

Weaving the spoken word through sentipensar: women transforming social norms to influence local governance in Guatemala and Colombia

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Acknowledgement	5
About the Authors	7
About IEPRI and FLACSO	8
Introduction	9
Theoretical Lenses	12
Social norms and participation	12
Intersectionality and differentiated experiences	12
Sentipensar and transformative knowledge	13
Methodological Considerations	14
Mapping Social Norms	14
Social Norms Laboratories and Communicative Action	15
Positionality and Reflexivity	17
Research Context: The case of Leticia and Panajachel	17
Leticia: Colombia	18
Panajachel: Guatemala	20
Legal and institutional frameworks for women's participation: between recognition and reality	22
Findings: transforming meaning through recognition	23
Leticia: men take care of the fire while women take the word	23
"We hold everything together... but we're not always recognized."	24
"We got up at three in the morning so we could participate"	25
"For some, participating takes two hours... for others, three days of travel"	26
"Women's voices must also be at the center"	27
From Invisible Work to Collective Voice	29
"It's not that we don't participate here... but we're not always taken into account"	29
"First, we need to get everything ready at home"	31
Spaces shape outcomes: many women in movement, but not yet a women's movement	31
Change is possible: recognition as the bridge between voice and influence	32
Discussion: From participation to the right to dream, speak and decide	35
Conclusions	37
Recommendations	38
For local governments	38
For civil society organizations, NGOs and Donors	39
References	41

Executive Summary

Across Latin America, important legal and policy advances have sought to expand women's participation in public life. Yet in many local contexts, these formal gains have not translated into meaningful influence. This study explores this gap by asking: how do social norms shape women's participation in local decision-making, and how can they be collectively challenged and reimaged?

Focusing on Leticia (Colombia) and Panajachel (Guatemala), the research adopts a participatory action approach combining interviews, focus groups, and social norms laboratories. Rather than treating women as subjects of study, the project engaged them as co-creators of knowledge and change.

The findings show that women are not absent from participation, they are already active in community and institutional spaces. However, their influence is constrained by persistent norms around care, authority, and recognition. Participation is often conditional: women must balance multiple roles, navigate expectations of "appropriate" behavior, and overcome barriers shaped by ethnicity, education, geography, and age. As a result, participation frequently takes the form of presence without power.

At the same time, women are not passive. They create their own spaces, build networks, and develop strategies to make their voices heard. The study finds that meaningful change emerges not only from institutional reforms, but from collective processes of reflection, recognition, and creativity. Through the social norm's laboratories, women identified what "hurts" and what "heals" their participation, and translated these insights into concrete actions. In Panajachel, women co-created postcards to make their voices visible and recognized. In Leticia, they developed a mural that reimagines gender roles through the idea that men take care of the fire while women take the word.

The study contributes to the literature on political participation by showing that influence in local governance is not only shaped by access to institutions, but by the conditions that enable women to speak, be heard, and remain engaged. Participation, therefore, is not only about being present in decision-making spaces, but about having the time, recognition, and collective support to influence them.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that transforming gender equality in local governance requires moving beyond formal inclusion toward creating relational, cultural, and material conditions for participation from below. When women are able to reflect together, recognize their shared experiences, and imagine alternatives, participation shifts from obligation to possibility—and from presence to power.

Acknowledgement

We express our deepest gratitude to the women of Leticia and Panajachel who participated in this project, both within institutional spaces and in those they have created autonomously. Their courage and vision are transforming social norms and advancing gender equality at the local level.

We also acknowledge the role of the local governments of Panajachel, Leticia, and the Department of Amazonas, whose support made it possible to open spaces for dialogue on gender equality. In their hands lies the possibility of promoting new social norms that integrate equality into everyday life, especially within formal participatory spaces—referred to in this study as “invited spaces”—where diverse voices can be heard.

We extend special thanks to the National University of Colombia, Amazonas campus, as well as to its faculty and administrative staff, to the graduate students and other students—including two artists who contributed to the final touches of the mural—and to the Indigenous undergraduate students for their support. We are especially grateful to Director Eliana María Jiménez Rojas for facilitating the space for the creation of the mural and the autonomous space, which will endure beyond the duration of this project.

Preface



By Johan Lilja, Secretary General, Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy

Around the world, democracy is facing growing challenges. Rising authoritarianism, shrinking civic space, and persistent gender inequalities continue to undermine the ability of citizens to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives. While many countries have introduced legal reforms to strengthen women's rights and political participation, formal equality alone does not guarantee that women's voices are heard, valued, or able to influence public decision-making. Understanding and transforming the social norms that shape participation has therefore become one of the most important challenges for strengthening local democracy.

This report, *Weaving the Spoken Word through Sentipensar: Women Transforming Social Norms to Influence Local Governance in Guatemala and Colombia*, makes an important contribution to this discussion. Drawing on research in Leticia and Panajachel, it explores how social norms influence women's opportunities to participate in local governance and demonstrates how creative, participatory approaches can help challenge these barriers. Rather than portraying women as passive recipients of policies, the report highlights them as knowledge holders, community leaders, and co-creators of democratic change.

One of the report's greatest strengths is its participatory methodology. Through social norms laboratories, dialogue, and artistic expression, the researchers worked alongside women to reflect on lived experiences, identify barriers, and imagine alternatives. The concepts of *sentipensar*, collective reflection, and knowledge co-creation remind us that democratic participation is not only

about institutional arrangements. It is also about recognition, trust, relationships, and creating spaces where people can speak, listen, and shape their communities together. The findings also remind us that local democracy begins in everyday life. Women's participation is shaped not only by laws and policies, but also by the invisible expectations surrounding care, authority, and whose knowledge counts. By making these dynamics visible, the report provides valuable insights for local governments, civil society organizations, and development partners seeking to create more inclusive and equitable democratic institutions.

At ICLD, we believe that local democracy is one of the strongest foundations for peaceful, sustainable, and resilient societies. Research such as this helps bridge academic knowledge and practical action, offering new perspectives on how local governments and communities can work together to strengthen democratic participation from below. I warmly commend the authors for producing a report that is both academically rigorous and deeply grounded in the experiences of women themselves. Their work offers timely inspiration for anyone committed to advancing gender equality, strengthening democratic participation, and ensuring that local governance truly reflects the voices of all citizens.

Visby, Sweden

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Johan Lilja', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Johan Lilja,
Secretary General, ICLD
August 2026

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About IEPRI and FLACSO

The Institute of Political Studies and International Relations, IEPRI, of the National University of Colombia, founded in 1986, is a prominent center for research and analysis of national and international political reality, which has contributed to the renewal and expansion of political studies in Colombia from interdisciplinary and comparative perspectives.

The Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences - FLACSO Academic Headquarters Guatemala, has the aim to reconceptualize and strengthen the social sciences in the country through research, the training of individual and collective capacities, and the dissemination of knowledge to contribute to the construction of democracy and alternative development from a plural and inclusive perspective.

Introduction

“Muchas veces solo escuchan; muchas veces no las dejan hablar... tienen voz, más no voto.”

“Many times, they only listen; they don’t let them speak... they have a voice, but no vote.”

(Interview with a social leader reflecting about constraints that indigenous women face to voice their needs, Leticia 2026)

“La vara con la que se mide la participación de las mujeres es más alta.”

“The standard used to judge women’s participation is higher”

(Focus group with women leaders, Panajachel 2025)

Efforts to advance gender equality in Latin America have led to the development of significant regulatory frameworks in countries such as Colombia and Guatemala. Both nations have adopted policies aligned with international commitments, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5) and recognize, in their constitutional frameworks (Colombia 1991, Art. 40, 43 and Guatemala 1985, Art. 4) the right to equal participation in public life and in decisions affecting one’s own life and community. However, this right is unevenly realized, as social norms, structural inequalities, and institutional limitations continue to restrict women’s effective influence. While considerable academic and political attention has been devoted to formal policy and normative reforms, for instance laws creating quotas or parity laws, socio-legal scholarship also reminds us that legal and policy changes do not automatically translate into effective participation (Krook & Mackay, 2011; Lovenduski, 2020). The persistence of unwritten social norms, those invisible rules of behavior that dictate traditional roles, continues to limit the agency of female leaders and prevent laws from materializing into tangible impacts in local territories (Mackie & Moneti, 2014; Pearse & Connell, 2016). As presented in the quotes above, social norms continue to define who is heard, who is recognized, and ultimately, who decides.

This study builds on the tension between formal laws that declare a right to equal participation in the decisions affecting people, and the everyday expectations and directives that limit the possibility of women to influence the decisions affecting them. We explore the social norms of participation in local politics, but also how women navigate, resist, and reshape these norms in two distinct local contexts.

These norms operate as structural barriers that transcend written law. In both Colombia and Guatemala, women remain underrepresented at national, regional and local political arenas. Women represent more than half of the electorate in Guatemala but held only 3,5 % of mayoral offices¹ and 16 % of municipal council² seats after the 2023 elections. In Colombia, despite quota and parity legal reforms (Rodríguez Pico 2024; Rodríguez Pico and Barrera 2024), women occupied only 13,2% of mayors in the 2023 local elections and 18,8% of municipal councils (ONU Mujer 2023).³ Moreover in both countries indigenous women remain particularly underrepresented in formal politics. Despite Indigenous peoples representing around 44% of Guatemala’s population, the 2024–2028 Congress includes only nine Indigenous deputies (5.6% of all seats), among them only two women.⁴ While Indigenous peoples represent approximately 4.4% of Colombia’s national population, they constitute the majority population in the Amazonas department (where Leticia is the capital), with Indigenous communities accounting for an estimated 55–60% of the inhabitants.

These inequalities are shaped not only by institutions, but also by social norms that inform everyday life. In the Colombian Amazon and the Guatemalan Altiplano, women continue to carry disproportionate burdens of unpaid care, subsistence work, and community responsibilities. Educational gaps have narrowed nationally, yet indigenous and rural women still face lower access to higher education, political networks, and

1 <https://emisorasunidas.com/2024/01/03/mujeres-electas-cargos-publicos-guatemala-2023/?utm>

2 <https://www.ojoconmipisto.com/solo-16-por-ciento-integran-concejos-municipales-son-mujeres/>

3 <https://colombia.un.org/es/255500-%E2%80%98cumbre-nacional-de-mujeres-electas%E2%80%999-m%C3%A1s-de-120-nuevas-mandatarias-locales-establecen-sus>

4 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/279781/Guatemala-General-elections-Final-report.pdf?utm>

economic resources, limiting their influence in decision-making spaces (CEPAL 2022).

As scholars have argued, exclusion is not uniform but intensified by intersecting factors such as ethnicity, class, language, geography, disability and age (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). Focusing on women, particularly indigenous and young women, therefore makes visible how power operates through both formal institutions and the invisible rules that define whose voice counts, who has time and resources to participate, and who is recognized as capable of deciding.

Within this broader context, our study distinguishes between two types of participatory arenas:

“invited spaces,” (Gaventa 2006) designed by state authorities as arenas of formal governance, and “self-made spaces,” created autonomously by communities to voice their needs. While invited spaces, such as participatory planning committees, street offices, participatory budgeting initiatives, one-stop offices, are intended to democratize decision-making, it remains an open question to what extent they enable meaningful inclusion or instead reproduce existing hierarchies and gender roles. Similarly, self-made spaces—such as cooperatives and grassroots groups—may offer opportunities for women to negotiate norms and exercise leadership, though their role in influencing formal governance processes is still debated (Agarwal, 2001; Vargas & Urinboyev, 2015).

