

# OXFAM CLOSEUP

SPRING 2014

IN CAMBODIA AND GUATEMALA

## THE POWER OF RIGHTS

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

- > OUR HUNGRY PLANET
- > WATER WORKS



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"We thank God we survived," says Rey Ann Corbin, 26, of the deadly typhoon that struck Tacloban, Philippines, last November. Oxfam partnered with community members like Corbin—pictured here with her daughter Eunice, 6—to keep families safe from mosquito-borne diseases in the aftermath of the storm. *Eleanor Farmer / Oxfam*

## DEAR FRIENDS,

At Oxfam, we call ourselves a rights-based organization. But what exactly does that mean? And what does it have to do with fighting poverty?

Everything. Equipped with their rights, people have the power to help themselves.

In the pages ahead, you'll read about indigenous people in Cambodia's Ratanakiri province who, for thousands of years, have enjoyed the bounty from land they hold in common. They fish, hunt, forage, and farm on it, ensuring their families will have both food and income. But there is now enormous pressure on those families to claim title to a small area of their common land, and then sell it to developers who are hungry to establish rubber plantations and gold mines. In the end—when their money from the sale is gone—Ratanakiri's indigenous people are left with nothing. Poverty replaces their rights to that communal property.

But when villagers have knowledge of those rights and unite to defend them, they are more likely to create a stronger future for their families. Oxfam, working through local organizations, is helping Ratanakiri's indigenous people do just that.

In Guatemala, one of our key areas of concern is the violence and limited opportunities women endure in a culture of entrenched sexism and discrimination. There, too, access to their rights is critical to women's ability to change that culture, to stand up and say "no more."

"We have the same rights as men," says Delfina Cot, a local leader who received training from one of Oxfam's partners working on violence prevention. "We don't have to remain silent."

Speaking out takes nerve, conviction, and hope. But when people exercise that right, battling the poverty that's rooted in injustice is more likely to succeed. Our job here at Oxfam—the job we need you to help us do—is to support the fundamental rights of people striving to make their lives better.

Sincerely,



Raymond C. Offenheiser  
President, Oxfam America

# OXFAM CLOSEUP

## OXFAM AMERICA'S MEMBER MAGAZINE

SPRING 2014 VOLUME 14, ISSUE 2

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OXFAMCloseup SPRING 2014

EDITOR Coco McCabe

WRITERS Chris Hufstader,  
Anna Kramer

DESIGNER Emily Drees

PRODUCTION LEAD Carl M. Soares

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**COVER:** Seiv Thaugn, the chief of Padol village in Cambodia, is helping his community to claim communal land title to valuable forestland. "There are direct benefits of communal land title," he says. "We have the security that no one will take our lands. We can grow food, and also find forest products any time we want. ... If we can maintain our communal land, we will preserve our culture. Our hills, forests, and river are where we pray." *Patrick Brown / Oxfam America*

We welcome your feedback. Please direct letters to [editor@oxfamamerica.org](mailto:editor@oxfamamerica.org).

# MEDIA MASHUP

LOOK. WATCH. LISTEN. JOIN THE CONVERSATION.

FROM THE BLOGS

## NEW VIOLENCE IN DARFUR

By Elizabeth Stevens | March 31, 2014

When my friend Sahar Ali and a colleague arrived at their doorway last week, an elderly woman and her daughter-in-law beckoned them inside and set about making them comfortable, offering tea and a place to sit. In Sudan, guests are treasured and fussed over and given the best of everything.

Which is what made Sahar want to cry. Because this was not a house. It was just a few strips of cloth tied to a frame of sticks in a dusty, wind-blown camp. A fragile shelter in the desert, built by two women who had just lost nearly everything but their lives.

A wave of violence in the Darfur region of Sudan has uprooted more than 200,000 people in recent weeks.

To learn more about the situation in Darfur and what you can do to help, visit [oxfamamerica.org/darfur](http://oxfamamerica.org/darfur).

