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Guatemala, Conflict

Guatemala: Decreasing the Economic Gap Between the Mestizo and Indigenous People of Guatemala by Promoting Representation and Education Against Prejudice

Guatemala, located in Central America, is home to Lake Atitlan, over 1,500 fascinating Mayan ruins, and volcanoes extending east to west of its borders: the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea. Today, the population of Guatemala is 16,858,333, and 43.75% of the individuals identify as Mayan, which further separates into 24 different groups. The “unequal distribution of wealth coupled with its rapid population growth” currently gives Guatemala the title with the highest poverty rate in Central America and its reputation as an extremely violent country (Bevan). Despite the large portion of Guatemala’s population which identify as Indigenous, a conventional hierarchy instilled between the Guatemalan society has served as a catalyst to additional issues which continuously affect their society and economy today. The group of individuals residing within the urban areas of their society remain at the top and the Indigenous “remain on the bottom rung of the socio-economic ladder” (Bevan) where they have been considered to reside for hundreds of years. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 79% of the Indigenous population were below the poverty line, which is twice the percentage within the non-Indigenous peoples of Guatemala. Outcomes of the Guatemala government’s actions yield interconnecting issues within their country and factors which contribute to the suppression of the Indigenous, further below the poverty line.

The rooted hatred for the Indigenous population within Guatemala relates to two specific occurrences in the country’s history: the civil war and the Spanish Conquest of Guatemala. Once being the heart of the flourishing Maya civilization until approximately 500 years ago in 1523, Spanish explorers “replaced the socio-economic order of the ancient Mayan civilization with a harsh plantation economy based on forced labor” (“Guatemala”). Although Guatemala gained independence in 1821, it continued to be ruled by a series of military dictators aligned with the landed oligarchy” (“Guatemala”). Thus initiating of long-term exclusion and discrimination of the Indigenous population in Guatemala.

Throughout the course of the 36-year civil war between U.S. military dictatorships and leftist political groups, supported by the Mayan population, approximately 200,000 individuals were forcibly disappeared or murdered. Of the victims identified, “83% were indigenous Maya. 93% of these human rights violations were carried out by government forces” (Bodenheimer). In 1951, Jacobo Arbenz, the elected populist military officer, “created agrarian reform to the major policy agenda, who supported land reform to benefit the largely indigenous peasantry” (Pallister). The change in turn caused an altercation with the interests of the U.S. based United Fruit Company and other private interests which led to the involvement of the CIA. Eventually, power shifted back to military forces which led to the upheaval of a corrupt leader and protests supported by leftists. Soon after, leftist rebel groups formed in efforts against the government. In the 1970’s, protests, killings, and a major earthquake causing 23,000 deaths and the displacement of many indigenous highland peasants progressively climaxed into the bloodiest years of the civil war. The

'rebels', Indigenous peoples, reestablished their "presence in rural areas, creating a base in Maya communities of the western highlands" (Bodenheimer). In 1980, indigenous activists wished to bring attention to the horrific conditions, events, and violence occurring within Guatemala and occupied the Spanish Embassy. In response, they were met by the police force which initiated the "genocide against its own people" (Dominguez) burning 39 hostages and protesters alive inside the Embassy. Between 1981 and 1983, 150,000 individuals were reported dead or missing, and 440 villages were entirely wiped off the map. Finally in 1996, the Guatemalan president Álvaro Arzú signed the peace agreement which ended the horrific civil war (Bodenheimer).

In the Quiche village residing within the mountainous northwest region of Guatemala, Rigoberta Menchu had a typical Indigenous family which consisted of 6 counterparts: her four siblings, her mother, and father. Her difficult childhood depicts "how hundreds of thousands Indigenous children grow up in Guatemala". Conventionally, she attended school for three years before her work labor was needed to make ends meet within her household. Rigoberta and her family annually performed arduous labor on large southern coastal plantations to remain in subsistence. This labor required arduous work, spending months picking coffee, beans, and cotton. At the age of thirteen, she was hired as a maid for a family within the urban sectors of Guatemala, in which she encountered immediate discrimination. Her father had been involved in the Peasant Unity Committee, and was one of the 36 people burnt alive within the Spanish Embassy. After losing the rest of her family, she moved away from the dangerous conditions from the civil war to Mexico where, "she began an international crusade to represent the hardships of the Guatemalan Indians and joined the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations." As a result of her efforts, she "brought worldwide attention and helped her to become the foremost spokesperson for indigenous peoples" and received a Nobel Peace Prize as her actions played a key factor in the events that led to a new president which signed the peace agreement to end the war ("Rigoberta Menchu Biography").