This distinction points to a deeper gap in the literature. While research on gender and governance has examined institutional reforms, quotas, and policy frameworks (Waylen, 2014; Rodriguez Pico and Barrera 2024), less attention has been paid to how women’s actual influence is shaped and potentially transformed through everyday social norms and lived practices, particularly in small municipalities where governance is most immediate (Phillips and George 2023; Björkdahl and Somun-Krupalija 2020; Bouka et al. 2019; Waylen 2014; Chappell 2006.). The review by Phillips and George (2023) notes that there is

comparatively little evidence on how social norms affect women’s ability to exercise influence once they enter local political arenas, including through local party dynamics, community expectations, and informal political networks. Similarly, Waylen (2014) argues that formal reforms often coexist with informal institutions that can reinforce existing power hierarchies, making it difficult to assess whether greater inclusion translates into substantive influence. Bouka et al. (2019) studied the role of social norms in Kenya demonstrating that women’s participation remained constrained by local social hierarchies and informal practices even where formal opportunities for engagement exist.

Thus, previous studies have shown that norms can restrict participation, but there is still limited understanding of how these norms can be challenged in practice through locally grounded, collective processes, especially beyond large-scale interventions such as media campaigns or formal training (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). Moreover, intersectional dimensions, (i.e., how norms are experienced differently across ethnicity, class, language, age, and territory), remain insufficiently explored in empirical, action-oriented research, particularly in Latin American contexts where indigenous governance systems, territorial inequalities, and cultural diversity shape participation in distinct ways (Radcliffe, 2015; Ulloa, 2016). While scholars such as Weldon (2006) and Goetz (2003) have demonstrated that women’s political experiences and opportunities for influence are differentiated by intersecting social inequalities, there remains limited understanding of how these dynamics are negotiated within everyday local governance settings and processes of collective action.

This study contributes to this debate by moving beyond diagnosis to experimentation, exploring how creative, participatory and arts-based approaches, such as social norms laboratories, can create spaces where women not only participate, but collectively reflect, challenge, and reimagine the norms that shape their political influence.

Against this backdrop, our research seeks to answer the following two central questions:

- *How do prevailing social norms shape women's influence in local decision-making in Panajachel and Leticia?*
- *How can participatory and creative methodologies support women in collectively challenging and reimagining these norms?*

To address these questions, we draw on a social norms and intersectional theoretical framework (Crenshaw, 1991), understanding norms not only as shared expectations that regulate behavior (Bicchieri, 2005), but also as embedded in power relations shaped by gender, ethnicity, age, territory and class. We also engage with feminist and decolonial perspectives, particularly those that foreground situated knowledge, voice, and the politics of recognition (Lugones, 2007; Escobar, 2018; Quijano 2007), emphasizing that participation must be understood from the lived experiences of women in specific cultural and territorial contexts.

As the analysis progressed, we observed that participants did not simply identify or describe social norms; they reflected on how those norms made them feel and how those feelings informed their willingness to challenge them. The concept of *sentipensar*, rooted in the work of Orlando Fals Borda (1970; 1987) became particularly useful for understanding this process, as it highlights the integration of emotion and critical reflection in the interpretation and transformation of social reality. Through this lens, norm change emerges not only from new ideas or information but also from the collective articulation of lived experiences, emotions, and aspirations.

Methodologically, we employ a participatory action research design (Fals Borda 1991) using a social norms lab approach. This combines participatory action research with experiential and arts-based laboratories, equipping women with pedagogical tools to collectively reflect on and challenge the

norms that shape their participation. Rather than treating women as subjects of study, this approach positions them as co-creators of knowledge and agents of change, bridging analysis with practice.

Our research journey illustrates how social norms function as invisible anchors that prevent possibilities “to dream in different colors”, as it was expressed by a collective of women with visual disabilities in Panajachel. In invited spaces, women's participation is often limited to consultative roles, constrained by time poverty and caregiving responsibilities. In self-made spaces, however, women demonstrate resilience and creativity, forming cooperatives and grassroots organizations that provide both economic support and platforms for political engagement, combining house and care work. By focusing on the lived realities of women in Panajachel and Leticia, we aim to contribute new knowledge on how local governments can collaborate with communities to break gender-unequal norms and foster transformative participation.

Theoretical Lenses

This study draws on three complementary conceptual lenses: social norms, intersectionality, and *sentipensar*, to understand how women's participation in local governance is shaped, constrained, and potentially transformed.

Social norms and participation

Social norms are understood as shared patterns of behavior sustained by collective expectations about what individuals do (descriptive norms) and what they are expected to do (injunctive norms) (Bicchieri, 2005; Cislighi & Heise, 2018). These norms operate as informal rules that regulate behavior through social approval, disapproval, and sanctions. In the context of gender, norms define roles, responsibilities, and power relations between men and women, shaping who is considered legitimate to participate in public life (Pearse & Connell, 2016).

A growing body of literature highlights the role of gender norms in limiting women's participation in governance by assigning them primary responsibility for unpaid care work, restricting their access to resources, and undermining their legitimacy as leaders (Kabeer, 2016). While formal institutions may open spaces for participation, norms often determine how these spaces are experienced in practice. As such, participation cannot be understood solely through institutional design, but must be analyzed in relation to the social expectations that shape access, voice, and influence.

Thus, at present, there are clear efforts to materialize the abstract principles of participatory democracy through a wide repertoire of participatory spaces and mechanisms; however, there is also a tendency toward instrumentalization and an excessive focus on procedures rather than on their real political impact (Duque, 2018).

This study also builds on work examining spaces of participation, particularly the distinction between “invited spaces” created by institutions and “self-

made spaces” generated by communities (Cornwall, 2002; Gaventa, 2006). According to Mirafteb and Willis (2005), these are “spaces of citizenship affirmation through which individuals strive to exercise their constitutional rights beyond formal spaces that often exclude their needs and priorities” (p. 201). While invited spaces should aim to democratize decision-making, they often reproduce existing hierarchies, whereas self-made spaces may provide more meaningful opportunities for agency and collective action.

Intersectionality and differentiated experiences

To capture the diversity of women's experiences, this research adopts an intersectional approach, which examines how gender interacts with other axes of inequality such as ethnicity, class, age, language, and geography (Crenshaw, 1991; Cho, Crenshaw & McCall, 2013). Intersectionality is particularly relevant in contexts such as Colombia and Guatemala, where Indigenous and rural women face compounded barriers linked to historical marginalization, territorial exclusion, and limited access to education and political networks (Radcliffe, 2015). Inequalities operate not only through differential access to decision-making spaces but also through unequal recognition and unequal influence. For instance, indigenous and rural women may be formally included in governance processes yet continue to face obstacles in having their knowledge, experiences, and priorities recognized as legitimate sources of authority, limiting their capacity to influence collective decisions (Hernández Castillo, 2016). Huencho and Saavedra (2024) study of indigenous women in Chile also points to the limited capacity of the state to recognise the differentiated barriers women faced because of their ethnicity.

This perspective challenges the idea of “women” as a homogeneous category and highlights how participation is shaped by multiple, overlapping forms of power. For example, indigenous women

may face both gendered expectations and racialized exclusion, while younger women may navigate different opportunities and constraints than older generations. Similarly, women with disabilities may face specific forms of exclusion linked to lack of accessibility, dependence on support networks, social stigma, and limited representation in community and decision-making spaces. Understanding these differences is essential for designing more inclusive approaches to participation and governance.

Sentipensar and transformative knowledge

Finally, the study is informed by the concept of *sentipensar*, rooted in the work of the sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (1987), which integrates thinking and feeling as a way of producing knowledge grounded in lived experience. *Sentipensar* aligns with participatory action research traditions, emphasizing that knowledge is not only analytical, but also relational, emotional, and collective. The notion of *sentipensar* emerged from the everyday knowledge of fishers in the Colombian Caribbean, whose expression was later adopted and developed by Orlando Fals Borda. The term refers to the integration of thought and feeling, challenging the separation between reason and emotion that often characterizes conventional research. Fals Borda used *sentipensar* to describe an approach to knowledge that combines critical reflection with lived experience, recognizing both cognitive and affective dimensions of understanding social reality (Rey-Sinning, 2024).

In this study, *sentipensar* functions both as a conceptual lens and as a methodological orientation. It recognizes that transforming social norms requires more than changing attitudes; it requires creating spaces where people can collectively reflect on their experiences, build trust, and imagine alternatives. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding how women navigate participation not only as a political act, but also as a process of recognition, identity, and collective agency. These processes open up possibilities for transforming

social relations and influencing policy from below, through everyday practices, collective organization, and creative expression.

By combining social norms theory, intersectionality, and *sentipensar*, this framework allows us to move beyond institutional explanations of participation and toward a more grounded understanding of how power operates in everyday life. It also provides a basis for exploring how norms can be collectively challenged and reimagined through participatory and context-sensitive processes that start at the local level and can lead to more influence in key political decisions of local governments.

Methodological Considerations

This study adopts a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach (Fals Borda 1991), emphasizing the co-production of knowledge and the active involvement of participants in understanding and transforming social realities. This approach was particularly suited to exploring social norms affecting women's participation, as it enabled a flexible, context-sensitive process grounded in local experiences. The research was structured in two phases: (1) mapping social norms in invited and self-made spaces of participation, and (2) implementing social norms laboratories.

The study was designed as a multiple case study, focusing on Panajachel (Guatemala) and Leticia (Colombia). These cases were selected due to their participation in the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) network of local governments committed to advancing gender equality. This institutional linkage facilitated access to key stakeholders and enabled the research to connect with ongoing local processes. While a shared methodological framework guided the study, its implementation was adapted to each context, allowing responsiveness to local dynamics.

Throughout the 10-month project, the research teams met bi-monthly to coordinate activities, share tools, and reflect on emerging findings. This iterative exchange ensured coherence while maintaining contextual sensitivity. The process culminated in a binational reflection workshop in Bogotá (April 2026), where the full research team analyzed results and identified shared insights. An online public event was also organized to discuss findings with local government representatives, social leaders, ICLD, and the Swedish Embassy.⁵

The project was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the National University of Colombia. All stages followed ethical protocols, including written informed consent, confidentiality, and a “do no harm” principle. Given the participatory nature of activities such as mural and postcard creation,

consent was treated as an ongoing process, particularly regarding the use of images and personal narratives. Participation was voluntary, and efforts were made to ensure safe and inclusive environments, including support for transportation, flexible scheduling, and accessibility for participants with disabilities.

We engaged with questions of power, representation, and reciprocity that are central to participatory action research. Local university students, including members of indigenous communities in Colombia, participated as junior researchers, strengthening cultural sensitivity and shared ownership of the research process. The project was developed in collaboration with the National University of Colombia and FLACSO Guatemala, building on existing relationships and longer-term commitments to knowledge exchange. A recurrent question from participants was, “What is in this for us?” This prompted us to place greater emphasis on co-ownership and tangible outcomes. The mural and postcards became important because they were not simply research outputs but creative artifacts that participants could shape, use, and claim as their own. In this sense, the action component of the project—which had initially been viewed as a potential limitation to feasibility—proved essential. It created opportunities for participants to see their experiences recognized publicly and for the research process to contribute, however modestly, to the changes they sought to make.

In addition to the main research process, the project included two complementary components: a mapping of tools used by local governments to address gender norms and the development of a policy brief. While not analyzed in detail in this report, these components are closely connected to the overall research design.

Mapping Social Norms

In both Leticia and Panajachel, a qualitative and participatory methodology was implemented, combining document review, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions (Rodríguez Gómez et al. 1999). Research instruments were jointly

5 See link to the recordings of the presentation: Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4A1WSU0iqMg>

designed and adapted to local contexts. Particular care was taken to respect indigenous governance structures, collective decision-making processes, and local knowledge systems. The process aimed not only to collect information, but also to create spaces for dialogue, reflection, and mutual learning.

