

RIGOBERTA MENCHÚ, ROSALINA TUYUC, AND LAURA REYES:  
CONTEMPORARY MAYA WOMEN IN GUATEMALAN POLITICS

by

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## ABSTRACT

MARY ELIZABETH MOORE. Rigoberta Menchú, Rosalina Tuyuc, and Laura Reyes: Contemporary Maya Women in Guatemalan Politics. (Under the direction of Dr. ERIC HOENES)

This Master's thesis analyzes the role of notable human rights activists, Rigoberta Menchú Tum, Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez, and Laura Reyes Quino, examining their directed efforts toward relieving the plight of the Mayan people in Guatemala facing genocide. Placing into perspective the obstacles, challenges, achievements, and distinct personal pathways they took to orient themselves inside prominent international and local political spaces. Following the height of the Guatemalan civil war (1981-1983) and increased violence towards indigenous people, Mayas started to take a more prominent role in politics. Indigenous women began to take up important positions in politics and activism, subverting both the expectations that indigenous people and the marginalization of women by the state. In sum, this thesis examines the ways in which Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes worked to break down social and political barriers in place in Guatemala, adding a new perspective to the current narrative of the Pan-Mayan social and political movements in the post-war nation.

DEDICATION

*For Marlena.*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CONAVIGUA	Coordinadora de Viudas de Guatemala
CREO	Compromiso Renovación y Orden
CUC	Comité de Unidad Campesina
EG	Encuentro por Guatemala
EGP	Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres
ICCPG	Instituto de Estudios Comparados en Ciencias Penales de Guatemala
INAT	Instituto Nacional de Transformación Agraria
MOJOMAYAS	Juventud del Movimiento de Jóvenes Mayas
MOLOJ	Asociación Política de Mujeres Mayas

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Following the height of the Guatemalan civil war (1981-1983) and increased violence towards indigenous<sup>1</sup> people, the Maya community of Guatemala started to take a more prominent role in politics. The inclusion of Maya women in key national government positions and powerful leadership roles in activist organizations and movements, subverted both the predisposed stereotypes and expectations of indigenous people and the marginalization of women by the state. Notable human rights activists, Rigoberta Menchú Tum, Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez, and Laura Reyes Quino, directed their efforts toward relieving the plight of the Mayan people in Guatemala facing genocide.

This thesis will analyze the political participation of an international icon—Rigoberta Menchú Tum—, local grassroots activist—Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez—, and educator and lawyer—Laura Reyes Quino—, placing into perspective the obstacles, challenges, achievements, and distinct personal pathways they took to orient themselves inside prominent international and local political spaces. I, examine the cases of Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes, specifically, as they differ from other women in leadership positions in Guatemala. These three women collectively represent the participation of the few indigenous women whom have entered national government leadership positions and are

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Maya” refers to a member of a Central American people, primarily located in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. Throughout the thesis, the terms “Maya,” “indigenous,” and “people” will be used interchangeably and refer to the collective ethno-linguistic group in Guatemala, encompassing approximately 24 different tribes.



established advocates of the indigenous community. Their participation in National General elections (2007 and 2011) and Congress differentiates them from their peers as their careers in Guatemala transcend located politics in municipalities and departments.

Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes are credited with having a profound influence on Maya history by helping women in Guatemalan society break out of expected domestic societal roles via leadership programs, educational activism, and creation of laws and quotas to include women in politics. By doing so, these women challenged the political disenfranchisement and violent acts led by General Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983), a dictator who led the army to purge the state of civilian threats “at the expense of the indigenous population.”<sup>2</sup> This thesis will examine the ways in which Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes worked to break down social and political barriers in place in Guatemala with the hope of gaining momentum for indigenous political inclusion.

Examining how these women moved into prominent leadership positions in Guatemala adds a new perspective to the current narrative of the Pan-Mayan social and political movements in the post-war nation. “Pan-Mayanism challenges the legacy of colonial and nineteenth-century state formations, which repeatedly used forced-labor policies that associated indígenas with heavy manual labor and small rural communities. The movement [worked] to promote the revitalization of Maya culture for the 60 percent of the national population that they count as indigenous in background.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, in examining how Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes achieved positions of power helps us understand how they represent a generation of Maya women’s intent on pursuing justice

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<sup>2</sup> Virginia Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit: Guatemala Under General Efraín Ríos Montt 1982-1983* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Kay Warren, *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics: Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 10-12

for those affected by the war and worked to create political inclusivity for the community. It is important to note however that while examining the biographies of these three indigenous women help to establish a timeline of Maya activism and political inclusivity in Guatemala they do not encompass the entirety of female indigenous contributions to the nation. However, their work on community leadership in the larger state suggests that political inclusion of indigenous women are marking initial claims to space in society and, expressing their need for change in the political establishment.

### 1.1: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Guatemala—a Central American nation of approximately 16.8 million inhabitants—experienced a civil war spanning approximately 36 years (between 1954-1990), which divided the nation socially, politically, by gender, and most importantly by ethnic groups. Guatemala a nation of approximately “6 million indigenous inhabitants (2008) [constituting approximately] 60% of the country’s total population are made up of indigenous,” peoples or 24 diverse ethnic identifying groups.<sup>4</sup>

“The study of ethnic relations in Guatemala has traditionally relied on [the] concept of ethnic boundaries, seeing a bipolar ethnic landscape in Guatemala in which rigid structural boundaries separate the categories Maya and Ladino. Maya and Ladino . . . while the subtleties and ambiguities of actual relations between Maya and Ladinos belie such stark oppositions, these racist stereotypes pervade — and shape—Guatemalan life. Guatemalan stereotypes categorize individuals as Maya or Ladino based on a few conspicuous cultural traits (prominently dress and language).”<sup>5</sup>

The interaction between the racial groups intensified during the Guatemalan civil war.

The political governing body of the nation in the mid twentieth century delineates

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<sup>4</sup> Silvel Elías, “Indigenous Peoples in Guatemala: 2016 Yearbook Article,” *International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA)*, <http://www.iwgia.org/regions/latin-america/guatemala>, 82.

<sup>5</sup> Edward F. Fischer and R. McKenna Brown, eds., *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala* (Texas: The University of Texas Press, 1996), 11-13.

an unstable transition of power, shifting from a democracy, to military dictatorship, and back to a democracy in the span of 40 to 50 years. The reign of authoritarian military dictators commenced with the overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman and establishment of Colonel Castillo Armas, as President, with the assistance of the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1954. The perceived threat of communism in Central America “persuaded US journalists and members of Congress, that the [Guatemalan] government was veering further and further leftward toward Communism in the early 1950s.”<sup>6</sup> Senior US Wisconsin Senator, Alexander Wiley, expressed his urgency to fellow Congressmen for the need to eliminate the “potential Red threat” stating, “the sooner we help sterilize that source, the better.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the coup d’état and establishment of Colonel Castillo Armas “was the culmination of a successful covert operation against international communism . . . The new regime rounded up thousands of suspected communists, and executed hundreds of prisoners.”<sup>8</sup> Yet, Armas’ rein was short lived with his assassination in 1957. Dr. David M. Barrett, an Associate Professor at Villanova University’s Political Science Department, suggests that the CIA’s swift call to action and lack of adequate information regarding the situation in Guatemala, was seen as “shameful . . . mostly because the governments that followed the 1954 coup in the subsequent five decades were far more repressive than Arbenz’s elective government.”<sup>9</sup>

The shift of power between political heads of state continued as approximately fourteen different politicians and generals fought to obtain absolute control of the nation.

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<sup>6</sup> David M Barrett, 2007, “Sterilizing a ‘Red Infection’ Congress, the CIA, and Guatemala, 1954,” *Kent Center Occasional Paper* 44, no. 5, art. 3, Congress: CIA Library, Washington, DC, <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol44no5/html/v44i5a03p.htm>, 23.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>8</sup> “Colonel Castillo Armas Takes Power in Guatemala,” History, 2009, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/colonel-castillo-armas-takes-power-in-guatemala>.

<sup>9</sup> Barrett, “Sterilizing a ‘Red Infection’ Congress, the CIA, and Guatemala, 1954,” 24.

The constant change of power created social, political, and economic instability, with each passing politician wavering on the topic on how to manage the movements and viability of indigenous people in the nation. In the 1980s, the Maya people in Guatemala accounted for an estimated 41.9% of the nation.<sup>10</sup> The Maya represented a large portion of the population, suggesting that a tense division was created within the two major ethnic identifying groups, ladino and indigenous. Richard Adams lists numerous elements such as demographics, national agenda, control of language, control of territory and economic expansion, to name a few, that can hinder the viability of Maya to expand and achieve successes such as social and political security and inclusion.<sup>11</sup>

The tense relationship between the ladino and indigenous communities intensified after the overthrow of Arbenz, which “set off a cycle of political violence and counterviolence that would last for more than three and a half decades.”<sup>12</sup> In the 1965, the Guatemalan military assumed all power as the “arbiter of the nation’s independence, sovereignty, and honor against all threats, both foreign and domestic,” resulting from a suspension of the 1955 constitution.<sup>13</sup> The use of fear and violence, especially the use of “death squads,” undermined the cohesiveness of the nation. Political patrons used death squads to “target, abduct, and murder select victims . . . enforcing terror” throughout the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>14</sup> For example, General Arana Osorio, ex-president of Guatemala (1970-1974), “expanded government efforts to bring armed rebels under control,”

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<sup>10</sup> “Strategies of Ethnic Survival in Central America,” in *Nation- States and Indians in Latin America*, by Richard N. Adams, eds. Greg Urban and Joel Sherzer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 184, Table 2.

Even though the indigenous population constitutes for a large portion of Guatemala’s population variable and questionable census data collection varies. Previous statistical data cites the population ranging from 40% to 60%.

<sup>11</sup> Adams, “Strategies of Ethnic Survival in Central America,” 184-203.

<sup>12</sup> Garrard- Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, 26.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 27-28

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

according to a 2003 *New York Times* article.<sup>15</sup> Prior to his presidency, General Osorio used the military to eliminate the opposition (Guerrillas and idealists organizations) through an “eighteen month pacification campaign [which] killed at least 8,000 people and virtually wiped out Guatemala’s guerrilla movement,” at that time.<sup>16</sup> The violence continued to escalate in the late 1970s under the General Romeo Lucas García’s rule from 1978-1982 and dictatorship of president General Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983).

The rein of General Lucas describes the rise of conflict and violence, specifically having targeted Maya community. According to Virginia Garrard-Burnet,

“Two notorious episodes that occurred . . . graphically illustrated [a] shift in government repression of popular opposition. The first of these occurred on May 29, 1978 when the much-feared Guatemalan special forces (Kaibiles) gunned down more than 50 Q’eqchi’ Mayan land rights activists,” in the Panzós land region. Secondly, “the Lucas government ordered the burning of the Spanish Embassy in Guatemala City . . . killing nearly everyone inside, including thirty-nine protestors, Spanish diplomats, local embassy staff, a former vice president, and the Guatemalan foreign minister.”<sup>17</sup>

Between 1981 and 1982 “thousands of troops swept across the western and central highlands and throughout the northern lowlands, killing suspected community members, burning houses and fields, and attempting to drive a wedge [in] indigenous” communities.<sup>18</sup> Repressive policies became violent and limited the movement of Maya. The scorched-earth campaign aimed to neutralize and destroy indigenous people “which left hundreds of thousands of Guatemalan citizens dead, exiled, or emotionally maimed and came close to destroying one of the world’s great native cultures.”<sup>19</sup> One can deduce

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<sup>15</sup> “C. Arana Osorio, 85, Guatemala Ex-Leader,” *The New York Times*, December 9, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/09/world/c-arana-osorio-85-guatemala-ex-leader.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Garrard- Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, 28.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 46-47.

<sup>18</sup> Shelton H. Davis, “Introduction: Sowing the Seeds of Violence,” in *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemala Crisis*, ed. Robert M. Carmack (Oklahoma: The University of Oklahoma Press: Norman and London, 1988), 22-24.

<sup>19</sup> Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, 6.

that the rising frequencies of repressive military acts were targeted towards the Maya population. The increased frequency of violent acts, death, and murder surrounding the Maya community is most prominent in 1982-1983.

The political rule of General Efraín Ríos Montt, though short in length (1982-1983), is described as one of the most violent periods in Guatemala's history that encompassed numerous human rights violations. Forcible resettlement programs such as the Scorched Earth Campaign represented the volatile environment Maya communities experienced. Repressive actions towards the Maya forced thousands of citizens to flee to "Mexico and by the end of 1982, 32,800 people were living in twenty-eight refugee camps or zones along the Mexico frontier. [An estimated] 250,000 to 1 million people," most of who are indigenous, displaced and were forced to live in "model villages" or migrate to surrounding countries.<sup>20</sup> These villages separated people from different tribes, taking them away from familiar traditional cultural markers such as language, dress, native lands, and community. Ríos Montt assumed control of the people by stripping the Maya of these cultural markers, which made "them more dependent on the government for food and work."<sup>21</sup> In an independent report, "A United Nations-sponsored truth commission [issued the statement] that state security personnel and paramilitaries were responsible for 93 percent of the violations . . . with nearly half (48%) of all reported violations occurring in 1982,"<sup>22</sup> and "80% of the War's dead and disappeared and an estimated 93% of them killed at the hands of the state."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Davis, "Introduction: Sowing the Seeds of Violence," 10.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>22</sup> "Efraín Ríos Montt & Mauricio Rodríguez Sánchez," International Justice Monitor: A Project of the Open Society Justice Initiative, <https://www.ijmonitor.org/efrain-rios-montt-and-mauricio-rodriguez-sanchez-background/>.

<sup>23</sup> Betsy Konefal, *For Every Indo Who Falls: A History of Maya Activism in Guatemala, 1960-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press: 2010), 13.

The displacement and separation of thousands of indigenous people in Guatemala affected the physical, emotional, and physiological progress of its citizens. Ladinos controlled land, economic opportunities, and cultural identifying markers (via control of the government) as well as separated people across the nation. The Maya of Guatemala worked towards joining government-sponsored model villages and civil patrols that would provide them with a sense of security, tranquility, and protection from the chaotic and violent environment. These programs produced mixed emotions and opinions as many members perceived these measures as becoming a “heavy burden,” producing shame and guilt that took their time away from agriculture and economic opportunities.<sup>24</sup>

## 1.2: INDIGENOUS RESPONSE TO STATE VIOLENCE AND ACTIVISM

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, a Haitian anthropologist, states that a “story about power, [is] a story about those who won,” leaving the rest silenced or suppressed.<sup>25</sup> Though Trouillot was writing about Haiti, this quote illustrates the problem that Mayas faced when their communities were broken and silenced by the government’s repressive actions of violence and death. In recent decades, the Maya have strived to build their history by establishing their communities’ needs and wants through political and activist channels in order to survive the process of deculturation (the cause of loss and abandonment of cultural traits) and forced assimilation into the nation, resulting from the genocidal tendencies and actions of the civil war.<sup>26</sup>

Social activism in Guatemala has taken different forms, addressing important

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<sup>24</sup> Shelton H. Davis, “Introduction: Sowing the Seeds of Violence,” 28.

<sup>25</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing The Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press: 1995), 5.

