



Forging Women’s Rights

A USAID-funded program facilitates greater access to justice for women in Guatemala



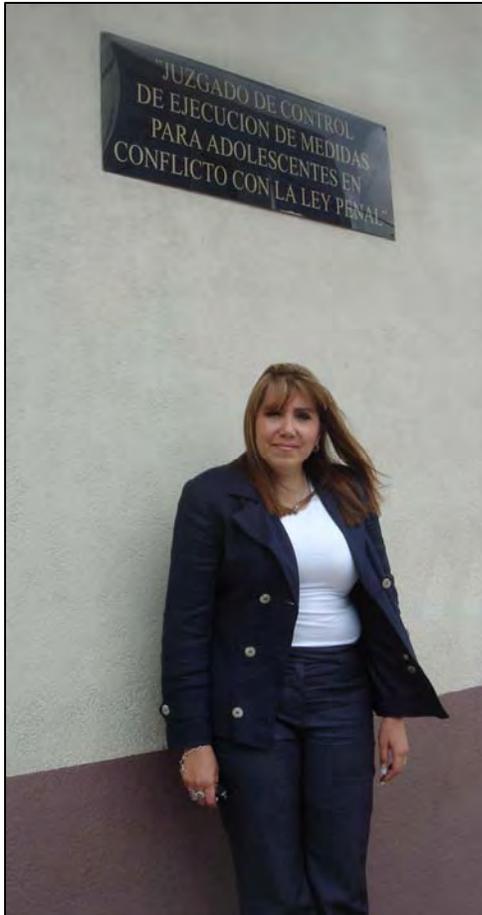
In partnership with the Guatemala Public Ministry and Supreme Court, the USAID-funded Women’s Legal Rights Initiative program, produced and distributed 30,000 posters about violence against women.

The case that really opened Judge Dina Ochoa’s eyes about women’s rights in Guatemala had to do with a 14-year-old indigenous girl who was raped by three teenagers. The perpetrators ended up reaching a settlement with the victim’s parents to buy them a plot of land, and were sentenced to a few months of community service.

The young woman ended up dying—not from physical injuries or from suicide, but from what the medical examiner characterized as post-traumatic stress.

“She died of depression,” Ochoa said flatly. “It was the fact of having been violated without anybody caring about it or considering it important—not the state, not her parents who were her guardians, not the prosecution, not the community, which took these young men back.”

Ochoa presides over a specialized court that oversees the implementation of all criminal sentences in Guatemala involving adolescents, so the young men eventually appeared before her for a hearing. But the sentence could not be altered, and all the judge could do was verify that the teenagers were complying with the terms of their community service.



Dina Ochoa, shown here at the Supervisory Court for Juvenile Sentences, is the president of Guatemala's Association of Judges and Magistrates. She says outrage led her to pursue a master's degree in women's rights, gender, and access to justice.

In her office stacked with files, which doubles as her courtroom, Ochoa—who is president of the national Association of Judges and Magistrates—talked about her outrage over that particular case, which happened about four years ago in the department of Chimaltenango. It drove her to pursue a master's degree in women's rights, gender, and access to justice at the University of San Carlos Law School.

"That really motivated me," she said. "This was a message to the public that women have no value, that women can be objects and can be used at any time."

Ochoa's moment of awakening came at a time of growing consciousness and increased action on women's rights in Guatemala. While nobody believes equal access to justice has arrived, experts point to signs of progress in the last few years: new laws, better training, greater public awareness, and more effective assistance for women who are victims of violence.

A USAID-funded program called the Women's Legal Rights Initiative (WLR) gave early impetus in the right direction and produced lasting results, according to Supreme Court Justice Beatriz De León de Barreda. "It was among the first stepping stones that began to mark out the path to follow," she said.

A Multi-Faceted Campaign

From 2002 to 2006, WLR worked on several fronts to advance the rights of women in Guatemala. Within the judicial system, it provided extensive training in how to bring a gender perspective to the law. Mediators were taught, for example, that domestic violence should be prosecuted, not negotiated.