In Leticia, fieldwork was conducted between November 2025 and April 2026. The process began with stakeholder mapping and engagement with indigenous women leaders and public officials working on gender equality. Access to participants was facilitated through local networks and relationships of trust. A total of 25 interviews were conducted, complemented by informal conversations to address emerging themes. Two focus groups followed: one with 13 women leaders from diverse Indigenous and community-based organizations (including AZCAITA, MUTTEYI, and Los Maníes), and one with seven public officials. These discussions explored gender roles, time poverty, participation barriers, and strategies of agency. They also enabled the identification of key participation spaces, including the *Mesa Permanente de Coordinación Interadministrativa*, MPC (Standing Committee on Interagency Coordination, (invited space) and self-managed spaces such as the *maloca* (ancestral house)⁶ and *chagra*.⁷

In Panajachel, fieldwork was conducted over three visits between November 2025 and February 2026. It included eight interviews with local authorities and representatives of women's organizations. In addition, during the first visit, a focus group was held with women leaders representing the Community Development Councils (COCODES), as well as a group interview with male leaders. These consultation activities were aimed at mapping gender social norms, participation spaces, and barriers. During the second visit, a second focus group was conducted with women from Panajachel and nearby municipalities, focusing on participation trajectories and generational

changes from an intersectional perspective. This phase enabled the identification of key institutional and community-based participation spaces, as well as barriers and opportunities shaping women's political engagement. In Panajachel, interviews were complemented by detailed field notes to allow more fluid dialogue. The methodology used during this phase open the door to the more participatory aspects of the research, developed during the next phase. Some transcriptions were done manually, while others were processed using a secure digital transcription tool (Google Pinpoint), following ethical protocols to ensure confidentiality and restricted access.

Data were analyzed using thematic categorical analysis (Rodríguez, 1996), focusing on key dimensions such as gender norms and roles, barriers and consequences of participation, and the characteristics of institutional and autonomous spaces.

Social Norms Laboratories and Communicative Action

The second phase consisted of Social Norms Laboratories, designed as participatory spaces to collectively reflect on and challenge gender norms. These laboratories were short, intensive workshops (one to two days, with follow-up activities) combining dialogue-based, arts-based, and socio-affective approaches.

In Leticia, two workshops were conducted in February 2026. The first workshop, *Tejiendo la Palabra de la Mujer* (Weaving the words of Women), brought together 29 participants to identify norms that “hurt” and “heal” women's participation. The second workshop focused on the co-creation of a mural representing alternative gender relations. Following institutional approval, the mural was collectively painted over several days under the leadership of one of the researchers.

⁶ The *maloca* is an Indigenous place of gathering that takes shape as a meeting space where the spoken word converges, knowledge is strengthened, and various healing dances are carried out, making it a fundamental spiritual and communal space.

⁷ The *chagra* is an essential space where food is cultivated and prepared, and around which daily life is organized. The *chagra* holds great importance, as from the moment of planting, a direct relationship is established with nature and with Mother Earth, who enables the production of food.

In Panajachel, the laboratory validated previous findings and led participants to prioritize the lack of recognition of women's participation. Based on this, women chose to develop a communication action. Through workshops and follow-up exchanges via WhatsApp and online discussions, they co-created postcards, selecting their own photographs and messages.

The laboratories followed a flexible structure: (1) trust-building activities, (2) collective reflection, and (3) co-creation of a communication output. In Leticia, culturally grounded practices such as the *Mantel de la Palabra* (Tablecloth of the Word) and rituals of harmonization were incorporated.

In Panajachel, the process extended beyond the workshop through iterative engagement.

The communicative action required to move traditional research workshop formats to engage with images, messages and strategies of outreach. This phase highlighted the importance of flexibility, as several outputs emerged organically. It also demonstrated the value of producing tangible outcomes owned by participants, moving beyond extractive research practices toward processes that generate recognition and collective meaning.

Method	Leticia (Colombia)	Panajachel (Guatemala)
Interviews	24 total interviews with indigenous women leaders and public officials (mixed gender)	8 interviews with women: • 3 representatives from government at the senior (executive) level • 2 female council members • 3 representatives from civil society (including 2 elected representatives from the COCODEs)
Focus groups	2 focus groups (total of 20 participants) Focus group 1: 13 women leaders Focus group 2: 7 government officials	2 focus groups (total of 20 participants) Focus group 1: 10 women representatives from COCODEs Focus group 2: 10 women representatives from civil society organizations, including Indigenous women and mestiza women.
Workshops / Labs	2 workshops Workshop 1: 29 participants (20 women and 9 men) Workshop 2: 18 participants (14 women and 4 men)	1 workshop on social norms 10 women leaders representing social organizations 1 group feedback session with 8 women (social leaders) to share the materials produced and reflect on the importance of building a political agenda, given that national and local elections will take place next year.
Creative outputs	Mural co-created with participants	Postcards co-created (photos and messages selected by participants) 1 reel to share in social media

Table 1. Summary of research methods

Positionality and Reflexivity

Access to participants was built through relationships of trust and the diverse positionalities within the research team. In Leticia, this was made possible through the leadership of Clara Isabel Ávila Ramos and José Manoy Muyuy Ojeda, both indigenous students at the National University of Colombia, whose roles as a community leader and an artist grounded the research in local realities. In Panajachel, Ana Silvia Monzón, a recognized feminist scholar, facilitated dialogue across academic and community spaces, while Paula Flores and Marcela García contributed analytical and artistic approaches.

The broader team combined local and external perspectives. Researchers such as Sergio Lesmes (anthropologist) and Clara Rocío Rodríguez, Yency Contreras (political scientists), and Juan David Acosta (philosopher) brought comparative and methodological rigor. Finally, Ana María Vargas, based at Lund University in Sweden, but also with experience of research in the Colombian Amazon, contributed to the reflexive workshop in Bogotá and, together with Ana Silvia Monzón, Clara Rocío Rodríguez and Yency Contreras guided the theoretical and methodological analysis.

At the same time, we recognize that differences in power, knowledge, and positionality shaped access, interpretation, and outcomes. The knowledge produced is therefore situated, reflecting both the strengths and limitations of these relationships. While efforts were made to minimize extractive practices and foster co-creation, the research remains embedded in broader structures of power that cannot be fully undone.

Research Context: The case of Leticia and Panajachel

This chapter situates our study within the specific realities of Leticia in the Colombian Amazon and Panajachel in the Guatemalan Altiplano, two territories where social norms profoundly shape women's access to local governance and services. While both regions operate under national frameworks that formally recognize gender equality, everyday practices continue to be governed by unwritten rules that assign women primary responsibility for family well-being.

Description	Leticia (Colombia)	Panajachel (Guatemala)
Areas	5,968 km ²	22 km ²
Total Population	54,927 (2022)	15,077 (2018)
Population identified as Indigenous	46.39%	76.26%
Major economic activities	Public administration, health, and education Commerce and tourism Small-scale services and microenterprises	Tourism Commerce and services Small-scale agriculture
Geographical location	Located in the Colombian Amazon in the international border with Tabatinga (Brasil) and Santa Rosa (Perú)	Located in the Atitlan Lake, an important international tourist and cultural site of the Maya community.

Table 2. Socio-demographic Description of Leticia and Panajachel

Leticia: Colombia

Leticia, the capital of Colombia's Amazonas department, is located at the southernmost tip of the country in the heart of the Amazon basin. It occupies a strategic position along the left bank of the Amazon River, forming part of the so-called "Triple Frontier" with Tabatinga (Brazil) and Santa Rosa (Peru). This unique border setting shapes the municipality's economic, social, and cultural dynamics, creating a highly interconnected and transnational urban area. Unlike most Colombian border regions, Leticia maintains continuous terrestrial and urban interaction with Brazil, alongside river-based connectivity with Peru, linking it to regional hubs such as Iquitos.

The municipality covers approximately 5,968 km², most of which is dense rainforest with critical

global ecological functions. Its territory includes 16 indigenous reserves and multiple riverine communities, where mobility and livelihoods depend on river systems such as the Amazon, Cotuhé, and Amacayacu. These geographic conditions contribute to high levels of economic informality, estimated at 91.9%, as daily life often transcends formal national boundaries (Cámara de Comercio del Amazonas, 2024). Leticia thus represents a multicultural and interethnic space where biodiversity and cultural diversity intersect.

With an estimated population of 54,927 inhabitants, Leticia is demographically balanced by sex (49.8% women and 50.2% men) (DANE, 2022; Alcaldía de Leticia, 2024). Around 72.4% of residents live in the urban area, while 27.6% reside in rural zones. Notably, nearly half of the population (46.39%) identifies as indigenous,



Figure 1. Map of Leticia, Colombia
Source: Created in-house using AI Copilot

reflecting the municipality's strong ethnic composition (DANE, 2022). Migration from other regions of Colombia, combined with historical processes such as extractivism, armed conflict, and displacement, has further contributed to Leticia's multicultural character.⁸

Leticia has also become a key destination for victims of forced displacement and the impacts of Colombia's internal armed conflict have been highly gendered. Women represent a significant proportion of those affected by displacement, and indigenous women are disproportionately impacted by violence, including forced recruitment of their children, sexual violence, and targeted killings. Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a critical concern. Women account for the vast majority of victims while most perpetrators are known to the victim, often within family or social networks. Structural factors such as alcohol consumption, entrenched social norms, and barriers to reporting, including stigma and partner control, contribute to the persistence and underreporting of violence (Gobernación del Amazonas 2019).

Economically, Leticia generates 73.9% of the department's value added, driven primarily by public administration, health, education (34.5%), and commerce and tourism (24.6%) (Alcaldía de Leticia, 2024). The business structure is dominated by microenterprises (97.3%), typically generating low employment levels. While the local economy has shown resilience, growing by 13% between 2016 and 2023, it remains highly dependent on cross-border trade and air connectivity, making it vulnerable to external shocks.

Women face significant structural inequalities in this context. Female unemployment (10.1%) exceeds that of men (7.8%), and disparities are greater among youth (Alcaldía de Leticia, 2024). Informality limits access to social protection, disproportionately affecting women. Poverty is also unevenly distributed: 63% of indigenous women live in monetary poverty, compared to 47%

of Afro-Colombian women (Alcaldía de Leticia, 2024). The Multidimensional Poverty Index stands at 48.4, reflecting deficits in employment, health, and basic services.

Social norms further constrain women's participation. Care work is heavily feminized, with women, particularly indigenous women, spending up to three times more time on unpaid labour than men, and 90% of rural women primarily engaged in domestic work (Gobernación del Amazonas, 2019). Early pregnancy affects one in five adolescents, limiting educational attainment; only 17% of women access higher or technical education. Despite higher health service utilization, systemic failures, such as the delivery of only 17% of cytology results, restrict access to effective care (Gobernación del Amazonas, 2019).

Overall, Leticia's geographic isolation, multicultural composition, and border dynamics create both opportunities and constraints. Within this context, entrenched gender norms, economic precarity, and structural inequalities shape the conditions under which women participate, or are excluded, from local decision-making processes.

8 <https://ierna.sinchi.org.co/informe/06-dinamicas-sociambientales-en-la-amazonia-2022/>

Panajachel: Guatemala

Panajachel, officially named San Francisco Panajachel, is one of the 19 municipalities of Sololá and the main gateway to Lake Atitlán. Its origins trace back to precolonial times when it was known as Ahachel or Panahachel, meaning “lugar de cañas y matasanos” (a place of canes and quacks). During the colonial period, Franciscan influence shaped its religious and cultural identity, which remains visible today in the church of San Francisco de Asís and other heritage sites. Over time, Panajachel evolved into a vibrant tourist hub, attracting both national

and international visitors, and positioning itself as a central node of cultural and economic exchange in the region.

