Behind Maya Doors: Gender Violence, Acceptance, and Resistance in Highland Guatemala

by

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Abstract

Relying on years of ethnographic research in highland Guatemala, this qualitative study explores domestic and family violence in a Maya community. Twenty-five life history interviews were conducted with most living members of an extended family in two departments of western Guatemala, and ten interviews were conducted with men and women not related to the family of reference in the same region. Based on these interviews, multivariate models of gender violence and abuse were developed, including male initiation of abuse, acceptance of or resistance to male abuse on the part of women, and cycles of violence. These frameworks provide a rich understanding of the etiology of dynamics that contribute to family violence and aggression towards women in contexts of gender subordination in patriarchal settings, economic and political upheavals, and poverty.

Biography

Liliana Goldín, PhD. is an anthropologist in the New York University Silver School of Social Work (NYU SSSW) and fellow of the McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research. She has conducted extensive research with Mayan peoples in Guatemala, exploring issues related to gender and poverty, economic development and economic strategies adopted by indigenous peoples. **Rachel Copeland,** LCSW, is a doctoral candidate at NYU SSSW. She has been conducting research in Costa Rica with poor adolescent mothers and their decisions when facing unintended pregnancies. **Diana Padilla-Medina**, LMSW, is a doctoral candidate at NYU SSSW researching attitudes towards dating violence among adolescents in poor neighborhoods of Puerto Rico.

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Introduction

In this study, we address the issue of domestic and family violence in an indigenous Maya community of highland Guatemala. We consider issues surrounding gender subordination that have evolved in the context of Guatemalan communities subjected to a recent history of discrimination, political unrest, and civil war where men and women have struggled to negotiate their rights or perceived rights and often direct violence and frustration against their own. We develop multivariate models of gender violence and the initiation of abuse that provide a rich understanding of the etiology of dynamics that contribute to family violence and aggression towards women. This is a qualitative study based on years of ethnographic research in the western highlands, where we have been working since the 1980's, documenting social and economic changes of K'iche' Maya populations as they struggled with neoliberal policies, a constantly reduced land base, and diminishing opportunities (Goldín 1992; 1999a; 1999b; 2001; 2009).

In 2012, we elicited life history interviews of most living members of an extended family, who now reside across two communities and who we call the Gonzalez family, in the departments of Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán. We talked to 25 individuals within the nuclear and extended family (ages ranging from 23 to 62) and extensively interviewed 13 of them (primarily representing the nuclear family, spanning three generations). We also conducted interviews with ten individuals between 20 and 30 years old (five women and five men) not related to the family but who lived in the same departments and were recruited through acquaintances of one family member. The latter permitted us to examine themes arising from the family interviews but with individuals who were not family members. The interviews were open ended with emphasis on family life and economic activities. Interviews lasted about two hours; they were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The texts were then reviewed by two of the authors, coded separately, and the coding schemes reviewed and compared for consistency. The materials were discussed in depth until agreement on the relevant domains was achieved and a code book was constructed that included all coding categories and individual items. Data were later entered into Atlas Ti and codes and groups of codes were content analyzed and contrasted.[1] The present analysis concentrates on the events of violence reported by men and women and their memories and interpretations of those events. One of the recurring themes emerging from the life histories is the widespread occurrence of forms of gender violence and abuse. These included conflicts, experiences of physical and verbal abuse, and/or neglect from fathers and husbands. At the core of these accounts lie characterizations of conflicted males who complain about a history of abuse and exclusion on the part of their parents, yet they inflict even more such abuse on their women.

The oldest living family member is a 63-year-old man. His wife recently died at the age of 55 from diabetes. Two of their male children, ages 25 and 32, had died from alcohol abuse. The youngest male sibling, who we call Gerardo, also died from alcohol abuse a month after we interviewed him in 2012 at the age of 26. We used the narrative accounts of siblings between the ages of 32 and 46 as the point of reference, referring to their parents and others in their parents' generation and their children and others in their children's generation in the context of their life accounts. While children in the youngest generation ranged in age from 15 to 28, we interviewed

only those who were at least 18 years old. In their community of origin, the department of Totonicapán, most members of the family work in cottage industries producing and selling western style clothing (see Goldín 1996 and 2009).

We contrast the themes emerging from the literature on gender violence to the themes emerging from these narratives. In doing so, we construct three models of abuse: one each concerning male initiation of abuse, female acceptance and/or resistance to abuse, and an overall model regarding the cycle of abuse. We theorize gender violence in a framework where low self-esteem, a perception of lack of affection and neglect, and a perception of invisibility within society place men and women in positions of weakness and lack of control. This lack of recognition and experience of 'disrespect' (Honneth 2003) contribute to perceptions of low self-worth, marginality, and loneliness or lack of perceived support. In turn, women's positions in a patriarchal and patrilocal society place them at the mercy of a social context that expects 'patience,' 'resignation' and endurance. They are expected to accept 'the life that women have' or resist at the expense of consequences that can include isolation, poverty, and the loss of children.

These accounts suggest that many men and women of the region struggle to negotiate what they perceive as the way to act in society, as informed by their understanding of the expectations of others in the communities, their internalization of the social order (Bourdieu 1977), and/or the structural constraints that place them in marginalized spaces. However, these accounts also make clear that men and women are not helpless in dealing with tensions derived from this duality of structure (Giddens 1984); rather, they use every resource available to them to react and act upon the situations in which they find themselves as "strategic improvisations—goals and interests pursued as strategies" against the background of those widely accepted forms of discourse and practice (Parkin 1997, 376; Postill 2010).

Violence against women is a tragic and persistent problem in Latin America, where most cases of violence remain unpunished (Imbusch et al. 2011; for Guatemala see INACIF 2012). Guatemala is no exception and cases of violence against women are widespread (Noticias 2013). This is not unique to indigenous peoples, as research shows that the problem extends to Maya and Ladino women alike (see Menjívar 2011; Garza-Calagaris and Ortiz 1992; Rosenbaum 1993; Eber 1995; Goldín and Rosenbaum 2009; Prensa Libre 2011; Jelin 1991). Often, violence is sanctioned by custom and women in Latin America struggle to fight longstanding assumptions (de Los Rios 1993, 11). Information on various forms of domestic violence is difficult to obtain because women are remiss in reporting events and for many domestic violence is invisible (Claramunt 1997, 91; Chant and Craske 2003). Thus the importance of relying on long-term relationships established through traditional anthropological fieldwork and the resulting trust and rapport established with the population included in this study.