In the academic arena, WLR Guatemala helped to develop and implement a diploma program in gender and the law at the University of San Carlos, which attracted students from a number of justice sector institutions, government bodies, and civil society organizations. This was followed by the full-fledged master's program in women's rights, gender, and access to justice. The WLR Initiative also sought to raise public awareness about the problem of domestic violence through radio spots in Spanish and five Mayan languages.

Supreme Court Justice De León said the program fostered closer coordination on women's rights among various state institutions, which ultimately led to a more streamlined process for victims of domestic violence to obtain justice. In an interview shortly before her retirement—her five-year term included a stint as the first woman elected president of the Supreme Court (2005-2006)—she also credited the WLR Initiative with giving her the support and encouragement she needed to establish a gender unit within the Supreme Court. That office continues to promote awareness of women's rights and take the lead on gender-related activities in the judicial sector.

Gender Training

One key objective of WLR Guatemala was to train judges and magistrates regarding international law on women's legal rights. Susan Deller Ross, director of the Women's International Human Rights Clinic at Georgetown University's Law Center, led training sessions and had the judges work through hypothetical cases in which gender-related issues might come into play.

Even though Guatemala had ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, as well as the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women ("Convention of Belem do Pará"), most judges and lawyers were not familiar with the treaties, Ross said in a phone interview. That tends to be the case around the world, she added, even though "judges have a responsibility to give people remedies to violations of these rights."

Those who participated in training sessions—not only judges, but also social workers and others who worked directly with victims of domestic violence—were often amazed to learn about the tools at their disposal under international law, Ross said. "They were suddenly realizing they had rights and they could do something about it."

WLR Guatemala also supported gender training efforts at agencies such as the Public Defenders Institute, a government entity that helps defendants who can't afford legal representation. Gustavo Girón, the institution's training coordinator, said the WLR program began by training trainers and then offering workshops to public defenders throughout the country.

Today, courses on defense strategies from a gender perspective are part of the mandatory curriculum for public defenders. In addition, the agency has provided gender sensitivity workshops for all its employees—not just attorneys, but technical, administrative, and even janitorial staff. Trainers from the Public Defenders Institute have also helped lead gender workshops for personnel from other institutions, including police, prosecutors, and judges, Girón said.



At a Victims' Assistance Office in Guatemala City, psychologist Telma Álvarez (seated) and Yolanda Sandoval, head of the Public Prosecutor's Office for Women, interview a 23-year-old mother who came in with a black eye.



Students Astrid Salazar (right) and Aracely López participate in a methodology class in the master's program in women's rights, gender, and access to justice at the University of San Carlos Law School.

The training has prepared the staff at the Public Defenders Institute to better serve clients and the public, several lawyers there said. Under the Law against Femicide and Other Forms of Violence against Women, which took effect in 2008, the Public Defenders Institute has the responsibility to provide free legal assistance to women who are victims of violence. Victims can come in person or call a hotline for help.

Because of the training, anyone who might talk to a victim would have a basic understanding of gender roles in society and the problem of violence against women, said Amalia

Mazariegos, who runs the legal assistance office in Guatemala City. “It helps the women feel, first, that they are being listened to and, second, that they are receiving support,” she said.

Public defenders also are prepared to bring a gender-based perspective to the defense of women charged with crimes, whether it’s a single mother who shoplifts milk for her toddler or a battered wife who kills her husband.

When a woman is charged with a felony, Edith Ochoa—whose job title at the Public Defenders Institute is “gender focus coordinator”—convenes a multidisciplinary team of social workers, psychologists, and lawyers to look at whether the case involves an ordinary crime that requires a traditional defense or whether gender factors come into play. “This is a very professional and very serious effort that takes a lot of commitment,” she said.

One tool at her disposal is the Manual of Gender-Focused Litigation Strategies, which was produced as part of the WLR Initiative. The manual, which lays out academic theories and legal arguments in this field, is used in the master’s program in women’s rights. Edith Ochoa (no relation to Dina Ochoa) said she has also made it available to lawyers and judges who want to have a better grasp of gender-related cases.

The public defender, who obtained her master’s at the University of San Carlos Law School earlier this year, said she had to vigorously defend her thesis on “The Crime of Parricide from a Gender Perspective” and argue why acquittal in certain cases would not amount to impunity. “There’s no impunity because the system of codified criminal law itself gives me the way out and establishes the grounds for innocence,” she explained.

