Chapter 7: From Public Speaking to Community Broadcasting

(Excerpt from Part Two: Stories of Learning)

“From Public Speaking to Community Broadcasting” (Chapter 7), written by a Guatemalan women’s collective, describes women’s own journeys and those of their communities. In the process, it shows the power of community radio as a tool for the emancipation of women in Guatemala, a way for them to find and channel their voices and their experiences of the long civil conflict and unrest and the discrimination they face as indigenous women. The radio enables them to disrupt negative conventions and exert their social leadership in public-community space.

More information: www.col.org/LearningWithCM

COL’s Healthy Communities programme: www.col.org/HealthyCommunities
“We women are educated in fear. From the time we are little girls, we have not been allowed to express ourselves about anything, much less about the context of war,” said Berta Lidia Ramos in Petén, the northern department of Guatemala. In this Central American country, marked by 36 years of internal war, women have now started to break the silence and community media is playing an important role.

War survivor Elvira Corado, who spent eight years in the mountains during the war, says, “We suffered a lot. We ate what we could. We never stayed in the same place for a long time. If our children were crying, sometimes we gave them pills so they fell asleep and the army wouldn’t hear us. We lived in fear. We had no freedom. We couldn’t meet other women.”

Women’s fears manifested themselves in several ways, in different codes. María Elena Andrés, a member of AMISMAXAJ, a women’s organisation in the Xinka territory, says, “I was ashamed to say hello to people in the streets.” Another woman of the territory says, “I used to walk with my head and my face covered with the rebozo⁷ (scarf).” Freedom of expression was limited by the culture of oppression against women. However, things began to change when women started to organise themselves into associations. Describing her first time speaking to other women in public, one member said, “The first time I had to speak in public, as I started saying hello to everyone I felt like I was going to make a mistake. I thought, What am I going to say? Sometimes I thought I was going to forget even my own name!”

⁷ The rebozo or perraje, worn by indigenous women, is used to cover them from the cold when they are harvesting fruits or vegetables or to cover what is in their baskets. It is also common for Xinka women in Xalapán to cover their heads when they are entering church.
From isolation, women make use of their freedom

The women of AMISMAXAJ have a plan to recover two important “territories”: the body and the land. Women have lived and suffered the structural oppression of patriarchy and racism and the effects of capitalism, including the battle to defend their Xalapán territories (southeastern Guatemala). To recover the body and the land, women use their meetings and the radio, as a tool of emancipation, to communicate.

Women from the Xalapán Mountains are discovering that they can express themselves and establish their thoughts through radio. It provides them with an opportunity to share their ideas and to fight against segregation and subordination. As they speak through the radio, they express how they feel and what they think. In the process they develop an alternate reality with their own voice, one that promotes a collective transformation.

Elvira Corado, co-ordinator of Radio Libertad in Petén, shares her experience:

“My voice was shaking, which happened because I wasn’t valuing myself, because they had made me stop believing in myself. I wasn’t even the half person I am now. Now I feel free to talk to other people. Being able to express myself allowed me to be in contact with other people, to make me grow myself into a leader and start to take my own decisions.”

The women of AMISMAXAJ, a women’s organisation in Guatemala, have found that radio gives them the perfect platform for expressing their ideas and speaking out against patriarchy, racism and oppression of indigenous people.
AMISMAXAJ is the only feminist organisation in the Xalapán Mountain region within the Jalapa Department. The women see an opportunity in the power of communication to dispel the fear ingrained within their society, accumulated during years of war. They take the microphones and set out their point of view. The radio is where they say what they feel and what they hope for. Beyond the radio, they extend their leadership in other social spaces.

A new proposal: We are protagonists of the radio!

“When I developed my voice, my mind developed too. Now I talk to other women through the radio,” says Berta Lidia Ramos from Radio Libertad in Petén.

The women of Finca Santa Rita, in La Libertad municipality, Petén, are fighting to recover their dignity. The idea to establish a radio station at the finca (rural property) came about through meetings held to defend the territories against the construction of a dam. The radios started to broadcast on 13 March 2004 in the north of Petén Department. What was once a jungle is today the centre of the region’s African palm industry. As the industry grows, it takes more and more land from farmers, who are already suffering as a result of historical and structural reasons, leaving them even further impoverished.

Most of those who form Radio Libertad are women. Through the radio they express and defend their ideals. They exert their and others’ leadership, hoping to end their isolation and to begin collective tenure of the land.

AMISMAXAJ members describe their community radio as a space where they can promote the politicisation and transformation of women who have been assigned identities rather than forging their own, and prevented from creating their own realities. The radio is an instrument that accompanies them in this historic fight to disrupt negative conventions and stereotypes, such as:

- Indigenous women don’t talk.
- What women say doesn’t have any value.
- Women must be at home and not participate in public spaces, such as communication media.
- When women meet and share, it’s just a form of gossip. Political themes are only for men.
Through their work using radio as a platform for expression, the women have established a new means of communication for other indigenous women:

- “Women can decide over their own bodies: it is our first territory.”
- “As indigenous women, our life is linked to mother earth. Our fight passes through the defense of our land and our territories.”

The women generate social dialogue when they communicate, and they build capabilities for communication among others. In this way, the women show that it is possible to work for equality and the eradication of exclusion. They are hoping that new generations will not lose this spirit of collectivity — that they will not forget their history of struggle and resistance against a repressive state. Women at Radio Libertad assume positions against megaprojects and genetically modified seeds, and for women’s rights and historical memory.

While thousands of Guatemalans, women and men, awake listening to music and national and international news, at Radio Libertad, Elvira Corado hosts La Estrella de la Mañana (Morning Star), a radio programme that looks to create and shape consciousness. She explains to the people the risks of socio-political sleepiness. She calls on them to defend their territories and their resources.

Petronila says she was so afraid, she cried the first time she spoke on the radio. As the days went by she stopped crying, but she was still shaking with fear. Now, she explains, all the fear is gone. At Totonicapan, the women took control of their own bodies, and this alone is a very important achievement. To use their voices to claim their territory, to develop themselves and their community, is yet another budding achievement.

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For further reference, see:

- World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters for Latin America and the Caribbean (AMARC-ALC) – www.alc.amarc.org (Spanish)