

**HAND Impact Report:  
Guatemala June 2013**

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## History

Guatemala, a country in Central America abundant with rich farmland, diverse cultures, and plagued by a devastating civil war, has suffered immensely over history. This country, bordered by Mexico and Honduras, with a population of over 15,000,000, has endured endless struggles on her way towards independence. One of the first inhabitants of Guatemala was the Mayan people who still are a significant part of Guatemalan society and culture today.

Beginning in 1519, the Spaniards began arriving in Guatemala, bringing both a new culture with different traditions and disease to the region. These Spaniards remained in the area for approximately 300 years until finally, in 1821, Guatemala became a free country. However, Guatemala's freedom from Spanish rule did not result in freedom for all people. Dictators continued to rule the country for many years afterward.

In 1960, over one hundred and thirty years after Guatemalans "freed" themselves from a tyrannical rule, the people entered into a devastating 36 year long civil war between the rebel fighters, known as the guerillas, and the government. This conflict resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Guatemalan people: both soldiers and innocent civilians. And of those hundreds of thousands of people killed, 86% were Mayans. As seen in *When the Mountains Tremble*, a documentary about the Guatemalan civil war with actual footage from within the conflict, the government soldiers would often enter indigenous communities and massacre all the men and boys, even if the communities were free of guerilla presence. The indigenous Mayan women who survived through this violent time in Guatemalan history, provided accounts in this documentary of hiding in the mountains when the army approached their villages, in order to avoid confrontation.<sup>1</sup>

During my time in Guatemala, I visited a memorial in Santiago Atitlan, a community on Lake Atitlan where the military was based for many years during the Civil War. When the Mayan people came to the army base to protest peacefully, the soldiers opened fired before any talk even began. Fourteen people were murdered that day including a five year-old boy. Unfortunately, this was not an uncommon occurrence. Many situations like this involved the indiscriminate killing of innocent Mayan people. After 36 years of this horrific civil war, Alvaro Arzu was elected president and a peace agreement was signed towards the end of 1996.

Today, Guatemala still remains an incredibly impoverished country. Out of the over 15 million people living in Guatemala, 56% live in poverty, while 1 in 5 live in extreme poverty.<sup>2</sup> These facts apply to the whole country of Guatemala, while the indigenous people of the highlands, specifically women and children, suffer most from poverty. In the whole of Guatemala, chronic malnutrition has reached 49%, meaning almost half of the population does not consume an adequate diet. In fact, this rate is the highest in the region and the fifth highest in the world. Similarly, the rate is even worse in

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<sup>1</sup> *When the Mountains Tremble*.

<sup>2</sup> "The World Factbook," Central Intelligence Agency.

the indigenous regions: 69.5%. The estimated infant mortality rate of 2013 is 24.32 deaths for every 1000 children born compared to 5.96 for every 1000 in the U.S. However, the maternal mortality rate in 2010 was 120 deaths for 100,000 live births compared to 21 deaths for 100,000 births in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Guatemalan people on average only complete 4.1 years of education, compared to the US where the average is 13.3 years. However, this average includes the diverse population of the Guatemalan people: from the wealthy elite to the most impoverished indigenous people. This statistic does not solely look into the Mayan indigenous people, where the rate is profoundly lower. The illiteracy rate for women 15 or older is 59%.<sup>4</sup> More than half of women in Guatemala cannot read or write. This information goes hand in hand with the fact that Guatemala has the lowest primary school completion rate in the hemisphere. And out of every ten kids that enter the school system, only 4 complete primary school and 1 completes lower secondary school. And of these kids lucky enough to be able to have the opportunity to go to a university, this only accounts for 8.5% of youth, encompassing all of Guatemala's population.<sup>5</sup>

The average income for all of Guatemala is only \$4,235 compared to \$43,480 in the US.<sup>6</sup> For example, in California the minimum wage is \$8 per hour. If one person in California worked merely a part time job (20 hours per week), this person would make \$8,320 per year. This is almost double of what a full time laborer would make in Guatemala. And on top of that, these Guatemalan people have a tendency to support multiple children, especially in the indigenous region. This means that this incredibly low income would have to support multiple people.

The UNDP (United Nations Development Program) uses the Human Development Index to rank countries based on "life expectancy, education, and income indices." While the US ranks third in the world on this index for 2013, Guatemala ranks 133 out of 187.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "The World Factbook," Central Intelligence Agency.

