

# RELEASING HUMAN POTENTIAL

## Womens forum offers women in Guatemala a new life education and alphabetisation

María Pérez Sales never went to school. Her mother died when she was seven years of age and since she was the only girl among five siblings, she had to take care of the household. And so she cooked, cleaned and did the laundry, while her father was at work and her four brothers were in school or playing. One time the dinner was not ready when my father came home from work, she told us, and he became so angry that he beat me with the belt so badly until I had welts on my skin. The girl moved to her maternal grandparents after this incident.

### Path of life seems predetermined

Admittedly María had a better life there as the grandparents were good to her. But they also didnt send María to school. She had to herd the sheep. The tranquil time lasted for six years and then the return into the household of her father, an early marriage, characterised by violence and therefore short, civil war, torture and finally the escape to Mexico followed. At the age of 19 María Pérez Sales returns to her home-community San Ildefonso Ixtahuacán, marries and adopts two children. She finally wants to learn how to read, write and calculate. Years go by without her getting closer to her goal. That is what the life of a simple girl in Guatemala can look like.

### Turn of the millennium brings womens rights

The civil war ends formally in 1996 with the signing of a peace contract. This intends that in Guatemala a national womens forum will be established, which is responsible for the implementation of all contents of the peace contracts specifically concerning women, for example alphabetisation of women and the strengthening of their political and social rights. The womens forum ADIMH, Asociación de Desarrollo Integral de Mujeres Huehuetecas (Association for the extensive support of the women of Huehuetenango), represents the umbrella organization Foro de la Mujer, in which all womens organisations of the civil society assemble, in order to stand up for the economic, cultural, political, social and civil rights.

### Women learn to speak up

ADIMH has members in the whole province of Huehuetenango, because the association has established so-called coordinadoras municipales in almost all communities. These small womens offices allow a dialogue between all women. Representatives for the district council are being elected here. These representatives learn in trainings by ADIMH, how they can assert the concerns of women in political institutions successfully, which laws exist for women and which rights all citizens of Guatemala are entitled to. In each district council in Guatemala an office for women is reserved by law. Nevertheless, it is not always easy, to assert this right.

### Mutual assistance

We are told by Maria Felipa, a co-worker of ADIMH in the community San Gaspar Ixchil, how difficult it was for women to establish their own group and to find acknowledgement: The mayor didnt want to hear about a participation of the women in political decisions in the community no matter if it was a law or not. The women were scared to defy him and the opinion of many other men in the community. The ability to assert oneself, willpower and tenacity have proven successful. The women have supported and encouraged each other in the groups and have asserted their demands. Today, there is a womens group in San Gaspar Ixchil and also a representative in the district council.

### Reading and writing as basis

However, what is just as important for women as a political representation is the ability to read, write and to calculate. 39 per cent of the women are illiterate. The project ADIMH offers an alphabetisation programme, because reading and writing are essential prerequisites to find work. Sometimes the lessons take place at the school of the respective location, sometimes also in the backyard of a private house. A plastic-tarpaulin is stretched over wooden frameworks in order to at least be protected of the worst rain or the glowing sun.

María Pérez Sales, who in the meantime is 39 years old, has finally realized her wish: in the ADIMH-school building in the district-capital Huehuetenango she has already completed the course for beginners and is now preparing herself for the next step. In the political and social life of her home-community San Ildefonso Ixtahuacán she is playing an important role.