Ochoa proudly points to six acquittals out of seven cases her office has handled in recent years involving women who killed a partner or relative. In one landmark case, a market vendor named Manuela Quino Morales had walked in on her live-in companion as he was about to rape their young daughter. The terrified mother grabbed the nearest tool at hand, a kitchen knife, and stabbed him to death. She was acquitted, based on a battered-woman defense.

Gender in the Classroom

On a muggy evening at the University of San Carlos Law School, María del Rosario Velásquez stressed to her class that the study of gender is not just about women but about the roles women and men play in society, the distribution of power between the sexes, and the dissimilarity of perspectives that may result. It’s important for prosecutors, public defenders, and others to be aware of such differences in handling cases, she said, adding, “Violence isn’t experienced the same by a man as by a woman.”

Gender is not just about women but about the roles women and men play in society, the distribution of power between the sexes, and the dissimilarity of perspectives that may result.

Most of the students attending the class—part of the master’s program in women’s rights, gender, and access to justice—were lawyers who work for various public institutions, with one social worker and a psychologist in the mix.

One topic for discussion this evening was a survey of Guatemalan domestic workers, many of them young indigenous women who live in servant quarters in the employer’s home and work long hours. The study was done by a previous class of master’s students, in collaboration with an NGO that advocates on issues involving domestic workers. The final report was sent to the Guatemalan legislature as a contribution to the debate on proposals related to wages and benefits, according to Velásquez.

The survey found that the average domestic worker in Guatemala made only about one third of the roughly \$190-per-month national minimum wage. Of those surveyed, 51% answered that their salaries were fair, while 32% declined to give an opinion, 14% said they were not fair, and 3% said they didn't know. Velásquez talked about the value placed on housework, pointing out that many women may have felt that it was better to at least be paid something rather than to do the same work at home for free.

One student noted that although the wages sounded low, *las muchachas* also received room and board, and that had to be factored in. Douglas Barillas, the only male student in the class, challenged her use of the word "girls" to refer to domestic workers. The teacher then asked him, "Why is it that you men don't work in people's houses?" Barillas answered that when he was 13, he'd worked in a home as a *conserje*—a word for janitor or caretaker that has the fancier overtones of "conciERGE."

That prompted a good-natured exchange about the terminology used for men and women in similar jobs. "Women are cooks, men are *chefs*," one student said, with a heavy dose of sarcasm. "A man is a designer, a woman is a seamstress," said another.

More seriously, student Abelina Cruz brought up the "double exploitation" faced by many young domestic workers. "The parents send their girls who are 13 or 14 years old to work in people's houses, and then they're exploited again in the homes," she said.

More than 90% of the domestic workers put in full workdays, typically 18-hour shifts, and 85% work holidays, according to the survey. The exploitation goes beyond hours and wages: 36% of domestic workers reported that they had been subject to sexual harassment on the job, while another 30% refused to say.

A majority of domestic workers surveyed also declined to provide their ethnicity; this led to a discussion about the migration of indigenous women to cities and the consequences in terms of their identity. Eulalia Mateo, who belongs to a Maya ethnic group, said many employers don't want their domestic workers to wear native dress. "They sometimes make them wear uniforms and cut their hair," she observed.

The master's degree in women's rights, gender, and access to justice began in 2005, the result of a partnership between WLR Guatemala and the University of San Carlos Law School. Since then, 52 students (three-quarters of them women) have completed the course work, though only 4 have finished their thesis and graduated. Although several others are close to a degree, Velásquez acknowledged that it has been hard for students to get through the demanding thesis process while working full-time.

The current two-year cycle started in early 2009 with 16 students, but a couple of them have had to drop out, according to Velásquez. Money is a challenge for many students. When the degree was first offered, students received full scholarships through USAID; for the second round, they received support from other international donors and Guatemala's judicial branch. To keep the program going, the university now offers scholarships that cover half the annual tuition.