<sup>4</sup> "Guatemala," World Food Programme.

<sup>5</sup> "Education," USAID.

<sup>6</sup> "Guatemala," UNDP.

<sup>7</sup> *The Rise of the South*, 144-147.

## **Interviews**

The indigenous population of Guatemala had always been an outnumbered and discriminated group compared to the Mestizos (people of mixed Spanish and Indian origin) of Guatemala. Furthermore, the civil war left these people in emotional and economic turmoil with many women without the man's support and children left without food or money. This is where Mercado Global has come in to play.

Mercado Global is a non-profit organization that was started in 2004 to work with indigenous artisans from rural communities in the highlands of Guatemala. Mercado Global sells these women's products at fair trade prices around the world to raise women out of poverty, send their children to school, and help create a better future for their families. Over the years, Mercado Global has gained a connection with over 36 cooperatives in the Sololá region of Guatemala. Women are provided with workshops from working with money to self-esteem and health-related problems. In addition, Mercado Global has a micro loan program where cooperatives can borrow money to purchase items such as the floor loom or sewing machines to be able to work more efficiently.

Throughout my three weeks in Guatemala, I had the privilege to interview artisans on three community visits, as well as some in the office. I also had the opportunity to participate in connecting with the members of four different cooperatives on the mother-daughter insight trip, which I helped plan and lead. Throughout my time, I interviewed 14 artisans or mothers and daughters of the artisans from four different communities in the Sololá region. For many of these women, they did not graduate middle school, let alone high school, and have multiple children to attend to at all times.

Throughout my interview process, I gathered a similar feeling. The women were incredibly happy to work with Mercado Global and felt the change in their lives, yet they also felt that they needed more production orders to sustain their new way of living. These women described that when they have orders and a steady paycheck they are better able to supply for their families. In most of my interviews, the women commented that they wanted more orders from Mercado Global. I found it interesting to hear that although Mercado global has helped women in so many ways such as gaining self-esteem, manage their finances, and become leaders within their families and communities, there still is so much more to do. These women still need more consistent work so that they can continue to provide for their families in the long run.

These women I interviewed, including the mothers and daughters of the artisans, felt an incredible change through the work Mercado Global has done. They commented how they are more able to provide for their children's needs and one mother of an artisan remarked how she enjoys that her daughter now helps with the finances around the house, instead of just her husband. However, reaching this point in their lives was not an easy process. Many women commented on how they were scared to learn the new techniques for Mercado Global work, such as quality control. Quality control is critically important for these women to adhere to because companies won't accept products that don't meet their retail requirements. These women now understand how important it is to be accurate

in their work so that they don't have to spend time and energy redoing products that don't fit Mercado Global's high standards.

In addition, I noticed how many of the women took a long time to open up to me during the interviews, if at all. At first they wouldn't really want to answer the questions, but with time, they started to feel more comfortable and safe with me. As a result, the women were more willing to answer the questions fully to explain their beliefs.

Besides interviewing women from Guatemala, I also interviewed three sets of mother-daughter pairs (from the silicon valley region) that participated in the Mercado Global insight trip at the end of June. These women and daughters had been planning for this trip for over a year, raising money to fund a new cooperative in Guatemala, and learning more about what they were to encounter. The purpose of this trip was to give U.S. mothers and daughters the chance to interact with indigenous mothers and daughters and break cultural divisions in order to further understand each other. These women and daughters visited two communities, one hospital, and the Mercado Global office in order to learn about Mercado Global's impact on the artisans and the culture and history of Guatemala.

Based on my pre-trip interviews, the daughters, ranging in age from 10 to 14, did not really have a full understanding of what Mercado Global does and how Guatemala is so different from America. On the other hand, the mothers had a fairly sound understanding of the organization, having been to multiple fundraisers for Mercado Global and communicating with Mercado Global staff about their work. Having then been to Guatemala, both the women and daughters were surprised to learn more about what Mercado Global really does, Guatemalan culture, and so much more.