Geographically, Panajachel covers 22 square kilometers on the northern shore of Lake Atitlán, at 1,597 meters above sea level. Its climate is tropical, with rainy seasons from May to October. The municipality is divided into 11 sectors, mostly urban, with Santander Street as its commercial and cultural heart. Tourism is anchored in the natural beauty of the lake and surrounding volcanoes, complemented by Maya traditions and artisanal

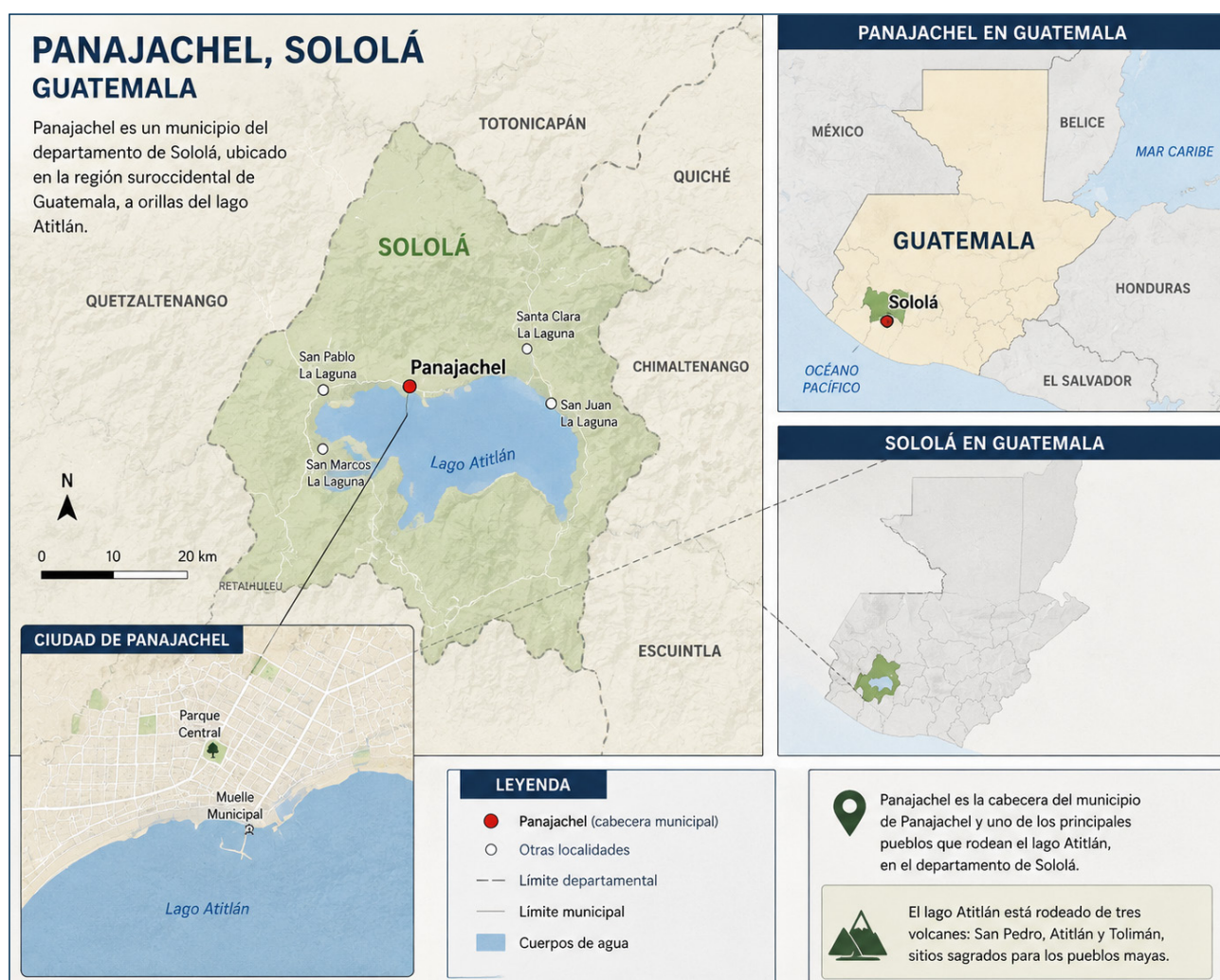


Figure 2. Map of Panajachel, Guatemala
Source: Created in-house using AI Copilot

markets. This tourism economy has historically reshaped land use, social relations, and local livelihoods, often privileging external investors and visitors over indigenous residents.

Demographically, Panajachel had 15,077 inhabitants in 2018, with a majority (76.26%) identifying as indigenous, predominantly kaqchikel Maya. Most of the population is urban, and the municipality is divided into 11 sectors, only one of which is considered rural. Women slightly outnumber men (51.8% vs. 48.2%), and the average age is 27.7 years. There are relatively high literacy rates (89.9%) and schooling averages (8.17 years, above the national mean). Socio-economically, Panajachel presents a mixed picture. Poverty affects 41.7% of its population, with 3.66% in extreme poverty. Yet, its Human Development Index (0.73) surpasses both departmental and national averages, especially in health (0.92), which may be explained by relatively better access to healthcare and services linked to tourism activity and urban concentration in the municipality. Education, however, lags behind, with challenges in retention and progression beyond primary school. Women, especially in rural and indigenous communities, face compounded disadvantages in accessing higher education and stable employment (Municipalidad de Panajachel 2020).

Historically, tourism has been a double-edged sword. Since the late 19th century, Panajachel has attracted visitors, and by the 1970s it became a countercultural destination for “hippies.” This influx brought economic opportunities but also gentrification, rising land prices, and cultural commodification. Foreign ownership of property and businesses often relegated local women to low-wage service roles, reinforcing structural inequalities. The term “gringotenango” reflects this transformation, where external presence reshaped identity and access to resources. Women, particularly indigenous women, have borne the brunt of these dynamics, balancing caregiving responsibilities with precarious labor in tourism and commerce.

Culturally, Panajachel is rich in heritage, from the “Museo Lacustre” and “Casa de la Cultura” to vibrant artisan markets. These spaces showcase Maya traditions and women’s craftsmanship, yet commercialization often undervalues their contributions. While women play central roles in sustaining cultural practices and family economies, their participation in formal decision-making spaces remains limited. Social norms rooted in patriarchy and machismo continue to restrict women’s influence, even as they shoulder significant responsibilities in households and communities.

In sum, Panajachel embodies both opportunity and inequality. Its strategic location and cultural wealth have fostered development, but tourism and gentrification have deepened socio-economic divides. Women’s participation is constrained by structural barriers, land ownership, education gaps, and gendered labor roles, yet they remain pivotal in sustaining cultural identity and community life. Understanding these dynamics is essential for analyzing how social norms shape women’s ability to engage in local decision-making processes and influence the conditions that affect their lives.

Legal and institutional frameworks for women's participation: between recognition and reality

Women's political participation in both Leticia (Colombia) and Panajachel (Guatemala) is shaped by evolving, yet uneven legal and institutional frameworks. Both countries have advanced in formally recognizing women's political rights through constitutional provisions and international commitments such as CEDAW and the Convention of Belém do Pará. Colombia has developed a broader and more binding legal architecture, including quota and parity-oriented legislation (only for appointed positions, not for elected ones, nor for the participation of women as candidates on party lists), national gender policies, and specialized institutions. Guatemala, although lacking binding parity laws, has made important advances in strengthening women's participation at the municipal level through the mandatory creation of Municipal Women's Offices and Directions (OMM/DMM) in all municipalities, as well as local gender planning mechanisms.

However, in both contexts, a persistent gap remains between formal recognition and women's lived experiences. Limited budgets, dependence on political will, weak institutional coordination, and persistent patriarchal norms continue to restrict women's effective influence in local decision-making spaces, pointing to a broader regional challenge in translating legal advances into substantive equality in Latin America.

At the municipal level, both countries have created institutions intended to promote women's participation. In Panajachel, the Municipal Offices for Women's Affairs (Direcciones Municipales de la Mujer, DMM) serve as key entry points for women's engagement. In Leticia, the Women's Advisory Council (Consejo Consultivo de Mujeres, CCM) plays a similar role, supported by municipal policy (Acuerdo 027 de 2019).

However, in both contexts these institutions share similar limitations:

- Low and unstable budgets
- Dependence on political will

- Limited capacity to influence core decisions such as budgets and planning
- Weak coordination with other sectors of government
- These spaces are generally informative or consultative rather than decision-making, and they tend to reproduce the participation and continued presence of a small layer of leaders, without generating broader impact on grassroots organizations and communities.

As a result, these spaces often operate as consultative or symbolic platforms, rather than arenas of real decision-making. This aligns with the findings of the study: women may be invited to participate, but their capacity to influence outcomes remains constrained. It is also affected by the centralization of meeting locations in areas that are difficult for indigenous women to access.

A key difference between the two cases lies in the structure of governance. In Leticia, participation is shaped by a context of institutional and legal pluralism, where state institutions coexist with indigenous governance systems. Spaces such as the Standing Committee on Inter-Agency Coordination (*Mesa Permanente de Coordinación Interadministrativa*, MPCCI), although not designed specifically for women, are perceived as more influential because they connect directly to resource allocation and intergovernmental decision-making (between the local government and the indigenous authorities). Indigenous women, in particular, engage strategically in these "formal spaces", privileging those where decisions "actually happen," even if they are not explicitly gender-focused. At the same time, this plural system creates tensions. The coexistence of ordinary law (e.g., Law 1257 of 2008 on violence) and indigenous justice systems generates gaps in protection and accountability. Participation is therefore not only shaped by access to spaces, but by the interaction between different normative orders.

In Panajachel, by contrast, the institutional framework is more unified, but participation is shaped by fragmentation across social groups. Women participate

through multiple channels such as COCODEs⁹, NGOs, community organizations, and municipal structures, but these spaces are weakly connected. Differences in education, ethnicity, class and access to resources create parallel forms of participation that rarely converge into a shared political agenda.

Across both cases, a central tension emerges: legal frameworks assume that participation is accessible and equal, while women's lived realities reveal otherwise. In Leticia, geography becomes a structural barrier. Participation mechanisms exist, but for women in remote river communities, attending a meeting can require days of travel and significant costs. Without resources for transport, participation becomes conditional or "assisted," often dependent on external actors. In Panajachel, the barriers are less geographic but equally structural. Participation is shaped by social hierarchies and norms that determine whose voice is valued. Indigenous women, particularly those with less formal education, face greater challenges in being recognized as legitimate political actors, even within formal spaces. A noteworthy situation in Panajachel is that of women with disabilities and indigenous women, who in recent years have made visible the multiple disadvantages they face and have put forward demands to the local government to assert their recognition as citizens and political actors.

The comparison shows that both Colombia and Guatemala have made important advances in recognizing women's political rights. However, the challenge is no longer only legal; it is practical, economic, cultural and relational. In Colombia, the challenge lies in moving from formal inclusion to effective influence, particularly within complex governance systems. In Guatemala, the challenge concerns both access and influence, due to weaker affirmative measures and persistent structural inequalities. Ultimately, the legal framework opens the door, but it is social norms, resources, and power relations that determine who can truly enter, speak, and decide.

