Return to the Nation:
The Organizational Challenges Confronted by
Guatemalan Refugee Women

Alison Crosby

Abstract

This article focuses on the challenges faced by organized Guatemalan refugee women on return from exile in Mexico. It seems that exile provided a temporary space in which women could organize and assert their rights as women, and this space was closed down upon return to the nation. Part of the explanation can be found in conflicts over power, in particular within the return communities. It is argued that the nature of international community intervention in the camps in Mexico, and throughout the return process, may have contributed to the current community conflicts. The article highlights the new organizational strategies being created by returnee women to effectively participate at the community and national levels, and respond to the needs of their bases within the rapidly changing post–peace accord era. An initiative to create a space for dialogue and negotiation among the women's organizations is examined.

Résumé

Cet article met l'accent sur les défis auxquels les femmes réfugiées guatémaltèques, qui se sont organisées pendant l'exil au Mexique, ont à faire face lors de leur retour au pays. Il semblerait que l'exil ait procuré un espace temporaire permettant aux femmes de s'organiser et d'affirmer leurs droits en tant que femmes et que cet espace de liberté se soit refermé lorsqu'elles sont retournées au pays. Cet état de chose peut s'expliquer, dans une certaine mesure, comme étant une lutte de pouvoir, spécialement à l'intérieur des communautés de retour. Il est suggéré que la nature de l'intervention de la communauté internationale dans les camps au Mexique et tout au long du processus de retour, pourrait avoir contribué à ces conflits communautaires actuels. L'article souligne les nouvelles stratégies organisationnelles que les femmes de retour mettent en place, dans la période de flux qui a suivi l'accord de paix, afin d'avoir une participation effective au niveau de leurs communautés et au niveau national et de pouvoir répondre aux besoins de leurs bases. L'article examine aussi une initiative visant à créer un forum où les

Introduction

This article offers a reflection on the challenges faced by organized Guatemalan refugee women on return from exile in Mexico. It is argued that refugee women's experiences of return throw into sharp relief the gendered boundaries of Guatemala, and can thus shed some light on the nature of women's participation in the post–peace accord era. The data comes from two years of work and doctoral research in Guatemala (1998–2000).[1] In the first section, I examine the effect of the return process on how refugee women organized, exploring their experience in Mexico. I then move on to discuss some of the work that I did with refugee/returnee women's groups around organizational change, in my capacity as peace-building program advisor for the international NGO Project Counselling Service (PCS).[2]

Refuge and Return[3]

The scorched-earth offensives perpetrated by the Guatemalan state during the early 1980s forced hundreds of thou-

sands of people to flee. Most who settled in refugee camps along the Mexican border with Guatemala were indigenous peasants. During more than a decade in exile, indigenous women organized in the camps, in preparation for the return process, and to ensure that their voices were heard in decision making within the camps. They learned Spanish in order to communicate among themselves, and with those outside who were involved with the refugee communities (national and international NGOs, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees). They also went through a process of understanding their rights as women. Several refugee women's organizations were formed, including Mamá Maquín, Madre Tierra, and Ixmucané, each relating organizationally to one of the three branches of the Permanent Commissions—the umbrella group set up to represent the refugees in the negotiation of the return process. Much was made by researchers and activists of refugee women's transformation in exile, and much hope was generated for the role they could play upon return to the nation, and the contribution they could make to Guatemalan women's organizing (Arbour 1994; Crosby 1999; Torres 1999).

In reality the seven-year return process proved to be difficult, both for the returnees in general, and organized returnee women in particular. Given the socio-economic conditions within war-torn Guatemala, the building of return communities was arduous. With little basic infrastructure available, communities often had to be built from scratch. Support from the international community lessened, and interactions with "those who stayed" were difficult, with the returnees often being viewed with suspicion and mistrust, both by local communities and the ever-militarized state.

Women's organizing often took a back seat to the daily pressures of building homes and communities. More emphasis was placed on productive projects than on maintaining spaces for training and reflection. The organizations' membership was often geographically dispersed, weakening the ability to organize effectively. New relationships had to be developed between women in the communities before they could begin to organize together. But what were they organizing for? The goal of organizing in Mexico—return—had been achieved. What was next? "Who do we become, now that we are 'returnees'?" The shift from *refugee* to *returnee* does not signify a change in the status of "other," for the returnee is still an outsider to the nation, "different." The question of who to become was one that refugee/returnee women's organizations all confronted. Such an identity quest was necessarily influenced (and constrained) by the surrounding social context.

One of the biggest problems faced by organized returnee women was conflict with the male leadership within their communities. On return, as part of their integration, returnee men began to reassert the roles within the family and community that they had occupied prior to exile. The co-operative structures set up in the return communities excluded the women's organizations from participation, and the co-operative leadership often sought to curb women's organizing.[4] In 1999 the co-operative of the return community of Nueva Generación Maya, in Barillas, Huehuetenango, closed down Mamá Maquín in the community, saying that the women's organization was too disruptive. Organized refugee women have described how, throughout the years of the return process, they were subject to threats and attacks, and even had their offices burned, by their own husbands, sons, and colleagues.

