

Guatemala: Informing Women on need for a Free and Conscious Vote

It has been only 50 years, since women could participate openly and actively in elections in Guatemala. In 1945, only women who could read and write were allowed to vote, creating a discriminatory and non-inclusive system. The right to vote was made universal for every citizen in 1965. This was strengthened later in 1985, when the first open democratic election took place. Since then, eight democratic elections and peaceful presidential transitions have taken place in Guatemala, sustaining a democratic system which has seen an interesting growth in women's participation.

For the 1985 election, the national voter list comprised of only 34.4% women and 60.6% men. The percentage of women on the national voter list increased with each subsequent election, with women surpassing men as the majority in the 2011 General Elections, 50.9% to 49.1%. In 2011, another significant event took place – Roxana Baldetti was elected as the first female Vice-President of Guatemala. These gradual but significant steps in Guatemala's electoral and democratic history, is a recognition of the increasing interest and efforts of women, to actively participate in the political process.

Unfortunately, there was a downside – the manipulation of women's vote by political organizations by appealing to their most basic needs. In the most isolated, indigenous and rural areas of the country where woman are responsible for the household and the well-being of their families, political parties, usually the ruling party, handed out bags filled with basic food items like cooking oil, beans, powdered milk, salt and rice, disguised as subsidized social programs, which are then advertised as huge achievements by the administration. This practice started in 2008 under the name “Solidarity Bag” provided basic food supplies to the most vulnerable population, particularly single mothers, mothers under the age of 20 and pregnant woman. The purpose of the program was to provide the ruling party with a strong base of potential voters as the beneficiaries had to complete a form with their personal information which created a sense of psychological dependency and fear as they were told during the campaign “vote for us, because others will take this benefit away from you if they win the election”. When the ruling party wanted more reassurance of their control, they unofficially obtained copies of voter registration information. This program continued under the new administration in 2011.

These activities did not go unnoticed by Guatemala's election monitoring body, the Supreme Elections Tribunal (TSE). The TSE's department (state/province-level) and municipal offices reported a significant increase of women, particularly indigenous woman, registering to vote. They also reported strange individuals collecting voter registration forms from the woman outside of the offices. Although this was reported to the local police, the police did not take any action as this was not a crime. Finally, the TSE's patience ended with the inclusion of photographs of local candidates and even national ones inside the bags to be distributed, and TSE imposed the highest monetary fine of \$500,000 on the ruling party for openly making illegal use of public funds and programs in their campaign, and for early campaigning.

When the official campaign period was about to begin in 2015, the TSE recognized the need for a voter education campaign and thus the inclusive campaign was designed with the following three main objectives:

1. To motivate women to make use of their right of suffrage, to vote free and conscious, to minimize the null vote and to avoid the dependency and clientele vote.
2. To empower women, to help them find their own voice, as citizen under equal rights, to be part of the democratic process of the Country.
3. To promote the civic and national enthusiasm among young women who are first time voters.

Guatemala has a population of around 16 million, out of which more than seven million are eligible to vote. The percentage of the indigenous population is estimated to be 41% of the total population, the second highest indigenous population in Latin America, after Bolivia. The indigenous population is mostly of Mayan descent, but there is also a small percentage, around 1.7%, of African descent. In total, 22 different languages are spoken in Guatemala, creating an enormous challenge for the TSE, to efficiently and effectively reach out to all communities with voter information and civic education efforts. In this instance, due to financial constraints and time limitations, the campaign was only translated (with support and control of the National Academy of Mayan languages), into the four most commonly spoken indigenous languages: Q'eqchi, Kaqchikel, Mam and K'iche.

For the campaign, various women belonging to different sectors and age groups were showcased under the banner “I decide”:

The campaign aired for one month, from August 6 to September 6, 2015 on national television, regional cable stations, national and local radio, community radio, and local market radio. It primarily targeted eight (out of 22) departments which had the largest women and indigenous population. An additional campaign in the capital city of Guatemala was implemented at public transportation stations using mime actors.

In sum, the campaign achieved its immediate goals, and has left three main lessons to the new ruling party: 1) to not repeat the malpractice of previous administrations, like disguising handouts as social programs (so far, the new administration has not replicated these programs and has put them on hold); 2) that the TSE will not allow such abuse to ever happen again, without punishment; and 3) that targeted voter education efforts, can be effectively developed and implemented on time, with satisfying levels of acceptance among the voters.

Mime actors in Guatemala informing women of the need for a free and conscious vote (below).



A woman of African descent showcased under the banner “I decide” (below).



Source: IFES