Attorneys Jeydi Estrada and Edith Ochoa of the Public Defenders Institute, both of whom earned master's degrees at the University of San Carlos Law School, have taken a gender approach in defending victims of violence.

René Villegas Lara, who oversees graduate-level programs at the Law School, believes in the program, which he said “has been beneficial in terms of creating leadership among women.” But he explained that the most popular degrees are in specialties with more money-making potential, such as criminal or constitutional law, while the gender study program struggles along with other specialties such as indigenous law and human rights.

“I think that as long as the university’s policy is to help out with a half-scholarship, the program is sustainable. Otherwise, I don’t think it is,” he said.

Velásquez said plans are underway to promote the program more actively within the justice system to raise awareness and tackle stereotypes. Echoing comments by a number of students and alumni, she said many colleagues still turn up their noses at the idea of a master’s in gender studies, dismissing it as a “feminist” idea.



A graduate of the program, psychologist Carolina Morales says she now takes a more comprehensive perspective when she works with clients.

The program gets high marks from alumni, though, several of whom said it had given them a whole new way of looking at the world. Carolina Morales, a psychologist who works for the Public Prosecutor’s Office for Women’s Issues at Guatemala’s Public Ministry, put it this way: “My profession teaches you to listen to the whole person, but with the gender perspective, you listen within the broader social context in which that person is living.”

Morales talked about a 12-year-old boy who had become violent toward his mother and his little sisters. The family situation was complex, Morales said, explaining that the boy’s father considered him the favorite child but also beat him, teaching him by example that the way to show manhood was through violence. The boy’s mother, meanwhile, showed favoritism to her daughters and viewed her son, like her husband, as an aggressor. Morales worked with the boy to help him understand “that violence is learned and we can unlearn it,” and to realize that he could cry and still be a man, that he had “the right to tenderness.” The psychologist said her study of gender roles in society had helped her be more effective with the boy and his family than if she had considered the case from a purely psychological point of view.

In working with victims of domestic violence, Morales has also been able to take what she learned about women’s legal rights established in national law and international treaties, and use that knowledge to help her female clients feel more empowered. “I’m ashamed to say that as a psychologist I had never even opened the constitution before,” said Morales, who completed the master’s and now teaches in the program.

Gender Theory on the Streets

In the densely populated, high-crime municipality of Villa Nueva, just south of Guatemala City, several community leaders—women elected to top positions in their neighborhood associations—sat around a table at the local office of the Public Ministry and talked about domestic violence. It’s a subject they

know all too intimately—perhaps because they have come to a neighbor’s assistance in the middle of the night, or because they themselves have been on the receiving end of a fist.

“We have our own knowledge from inside our own homes,” said Patricia Girón, who has accompanied friends and neighbors to the police and helped women get restraining orders against their aggressors. “That’s why we’re so eager to help the women in our communities. It doesn’t matter what time of day or night it is, they can count on us.”

An offshoot of WLR Guatemala, the volunteer network in Villa Nueva continues to carry on its work, fueled by personal drive and pressing need. The effort was begun by Vilma Dinora Morales, a therapist who was in charge of the Public Ministry’s Victim Assistance Office in Villa Nueva when she earned her diploma in gender and the law at the University of San Carlos. The study program, which preceded the full-fledged master’s degree in women’s rights, required students to develop gender advocacy projects that could be applied in their workplaces or in the field.

Beginning in 2005, Morales developed and implemented a project to train some 50 community leaders to become “legal promoters”—volunteer paralegals who could help victims of domestic violence understand their rights, navigate the legal system, and find the assistance they needed. They developed an illustrated, easy-to-understand training manual to explain the issues involved in intra-family violence and the laws in place to protect victims.

Although some of the original trainees are no longer actively involved, those who are have gone on to recruit others—“multipliers,” as Lesbia Lippman calls them. Lippman is president of a large neighborhood association in Villa Nueva and a member of the original group trained as part of Morales’s project. She has since tapped more than 20 other women in elected leadership positions in their neighborhoods to receive training in how to address the problem of domestic violence. Some of them, in turn, have found other volunteers who are motivated to help.



Reina González, a social worker in the Family Tribunal in Guatemala City, gives advice to Sandra Paque, who fled from home with the clothes on her back. González received training on gender issues under the WLR Initiative.