<sup>26</sup> Fischer and R. Mckenna Brown, *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala*.

contemporary issues including religion and search for equality. The Pan-Mayan social movement aims to regain a sense of cultural and ethnic identity to help restore the Maya's self-awareness, which was witness in 1960, with the influx of foreign priests and U.S. missionaries to Guatemala.<sup>27</sup> The rapid arrival of foreign establishments and ideologies introduced a new way of thinking into the nation, which provided a space away from the instability of the government. According to Fischer and Brown:

Religious organizations, such as Catholic Action, originally established in Guatemala in 1948, “helped to stimulate a mobilization of the Indian population around economic and political issues . . . providing an acceptable outlet for Indian frustration with social inequality in the country. Following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the Medellín Conference of the Latin American Episcopal Council (1968), there was a marked shift in Catholic Action programs from theological to social issues. Out of these meetings emerged a consensus among a large number of progressive priests that the Church must concern itself with improving the material conditions of its followers, raising the Conscious of the poor and enabling them to become the authors of their own destiny.”<sup>28</sup>

The Catholic Action extended its reach “more deeply into the highlands [thus becoming] at once a religious, political, and cultural movement.”<sup>29</sup> The growing number of foreign ideas like those of Liberation Theology, “emphasized issues of social justice . . . [and] preferential option for the poor,” helped enable Catholic Action to recruit young idealistic members like Emeterio Toj Medrano, a K'iche' Maya,<sup>30</sup> who would later play a role in spreading the message of the Bible alongside a message of acceptance and peace for all.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, “like many catechists of the period . . . Toj helped organize culturally focused events, reflecting a growing emphasis by priests and young people on the need to

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<sup>27</sup> Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls*, 34.

<sup>28</sup> Fischer and R. McKenna Brown, *For Every Indio Who Falls*, 58.

<sup>29</sup> Konefal, *For Every Indo Who Falls*, 33.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 34 & 29.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 29.



value Maya culture.<sup>32</sup>

The idea of community unification under the concept of one race became a popular idea, so much that the community began to promote and foster events and programs throughout the Pan-Mayan movement, giving those of indigenous origin access to resources, education, and a network helping the community develop and build. “In the early 1970s the role of language as a focal point for the Maya cultural activism was reinforced by the work of the Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín (PLFM).”<sup>33</sup> The PLFM trained and “paid Maya linguistics to train groups of young, rural, and poorly educated Guatemalan Maya in technical linguistics [ultimately] producing dictionaries and grammars that highlighted similarities between languages and dialects, thus emphasizing Maya cultural unity.”<sup>34</sup> This became a pivotal move in unity as the Maya begin to identify the importance of preserving self-identifying cultural markers such as language that could help individuals effectively communicate with one another and created a foundation for Pan-Mayan unification.

Similar organizations and programs continued to develop in Guatemala, all aimed to preserve and bring forth important cultural issues impacting the Mayan community. “A group of professionals launched a monthly magazine entitled *Ixim* in 1977 as an alternative to Ladino-controlled national media outlets.”<sup>35</sup> The young professional saw a need to raise a collective consciousness, informing the people of political, economic, and social issues including ethnocide, “the deliberate and systematic destruction of the culture

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<sup>32</sup> Konefal, *For Every Indo Who Falls*, 29-36.

<sup>33</sup> Fischer and R. McKenna Brown, *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala*, 59.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

<sup>35</sup> Konefal, *For Every Indo Who Falls*, 61.

of an ethnic group,” and cultural discrimination.<sup>36</sup> This illustrates the importance behind how the Maya community begins to accrete itself in society, formulating the idea of unification.

Popular community projects and gatherings such as *Ixim* magazine and the *Rabín Ahau* or local *Reinas Indígenas* pageants, enabled community members to gather safely, providing them with an open space to discuss social, cultural, and political issues. The local pageants were spaces appropriated to represent the indigenous community as part of the larger Guatemalan nation. “The reina indígena [pageants] were a space appropriated for political action . . . queens . . . [delivered] speeches that advocated mobilization,” helping to establish the importance of women in a public setting.<sup>37</sup> “It was no accident that protesters positioned the gendered symbol of the indigenous identity— Maya women in community-specific dress— as the focal point of their protest. As symbols of authentic Maya identity, indigenous women— and especially reinas indígenas— played a central role in state indigenismo in the annual festival.”<sup>38</sup> The pageants acted as protected spaces, allowing community members, specifically indigenous women, to gather in large numbers allowing them to speak and bring forth issues involving not only the disenfranchisement of indigenous rights but also the lack of political voice found in the narrative of the Guatemalan civil war.

Even though only a small minority of the Maya population participated in the Reina Indígena pageants, they prevailed in presenting indigenous females as prominent and important symbol for motivating and mobilizing the community. The Reina

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<sup>36</sup> Konefal, *For Every Indo Who Falls*, 61.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 94.

<sup>38</sup> Betsy Konefal, “Blood in Our Throats,” in *The Guatemala Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, eds. Greg Grandin, Deborah T. Levenson, and Elizabeth Oglesby (Durham: Duke University Press: 2011), 328-329.

Indígenas participants used their platform as “Queens of the pageant” to open the discussion of cultural inclusivity and Pan-Mayan unity, despite the fact that the pageants have also been criticized for the way that the women were manipulated by their sponsors and local organizers to express specific messages to the public. In her book, *For Every Indo Who Falls: A History of Maya Activism in Guatemala, 1960-1990*, Betsy Konefal states that “given gendered stereotypes, politicized speeches by queens sometimes aroused suspicion and accusations that their words were not their own.”<sup>39</sup> Regardless of the authenticity of the speeches and intentions the sponsors and organizers held, the women that participated in the pageants held a prominent position in the community, which gave them an opportunity to speak about important political and social issues, and opened the doors for future female activists and politicians.

The growing Pan-Mayan movement helped to provide the community with a space to vocalize awareness on the topics of language preservation, poverty, and political inclusion. Organizations like Catholic Action, Committee for Peasant Unity (CUC), Christian Democratic Party, Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) and other Maya led organizations helped to foster ideals within the oppressed people. Giving indigenous leaders and community members the opportunity to participate in the growing Pan-Mayan movements and local grassroots organizations would later play a role in the lives of all indigenous leaders, especially that of future female indigenous leaders like Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes. The intensity of activist practices in both the realm of religious institutions like the Catholic Church and local folkloric pageants allowed indigenous practices become popular throughout the nation. The Maya community now had the pretext of gathering in groups under the justification of promoting social activism,

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<sup>39</sup> Konefal, *For Every Indo Who Falls*, 96

cultural rehabilitation, and most importantly to “denounce the crass inconsistencies in government actions.”<sup>40</sup> Local gatherings enabled indigenous people to come together to promote ideas, discussing the involvement of the indigenous community in Guatemala. Overall leading organizers, protestors, and activists used both cultural and political platforms like local “beauty pageants” to express their opinions on the lack of equality and maltreatment of their community.

The civil war in the 1980s greatly affected the progress of the Pan-Mayan movement as it influenced individuals to fight for equality, social justice, and political representation. Female activists such as Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes, began to appear in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the plight of indigenous people and occurrence of human rights violations in Guatemala became international news. The social and political divide of the nation coupled with external and internal elements (e.g. economic instability, a growing racial and gender divide, and publication of Rigoberta Menchú’s testimony, which occurred roughly at the same time period,) dictated and changed the political climate of the nation in 1983. The publication of Rigoberta Menchú’s testimony, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la consciencia* in 1982, brought international attention to the plight of indigenous people and the social and political status of the nation. Menchú’s testimony depicted the torture and murder of her fellow countrymen causing media outlets to criticize the government as the nation’s violent history came to the forefront. International newspapers, journals, and news channels discussed the numerous human rights violations that had occurred in Guatemala, and prompted outrage at the maltreatment of the indigenous population.

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<sup>40</sup> Konefal, “Blood in Our Throats,” 329.

### 1.3: LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature on indigenous politics in Guatemala examines the physical, social, and economic damage that the civil war caused the Maya and as well as how the growing Pan-Mayan movement focused on the preservation of culture and search for equal rights. This however, does not adequately represent or address the importance of female indigenous participation as key players in political positions. Even though this literature mentions female participation in politics, as it is often times, limited to small local roles, used as context for the larger Pan-Mayan movement occurring in the late twentieth century, or enveloped by the violence and power struggle seen during the civil war.<sup>41</sup> Although, there has been considerable research on the struggles and limitations placed on the Maya community academics and scholars in various fields of study (history, anthropology, gender studies, etc.) do not fully explore the movement of current female political participants and their implications.

Scholars and academics highlight the violence and instability of Guatemala during the civil war, focusing on the occurrence of human rights violations and the social, political, and economic implications on the Maya community. This literature helps to build on the racial, gender, and socioeconomic tensions found in Guatemala, which hindered the upward mobility of the Maya yet helps to establish a contextual timeline of political and activist movements led by both male and specifically female indigenous leaders throughout the Pan-Mayan movement. Yet, the timeline was skewed with the introduction of an individual testimony, outlining the personal perspective of Rigoberta

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<sup>41</sup> *Report of Organizational Performance Review* (Guatemala: Isabel Aguilar Umaña, 2009), 36-39, Dynamics at a Local Level: Table, [www.fokuskvinner.no/pagefiles/5228/evaluation%202009%20conavigua%20English.pdf](http://www.fokuskvinner.no/pagefiles/5228/evaluation%202009%20conavigua%20English.pdf).

Menchú, which would transform how international audiences viewed the plight of the Maya community in the twenty and twenty-first centuries. The extent of indigenous oppression was realized by scholars and academics as the focus of literature was altered with the introduction of indigenous participation in politics by Rigoberta Menchú, Rosalina, Tuyuc, and Laura Reyes, thus analyzing the barriers of inclusion for oppressed communities and gender groups in a war torn nation. Thus, the literature highlights key moments of Guatemala's history, exploring the different facets of violence, social activism, and barriers to political inclusion, all affecting the establishment of female indigenous leaders as key players inside the political sphere.

Robert M. Carmack's edited book, *Harvest of the Violence*, compiles the scholarly work of anthropologists and historians, "helped to demonstrate why US policy toward Guatemala must be shifted along lines that will allow the Indians and their ladino (non-Indian) compatriots to achieve the "basic" needs denied to them."<sup>42</sup> Richard Adams' article "Strategies of Ethnic Survival in Central America," in the edited book *Nation-States and Indians in Latin America*, illustrates how minority groups in Latin America became hindered in their ability to progress when faced with opposition. Adams lists social, environmental, and political components such as demographics, national agenda, control of language, and control of territory, to name a few, that hinders the viability and movements of the Maya to expand and achieve social and political security and inclusion.<sup>43</sup> This article is important as it highlights the different avenues of control the government took in justifying the violence and genocide of the twentieth century.

Virginia Garrard-Burnett's book, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit:*

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<sup>42</sup> Robert M. Carmack, ed., *Harvest of the Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis* (Oklahoma: The University of Oklahoma Press: Norman and London, 1988).

<sup>43</sup> Adams, "Strategies of Ethic Survival in Central America," 184-203.

*Guatemala under General Efraín Ríos Montt, 1982-1983*, examines the social and political government of Guatemala during one of its most violent and chaotic times of its history.<sup>44</sup> Garrard-Burnett, examines the reign of Ríos Montt, describing the radical tactics, he used to subdue the indigenous population, including the implementation of “model villages,” scorched-Earth campaigns, and other suggested cleansing strategies. Direct attacks on indigenous people via the destruction of communication channels, the removal of resources, and most importantly the exile from government and prominent social leadership positions are themes seen throughout her book.

Patricia Foxen’s chapter, “Mayan Identities Through History: The Civil War (1978-1984),” in the book *In Search of Providence: Transnational Mayan Identities* strives to bring to light the residual damages left behind in relation to the destruction and separation of the traditional family structure in Latin America.<sup>45</sup> Foxen introduces the idea of fear as Mayan communities were torn apart with the army forcing young boys to join their ranks and participate in the violence against community members and often times raped women. The impact and the displacement, tearing families apart, created a need for change. Foxen’s contribution will thus help to establish a foundation showcasing the important role that women hold in the community.

Judith N. Zur’s book, *Violent Memories: Mayan War Widows in Guatemala* analyzes gender relationships focusing on the experiences Mayan widows and orphans had because of the violence that ensued during the Guatemalan civil war.<sup>46</sup> Zur examines the lives of widowed women, showcasing how and in what ways they were forced to

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<sup>44</sup> Adams, “Strategies of Ethic Survival in Central America.”

<sup>45</sup> Patricia Foxen, “Mayan Identities Through History: The Civil War (1978-1984),” in *In Search of Providence: Transnational Mayan Identities* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2007).

<sup>46</sup> Judith N. Zur, *Violent Memories: Mayan War Widows in Guatemala* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998).

restructure their lives in part due to the chaos and instabilities caused from the death, murder, and disappearance of fathers, sons, and husbands. Zur creates agency for the underrepresented section of the community and expresses the importance behind being a woman in illustrating their memories as being pivotal pieces of self and communal development.

The testimony of Rigoberta Menchú Tum, *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú y Así me Nació la Conciencia*, or *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* describes, “her life story [as] an account of contemporary history rather than of Guatemala itself.”<sup>47</sup> Menchú described her life as a poor Indian Mayan woman during a violent and turbulent period, where Mayans remained ostracized and suppressed in many rural parts of Guatemala. The violence Menchú spoke of included torture, the brutal death of family members, and displacement of the Maya community. Menchú “survived the genocide that destroyed her family and community and is stubbornly determined to break the silence and to confront the systematic extermination of her people, (with the publication of the testimony). She refused to let [the people] forget . . . [in turn] fighting for the recognition of her culture, for acceptance,” and inclusivity of her people.”<sup>48</sup> Even though Menchú’s testimony is considered controversial in the eyes of some scholars such as anthropologist David Stoll, due to the lack of sufficient evidence and consistency of her story, this book is important to include as Menchú brings international attention to the nation, helping her win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992.<sup>49</sup> The powerful story captivated

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<sup>47</sup> Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, ed., *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman In Guatemala*, trans. Ann Wright (New York: Verso, 1984).

<sup>48</sup> Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, ed., introduction to *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman In Guatemala*, Translated by Ann Wright (New York: Verso, 1984), xi-xiii.

<sup>49</sup> Arturo Arias, ed., *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* (Minnesota: The University of Minnesota Press, 2001).



Europeans and Americans alike at the height of the Guatemalan civil war, showcasing the civil unrest and human rights violations that occurred in the twentieth century.

Kay Warren's book, *Indigenous Movements and their Critics*, "examines the social construction of Pan-Mayan politics and demonstrates the way elements of Maya culture (and many other cultural hybrids) inform that construction and are transformed in the process."<sup>50</sup> Warren's book provides ethnographic research, focusing on cultural markers, eyewitness testimony, and official history, orienting the Pan-Mayan movement and its historical importance for indigenous people in Guatemala. She further examines the oppression communities experienced in the mid to late twentieth century helping to conceptualize how cultural movements such as the Pan-Mayan movement build an ethnic voice on how individuals and or activist organizations impact communities.