Community Context

Guatemala is a very poor country with a population of 15 million of which about 50% identify as indigenous, often speaking one of 22 Maya languages at home in addition to Garífuna and Spanish, the latter the official language that is taught in schools. While the traditional occupations of the Maya are dependent upon agriculture, weaving, and craft production, modernization coupled with increased poverty and the loss of land to various elites either through usurpation or sales have forced indigenous populations to develop alternative livelihood strategies that include the intensification of certain forms of production such as export of nontraditional goods (vegetables, fruits, flowers and crafts), western style clothing manufacture

in workshops, or since the 1980s, in export processing and manufacturing plants that subcontract for international buyers. By all measures Maya people continue to be discriminated against by the Ladino (mestizo) and white population and this is observed in economic, political and social forms. Despite these conditions, Maya communities are not homogenous; many have been able to provide their children with higher education resulting in a growing contribution of Maya intellectuals to Guatemalan society (see e.g. Goldín 2009).

One of the townships in our study is located in the department of Totonicapán at an elevation of about 8,000 feet in the western highlands and has a population of approximately 40,000 individuals, mostly K'iche' Maya speakers.[2] The main occupations in the township include corn and wheat cultivation, animal husbandry, and the production and sale of western style clothing in cottage industries, where one individual man or woman assembles clothing for a small-scale capitalist, although slightly larger workshops of 4-8 laborers have proliferated. About 75% of the population of both genders is involved in this industry, either in the direct production or sale of related items such as cloth, threads, and machine parts.

The second community in our study is the primarily commercial Quetzaltenango, the second-largest city in Guatemala with a population of about 225,000, of which about 65% is K'iche Maya. The two towns are located about 40 minutes by bus from each other. Due to the latter's access to roads, a large marketplace, and buses that circulate within the wider region and country, there is fluid communication between the two towns, as people often ride the 45 minute distance between both towns to visit family, attend school, or shop. Quetzaltenango also offers more schools, a state university and six private universities, health centers, and diverse job opportunities than the smaller town. With the exception of one school teacher, one rural school principal, and one university student, all other men and women in this study are involved in the production or sale of garments or embroidered huipils (native blouses).[3] For women and children in the region, gender violence is closely linked to limited resource access and gender-based unequal economic development.

Forms of Abuse within the Family

Abuse in the families included physical abuse, verbal abuse, mental abuse, the withholding of key economic resources, and neglect. During our interviews, we also heard evidence of cross-generational violence as well as violence that originated from individuals outside the family. Gerardo (26) recalls multiple instances of his mother being physically attacked by his father, but he recalls most vividly the day his mother decided to defend herself: *with the same violence… My sisters and I were hiding in a bathroom… Then I saw my mother with a broom in her hand, chasing after my father. He was drunk.* Ines (46) summarizes her life of violence, reflecting first on her father and later on her husband: "*Yes, he gave me a bad life. I was not happy. Ever since we were young, we* [she and her sister] *worked. We suffered until we got married. Then we found bad men, and it has been like this until now. So I left him.*" Beatriz (34) also relates how her husband physically abused her, having accused her of having lovers. Ana (44) told us that her husband would hit her and not give her money for expenses. After an incident where he dragged her while she was carrying her baby son on her back, she decided to leave.

During childhood, some females reported being verbally and psychologically abused by their fathers. Jazmin (26) told us that her father was often verbally abusive; he would tell her that she was not smart, or worthy: "*He used to say that we were dumb women and would never have what we wanted.*" Jazmin still hears those words in her mind and feels that is why her progress as

a student has been slow. Ines recounts almost identical experiences. She was not able to study beyond elementary school even though her father could afford an education for her: *"He used to say that we were women and that women were not born to study, only to do housework and take care of their husbands."* Her father was violent towards her mother: "*He would hit her and he had other women… That is why I married so young because I wanted to leave those problems behind."*

Jorge (23), who is not related to the Gonzalez family, mentions growing up in a household where his father continually disrespected and mistreated his mother. He was taught "*that men come first and the woman is there to serve him.*" He says he had a '*machista*' (controlling, dominating) father who treated his mother badly and had other women.

Ines tells us that she ended up marrying someone as abusive as her father, not only hurting her physically but also verbally and financially: "*He rarely gives me money for lunch, for food... One day we just had 'mosh'* [plain oatmeal] *with my daughters… I told him, Are you going to give me money for our expenses? No, he said, and used insults. So I said, I am leaving now, it's over!*" He would not let her start a business so that she could be independent: "*Yes, you have to put up with it,*" he told her, *"because you don't know how to do anything."*

Another phenomenon experienced by many during childhood was neglect. Instances of childhood neglect abound in the narratives and are experienced and reported as explanations or justifications for the 'bad,'or abusive and violent behavior of men. Gerardo recounted: *"They rejected me so much…that is how I see it…that I suffered from loneliness…I felt that nobody, nobody was interested in me! I needed support!"* Several other accounts included men who report growing up without paternal participation or affection: *"He never gave us a hug!"* This lack of attention and love often was used to explain why their brothers may have abused alcohol and died at young ages: "*Maybe that is the reason why Jose succumbed to the vice.*"

The behaviors described above are not unique to the individuals that we interviewed. Many such behaviors occur behind doors and away from the view of those of us working in these communities. Work among Ladina women in eastern Guatemala (Menjívar 2011), in the Maya highlands of Chiapas (Rosenbaum 1993; Eber 1995), and in Guatemala City where indigenous women migrated (Goldín and Rosenbaum 2009; Goldín 2012) suggests that violence against women, both overt and covert, is not only pervasive but part of everyday life. The ideologies that inform these practices are not the product of exceptional individual flaws in people or communities. Rather, they are grounded in behaviors that have been normalized and accepted by men and women alike, coupled with a judicial system supported by patriarchal attitudes (see below). These also are not unique ideologies of indigenous peoples, but rather are shared by most populations living under patriarchal structures and norms (Menjívar 2011). Out of fear of stereotyping indigenous communities, researchers may fail to report situations that cut across diverse cultural and geographic settings, or what Ehlers (2000: xxxv) refers to as the "constant soap opera of household gender relations." She noted that while some women in a western highland town evade such dynamics with good jobs, family support, and their own sources of income, rich and poor women alike "are still victimized by the unreliable men in their lives."

Cycles of Abuse: Male and Female Perspectives

Our narratives reveal complex dynamics surrounding the emergence and reoccurrence of abuse in the families studied. We divide our analysis into three parts, one focused on factors that contribute to the initiation of abuse on the part of males, the other focused on women's resistance and/or acceptance of the male behaviors, and the third focused on cycles of abuse within the

family. The frameworks we present are based on extant research literatures as well as the dynamics documented in the narratives.

