Women Fight
for an Equal Voice

Lucia Teleguario is a strong indigenous leader from the Kaqchiquel people in Guatemala. She is part of the fight to have women's voices heard in the process of building peace and democracy in post-conflict Guatemala.

The situation has improved greatly since she helped found a women's organization in the community fifteen years ago. Yet Guatemalan women still face obstacles when it comes to participation in important decision-making bodies.

"When we originally founded the women's organization in which I participate, I was taken by the soldiers to their barracks and interrogated for several hours just because a group of women gathering seemed suspicious to them," said Ms. Teleguario at a meeting of Kaqchiquel women in the highlands town of Patzun.

"Now it is different," she continued. "Now we can meet and express our ideas openly. Now we have other types of challenges."

The Patzun meeting was organized by the National Union of Guatemalan Women, one of the oldest women's associations in the country, as part of efforts by women's organizations to bring gender perspectives into the implementation of the peace accords.

The Guatemalan peace agreements put an end to the armed conflict in 1996. They also encompass a comprehensive platform for building socio-economic development and democracy, including time-specific commitments for addressing gender inequalities. Even though implementation of the peace accords is lacking in many areas, an important law passed in 2002 promotes broad social participation in the Rural and Urban Development Councils, which are responsible for planning strategies from the local to national levels. As a result

Lucia Teleguario (second from left).

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of advocacy by women's organizations and the Presidential Women's Secretariat, the new law reserves seats for women in the Councils at the municipal, provincial, regional and national levels.

Even so, the women's organizations are aware that this legal framework is just the beginning. Women remain extremely underrepresented in the Councils – only eight per cent of the members of the Municipal Council in Paztun are women. Additional measures are needed to overcome remaining barriers to women's participation such as sexist stereotypes, inadequate access to education and information, unbalanced domestic workloads, and gender-based violence, which has increased alarmingly in recent times.

Several organizations, including the National Union of Guatemalan Women, have launched initiatives to promote women's participation in the Councils. These include: disseminating information about the new law among women; training women in negotiating and advocacy skills; strengthening women's organizations and coalitions; supporting the creation of women's common agendas to present to the Councils at the different levels; looking for alliances with diverse social actors; and sensitizing the authorities and the population through media campaigns about the right of women to take part in the Councils.

"We not only have the right to participate, but we also know very well the main needs of our communities, of our people," said Marta Coyote, the main leader of an indigenous weavers' association, at the Paztun meeting.

In overcoming the challenge to women's participation in peace-building, Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) is a valuable tool. It calls for the adoption of a gender perspective in the implementation of peace agreements, including the involvement of women at all stages of the process. Stronger international efforts are needed to ensure that Security Council resolution 1325 is fully implemented at the local and national level.

Gender equality and respect for the rights of indigenous peoples are essential to building a fair, democratic and just society. When indigenous women such as Ms. Teleguario are given a voice in the institutions of their country, they will be able to fully contribute to peace and democracy in Guatemala.

Women as Partners in Peace and Security