In Villa Nueva, Aura Cuevas (second from the right), who runs the Public Ministry’s local Victims’ Assistance Office, talks about some of the complex problems surrounding domestic violence.

Noemí Orozco, a fairly recent recruit, talked about a friend who lives with constant pain in her hands and arms due to injuries inflicted by her husband three years ago. When he came at her with a broken bottle, she put up her hands to protect her face, and he slashed her wrists. “I love her not like a neighbor, but like a sister,” Orozco said through tears. “She told me, ‘if this [support system] had been here when he cut my veins, I would have pressed charges.’”

Marleny Negregos, a lawyer who works at the Villa Nueva Justice Center—a one-stop shop that aims to improve citizens’ access to justice—asked Orozco several questions about the woman’s current situation. She encouraged the volunteer to have her friend get a restraining order against

her husband, adding that she could even go to a women's shelter for protection. "She's in danger of losing her life," Negreros cautioned.

Lippman acknowledged that the volunteer work can be dangerous at times. "You never know who the aggressors are and what kind of friends they might have. But God has always been with us," she said matter-of-factly. She told of one young man—not the only one—who had once threatened to kill her. "Well you'll just have to kill me then," she told him, "because I have to help your mother."

"Now when I see him I ask him, 'When are you going to kill me?'" she said with a broad smile. Lippman said she will sometimes sit down with a man who has been violent at home and explain to him "everything that it might cost him" to continue his behavior: time in jail, the loss of employment, a criminal record that would make it hard to get another job.

Although it is clear that people in Lippman's community look up to her, she joked that she's known as "the angry woman" because she confronts troublemakers. Recently, she had grown so weary of a next-door neighbor who constantly yelled obscenities at his wife that she asked the police about her own rights to press charges. As Lippman told it, she then paid a visit to the man's wife and said, "Listen, I already went with you to file a complaint, and I imagine that the court gave you protection measures. You're still putting up with that man, but that's you. I'm not going to put up with him anymore. I'm not obligated to listen to the terrible things he says to you. It's as if he were saying them to me, because I have to hear him all the time. I swear that if I hear him one more time, I'm going to file a complaint." As of three weeks later, Lippman had not heard the man insult his wife again.

After many of the volunteers recounted their experiences, Patricia Girón shared her own story as a victim who had seen the violence in her home passed on to the next generation. One of her sons showed up one day covered with gang tattoos, announcing to her, "Today is the day my father is never going to hit you again."



Marleny Negreros (center) of the Villa Nueva Justice Center comforts a woman who reported being struck repeatedly on the head by her employer.

"If I knew then what I know now, I would have stopped [my husband], because he was causing psychological harm to my children," Girón said, visibly anguished. "I would have put him in prison, but I didn't know. And suddenly I turn around and my son is a gang member." Girón said her husband had eventually stopped doing drugs and drinking, and her son had finally left the gang life behind and was starting to study again. She hoped he could get his gang tattoos removed so he could get a job someday.

The day after Girón poured her heart out to the group, her son was shot to death.

Since Morales started the project to train community paralegals, she has moved on to a Public Ministry job in Guatemala City; she now coordinates networks that bring together public agencies and NGOs around the country to address the problem of domestic violence. In a telephone interview, she said she remains committed to the Villa Nueva endeavor and often volunteers on weekends to talk to community leaders or provide training support.

Morales hopes to create an NGO to be able to raise some funds, at least to cover some of the basic expenses such as

transportation. The volunteers have very little money themselves, she said, but "they figure out how to take victims to where they can get help."

Gender on the Bench

Throughout Guatemala, judges who are attuned to women's rights have plenty of opportunities to apply a gender perspective on the front lines.

Culture dictates that it is the man of the household who takes the lead on legal matters. This creates a special challenge when it comes to reporting domestic violence.

Santa María de Jesús, a predominantly Mayan town of about 25,000 people, is located a few miles outside the city of Antigua, at the foot of the mist-shrouded Volcán de Agua. In 1999, Rafaela Salazar arrived here to preside over the newly established Justice of the Peace Court. Such courts, which were expanded under the 1996 Peace Accords, are the first stop for all manner of legal cases in towns and villages throughout Guatemala.