RIGHT: Children collect clean drinking water at an Oxfam tapstand in Darfur's Kalma camp. Sahar Ali / Oxfam America



WATCH 

### HOW YOU HELPED

After Typhoon Haiyan struck the Philippines, tens of thousands of you donated to Oxfam to help people rebuild and recover. In just three months, your generosity helped provide urgent aid to 547,000 people. Each thank-you in this video is for you.

Watch the video at [oxfamamerica.org/haiyanrebuild](http://oxfamamerica.org/haiyanrebuild).

IN THE NEWS

### GOOD ENOUGH TO EAT

From [nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com) | Jan. 22, 2014

In an opinion piece called "Abundance Doesn't Mean Health," *New York Times* columnist Mark Bittman discusses Oxfam's Good Enough to Eat index of 125 countries. He writes, "The index attempts to determine the best and worst countries in which to eat, by measuring levels of undernourishment and underweight in children; asking "do people have enough to eat?"; measuring costs of food versus other goods and services, to see whether food is affordable; looking at the diversity of people's diets and the availability of safe water; and monitoring diabetes and obesity levels to learn whether the diets are healthy."

// ... we often underestimate what a profound decision it is to make yourself refugee, to choose to leave your country to cross a border without a passport and a visa but just to sort of put yourself on the mercy of the authorities of another country ... //

Nigel Timmins, a deputy humanitarian director for Oxfam, speaking on NPR's *All Things Considered* on March 15, 2014, about the conflict in Syria that has now entered its fourth year.



# WARMING WORLD, HUNGRY PLANET

Changing weather is already threatening the world's harvests. Here's what we can do to protect the future of food.

Could guacamole be a thing of the past? It seemed that way in March, when a viral news story claimed that Chipotle Mexican Grill might stop selling the beloved condiment because of the effects of climate change on the global avocado harvest.

While your guacamole probably won't disappear anytime soon, the issues the story raised are real. Several record-breaking weather events this year have affected the availability and affordability of food. In California, the worst drought in more than 100 years hit the state's agricultural industry, which produces nearly half of all US-grown vegetables, fruits, and nuts (and 90 percent of our avocados). From the Philippines to Brazil, extreme weather and changing seasons are destroying harvests, pushing food prices up and production down.

Many now believe climate change is the single biggest threat to winning the fight against global hunger.

The good news? We can help—and now is the time. What we do to prepare for a warming world today will, to a large extent, determine how many people go hungry over the next two decades.

Besides making smart choices in our own lives, we can call on governments and big business to cut harmful emissions, help farmers deal with changing weather, and make sure there will be enough food for us all in the years to come.

Take the world's biggest food companies, which work with suppliers all over the world. These giants don't just contribute to pollution—they also have a major stake in protecting our food

supply. In the next 15 years, climate change could more than double the price of ingredients like corn and wheat. That's bad for both companies and consumers.

We've seen it before: When you speak, companies listen. Find out how the companies behind your favorite brands measure up, and call on them to do better, at [behindthebrands.org](https://behindthebrands.org).

WRITER: ANNA KRAMER

*ABOVE: Julio Huilca Oqhue, 65, with the reservoir he uses to irrigate 10 acres of pastureland. Oxfam's local partner organization helped him build the reservoir as part of a project to help farmers in high-altitude Peru adapt to the effects of climate change. Percy Ramírez / Oxfam America*

# WATER & DRIVE

IRRIGATION HAS BROUGHT A MEASURE OF SECURITY TO THE LIVES OF MAGARTU BALCHA AND BERTUKAN GIRMA. IN THE TWO YEARS SINCE THEY TAPPED IN, THEIR FAMILIES HAVE BEEN THRIVING. COCO MCCABE REPORTS.

In the October light streaming through her door, farmer Magartu Balcha sits down next to her stove, breaks a chunk of charcoal to start a fire, and begins to cook the coffee she had promised her visitors more than two years before. Come back, she had urged them then. Come back and see what determination mixed with water can do. In Ethiopia, it's a recipe for progress.

A short distance away, in a yard that had been awash in a sea of onion seedlings that same year, 2011, the ground is now bare and pocked with hoof prints—not a worrisome sign once you learn what the pocking represents: food and security, in the form of dairy cows and sheep, for the small family

who lives here. This is the home of Bertukan Girma and her husband Tufa Midhakso. And it is access to water, plus their energy and drive, that has allowed them to become more than backyard growers.