Betsy Konefal's, *For Every Indio Who Falls: A History of Maya Activism in Guatemala, 1960-1990*, concisely examines the history of Indian Mayan activism in Guatemala in the late twentieth century. She introduces women as important members of Mayan activist groups and explores "how (some) Maya became, in varying degrees, involved in political activism and opposition to a repressive state," reinforcing the idea that Guatemala was and still is a divided nation.<sup>51</sup> Konefal questions the idea that ethnic, gender structure, political involvement, and economic status further established the tense relationship between the indigenous and ladino communities. *For Every Indio Who Falls* chronologically showcases the role and transformation Mayan activist groups and individuals have played in politics, thus creating agency for the Maya population.

Manuel Vogt's article, "The Disarticulated Movement: Barriers to Maya

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<sup>50</sup> Kay Warren, *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics: Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 3-4.

<sup>51</sup> Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls*.

Mobilization in Post-Conflict Guatemala” analyzes “how organizational sectorization, the lack of Maya elite consensus on key substantive issues, and unclear alliance strategies compromise the effectiveness of horizontal voice among Maya organizations.”<sup>52</sup> Vogt compares Guatemala’s indigenous political movement beginning in the 1990s, to that of other Latin American nations, questioning why Guatemala has yet to achieve indigenous political inclusion. He examines the “patterns and obstacles to present-day Maya mobilization” focusing on both internal and external factors that further the cultural and political division amongst the Maya and Ladino communities,<sup>53</sup> and taking into account the marginalization and violence that occurred during the Guatemalan civil war in the 1980s.

Dinorah Azpuru’s report, *The Gender Gap in Politics in Guatemala: 20 Years of Advances and Setbacks*, “examines the gender gap in politics in Guatemala using data gathered over the [span] of 20 years.”<sup>54</sup> Dinorah examines the gender dynamics and barriers to inclusion inside the political sphere focusing, on women and men’s “perception of freedom in [exercising] political rights” in Guatemala.<sup>55</sup> This report analyzes the different levels of participation in both men and women and further examines “factors that help explain [how some] women tend to feel more freedom to participate in politics,” than others.<sup>56</sup> The role of education is also a significant factor in analyzing how and in what degree women participated in politics. Thus, showing that

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<sup>52</sup> Manuel Vogt, “The Disarticulated Movement: Barriers to Maya Mobilization in Post- Conflict Guatemala,” *Latin America Politics and Society*, vol. 57, no.1 (2015): 30, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.librarylink.uncc.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=5dec72f8-faef-4d1d-adcd-e7d3838613c2%40sessionmgr4009&vid=1&hid=4106>.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>54</sup> Dinorah Azpuru, *The Gender Gap in Politics in Guatemala: 20 years of Advances and Setbacks*, Americas Barometer Insights, no. 95 (2013): 1, <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights/IO895en.pdf>.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>56</sup> Azpuru, *The Gender Gap in Politics in Guatemala*, 5.

“the perception of freedom to participate in groups have consistently been higher over the years that the freedom to demonstrate and to run for office.”<sup>57</sup>

#### 1.4: CONCLUSION

Even though there has been a substantial amount of evidence to support the political exclusion of Maya communities in Guatemala, the current narrative hints that more work needs to be done in order to see an increase of women’s participation in politics. Despite the wealth of literature written about the violence occurring during the Guatemalan civil war, a lack of it examines the conditions that hinder their participation in politics. Further attention and analysis is needed to show how Maya women have been able to slowly interject themselves into the political sphere that has been traditionally dominated by Ladino men. It is important to recognize the agency of Maya female leaders and to pay attention to the increase of political participation of women like Rigoberta Menchú, Rosalina Tuyuc, and Laura Reyes because they embody change and construct a pathway to political and social inclusion in Guatemala.

Maya activism and political participation has transformed the history of indigenous communities in Guatemala. The cultural and political movements of this community have allowed indigenous individuals to create safe spaces for future activists and politicians, including women. The Pan-Mayan movement gained popularity during the 1980s and 1990s, aiming to preserve all that was lost in the civil war. Even though the civil war halted social and direct political activism, the Maya surged to defend their rights and gain a social and political space in the nation. Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes helped to pave the way for change in a broken nation through the establishment of social

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<sup>57</sup> Azpuru, *The Gender Gap in Politics in Guatemala*, 4.

organizations, which helped to provide the community with better access to resources, education, and a space for political inclusion. Although Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes faced their own individual challenges and obstacles, they continued to fight for their beliefs. By illustrating their differing backgrounds, social status', and education levels, one is able to examine how they bring forth attention, both locally and internationally, to the plight of the Maya and how they strive for political inclusivity in a nation recovering from war.

## CHAPTER 2: CONTEMPORARY MAYA FEMALE ACTIVISTS: MENCHÚ, TUYUC, REYES

The Pan-Mayan Movement emerged near the end of the Guatemalan civil war and “focused on issues of cultural origin and self-definition.”<sup>58</sup> The Maya fought for “recognition of cultural diversity within the nation-state” to unify indigenous people and provide communities with educational resources and opportunities.<sup>59</sup> The movement gained momentum after the Guatemalan government, led by Rios Montt (1982-1983), created “systematic massacres of the country’s indigenous population,”<sup>60</sup> thus causing a shift in the direction from a cultural movement to a more complex “movement [in] politics in the post-Cold War world.”<sup>61</sup>

Following the peak of the Guatemalan civil war and cultural Pan-Mayan movement, indigenous activists sought to fight for social justice and political inclusion for the community. Prominent female activists and politicians, Rigoberta Menchú, Rosalina Tuyuc, and Laura Reyes, exemplify how indigenous women participate in politics and how they work towards creating a paradigm shift in education. “Members of the Pan-Mayan Movement, which gained prominence in the late 1980s, saw cultural stakes in the peace process. It was a chance for them to gain recognition of cultural and collective rights and to argue for a state in which Maya communities would have

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<sup>58</sup> Warren, *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics*, 37.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 36

<sup>60</sup> Emi Maclean and Sophie Beaudoin, “Efrain Rios Montt and Mauricio Rodrigues Sanchez,” *International Justice Monitor*, <https://www.ijmonitor.org/category/efrain-rios-montt-and-mauricio-rodriguez-sanchez>, 1.

<sup>61</sup> Warren, *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics*, 34

‘decision-making power over their own destiny.’<sup>62</sup> American anthropologist, Kay Warren states that, “the Pan-Maya movement maintains its own language for transcendence – one that would promote ethnic politics as the highest measure by seeking an institutionalized voice for Mayas and structural reforms in power relations.”<sup>63</sup> The Pan-Mayan movement however shifted emphasis after the Guatemala civil war, post 1990, from revitalizing cultural values, such language and traditional dress, to an emphasis in politics.

When analyzing the biographies of activist leaders Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes, we can establish an understanding of how they develop careers in political, social, and educational activism during and after the Guatemalan civil war. Although, Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes’ personal testimonies are used to illustrate their individual obstacles and challenges in this chapter, their subjective stories are important to include as they provide valuable insight into their careers in politics and activism. The biographies in this chapter were formed using both sections from their subjective testimonies as well as a combination of critical sources published by America, Guatemalan, and international critics in newspapers, academic journals, and books. The evaluation of this information forms a foundation for examining Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes’s backgrounds, and highlighting the challenges and achievements each individual leader experienced. This ultimately gives a voice to the Maya community and helps to establish the importance in the increase of female indigenous political participation in Guatemala.

## 2.1: RIGOBERTA MENCHÚ TUM

Activist and politician Rigoberta Menchú Tum has become an international

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<sup>62</sup> Emi and Sophie Beaudoin, “Efrain Rios Montt and Mauricio Rodrigues Sanchez,” 53.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 67.

symbol representing the plight of the Maya community in Guatemala. Her well-known testimony of growing up during the civil war, subsequent activist work which earned her a Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, and foundation *La Fundación Rigoberta Menchú Tum*, (Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation) enabled her to gain fame on an international level. Menchú “grew up in a context of extreme poverty, inequitable land distribution, inhuman labor conditions and repressive authoritarian rule.”<sup>64</sup> She feared for her life for identifying as a poor Maya woman and “fled the violence of her native Guatemala” to Mexico and exiled herself for several years before returning home.<sup>65</sup> Her work in activism and testimony, *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*, helped her in becoming “an eloquent spokeswoman for indigenous peoples and victims of government repression,” which helped her gain an international platform to discuss the human right violations occurring in Guatemala.<sup>66</sup>

Rigoberta Menchú Tum, who is of Maya-Quiché origin, was “born on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1959 to a poor Indian peasant family” in the town of Laj Chimel, a highland region of northwest Guatemala.<sup>67</sup> The rural region is approximately a nine hour walk from the nearest urban town of Uspantán, separating the Maya community, both physically and socially, from the ladino city center. Menchú is the sixth of nine children to father Vicente Menchú Préze and mother Juana Tum K’otojá who were both of indigenous origin and worked in the Maya community. Vicente Menchú was a day laborer, influential community leader, and land activist, while Juana Tum K’otojá was a midwife

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<sup>64</sup> Jack A. Goldstine, ed., “Menchú Tum, Rigoberta,” in *The Encyclopedia of Political Revolutions* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc, 1998), 346.

<sup>65</sup> Tim Golden, “Guatemala Indian Wins the Nobel Peace Prize,” *The New York Times*, October 17, 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/17/world/guatemala-indian-wins-the-nobel-peace-prize.html>.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>67</sup> “Rigoberta Menchú Tum- Biographical,” *Nobelprize.org*, Nobel Media AB 2014, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1992/tum-bio.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1992/tum-bio.html).

who provided support and medical care to women in the community. Rigoberta Menchú's parents introduced her to community-based activism and taught her to participate in social and political reform movements in Guatemala. American *New York Times* journalist, Tim Golden, emphasizes that Rigoberta "is one whose fate seems to be shaped less by her obvious intelligence and the precocious leadership qualities she claims for herself than by the influences of others. By all accounts, her most important mentor was her father, Vicente."<sup>68</sup> The persistent work of Rigoberta Menchú's mother and father in the community provided her the opportunity to witness the importance of social and political reform at an early age, thus helping her develop a foundation for her activist career.

Even though Rigoberta's parents worked to develop relationships and social reform activities in the community, the instability and prevalence of poverty in Guatemala during the civil war affected the availability of jobs for them as for many others. The lack of financial security and ability to gain economic upward mobility pushed families like Rigoberta's to uproot and travel in search of employment. Vicente Menchú, for example, moved his family from their home in 1967 to the southern coastal plains of Guatemala, spending months picking coffee and other agricultural crops.<sup>69</sup> In her testimony, Rigoberta states, "I remember that from when I was eight to when I was about ten, we worked in the coffee crop. And after that I worked on the cotton plantations further down the coast where it was very, very hot."<sup>70</sup> The shortage of available labor opportunities and lack of controlled working environments for indigenous people in

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<sup>68</sup> Tim Golden, "A Legendary Life," *The New York Times*, April 18, 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/18/books/a-legendary-life.html>, 3.

<sup>69</sup> Burgos-Debray, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, 22.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 22.



Guatemala forced many families to depend on the labor activities of women and children. In a 2010 speaking engagement at the University of San Diego, Rigoberta recounts how the lack of resources, such as food and water, forced families like her own to migrate from farm to farm looking for work and stability.<sup>71</sup> Menchú's time spent in the coffee fields for two years illustrates the financial hardships her family experienced as she was obligated to work at a young age. According to her biography, Rigoberta Menchú began working at the age of five, helping her mother cook for the plantation workers and was given the responsibility to look after her younger brother. The labor-intensive work continued for years as Rigoberta and her family earned little money and lived in cramped and unsanitary conditions on the plantations. For example, she states that there were, "no toilets in the *finca*. There were about 400 of us living there . . . [and] it was [one] toilet for all those people."<sup>72</sup> The poor working conditions the Menchú family experienced ultimately led to the death of her brother, Felipe, from the fumes and intoxication of pesticide.<sup>73</sup>

Years of intensive work on farms with little and sometimes no pay and unfair working conditions pushed Rigoberta Menchú to search for a different pathway of life, where she found work as a maid for a wealthy Guatemalan Ladino family at the age of thirteen. Rigoberta "wondered how [her sister's work as a maid] could be harder than [the] work [on the farm]," because she "always thought that it would be impossible to work harder than [she] did. So why put up with it?"<sup>74</sup> Rigoberta questioned her future and

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<sup>71</sup> Rigoberta Menchú: Challenges to Lasting Peace in Guatemala, directed by Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego, aired January 25, 2010 (San Diego: Jan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice Distinguish Lecture Series, 2010), <https://youtu.be/UXgaWlnwMBM>.

<sup>72</sup> Burgos-Debray, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, 33-37.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 40-42.

<sup>74</sup> Burgos-Debray, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, 90.

pondered how to “find a way out of [her] life when [the] landowner offered [her] twenty quetzals a month [to work for him] . . . and that’s when [she decided] to be a maid in the capital.”<sup>75</sup> Rigoberta ultimately chose to work as a maid with the ambition to learn how to read, write, and speak Spanish in order to have the skills needed to communicate with the Ladino community.<sup>76</sup> Her father did not approve of her working in the capital because he believed that if Rigoberta left, she would “forget about [the community’s] common heritage [and] it will be for good.”<sup>77</sup> Rigoberta’s family did not influence her new position in the capital. According to her testimony, Rigoberta states that her father “was very worried because he’s never wanted [my sister and I] to go to the capital to be maids. He thought that our ideas would be all distorted afterwards. He was afraid that we would forget all the things he and my mother had taught us since we were little.”<sup>78</sup>

Although moving away allowed Menchú to gain economic stability, she faced continuous inequality and racial discrimination. Menchú recounts the disrespectful, emotional, physiological, and verbal abuse she endured while working as a maid in the capital city. She often felt “lower than the animals in the house, worked for more than four months and received no money, [and stated] I’d never suffer like I was suffering in the house of those rich people.”<sup>79</sup> She even recounted a memory during dinner when “there was a dog in the house, a pretty, white, fat dog [who ate]– bits of meat, rice, things the family would eat [while she was given] a few beans and hard tortillas.”<sup>80</sup> “[It] was obvious to anyone who [listened to] her indigenous language [that] she [was] not from

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<sup>75</sup> Burgos-Debray, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, 90.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-99.

<sup>80</sup> Burgos-Debray, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, 92.

around here.”<sup>81</sup> Her inability to communicate with her employer, in conjunction to the racial discrimination occurring between the Ladino and indigenous communities, made it more difficult to gain acceptance as a young Maya women.

The humiliation, social degradation, and lack of respect influenced her decision to pursue a primary education at the Belgian-Guatemala Institute in Guatemala City. The omission of personal details recounting her education in her testimony would create controversy from critics who questioned the legitimacy of her memories. For instance, Rigoberta “is quoted by Burgos-Debray as saying that she had no formal education and had only learned Spanish three years [prior to their interview in 1982 and was] in fact a privileged student at four different schools.”<sup>82</sup> In addition to Burgos-Debray’s statement, Anthologist David Stoll and other independent researches concluded that Rigoberta Menchú did in fact learn Spanish, yet did not fully disclose the details on how she obtained a primary education, stating that she had learned Spanish three years prior to meeting Ethnographer Burgos-Debray.