Male Initiation of Violence and Abuse in their Families

The Role of Patrilocality

Patrilocality refers to the residency rule that directs a newly married couple to move into the husband's parents' home. The new couple may remain there for years, sometimes their entire lives (Ehlers 2000; Rosenbaum 1993). The couple might create a separate room and kitchen for themselves, but they still live under the husband's parents' roof. If they can afford it, the couple will eventually move to their own home. Most women dream of being the head of their own home. The married women we talked with discussed problems they had with their mother-in-law while living with her. Similarly, most of the mothers-in-law complained about their daughters-in-law. In this atmosphere of patrilocal residency rules, there is tension and mistrust. The son is at once both protected and oppressed. Men live with their own fathers during this time and are subject to their control, humiliation, and often a perceived lack of affection or support. Their wives, in turn, experience the control of their husbands, their father-in-law and, most often, their mother-in-law. The wives are compared to their sisters-in-law, until the latter move out. Feeling unwanted and out of place, young women hope for a life independent of their in-laws, where they can deal with their own partners without input from others.

This tense context exacerbates the husband's violent behavior against his wife. Several studies have related violence in the household to patrilocality (Chenaut 2011; Menjívar 2011). The woman's primary protector is her new husband, but he tends to spend most of the day outside of the home in his business or agricultural endeavors. Women report feeling like victims or even maids rather than guests in their in-laws' home. The single exception we recorded, Mary, reported being protected by her mother-in-law, producing tension with her brother-in-law, who felt that Mary was favored by his parents over his own wife. As these young men continue to experience paternal control, they act out by controlling the one person they have clear dominion over—their new bride.

Men's Low Self Esteem and Insecurity

At the core of each abusive man's narrative history are feelings of deprivation; they report being deprived of love, attention, and respect both as children and as adults. These accounts include growing up without a father, being abused or ignored by their fathers, being misunderstood, being treated badly for having begun drinking at an early age, feeling inappropriate and "stupid" at school because of poor performance, or feeling bad for lack of linguistic abilities in Spanish. The cases we report below are not unique or exceptional but representative of the array of discourses about family, self-worth, and insecurities.

Marcelo (20), not related to the Gonzalez family, always felt inadequate. His family spoke Mam at home and when he entered school he realized he could not speak Spanish, he could not read and write, and thus developed low self-esteem, became shy, and was unable to relate to others. While he is now able to speak Spanish, his insecurity lingers because he feels as though he does not 'pronounce' it well. Gerardo (26) reports that nobody took care of him growing up, that his parents were always fighting and ignoring him and that his sisters were oblivious to him. He fell in love at age 14 with a woman that was 23, the first woman to love

him, he says. "*She treated me the way I wanted to be treated; I found in her what I did not have at home… I looked for my father's love… Today I know that what affected me most was loneliness.*" Jazmin's father grew up without a father. His father abandoned him and his mother died at a young age. He was taken in by others. He felt as a victim, lonely and with lack of support. Ines's husband, in turn, wanted to be a musician. He never could. *"All goals that I set for myself have vanished* [se esfumaron]."

The theme that emerges is one where many of the men experience low self-esteem, which we believe sets the stage for abusive relationships. The literature on Maya households has addressed the issue of men's emotional distancing, which is based on men's own experiences of neglect and perception of loveless childhoods, leading to a sense of insecurity (Ríos 2011; Falla 2005). These experiences reinforce men's difficulties exercising their masculinity and, in turn, their place in their homes and in society.

Drinking and Violence

Another recurrent them in the narratives was the role of alcohol consumption in the perpetration of physical violence and abuse against women. The accounts of Gerardo, Carmen, and Mónica suggest an association between drinking and aggressive behaviors. With two exceptions, every man in the family and almost every husband of the young adult daughters presented drinking behaviors that contributed to abuse. As noted, three of the brothers, including Gerardo (who we interviewed in 2012) are now deceased as a result of alcohol abuse. They all began drinking at an early age: "*I began with a beer, cigarettes, when I was about thirteen, fourteen years old… At sixteen I started drinking, constantly, as a beginner… Once I drank three nights in a row.*"

Gerardo often commented on his memories of his drunken father and regretted not being able to stop drinking. He told us he was not physically aggressive with his wife, but that his drinking caused innumerable problems which he chose not to disclose. While he loved his wife, he was critical of her and felt that she 'did not compare' to his mother.

When we asked Carmen if any of her female friends had to put up with an alcoholic spouse, she responded "most." We asked her to tell us, out of every ten women, how many she thought may experience a spouse who drank and her answer was: "*Often, at least nine. Most of them! Here, women are resigned to having a husband who is an alcoholic and a wife beater.*" We asked her what is the usual behavior or reaction of the woman faced with such abuse: *"She is alone. She spends the night and in the morning prepares her children breakfast, as if nothing had happened, and that becomes custom. It becomes the usual, and that is how I imagine we alter our children's minds…"* Carmen says that no woman 'accepts' an alcoholic husband, but maybe she is resigned to him [*se conforma, se resigna*]. Carlos (22), not a member of the Gonzalez family, says his father is an alcoholic. In February he went to see a doctor and was told he had to stop drinking or he would die. His grandfather died from cirrhosis of the liver.

Most cases reported to us were of men's engaging in excessive drinking. However Camilo (23), not part of the Gonzalez family, told us about his alcoholic mother who would drink so much she would sometimes sleep in the street and disappear for days at a time. He sadly recalls how one day she finally passed away due to alcohol abuse.

Prior research has highlighted the role of alcohol abuse as a contributor to gendered violence across multiple cultural contexts (West 2010; Flake and Forster 2006; Klevens 2007; Galanti 2003). In the Maya context, studies have shown the tension between ritual alcohol use in more traditional communities and excessive consumption (Eber 1995; Rosenbaum 1993;

Chenaut 2011). Menjívar (2011) found alcohol abuse to be a correlate of gender violence in Ladino areas of eastern Guatemala.

Infidelity, Rejection and Internalized Racism

When Ines asked her husband (also indigenous Maya) what was wrong, and why he treated her the way he did, he told her that she was an ugly Indian: *"You are an Indian. There are beautiful women, Barbies, but not you. You are an Indian."* This form of rejection is widespread and hurtful. Men mention their preference for lighter women, extending the racist attitudes and beliefs they have been victims of since the European invasion.

