



Conference in Guatemala, March 2009

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It is a privilege and honor to be here today, at such an auspicious time, the day after the passing of the law against trafficking. This country that has been through so much over so long appears in fact to be turning to a new era of opening and flowering, striving for the realization of the rights of women and indigenous people.

Today, I bring you lessons not drawn from any special knowledge of Guatemala, which I do not have, but lessons from elsewhere, because as much as our countries – Guatemala and India - are different and I cannot think of two countries as different as these, we have many commonalities. For instance, it is curious how North East Indian textiles look like textiles from Guatemala. It was probably somewhere and at some time during the colonial era that some trader brought samples from one place to the other, and the result is that today they are very similar!

India and Guatemala are different in size, location, position, but nevertheless we share many things in common. One thing that people who work for development and women's empowerment know quite well is that when it comes to women's empowerment there are many common things around the world that women share, despite differences of countries, nationalities, experiences and history. Commonalities across many places in the world make it possible for us to learn from each other.

In these three short days since I came to Guatemala, I have been learning a great deal about your country: I am impressed by the energy of your leaders and your people, and the commitment to make transformation happen, by the concern to ensure human rights for all, to have them recognized and realized as well. For this reason in my reflection today I would like to share some of the lessons I have learned from the history of my own country.

Based on our experience in India, I will be talking about challenges and issues which may lie before you. Let me share with you my main question on this matter: "what are the essential ingredients to empower women, so that they can overcome poverty?"

We must enquire what key requirements need to be in place so that women can be empowered. I should say something about this: nobody can empower us women, we empower ourselves, but what others can do for us is to create a conducive environment where we can empower ourselves. We need the ambiance, the surrounding of laws, policies, programs that can make it possible for women to realize their full potential and to transform the societies around them, since empowerment of women is not just

realizing women's rights, it is about transforming everything else around us, the entire society. Let us not forget that we are more than 50% of population.

In the support required from outside, the following are essential: first and foremost laws, like the law that was passed yesterday, are essential ingredients to create a proper environment for the empowerment of women. Laws are crucial: among the most important laws are the ones on violence against women, on trafficking in women, those that support women's ability to exercise bodily integrity, including to attain control of their own bodies and reproductive capacities. These laws are crucial, difficult as they may be to pass. Because, if a woman cannot even control her physical body, what empowerment can be possible?

Secondly, we must refer to laws enabling women's control over property and income. I mention the word control in order to make a difference from only nominal access. Having a good law giving women property and inheritance rights is not enough. Women need to be able to actually *control* assets and income. In 2005, India passed a very progressive law against domestic violence. I won't get into details but there was especially one particular issue that the women's movement brought forward in the debate as important, that is, the right not to be thrown out of the household when they complain and raise their voice against violence. As we know, in India the house is often not in the woman's name but normally in the name of the husband, the father in law or other men. Whenever a woman dares to raise her voice against violence, there is a strong likelihood that she will be thrown out of the house. This law for the first time mandates that women must be able to control the space within which they live, or at least have the right not to be thrown out when they stand up against violence. The interaction and interplay between women's ability to control assets and incomes is linked to their ability to withstand violence and difficult situations.

A third area where laws are crucial is related to welfare and labor. There are countries where workers have been fighting for decades to have their rights recognized and defended. This is especially crucial when it comes to the "maquila" where women work for long hours every day with very few rights.

It is true that laws do not change reality by themselves, but they are essential to create the environment where change can happen. Laws must be implemented so that rights can be realized. In India we have many excellent laws - if you simply read our laws you would think we were in paradise. The problem is that many of them are not implemented. We must strive to ensure that there are budgets and implementation mechanisms to turn laws into realized rights. Implementation is a critical part to create a proper environment for the advancement of women.