At the national level, returnee women participated in the Co-ordinator of Uprooted Women, part of the Consultative Assembly of Uprooted Populations (ACPD). The ACPD was formed to represent the uprooted population on the technical commission created to oversee implementation of the Agreement on Resettlement of the Populations Uprooted by the Armed Conflict, which was the peace accord signed between the PAN (National Advancement Party) government and the URNG (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity) in June 1994. However, within the ACPD, women were not given leadership positions. According to one woman, "The men never elect us or think of us. We have to put women forward ourselves in order to be taken into account, and when we do achieve this, we are given secondary jobs such as secretaries, which are positions the men do not value" (Project Counselling Service 2000).

Through their membership of the ACPD, returnee women also participated in the National Women's Forum, which was set up to ensure women's participation in the implementation of the peace accords. The forum was an intercultural space, incorporating both rural and urban women. Decisions were made by consensus, which improved women's negotiating skills. According to one forum document, it represented "a network of 25,000 women across the whole country, an unprecedented experience in Guatemala."

Returnee women's participation in regional and national organizations is important, particularly in such boundary-crossing initiatives as the National Women's Forum. However, in order to participate in such institutional spaces, returnee women either had to live away from home, or travel between four and twenty hours, and spend several days away from their homes. This required support from

partners and family members in household and childcare responsibilities, which was often difficult to obtain (Project Counselling Service 2000).

It seems that exile provided a temporary space in which women could organize and assert their rights as women, and this space was closed down upon return to the nation. Part of the explanation can be found in conflicts over power. Women's organizing in Mexico provided the refugee communities with increased access to local and international resources. International NGOs and the UNHCR played a particularly important role in the camps, providing women with support, both financial and moral. However, international support gradually evaporated during the return process. Within the return communities, conflict over increasingly scarce resources was gendered. As the returnee women put it, "In refuge, women's organizing was useful to the men. Here it is no longer useful" (Project Counselling Service 1999). It has been argued that the crisis generated by the exile experience provided a "parenthesis effect," which facilitated changes in women's roles and relationships to the men in the camps (Lozano 1996). These changes were viewed as temporary, and male power was reasserted on return.

The lack of support from external actors for refugee women after return contributed to the closing of spaces in which returnee women could participate and organize. In exile, international NGOs and the UNHCR worked with refugee women in organizational, developmental, educational, and women's-rights projects and processes. External actors also provided women with much-needed moral support in exile, often using their influence to gain the refugee men's acceptance of women's participation, and facilitating women's access to certain public spaces (Project Counselling 2000). This support was interrupted by the return, and no continuity was provided during the (re)settlement or (re)integration.

The nature of international community support for refugee women in exile needs to be analyzed. According to one external actor, there was "a high degree of paternalism and dependency" in the projects carried out with refugee women (Project Counselling Service 2000). It was difficult for refugee women themselves to reproduce the processes on return. One evaluation of the role of the international community in the refugee camps commented that "women hadn't developed sufficient understanding of the process and structures to implement them in the settlements" (Lozano 1996). It is also important to note that the work with the refugee women's organizations in the camps was quite new, beginning only two years before the first set of collective returns. The training was also provided mainly to the leadership within the women's organization, and the capacity to transmit the learning to the bases was not developed (Project Counselling Service 2000). Very recent changes were interrupted by the return. On return, the conditions and social relations were very different within the communities, and thus provided a setback to the transformation begun in exile.

The act of (re)crossing national boundaries does not necessarily signify (re)integration into the nation. The process of becoming a returnee is fraught with dangers and insecurities. The closing down of space in which women could organize highlights the gendered boundaries of Guatemala itself. However, in the face of all the difficulties encountered that have been discussed in this section, returnee women continued to organize and work towards a better future. They felt recognized socially, and understood their rights and responsibilities as women (Project Counselling Service 2000). The following section looks at some examples of the organizational change work that I undertook with the refugee women's organizations.

Creating Spaces for Dialogue

The organizational challenges confronted by refugee and returnee women have been a central focus of both my work and my doctoral research. From mid-1998 to the end of 1999, I coordinated a program within PCS-Guatemala that focused on strengthening the ability of civil society organizations to participate in the peace process.[5] Ten organizations participated in the program, including the three refugee/returnee women's organizations. A particular focus of the program was the strengthening of the organizational elements of social processes. The realities of the post-war era required different strategies for participation and resistance, and consequently modes of organizing that were different from those that had been effective in wartime. Many groups were seeking to change the militarized forms of social relations, which affected the practices of their organizations. Organizational change is not a goal in itself, but a mechanism to enable groups to carry out their work and respond to rapidly changing socio-political circumstances.[6]

As in many other civil society organizations in Guatemala, the structures of the refugee/returnee women's organizations tended to be vertical, with a high degree of centralization of decision making, access to information, control of funding, and forms of consultation, which led to separation between leadership and bases (Project Counselling Service 2000, 29). A focus of the work with the wom-

en's organizations was how to make the organizational structures more accountable and transparent, and thus responsive to the needs of the bases. It was important that all levels of the organizations be involved in these processes.