Infidelity is quite common. Mónica says that the main problem at her parent's home was that her father had a lover for twenty years. He said it was gossip, but even his lover would be aggressive towards Mónica's mother. She told us that her sister also went back with a man who would treat her badly, who had stolen from her father, and who also had a lover.

Before getting married, Beatriz tried to talk with her partner about loyalty and love, but she never felt he understood these terms. She was worried about *machismo* that is common among men and she tried to address it with him, but to no avail. She eventually left him for three years after he slept with another woman. When back together, she told him: *"Fidelity comes from within, and you, because of your pride and for being machista, you let yourself go, you did not listen to me, until you failed. He now suffers and says that he is sorry for what he did."*

Marisa (29) (not a member of the Gonzalez family) lived in the city of Quetzaltenango and met her husband through Facebook. They would chat every day and decided to meet in person. He asked her to be his girlfriend and eventually she became pregnant with his child. They were not married. One day, she received a call from a woman who said she was his wife. We heard the same story from another woman of the same age, Nora (not a Gonzalez family member), whose boyfriend of three years impregnated another woman.

Carlos (22) travelled between a rural town and Quetzaltenango where he met a woman from the Pacific Coast. He was in love with her but found out a year later that she had an affair with his best friend. Infidelity is not unique to men, but it is more common and expected among men. Practically every woman reported her husband or her friends' husbands were unfaithful. Stories of men with several wives are not uncommon.

Infidelity, multiple wives in different localities, and rejection in the form of verbal insults directed at physical attributes are common and documented in the literature (Menjívar 2011; Chenaut 2011; Goldín et al. 2006). They are expressions of an amalgam of gender abuse and dynamics of oppression that are broader than those explained by individual relations.

Lack of Communication

The narratives suggest that there is a lack of communication between spouses and between children and parents: *"There is conflict between our parents,* Gerardo said, *one cannot reach the other. The major problem I see is the lack of communication."* Gerardo also comments on his own marriage: *"Yes, look, in another stage of my marriage, the problem we had with my wife was that we kept too many things to ourselves. We never talked to each other, lack of communication."* This concept is widely accepted. Women complained that it was difficult to talk to their husbands. Husbands complained that their wives were not educated enough to have good conversations or that they did not understand them well. The real or perceived intellectual or educational differences between them contributed to emotional distancing. It also created

toxic and limited spaces for open communication and mutual understanding (see e.g. Carter 2004; Falla 2005; Rosenbaum 1993). The educational differences that often exist are generated by patriarchal custom that encourages the education of boys over that of girls. As a result, men often complain that their wives just 'don't understand' and may use that as a justification for infidelity.

Machismo and the Traditional Male Role

Machismo, an expression of exaggerated masculinity or the characteristics of men that are strong, self-centered, and controlling, is not unique to indigenous men in Guatemala. It is present in many patriarchal contexts. The attribute of being *macho* often justifies violence and control on the part of men towards women in the eyes of both men and women (Villegas et al. 2010; Gilmore 1990). *Machismo* reinforces the links between masculinity and power (Asencio 1999) and the traditional gender roles of men in Guatemala. *Machismo* may include heavy drinking, toughness, aggression, and virility, mixed with positive attributes, such as being honorable, being a provider, and being the authority figure (Saez et al. 2009, 117). These assumptions are shared by men and women alike and often are normalized as "the way men are" (see e.g. Menjívar 2011). In the Maya context, *machismo* is impacted by men's frequent inability to provide for their families which "becomes a metaphor for their feelings of sexual inadequacy," making them suspicious of their wives' loyalty and reinforcing the need to control women (Rosenbaum 1993, 39).

An Overall Framework

We can piece together the above dynamics surrounding male abuse of females in the form of the *influence diagram* in Figure 1. Summarizing the main dynamics in the figure, men's relationships with their fathers often are characterized as frustrating and loveless, developed in the context of patrilocality rules that keep young married men next to their fathers in situations where the father controls and aggresses against the man in the presence of the man's wife. This contributes to men acting in controlling, loveless, or neglectful ways towards their own wives and children. Such dynamics generate feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem, and the questioning of masculinity in young men, which, in turn, can lead to alcohol abuse, expressions of excessive *machismo* in the form of male domination, and infidelity. Men are expected to act in accord with norms that specify men as "breadwinners" and the head of the household, encouraging men to control family assets. This produces a negative reaction to efforts by women to be independent and the formation of repressive attitudes and behaviors toward women seeking independence. Men are also impacted by racist and neocolonial values towards women as well as local norms that, in spite of traditional community endogamy rules, tend to privilege lighter and 'other' women. All of these conditions predispose men to initiate sustained abuse against their spouses.

Women's Resistance and/or Acceptance of Male Abuse

Women abused by their husbands may respond in a range of ways, from passive acceptance to resistance. In this section, we highlight forms of resistance and factors that impact the acceptance versus resistance to abuse. We end the section by integrating these into an overall influence diagram, similar to Figure 1.
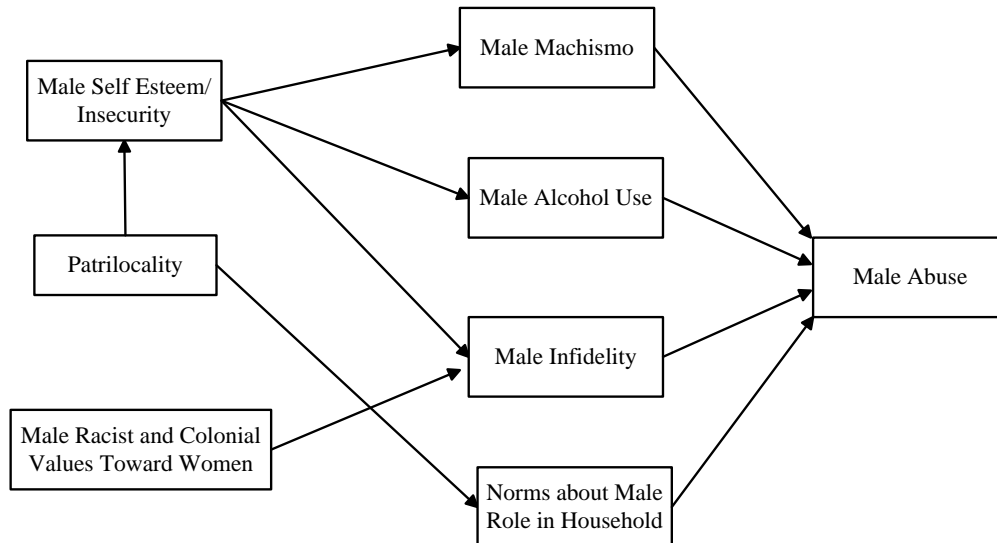
Male Initiation of Violence and Abuse

Figure 1

Women's Assets

Assets are economic, social, and symbolic capital. A woman's children, her business or source of income, her skills, education, intelligence, among other things, are her assets. If she cannot cook when she marries, for example, she is a disadvantaged woman. A young woman told us that "her husband was patient with her" until she learned how to cook.

