as they would treat a slave? One possible answer is the Roman Catholic Church, which has established that women can't take birth control. The Bible says, "go and be fruitful and multiply the earth", which is followed strictly. How can a priest who has made a cow of celibacy know the pains of giving birth or the pain of having only a morsel of food to give to one's children?

Birth control is a very powerful and can revolutionize women and their self-esteem. A woman's self-worth can diminish even further if she gave birth to kids against her will. If women begin to discover they are good for many things other than having kids, there would be more women in politics and in other positions where self-esteem is high.

Many women also become contaminated with sexually transmitted diseases, and even with cancer. "One of the things that worries me is the fact that the number one killer in Guatemala is cancer in the uterus. That is caused by not getting the Pap Smear each year." The root cause of this problem is that many churches don't allow women to even step inside a

gynecologist's office. In my opinion, it is not fair that women have all these restrictions against them, while men do not.

I think we are starting to see machismo spread much more even in the Catholic Church. People in Guatemala tend to be very religious, and that is stopping them from being more fruitful. If the Catholic Church loosened its reigns, it could save thousands of lives.

I was excited to interview the mid-wife since I had no idea who they were or why they were respected so much. Once I got to her house I noticed there were a lot of kids running around and I wondered if this had anything to do with her job.

I asked Dolores, our interpreter, to ask her what a mid-wife was like. A midwife is a woman that helps other women when they are in labor. Women who have not had children are not permitted to be midwives. "Being a midwife is a gift, you cannot choose to be one, the gods choose you." She told me she was chosen one night when she had a strange dream that she was a midwife and her husband had died, at that moment she knew she was being called upon to be a midwife. After the same dream had repeatedly occurred for the next year her husband passed away and she became a midwife, as for training, she learned all the methods through the dreams the gods granted her. She has worked with many types of women, but mostly the Mayan women who believe as she does.

Then something utterly bizarre happened at the end of the interview during the last question, I was very concentrated and, in my mind, and I suddenly understood everything she was saying. It was more like a voice inside of me was interpreting before Dolores even spoke one word to me, which shocked me.

In the Maya culture, women can be shamans or healers. From my knowledge there is no machismo in the Mayan culture, because men and women are both accepted as human. They share jobs, and work together as a family, but machismo does exist in the internal workings of their culture.

I found distinct differences between the lives of women in Guatemala and the lives of women in the United States. Women in the United States attend school for 13 to 20 years to obtain practical jobs, while in Guatemala; most women don't go to school with no choice but to work as housewives, shopkeepers, and midwives. They know only the lives they have lived, which consists of working and providing their families with merely the essentials of life. They have made it there with intelligence, overcoming stereotypes, machismo, and their own limits. Although machismo does affect how women see themselves and feel about themselves, it can be overcome.

The question still remains: how does machismo affect women's roles? I have come to the conclusion after all my research, that machismo does not have to be a negative effect. Men putting women down only gives them an excuse to become a more powerful, stronger person to overcome challenges, and be a better person. It can be used as motivation to break chains of servitude and make something of themselves. Machismo will still be around for a while, so if we can't get rid of it, we might as well gain from it. We are all victims of some kind of prejudice, and we can all learn in some way or another, and in the words of Shakespeare "All's well that ends well."