

TAKING THE WORD

Indigenous Women's Struggle for Equality in Colombia and Guatemala



Executive summary

This roadmap provides a strategic framework for the local governments of Leticia and Panajachel to bridge the gap between legal commitments and the meaningful political influence of Indigenous women. Although current regulatory frameworks for women's participation in Colombia and Guatemala have strengthened formal mechanisms and created participatory spaces to promote gender equity, a wide gap persists between mere presence in governance spaces and the exercise of genuine decision-making power. This paper provides practical tools to dismantle the “invisible anchors” that prevent Indigenous women from influencing policymaking within their territories.

Today, transforming social norms is one of the most important strategic levers for policy. Addressing these norms is essential to move beyond “presence without power” toward a democracy that transforms gender roles and strengthens the multi-ethnic and multicultural identities of Indigenous women within their communities.

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1. Introduction

The persistence of unwritten social norms that reinforce traditional gender roles limits women's ability to participate in policy decisions. These invisible rules of behavior require not only changes to written rules, but also concrete strategies that transform institutional arrangements into spaces where women have real decision-making power.

In Leticia and Panajachel, social norms function as informal regulatory frameworks with an authority that, in reality, supersedes written law. These norms act as invisible filters that determine who has social “permission” to speak and who must remain silent.

This study is organized around three analytical pillars that highlight lived experience and provide insight into the context of Indigenous women's political participation. On the one hand, it identifies shared and sustained patterns of behavior in the spaces in question that enforce exclusion through social approval or sanction. On the other hand, it demonstrates how ethnicity, age, geography, and disability intertwine to create complex layers of marginalization. Finally, the study highlights *sentipensar* “thinking-feeling” as a tool for political agency that validates lived experience and promotes collective action.

2. Method

The project was conducted between December 2025 and March 2026 with local interdisciplinary teams, using a participatory action-research approach that goes beyond mere data collection to engage in a cyclical process of reflection, action, and change, in which the researcher is not an external agent but an active participant within the context under study. We also used a comparative policy approach to facilitate the co-creation of innovative interventions at the local level, which integrated fieldwork, focus groups, and experiential labs. This methodological approach seeks to better understand the reasons, motivations, and expectations of local groups regarding gender roles.

3. Research and Results

The research highlighted the main risks associated with the institutionalization of Indigenous women's participation, as well as social norms that reinforce traditional gender roles. These findings point to the need for targeted public policy interventions.

What are the main obstacles created by prevailing social norms?

- **The burden of unpaid care work and time poverty**, along with women's limited access to income and the time they devote to education, perpetuate gaps in political participation and representation, even when women attain educational levels comparable to or higher than those of men. Social pressure to fulfill the role of caregiver leads to exhaustion that often results in women withdrawing from political leadership processes.
- **The burden of social guilt.** Women's public participation is perceived as disrupting the spiritual and social order, burdening them with guilt that extends beyond the domestic sphere. For example, many women leaders must ensure that the farm and the home are ready by 3:00 a.m. to avoid community judgment for neglecting their caregiving duties.
- **Lack of recognition of Indigenous women's knowledge.** A hierarchical structure persists in which the ancestral knowledge of midwives and grandmothers is labeled "informal," along with the invisibilization of women's proposals in public decision-making spaces. This subjective dismissal acts as a control mechanism that limits the impact of their proposals in formal public settings.
- **Institutionalized male interference or paternalism.** The persistence of men acting as "advisors" or "translators" in women's spaces, stripping women of their voice and technical autonomy. This symbolic subordination undermines the principle of women's political autonomy.
- **Political participation is shaped by the material conditions of daily life.** In these regions, geographic and socioeconomic factors impose budgetary constraints at both the individual and institutional levels, and the logistical demands of women's leadership are amplified.

4. What are the main strategies and policy guidelines that transform prevailing social norms?

The ability to ensure strategies for political participation is determined by the nature of the spaces involved, where the risks of instrumentalization must be managed. Therefore, the actions and strategies proposed by local governments must address the following risks:

Type of Space	Strategic Purpose	Risks of Exclusion
Invited Spaces (Formal Governance)	Access to municipal budgets (COCODEs/MPCI) and institutional recognition.	Instrumentalization, reproduction of patriarchal hierarchies, focus on bureaucratic procedures rather than actual impact.
Self-Managed/Invented Spaces (Community-Based)	Spaces for healing, <i>sentipensar</i> “feeling-thinking”, and the sharing of stories in Malocas and Chagras.	Limited influence on the allocation of formal state resources; risk of institutional invisibility; limited capacity to influence public policy.



Based on these findings, the following policy recommendations are proposed for local governments.

4.1 Recommendations

a) Local Intercultural Care Systems

Local governments should establish local care systems that extend beyond childcare services to provide technical and operational support for maintaining the Chagra. This measure aims to free up discretionary time for women leaders whose workdays begin at dawn, recognizing that food sovereignty is the pillar that underpins their political participation.

It is recommended that the municipal government, in dialogue with the autonomous governments of Indigenous communities and with the support of departmental governments, create intercultural care systems through a decentralized, territorially grounded model that effectively alleviate the burden of unpaid work, enabling community-based care support while women leaders participate in decision-making forums.