There is another key issue which refers to women who work outside of their homes for a living, and not only in a maquila, i.e the majority of women in Guatemala. As in my own country, they are workers of the informal sector: women make a living in every way possible, since no significant social security is likely to be implemented in our countries at least in the short term. They need to work no matter if they are sick or otherwise constrained, since no social security will cover them. Because of their desperate economic circumstances, women often work for any form of income. In India we discovered that for women in informal work, to have the capacity to improve income-earning, especially in rural areas, there are 3 or 4 critical ingredients:

The first is technology. In today's world of computers, it is remarkable how fast women, even with low level of education, are actually learning to use new technology in order to improve their skills in the market, negotiating prices, and innovating design. In other words their capacities to engage with effectively with the market are strengthened by technological capacity building, even in the informal sector. There are many experiences that prove that.

Other critical ingredients for women working in the informal sector are credit and market access. I was told that experiences with women's cooperatives are uneven in Guatemala and are not considered necessarily the best option. It is understandable why this would be the case, since it is often difficult to get women to come together because of the history of violence and despair, in a country where for so many years nobody could come together for any reason, without facing the threat of brutality and violence. In our experience though, self help groups, based on credit are not only a vehicle for credit, but for many other changes in society. Women participate in self help groups not only with the objective of earning income, but also because, thanks to the group, they can assure access to a broader area of services, in particular education and health.

Another area which is critical, and I want to mention it here, still relates to women who are working in the informal sector. People tend to forget that indigenous women selling vegetables in the market may also need support for child care. We are so used to see women in the markets, carrying babies and three elder children around. Child care can be a requirement for women in this particular situation. In India, self employed women often declare that childcare is a priority for action. They said that if they breastfeed they would take the babies with them, but the situation must be different for older children who are at serious risk to lose out opportunities for education. Children with no care are victims of poor nutrition and in general a good early start is crucial for the healthy development of children, especially of our daughters. The girls are the most vulnerable of all: when the mother does not have time, it is very likely that the burden will fall on the daughter. Then, in order to help her mother, she will drop out of school and lose her opportunities to be educated and trained. For all the above mentioned reasons, child care is not a luxury: it is an essential demand.

There is also another strategic need for women that must be realized. I do not know about time use studies for Guatemala, but when it comes to India, rural women spend huge amounts of time on fuel and safe water collection. Policies and programs should free those spaces of time use, so that women can devote themselves to earning an income and overcome poverty. In this workshop conditional cash transfers (CCT) have been mentioned several times. CCT have become the most preferred policy to improve health and education in this region. Experience by and large seems to point to success of this tool, however a gender perspective is necessary. Women are often uniquely responsible for reproductive work at home. They work in the care economy, ensuring that the unpaid work at home gets done. When policy makers are to design CCT or others policies, they ought to make sure that they do not place additional burdens on women, since they are burdened enough. In ensuring the conditions underpinning the CCT (attending education and health mainly) one never knows who actually does the work. Is it the mother, is it the daughter pulled out of school? And, given that women's free time is a rare commodity, what is the opportunity cost? What does she have to give up in order to participate in the CCT? Her ability to earn an income? Her own precious moments of leisure? We need to be careful on this aspect.

Two recent reports provide useful guidance about action priorities for policy makers as well as civil society. The Millennium Development Project Task Force on education and gender equality come up with 7 key priority areas of actions I would strongly emphasize you read. Some of them I have mentioned already. They are essential to create a proper environment for empowerment and poverty removal. Another source is the report of the Women and Gender Equity Knowledge Network of WHO's Independent Commission on Social Determinants of Health. The title of the report is "Unequal, Unfair, Ineffective and Inefficient: Gender Inequity in Health and how we can overcome it." The report identifies 5 key actions areas to improve women's health recommended for policy makers.

One other area to be highlighted to promote a helpful environment for empowerment is related to participation in politics. For instance, in many countries, the debate on quotas is still going on and has provoked a huge discussion over the years. India has a quite interesting experience to share, an experience that has been an enormous success on one side but has been a failure on the other. The bad news is that, for the last 6 years or so, we have had a bill pending in parliament, which calls for a quota for women. In almost every parliament session, the Government promises to bring the bill to a discussion and turn it into law. But it never happens. I can tell you that if I live to see the day this quota will be approved, I will be very happy indeed!. As you might know, women's movements in India are quite strong and active. In spite of that, only 7% of members of Parliament are women. It is very likely that women's organizations alone,

with female parliamentarians, won't be able to push quota forward, and turn parliament in a more inclusive and representative body.