“Using contacts provided by Dr. Stoll and others found independently, a reporter for The New York Times conducted several interviews here in early December that contradict Ms. Menchú’s account. Relatives, neighbors, friends and former classmates of Rigoberta Menchú, including an older brother and half sister and four Roman Catholic nuns who educated and sheltered her, indicated that many of the main episodes related by Ms. Menchú have either been fabricated or seriously exaggerated. Contrary to Ms. Menchú 's assertion in the first page of her book that "I never went to school" and could not speak Spanish or read or write until shortly before she dictated the text of "I, Rigoberta Menchú " she in fact received the equivalent of a middle-school education as a scholarship student at two prestigious private boarding schools operated by Roman Catholic nuns.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Marc Lacey, “Complex Defeat for Nobel Winner in Guatemala,” *The New York Times*, September 11, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/11/world/americas/11guatxx.html>.

<sup>82</sup> Golden, “A Legendary Life,” 1

<sup>83</sup> Larry Rohter, “Tarnished Laureate: A Special Report: Nobel Winner Finds Her Story Challenged,” *The New York Times*, December 15, 1998, <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/12/15/world/tarnished-laureate-a-special-report-nobel-winner-finds-her-story-challenged.html>.

Her ability to speak Spanish and possess basic reading and writing skills helped her in exploring a personal set of social and political beliefs. This ultimately guided Menchú to take the necessary steps in becoming an integral part “in social reform activities through the Catholic Church, and [becoming more] prominent in the women’s rights movement when still only a teenager.”<sup>84</sup>

In her mid-20s, (between the late 1970s and early 1980s) Rigoberta Menchú joined a Committee for Peasant Unity (Comité de Unidad Campesina or CUC) that was led and cofounded by her father, Vicente Menchú Préze. Rigoberta Menchú’s personal family ties and participation in the CUC played a large role in her personal career when organizing and advocating for indigenous rights and helping to mobilize peasants across the nation.<sup>85</sup> For instance, Menchú’s father is placed in charge of the management and organization of the distribution of land titles and other important legal paperwork in his community.<sup>86</sup> Nonetheless, a government organization known as el Instituto Nacional de Transformación Agraria (INAT), made it more difficult for indigenous people to receive legal property titles.<sup>87</sup> Various engineers consistently came to communities to measure land yet failed to deliver proper measurements, which held no legal value.<sup>88</sup> “At one point the government actually did promise to issue the titles, but the Indians were met by heavily armed soldiers [in the town of Panzós] when they marched in the town hall to obtain them. The soldiers opened fire, and in the ensuing encounter more than one

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<sup>84</sup> Rigoberta Menchú Tum- Biographical,” 1.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>86</sup> Cynthia M. Tompkins and David W. Foster, eds., “Rigoberta Menchú Tum Guatemala: Human Rights Activist,” in *Notable Twentieth Century Latin American Women* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), 178.

<sup>87</sup> “Vicente Menchú, una vida de lucha por su pueblo,” *La Prensa Libre*, October 29, 2015, <http://www.prensalibre.com/hemeroteca/vicente-una-vida-de-lucha-por-su-pueblo>.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 2.

hundred Kekchí peasants were killed.”<sup>89</sup> INAT also produced polices making it difficult for indigenous populations to maintain property titles stating “that the abandonment of land for more than one year automatically [became] the property of the government.”<sup>90</sup> Following the Panzós massacre, Vicente Menchú fought to eradicate discrimination in 1980 by “joining he delegation of protesters who, after being rebuffed at the American embassy, attempted to peacefully occupy the Spanish Embassy in Guatemala City,” which ultimately led to his death.<sup>91</sup>

The horrific and unpredictable social and political events impacted Rigoberta Menchú so much that she would later speak on behalf of her father’s death in the Spanish embassy fire in Guatemala stating that, “security forces in the capital stormed the embassy where he and some other peasants were staying.”<sup>92</sup> She would later come to find out that her mother was also tortured and her brother was murdered. The actions taken by the government served as a catalyst for Menchú as she searched for justice and vengeance on behalf of those, like her family, who were wrongfully killed for being Maya in Guatemala.

Menchú feared for her life as she moved to Mexico and placed herself into political exile in 1981 for the next 10 years.<sup>93</sup> There, Menchú began her journey advocating for indigenous rights and political inclusion, traveling to both the United States and Europe. She was able to draw “attention to the plight of Guatemala’s peasants,” by organizing speeches to garner support for the Maya community.<sup>94</sup> Despite

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<sup>89</sup> Carmack, *Harvest of Violence*, 20.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 87.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 52-53.

<sup>92</sup> “Rigoberta Menchú Tum- Biographical,”1.

<sup>93</sup> Goldstine, *The Encyclopedia of Political Revolutions*.

<sup>94</sup> Tompkins and David W. Foster, “Rigoberta Menchú Tum Guatemala: Human Rights Activist,” 178

having few material resources, Menchú was able to leave Guatemala with the support of the CUC stating “the compañeros got me on a plane to Mexico.”<sup>95</sup>

Golden critically points out that, “Miss Menchú renewed her activity in the Committee of Peasant Unity, [after fleeing to Mexico and] . . . she became increasingly involved in efforts to focus international pressure on the Guatemalan military.”<sup>96</sup> During her stay in Mexico people became interested in her exile, and she “was invited to take part in a conference of church people from Latin America, Central America, and Europe, where [she] was asked to describe the lives of women.”<sup>97</sup> In addition, Rigoberta gained the support and protection of “Danielle Metterrand, the wife of the French President, [where] she generated [attention at] press conferences,” and was able to make connections with high-ranking officials and activist leaders.<sup>98</sup> While traveling to Europe Menchú was able to catch the attention of supporters, where she met “Arturo Taracena Arriola, a representative of Guatemala’s opposition movement in Europe, [who] introduced [her] to Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, a Venezuelan ethnographer to whom Menchú recounted the story of her life during a week-long series of interviews.”<sup>99</sup> After various taped sessions with the indigenous activist, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray formulated and published Menchú’s, now controversial testimony, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman In Guatemala*, which drew international attention to the human rights violations occurring during the civil war.

*I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman In Guatemala* recounts the detailed life of Rigoberta Menchú and her family during a widespread period of civil war and

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<sup>95</sup> Burgos-Debray, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, 242.

<sup>96</sup> Golden, “Guatemala Indian Wins the Nobel Peace Prize,” 1.

<sup>97</sup> Burgos-Debray, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, 244.

<sup>98</sup> Warren, *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics*, 34.

<sup>99</sup> Tompkins and David W. Foster, “Rigoberta Menchú Tum Guatemala: Human Rights Activist,” 178-183.

genocide. Menchú's testimony gives a voice to the Maya community as it focuses to preserve the Mayan culture in Guatemala. She illustrates the violence, chaos, and instability of the government through several of her own eyewitness accounts of Maya families fleeing from genocide and as well as her own personal accounts of her family being killed. Her testimony is internationally acclaimed, winning "the Casa de las Américas prize for the best testimonial work in 1983."<sup>100</sup> Currently "[it has also] been translated into more than ten languages and has sold over 500,000 copies worldwide."<sup>101</sup> Menchú states that her book allowed "our stories to be heard, our stories as women who have suffered . . . [having others become] aware of our pain but also our dreams, our hopes of accomplishing something in our lives, and our hopes for a new Guatemala."<sup>102</sup> Although Rigoberta Menchú gained international publicity for her work, Most Maya communities were not aware of her testimony until after "she returned for a meeting with the National Reconciliation Committee," and was arrested in 1988.<sup>103</sup> Her arrest gave her subsequent media attention upon returning to Guatemala in 1988, which prompted communities to learn about her published testimony.

Rigoberta Menchú's continued efforts to represent the Maya community afforded her the opportunity to be the first female indigenous recipient of The Nobel Peace Prize in 1992.<sup>104</sup> The Nobel Laureate used the recognition and money that came with the prize to establish the Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation in 1993 with a mission to "contribute towards recuperating and enriching inherent human values to create world peace taking

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<sup>100</sup> Goldstine, *The Encyclopedia of Political Revolutions*, 347.

<sup>101</sup> Tompkins, Cynthia M. and David W. Foster, "Rigoberta Menchú Tum Guatemala: Human Rights Activist," 181.

<sup>102</sup> Alida Brill, ed., "Rigoberta Menchú, "Guatemala: A Story of Tragedy and Promise," in *A Rising Public Voice Women in Politics Worldwide* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1995), 230.

<sup>103</sup> Goldstine, *The Encyclopedia of Political Revolutions*, 348.

<sup>104</sup> "The Nobel Peace Prize 1992: Rigoberta Menchú Tum," *Nobel Prizes and Laureates*, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1992/press.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1992/press.html).

as its base the ethnic, political and cultural diversity of the world. To work to create justice and democracy, especially for indigenous peoples and natives.”<sup>105</sup> The foundation strives to fight for social and political inclusion for the indigenous female community in Guatemala; providing citizens with educational opportunities, developmental initiatives, fortifying human rights, and programs for citizen participation.<sup>106</sup>

Despite Menchú’s award and her increased prominence internationally, critics believed the only reason for her nomination was in part due to the 500<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ discovery of America and her identity as an indigenous woman would only add to his celebration.<sup>107</sup> Critics also believed that many accounts of Menchú’s testimony were falsely written as they have found inconsistency in how Menchú portrayed certain events in her life and her persistent denial for having connections with the Guatemalan guerilla movements. Her work has gained so much international attention that critics have gone to extreme measures to denounce and discredit her testimony. One critic in particular, American anthropologist David Stoll, conducted 10 years of research to show the lack of transparency behind Menchú’s testimony in which he questions her overall intentions and authenticity as a Guatemalan activist and politician.

“The real problem that [Stoll] raises with academics’ relation with Guatemala is the enshrinement of one version of events, namely Rigoberta’s as the authoritative version, with the corollary that someone like [Stoll] who brings into play other versions of events is doing something heinous. So, [Stoll is] simply defending the obvious self-evident need to compare different versions of events.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> “Mission and Vision,” *Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation*, <http://frmt.org/en/misionyvision.html>.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>107</sup> Rigoberta Menchú, "Interview with Rigoberta Menchú Tum: Five Hundred Years of Sacrifice Before Alien Gods," interview by Silvia Porras and Anders Riis-Hansen, *Commission for the Defense of Human Rights in Central America* . (1992): 1-5, <http://www.indians.org/welker/menchu2.htm>.

<sup>108</sup> David Stoll, “On Rigoberta, Guerrillas and Academics: An Interview with David Stoll,” telephone interview by Steven Dudley, in *NACLA Report*, Vol. 32, No. 5, (1999): 1-3, <https://nacla.org/article/rigoberta-guerrillas-and-academics-interview-david-stoll>.



As a result of Stoll's claims, Menchú had a difficult time building rapport and confidence in her community as her authenticity and credibility were called into question by both international critics and indigenous community members.

In 1999, anthropologist David Stoll accused Menchú of falsifying and distorting facts in her testimony. At times, he even described her as indecent for categorizing the experiences of "all indigenous Guatemalans" into a single mold in his book, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*.<sup>109</sup> Stoll compared her "1982 life story with local testimony and documentary sources . . . [questioning] why the story took the shape it did, as well as why it appealed to an international audience before being transmitted back home."<sup>110</sup> Stoll states "the selectivity of memory does not explain Rigoberta's omission of facts and or lack of consistency when compared to other sources of the same time period."<sup>111</sup> Stoll committed ten years of research and interviewed a large number of Menchú's family members, friends, and villagers, which posed challenges for Menchú in her search for political inclusion.

Nevertheless, as time passed people in the Maya community became more aware to human rights violations during the civil war. Menchú began to initiate steps in preserving and protecting the Maya culture by launching a political career for presidency in both the 2007 and 2011 Guatemalan national general elections. Menchú was direct in her activism by reminding the government that, "if the Guatemalan nation is not prepared to have a female indigenous president they will have to be prepared."<sup>112</sup> She believed that

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<sup>109</sup> David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1999).

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>112</sup> Lula Gómez, "Si Guatemala no está preparada para tener un presidente mujer e indígena tendrá que estarlo," *El País*, May 10, 2009, [http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2009/05/11/actualidad/1241992803\\_850215.html](http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2009/05/11/actualidad/1241992803_850215.html).

in order to instill change “the indigenous needed to occupy the spaces taken from them and stop begging for change and move onto power.”<sup>113</sup> Rigoberta Menchú ran for political office in the 2007 Guatemalan general elections for the Presidential office alongside her running mate, Luís Fernando Montenegro. “[They were both] supported by a coalition made up of WINAQ and the center-left Encuentro por Guatemala or Encounter for Guatemala Party.”<sup>114</sup> Menchú focused her campaign efforts to “poverty alleviation, greater security, and combating corruption,” in order to heal the Maya community from oppression.<sup>115</sup> Even though Menchú had good intentions to represent her community as a whole, the lack of support and votes she received on Election Day were due to the fact that people felt abandoned from her many years in exile and did not trust her efforts to stay. As a result, Menchú did not win the 2007 Guatemalan general election for the Presidency, but placed 5<sup>th</sup> among 14 candidates “with 2.42 percent ratings.”<sup>116</sup> Despite her loss, however, she continued to push forward in order to gain back community support and trust. “It may seem like her work has fallen short of bettering the lives of Guatemala’s indigenous people . . . but her success may be larger than the polls suggest. Menchú told *The Tico Times* in a recent conversation, “I haven’t reached 30 percent of the vote, but I’ve reached 95 percent of the country” and the hearts of the nation.<sup>117</sup> After the 2007 election, Menchú spent her time and energy to create one

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<sup>113</sup> Lula Gómez, “Si Guatemala no está preparada para tener un presidente mujer e indígena tendrá que estarlo,” 1.

<sup>114</sup> Inés Benítez, “Elections-Guatemala: Rigoberta Menchú Running for the Long Term,” *Inter Press Service Agency*, August 28, 2007, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2007/08/elections-guatemala-rigoberta-menchu-running-for-the-long-term/>, 1.

<sup>115</sup> “Breaking Prospects For A Democratic Renaissance in Guatemala,” *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*, August 6, 2007, <http://www.coha.org/bleak-prospects-for-a-democratic-renaissance-in-guatemala/>, 5.

<sup>116</sup> Benítez, “Elections-Guatemala: Rigoberta Menchú Running for the Long Term,” 1.

<sup>117</sup> Anna-Claire Bevan, “Central America Snapshot: For Guatemala’s Rigoberta Menchú, Votes aren’t Everything,” *The Tico Times*, October 21, 2013, <http://www.ticotimes.net/2013/10/21/central-america-snapshot-for-guatemala-s-rigoberta-menchu-votes-aren-t-everything>, 2.

of the first indigenous political parties in Guatemala, WINAQ, representing the K'iche'ean word for "people."<sup>118</sup> Menchú ultimately organized WINAQ as a formal political party so that she could run again in the 2011 General Presidency Elections of Guatemala. This illustrates the importance behind Menchú's "candidacy as [it symbolizes] that the political system, which has traditionally been dominated by [men] of European descent," is no longer the norm and has expanded to include the minority.<sup>119</sup>

Rigoberta Menchú's political work and activism have helped her become an international symbol as she strives to give voice to those who had felt silent during the civil war. Her efforts to gain leadership in her community have inspired other women to push for justice for all individuals. Both through her successes and through failures she would ultimately give strength for other female indigenous activists to gain access to resources, education, and social inclusion to feel respected and included in their own communities.