One of the women's organizations undertook a diagnostic study as part of the project. The objective was to redefine organizational strategies and structures. The study took into consideration the shifting national context, and returnee women's experiences of reintegration. A space for exchange and reflection on the needs and interests of the membership was created. The interviews were conducted by the local co-ordinators themselves, rather than the national leadership, in seventeen communities in three regions of the country. The methodological approach was aimed at reactivating communication between base women and their representatives, to strengthen identification with, and confidence in, the organization. In evaluating the process at the end, the women emphasized the importance of its participatory nature, that they themselves were responsible for conducting the study. The process was supported by the national leadership, and a local NGO that provided the women with the necessary training and accompaniment, facilitating workshops where the interviewers could reflect on the process and the preliminary findings, and putting together the final report using the data gathered by the women. The central challenge faced in completing the study was how to implement the recommended organizational changes.

All three women's organizations undertook similar restructuring, trying to make their organizations responsive to the shifting national and local contexts, as well as to the experience of return. In working with all the organizations, it struck us that it would be important to create a social space in which the organizations could reflect together on the challenges they faced as returnee women in their day-to-day work, discuss strategies for the resolution of problems and conflicts, and compare notes on how to implement organizational change. Until recently, the creation of such a space would not have been possible, given the historical tensions between the organizations, which are rooted in the political tensions and differences between the branches within the permanent commissions. However, political allegiances were split open during the post–peace accord transition, and this allowed for new spaces for dialogue and negotiation to be developed.

The new space for dialogue and negotiation had to be carefully designed. We decided that the first workshop would use the organizational change project as a basis for preliminary discussion and dialogue. Members of each or-

ganization would discuss how they went about implementing their respective projects, with ample time reserved for reflection, exchange, and questions. In addition to the three returnee/refugee women's organizations Mamá Maquín, Madre Tierra, and Ixmucané, we decided to invite a rural women's organization, I'x Defensoría de la Mujer Indígena, to participate in the workshop. I'x had participated in the organizational change project, and was confronting many issues similar to those of the returnee/refugee women's organizations. The workshop would also provide an opportunity to begin to break down some of the barriers between "those who stayed" and "those who left."

In the weeks leading up to the workshop, we spent a great deal of time working with each organization on the workshop format, goals, and objectives. Each organization was asked to prepare a brief presentation on the main processes undertaken, with a focus on key difficulties and achievements. Preparation for the workshop was made easier because of the trust built between PCS and the women's organizations, through the work we had done together, not only on the organizational change project, but also historically. One particularly important project was the research study PCS had undertaken with returnee women on their experiences before, during, and after exile (see Project Counselling Service 2000).

I co-facilitated the workshop with the PCS gender consultant. Two national and two regional coordinators from each organization participated, along with an *asesora* (external support person). The presentations structured the event, with time set aside after each one for questions and dialogue. The organizations all came extremely well prepared, bringing photographs, slides, and drawings. Time was reserved at the end to discuss common themes, and possibilities for future workshops. Common difficulties highlighted included conflicts over power; problems with the co-operatives; limited participation in decision making; funding; and women's low civic participation (e.g., in voting). Among their achievements, the women listed the degree of participation within the organizations, and the work that they had done despite adversity.

The workshop was a great success. All the women present engaged in lively and frank discussion and debate. There was the sense that this was a new space for dialogue and joint action, and that possibilities should be generated for continued co-ordination, collaboration, and sharing of information. A key comment made by many women was that the workshop had given them *ánimo* (energy) for the work to be done, despite the difficulties and challenges highlighted during the day. As one woman stated, "We all suffer

the same things, but each one of us here values our work. We must not leave things here. Let's hope that we can continue sharing" (Project Counselling Service 1999).

To conclude on a positive note, the success of the organizational change project, and the workshop initiative in particular, led to the development of a program by the women's organizations and the PCS that would support the daily work of the individual women's organizations, and continue individual and collaborative organizational change and strengthening. Funding was obtained, and the program is about to get underway. A central component will be the creation of an inter-organizational space for leadership development, and the formulation of collective responses to the barriers to organization that returnee women experience, which have been highlighted in this paper. It is hoped that this work will contribute to the strengthening of returnee women's participation within the post–peace accord nation.