But despite this failure for which there are many reasons, we have also witnessed an incredible success on the other side: a constitutional amendment passed over 15 year ago in 1992, indicates that at least 1/3 quota in village councils and urban municipal councils must be reserved to women. Since then, more than a million women have entered politics at the local level. The influence of women has determined programs, policies and budgets in villages all over the country. Given the difficulty in getting the quota in parliament, this amendment to the constitution went through quite smoothly. Probably at the central / federal level members of parliament do not mind too much what happens in village councils! But for women's political participation, it has meant a great deal! Women have transformed priorities of the village councils, increased spending in areas such as health, sanitation, child care centre in villages, and ensuring that nutrition programs work better. Change has happened because women got involved and the above mentioned issues are often women's, not men's priorities. Although the experience is uneven and all sorts of complaints are heard, such as when elected women representatives in the village councils act as a surrogate of their husbands, overall the impact has been very positive. And there is recognition that for women representatives to be effective, they have to be trained; their capacities have to be built.

Finally, I would like to share a thought on gender mainstreaming at the Government and institutional level. There are 4 crucial required skills to mainstream gender, although the very concept of mainstreaming is often criticized. We need positive and strong leadership to mainstream gender equality in government activities. I met your leaders who are impressive. A strategic positioning for women's mechanisms is also essential. Your institution has been placed in the Office of the President. That can put you in a special position which is good, but with each new president you have to win your case again. We must strive to make the structures more systematically built in, so that there is no need for recreation every time there is a change in government. A third requirement is the creation of incentives for those who work in government. We must ask ourselves why people should support the cause of women's empowerment since change is often not welcome since people have to learn new ways of doing things. There are many different ways to create incentives that will encourage public servants, from the lowest to the highest level to welcome change and begin to support it. Lastly, but most importantly, regular budgets are essential to press forward changes. If you do not have money, no matter how strong the leadership or strategic positioning, nothing will change.

Another suggestion concerns academics and civil society support from data and analysis. Our seminar in Antigua yesterday pointed out that the process of collecting

information on indigenous women and everyone else creates possibilities to deepen analysis and take action built on actual data. There is a necessary link between data and action. Governments run on information and money. When you ask something to the Government, you will always be asked for numbers and facts, in order for the public institutions to look for an appropriate solution and take action.

My last consideration is focused on the global financial crisis. No doubt today's Guatemala is caught in an enormous global crisis, along with the rest of the world. One of the major potential dangers in countries like yours and mine is the implementation of double standards to address the crisis. We all remember the damage of structural adjustment in Africa, Asia and Latin America, particularly in key areas that are vital to women's rights and well being, such as education, health and security. We cannot have a situation in the world today, and I say this as a warning, since there are enough signals that are pointing exactly in this direction, where the US and European governments spend trillions in fiscal stimulus while Guatemala or Honduras or Mexico is expected to cut expenditure, tighten the belt and reduce spending. We cannot have the response of fiscal stimulus for the rich countries and fiscal discipline for the poor. If this happens and if the IMF enforces such fiscal discipline, we may end up with worse situations than we saw in the 1990s with structural adjustment. We need to stand up and fight against this, in a coordinated manner. It will be a tragedy indeed for Guatemala in particular, because the flowering, the opening I was mentioning at the beginning will be postponed. Yes, the crisis will end someday. But the needs of women and their families are pressing, and removing the enormous burden of poverty which burdens them cannot be postponed. There is an immediate need to withstand such pressures, find ways around the retrograde forces, and most of all link up with others elsewhere. The crisis must bring forward new opportunities for women to move forward. It cannot be an excuse to postpone the realization of women's rights.