Most women expressed frustration for not having access to an education. Their brothers were encouraged and sent to good schools in Quetzaltenango, but the women were forbidden to continue beyond the third/fourth year of elementary school. Some were allowed to complete elementary school. Women felt that if they had had an education, they would be able to support themselves, face their husbands, and "be something." Instead, the lack of education greatly contributed to feelings of low self-esteem. Ana wanted a career: "*I wanted to study to be a nurse, I liked to study… but nobody supported me and my sister. I wanted to do something, and the only thing I know how to do is to mop and sweep. I told my children that they can do better… because they went to school.*"

As noted, many women expressed a desire to set up some kind of business. They asked their husbands to let them work or create a business, but were denied the opportunity because they were expected to assist their husbands. Ines told us about the time she and her husband crossed the border to Texas and she was working near Houston: "*I was working in a house and he did not like it. I cleaned the house. They were good people, and they paid me well… I did two jobs, but he was always finding problems with me working.*"

When Ines was young, she begged her father to let her study. She asked the town pharmacist to talk to her father to see if he could convince him to let her continue beyond elementary school. The pharmacist did so: "*My father agreed, but never followed up,*" she said. *The year after completing elementary school, I even got my own notebook and got ready to go to school in anticipation.*" Her father did not let her go. Her mother agreed with her father. She did

not want problems with her husband. Gerardo wanted his daughter to continue her education. He wanted her to be a doctor but said she wanted to be a teacher. He feels things are changing from his childhood. Their father said that he would not invest in his daughters, now in their 30s and 40s. He sent his two sons to study to Quetzaltenango to the best schools. As Beatriz pointed out to us, most female university students are either single or divorced, but if married, it is their husband who is praised for the accomplishments of the wives.

In order to claim some assets, women struggle to receive what they consider their fair share of their inheritance and this occupies a considerable part of the concerns of women, especially when they are alone with their children or in bad marriages. Just as some fathers want to marry off their daughters early so they can stop supporting them, so too do they want to remove them from their responsibility to avoid having to leave much of an inheritance to them, preferring to bestow it upon their sons.

Although often not considered forms of abuse, women were deprived of having rights to their homes, starting a business, having an education, and/or acquiring the skills or aptitudes for important activities. Women consider their networks of social relations, a job, and a sense of belonging to their communities as part of their assets. To the extent that they lack some or many of those, they remain vulnerable to abuse (Moser 1996, 1998; Gálvez Borrell and Gellert 2001; Moser and McIllwaine 2001; Moser and Clark 2001). Having assets also impacts whether women resist or accept abuse on the part of their husbands. Asset management affects household poverty and the vulnerability of women and children.

Low Self-Esteem in Women

There are abundant examples in the narratives of women that suggest cycles of violence and abuse lead to the erosion of self-esteem and self-advocacy. Expressions of hurt feelings, humiliation, fear, emptiness, loneliness, and resignation were not uncommon. Ines articulates some of those feelings well: *"I went back* [to my husband]. *What could I do? This is the fear we all experience. That is why we put up with these men that are violent because we are nothing; we don't know anything [*no somos nada no sabemos hacer nada*]; we don't have a profession, and that is why we put up with them."*

Jazmin often heard her father tell her she was dumb and worthless. As she has difficulty with her current university studies, she wonders if he was right. She still struggles with feelings of inferiority: "*He is right, I tell myself. I will never amount to anything. We are women and dumb and will never have what we want*."

In contexts where women are unable to access much work independent of their husbands and where that dependence reinforces men's control over women, feelings of low self-esteem and low regard make it difficult for women to self-advocate and, in turn, make them more accepting of the verbal and psychological abuse they experience (Ehlers 2000; Menjívar 2011).

Social Norms: Husband as Breadwinner, Wife as Supporter

In general, conceptions of men's ideal behavior are that a man should 'provide' for his family and he should be reliable. Men might also be violent, drink too much, or not be loving or affectionate fathers, but as long as the male is "providing," there seems to be tolerance for these behaviors. Once men stop providing, tolerance diminishes greatly.

Women's work around the home is seen as an unqualified obligation to care for the family's needs. If funds are needed for the family, women are expected to find ways of obtaining

such funds. As such, helping in agricultural activities, bringing produce to the market, engaging in paid or unpaid housework, participating in cottage industries or more traditional activities such as embroidering or weaving are considered appropriate roles for women. Rosa (25, not a member of the Gonzalez family) presents a case of the typical female role and expectations, except that she has not married yet. She helps her parents. She gets up at 4am to prepare breakfast for the men before they go to work. During the morning, she takes care of the cleaning and lunch preparation and threshes and cleans corn that she can later sell. During her free time, she embroiders huipils to sell, each one requiring six months to complete. She receives no income for the work she does at home. As noted, women do indeed work in this region, but their opportunities for work are limited by gender preferences and by their spouses' businesses and dispositions. In addition to any money-producing activities, women are responsible for all other household chores and childcare (Ehlers 2000; Rosenbaum 1993; Menjíbar 2011).

The well defined roles of men and women as providers and supporters predispose women to accept the abusive behaviors of men. It is primarily when men fail to provide any resources whatsoever that we see evidence of women taking a stand and rejecting the abusive behavior of their husbands, as exemplified by the accounts from Ines and Beatriz.

Social Norms: "Hay que aguantar;" Putting up with Machismo and the Way Men Are

Maria says that *machismo* is alive and well and that is how men are taught to be. According to her, men have it easy and that is why they do not value things as much. Like other men, Jorge (23) learned how to treat women from his *machista* father, who reportedly treated his mother badly as if she were a servant. Only one of the men with whom we talked, Camilo (23), not in the Gonzalez family, identified himself as not being *machista* (his own words). He is willing to cook, sweep, and wash dishes and hopes that when he marries, his wife will "love God and have good feelings."

In the accounts we documented, the following are expected of women: They need to respect [*respetar*] (and often fear) their fathers and husbands. They need to tolerate [*tolerar, soportar*], endure [*aguantar*] whatever conditions either places on them. They need to resign themselves [*conformarse*] to the fact that life is like this for women and to accept [*aceptar*] their condition. As one young woman put it regarding the behavior of men, "*toda rosa trae espinas,*" every rose has its thorns.