For Balcha, Girma, and Midhakso, the boost they needed to be able to help themselves was irrigation—a reliable source of water in an unreliable climate where countless farmers remain dependent on rain to feed their crops, and ultimately to feed their families. And two years after first sharing with visitors their hopes for the future, both Mallima Bari households in the East Shewa Zone are beginning to reap the benefits of their hard work.

Balcha, a widow, had been struggling to support her young family as a day laborer, and grief was weighing her down in the months before she joined a group of farmers participating in an irrigation project launched by Oxfam's partner, Sustainable Environment and Development Action, or SEDA. Balcha's oldest child had lost his life in a drowning accident while she was at work. His dream had been to go to school—something Balcha could not afford.

"Next year I can buy you an exercise book and clothes," she recalls telling him. "But this year, we don't even have food."

Now, some of that terrible hardship is behind her. With SEDA's support, the farmers'

group Balcha joined helped to dig a well to supply water to about 22 acres of land. Each farmer was allotted access to a little more than half an acre. Balcha is looking forward to a good harvest of corn from her section. Along with that, her rain-fed teff—a staple grain in Ethiopia—stands tall and golden around her house.

"I am progressing very much from my internal pain and depression, and I have hope," says Balcha. "Now I'm really in a better position. I have fed my children well." Not only that, Balcha's middle son, 9-year-old Tola Ayele, is in school, and his younger brother, Bulta Ayele, will be enrolling soon.

On this October morning, as Balcha stokes her fire and roasts her coffee beans, she talks about how her life has changed in the past couple years. A chicken, one of a dozen she now owns, wanders into her round, thatched-roof hut, the hen's businesslike clucking a reminder of the eggs Balcha's children eat regularly these days while she sells the surplus. Through a savings group she is part of, Balcha has managed to pay off the back taxes she owed on the land where her teff now grows. And she has begun, slowly and carefully, to buy the materials she'll need—nails and corrugated metal roofing—to build her family the new house she dreams of.

"Within one to two years I will be in a better house and you will see me in a

## WHAT'S WRONG?

Many Ethiopian farmers, who rely only on rain to feed their crops, struggle to grow enough food for their families. Climate change is making the challenge even greater.

## WHAT'S OXFAM DOING?

Working through local partner organizations, Oxfam is helping small-scale farmers across Ethiopia access irrigation, ensuring their harvests even if the rain fails to fall.

## Right the Wrong



better situation,” says Balcha. “I see a bright situation.”

At Girma’s house, the hand pump in the corner of her yard that fed her first harvests of onion seedlings continues to pull up precious water. The proceeds from those irrigated seedlings allowed her and her husband to build a small new home and buy their family the milking cow they proudly showed to visitors two years ago. It was the first cow they had owned—a critical investment in nutrition for their children.

Now, that investment has grown to include four dairy cows and a small herd of 11 sheep. A focus on savings has helped the couple to increase their assets—along with a determination to become farmers in their own right. They have access to a little more than half an acre of irrigated land planted in October with beans—and work as sharecroppers on another three acres of rain-fed land, where they grow wheat and corn.

Neither parent is home when the visitors show up. Midhakso has gone to the clinic

to be treated for malaria symptoms. But soon, Girma comes scurrying down the road and ushers everyone back through the gate and into her yard. Gathering her children about her, she poses for a picture. Her smile tells the story.

“They are moving onward,” says SEDA’s Hussein Bekele. “They are doing a very good job.”

### A CLOSER LOOK

Read about some of the challenges of keeping the water in irrigation systems flowing at [oxfamamerica.org/irrigate](http://oxfamamerica.org/irrigate).



TOP: Bertukan Girma now has a small herd of cows that provide milk for her three children.

BOTTOM: Magartu Balcha has paid her back taxes and has begun to buy the materials she needs to build her family a new house.