Findings: transforming the meaning of social norms through recognition

This section presents the findings of our study by addressing the research questions through a narrative approach. Rather than presenting results as isolated variables, the analysis is structured as a story of how social norms shape, constrain, and are contested in women's participation in local decision-making. To preserve the richness and specificity of each context, the findings are first presented separately for Leticia (Colombia) and Panajachel (Guatemala). In each case, we examine: (1) how prevailing social norms shape women's influence in local decision-making in Panajachel and Leticia, and (2) how participatory and creative methodologies support women in collectively challenging and reimagining these norms.

Leticia: men take care of the fire while women take the word



This idea *that men take care of the fire while women take the word*, became a guiding principle in the design of a communication piece in Leticia, a Mural. During the activities of this research project, the group of women who participated, including indigenous university students, teachers, women elderly leaders and other

⁹ COCODES (Community Development Councils) are formal spaces for participation that seek to channel the community's voice into development planning, although in practice their influence may vary depending on the political and territorial context.

leaders met at the Maloca (ancestral house) located at the National University. This space who is used by students and visitors to exchange the word has been traditionally a place where women take care of the fire while men circulate the word.



Clara Isabel Ávila who led the research in Leticia and was also a student of the Master program in Amazon Studies explained how she had been claiming the need to strengthen women's spaces, to share traditional knowledge. Clara, who is also part of the Inga Indigenous group and the other women leaders used to meet and share traditional foods such as Caguana. They used this research project to proposed the creation of a space called "Palabra de Mujeres" (Women's Word) every Thursday in the afternoons in the Maloca at the University. This space in some contrast with the Friday Mambaderos¹⁰ a space usually reserved to Men. Through these conversations they collectively reimagined roles within the maloca (ancestral house), proposing a symbolic shift in which men assume responsibilities traditionally associated with care and sustenance, while women move to the center of the *círculo de la palabra* (circle of the word). In the mural, this inversion is visually represented by women being at the center and men being engaged in activities of care, as a way of making visible a shared aspiration: that women's participation in public and political spaces requires not only being invited to

speak, but also a redistribution of the everyday labor that sustains community life. More than a metaphor, it became a concrete expression of how transforming social norms involves both rethinking roles and creating the material conditions for women's voices to be heard.



"We hold everything together... but we're not always recognized."

In Leticia, women in our workshops agreed their participation is deeply embedded in everyday life, yet systematically undervalued. Across focus groups and interviews, women described themselves as the "fundamental basis of family and community life" [focus group with women, Leticia], responsible for sustaining food systems, cultural transmission, and community cohesion. However, this central role does not translate into recognition in decision-making spaces. In the focus group on social norms, several women explained that, in order to be present in institutional spaces, women in Leticia had to struggle; but even when they were pushed out, they kept returning until they succeeded in becoming visible.

This lack of recognition is particularly visible in the undervaluation of women's knowledge. One woman at the focus grouped "mantel de la palabra" described how, after expressing interest in joining an Indigenous technical committee, she was told that her role would

¹⁰ Mambe is a sacred Amazonian Indigenous preparation made from ground coca leaves and plant ash. It plays an important role in spiritual, social, and political life, facilitating the *palabra dulce* ("sweet word")—dialogue, knowledge-sharing, and collective reflection. Practices concerning its use differ among indigenous peoples, with some traditions restricting consumption primarily to men while others include women as users and custodians of mambe knowledge.

be to “serve us coffee, water, and all that,” while another leader questioned her competence, stating that “if you don’t know what you’re doing, you can’t get involved.” They also explained how women are often denied authority as knowers and decision-makers. The knowledge of *abuelas* (elder women), *parteras* (midwives), and traditional healers is similarly sidelined in favour of Western institutional frameworks, reflecting a broader hierarchy between formal and ancestral knowledge systems. As a result, women’s contributions—especially those of Indigenous women—are not equally legitimized.

Gender norms are reinforced through multiple layers of control. Women reported that, even when they participate, they are often expected to remain silent: “Often they just listen... they don’t let them speak” [interview, Government official in the Direction of ethnic issues in Amazonas Department]. In other cases, they are present but excluded from decision-making: “they have voice but not vote” [same interview]. These dynamics reproduce a gap between presence and power. As one Indigenous woman noted, participation often occurs on terms that limit women’s agency: “many times they only listen ... they have a voice but not a vote.” Her account illustrates how social norms can allow women to be physically present while restricting their authority and influence. Yet her reflection also reveals that such norms are not static. This leader explained how the introduction of a quota through Ordinance 045, which guaranteed the inclusion of one woman from each Indigenous territory, was seen as a significant shift because it moved women from being observers of decisions to becoming recognised participants in decision-making processes. This suggests that formal institutional changes can create opportunities for challenging entrenched gender norms, although the meaningful exercise of influence remains an ongoing struggle, one influenced by social norms.

At the same time, participation is shaped by intersecting inequalities. Gender, ethnicity and geography combine to deepen exclusion. For women in rural and river communities, participation is not

only socially constrained, but materially limited by distance, cost and infrastructure. As one official noted, simply attending a meeting can require resources far beyond what many women can afford [interview with government official of the Departement of Amazonas]. These barriers are particularly significant in the Amazonian context, where communities are often accessible only by river or plane and participation may require long and costly journeys. As a result, opportunities for participation are not equally available to all women, and those living in more remote territories face additional challenges in ensuring that their voices are heard in decision-making processes. This suggests that exclusion cannot be understood solely in terms of social norms. Women’s opportunities to participate are also shaped by the geographic realities of the territory, which interact with existing gendered responsibilities and inequalities.

“We got up at three in the morning so we could participate”

Women in Leticia navigate these constraints through significant personal effort and collective strategies. A central theme across the findings is what some scholars called time poverty. Women described waking up at 3:00 a.m. to prepare food, organize the household and ensure that care responsibilities are fulfilled before attending meetings or training [focus group with women, Leticia].

Participation, therefore, is not a simple act but requires planning, negotiation and sacrifice. Women must ensure that “everything is left ready” to avoid social judgment for neglecting their roles as caregivers. This reflects a powerful social norm: participation is only acceptable if domestic responsibilities are not disrupted. When women are unable to fulfill all their roles, they are sometimes told that they live “*vidas desordenadas*” (unorganised lives). They are thus stigmatised for not prioritizing taking care of their homes and instead being attending meetings about political issues.

Despite these constraints, women actively seek

autonomy. Many pursue economic independence through entrepreneurship, including the production and sale of handicrafts and traditional foods. Yet participants repeatedly noted that achieving economic independence requires overcoming significant time constraints linked to gendered expectations of care and domestic work. As one indigenous woman noted, “Sometimes we do not have time for our businesses, and we do not have time to express the ideas we have in mind.” This observation suggests that women’s influence is shaped not only by whether they are invited to participate, but also by whether they have the time and opportunity to develop, articulate, and advance their ideas in public and community spaces. However, this can generate tensions within households, particularly when traditional gender roles are challenged. As one participant explained, “many times, when I raise my voice or try to set a limit, I face of violence...some form of physical abuse, and, tragically, in some cases, this can lead to death. It is a very risky situation for us,” [interview, indigenous woman. This illustrates those efforts to exercise greater autonomy and influence are often constrained not only by social expectations but also by the risks women face when contesting established power relations.

At the same time, women are building forms of resistance and solidarity. The research identified processes of collective organization, intergenerational learning and mutual support. Reflecting on the space “Palabra de Mujer” (women’s word) created at the National University, one of the participants of the social norm’s lab, explained that one thing that heal her is having these kinds of spaces. She said: “What empowers us is that in these spaces, we find ourselves in environments of empathy and understanding... We allow ourselves to share emotions that we wouldn’t share in other settings. It’s also important—as we’ve already mentioned—to sustain these spaces and talk about them with the younger generations so that, for example, girls and boys alike will seek out these spaces to continue strengthening these processes”. Women emphasized the importance of sharing experiences, learning from one another and strengthening their

voice. As one reflection from the process highlighted, participation becomes meaningful when women recognize that their struggles are collective, not individual.

Emerging changes in masculinities also appear as small but significant shifts. Some women described how partners, sons or younger men are beginning to take on care roles, allowing women greater freedom to participate. While not widespread, these examples point to potential pathways for transformation. As one participant mentioned “These spaces should not only strengthen discussions around shared responsibility for caregiving, ensuring that caregiving is not seen as solely a women’s responsibility, but also actively include men in order to foster dialogue, facilitate agreement-building, and promote the communication of those agreements” (Notes from Mantel de la Palabra).

“For some, participating takes two hours... for others, three days of travel”

Participation in Leticia is profoundly shaped by space, both physical and institutional. A key finding is the centrality of geography in structuring who can participate and how. While urban women may attend meetings within hours, for “women of the river” participation can mean days of travel and unaffordable transportation costs [interviews and focus groups, Leticia]. This creates a form of de facto exclusion, where formal participation mechanisms exist, but are inaccessible in practice. As a result, participation often depends on external funding (e.g., NGOs), producing what can be described as “assisted participation” that is not sustainable over time or that lead to co-optation of their own agendas. This reflection was provided by the government official leading the implementation of the gender policy in the Department of Amazonas. He explained how he spent 400 million pesos (approx. 100.000 EU) in a process to socialise the policy.

Institutionally, there is also a tension between spaces. While municipal mechanisms such as the *Consejo Consultivo de Mujeres* (Women Consultive Council)

exist in Leticia, they are often perceived as having limited influence. In contrast, women, particularly indigenous leaders, strategically engage in spaces like the Permanent Inter-Administrative Coordination Roundtable (MPCI) where decisions about resources and development are made. Unlike the “women’s council” which has limited budget, the coordination table coordinates the competences and resources given by the government to indigenous authorities. This space of participation is considered as more important because a significant number of economic resources are decided there.

At the same time, self-managed spaces in Amazonas (Colombia), such as the maloca (ancestral house) and the chagra (traditional agro forest gardens) emerge as critical arenas of participation. During the Mantel de la Palabra, the participants mentioned the importance of having a physical space for women to share their knowledge. As one participant mentioned *“Well, I sing, I write, I paint, and I teach. But where can this knowledge be shared, and how? How can younger generations become involved, and in what kinds of spaces?”* (Notes Mantel de la Palabra). In response, they proposed establishing a community-led ‘living school’ for the transmission of ancestral knowledge, including strengthening *malocas* (traditional communal houses), creating additional spaces for learning, and engaging those individuals who still possess this knowledge, recognizing that much of it has already been lost among many community members.

The meetings we conducted as part of this research were made at the Maloca “Case Hija” at the National University of Colombia, campus Leticia. Victoria Lasprilla who teaches at this campus reflected on an interview about the role of Maloca’s for women to share their knowledge. She said:

What is needed here as well are women’s words, women’s guidance, women’s counsel, and the nurturing or harmonizing qualities they bring—all of those principles that are deeply rooted in local indigenous traditions, but that really need to be made more visible and given greater space.

When Indigenous women speak in the Maloca, their voices bring other perspectives that are also essential. (Interview Professor Victoria Lasprilla)

During the conversations with women indigenous leaders in Leticia, the role of the chagras (traditional agro forest gardens) is often present. They brought to the meetings a pineapple, an avocado, some casava or something to share from their chagras, a place traditionally led by women. Professor Victoria reflects also on the role of chagras’ for the political participation of women and mentions that *“If you do not have a chagra, if you do not know how to weed a cassava plant, how can you possibly know how to organize people’s work? ... The chagra is the first school for forming a family and for governing”* (Interview Professor Victoria Lasprilla).

The Maloca and Chagra are not only physical spaces, but social and spiritual ones. In the maloca, “nace el pensamiento colectivo” (Collective thinking is born) and the “palabra” (word) circulates without bureaucratic mediation. In the chagra, women sustain food sovereignty, economic autonomy and cultural continuity.