In the midst of having so much trouble with her husband and hoping she could leave him, Ines talked to her father. He told her that she had to go back to her home and put up with her husband (*tienes que aguantar*):*"That is the life of women"* her father said to her:*"Endure, he said; and I said, okay, and I returned."* Carmen feels that her mother, who recently passed away, did not teach them well. Her mother accepted their father's *machismo* and assumed her difficult life was the life women had to live. She had to suffer for her children. Her mother did not believe that women should get an education. But now Carmen feels that women should have "voice and vote" [*voz y voto*]; that abandoning their home is not a crime. She thinks that women don't have to put up (*aguantar*) any longer. Beatriz noticed that her brothers received the wrong messages, not just from their parents but also from their teachers. His teacher communicated that women are there just for them to spend time with [*para pasar el tiempo*]. Ana laments that her own son treats her badly as he follows his father's model: "*It is his father who put that in his head. He copies his father, who is machista.*"

As the large literature shows, women are expected to be patient, put up with abuse, and hope that their spouses will have good moments, preferably drink little, and be supportive (see Chant and Craske 2003; Drogus 1997).

Divorce: Social, Economic and Legal Constraints

In the case of Guatemala, there are structural facilitators that contribute to the gendered dimensions of violence. As noted by many women in our study, the 'authorities' often consider domestic violence or any other form of abuse as a 'household and personal problem.' The all-male police force treat these forms of abuse as a normal aspect of marriage and family dynamics. In instances where police officials are sympathetic to a woman's plight they feel limited by the assumed need for permission from the husbands to take action, such as having the woman leave the home. Several women told us that divorcing their husbands is their wish, but lack of money and time prevent them from doing so.

Although the laws in Guatemala have recently changed, few indigenous women are aware of the changes and rarely have access to legal counsel. Guatemala has one of the worst records of domestic violence in the western hemisphere (Cianciarulo 2011; Thomson 2012). Until recently, few options were available to women who were victims of domestic violence. Typically, a woman's sole option is to pursue divorce and/or criminal charges against the perpetrator (Musalo, Pellegrin and Roberts 2010; Prensa Libre 2010; Thomson 2012). Two pieces of recent legislation, the 2008 Law against Femicide and Other Forms of Violence against Women (Femicide Law) and the 2010 changes to the Civil Code regulating divorce, have theoretically given Guatemalan women more rights and protections from domestic violence.

From the 1960s until 2010, Guatemala made several revisions to its civil code for divorce, but inequality between men and women in divorce proceedings remains substantial (Thomson 2012; Cianciarulo 2011). A significant change in 2010 allowed women to marry immediately after they divorced (CENADOJ 2010; Prensa Libre 2010). Women are also now allowed to initiate and file for a divorce whether or not their husband agrees to it. However, the law remains silent on pensions, property, and child custody (Prensa Libre 2010). Indigenous women are not well informed about changes in the law. Many falsely claimed that they needed their husband's permission to divorce. They also incorrectly believed that if they divorced their husbands, they would lose either their children or all their property rights, a matter that is actually decided on a case-by-case basis provided that one has access to legal counsel.

For example, Ines' husband did not give her access to any income they obtained as a married couple. She was unable to establish her own business and she was incapable of defending herself with legal counsel due to a lack of money. Her husband was able to hire a lawyer and fight for their property. He placed their home and business in his brother's name, as advised to him by his lawyer, to prevent her from receiving any part of what was rightly hers if she did sue him. "*As a woman I suffered discrimination, lack of support by the authorities, I felt alone and helpless. The authorities were on my husband's side, they told me not to be rebellious or a bad woman, that I should ask for forgiveness and go back with him because he is a good person.... He never gave me the divorce, now I want to divorce him but it takes money and time that I don't have*." Carmen says the same, after she found her husband with another woman. They went to the town's elders to ask for mediation and they ultimately agreed to reconcile. But he then left her. He was ordered by the Justice of the Peace to pay support for their daughter, but he never did. Carmen could not afford a lawyer to take him back to court. Even as the laws are changing to protect women and children's rights from abusive partners, the practice of the law

and its enforcement are slow to reach the most vulnerable sectors (see Goldín and Dowdall 2012). Inequality at home is exacerbated and sustained by structural forces that further reinforce widespread inequalities in society (Pérez Sáinz 1997; Cuadra 2003; Briceño León and Zubillaga 2002).

Resistance, Hope, and Social Support

Ines Leaves her Husband. After a major fight, Ines went to a neighbor's house who advised her to go to the police or the court: *"I told him* [the official] *that my husband had put me out of my house... Have you been attacked?, he asked. No, I said. Do you have to wait until I am attacked* [golpeada/ hit]*? ... I've had a life with him, I said. I cannot stand it any longer. There have been 13 years with problems and problems, I am hit but inside* [estoy golpeada pero por dentro]*."*

Ana Leaves her Husband. Ana tells us that she suffered so much, that she 'wasted' twenty years of her life and had nothing. She had to sell most of her belongings to provide for her children. Depriving women of the money needed to cover their necessary expenses [*el gasto*] is a recurrent form of aggression. But she could not afford a lawyer that could help her. She left her husband.

My Mother Left my Father. One of the siblings in the family recounts how their mother temporarily left their abusive father: *"He started drinking very heavily and my mother was tired and she said "no more"!*

Beatriz Decides to Go Back to Study. Years ago, when she was 16 years old, Beatriz was in school studying with the goal of becoming a teacher. At the time, she told us that she did not ever want to marry because she had observed through her family and friends how bad men were to women. She indeed married a few years later and was forced by her husband to stop her studies. She had four children with a man who abused her and did not provide for their household. She is still married to him, but after years of frustration, she went back to school and recently obtained a college degree. Her husband became a stay-at-home man who "accepted" her independence while she worked to make a living in addition to her studies. She says that while she rises at 4am and works until late at night, that her husband is praised by all in the community for "allowing" her to leave their home to work and study:

> *I used to tell a girlfriend: I am stuck… I am part of the circle of women who are beat and abused. I am stuck here. No, said my friend, and she used these words: 'The difference with you is that you are inside the circle, but some day you will leave.'*

Beatriz finds that her life changed when she told her husband she would continue on with her life, studies, and personal growth with or without him:

> *My children have grown up. I already breast fed them. Now I am leaving. I don't do it to be a feminist or a rebel. I am a person who has dreams and I will move ahead as I told you one day. I am a human being and you had no consideration for me when you betrayed me when I washed and ironed your clothes.*

And she concludes: *"They say that behind a good woman there is a good husband, but I think it is the opposite!"*

Carmen on Why Women Don't Leave. Carmen also left her husband, but she says that other women don't leave, even though they should:

> *Most of my friends give the same response: He is the father of my children. In any case I looked for it* [me las busqué] *and now I have to put up with it… and where would I go with my children?... They don't see an alternative! 95% of indigenous women cling to their husbands whether they like it or not, and they just stay put.*

An Overall Framework

In the same manner described with factors that shape male initiation of abuse, we can summarize the above using an influence diagram, per Figure 2. Women negotiate their status in the family in the context of varying degrees of family cohesion or disintegration. As communication and intimacy deteriorate with their spouses, and as they sense less social support, women's lowered self-esteem and feelings of blame are exacerbated. These feelings are further impacted by their husband's racism and oppressive ideological abuse. The acceptance of blame and low self-esteem all lead to a higher tolerance for abuse. Resistance will also depend, in part, on women's assets in the form of education, skills, assertiveness, number and gender of children, and forms of independence and economic sustainability. With few assets, women feel trapped and stay in abusive relationships. The social norms that tie them to their husbands and fathers and that require them to stay and take care of them also come into play, as do structural constraints that prevent them from generating income. Perceived social norms are, in turn, the result of women's own attitudes about marriage, abuse, and the socialization they received from their mothers in direct or indirect form by observing behaviors at home.

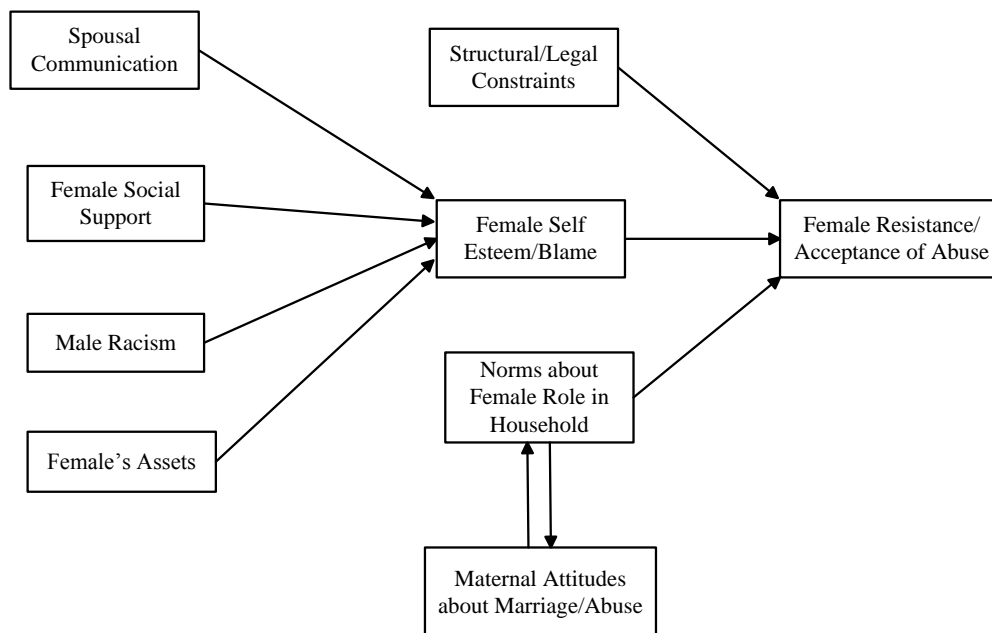## Female Resistance or Acceptance of Abuse

Figure 2

The Cycle of Violence

Figures 1 and 2 elucidate some of the key dynamics that lead men to initiate gender violence and for women to tolerate or resist it. These factors also serve to perpetuate gender violence within a family over time, leading to repeated abuse by husbands relative to their wives. As noted in the extant literature, as men engage in abuse, they often reproduce the same behaviors they had been exposed to growing up and that they themselves resented or failed to comprehend as children. Our narratives suggest additional dynamics that contribute to repetitions of abuse as summarized by the influence diagram in Figure 3. After the initiation of abuse, the relationship between the husband and wife is affected, with communication between the couple decreasing and the spousal relationship deteriorating. As the marital relationship suffers, and as husbands begin to fail to live up to basic expectations of economic support for their families, men tend to drink and engage in infidelity, which further deteriorates both the relationship and expressions of lack of respect. In response, women engage in more self-blaming and their self-esteem continues to be adversely affected. The norms surrounding the "acceptability" of abuse become increasingly salient. All of these dynamics serve to encourage repeat instances of abuse. Prevalent in this discussion is the fact that where both men and women have been victims themselves of some form of violence and abuse, they reproduce the behaviors they experienced as children, making violence a normalized behavior, accepted by all and often assumed to be expected (Ely, Dulmus and Wodarski 2004; Moser and McIllwaine 2001; Fagan and Browne 1994; Alhabib, Nur and Jones 2010; Goldín et al. 2006). Such ideas are not uncommon among both men and women, where men consider it normal to be the oppressor and women hold beliefs that justify violence against them.
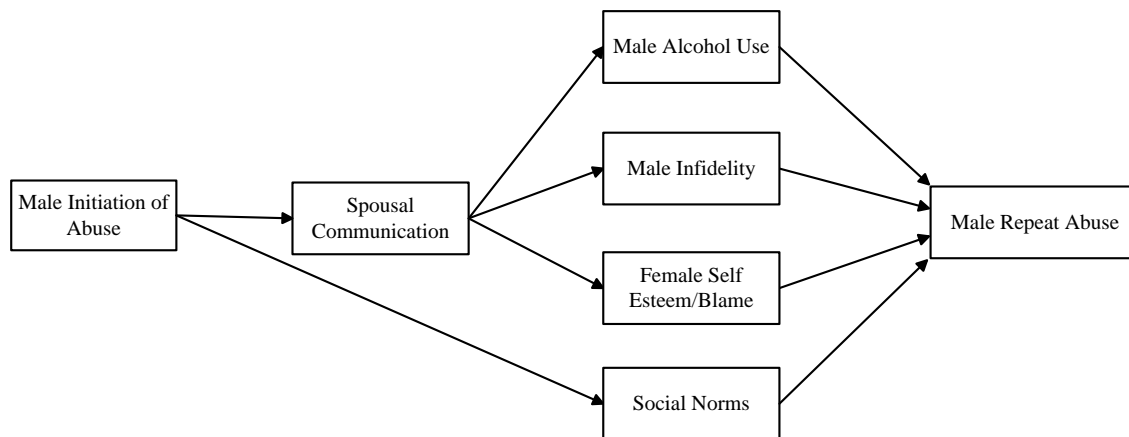
Cycles of Violence