When Salazar first arrived, people were startled to find that the face of justice was not *el juez* but *la jueza*, and a Mayan woman at that—someone who spoke not only Spanish but Kakchiquel too. "The job here had to do with breaking barriers," Salazar said, noting that "in a *machista* culture, the authorities are supposed to be male."

In fact, she said, culture also dictates that it is the man of the household who takes the lead on legal matters. This creates a special challenge when it comes to reporting domestic violence.

Salazar, who attended the diploma program in gender and the law at the University of San Carlos in 2004, has invested considerable time and energy over the years talking to families and doing community outreach and education. She has hosted bilingual radio programs to talk about women's rights and held "Judge for a Day" competitions in the local schools.

The effort has made a difference, she said: Now when the police arrive at a house to respond to a domestic violence call, or a court representative notifies someone that they need to appear for a hearing, it is often the children who explain to their parents that they should participate in the process. "You have to educate boys and girls to be able to change people's way of thinking," she said.

In domestic violence cases, a victim first files a report with the police; then the case goes to the justice of the peace for immediate action. The justice may issue a restraining order to keep the aggressor at a distance and garnish a percentage of the man's wages to provide some support to the children during a separation. Such measures are provisional, and the case eventually is heard in family court in the departmental capital.

On a bustling Friday afternoon in the town plaza, Ebodia Hernández said she had gone to seek help from *la jueza* several times in the past, back when her husband was being violent. At one point, when she was separated from him and had been granted security measures for her protection, he came after her at her workplace and ended up in jail. "Women have rights, and they have to stand up for themselves," Hernández said, holding the hand of her little girl, Estefaní.



In the town of Santa Maria de Jesús, Justice of the Peace Rafaela Salazar's community outreach included "Judge for a Day" programs in the schools.



“Women have rights, and they have to stand up for themselves,” says Ebodia Hernández (right), shown here with her daughter, Estafaní, and Justice of the Peace Rafaela Salazar.

Once when Salazar was going to be away for a few days, the justice of the peace who would be filling in told her that he thought her court was “too protectionist” and said that women needed to get knocked around once in a while to be put in their place. During the time he was in charge, two “horrendous” cases happened to come up—one involving an older woman who was killed along with two granddaughters, and the other the case of a man who severely beat his wife and chopped off her hair. Despite his prejudices, Salazar said, the substitute justice ended up handing down protection measures.

“It’s as if life was teaching him some lessons over the course of those days,” she said.

The first two years Salazar was in Santa María de Jesús, she could count the number of reported domestic violence cases on one hand; in 2009, by contrast, she had already handled 58 of them by September. During an interview in what turned out to be her last day in her post—she had just received a promotion to a criminal court judgeship in the department of Quiché—Salazar said she viewed her work in addressing women’s rights as “a mission, not a job.”

That sense of conviction is shared by two other judges who were in the diploma program with Salazar: Lucrecia Arévalo, who handles labor, social security, and family matters in the department of Chiquimula; and Midiam Urbina, who handles cases involving children and adolescents in Quiché. Over lunch, the three women said they incorporated the principles they learned about gender and the law into their work. “It definitely transformed our way of thinking,” Arévalo said.

Urbina said that sometimes in a hearing, a husband will do all the talking and the woman will seek his permission to offer an opinion. The judge will have the man step outside so the woman can speak freely. “I tell her, ‘Don’t be afraid, because you have rights.’” One woman whose husband had left her was still living with her abusive in-laws because they had threatened to take the children away from her if she moved out. The judge explained to her that she would not lose her children and that, under the constitution, she was a free person.

“Women don’t know their rights,” Urbina said. “That means we have a great commitment to society to explain their rights to them and to make women aware that under the law they can get out of these terrible situations.” In Chiquimula, Arévalo has worked to change attitudes toward victims of domestic violence and bring about changes in procedures. When a woman shows up with bruises, the judge said, “you help her immediately, without waiting to see whether she has the right paperwork.”