PHOTOS: *Eva-Lotta Jansson / Oxfam America*





# 'LAND IS LIFE FOR US'

**CHRIS HUFSTADER REPORTS ON INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN NORTHERN CAMBODIA AS THEY STRUGGLE TO KEEP THEIR COMMUNAL FORESTS IN THE MIDST OF A LAND RUSH.**

Romas Yes rolls up to her mother's house on the back of a beat-up orange motor-bike. She invites visitors up the steep, ladderlike steps into the shade of the house, built on stilts nearly two meters above ground. The house, like so many others here in the far northern Cambodian province Ratanakiri, is built with wide timber floors and walls. This ethnic Jerai family has little else. In the corner there is a rice bag with just a few handfuls of grains remaining.

Yes, her husband, and six children have been living here for about a year, since they sold their 2.5-acre farm to pay their debts. About two years before that Yes had borrowed about \$100 from a local micro-finance bank. She says she just could not make the payments and repay other loans as well, so she had to sell the land before the bank took it. "I grew crops on that land," she says, sitting near the doorway of the house, underneath family portraits hanging on the wall.

She used the \$1,200 from the land sale to pay off the bank and all her other debts. "Now I have nothing," Yes says. Her old farm is now part of a larger cassava plantation, and the loss of her acreage—once part of a communal landholding—has further frayed life-sustaining traditions that have knit indigenous communities together for thousands of years.

Yes is small. She has a slim, wiry frame, and she looks strong for her size. She and her husband now work on a rubber plantation. They spend all their money on food, and usually run out before the end of the month.

"I regret selling my land," Yes says firmly at the end of the visit. "If we still had land, we could grow crops, and I think my family would be better off."

Back at the rubber plantation, she pauses and bids farewell as she passes through the security gate. She puts her hands together and bows in the Khmer *sampeah* gesture of respect as the steel gate closes.

## **CAMBODIA'S LAND RUSH**

There are thousands of stories like Yes's all over Ratanakiri, a province in the middle of a land rush. Foreigners and well-connected Cambodians with cash are snatching up land from impoverished indigenous people like Yes, and growing rubber trees or cassava, and digging gold mines.

Indigenous Cambodians, who represent somewhere between 1 and 4 percent of Cambodia's 11.4 million people, traditionally make their living from the land, growing rice in fields they rotate around the forest regions, hunting, or gathering fruits or nuts.

These two realities do not work well together, says Lay Khim, Oxfam's program officer in Cambodia. "Economic growth in



ABOVE: Seiv Swein is the commune chief in an area that includes Padol village. After carrying out legal rights training with indigenous farmers in the area, Swein persuaded villagers to resist the temptation to secure individual land titles, and instead unite to claim communal land title.

RIGHT: Romas Yes sold her small farm, took a job at a nearby rubber plantation, and has struggled to feed her family ever since. Her advice for other indigenous farmers: "Don't sell your land. Without your land, you have nothing to depend on."

PREVIOUS PAGE: Indigenous rice farmers in La In trek to their fields. The community recently secured communal land title, allowing it to protect valuable forestlands in Cambodia's northern Ratanakiri province.

PHOTOS: Patrick Brown / Oxfam America

general in Ratanakiri is having a more negative than positive impact on indigenous people," he says. "Their lives are closely linked to the environment, so when we convert forests into plantations and other types of development, the indigenous people suffer."

Indigenous communities have the right to own and protect communal land, but government officials in the provinces right up to the prime minister are ignoring articles in the 2001 Land Law that allow communal land title. In fact, the authorities are encouraging individual farmers like Yes to claim small pieces of indigenous territories that they can use as collateral for loans—or to sell to investors.

Oxfam staffers in Cambodia estimate that 80 percent of indigenous people selling small plots of land are doing so under pressure from companies and local government leaders, and are accepting prices well below market values.

Oxfam is working with three organizations in Ratanakiri that are helping indigenous communities secure communal land. An important element of this work is legal education for indigenous community leaders, who, according to Khim, "don't have a tradition of voicing demands to the government, or promoting their own development agenda. They are more or less silent."

Dam Chanthy is an indigenous Tumpoun woman who has been working on land rights issues in Ratanakiri for 10 years. She heads the Highlander Association, an Oxfam partner, and worries that more and more families will end up like Yes's, struggling in poverty. "I tell them, 'Land is life for us. If you sell your land now, how will your life be in a few years when the money is gone?'"