## 2.2: ROSALINA TUYUC VELÁSQUEZ

Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez, a Guatemalan grassroots activist, became involved in the development of social programs aimed at empowering indigenous women, giving them the resources in becoming strong and respectable leaders in their communities. She mainly focused her attention on widows who demanded change from the government after the disappearance of relatives during the war. "The conviction and hope of [these] women motivated her to get involved," and pursue a career in social activism and

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<sup>118</sup> *Word Finder*, s.v. WINAQ, <https://findwords.info/term/winaq>.

<sup>119</sup> Bevan, "Central America Snapshot: For Guatemala's Rigoberta Menchú, Votes aren't Everything," 1.

politics.<sup>120</sup> She not only founded CONAVIGUA (Coordinadora de Viudas de Guatemala), the first female – led indigenous group in Guatemala, but she also obtained a successful political career for several years. In 2008, a collective project known as the *Weavers of Peace: Guatemalan Women’s Testimonies*, was constructed between three organizations: CONAVIGUA, the Institute of Comparative Studies in Criminal Sciences in Guatemala (ICCPG), and the Political Association of Maya Women (MOLOJ). Each organization sought out to gather testimonies and “stories [from a variety of Ladino and indigenous women] in order to bring to light [women’s] contributions to society during the war.”<sup>121</sup> The recovery of these testimonies “are vital to the contribution to the daily struggle of women who, at present confront similar challenges in different parts of the world . . . The testimonies contain definite and lasting lessons regarding the different ways in which women through their political participation and organizing have constructed a more humane and more inclusive world.”<sup>122</sup> Rosalina Tuyuc’s testimony is one of the many included in the collection that highlights the challenges she faced throughout her childhood and activist career with CONAVIGUA. Within *Weavers of Peace*, Tuyuc’s testimony illustrates her “fight for life and against [the] forced disappearance,” of family members.<sup>123</sup> “In her fight for truth and justice,” Tuyuc sought to obtain a voice for Maya widowed women and establish herself as a prominent figure in Guatemalan society and politics.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Asociación Política de Mujeres Mayas (Guatemala), CONAVIGUA (Organization), and Instituto de Estudios Comparados en Ciencias Penales de Guatemala, eds, “Strugglers for Life and against Forced Disappearance: Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez.” In *Weavers of Peace: Guatemalan Women’s Testimonies* (Guatemala: Magna Terra Editores, 2008), 103.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 93.

<sup>124</sup> Katherine Marshall, “Rosalina Velasquez: A Maya Visionary for Peace, Mother Earth and Motherhood,” *Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs*, May 13, 2012,

Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez was born on October 14, 1956 in the small town of San Juan Comalapa, located in the Western highlands of Guatemala.<sup>125</sup> She is the oldest of six children, having three brothers and two sisters. At an early age, Tuyuc had to personally sacrifice her youth to cook, clean, and provide care for her younger siblings while her parents worked. ‘Ever since, I was a child [Tuyuc states], I went everywhere with my father, to church, and to work in the fields.’<sup>126</sup> In *Weavers of Peace: Guatemalan Women’s Testimonies*, Tuyuc recounts her life journey stating that she was only able to complete the sixth grade “because I am the oldest, I was the one who had to make the most sacrifices . . . I had to stop studying because the others had to have this opportunity.”<sup>127</sup> Tuyuc completed the fourth grade and subsequently finished the fifth and sixth grade via “long distance learning or mail correspondence.”<sup>128</sup> Her inability to obtain a secondary education was most likely linked to her domestic responsibilities as a child and the limited access and availability of resources within her community. Tuyuc, states, “I felt a great deal of pain when [my parents] told me that I could not continue with my studies, I was very small, and due to poor living conditions in which we lived, I started to work outside of my home.”<sup>129</sup>

The lack of equal opportunities and poverty stunted Tuyuc’s ability to expand her knowledge and she was forced to grow up quickly in order to help support her family. Working at a young age however, had some benefits to her outlook on life. Rosalina Tuyuc’s father, Francisco, for example took her and her siblings to the farms of Western

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<https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/rosalina-velasquez-a-mayan-visionary-for-peace-mother-earth-and-motherhood>.

<sup>125</sup> “Strugglers for Life and against Forced Disappearance: Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez.” 104.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 103.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 104.

Guatemala highlands to pick cotton, beans, and to cultivate other products. She learned the meaning behind hard work and she was able to interact with her peers and other community members whom worked alongside her. The more Tuyuc worked she began to see her situation as a stepping-stone. Tuyuc states, “due to poverty, I did not have the material comforts that other people had, but I was taught to respect people, animals, trees, and rivers.”<sup>130</sup> Her involvement within her community ultimately helped instill a passion for change, as she wanted to not only better herself but also those around her struggling to make ends meet.

Tuyuc’s introduction to activism and community involvement originated with her father, as he frequently took Rosalina with him to conduct social work in the church and surrounding community. At the early age of 13, Tuyuc worked with youth groups and later found her passion in working with underprivileged women in the indigenous community, who lacked the opportunity to further themselves. She began to “teach them how to read and write.”<sup>131</sup> She used her own experiences to empower women and to help those around her find the ability to further themselves with opportunities that could provide them with a primary or secondary education.

Tuyuc’s involvement continued to grow into her adult life as she also “worked as an auxiliary nurse” caring for women in need of medical attention.<sup>132</sup> Tuyuc’s involvement as a nurse pushed her into becoming an activist for helping indigenous women and their children because she felt the need to help them find strength in difficult times. Tuyuc states, “women themselves were wounded, their health undermined by the wrongs and violence, which included many rapes. Their suffering was not healed.

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<sup>130</sup> “Strugglers for Life and against Forced Disappearance: Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez.” 104.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 104.

[Women blamed] themselves because they could not run” away.<sup>133</sup> This experience, coupled with the loss of her husband, Rolando Gómez Sotz, in the 1980s, challenged her to connect with other widowed women affected by the violence and instability of the war.

Rosalina Tuyuc’s personal testimony states,

“the knowledge that we could contribute to peace and the struggle for life, by joining forces, kept us women together and helped us to carry on. It was worth the sacrifice. We lost our fear of speaking out and we lost our fear of dying. We suffered from kidnapping attempts. Not even bombs, machine-guns, armored cars, or hooded men with arms could stop us. Women and girls mobilized against the use of military tanks. These women were not afraid and they began to denounce human rights violations.”<sup>134</sup>

Tuyuc fought for the rights of women and believed that if she could provide resources and opportunities for them to prevail, women would not only be able to heal from the wrong doings of the government but they could also take the necessary steps to become strong independent women.

The transition from wife to head of household however created a gap within the traditional family dynamics of the Maya community. Widows who had no other choice but to take on these roles were questioned because the traditional machismo and patriarchal structure was still valued among members of society. Tuyuc states that “in a machismo culture that puts women aside, and where indigenous people and their traditions were ignored,” made it difficult for women to establish a firm foundation to fight for social inclusion. [But] women have [begun to] fight for women’s rights” to

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<sup>133</sup> “A Discussion With Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez: Mayan Human Rights Activist and Recipient of the 2012 Niwano Peace Prize,” *Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs*, May 10, 2012, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/interviews/a-discussion-with-rosalina-tuyuc-velasquez-mayan-human-rights-activist-and-recipient-of-the-2012-niwano-peace-prize>, 2.

<sup>134</sup> “Strugglers for Life and against Forced Disappearance: Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez.” 104.

emerge from the violence which occurred during the civil war.<sup>135</sup> In response to these challenges women were facing, Tuyuc organized and established one of the fastest growing activist female organizations in Guatemala— *Coordinadora Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala*, or as it is more commonly known CONAVIGUA.<sup>136</sup>

“CONAVIGUA [was initially] created in [the] context of militarization and repression,” in 1988 and it strove to “recover [a woman’s] honor” in establishing a base for indigenous women.<sup>137</sup> From its commencement in 1988 CONAVIGUA gained momentum reaching 9,000 members in 1994 including widows as well as helping to support “the demands of the trade Unions as well as students, working with agricultural workers, the CUC,” to name a few.<sup>138</sup>

Tuyuc’s organization had been a success for the past 30 years; helping to fight for social justice for the estimated 60,000 women widowed by the war. At one point in this movement, “the authorization of nine exhumations were achieved [for instance] and 13 victims were recovered (seven men, five women, and one child) . . . relatives of [the] victims were morally and spiritually strengthened by mental health services provided by CONAVIGUA, who offered professional psychosocial support.”<sup>139</sup> She even worked with “leaders of CONAVIGUA . . . [to collect] testimonies from thousands of women and synthesize them in the report for the Archdiocesan Project for the Recuperation of Historic Memory and in reports of the Commission for Historic Clarification.”<sup>140</sup> This

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<sup>135</sup> “A Discussion With Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez,” 1.

<sup>136</sup> The English translation of CONAVIGUA is the following, Coordinative of Organizations of Maya People of Guatemala.

<sup>137</sup> “Strugglers for Life and against Forced Disappearance: Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez,” 105.

<sup>138</sup> Gabriele Küppers, “Rosalina Tuyuc: Human Rights and Women’s Rights,” in *Compañeras: Voiced from the Latin American Woman’s Movement* (London: The Latin American Bureau, 1994), 114.

<sup>139</sup> “Coordinator of Widows of Guatemala (CONAVIGUA),” *Global Ministries*, October 8, 2012, <http://www.globalministries.org/news/lac/national-coordinator-of.html>.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, 108.



ultimately gained national and international media coverage and increasing numbers of women began speaking out against the government.

Tuyuc continued to break down social and political barriers and “was elected and served in Congress from 1996 to 2000. During [which Tuyuc] occupied the positions of third Vice-presidency, the Presidency of the Commission of Women, Minors and the Family, and the Vice-presidency of the Defense and Agriculture Commissions. She [was also the] president of the Nation Compensation Commission during 2004-2008 administration.”<sup>141</sup> As a political figure and female activist, Tuyuc fought to facilitate the creation of new laws, laws that would elevate both the Mayan culture and identity and the position of women in modern day society. In the late twentieth century, Tuyuc’s political and activist career climaxed when she was given the opportunity to speak in front of the United Nations System, United States Senate, and parliaments in Europe. Tuyuc recounts in her testimony that “during the negotiation of the Peace Agreements, I was the spokeswoman and legal representative of CONAVIGUA. I participated in the Great National Dialogue, and I think that the only two women participating and representing women were from CONAVIGUA.”<sup>142</sup>

Her work as both a politician and activist has allowed her to be recognized for numerous honors and accolades, including a nomination for the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize<sup>143</sup> and most notably being the recipient of the Niwano Peace Prize in 2012. The international Peace award, “[was established] to honor and encourage those who are devoting themselves to interreligious cooperation in the cause of peace, and to make their achievements known as it is hope . . . to further promote interreligious cooperation for

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<sup>141</sup> “Strugglers for Life and against Forced Disappearance: Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez.” 103.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 108.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 103.

peace.”<sup>144</sup> The Niwano Peace Prize recognized Tuyuc’s continuous efforts in campaigning for the Maya community. “In recognizing the work of Rosalina Tuyuc Velasquez, the Niwano award shone a bright light on the continuing violence and injustice in the country, and the special power that the indigenous spiritual beliefs bring to the fight for peace.”<sup>145</sup>

Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez pushed for political and social inclusion after experiencing hardships as a child and experiencing the death of her husband in post war Guatemala. Her continuous efforts to help those in need has afforded her the opportunity to form social programs and organizations, such as CONAVIGUA, which are not only aimed at empowering women but they also help establish programs that would allow women to pursue an education. Her efforts in holding several political positions allowed her to communicate on larger scales in which helped her help women feeling more supported, safe, and heard within their own communities and households.

### 2.3: PETRONA LAURA REYES QUINO

Petrona Laura Reyes Quino is a politician, activist, and lawyer who fights for social and political inclusion in her community through social activism at the Universidad Galileo, her motivational TV program *Creciendo con Laura Reyes*, and in her campaign for national congressional office in Guatemala. Reyes is currently the Director of Human Development Programs at the Universidad Galileo and has been a part of the program since 1983. “Founded in October 2000, by Dr. Eduardo Suger, [the Universidad Galileo] [became] the first university in Guatemala with a technology focus. Within the university,

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<sup>144</sup> “About the Niwano Peace Prize,” *Niwano Peace Foundation*, [http://www.npf.or.jp/english/peace\\_prize/](http://www.npf.or.jp/english/peace_prize/).

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

the Human Development Program [emerged] in 1982 with the collaboration of the National Union of the Disabled.”<sup>146</sup> Reyes’ activist and political work at the Universidad Galileo aimed to provide her community and students with educational resources and opportunities to grow as both community leaders and as academics.

Laura Reyes Quino, who is of Maya Kaq’chikel origin, was born on April 14, 1959 in the municipality of Tecpán in the department of Chimaltenango, approximately two hours from the capital, Guatemala City.<sup>147</sup> The city of Tecpán is the second largest city in the municipality of Chimaltenango with an approximant population of 22,000 citizens. Reyes is the youngest of nine children (4 boys and 5 girls) to parents José Reyes Colom and mother Antonia Quino, “local merchants and hard workers” within the community.<sup>148</sup> During an interview with a local television station, Chimaltenango Decide, Reyes recounted a memory of her parents work ethic stating that her father often times worked in construction, building local schools, while her mother sold tortillas to teachers and school children.<sup>149</sup> Even though her parents did not have to relocate to the agricultural fields of Guatemala for work, like many of their fellow community members, they were not afforded luxurious lifestyles and lived in poverty-like conditions. Yet, Laura’s parents believed in establishing an individual sense of belonging and, promoted the belief that “through hard work, perseverance, and effort success can be achieved.”<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> “Accerca de la U,” Universidad Galileo, <http://www.galileo.edu/acerca-de-galileo/datos-de-universidad-galileo/>.

<sup>147</sup> Louisa Reynolds, “Mujeres Indígenas Participan en Carrera Electoral,” SERVINDI, <https://www.servindi.org/actualidad/48316>, 1.

<sup>148</sup> Insituto National Demócrata para Asuntos Internacionales (NDI), *Estamos en Campaña: Cuaderno de Trabajo*, (Guatemala: National Endowment for Democracy, 2012), <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/GUAT-Estamos-en-campana-SPA.pdf>, 22.

<sup>149</sup> Laura Reyes Quino, interview by Luis Roberto Texaj, *Laura Reyes Dip. (Pan Entrevista # 12)*, Chimaltenango Decide, August 15, 2015, <https://youtu.be/pxKlsq0JlyE>.

<sup>150</sup> NDI, “Estamos en Campaña: Cuaderno de Trabajo,” 22.

This positive outlook on life impacted Reyes as she faced discrimination throughout her childhood in result of her physical disability and self-identification as Maya. Reyes was born with a partial left arm and states “that young children would call her names and make fun of her appearance.”<sup>151</sup> The lack of resources given to men and women with disabilities in Guatemala often times limited their professional development for careers in higher education and technology.<sup>152</sup> Though Reyes, learned to cope with the discrimination throughout her childhood it resonated with her adulthood life and impacted her activist work, which focused on the educational development and implementation of social reforms for the disabled.