Figure 3

Discussion

The fact that some of the women we consulted were able to remove themselves from the situations of constant abuse is a hopeful statement about gender relations and possibilities in the western highlands of Guatemala. Indigenous women often find themselves in impoverished

conditions in which they lack information about wider developments taking place at the national level. But even in such circumstances, some women are capable of moving forward with their lives and, as seen above, supporting other women in the process. A friend of one of the women we interviewed told her: "*You are the head and not the tail*,"[4] as she encouraged her to remove herself from the situation she was in. This message resonates with many women and captures the essence of the tools needed for an end to humiliation and gender oppression. The task requires women, as mothers, to teach their sons ways in which they can feel more secure in their own masculinities as well as how to establish equal and supportive partnerships with their wives. *Machista* attitudes, drinking, and infidelity are behaviors fed by insecurity and lack of male self-esteem, possibly generated by relations and role models in their patrilocal homes, where mothers and fathers reproduce cycles of abuse and social norms that limit women's power to claim their places and develop self-worth. Identifying the source of these behaviors is by no means justifying them. However, identification may lead to potential interventions, awareness and change.

Mothers need to communicate to their daughters that education and independence are to be sought as important assets. Younger mothers in their 30s and 40s are beginning to tell their daughters to study and find a career. They are trying to support such initiatives despite the fact that they are still dependent on their husband's support. These young mothers are conflicted by the internalization of mixed messages they received from their own mothers. This older generation of abused women, now in their 60s, did not feel free to support their daughter's independence. While the women in their 20s seem more hopeful, and many have had access to additional education, there are still many more, particularly those living in rural areas, that are reproducing the lives of their mothers. Expectations for the future are hopeful and promising and some changes are evident but they are not occurring fast enough. As noted in the models provided earlier, abuse will come to an end when men feel loved and respected as they grow up and, as boys and young men, are educated to respect the women around them in a context where women have access to work and other assets and where the system of legal and community support protects and enforces the newly established laws, giving women the social, economic, and psychological resources needed to appeal for their rights.

We see in people's practice that they are not blindly accepting some social ordering imposed from above (Couldry 2010), but instead they are starting to revise practices to allow for new responses. Individuals form a sense of identity through personal relationships and relations of recognition (Honneth 2003). They construct their selves through affective, legal, and social forces. Through love and support in intimate relationships, they can obtain the self confidence needed for action and satisfaction. The legal sphere legitimates claims and places individuals on equal footing, something recently achieved but not fully recognized as an option by indigenous women seeking separation or divorce. Lack of legal recognition and structural support fosters lack of self-respect and self-worth. Recognition in the group confirms one's personal existence as a worthy member of society and results in higher self-esteem. Lack of recognition in personal, legal, and social contexts, related to broader access to economic and political resources, place men and women in oppressive relations of broad disrespect. This is expressed in the violation of personal space, humiliation in general, and other forms of violence and abuse that have repercussions in broader spheres of life (see Fraser and Honneth 2003; Held 2008).

In this study, we elicited life histories from members of an extended family and additional youth not related to the family and were able to derive from them three models of abuse dynamics in the form of three influence diagrams. We heard some of the same stories from multiple perspectives making positioning and filters of gender, occupation, and place part of the

story. By not privileging any one account but giving all the voices their space, the dynamics within the family reveal more about overarching attitudes and behaviors, prevalent social norms and historical changing contexts than specific personal representations. By soliciting life history interviews with young adults in the region who were not related to the family, we tried to address the possibility of a unique family bias, which we did not find evidence for. Our study, of course, is limited by the small sample in two Maya communities of the western highlands of Guatemala. However, the study suggests a rich accounting of gendered forms of abuse that the broader literature from Mesoamerica tends to confirm in the context of some of the same patriarchal dynamics that affect gender violence in many parts of the world. These take on specific characteristics in the context of local practices, values and socioeconomic contexts, but the fundamental dynamics in the proposed influence diagrams are likely representative of a large number of cases where abuse takes place.[5]

In terms of implications for applied interventions, our study suggests the key variables that need to be taken into account. This includes work not only with women but also with boys and men that address troubling areas of low self-esteem, perceived compromised masculinities, and alcohol abuse. Women need access to information about their rights within their marriages and as individuals. The message to women needs to be what they already suspect: that it does not need to be this way, that they deserve an education, respect and recognition from others in their communities and most importantly from themselves. The work in Guatemala could begin by developing leadership skills within democracy building networks that encourage women to argue for their rights in conditions where they are excluded from most decision making centers.[6]

Notes

1. All names in this paper are pseudonyms. The first time a name is listed it is followed by the age of the respondent. The generation of reference ranges between 32 and 46 years old; younger participants include some of their children as well as non-relatives included for purposes of confirming the trends observed. All interviewed were asked for consent and verbally informed of the overall goals of the project and offered confidentiality. They gave us permission to anonymously recount their experiences. They were all eager to talk and share their experiences. Except for the city of Quetzaltenango, we keep all other locations in the departments of Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán confidential.

2. A township (*municipio*) is a population of over 10,000 people and the basic territorial organization of the state. In Guatemala there are 22 departments and within them a total of 337 townships. There are 22 Maya languages plus Spanish and two non-Maya languages spoken in Guatemala. K'iche' and Mam are two Maya languages spoken by members of our research sample.

3. Guatemala experienced a brutal civil war from the 1970s until the signing of the peace accords in 1996. While the whole country lived in fear and was affected by the civil war, the area where this study was conducted was less affected, as far as number of casualties, than other regions of Guatemala. This is thought to be related to the relative economic development of the area, the populations considered by the military to be "good Indians" (Goldín 2009).

4. "*Look up, she told me, you are the head and not the tail*" [levanta cabeza me dijo, vos sos cabeza no sos cola].

5. In our sample only one woman in the family, M (30 years old) told us that her husband is 'different,' loving of all his children, girls and boys, and a good partner. She attributes this to his upbringing, by a "humble, simple, and loving mother." He is also a religious man.

6. In recent years Goldín et al. (2006), Goldín and Rosenbaum (2009), Rosenbaum (2000), described UPAVIM, a women-focused NGO in Guatemala City that quite successfully does just that.

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