#### NEWEST THREAT TO COMMUNAL LAND

In the past year, a new threat to indigenous rights to communal land title came in the form of something ominously called Prime Minister Directive 01, which created an expedited surveying and title application process aimed at helping smallholders get individual land titles. The process involved a military style deployment of 2,000 hastily trained uniformed youth volunteers with 2,000 government staff who went into communities, surveyed lands, and encouraged farmers to file individual claims. A study

for the World Bank described Directive 01 as a "high speed and limited transparency" endeavor, noting that the potentially intimidating military aspect of the operation made "indigenous people fear companies will bulldoze their land and they will be left with nothing if they do not accept private titles."

Directive 01 destroyed the communal land effort in Ka Chok, a village in northern Ratanakiri that had already lost much of nearby forests to rubber plantations. "Last year the youth volunteers came and surveyed the land for 43 of the 140 families in the village," says Sal Yert, the middle-aged chief of Ka Chok, sitting in his house with a group of elders, while a teenager in the corner reads a book to a younger child. "A month later the provincial governor came and delivered certificates to families—along with a scarf and a sarong" and the equivalent of about \$5.

Yert says his neighbors accepting the individual land titles are under financial pressure. "They have these loans, and had to get their certificates so they could sell their land," Yert says, after walking a short distance from his home to the edge of a rubber plantation.

"Now we only have a place to bury our ancestors," Yert says. "We have lost all our ancestral forest."

#### UNITY THROUGH RIGHTS

When communities know and can defend their rights to maintain their communal land in the face of those urging them to

#### WHAT'S WRONG?

The rush to invest in valuable land in northern Cambodia is putting pressure on indigenous farmers to sell their land and fragment their forest communities. With few other options for employment, landless people face poverty.

#### WHAT'S OXFAM DOING?

Oxfam is supporting local land rights organizations that help indigenous people file claims for communal land title. The titles allow them to preserve their forests and their way of life.

Right the Wrong

sell, they can use their unity to resist pressure to stake their future on individual land titles. The indigenous Jerai village Padol is proving this.

“Our livelihoods depend on hunting, wood, and other forest products,” says Seiv Swein, the avuncular, thoughtful commune chief of an area including a village called Padol, on the banks of the Se San River. “As a Jerai person, I know we must sustain our land, our forest,” he says.

Swein takes some visitors out on a narrow boat to a 108-square-foot island of gravel in the middle of the Se San river. The fast, gray waters rush around the perfectly rounded stones. High, heavily wooded hills loom over the far bank.

Swein says the hardest part was persuading everyone in the town to support the communal land title and resist the temptation to get their own. “We gathered people and trained them about their rights and the benefits of communal land titles. If people all get individual land titles they would lose their ancestral forests. Our livelihood depends on forest products like fruits and bamboo. ... ‘How will you survive?’ I asked.” His argument worked: Padol filed papers to be designated an indigenous community, and it is surveying the land to submit with its communal land claim.

### 11-YEAR STRUGGLE

La In is a small, ethnic Tumpoun village in Ratanakiri. Just outside the center of the village is a sawmill, and as you walk down a dirt road past a peanut field, you can see La In’s burial ground—a stand of ancient trees, with a few shrines built in between. It’s right next to some rubber trees, part of a commercial plantation.

La In is one of the few indigenous communities that has achieved a communal land title. It took 11 years.

Nun Chhrong, a community organizer in La In, says it was difficult to defend the village’s land from outsiders before the community had its communal land title. “People come here and try to clear land in our community for planting rice, and when we talk to them without these documents, they don’t believe us,” he says, showing visitors a map with La In’s borders clearly demarcated. “But with these documents,



## WHEN COMMUNITIES KNOW AND CAN DEFEND THEIR RIGHTS TO MAINTAIN THEIR COMMUNAL LAND, THEY CAN USE THEIR UNITY TO RESIST PRESSURE.

we show them the maps ... and tell them about our bylaws that say we have this legal entity in our community; so they can’t use our land.”