However, even in these spaces, gender norms persist. Traditional spaces such as the *mambiaderos* (traditional Indigenous communal spaces in the Amazon where men gather to share coca (*mambe*), exchange knowledge, and discuss community matters) continue to be dominated by men, limiting women’s participation and voice. The creation of the space “Palabra de Mujer” at the Maloca at the National University is an attempt to challenge these norms. To show that women have also significant knowledge to be shared.

“Women’s voices must also be at the center”

Despite these constraints, the findings reveal important openings for change. A key insight is that transformation is closely linked to reclaiming voice and space. Women expressed a strong desire to be heard, to participate meaningfully, and to see their knowledge recognized. The following table collects some of the reflections that women share during

the social norms laboratory about the constraints the experience to voice their needs.

These testimonies reminded us of the concept of sentipensar, where knowledge is produced through the inseparable connection between feeling and thinking. Participants described women's spaces as places where "people speak what comes from the heart" and where

there is freedom to express "what one feels and what one thinks," highlighting the affective and relational dimensions of voice, knowledge, and participation.

The social norms laboratory process made visible how collective reflection can shift perceptions. By creating a space where women could speak freely, share emotions and imagine alternatives, the process

Theme	Original quote (Spanish)	Translation (English)
Women are placed behind	"Yo creo que en la maloca también lo discriminan a uno. No, las mujeres atrás de los hombres." [Transcript...io Leticia Word]	"I think women are also discriminated against in the maloca. Women are placed behind the men."
Women's initiatives are not allowed	"Anteriormente en las organizaciones indígenas, hablar de propuestas para mujeres, de proyectos, eso era como un pecado." [Transcript...io Leticia Word]	"Previously, in Indigenous organizations, speaking about proposals or projects for women was almost considered a sin."
Male monopoly over decision	"¿Por qué la mesa técnica indígena que hace la articulación entre las organizaciones y la gobernación estaba representada por solo hombre?" [Transcript...io Leticia Word]	"Why was the indigenous technical committee that coordinates between organizations and the regional government represented only by men?"
Questioning women's knowledge and capacities	"Muchas veces uno también juzga a las personas porque creen que no tenemos el conocimiento, las capacidades."	"Many times, people judge us because they believe we do not have the knowledge or the abilities."
Lack of attention to women's voices	"Hay poca atención a la voz femenina, también poco respeto y poca escucha a la voz femenina; todavía necesitamos esos espacios de escucha para la mujer."	"There is little attention paid to women's voices, as well as little respect and little listening to women's voices; we still need spaces where women are truly heard."
Speaking comes with a cost	"Apoyemos más a esas mujeres que hablan duro porque no es fácil."	"We should support women who speak out strongly, because it is not easy."
Women speaking from their heart	"Se habla lo que sale del corazón."	"People speak what comes from the heart."
Women-only spaces as spaces of expression	"Cuando hay espacio solo de mujeres con libertad para hablar de lo que se siente y de lo que se piensa."	"When there are women-only spaces, there is freedom to speak about what one feels and what one thinks."

Table 1. Women's reflections about their voices (Leticia)

strengthened their sense of agency and collective identity. Symbolically, the idea of placing women at the center of the “word circle” brought up by the participants reflects a broader aspiration: to move from being present but unheard, to being recognized as legitimate actors in decision-making.

At the same time, the findings highlight that change requires addressing both structural and normative barriers. This includes bridging the gap between institutional frameworks and indigenous governance systems, redistributing care responsibilities, and ensuring that participation mechanisms are accessible in practice, not only in theory. Ultimately, the Leticia case shows that transforming social norms is not only about changing attitudes, but about reconfiguring relationships between knowledge, care, territory, and power, so that women’s voices are not only included, but central.

Panajachel: From Invisible Work to Collective Voice

“Knitting together... we move forward!” was the collective slogan chosen by the women in Panajachel to be highlighted in the piece of communications produced as part of this research project. During the social norm’s laboratory, we discussed several alternatives to use a communicative piece that could help women in Panajachel increase their visibility and articulate their struggle for recognition. A final vote was made and the idea of making postcards was selected, reflecting on the touristic destination that Panajachel represents and the need to send their message to other women. Through the postcards, they decided how their faces, voices, and colors would be seen, recognized, and carried beyond their immediate spaces. This collective process of making themselves visible reflects a deeper aspiration: not only to participate, but to be acknowledged, connected, and remembered as part of a shared movement toward greater influence in local decision-making.



“It’s not that we don’t participate here... but we’re not always taken into account”

In Panajachel, women’s participation is not absent. Women are present in COCODEs (Community Development Councils), women’s committees, community initiatives, NGOs, cultural spaces, business networks, and autonomous collectives. We met with different organizations, such as the group of women with disabilities called “women with capacity to dream in colors” and ME TOCA, a feminist collective using art such as the theater of the oppressed to

change social norms. These organizations support community-based groups of women entrepreneurs that have organised to support each other and earn a livelihood. However, the findings show that their participation continues to be shaped by gender norms that regulate where women should be, how they should behave, when they are recognized as valid interlocutors, and when their voices are considered legitimate.

The first constraint appears in the private sphere. Women are widely expected to prioritize domestic work, care and family obligations before participating in public life. As one participant explained, the expectation is that women should be “wearing their aprons because they have to be working at home” [focus group with women leaders, Panajachel]. Women are often unable to participate because they are constrained by their husbands and family responsibilities. According to a representative from the Women’s Affairs Office, husbands may question or discourage women’s involvement by saying: “They are not paying you to be there. Who is the one supporting you?” (Interview with government official).

Participation is also mediated by male authority. Several women described the need to ask permission from husbands or male relatives before attending meetings or community activities. One participant summarized this hierarchy by saying that “Men are always ahead of us women” [focus group with women leaders, Panajachel]. Another participant reflects on the reason why women in practice are waiting to get permission from men to participate. She says that religion plays a key role. “From early ages we were thought that we have to be under the control of a man. As indigenous women we are also thought the principle of respect, the men are always in front of us”. In this context, women’s participation is not fully understood as a right, but as something that can be authorized, tolerated or questioned.

These norms are reinforced through moral control over women’s bodies and appearance. Women explained that being “decent” and “modest” remains

a powerful expectation [focus group with women leaders, Panajachel]. Dressing well, wearing perfume or looking “too nice” may generate suspicion or criticism, as if looking nice itself was a transgression. Men also justified this control through the language of protection. As one male participant stated, “As a father, you have to tell your daughter how to dress.” [group interview with male COCODE members, Panajachel]. What appears as care can therefore operate as a mechanism of social control. The same men also reflected later in this interview, “In Panajachel there is not discrimination for women’s participation. If they want to participate and they are not doing that is because they are limiting themselves, the spaces exist”. Listening to the voices of men in spaces of political participation is essential to better understand the social norms that limit women’s participation. As one government official remembered, there was a time when a men made the comment in public that women should not be speaking in the public meetings of Panajachel:

It is sad to say, but people give us space because of the knowledge and qualifications we have acquired through our professional training. Yet it is important to recognize that there are women without a diploma who know far more than we do. Through their leadership and lived experience, they have managed to establish themselves and earn recognition.

(Interview with a Government official, Dirección de la Mujer, Panajachel).

In public spaces, these restrictions are reproduced through stereotypes that question women’s authority. Women reported being described as “emotional”, “feisty”, “gossipy”, “difficult” or “irrational” [interviews and focus groups, Panajachel]. These labels weaken women’s credibility and make their participation appear disruptive. As one woman stated, “The bar by which women’s participation is measured is higher.” [focus group with women leaders, Panajachel]. The result is a gap between presence and influence: women may be in the room, but they must still prove that they deserve to be heard.

“First, we need to get everything ready at home”

Women in Panajachel are not passive in the face of these norms. They adapt, negotiate and resist. Many participate after completing domestic responsibilities, arranging care, justifying their absence from home or demonstrating that participation will benefit the family. These strategies open doors, but they also reproduce time constraints and emotional burden.

At the same time, women have developed strong forms of resistance. Over the last two decades, women have entered training processes, literacy programs, community leadership spaces and rights-based organizations. Several participants emphasized that “now they (women) are not afraid” [interviews with women leaders, Panajachel]. They speak in public, denounce violence, engage municipal authorities and claim their rights. The following quotes from the focus group we conducted in Panajachel illustrates these changes:

“My mother prepared me and that helped me speak in public, develop that ability, and lose my fear.”

“We started knocking on doors at the municipality and many times they told us: No. ‘What do we need a women’s committee for?’ After insisting so much, they finally approved a community women’s committee.”

“I began to learn about my rights, that I can be in these spaces, that I can demand my rights as a woman and as a woman with a disability.”

Intergenerational change is especially important. The fieldwork showed that many younger women’s participation was made possible by mothers and grandmothers who pushed against older restrictions. This challenges the idea that women do not support one another. Instead, women’s stories show that participation is often built through quiet, intergenerational acts of care, sacrifice and encouragement.

Spaces shape outcomes: many women in movement, but not yet a women’s movement

Although Panajachel has a dense landscape of women’s organizations, community commissions, and local leaders, participants repeatedly emphasized the absence of a cohesive women’s movement. As one interviewee observed, “We still need to build alliances and become true companions to one another,” noting that many leaders struggle to reach agreements and often end in conflict. Similarly, she argued that meaningful change requires “a strong, organized civil society that is not constantly fighting among itself.” These reflections suggest that while women are increasingly organized and vocal, collective articulation across groups remains an ongoing challenge. (Interview with a women Political Leader)

The findings show that the type of space matters. In invited spaces, such as COCODEs, COMUDE, the Municipal Women’s Office, women’s commissions and political parties, women have gained visibility.¹¹ According to leading officer of the Women’s office of Panajachel, women’s participation has changed and we see more representation:

Previously, women didn’t participate much; it was more for men. It was believed that women had no business being there. Now I see a change within society because the situation for women is improving. We see women making their presence felt in newly created spaces: like neighborhood committees, school boards, community commissions, municipal commissions, organized women’s groups, entrepreneurship fairs, festivals, and Children’s Day celebrations where women organize in their neighborhoods.

However, access does not automatically translate into influence. Women’s participation in Panajachel is shaped by differences in education, ethnicity, age, and organizational trajectories. Indigenous women often participate through community and municipal structures, while more educated women tend to

11 COCODEs are community-level participatory councils responsible for identifying local priorities and promoting community development, while COMUDEs are municipal forums where local authorities and organized residents jointly discuss and influence development planning and decision-making.

engage in technical, governmental, or NGO spaces. Younger women also identified adult-centrism as a barrier to participation. As one participant noted, “Women with higher levels of education are staying on the sidelines. Their social and community contribution is not taking place; there is a great deal of individualism.” (Notes from focus group). Rather than reflecting a lack of collective interests, the fragmentation of women’s organizing in Panajachel appears to stem from these social and organizational divides, which complicate alliance-building across groups.

In some spaces, women described being interrupted, dismissed or told to remain silent. One reported case involved a man telling a woman that she had nothing to teach him, because she was an “indian woman”. *“Women either step down, lose their vote, or lose their voice. Men often push them out. When men are not willing to accept a woman challenging them, they gradually try to silence her and undermine her confidence.”* Explained a government official from the Women’s Office, Panajachel].

Self-made spaces offer a different possibility. Groups such as Women with the Ability to Dream in Color, ME TOCA, women recyclers, artisans, young indigenous women, *comadronas*, cultural initiatives and women entrepreneurs allow women to define their own agendas.¹² These spaces created confidence, shared identity and political voice.