Yet, unlike her peers, Reyes had the opportunity to gain a primary and secondary education through the support of her parents. She attended La Escuela Miguel Gracia Granadoes and el Colegio San Vicente de Paúl and at of 18 moved to Guatemala City to continue her education at a university level.<sup>153</sup> Reyes worked as a waitress to financially support her education at the public Universidad de San Carlos, where she worked towards a law degree affirming to her parents “that she would go to the capital because she wanted to become a lawyer and would willingly face the obstacles presented to her.”<sup>154</sup> Despite her perseverance, Reyes had to abruptly leave the university due to personal financial hardships after her fifth semester and later accepted a position as secretary to economically support herself before returning to school. The lack of job opportunities and resources available for Reyes at the time hindered her ability to finish her degree,

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<sup>151</sup> Reyes Quino, interview by Luis Texaj, *Laura Reyes Dip. (Pan Entrevista # 12)*.

<sup>152</sup> “Por Una Enseñanza Para Todos Los Guatemaltecos Sin Distinción,” Department of Human Development, <http://www.galileo.edu/pdh/noticias/por-una-ensenanza-para-todos-los-guatemaltecos-sin-distincion/>.

<sup>153</sup> NDI, *Estamos en Campaña: Cuaderno de Trabajo*, 22.

<sup>154</sup> Reynolds, “Guatemala: Mujeres indígenas participan en carrera electoral,” 1.

later stating, “it took her approximately 24 years to complete it,”<sup>155</sup> completing her Law degree in 2004.<sup>156</sup>

Reyes was given a second chance as a private university offered her the opportunity to enter a Computer Program on three different occasions. The program was designed to accommodate the disabled at the Universidad Francisco Marroquín. The founder of the program, Eduardo Suger, offered her a position within the computing program on the condition that she worked for him after graduation. Reyes accepted the offer, completing post-graduate courses in computing and Law, with a focus on indigenous constitutional rights, and labor laws.<sup>157</sup> Reyes commends her success stating that it would not be possible without the support she obtained from her parents. This is important to note due to the limited opportunities the Maya community often times received.

Upon completing her degree, Reyes worked as a secretary in the department of Information Technologies at la Universidad Francisco Marroquín and later the Universidad Galileo for 24 years, for Eduardo Suger. Reyes was later promoted to direct the Computing program, from which she graduated from, and eventually became the director of the Human Development program in 1983. Her administrative position in the computing program gave her an opportunity to showcase not only the skill sets she had gained but reinforced the idea that indigenous women are able to obtain leadership positions in society.<sup>158</sup> “The vision of [the Human Development] program [that Reyes

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<sup>155</sup> Laura Reyes, interview by B'ATZ', B'ATZ', TV Maya, May 18, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p\\_vF8k9GDHU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_vF8k9GDHU).

<sup>156</sup> Sofía L. Vásquez V., Elena Patricia Galicia Nuñez, and Ana Silvia Monzó, *Entre la Realidad y el Desafío: Mujeres Y Participación Política en Guatemala*, 2013 <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Entre-la-realidad.pdf>, 135.

<sup>157</sup> Reynolds, “Mujeres indígenas participan en carrera electoral,” 1.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

leads, helps] to develop qualified human talent, based on higher education within the reach of people with limited economic resources or who have a physical, mental or sensorial defect.”<sup>159</sup> Reyes has developed a career in educational activism where she strongly advocates for people to have the right to attend a university despite any sort of limitation that could prevent one from gaining a proper education. The fight for education development is crucial to her transformation in 2011 as she is invited to run for Vice President under Eduardo Suger in the 2011 Guatemalan national election where she promoted education, health, and social equality.<sup>160</sup>

Eduardo Suger “a Swiss national, but Guatemalan at heart, has a professional career and great attachment to science in which has awarded [him high honors and recognition in] Computer Science, Engineering, Mathematics, and Physics.”<sup>161</sup> The Rose Award for Education and the National Order Francisco Marroquín awarded by the Ministry of Education in Guatemala,” are just two distinctions that had shown his mission in developing educational programs and teaching within his community.<sup>162</sup> His participation with the Universidad Francisco Marroquín’s computer technology program for students with disabilities has created opportunities for students like Laura Reyes to gain an education. Suger and Reyes first began to develop a relationship after Reyes was offered a position to work in Suger’s office as the Secretary of the department of Computer Science. For the past 34 years, Reyes has helped Suger promote the importance of helping individuals find opportunities to better themselves. Suger’s

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<sup>159</sup> “Por Una Enseñanza Para Todos Los Guatemaltecos Sin Distinción,” Department of Human Development, June 21, 2016, <http://www.galileo.edu/pdh/noticias/por-una-ensenanza-para-todos-los-guatemaltecos-sin-distincion/>, 1.

<sup>160</sup> Vásquez V., Elena Patricia Galicia Nuñez, and Ana Silvia Monzó, *Entre la Realidad y el Desafío: Mujeres Y Participación Política en Guatemala*, 136.

<sup>161</sup> “Por Una Enseñanza Para Todos Los Guatemaltecos Sin Distinción,” 1.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

political career stemmed from realizing the lack of resources and opportunities afforded to the community and ran for President in 2007 and 2011. In a 2011 interview with CNN, Suger states his concerns regarding the lack of available health care, the up rise in violence over the past several years, and the government's unwillingness to fix society's problems.<sup>163</sup> Even though Suger did not win the 2007 and 2011 Presidential elections, he continues to advocate for educational rights via the Human Development Program at the Universidad Galileo with Laura Reyes.

Eduardo Suger endorsed Reyes as his Vice-president in the 2011 Guatemalan general elections, under the umbrella of the political party Compromiso, Renovación y Orden (CREO). Suger stated that, he wanted to have a reliable person by his side, a person that he had previously work with and most importantly trusted.<sup>164</sup> CREO's support is important to note due to the internal message the political party wanted to spread aiming to do things differently than the traditional political parties of the time.<sup>165</sup> This included the preparation of political propaganda via commercials showcasing the unity of indigenous peoples and ladino communities.<sup>166</sup> Reyes accepted the nomination stating, that CREO has been her home for numerous years and by accepting the nomination she would be able to serve Guatemala properly.<sup>167</sup> Therefore, she became one of the few indigenous women ever to run for high political office in the nation. This is important to note as Reyes launched her political career advocating for social reforms for

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<sup>163</sup> Eduardo Suger, "Entrevista al Dr.. Eduardo Suger parter 1," interviewed by Ismael Cala, *CreoEn Suger*, CNN espanol, April 28, 2011, <https://youtu.be/sgdVMmdj15M>.

<sup>164</sup> Rudy Tejada, "Laura Reyes acompañará a Suger por Creo," in *Siglo 21*, March 5, 2011, <https://issuu.com/shifft/docs/siglo290511/4>, 4.

<sup>165</sup> Reynolds, "Mujeres Indígenas Participan en Carrera Electoral," 2.

<sup>166</sup> Creo Institucional Completo, July 25, 2011, <https://youtu.be/ArW33mnoPyQ>.

<sup>167</sup> Tejada, "Laura Reyes acompañará a Suger por Creo," 4.

the disabled and attended conferences such as the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women and Conferencia Bianual "Hacia un Futuro Colectivo," amongst others.

Reyes' contribution to the plight of the Maya community in post-war Guatemala demonstrated the progress female indigenous gained when participating in both the social and political sphere in the twenty-first century. Reyes like her counterparts, Rigoberta Menchú and Rosalina Tuyuc, strives to provide educational, resources, and training to help the Maya community succeed. Thus, her historic run for vice-presidency showcased that a Maya woman was able to achieve political success when given the correct tools and leadership training. Nevertheless, Reyes was able to confront discrimination to educate herself and help others in similar situations.

#### 2.4: CONCLUSION

Rigoberta Menchú, Rosalina Tuyuc, and Laura Reyes faced adversity throughout their lifetime collectively representing the discrimination and oppression, which occurred during the civil war. Although, Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reye identify as Maya and appeared to face similar economic and social conditions, their biographies helped to illustrate the distinct pathways and opportunities individually afforded to them. Rigoberta Menchú described a life filled with poverty, loss, and death leading to her forced exile and lack of education yet provided her with connections ultimately leading to the formulation and publication of her testimony and subsequent win of 1992 Nobel Peace Prize. Rosalina Tuyuc on the other hand, was inspired to work with grassroots activist organizations and detached herself from politics to focus on the development of social reforms for Maya widows. Lastly, Laura Reyes became an educated, successful lawyer advocating for



education and equal rights for the disabled. The obstacles these women faced transformed them into prominent leaders within the community. Because “the silencing of women [during the civil war] pushed [them] to demand [that their voices] be heard . . . [in] the national political arena.”<sup>168</sup> Thus, the challenges and achievements Menchú Tuyuc, and Reyes had throughout their careers will help to illustrate the transformation, which is taking, place inside Guatemala, presenting indigenous women as key and prominent players in nation building processes.

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<sup>168</sup> Zur, *Violent Memories*, 65.

### CHAPTER 3: COMPARITIVE ANAYLSIS

The biographies of Rigoberta Menchú, Rosalina Tuyuc, and Laura Reyes collectively illustrate the different obstacles indigenous women faced during and after the Guatemalan civil war. All three women experienced individual discrimination, whether it was due to their gender, identity as Maya, and or due to a disability. High poverty levels and lack of access to resources also hindered their ability to achieve political and social mobility throughout their careers. The physical and social trauma experienced by women and personal experience with loosing loved ones to the civil war enable Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes, to discuss gender specific issues in turn expressing their personal experiences on the matter. Although, Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes appeared to experience similar social and economic circumstances throughout their childhood and early adulthoods, each followed a distinctive pathway while striving to obtain political and activist careers. Even though they all have similarities in their personal and professional lives, their individual differences and roles as women in a war torn nation impacted the influence they had in Guatemalan politics.

As the first women to establish themselves in high political national offices, they have been criticized for not fitting the traditional mold of a politician, which “has traditionally been dominated by ‘criollos’ (people of European descent).”<sup>169</sup> The nation of Guatemala is unique, differing from other Central American nations, as the process of

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<sup>169</sup> Inés, “Elections-Guatemala: Rigoberta Menchú Running for the Long Term,” 1.

including women in politics has been few in numbers. The sexual abuse, torture, and gender discrimination against Maya women during the civil war impacted the population as women worked to break social boundaries and placed themselves into leadership roles.

This chapter analyzes aspects of Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes' biographies to illustrate how three indigenous women, who are classified as "second class citizens," have established themselves as prominent Maya leaders. The establishment of Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes as leaders and participants inside the political sphere exemplifies the beginning stages of women in power, which is occurring in Guatemala, as indigenous women slowly break down racial, gender, and socio-economic barriers. The analysis of Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes' individual and collective challenges and achievements help to illustrate how and in what ways they faced adversity yet continue to gain support and respect from their peers and work towards establishing creditable organizations and political parties.

The comparative analysis of Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes' individual pathways focuses on the reoccurring patterns of gender, education, and visibility in society. The differences and similarities between the three women increase the overall understanding of their positions as leaders and how they transformed the misconception that indigenous women were not able to enter the political sphere in Guatemala. Even though sections of the analysis derive directly from their independent testimonies and biographies, their work helps to highlight key moments in their lives and helps to establish what these women viewed as a priority. Thus, depicting how they maneuvered through social boundaries to overcome societal pressures and stereotypes.

The subject of gender and the occurrence of gender discrimination, the first element, has affected women's participation in politics due to the discriminatory political structure of 1982 to 1983, which enacted political doctrines and genocidal policies during the Guatemalan civil war. The policies were "imposed on rural populations who witnessed brutality and death but found themselves operating in a culture of terror."<sup>170</sup> Tensions between the Ladino and indigenous communities, created political and social divisions so much so, that the representation and inclusion of Maya leaders, let alone female leaders, was nonexistent. The civil war "[intensified] and [channeled] conflict, bringing the coercive powers of the state and its political opposition into everyday life and raising the stakes of social criticism and political action."<sup>171</sup> Because women were considered as "second-class citizens" to men and were marginalized for being women and indigenous it made it difficult for Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes to be recognized as leaders on an international level, local grassroots level, and a member of a right winged political party, respectively.

The truth commission report, *Guatemala Memory of Silence*, produced after the civil war (1997-1999), recorded the emotional and physical losses that women experienced and documented cases of violence, murder, destruction, and often times sexual abuse and torture.<sup>172</sup> Selected commissioners, managing the report, "conducted 7,200 interviews with 11,000 [people] . . . to clarify past human rights violations and acts of violence that have caused the Guatemalan population to suffer."<sup>173</sup> These reports state,

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<sup>170</sup> Warren, *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics*, 109.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>172</sup> *Guatemala Memory of Silence: Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification* (February 1999): 11-87, [https://www.aaas.org/sites/default/files/migrate/uploads/mos\\_en.pdf](https://www.aaas.org/sites/default/files/migrate/uploads/mos_en.pdf).

<sup>173</sup> "Truth Commission: Guatemala," United States Institute of Peace, February 1, 1997, <https://www.usip.org/publications/1997/02/truth-commission-guatemala>.

“that the rape of women, during torture or before being murdered, was a common practice aimed at destroying . . . the most intimate and vulnerable aspects of the individual’s dignity.”<sup>174</sup> A local Guatemalan newspaper, *El País*, for example states, “88.7% of victims were Mayan women with the majority (62%) being women between the ages of 18 to 60.”<sup>175</sup> This physical and sexual abuse coupled with “thousands of [indigenous] women [losing] their husbands, becoming widows and the sole breadwinners for their children, often with no material resources,” transformed the traditional role of an indigenous woman and challenged the gender dynamics of the community.<sup>176</sup>

It is in this context of extreme gendered violence that Maya leaders such as Rigoberta Menchú, Rosalina Tuyuc, and Laura Reyes have struggled with political disenfranchisement and worked to counteract the marginalization that has affected women within their communities. The loss of family members, experiences of racial and gender discrimination, and emotional distress caused Rigoberta Menchú, Rosalina Tuyuc, and Laura Reyes to pursue careers in political and social activism. Although these women all identify as Maya and share similar traits and experiences, they are unlike in their social, political, and educational statuses.

Both Menchú and Tuyuc struggled to advance in society at a young age due to the lack of available resources and opportunities to obtain an education, whereas Reyes, who came from a relatively more privileged class-position, was fortunate to obtain a law degree faced continuous discrimination due to her physical disability. Her families’

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<sup>174</sup> *Guatemala Memory of Silence: Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification*, 35.

<sup>175</sup> José Elías, “Guatemala Juzga a los Militares Acusados de Someter a Esclavitud Sexual a Mujeres Mayas,” *El País*, February 1, 2016, [http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2016/02/01/america/1454338943\\_410245.html](http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2016/02/01/america/1454338943_410245.html).

<sup>176</sup> “Truth Commission: Guatemala,” 23.

economic position, though not much different than Menchú and Tuyuc's, enabled her to access educational resources her peers were not able to receive. Both her father and mother were part of a merchant class which afforded Reyes with the opportunity to pursue an education and not have to work in the agricultural fields. Her social position as the youngest child in the family also played a role as both her father and mother supported her pursuit for a higher education. Even though Reyes identified as a poor indigenous Maya, she was given outside opportunities in part due to her physical disability and social economic position. Therefore, these women's individual obstacles and unique pathways in bringing justice and opportunities for their communities, illustrate how they developed into influential female indigenous activists and politicians and how their stories personify their struggles before, during, and after the civil war.