At the time of the diploma program, the three colleagues worked in Justice of the Peace Courts in the department of Sacatepéquez; now, with Salazar’s promotion, they would all be Judges of the First Instance. Arévalo said the gender studies programs at the university played a key role in helping them advance professionally. “There was definitely a response on our part, a sense of empowerment and a consciousness that we wanted to get to the next step,” she said.

When they were at the University of San Carlos, the three judges designed a joint diploma project to provide gender-related training workshops for all personnel in Justice of the Peace Courts in Sacatepéquez. Such training was subsequently expanded to cover Justice of the Peace Courts and Courts of the First Instance around the country, through the Supreme Court's School of Judicial Studies.

After the diploma program, Salazar ended up pursuing a master's degree in criminal law, while both Arévalo and Urbina completed the master's coursework in women's rights, gender, and access to justice—though neither has finished her thesis. Both had been writing about laws that have since been changed, so they now have to tackle the subjects from a different angle. For example, in her thesis Urbina set out to show why DNA testing should be used routinely so that fathers would be forced to recognize their children. The law now calls for that, so she plans to re-search the effectiveness of its implementation.

The three judges agreed that Guatemala had made strides in recent years in the legal arena; for example, under the Law against Femicide, violence against women is now a crime whether or not a woman wants to press charges. But the judges also agreed that in practice, women still face formidable daily obstacles. In the case of a separation due to domestic violence, for example, a woman may have the legal right to a percentage of the man's salary for child support, but if he has 10 or 11 children and isn't earning much to begin with, it amounts to "dividing misery among misery," as Urbina put it.



Salazar, Urbina, and Arévalo (left to right) designed a joint diploma project at the University of San Carlos to provide gender-related training workshops for all personnel in Justice of the Peace Courts in Sacatepéquez.

"Drop by Drop" Progress

Like many of their counterparts in Guatemala City, Judges Salazar, Arévalo, and Urbina said they would like to see more progress in the justice system and more female judges, particularly on higher courts. (In October, the number of women on the Supreme Court went from two to one.) Many lawyers and judges—including some women—still don't take women's rights seriously; occasionally, a male judge is even charged with domestic violence. Arévalo said that among her colleagues at work, she sometimes feels she is being treated dismissively as "the gender lady."

"We women are persistent. It may be drop by drop, but it eventually turns into a river."

*Supreme Court Justice
Beatriz De León*

Speaking in her office in the Palace of Justice in Guatemala City, Supreme Court Justice Beatriz De León acknowledged that the pace of change can seem akin to that of ants building an anthill. But she said the justice system has become much more responsive in recent years to the problem of domestic violence; many Victims' Assistance Offices around the country now provide centralized legal, medical, psychological, and social services so women do not have to spend hours or days getting the protection and support they need.

Institutions are also working more closely together to advance women's legal rights, Supreme Court Justice De León pointed out. And through the University of San Carlos Law School and the Supreme Court's School of Judicial Studies, a growing number of professionals are developing a richer perspective on gender and the law, and are applying that knowledge in their work.

A number of national institutions and international donors have contributed to the advances of recent years, but the retiring justice credited the WLR Initiative with helping to spark initial interest, spread awareness, and build momentum. The work will continue to move forward, she said. “We women are persistent. It may be drop by drop, but it eventually turns into a river.”

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Supplemental Photos



A courtroom on wheels, located outside a Victims' Assistance Center in Guatemala City, is ready to grant victims immediate protection measures.



Lesbia Lippman (right), one of the original trained "legal promoters" in Villa Nueva, has recruited other community leaders, including Patricia Girón (left) and Esperanza Arreaga (center), to address the problem of domestic violence.



At the Public Defenders Institute, Myldred García and other trained staff handle hotline calls from victims of domestic violence.



“Wanted: Men Willing to Walk in Women’s Shoes” reads this poster for International Women’s Day in a social worker’s office.



Attorney Edith Ochoa (right) coordinates defense strategies in felony cases that have a gender focus, such as that of María Isabel Toribio. María was cleared of murder charges based on a gender-related defense and today works on the housekeeping staff of the Public Defenders Institute.



In Villa Nueva, community leaders and Public Ministry staff members work together to respond to domestic violence.