Almost every mother-daughter pair I interviewed said that the best day of the trip was when they got to visit the community of Nahualá, a brand new community for which the girls had raised funds to provide the training needed to work with Mercado Global. They described this experience as crossing over the cultural boundary and being really able to connect with these women. They enjoyed connecting with these women through answering questions and sharing presentations regarding the U.S. market and Mercado Global products in U.S. stores. They also enjoyed both soccer and basketball games with the children of the artisans and the artisans themselves, where it really didn't matter where you were from or what challenges you faced, just that you were playing the game.

In reality, these women's values were very similar. Both sets of women seemed to place great importance on family, education, and work, etc. However, although their values were similar, there are incredible differences in their daily life. Guatemalan women get up early to work for hours on hours during the day with no breaks; they provide food for their family, do chores around the house, and then make their products. The U.S. women I interviewed tended to wake up later to make breakfast and then drive their kids around and either work out, run errands, or go to meetings. At the end of the day, these U.S. women would come home to watch tv, relax, play their musical instruments, and help with some homework. The Guatemalan women would never dream

of watching tv or having the time and money to be able to learn to play an instrument. Finally, they interpreted my question about goals very differently. When I asked both groups what their life goals were, Guatemalan women interpreted this question to describe their families and the goals for their families. However, when asking U.S. women, they focused more on their own goals for their future: whether pursuing music, doing more community service, etc. This doesn't mean that they don't care about their families, just that Guatemalan women more focus on living their lives in order to have a successful family, while people from the U.S. have the chance for both themselves and their family members to succeed.

## **Autobiography**

Traveling to a foreign country on my own was a novelty for me. Though I had gone to sleep away camp before and even visited Europe twice with my best friend, I had never flown alone to a country where I wouldn't know anyone, let alone a third world country with incredible poverty. And I'd definitely never stayed in a house with a family by myself with a different culture and language. So, you could say I was a bit scared. Yet it's not like every teenager gets the chance to travel to Guatemala.

My first impression of Guatemala? Colorful. Everywhere you look you see colors: colorful stores, colorful clothes, colorful people. And then you see poverty: disabled people on the street begging for money; so many scrawny dogs roaming the streets looking sick and malnourished; women or girls sitting on the sides of the street trying to sell the same products as 20 other women just ten feet away. And this was just my brief observation of Guatemala City. As we drove along the countryside I saw so many indigenous Guatemalans in their traditional attire strolling down the streets, whether walking hand in hand with their children, or balancing loads on their head, or even farming on the side of the road. These women and children fashioned the traditional attire of long pieces of fabric rapped around them with belts and the amazingly detailed huipiles, the women's shirts. The men, although mostly in western clothes, would occasionally be wearing the traditional colorful pants that matched the women's attire.

Learning to adapt to a different lifestyle was definitely not as difficult as I expected. I felt safer walking the streets of Panajachel than I do walking some neighborhoods near my own house. The whole family with whom I lived welcomed me into their home, even their parrot Lorenzo. For Guatemala, the house was relatively high end: running water and electricity. However, you could see the vast differences between there and the U.S. The room I stayed in was pretty bare besides a wooden bed and hardwood floors and a little desk.

One of the best things about living in "Pana" was about how inexpensive everything was: from 20 cent cookies to 1 dollar coffee. With very few tourists in the region, there were still multiple women and men attempting to sell the same products along the same streets. The tuk tuk, three wheeled cabs, raced along the streets, avoiding stray dogs and people crossing here and there.

As I became accustomed to daily life, I also had to adapt to my new work life. Before this, I had never worked in an office. In addition, interviewing the artisans and family members was not an easy task. The artisans' first language was not Spanish. They spoke one of three Mayan languages in that region and had either learned Spanish in school or would answer my questions through a translator. It was hard to get across exactly what I wanted the women to answer from my questions and interviewing these women required quick thinking to rephrase questions if a woman did not understand or dropping a question and moving on. I was practically shaking as I began my first interview and even after a few interviews, it was still hard to get the artisans to open up all the time. I tried to act as warmly as possible with the women, yet sometimes it was hard to be convincing since I was so nervous myself. Fortunately, with time, some of the

women were able to speak more freely and answered the questions more thoughtfully and completely. Whether or not I was able to explore as much as I wanted in the interviews I conducted, it opened me up to another culture and people. Though I have visited Guatemala in the past, talking directly to these women created a more personal connection. Learning about their lives enabled me to understand more about how different their lives are from the people around me, yet how they can still value the same things.