Yet Panajachel also reveals a central tension: there are many organized women, but limited articulation among them. Differences of ethnicity, age, education, nationality and access to funding fragment participation. Since Panajachel has attracted funds from international cooperation, women and their organisations compete to access these funds, seeing each other as rivals instead of working together. International cooperation and local government initiatives that promote competition among groups instead of cooperation

were identified as one of the key reasons for the social fragmentation of the women’s movement. In this sense, Panajachel has many “women in movement,” but not yet a consolidated women’s movement. This was identified by the participants as a limitation to the possibility to achieve wider transformation at the local level.

Change is possible: recognition as the bridge between voice and influence

“I used to be afraid to participate. I would ask myself, ‘Will I really be able to do this?’ (Quote from a participant in the social norms laboratory)

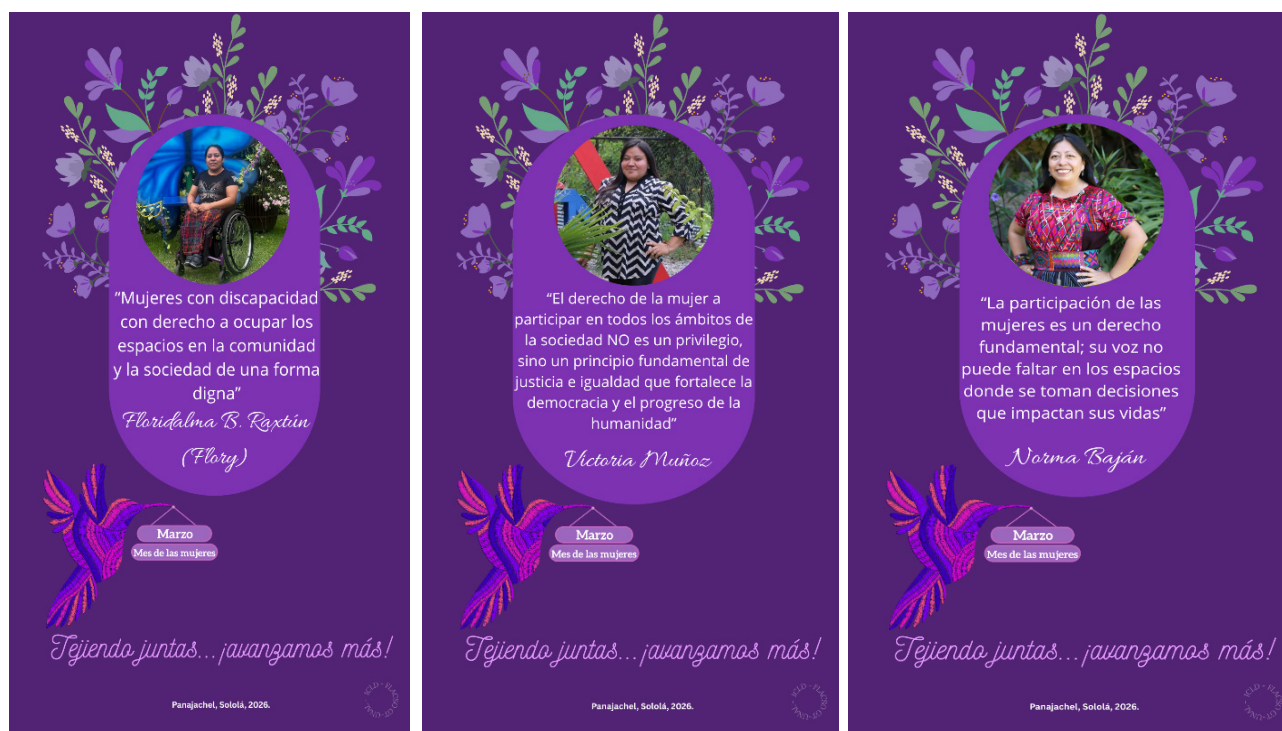
During the social norm’s laboratory, we discussed how women perceived different barriers to make their voices heard in Panajachel. The following table presents illustrative quotations that highlight the barriers women face in having their voices heard and participating meaningfully in community, organizational, and institutional decision-making processes.

The social norms laboratory discussed different ways to challenge the barriers face by the participants in participating in the decisions affecting their lives. At the end, one of the central demands was about recognition. Women wanted their contributions to be seen, valued and remembered. This is why the communication action focused on postcards with their own photographs and messages.

The postcards challenged invisibility by showing concrete women with faces, names, histories and demands. They also created a space of mutual recognition. As one participant reflected, the process helped her see that “My fight is not individual, it is collective.” [laboratory/socialization activity, Panajachel]. Another participant with disability emphasized that it was a space where “my voice

12 Mujeres con Capacidad de Soñar a Colores: The first collective of women with disabilities in rural Guatemala, founded in Panajachel in 2018 to promote mutual support, rights advocacy, and participation in decision-making. ME TOCA: A feminist activist collective using theatre and popular education to promote women’s empowerment, leadership, and social change in Panajachel since 2020.

Theme	Original quote (Spanish)	Translation (English)
Learning who is allowed to speak	“Desde nuestra casa nos han enseñado quién tiene voz y quién tiene voto, quién puede hablar y quién no.”	“From our homes we are taught who has a voice and who has a vote, who is allowed to speak and who is not.”
Women's issues excluded from the agenda	“En los Cocodes, los temas que estaban intrínsecamente relacionados con las mujeres, ni siquiera aparecían en la agenda.”	“In the Community Development Councils (COCODES), issues directly related to women did not even appear on the agenda.”
Dismissal of women's organizing	“¿Para qué un comité de mujeres?” (focus group)	“What do we need a women's committee for?” (Focus group)
Machismo as a barrier to participation	“En los espacios donde he participado, me ha costado, hay mucho machismo.” (focus group)	“In the spaces where I have participated, it has been difficult; there is a lot of machismos.” (focus group)
Greater freedom in women-only spaces	“Si los espacios son entre mujeres hay más libertad de compartir lo que pensamos y sentimos.” (focus group)	“When spaces are among women, there is greater freedom to share what we think and feel.” (focus group)
Political tokenism	“Las mujeres en espacios de participación política partidística son usadas como relleno. Hay representatividad, pero no en espacios donde se influencia.” (Interview with government official)	“Women in party-political spaces are used as fillers. ‘So that there is representation,’ but not in positions where they can actually influence decisions.” (interview with government official)
Domestic responsibilities	“Que las mujeres salgan de sus jornadas es difícil por sus horarios. Los hombres son los que deciden a qué hora hacen las reuniones.” (Interview with government official)	“It is difficult for women to leave their daily responsibilities because of their schedules. Men are the ones who decide when meetings are held.” (Interview with government official)



was heard” and where her thoughts and feelings were taken into account [laboratory/socialization activity, Panajachel]. As researchers, we were initially committed to anonymising participants’ identities in order to protect their privacy and integrity. Yet many participants expressed a different wish: they wanted their faces, voices, and experiences to be visible and acknowledged. The process of creating the postcards became a collaborative and joyful endeavor. Together, we selected photographs and crafted images that participants could feel proud of and honored by. We laughed, reflected, and shared meaningful moments, occupying a common space as researchers and participants alike. The process fostered a sense of mutual recognition, and we, too, felt proud of the final result.

During the bi-national workshop we made in Bogotá where the two research teams met, the team from Leticia decided to take the post-cards from Panajachel and give them to the participants in Leticia. During a Thursday meeting at Palabra de Mujer in the Maloca, women in Leticia shared

a very emotional moment where each of them got a post card and wrote a response back to the women in Panajachel that made the post card. This unexpected moment in our project showed us also the importance of cross border learning and sharing. For both women in Leticia and Panajachel, knowing that they are not alone in their struggle helped them to see hope.

Finally, in the case of Panajachel, we reflect on how recognition becomes a bridge between participation and influence. It is an important step, considering the backlash that women’s rights experience nowadays with many calling to constrain instead of expand their rights.

Discussion: From participation to the right to dream, speak and decide

Across Leticia and Panajachel, this study challenges a central assumption in the literature and policy debates: that expanding institutional access is sufficient to enhance women's influence in local governance. While participatory reforms have focused on inclusion, our findings demonstrate that the key issue lies not in access per se, but in the conditions under which participation becomes politically meaningful. A narrow focus on increasing the number of women in positions of power has, in some cases, resulted in proxy or symbolic representation, where women enter politics through kinship networks or without addressing gender inequality (the wife of or the sister of) highlighting the limits of numerical inclusion alone.

Taken together, the findings show that prevailing social norms shape women's influence in local decision-making not by preventing participation altogether, but by regulating who is considered legitimate, knowledgeable, and entitled to speak. For example, in Panajachel, several women described how their contributions were taken less seriously when they lacked formal education or fluency in Spanish, despite possessing extensive knowledge of community issues. In Leticia, women from river communities explained that distance, transport constraints, and domestic responsibilities often prevented them from attending meetings where key decisions were made. In both cases, influence was shaped not only by participation itself but by social expectations regarding whose voice carried authority.

Women in both contexts are already participating. However, their influence is mediated by what social norms theory conceptualizes as collective expectations regulating legitimacy and authority (Bicchieri, 2005; Cislighi & Heise, 2018). Participation thus operates as a stratified process, where presence does not translate into decision-making power. This refines existing debates on representation (Jaya, 2006; Lovenduski, 2020) by foregrounding the role of recognition regimes, socially embedded hierarchies that assign differential value to knowledge, speech, and identity (Fraser, 1995; 2000). In both cases, indigenous women's knowledge is often devalued

relative to formal education or institutional authority, producing a gap between participation as presence and participation as influence. The problem is not lack of education but a social expectation that formal education is the only source of knowledge for women, a requirement that is not held against men but also that fails to recognise the plural knowledges they hold.

In our study, we reflect on the idea that social norms are not only cognitive expectations but materially embedded in the organization of time, labor, and everyday life. Women's participation is contingent upon fulfilling unpaid care responsibilities, rendering participation conditional and costly. While the concept of time poverty has been widely discussed in development literature (Kabeer, 2016; Buvinic & Levine, 2016), our findings extend this analysis by conceptualizing time as a mechanism of political exclusion.

Participation is unequally distributed because the capacity to participate is unequally produced. However, participants in our workshops and focus groups did not identify with the term "time poverty," which was perceived as negative; instead, they described their experiences as managing multiple roles, highlighting how the burden of care is normalized rather than problematized, but also their capacity and agency. Their lives were rich with valuable knowledge and dreams, but they needed recognition and shared collective responsibility for care work.

The study empirically grounds intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Cho et al., 2013) by demonstrating how gender intersects with ethnicity, education, and territory to produce differentiated forms of participation. In Panajachel, participation is structured through symbolic hierarchies, where ethnicity and education shape legitimacy, resulting in fragmented and parallel forms of engagement. Women repeatedly referred to differences between those who had access to formal education, Spanish-language skills, or institutional networks and those who did not. As a result, participation often occurred through parallel spaces, with some women feeling more comfortable speaking within community-based groups than in

formal municipal settings. To overcome this barrier, what is needed is for local governments to create channels between the autonomous spaces where women already voice their needs, without feeling less because of their ethnicity or level of education.

In Leticia, we found that intersectionality was mediated through territorial and spatial inequalities, where geographic dispersion imposes material constraints on participation, particularly for women in river communities. Women from river communities described the time, cost, and logistical effort required to travel to urban centers where meetings were held, illustrating how geography itself becomes a gendered barrier to participation. Moreover, findings from Leticia highlight the significance of legal and institutional pluralism, where women navigate overlapping normative orders between state institutions and indigenous governance systems (de Sousa Santos, 2002; Radcliffe, 2015). This plurality complicates linear models of participation and requires situating social norms within coexisting systems of authority. Across both cases, intergenerational dynamics further reveal that norms are reproduced and transformed relationally and not only through formal laws, challenging static conceptions of culture and supporting feminist critiques of linear change models (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015).