Chhrong says that because the community had already lost so much land, like the rubber plantation next to the burial area, the survey took a long time. He estimated that La In should have been able to control 17,000 acres, but even after a year of surveying community members could only document 2,984 acres.

Still, he says he is proud of La In’s accomplishment. “This communal land title is important for our culture. It gives us dedicated areas for burial, plantations, and the spirit forest,” he says.

“If we registered for individual land titles we would not get such areas designated by the authorities for our use. They would just take them away.”

A Cambodian organization called Development and Partnership in Action (DPA) worked with Chhrong and others in La In to help with surveying, legal documentation, and other crucial steps in the land titling process. Oxfam is now working with DPA, along with the Highlander Association, to help several other villages in the area (including Padol) secure communal land title.

Training community leaders in their legal rights to communal land is a crucial component of this program. “By supporting legal education, we can help indigenous communities gain respect for their right to hold communal land title,” says Lay Khim of Oxfam. “Legal education will promote better community awareness and organization.”

Dam Chanthy says that if other communities can unite their members like Padol and La In did, they will achieve their goal of communal land title. When she educates indigenous people in communities, she encourages them to keep their eye on the future, telling them: “If you keep communal land you will benefit from it for generations. It can’t disappear.”

That’s why she tries to bring Romas Yes to meetings, so she can share her experience with communities that still have the opportunity to secure a communal land title.

Yes has a simple message for indigenous people: “Don’t sell your land. Without your land, you have nothing to depend on.”

### A CLOSER LOOK 🔍

Check out this video about Dam Chanthy, the inspirational leader of the Highlander Association, and her work to help indigenous communities protect their forests: [oxfamamerica.org/spiritforest](https://oxfamamerica.org/spiritforest).

# HEAR HER NOW: 'NO MORE'

IN GUATEMALA, VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IS A DEEP AND LONG-STANDING PROBLEM. AND FOR MANY OF THEM, TALKING ABOUT IT HAS BEEN TABOO—UNTIL NOW. COCO MCCABE REPORTS ON AN OXFAM TRAINING PROGRAM THAT IS OPENING THE DOOR FOR WOMEN TO ESCAPE THE CYCLE.

Wily Felipe Xicay Chivilio leans over his desk listening carefully to a visitor's questions. The other students have gone for the day, their shouts and laughter bouncing off the outside walls of the school, leaving Xicay Chivilio in the quiet of this almost-empty classroom in the Guatemalan village of Chukumuk. At 13, he is both poised and expressive.

"They told me we should insult the girls and touch their breasts, and I did not want to do that," he says. Then, the boys turned their taunts on him. When he later told a teacher about the boys' plan, and

the teacher reminded them of what they had learned about gender violence, they came after Xicay Chivilio again, calling him a gossip, and telling him he was just like the girls.

And so it starts—the machismo that fuels a culture in which many boys are brought up to think there is no need for them to help with the dishes or sweep the floor or change the baby's diaper. That's woman's work. And it's OK for that woman not to leave the house without her husband's approval, OK for him to muzzle her opinions, OK for him to hit her—and even, sometimes, to kill her. According to the Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA, more than 6,700 women were murdered in the country between 2000 and 2012, and the majority of cases remain unsolved despite passage in 2008 of a law against femicide.

Death statistics, however, tell only part of the story. They are the closing chapter on discriminatory social standards that trap countless women in unhappy—and often dangerous—relationships, rob them of their self-esteem, deprive them of family assets, and prevent them from earning equal pay for a day's work. And for indigenous women, many of whom do not speak Spanish and have not had the opportunity to go far in school, the discrimination runs even deeper.

But here, inside the walls of this model school in Chukumuk, students are writing a new beginning to this story. With training

provided by Oxfam partner Fundación Innovaciones Educativas Centroamericanas, or FIECA, they are learning how to speak out about the violence they see and experience. They are learning to say no. And, most important of all, they are learning to claim their rights to stay safe.

The initiative, part of a broad campaign to prevent gender-based violence, was launched by a coalition of organizations, including Oxfam, in El Salvador in 2005. In 2009, the campaign expanded into Guatemala with a focus on communities where indigenous people make up a majority of the population. According to the UN, in the two provinces in which Oxfam works—Sololá and Chimaltenango—indigenous people represent more than 75 percent and more than 50 percent, respectively, of the total population.