Out of the three women, Tuyuc's organization faced a substantial amount of gender discrimination mainly because it was organized and led by indigenous women. Tuyuc founded an all Maya women's organization, CONAVIGUA, which helped to "call attention to the fact that militarization was breaking apart families, destroying the life of the collective, and destroying even life itself."<sup>177</sup> Women were targets due to their suggested vulnerability within the community and extorted for services by the civil patrols from 1980 to 1988. "Women from minority and indigenous communities [were] deliberately targeted for rape and other forms of sexual violence, torture, and killings because of their ethnic religion or indigenous identity."<sup>178</sup> The persistent violence towards women challenged Tuyuc's organization to provide adequate recourses for

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<sup>177</sup> Küppers, "Humans Rights and Women's Rights: Rosalina Tuyuc: Guatemala," 112.

<sup>178</sup> Georgina Nicoli, "Indigenous Women: the face of Latin America's most Silences People," *Progressio* 75, July 3, 2016, <http://www.progressio.org.uk/blog/empowered-blog/indigenous-women-face-latin-america's-most-silenced-injustice>.

widowed women to fight for justice and equality. “At least 9,411 reported female victims of human rights violations . . . the vast majority who suffered sexual abuse-88.7% were of Maya descent,” according to the social activist group MADRE.<sup>179</sup> The high levels of violence and gender discrimination impeded the women of CONAVIGUA to gain respect and recognition from the government. According to Tuyuc’s Testimony, in *Weavers of Peace*, she demanded “that the civil patrols stop harassing women, asking them for money or imposing forced labor . . . as [a] condition for the release of their husbands. The State was closed minded regarding this situation and never believed [CONAVIGUA] because [they] were poor indigenous women.”<sup>180</sup> After several years of petitioning the government, in 1994 Tuyuc and CONAVIGUA concluded, “instead of helping us, they slander us. They marginalize us because we’re women, because we’re indigenous women.”<sup>181</sup> This offered insight into the lack of support, the lack of resources, and inability for the government to change and fight on behalf of indigenous women’s rights.

Despite Reyes’ leadership roles, she also faced discrimination and struggled to secure a position in society and politics due to her gender identity as Maya and physical disability. According to a 2015 United Nations Conference, delegates described the challenges Reyes faced during her political career. Stating, that “being [a] female indigenous . . . living with a disability was a challenge in its own right, but when combined, individuals often suffered from the worst kinds of discrimination.”<sup>182</sup> Reyes’

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<sup>179</sup> “Demanding Women’s Human Rights in Guatemala,” MADRE, [https://www.madre.org/sites/default/files/PDFs/1332520499\\_Guatemala%20Shadow%20Report%20Shortened%20032312\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.madre.org/sites/default/files/PDFs/1332520499_Guatemala%20Shadow%20Report%20Shortened%20032312_FINAL.pdf), 2.

<sup>180</sup> “Strugglers for Life and against Forced Disappearance: Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez,” 105-106.

<sup>181</sup> Küppers, “Humans Rights and Women’s Rights: Rosalina Tuyuc: Guatemala,” 113.

<sup>182</sup> “Inequalities Remain ‘Achilles’ Heel’ for Driving Forward Current Development Framework, Experts Warn Women’s Commission as General Debate Concludes,” (Meeting Coverage and Press Release for the Economic and Social Council Commission on The Status of Women, Fifty-Ninth Session, 15<sup>th</sup> & 16<sup>th</sup> Meetings, March 18, 2005), <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/wom2033.doc.htm>.

physical disability and status as an indigenous female leader continue to challenge her career as indigenous women are still perceived to be invisible in Guatemalan politics.<sup>183</sup> “Women with disabilities were often excluded simply because . . . many public spaces and public transport systems were completely inaccessible to people with disabilities.”<sup>184</sup> Not having the resources to accommodate disabled individuals personally challenged Reyes to work towards preventing discrimination of people with disabilities. According to a 2012 interview with TvMaya: B'ATZ' *Trasciende*, Reyes states that as an adolescent she was called “ugly, a pig, and was labeled as inferior to others [for being born with a partial left arm.] She also states that she was at times unable to participate in extracurricular activities such as sports, which hindered her ability to build relationships with others.”<sup>185</sup> Reyes not only struggled to gain respect from her peers throughout her childhood but she was treated different because she is a disabled Mayan woman in politics.

Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes all experienced some level of discrimination throughout their careers, directly or indirectly, for identifying as a Maya woman. There has been a variety of opinions from community members and academics regarding women’s participation in social, educational, and political activist roles in Guatemala. “Women have always trailed men in terms of their voter registration [and political participation], even though men and women have the same opportunity.”<sup>186</sup> Gender discrimination hinders women’s ability to participate in politics. *The Gender Gap in Politics in Guatemala: 20 Years of Advances and Setbacks*, suggests that “women [tend]

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<sup>183</sup> “Inequalities Remain ‘Achilles’ Heel’ for Driving Forward Current Development Framework, Experts Warn Women’s Commission as General Debate Concludes,” 1-3.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>185</sup> Laura Reyes Quino, interview by Luis Roberto Texaj.

<sup>186</sup> Azpuru, *The Gender Gap in Politics in Guatemala: 20 Years of Advances and Setbacks*, 2.



to be more hesitant about engaging in politics than their male counterparts . . . [because] women are still at a disadvantage in several aspects, including the perception of freedom to participate in politics.”<sup>187</sup> The challenges Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes have faced throughout their careers have encouraged them to become voices within their communities in order to change the way the government views women and non-Ladino communities. Since most political positions in Guatemala are predominantly male run, the possibility of having a female indigenous woman in power is uncommon and relatively new to the nation. “Older Mayan men [have felt that] when it comes to women, [they did not] ‘want a woman to boss them around, and especially a woman president. They think it will ruin the country.’”<sup>188</sup> The traditional social role of a Maya woman in Guatemala usually encompasses domestic duties such as cleaning, cooking, and bearing children. This limited their ability to seek opportunities outside of the household and establish themselves other than a housewife. In addition to the direct gender discrimination occurring during the civil war, Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes indirectly discriminated against were in some fashion. “Women’s pain was once more a subject of mirth for the government, most [Maya women either became] widows [of the war or lost significant others] because the military and the civil patrols abducted and murdered them.”<sup>189</sup>

The gender discrimination Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes experienced was an obstacle hindering their inclusion into national politics. Yet, their identity as Maya women also served as a positive element providing them the platform to speak out against the negative treatment women faced. It can be said that their gender served a dual

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<sup>187</sup> Azpuru, *The Gender Gap in Politics in Guatemala: 20 Years of Advances and Setbacks*, 3-4.

<sup>188</sup> Lacey, “Complex Defeat for Nobel Winner in Guatemala,” 2.

<sup>189</sup> Küppers, “Humans Rights and Women’s Rights: Rosalina Tuyuc: Guatemala,” 112.

purpose both positively and negatively. Demetrio Cojtia Mayan intellectual—and Rigoberta Menchú describe this dichotomy respectively stating that “the principal contribution of Rigoberta is not what she says or does but what she is,” and “If I were a man and not indigenous I would be accepted differently.”<sup>190</sup> Thus, the duality of gender in Guatemala, in the cases of Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes is unique as their identification as Maya women both hindered and helped their rise in politics. The attention their testimonies and biographies received were in part due to their gender. Irma Otzoy from the Maya Education Foundation, expresses the importance of women, stating “that Maya women are more valiant than men. . . . Maya women feel the strongest sense of cultural responsibility to transmit their values to future generations. Maya women and men alike recognize that Maya women have the courage to openly defy a society that discriminates against them.”<sup>191</sup> The subject of gender though perceived as a negative element during the Guatemalan civil war, enabled female indigenous leaders to gain access to international and local audiences helping to establish their presence in society and politics.

Education, a second element, is an important component that is highlighted within the biographies of Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes. The ability to read, write, and or speak Spanish is key to the development of their political careers because without proper communication they were not able to build relationships within the community and become prominent Maya leaders. Education was not generally a luxury that indigenous women had access too, especially during the civil war. According to the World Bank

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<sup>190</sup> Alan Zarembo, “Guatemala’s Nobel Laureate is a Hero on the World Scene- -and a Figure of Controversy at home.; Trouble for Rigoberta, *Newsweek*, June 21, 1999, New York, 3-4.

<sup>191</sup> Irma Otzoy, “Maya Clothing and Identity,” in *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala*, eds., Edward F. Fisher and R. McKenna Brown (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 147.

report, *Education and Poverty in Guatemala*, Guatemala's education proficiency is based on illiteracy rates, which ranked last in Latin America in 2002. This further illustrates how significantly high illiteracy rates for women in 1980, 54.3 percent, and 1990, 46.3 percent, affected their ability to gain an education.<sup>192</sup> Enrollment in secondary schools and university levels for indigenous community members is also even lower encompassing 18.7% and 7.9% of the population respectively.<sup>193</sup> "Maya females are by far the most disadvantaged group in Guatemala. With only 39 percent of 15-64 year-old Maya women and just two-thirds of 10-19 year-old Mayan females are literate."<sup>194</sup>

Rigoberta Menchú and Rosalina Tuyuc differ from Laura Reyes in that they did not have the same support systems and educational opportunities afforded to them, given their social and economic backgrounds. Reyes however, was afforded several scholarships for identifying not only as a Maya female, but also because of her disability, which provided her the opportunity to obtain a degree in Computer Programing and subsequently Law. Reyes heavily emphasized obtaining an education as she herself benefited from working with prominent Ladino community members. Unlike Reyes, Menchú and Tuyuc's educational backgrounds were not as prominently highlighted and only provided vague details as to how they learned to read, write, and speak Spanish. Menchú's lack of mention of receiving an education at the Belgian-Guatemalan Institute

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<sup>192</sup> John Edwards, *Guatemala Poverty Assessment (GUAPA) Program: Education and Poverty in Guatemala*, (Technical Paper No. 3), (Tulane University: Guatemalan Poverty Assessment Program of the World Bank, 2002), 4-5.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>194</sup> Kelly Hallman, Sara Peracca, Jennifer Catino, and Marta Julia Ruiz, *Multiple Disadvantages of Mayan Females: The Effects of Gender, Ethnicity, Poverty, and Residence on Education in Guatemala* (No. 211), (New York: Population Council, 2006), 3, <http://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/wp/211.pdf>.

in her testimony is controversial because it can be said that Menchú falsely represented herself in order to project an image of poverty and discrimination solely to gain sympathy from international audiences. Rosalina Tuyuc's testimony does not highlight her education as her focus is her political and activist work in CONAVIGUA, but subtly hints that poverty and cultural traditions limited her and other indigenous women's ability to gain an education. Therefore, the topic of education in regards to Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes is essential to understand as the level of education they obtained impacted each woman's individual career path and credibility amongst community members.

Rigoberta Menchú received a substantial amount of criticism from scholars, Guatemalan community members, and government officials after the publication of her testimony, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Her lack of support from her community challenged her ability to successfully obtain a political career, gain respect and trust from the people, and convince critics that she is able to be an effective leader who can bring justice for those affected by the Guatemalan civil war. After the publication of David Stoll's book, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, in 1999, the controversy stemmed from the fact that Menchú's testimony does not mention her receiving an education at the Belgian-Guatemalan Institute. In one of many responses regarding her education, Menchú states I "never went to school and [found] speaking Spanish very difficult. I didn't have the chance to move outside [of my] own world and only learned Spanish" late into my adulthood.<sup>195</sup> While her statement may create sympathy regarding her circumstances, her inability to give accurate accounts further discredit her legitimacy as a poor Maya leader. It does not make sense that people within Maya communities recall "Menchú [speaking] better than a Ladino [labeling her Spanish proficiency as]

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<sup>195</sup> Burgos-Debray, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, 1.

perfect”<sup>196</sup> and providing evidence, that she completed the “the first year of junior high school” at the Belgian-Guatemalan Institute.<sup>197</sup> “What is Menchú hiding?” Is a question that is often asked by both American and international critics at the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *La Hora* and *La Prensa Libre*. These discrepancies in her testimony do not allow members of indigenous populations to be able to relate because her story diverges into many pathways.

Although critics have also been placed in awkward positions for trying to discredit Menchú’s testimony, they are unable to do so given that her achievements throughout her career have said to be “a significant historical impact [that] implies a qualitative advance for democracy.”<sup>198</sup> She became internationally visible in becoming the first indigenous woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, run for President in Guatemala in 2007 and 2011, and she “founded the country’s first Mayan political party, WINAQ.”<sup>199</sup> Her testimony, though controversial, gave her an avenue to discuss issues pertaining to human rights violations and gender and racial discrimination against indigenous communities. “For two decades she has been the principal figure leading indigenous struggles in Latin America, she has participated in many international forums in their defense, and her biography . . . contributed to attracting the world’s attention to the bestial behavior taking place in this small Central American country.”<sup>200</sup> Menchú’s achievements have afforded her the opportunity to move past the struggles and challenges

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<sup>196</sup> Hector Tobar, “Rigoberta Menchú’s Mayan Vision: Revered For the Symbolic Power of Her Nobel Prize But Attacked For Her Continuing Life in Exile, The Guatemalan Leader Focuses on Brining A New Dawn to the World’s Indigenous Peoples,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 23, 1994, [http://articles.latimes.com/1994-01-23/magazine/tm-14518\\_1\\_indigenous-peoples](http://articles.latimes.com/1994-01-23/magazine/tm-14518_1_indigenous-peoples).

<sup>197</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>198</sup> Inés, “Elections-Guatemala: Rigoberta Menchú: Running for the Long Term,” 1.

<sup>199</sup> Bevan, “Central America Snapshot: For Guatemala’s Rigoberta Menchú, Votes aren’t Everything,” 1.

<sup>200</sup> Rigoberta Menchú, “Rigoberta Menchú: Those Who Attack Me Humiliate the Victims,” interview by Juan Jesús. Aznárez, *El País*, January 24, 1999, in *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, ed., Arturo Arias (Minnesota: The University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 116.

faced throughout her career, having won the Noble Peace Prize, running for two political offices, founding WINAQ and establishing herself as a prominent Maya leader through her testimony. Menchú states, “Guatemala’s history is impossible to change one way of the other, [but my] primary objective is the promotion of the indigenous peoples.”<sup>201</sup>

Rosalina Tuyuc and Rigoberta Menchú recall having faced similar obstacles for obtaining an education. They both hint at being oppressed and impoverished but do not go into detail and give specific accounts of how and when they obtained an education. Critics do not consider Tuyuc’s testimony for being controversial but rather accept that she represents the gender-specific challenges indigenous women faced because she was forced to uphold cultural nuances, such as the responsibility of domestic duties in the household. Although Tuyuc mentioned completing “the fifth and sixth grade through distance learning (mail correspondence),” she hinted at having to make significant sacrifices in order to take care of her younger siblings.<sup>202</sup> Throughout Tuyuc’s biography, in *Weavers of Peace*, she references her inability to continue her education by stating;

“I had to stop studying because the others had to have this opportunity . . . I felt a great deal of pain when they told me that I could not continue with my studies. I was very small, and due to the poor conditions in which we lived, I started to work outside of my home weaving, making tortillas and taking care of other women’s children.”<sup>203</sup>

It can be inferred that Tuyuc’s main reason for not giving a full account of her educational background is because she avoids the thought of having been forced to stop studying. “Being [born both as a female and of] indigenous [decent] reduces the likelihood of being enrolled in school at any given age.”<sup>204</sup> She instead focuses her

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<sup>201</sup> Menchú, “Rigoberta Menchú: Those Who Attack Me Humiliate the Victims,” 116.