A key contribution of this research is to shift the focus from individual attitude change to collective and relational processes of transformation. While dominant approaches emphasize behavioral change through information or media (Paluck, 2009; Dhar et al., 2022), recent scholarship has called for more context-sensitive and participatory approaches (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). Our findings support this shift by demonstrating that norms persist not only due to beliefs, but due to the absence of spaces where they can be collectively interrogated.

The social norms laboratories functioned as such spaces, enabling participants to reflect on shared experiences, build trust, and reimagine alternatives. From a feminist epistemological perspective, these

processes align with critiques of extractive knowledge production and emphasize the importance of situated and co-produced knowledge (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991). The laboratories did not merely validate findings; they facilitated processes of recognition and collective meaning-making, which are central to norm transformation.

Importantly, transformation occurred through symbolic and culturally grounded practices. In Panajachel, postcards enabled women to construct narratives of visibility and recognition. In Leticia, the symbolic inversion of roles, men tending the fire while women take the word, reworked gender norms from within local cosmologies. This supports the argument that norm change is not achieved by replacing “traditional” norms with “modern” ones, but through re-signification within existing cultural frameworks (Butler, 1990; Escobar, 2018). In Leticia, the symbolic inversion of roles, with men tending the fire while women took the word, created a powerful moment because it drew on existing cultural practices rather than rejecting them.

A central contribution of this study lies in rethinking women’s political participation in local democracy through the lens of *sentipensar* (Fals Borda, 1987), foregrounding its affective, relational, and experiential dimensions. While much of the literature conceptualizes participation in terms of access, representation, and institutional design, our findings show that women’s engagement is also shaped by how participation is *felt*, including experiences of recognition, exhaustion, fear, and solidarity. Women spoke about feelings of frustration when their opinions were ignored, exhaustion from combining leadership responsibilities with unpaid care work, and fear of being criticized for speaking publicly. They talked about speaking from their hearts. These reflections emerged repeatedly in both the workshops and the creative activities and were taken by the researchers as valid and important while speaking from the heart is often seen as “irrational” and “unprofessional” in political spheres.

In the social norm's laboratories, this perspective was operationalized by inviting participants to reflect not only on what limits or enables their participation, but on what “hurts” and what “heals” in their experiences of engaging in public life. This *sentipensar* approach, integrating thinking and feeling, proved analytically significant. Naming what “hurts” made visible the emotional and relational costs of participation, such as judgment, invisibility, and the burden of multiple roles, while identifying what “heals” revealed the conditions that sustain engagement, including trust, collective support, and spaces of mutual recognition.

By explicitly incorporating *sentipensar* into the analysis, this study contributes to the literature on political participation by showing that influence in local governance is not only determined by institutional access or formal representation, but by the conditions that allow women to remain engaged, recognized, and collectively empowered over time. Participation, therefore, is not only about being present in decision-making spaces, but about having the possibility to reflect, feel, and act together.

In this sense, *sentipensar* expands feminist approaches to participation (Haraway, 1988; Kabeer, 2016) by demonstrating how collective, embodied reflection can become a pathway for transforming participation from below, where women not only enter political spaces, but begin to reshape their meanings, relationships, and possibilities combining their feelings and thoughts. For example, women in both Panajachel and Leticia moved from describing participation as an individual responsibility to understanding many of the barriers they faced, such as care burdens, lack of recognition, and unequal authority, as collectively produced challenges. Through dialogue with other women, participants also began to see themselves not only as caregivers or beneficiaries of development initiatives, but as knowledge holders, community leaders, and political actors whose experiences were valuable for decision-making.

Conclusions

We write this report from many places at once, from Colombia, Guatemala, and Sweden, from indigenous roots and migrant paths, from youth and experience. We carry the voices of the women and men we met throughout this year not only in our minds, but in our hearts. We learnt in our research that women are continuously working to sustain life and community, while navigating social norms that limit their aspirations, voices, and everyday possibilities. To them participation is not only to be there, but to be seen, recognised, heard and imagined.

In Leticia and Panajachel, women are already participating. They wake before dawn, they organize, they lead, they care, they sustain life. And yet, again and again, they are told, sometimes softly, sometimes directly, that their place is elsewhere, that their voice is secondary, that their knowledge is not enough.

This research shows that the problem is not only about opening spaces, but about transforming what those spaces mean. We saw how the autonomous or self-made spaces open up possibilities to dream and exercise a different form of participation than the one dictated by official invited spaces. But those spaces can't be romanticised as they can also reproduce social norms that limit their voices and bodies. It is not necessarily the space, but the purpose of that space. “Word of women” was a space created in Leticia with the purpose of enabling discussion of women about their needs and aspirations.

To participate, women must first leave everything ready. The house, the children, the food, the chagra. Only then can they step into the public sphere. But even there, participation is often incomplete: voice without vote, presence without recognition, effort without influence.

And still, they continue. They find ways. In Panajachel, through photographs, words and shared stories, women made themselves visible, naming what had long been invisible: their contributions, their

trajectories, their right to be recognized. In Leticia, in the maloca, they imagined something simple and profound: that men could tend the fire so women could take the word. Not as a rupture, but as a rebalancing. Not against culture, but from within it.

Across both territories, a common thread emerges: women do not only want to participate, they want to be recognized as political subjects, as holders of knowledge, as decision-makers, as carrying meaningful words and feelings. And perhaps most importantly, they see each other. Because participation is not only an individual act. It is collective. It is intergenerational. It is something that is woven, like the “canasto” (basket), or the “huipiles” (traditional Indigenous garments) like the stories between mothers and daughters, like the spaces that did not exist before and now begin to take shape. The seed is there. To transform norms is not only to change rules. It is to create the conditions where women can move from enduring to imagining, from being present to having power, from surviving to deciding.

Recommendations

This report comes with a separate policy brief that provides more details about ideas and strategies that can be used by local governments interested in making women’s right to participation a reality both in the law and in everyday practice. Nevertheless, we list here some of these recommendations as examples.

From our hearts as researchers, we want to highlight that social transformation does not begin only in parliaments, municipal councils, or development programs. It also begins around cooking fires, in shared meals, in moments of gossip and laughter, in artistic expression, and in conversations among women about what hurts and what heals. These everyday spaces are rarely recognized as political, yet they are often where confidence is built, solidarities are formed, and alternative futures are imagined. While laws, quotas, and institutional reforms remain necessary, they cannot transform social norms alone. Change requires

listening to the ways women themselves make meaning, cultivate relationships, and create collective strength. If democracy is to become more inclusive, formal political institutions must not only make room for women; they must also learn from women’s own ways of speaking, knowing, caring, and acting in the world.

We want to end with this call to politicians:

Transforming participation requires more than opening the door to women—it requires redesigning the room itself.

For local governments

1. Make participation possible, not just open

If a woman must wake up at 3 a.m. to attend a meeting, the system is not working. Make a budget for transport, childcare, food and time. In Leticia, include river transport and bring meetings to communities. Consider the needs of women with disabilities.

2. Move from “listening” to sharing power

Women do not want only to be heard; they want to decide. Ensure women have a voice and vote in councils and committees. Track whose ideas are included in final decisions. Include simple tools in meetings: track speaking time, how much time is provided for participation, whether decisions are influenced by citizens, and follow-up actions.

3. Recognize what already exists

Women are already organizing, in the maloca (ancestral home), in the chagra, in collectives, in COCODEs. Invite these spaces into policy processes. Hold meetings *in* these spaces, not only in offices.

4. Redistribute care to enable voice

Women cannot take the word if they carry everything else. Promote local care systems (childcare, shared responsibilities). Work with men so that, sometimes, they “tend the fire” while women speak.

For civil society organizations, NGOs and Donors

1. Weave connections, not only projects

There are many women, but often working alone. Create regular spaces where women meet, reflect and build shared agendas. Fund follow-up spaces after workshops so relationships and agendas continue.

2. Create intergenerational spaces

Change happens between mothers and daughters. Design activities where elders, young women and girls exchange knowledge and leadership.

3. Use art as political action

Support murals, storytelling, theatre, photography and digital media created by women themselves.

Conclusion

This study provides rare and rigorous experimental evidence that participatory governance—when thoughtfully designed and faithfully implemented—can yield meaningful improvements in public health and democratic legitimacy (Touchton & Wampler, 2023; Wampler et al., 2021). By comparing three models of community-based decision-making in the rural counties of Elgeyo-Marakwet, Kenya, we show that structured public participation can reduce infant mortality, improve perceptions of government fairness, and foster civic engagement (Gonçalves, 2014; Mansuri & Rao, 2012).

Among the most compelling findings is the differential impact of participatory formats. While all forms of citizen input outperformed the control group, villages exposed to voting and especially deliberation experienced the largest gains (Grillos, 2022; Collins, 2021). These results underscore a critical insight: how citizens participate matters (Fung, 2006; Arnstein, 1969). Simple consultation mechanisms, while politically convenient, do not unlock the full potential of citizen voice.

Voting and deliberation—by empowering residents to shape decisions directly—generate deeper ownership, greater trust, and better-targeted investments in public goods (Baiocchi et al., 2011; Habermas, 1996).

The study also contributes to broader debates on the role of democratic institutions in development. In contexts where state capacity is uneven and resources are scarce, participatory budgeting offers a viable pathway to improve not only service delivery but also citizen–state relations (Abers, 2000; Avritzer, 2010). Importantly, these improvements are not just symbolic. A 22–29% reduction in infant mortality represents a profound shift in the lived experience of communities and a measurable return on modest financial investment (Touchton & Wampler, 2014; Olken, 2010).

These findings carry important implications for policymakers and development practitioners. First, they point to the need for greater ambition in participatory design. Governments, donors, and civil society actors should move beyond checkbox approaches and invest in structured, inclusive mechanisms—especially deliberation—that build social capital, generate better decisions, and enhance procedural fairness (Farrar et al., 2010; Landemore, 2017).

Second, the results provide a blueprint for scaling successful models. Kenya’s legal framework, civil society infrastructure, and political openness make it a promising site for expanding participatory budgeting across counties (Rwigi et al., 2020; Cheeseman et al., 2020). Elsewhere, governments can adapt these lessons to fit their institutional environments, recognizing that flexibility and local ownership are key (Cabannes & Lipietz, 2018; Shah, 2007).

Third, the study reinforces the importance of monitoring and evaluation in democratic innovation. Participatory institutions should not be adopted on faith alone; they must be assessed, refined, and adapted based on empirical evidence and community feedback (Mansuri & Rao, 2012; Agrawal & Gupta, 2005). The success of this project was due in part to the collaboration between researchers, implementers, and local govern-

ment—a model that others would do well to replicate (Beath et al., 2017; Humphreys et al., 2006).

Finally, beyond its immediate policy implications, this study affirms a more hopeful view of democracy. Even in contexts marked by poverty, inequality, and fragile institutions, citizens are capable of exercising agency, reasoning together, and shaping the public good (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). Participation is not a luxury—it is a foundation for inclusive development and accountable governance (Fung & Wright, 2001; Heller & Rao, 2015).

As the global development community grapples with questions of legitimacy, resilience, and reform, the lessons from this project are clear: local democracy, when designed for equity and deliberation, can save lives—and build stronger societies in the process (Touchton et al., 2017; Wampler, 2007).

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