The campaign's approach, says Oxfam program officer Sandra Ruano, is to provide training on three levels: through the centralized government and public institutions based in the country's capital; through local authorities, such as mayors, judges, police officials, and school administrators; and through women who are leaders in their communities. Systemic change is at the heart of the strategy.

"So many people think violence is normal," says Ruano. "So many men in the country beat their wives because they saw how their fathers beat their mothers. They have to realize what violence is."

## WHAT'S WRONG?

Discriminatory social standards in Guatemala have profound consequences for women, often trapping them in abusive relationships, limiting their education, and hindering the contributions they could make to their families and communities.

## WHAT'S OXFAM DOING?

First started in El Salvador, our campaign to prevent gender-based violence expanded into Guatemala in 2009. Its goal is to help bring about systemic change, from the centralized government all the way down to communities.

## Right the Wrong



## GENTLE LESSONS

That's where the work of Mildred Rocsana Cumes comes in. A technical assistant for FIECA, she has helped even some of the youngest students at the village school in Chukumuk—a community of Santiago Atitlan in Sololá—learn about boundaries and understand what sexual violence is.

Sitting on the floor with a small group of third-graders, Cumes reminds them of the song lyrics they memorized last year—“Between you and I a different life. Together we will achieve better change”—a song from the El Salvador campaign. Cumes has shared other materials from the El Salvador archive as well, including videos featuring fairy tales having a prevention theme. With a visitor in the room, the students are shy at first, but after a little prompting, they offer the most important lesson about sexual violence they have learned from Cumes.

“To shout, to yell, to complain, and to tell the judge,” says 10-year-old Marta Magdalena Tacaxoy.

“I taught them about their rights as children. They own their bodies. They have to

be very attentive to themselves and their siblings,” Cumes says later. About 200 students received the training.

“They have lived through these topics in their own homes,” adds third-grade teacher Maria Angelica Concepcio Tziná Ajtzip. “I believe this should be taught in each classroom and [that we should] start women's groups and teach mothers as well, because mothers don't know.”

A few doors down, in a sixth-grade classroom, Xicay Chivilio, the 13-year-old boy jeered at by others, recounts how he stood firm in the face of peer pressure, Cumes' lessons about sex abuse clear in his mind.

“I let them tease me,” he says simply. But what he hopes for now is more training. And in the meantime, Cumes is working to set up a committee of students, including Xicay Chivilio, who will share with the other schoolkids some of what they learned from her.

“Information is power,” says Oxfam's Ruano. And slowly, through Oxfam's initiatives, that information is spreading, from teachers to students, from mothers to daughters, from battered women to their abusive partners: The violence so many have lived with is wrong and here's how to stop it.

## LAURA CHAVEZ'S STORY

On an afternoon in early March, dark clouds pile up outside a home in the village of Tzanchaj. They let loose, and rain pounds the metal roof. It's deafening. But Laura Chavez, visiting a friend in this one-room house, doesn't let the racket drown out her message. It's this: “I put myself as an example. I lived through the same thing. It was over and over the same circle of violence—until I made it stop. It is within us as women to make this stop and say no more.”

Today, Chavez, 32 and the mother of four daughters, is head of a group called Flor de Atitlan, organized with the help of the municipality's women's office. Part of the office's goal is to tackle the problem of violence against women—something Chavez knows only too well.

It was four years ago when Chavez decided she had taken enough from her husband. Cycles of abuse and reconciliation had worn her down to the point that other reasons for staying in the marriage—Christian

BELOW: Sharling Tellez Son, who is the coordinator for the justice administration center in Santiago Atitlan, says the municipality is one of the most violent in the province of Sololá.

FACING PAGE: Mildred Rocsana Cumes is a technical assistant for FIECA and has worked closely with children on preventing gender-based violence. “The good thing about all of this is I like it,” she says. “I am a teacher. Helping children in this topic gave me a lot of satisfaction.”

PREVIOUS PAGE: Laura Chavez was able to break free of the violence that defined her life, and she is now working hard to support her four young daughters and set a new example for them. “We love her very much and we appreciate all she does for us,” says one of her daughters.