<sup>202</sup> “Strugglers for Life and against Forced Disappearance: Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez,” 104.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>204</sup> Edwards, *Guatemala Poverty Assessment (GUAPA) Program: Education and Poverty in Guatemala*, 11.

attention on detailing her position within CONAVIGUA because her work adds value to her life. Her lack of education is understood because she represented the “75 percent of the population [living] below the poverty line . . . and [the] 58 percent of the population [living in] extreme poverty.”<sup>205</sup> Her ability to provide others with educational opportunities, despite having only achieved a small amount of education herself, is widely seen as a great achievement.

Similar to Menchú’s international recognition, Tuyuc was awarded the 2012 Niwano Peace Award for her continual fight and work as a human rights activist. She opened lines of “communication between Congress, the women's movement and the interior communities of the country. To support the commissions created by the peace agreements and to open the lobbying with the commissions and the Board of Directors of the Congress.”<sup>206</sup> Unlike Menchú and Reyes, Tuyuc has been specifically recognized in breaking “a political ceiling” by empowering women to step outside their comfort zones and discuss issues impacting their families and themselves.<sup>207</sup> Due to the large number of women participating in CONAVIGUA, it is fair to say that Tuyuc’s influence in indigenous communities is somewhat more direct than that of Menchú or Reyes’ because she is consistently focusing in “helping women become active players in the political process— at local, municipal and national levels of government.”<sup>208</sup>

Laura Reyes, on the other hand, did not face the same obstacles in obtaining an education that Menchú and Tuyuc did because she did not have to attend to anyone else’s

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<sup>205</sup> *Guatemala an Assessment of Poverty (Report No. 12313-GU)*, (Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office, 1995), 1.

<sup>206</sup> “Rosalina Tuyuc, Mujer Callada Pero Indomable,” *La Prensa Libre*, November 23, 1999, <http://www.prensalibre.com/hemeroteca/rosalina-tuyuc-mujer-callada-pero-indomable>.

<sup>207</sup> Edward Hegstorm, “In Guatemala’s Male-ruled Politics, Activist Widows Break Into Congress,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 16, 1996, <http://www.csmonitor.com/1996/0116/16071.html>.

<sup>208</sup> Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez, “Defending the Rights of Guatemala’s War Widows,” in *America’s Quarterly*, 2012, <http://www.americasquarterly.org/node/3521>.

needs other than her own. Reyes, being the youngest of nine children in her family, did not hold the same domestic responsibilities as that of Menchú and Tuyuc. She was extended an opportunity to study computer programming at the Universidad Francisco Marroquin on a full ride scholarship. She further continued her education at the Universidad de San Carlos, where she earned a degree in Law<sup>209</sup> with a concentration and “Master's degrees in human resource management and labor law, diplomacy, international relations and public image, rights of indigenous people, constitutional law and strategic planning.”<sup>210</sup> She differed from Menchú and Tuyuc in that she had a strong support system from her family to help her look past her physical disability and achieve the completion of a post-secondary degree. When interviewed by Luis Roberto Texaj in 2015, on a digital platform, *Chimaltenango Decide*, Reyes states “the family structure is the bases of the nation and credits her success from the unconditional support and guidance she received from her family.”<sup>211</sup> Unlike Menchú and Tuyuc, her extensive educational background and disability helped her focus in developing educational programs for the physically and mentally disabled, the blind, deaf, and those of low economic statuses.<sup>212</sup> Reyes takes pride in her educational achievements and continues to advocate for the rights on behalf of the disabled. Reyes states that “education, [is] the only weapon that could change lifestyles and increase opportunities” in Guatemala.<sup>213</sup> Even though Reyes is a part of a private minority group of indigenous women, who have the opportunity to obtain an education, Reyes makes sure to highlight how important

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<sup>209</sup> Reynolds, “Guatemala: Mujeres Indígenas Participan en Carrera Electoral,” 2.

<sup>210</sup> Vásquez V., Elena Patricia Galicia Nuñez, and Ana Silvia Monzó, *Entre la Ralidad y el Desafío: Mujeres Y Participación Política en Guatemala*, 135.

<sup>211</sup> Reyes Quino, interview by Luis Roberto Texaj.

<sup>212</sup> Reyes Quino, interview by Luis Roberto Texaj

<sup>213</sup> Reyes Quino, interview by Luis Roberto Texaj.



education is in order to implement change. It is evident that Menchú and Tuyuc did not express the same amount of importance in education as Reyes; they still achieved international and local recognition for their work in politics and activism. Reyes has yet to be given an award with the same level of significance as Menchú's Nobel Peace Prize and Tuyuc's Niwano Peace Prize.

A third element highlighted in all three biographies is the concept behind visibility. Rigoberta Menchú, Rosalina Tuyuc, and Laura Reyes continue to fight for the inclusion of the Maya community in the political sphere and the development of activist organizations to gain respect and retribution for the violence and oppression many experienced in the 1980s. Statistics, however, fail to reflect the rise of female indigenous leaders in politics and in turn illustrate the weakness of female Maya political participation in everyday Guatemalan politics. For instance, “only 3 percent and 2 percent of the candidates for the district and national elections respectively, were indigenous women” in 2002.<sup>214</sup> Women represented “at least 20 percent of the Guatemalan population (prior to the 2007 elections), [and] only two of 158 deputies in Congress and one of 333 mayors [were] indigenous women.”<sup>215</sup> Out of the “158 politicians elected to congress in 2011, 18 were indigenous [women] . . . and of the 333 mayoral races none of them [were women of] indigenous” origin.<sup>216</sup> Even though statistics reflect a marginal growth of Maya female participation throughout the years, it further illustrates the historical exclusion of the female indigenous community from political positions and

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<sup>214</sup> Nineth Montenegro, “El desafío de la participación política de la mujer en Guatemala,” English translation, in International IDEA *Mujeres en el Parlamento. Más allá de los números*, Stockholm, Sweden, 2002, 2.

<sup>215</sup> “Guatemala: Strengthening Indigenous Women’s Political Leadership,” *The National Democratic Institute*, (2009): 2, <https://www.ndi.org/our-stories/guatemala-strengthening-indigenous-women’s-political-leadership>.

<sup>216</sup> “Guatemala.” *The National Democratic Institute*. <https://www.ndi.org/guatemala>.

suggests that even though women like Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes have achieved individual success the Maya community has yet to achieve a large percentage of representatives within the nation.

In the post war period, Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes' work has been viewed in both a negative and positive light. In the case of Rigoberta Menchú, her "name is very well known in certain social circles, [but] remains detached from most of the population."<sup>217</sup> Menchú distanced herself from her community with the decision to flee Guatemala in 1981 and returning "to the country only a handful of times."<sup>218</sup> Upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, in 1992, Menchú "told reporters that she would use the prize to campaign for peace in Guatemala and the rights of Indians throughout the hemisphere."<sup>219</sup> She has often times been criticized however, because her focus had shifted towards sustaining her new title and international recognition rather than committing to the advancement of her people in local communities. As Eduardo Villatoro, a Guatemalan journalist for *La Hora* newspaper, critically points out, she prioritized traveling abroad by attending several press gatherings and international conferences which led her to "ignore the protests of indigenous and peasant groups against the neoliberal policies of the corporate government."<sup>220</sup> As a result, people began to question the authenticity behind Menchú's personal testimony, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, thus, making it more difficult in gaining support from her community in her 2007 and 2011 political campaigns.

On the other hand, Rosalina Tuyuc gained an immense amount of local

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<sup>217</sup> Luis Solano, "Guatemalan Elections," interview by Karen Crump, *El Observador: Information Services Latin America*, <http://isla.igc.org/Features/Globalization/Elections.html>, 2.

<sup>218</sup> Golden, "Guatemala Indian Wins the Nobel Peace Prize," 1.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>220</sup> Eduardo Villatoro, "Acerca del Verés de la Doctora Menchú," *La Hora*, September 20, 2007, <http://lahora.gt/hemeroteca-lh/acerca-del-reves-de-la-doctora-menchu/>, 2.

recognition from indigenous populations after founding CONAVIGUA, an organization aimed to provide indigenous widowed women with educational resources, mental health and legal support. In 1988 to 1994, CONAVIGUA went from having 200 to 9,000 members<sup>221</sup> and grew to encompass “12,000 women and 5,000 young ladies affiliated with MOJOMAYAS, a subsection of CONAVIGUA,” in 2009.<sup>222</sup> The extensive amount of time spent growing CONAVIGUA, however, drew Tuyuc’s attention away from her own family. It is ironic that although Tuyuc emphasized empowering women both professionally and at home, she herself was not able to balance her time between her career and family. When evaluating her work as an activist, Tuyuc described her personal difficulties stating,

“that my contribution was not easy because it involved a lot of personal sacrifice. I sacrificed being with my family and my personal pursuits. I dedicated my life and my time to women’s struggles. I never had time for my children. But I am very happy for having contributed to the organization of women and victims of the Armed Conflict.”<sup>223</sup>

Similar to Menchú’s isolation from the Maya community in pursuit for international recognition, Tuyuc prioritized the success of CONAVIGUA above the responsibilities she held for her family in order to establish a profession in local grassroots activism. Tuyuc became more concerned with encouraging women “to raise their voice, to struggle against militarization, hunger, discrimination, abuse, and injustice” and essentially removed herself from building a strong family relationship and dynamic.

Laura Reyes differs from Menchú and Tuyuc because rather than having to personally work towards a position in political office, she was handed the opportunity to run as a Vice-President under Eduardo Suger. When compared to Menchú and Tuyuc,

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<sup>221</sup> Villatoro, “Acerca del Verés de la Doctora Menchú,” 112.

<sup>222</sup> *Report of Organizational Performance Review*, 13.

<sup>223</sup> “Strugglers for Life and against Forced Disappearance: Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez, 111.

Reyes uses her personal connections with the right winged political party CREO, rather than establishing independent organizations to help support her career. Reyes' sole purpose in the 2011 campaign was in fact "to gain support of indigenous peoples, hence the indigenous vote"<sup>224</sup> and as a result became "unnoticed in electoral propaganda, despite the fact that CREO became the third electoral force in the country."<sup>225</sup> Analyzing Reyes' political career pathway suggests that she has limited her career to a singular political party and has yet to gain the local or international support that Menchú and Tuyuc have established. According to Manuel Vogt, a post-doctoral research associate at Princeton University, "the right-wing parties attempt to control rural Maya people" thus, inferring that because of Reyes' status as a Maya women, she was limited the opportunity to establish her political career both locally and internationally.<sup>226</sup> Although Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes struggled to maintain a constant visibility within the nation, they all worked towards building significant political and activist careers, helping to establish political inclusivity for the Maya community.

### 3.1: CONCLUSION

Rigoberta Menchú, Rosalina Tuyuc, and Laura Reyes all overcame some degree of gender and racial discrimination in their pursuit of gaining political recognition during the Guatemalan civil war. Despite all the challenges faced throughout their political careers, Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes achieved individual success in their prospective roles

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<sup>224</sup> Meeylyn Lorena Mejia Lopez, *Indigenous Women and Governance in Guatemala*, (Case Study presented by the Canadian Foundation for the Americas, March 2006), [http://www.focal.ca/pdf/mujer\\_indigena\\_e.pdf](http://www.focal.ca/pdf/mujer_indigena_e.pdf), 1.

<sup>225</sup> Vásquez V., Elena Patricia Galicia Nuñez, and Ana Silvia Monzó, *Entre la Realidad y el Desafío: Mujeres Y Participación Política en Guatemala*, 136.

<sup>226</sup> Vogt, "The Disarticulated Movement: Barriers to Maya Mobilization in Post- Conflict Guatemala, 41.

in social activism, educational activism and in politics. They helped to discuss the importance behind the genocidal tendencies of the Guatemalan government and how women of indigenous descent have struggled to hold political positions for years. Their work towards establishing strong activist organizations has helped them transform the nation, providing justice, resources, and educational opportunities for the Guatemalan indigenous communities. Their work and contributions in politics, social activism, and educational activism helped them to transcend social, racial and gender boundaries as each individual's career impacted the visibility and educational opportunities for the Maya community in Guatemala. Not only have their careers help to set precedence for future female indigenous leaders but they have also generated attention to the plight of the Maya community. Their work has enabled them to individually gain access to their communities, focusing on the needs of widowed women, the disabled and overall population. Even though Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes have all achieved some level of both personal and professional success, their careers, especially that of Menchú, have become synonymous with elements of controversy and gender and racial discrimination.

Rigoberta Menchú, lacked a formal education, and faced controversy after the publication of her testimony, which made it difficult for her to connect with her community. She, however, faced adversity and became the first female indigenous activist to gain international attention by winning the 1992 Noble Peace Prize, running for President in the 2007 and 2011 general elections, and establishing the first indigenous political party WINAQ in Guatemala. Rosalina Tuyuc, not only struggled to gain a formal education as a child, but she dedicated an ample amount of time to her organization CONAVIGUA that received limited support from the Guatemalan

government. Tuyuc resurged from the oppression to build a successful and growing political and activist career. Her appointment as Guatemala's first indigenous female Congresswoman and recipient of the Niwano Peace Prize in 2012, elevated her social position, giving her the platform to continue fighting for justice for the widowed of the war and indigenous inclusivity in the political sphere. Laura Reyes on the other hand, faced obstacles concerning her physical disability, and people within the community questioned whether her identity as a Maya female had been used for political propaganda during the 2011 Presidential campaign of Eduardo Suger. Reyes however, achieved success after working towards developing programs and providing resources for both Mayas and disabled communities.

Menchú, Tuyuc and Reyes have achieved political success in Guatemala, advocating for equal rights for both their communities and for women. Their work, alongside their peers, is seen via the signing of the 1996 Guatemalan Peace Accords. Both Menchú and Tuyuc negotiated for equal rights and delivered speeches for the signing for the Peace Accords, so that the community could one take the necessary steps toward prosecuting the responsible parties for the civil war. This became evident when the former dictator Rios Montt amongst other higher office officials were charged for the genocidal policies they endorsed throughout Rios Montt's reign. This is a profound achievement as indigenous leaders like Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes pushed towards justice. Menchú currently continues to advocate for justice for the wrongful death of her father and those lost during the Spanish Embassy fire in 1983. Reyes on the other hand, is developing educational programs and scholarship opportunities at the Universidad Galileo for the disabled, giving disable indigenous patrons the same opportunity she was

given. Tuyuc works with her organization CONAVIGUA to provide legal aid and provides educational programs for widowed women.

Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes represent a niche inside the Maya community and Guatemalan political sphere. Their work and contributions in politics, social activism, and educational activism helped them to build successful and impactful careers yet, there are still many questions waiting to be answered. To what extent is the Guatemalan government willing to support Maya women in politics? How can the legacy of Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes continue to impact younger Maya generations, once the Guatemalan civil war has become only a subsection in history? Given that the foundation of Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes' careers are based on their direct experiences and emotional connections to the civil war, how will younger generations continue to work towards changing society if they never felt or experienced the conflict firsthand? Nevertheless, there are still many questions waiting to be answered on how Menchú, Tuyuc, and Reyes' continue to build opportunities and provide an inclusive space for all indigenous community members.

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