Despite the civil war's official conclusion, its effects were detrimental upon the economic standing of the Indigenous population of Guatemala. Near the end of the 1980's, "90% of the Guatemalan population lived below the poverty line. The war left 10% of the population displaced" resulting in a mass migration to Guatemala's capital and the formation of "shantytowns" (Bodenheimer). The civil war also resulted in a great imbalance of national wealth; 50% resided in the top 10% of the wealthiest individuals, and 10% of the poorest, the Indigenous, owned less than 1%. Today this imbalance continues a downward trend as "260 Guatemalans own 56% of the national economy," therefore, "0.001% of the population owns *more than half* of the country's wealth," (Gargiulo).

Years of violence and political repression continuously have a substantial effect upon civil society and the Indigenous' role in politics (García) exponentially reinforcing, "the fragmentation and localism of indigenous social movements in Guatemala and prevented the emergence of a viable Mayan political party," (Pallister). Forcing their groups into isolation within the rural areas of Guatemala, in turn widened the gap between both classes creating a more dramatic inequality upon the economy. "Lasting effects of the civil war and a failure of the government to institute necessary reforms have created a dire health

situation for Guatemala's indigenous people," (Lawton). Thus representing the government's role in the Indigenous' suppression, further into the depths of poverty.

The education of Indigenous children in Guatemala is viewed as trivial. According to Article 14 of the UN Convention stating the rights to the Indigenous, "Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the state without discrimination," to the right of, "improvement of their social and economic conditions." However, 95% of Indigenous children miss out on a primary school education and "for every 10 Indigenous children in Guatemala, only four will make it to primary school, and only two will complete secondary school." On average, education attainment is less than five years and less than two years for Indigenous women, due to financial constraints resulting in children dropping out of school to financially support their families. In total, Guatemala's illiteracy rate marks 25.5%; furthermore their Indigenous population reveals a 60% illiteracy rate. Amies wrote, "The disparity in the standard of education will lead to fewer children in poorer areas completing school, and further increasing illiteracy rates in the country thereby trapping more children in a cycle of poverty".

What causes Indigenous parents to resort to removing their children from an education? Lack of opportunities due to *discrimination* within the employment field. Roughly 40% of Guatemala's workforce is employed by agricultural and service sectors, harvesting bananas, coffee, cotton, and sugar cane. The average income employees receive is 81.87 Guatemalan quetzals which is equivalent to \$10.63 USD. Approximately "65 percent of the land is controlled by 2.5 percent of farms, land is passed down through families," (Preston) of the "elite" mestizos: people of mixed native and European ancestry. "More than two million Guatemalans from ages 15-24 do not meet the criteria to enter the workforce," thus they are forced into exclusion from the economy by the farming 'elite'. Their alternative option relies on joining the informal employment sector, both resulting in an income which allows them to float just above the poverty line for the rest of their life. The few Indigenous who received a proper education do not obtain equivalent opportunities mestizos with the same level of an education based upon their cultural background and the employer's conventional beliefs. Discriminatory employment practices creates a barrier, and ridding this given obstacle gives Indigenous individuals the opportunity to create an income more suitable to provide for their families.