PHOTOS: Ilene Perlman / Oxfam America



teachings, parental pressure, fear of social isolation—began to carry less weight.

“The Bible said, with all respect, you have to be with your husband in good times and bad,” says Chavez. “But I was not going to allow my husband to kill me.”

Without telling anyone of her plan—they might have stopped her—Chavez went to court and began the proceedings to get free of the violence. For other women caught in the same trap, one of the biggest reasons they can’t find a way out, says Chavez, is the fear of trying to make a living on their own. How will they survive?

“I say they can make it,” says Chavez, again offering herself as an example. She buys and sells traditional clothing, earning a small profit on each trade. “I tell my daughters we live very humbly, but we are happy.”

From the strength of her own experience, and with the training she and other women leaders received from FIECA, Chavez is now helping women in her community understand their rights, recognize the abuse they have endured, and confront the difficult and often life-changing questions that new knowledge presents.

“I do not force anyone to do anything. Not at all,” says Chavez. “The only thing I do is tell them the things they can do. She has to take the initiative. My responsibility is to tell them she does not have to allow the husband to do what he wants.”

#### EMPOWERED IN PATZUN

Gathered together on a street in Patzun, a group of women from surrounding communities flash a thumbs-up sign for a photographer. They laugh and talk as they make their way toward the municipal office for women—their gathering place. Though they are dressed in traditional clothing—lusciously embroidered blouses and woven skirts topped with colorful belts—they are distinctly nontraditional in the way they view relationships between men and women. Now, they know their rights, thanks to training they received from Paola Lux Sacbaja, one of the technical assistants from FIECA working in the province of Chimaltenango.

“We have the right to leave the house, the right to work outside the house, because



we have the same rights as men have,” says Delfina Cot, with deep conviction in her voice. “Anything that goes against our rights we can file a complaint. We don’t have to remain silent.”

Inside the office, a poster on the cycle of violence reminds the women of how psychologically hard their journey for justice is—and how far they have come. Although a national law passed in 2002 and reformed in 2010 requires municipalities to establish these offices, this one was not opened until 2012. The mayor’s wife, Celia Roman, was a key ally in making it happen.

“Sometimes we had a little fight against men to get this,” Roman says. “The men said, why do you need an office? They take women into consideration very little.”

But in fact, says Ruano, the municipal offices for women play a vital role in helping them learn how to claim their rights and develop skills that will improve their economic opportunities. FIECA has been working with women directly through the offices.

#### A LONG WAY TO GO

For all the progress FIECA is helping women to make, women still have a long way to go. Changing deeply ingrained habits and ways of thinking doesn’t happen suddenly, says Patricia Eugenia López Morales, a judge based in Sololá. She is among a small group of judges who have received specialized training from Oxfam’s partner, the Gender and Justice Foundation.

“It helps me to understand the environment better and do my work in a more appropriate way,” says López Morales of the training. But more is needed if the judicial system is really going to change.

Sharling Tellez Son, who is the coordinator for the justice administration center in Santiago Atitlan, is determined to see that change take root. She too participated in the training offered to the judges, and what she learned jolted her to the core.

“To know how chauvinistic I was, it was a shock,” says Tellez Son. She is now on her own mission to educate every intern who comes through the center’s door. So far, there have been 32. Multiply that by more than 90 judges and 13 justice assistants who have taken the training, by Xicay Chivilio and the other schoolkids in Chukumuk, by the stream of visitors who come to Laura Chavez for advice, by the empowered women of Patzun, and you might begin to feel that at the end of a very long road, there could be hope for women’s justice in Guatemala.

“It’s a long process,” says Sacbaja, the FIECA technical assistant. “We have just barely planted that grain of corn. We have to wait for it to sprout and grow and bear fruit, and then drop the seeds on the soil.”

#### A CLOSER LOOK

Learn more about Oxfam’s work with women and girls at [oxfamamerica.org/women](https://oxfamamerica.org/women).



226 CAUSEWAY STREET, 5TH FLOOR  
BOSTON, MA 02114-2206

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