Endnotes

1. I would like to thank the refugee/returnee women's organizations Mamá Maquín, Madre Tierra, and Ixmucané, as well as the rural women's organization I'x Defensoría de la Mujer Indígena. The working relationships I developed with these exceptional women were the inspiration for this paper. I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues at PCS Guatemala, in particular Susan Murdock and Carolina Cabarrús, as well as Jean Symes and Sylvie Perras from Inter Pares. Conversations with Frances Arbour were useful in helping me think through some of the key arguments within the paper. Financial support for my doctoral research was received from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRCC), through a doctoral fellowship.

2. PCS is an international consortium comprising five NGOs, with four from Europe (Danish Refugee Council, Norwegian Refugee Council, Dutch Inter-Church Aid, and Swiss Inter-Church Aid) and one from Canada (Inter Pares). Since 1979, PCS has been working with local counterparts, NGOs, and popular organizations to find durable solutions to the problems faced by refugees, displaced persons, and others affected by armed conflict throughout Latin America.

3. Part of this section is taken from my contribution to Blacklock and Crosby, forthcoming. Most of the information on refugee women's experience of exile in Mexico comes from previous research (see Crosby 1999). Unless indicated otherwise, the main source of data on refugee women's experiences of return is my work with the women's organizations, through meetings, conversations, interviews, and workshops. A major source of information is the recently completed study undertaken by PCS Guatemala with returnee women on their experiences before, during, and after exile. I quote from the unpublished Spanish version of the manuscript, and all translations are my own.

4. Returnee women in general were not members of the co-operatives, and therefore could not be landowners (the exception being the return community of Nueva Libertad, Alta Verapaz, where women were both co-operative members and co-owners of the land. This, however, seemed to be due to the co-operative's attempts to exclude other families from joining the community) (Project Counselling Service 2000). The explanation for women's non-membership can be found in the high membership fees, and the amount of time required for co-operative activities. Household duties, which consumed fifteen hours of women's work daily, on average, were not recognized by the co-operative as a contribution to the community. Women were also subject to threats by co-operative members when they persisted in demanding co-operative membership and access to land.

5. The peace process should not be viewed merely in terms of the implementation of the peace accords signed between the PAN government and the URNG, but rather as a wider project of dismantling militarized social structures and relations.

6. The program, officially entitled Support for Internal Transition of Civil Society Organizations in the Peace Process in Guatemala, was jointly administered by PCS-Guatemala and Inter Pares (the Canadian NGO, which is a founding member of the PCS consortium). Inter Pares obtained funding for the program from the Canadian government's Peace Building Fund. I had some difficulty in deciding on the shorthand term to refer to the program in this article. While the program was underway, we referred to it as the institutional strengthening project (*fortalecimiento institucional,* or FI in shorthand). However, such a term does not adequately reflect the nature of the program: as an Inter Pares colleague commented to me, PCS supports social processes, not institutions per se, and what was important within the program was strengthening the organizational elements of social processes. In the end, I decided to use the term *organizational change,* although this does not adequately capture the essence of the work undertaken, either.

Bibliography

Arbour, Frances. "The Voices of Women: A New Force Shaping the Guatemalan Return." *Refuge: Canada's Periodical on Refugees* 13, no. 10 (1994).

Blacklock, Cathy, and Alison Crosby. "Feminist Research across Guatemalan Time and Space." In *Gender and Violence: Women in Conflict Zones,* edited by Wenona Giles, Jennifer Hyndman, and Maja Korac. University of California Press, forthcoming.

Crosby, Alison. "To Whom Shall the Nation Belong? The Gender and Ethnic Dimensions of Refugee Return and the Struggle for Peace in Guatemala." In *Journeys of Fear: Refugee Return and National Transformation in Guatemala,* edited by Liisa North and Alan Simmons. Montreal & Kingston, London & Ithaca: McGill-Queen's Press, 1999.

Lozano, Itziar. *Informe de evaluación del trabajo con mujeres refugiadas en Chiapas 1991–1995.* Chiapas, Mexico. Unpublished, 1996.

Project Counselling Service. *Memoria del Intecambio de experiencias de la organizaciones de mujeres.* Guatemala. Unpublished, October 1999.

Project Counselling Service. *Las mujeres refugiadas y retornadas en Guatemala: Desafios y enseñanzas del refugio y la reintegración.* Guatemala. Unpublished, January 2000.

Torres, Gabriela. "The Unexpected Consequences of Violence: Rethinking Gender Roles and Ethnicity." In *Journeys of Fear: Refugee Return and National Transformation in Guatemala,* edited by Liisa North and Alan Simmons. Montreal & Kingston, London & Ithaca: McGill-Queen's Press, 1999.

Alison Crosby is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology at York University. Her dissertation examines the shifting—and gendered—strategies of civil society organizing in Guatemala from the war to the post-war era.