This experience also taught me how everything in life comes with a price: food, shelter, and even family. These women work unbelievably hard just to get enough money to put three meals on the table and hopefully send maybe some, but not necessarily all, their children to school. And what do I worry about? New clothes, an iPhone, going on a nice vacation. These women barely have enough money for basic food (usually not including any meat or any high protein food). The expression that many teens in the U.S. use today is “first world problems” when they are half mocking themselves for obsessing about non-essential or insignificant issues. But this expression carries a lot deeper meaning now that I’ve conducted these interviews.

One day in Guatemala I visited Chuacruz, the community I fundraised for as a Bat Mitzvah project in 2009. During this visit, I saw the finished computer lab while talking to the director of the school. Talking to the director really made me realize how much work there is left to do. The computer lab only consisted of six computers, leaving not nearly enough computers for children to be able to learn on appropriately. The director informed me that multiple children had to share each computer during computer classes. Though I saw the school much improved from its original condition, I realized how there were still so many steps to take to further improve it. Nothing can be fixed with a one-time action. This one time donation only helped the school to progress, but didn’t solve everything.

However, probably the most intense moment during my time in Guatemala was on a community visit with the mother-daughter group to San Jorge. This community used to provide jewelry orders for Mercado Global, but with Mercado Global no longer selling jewelry but now making textiles, Mercado Global has been trying to get these women to undertake a two month training to learn how to sew. Unfortunately, not all of the cooperatives in San Jorge participated or agreed to participate in the training, and therefore had not received work from Mercado Global for a long while, creating some tension from within the different cooperatives.

We ate a traditional chicken lunch with the women and had time to talk to them one-on-one. I was casually strolling around jumping in on conversations here and there until I noticed three of the mothers from our trip looking concerned while talking with a young Guatemalan woman holding a very small baby. As I approached the group I kept hearing snippets of conversation involving medical terms. I asked one of the mothers what was happening and she informed me that the baby appeared jaundiced. When I looked over at the child, I noticed he was literally yellow. His skin, his eyes, everything was yellow. And he looked very sleepy. The baby had been suffering from some kind of



liver problem or gall bladder disease since birth and the mothers (all of whom happened to be doctors) were trying to understand what medical treatment this boy had received and what he needed to get better. Though the baby had been hospitalized for a couple months right after birth, he had not received adequate medical treatment or follow up because the family couldn't afford it. According to the mother of the child, the baby needed a surgery and possible medications that would cost a fortune for this family who already had multiple other children. And as the mothers talked with the mother and baby, they learned that the baby really would not have a chance to go back to the hospital because not only was it expensive, but a long ways away as well. And without the treatment necessary, this baby would die. This baby who was not even a year old, had not spoken his first words, had not taken his first steps, was going to die within a couple of months. This was one of the saddest moments I have ever experienced. I could not believe that basically nothing could be done. This hit me hard, but I also realized *this* is why Mercado Global exists: to help these women help themselves. Whether to provide education for their children, a healthy diet, or the necessary health care precautions.

## **Future**

Mercado Global has increased its sales dramatically from year to year and is still working to expand their business in order to provide more opportunities for the indigenous women of Guatemala. With the changing times, Mercado Global has had to make a lot of tough decisions in order to help the majority of their artisans. Some artisans face their line of work losing orders, such as some of the jewelry cooperatives. In the present economy, jewelry materials are overpriced and the handcrafted materials the Guatemalan artisans make can easily be produced at lower costs in factories in Asia. Mercado Global can only offer its help and funds to try and retrain artisans from their previous life's work. These artisans may be scared or worried about changing the practices that their mothers taught them or they may not have the time or money to sustain their family for two intensive months of training.

Mercado Global is still working to create a sustainable future for the indigenous women of Guatemala. Mercado Global understands that one intervention does not solve a problem. The organization always has ideas of how to further improve the lives of the indigenous women; they have no end goal, but rather can always continue improving. The saying, "Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day; teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime," encompasses exactly what Mercado Global is aiming for. Mercado Global shows these women how they can create high-end products that stores all over the world will want to buy while also showing them how to save money to send their children to school and learn about the importance of empowerment. Mercado Global knows that with this new and sustainable way of living, these women will be able to support themselves and their families for a lifetime.

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