The government's purposeful neglect and separating factors which targets the Indigenous became increasingly evident at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government disregarded accessibility for their Indigenous populations of the, "health system, generally as a result of privatization policies" ("Indigenous Peoples in Guatemala"). One should note that "20% of Guatemala's population lacks health care – mostly in rural indigenous areas" due the location of health care facilities in metropolitan areas of Guatemala, resulting in difficult access for the Indigenous to receive urgent care (Bevan). The informal employment-sector became dramatically affected due to their need for tourists' business to keep their families financially afloat, making an income selling woven blankets, key chains, and jewelry. The informal workforce constitutes 70% of their population and their large portion in society is particularly vulnerable during the pandemic. This large portion of society is particularly vulnerable during the coronavirus pandemic, with many possessing no savings and needing to continue daily work, despite the stay-at-home order, in turn introducing a potentially, "higher risk of contracting the virus

because their jobs require frequent contact with people. Without savings or social protection, their situation is dire” (“Informal Workers Face the Pandemic”) allowing them to sink further below the poverty line.

In the efforts of the Indigenous peoples’ participation in the government and voting, it will immediately give them a voice within their country. Representation of their ways of life to educate the rest of the population about the importance of equality among their people. Hopefully, in turn to decrease or diminish the gap between the rural and urban areas of Guatemala, without changing either groups’ ways of living. Additionally, encouraging further education to break their family’s cycle of poverty by removing cultural barriers. This government action will allow further engagement with the Indigenous, “to enhance their ability to promote their rights, determine their own priorities, and advance their self reliance” in turn developing “community action plans that reduce conflict and strengthen social cohesion” (“Indigenous Peoples”).

In the past, referendums implementing an alliance with the Indigenous peoples’ views were put into action in response to international pressure upon Guatemalan government officials. Ultimately, the referendum, pertaining four questions, was voted down by 18.5% of registered voters who participated. Indigenous candidates who ran for a place in office, hoping to break cultural barriers. In 2007, “Encuentro por Guatemala (Encounter for Guatemala—EG) surfaced as the county’s first Indigenous political party,” (García) and Rigoberta Menchu ran for president the same year, receiving 3% of the popular vote. Although the Mayan efforts within its social movement have created a prominence in forgoing, “a national political party in favor of a more dispersed pattern of political mobilization at a local level.” Beneath this surface reveals the unavailability, “of avenues for political representation at the municipal level” (Pallister). Today, Guatemala does not have formal laws or policies to promote political Indigenous representation, such as electoral quotas in its political parties or reserved seats or districts in the National Assembly for Indigenous peoples.

In 2000, the United Nations addressed the need for collaboration to alleviate prejudice against the Indigenous peoples. Therefore, their council came together to address issues and resolve them through the “United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues”. Ten days every year the council congregates and discusses the “social and economic development, education, health, and human rights” (International Labor Organization) which suppress their Indigenous population. Their goal is to address conflict, create peace, and sustain a resolution. Guatemala shares similar issues between their groups of Indigenous and the mestizo population. A possible solution to alleviate Guatemala’s gaping economic standing may be a similar course of action to the United Nations’. Hypothetically, the individuals who create a plan of execution would be Indigenous’ representatives within the Guatemalan government.

An alternative form of action in the efforts of representation within the government is the training against prejudice within Guatemala’s entire nation. The Learning for Justice organization suggests thirteen principles of strategy to positively motivate the removal of barriers sustaining reason for prejudice among large groups of people. Ways to ignite a resolvement of conflicts within their nation is highlighting similarities to allow a form of a connection, along with the differences to signify its miniscule importance

used in the determination of a hierarchy. Indigenous representatives within Guatemala's government may voice the educating principles to reduce prejudice within the urban and rural areas of their country. Therefore, with these representatives expressing a beneficial form of anti-prejudice education, these groups of individuals will not require direct contact with one another which historically invoked acts of violence.

Accommodatingly, this form of education would strengthen the Indigenous' voice and power in their country's democracy to flourish, relieving long-held tension within their population, and restore long-awaited justice for the Indigenous. In the hopes of effectiveness to the actions of education and representation, equivalent opportunities in the employment field among people from differentiating ethnic backgrounds in turn allows their children to remain in school and receive a proper education, increasing Guatemala's 74.5% literacy rate. Subsequently, leading to economic stability by decreasing the gap separating the social classes within their country and resolving other long-standing issues which bitterly resonate within Guatemala today.

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