Community - based care infrastructure should be developed in the reservations to enable women to “speak freely.” The municipal budget should fund local care advocates—local experts in caregiving, not outsiders—allowing women leaders to participate in decision-making spaces without the burden of social stigma for “neglecting” their traditional roles.

b) Meaningful Participation and Binding Vote

Local governments must provide women’s organizations with technical tools and the capacity to exert real influence in the allocation, monitoring, and oversight of the municipal budget.

Local governments must promote the development of leadership training programs that translate community experience into tools for formal representation.

Local government must promote the inclusion of women on all technical committees, ensuring their influence on land-use planning and budget allocation—beyond policy areas traditionally framed as “women’s issues.”

The municipal council should promote reforms to the regulations governing certain participatory bodies to ensure that women's commissions have a binding vote in the approval of projects under the Municipal Development Plan. Local governments should move beyond token participation toward meaningful political influence, where women make direct decisions regarding the "Gender Equity" budget line item, ensuring that resources are allocated to rural and Indigenous communities rather than concentrated in the urban center.

c) Women's Autonomous Speaking Circles

Local governments should develop mandatory awareness-raising protocols for men and traditional authorities to reduce the silencing of Indigenous women's voices, experiences, and agency; promoting spaces where women can make decisions free from interference and without requiring male approval to exercise their leadership.

It is essential to implement strategies to denaturalize violence and strengthen sisterhood as a political tool. Inspired by the project's experiential workshop, we suggest promoting a symbolic reversal of roles, like the design of the mural created collectively in Leticia, Colombia, where men take charge of the fire and food while women deliberate.

Institutionalizing these dialogue circles in spaces such as the Maloca—where a permanent space was established to listen to women's voices—enables collective healing and the building of support networks in the face of male interference in decision-making.

d) Intergenerational Dialogue and Shared Masculinities

Municipal governments should support intergenerational spaces for knowledge transmission where grandmothers teach the mother tongue and traditional arts to young people. Engaging men as active partners in caregiving as a form of political support will allow women to lead with greater freedom. Strengthening intergenerational bonds through activities such as basket weaving can contribute to preventing substance abuse among young people and consolidate the social foundation that underpins women's political participation.

Local governments should promote Social Change Laboratories that, through creative methodologies, create spaces to reimagine gender roles in the public sphere. These actions validate the knowledge that emerges from the intersection of *sentipensar*, eroding cultural resistance to female authority.

e) **Geography of Sovereignty with an Intercultural and Gender Perspective**

It is a priority to create and allocate specific budget lines in local, departmental, and national budgets for river transportation, travel expenses, and meals for rural and Indigenous women council members, thereby eliminating the economic barrier that currently ensures that only urban women have a real voice. Participation cannot depend on international cooperation; rather, it must be a social investment by the State.

To this end, local governments must ensure that the regular meeting mechanisms of formal participatory bodies are modified, since shifting the burden of travel recognizes women's territorial sovereignty and reduces the barrier posed by geographical dispersion.

It is recommended that these bodies hold their meetings on a rotating basis in the Malocas and communities. State institutions must meet communities where they recognize the sovereignty of these spaces. This symbolic shift allows institutions to immerse themselves in the Indigenous worldview and respect the community's rhythms.

f) **Bridging the Digital Divide in the Face of Oral Tradition**

Local governments must invest in basic digital infrastructure in populated areas and Indigenous reserves. The installation of connectivity hubs would enable virtual participation in council meetings or assemblies when physical travel is impossible due to weather or cost. By bridging the digital divide, we protect the sovereignty of the spoken word and ensure that technology enhances oral tradition rather than serving as a tool for political exclusion.

We propose the creation of Digital Governance Hubs in dispersed rural areas, funded by local governments. Equipping malocas or community centers with satellite connectivity will allow women leaders to participate virtually in council sessions, reduce the time spent traveling, and maintain a constant flow of information about institutional services without leaving their territories.

5. Strategic Action Matrix

The long-term sustainability of this roadmap depends on its integration into Municipal Development Plans (PDMs) or territorial action plans co-financed by the national government or through International Cooperation.

Policy Action	Strategic Objective	Key Performance Indicator (KPI)	Primary Responsible Party
Intercultural Care Systems	To alleviate time poverty by funding care and support in rural communities.	Percentage of the municipal budget allocated to decentralized rural care services.	Municipal Planning Office
Meaningful Participation and Binding Vote	To ensure that women's organizations have a real say in local planning and budgeting.	100% of Women's Commissions with a binding vote in COCODEs (GT) and MPCIs (COL).	Mayor's Office/ City Council
Women's Autonomous Speaking Circles	To reduce the silencing of Indigenous women's voices, experiences, and agency.	Number of experimental workshops implemented in Indigenous communities	Mayor's Office
Social Change Labs	To strengthen intergenerational bonds and fostering shared responsibility among men.	Number of Social Change Labs implemented with the participation of Indigenous men and women.	Mayor's Office
Geographical Sovereignty with an intercultural and Gender-Sensitive Approach	To ensure physical presence through travel stipends, subsidized river transportation, and rotating council sessions in the territory.	Number of leaders from remote reservations attending sessions; number of sessions held outside the urban center.	Secretariat of Government
Bridging the digital divide in the face of oral tradition	To bridge the geographic divide through satellite connectivity hotspots in malocas and community centers.	Number of active and operational digital governance hotspots in rural areas.	Mayor's Office

6. Reflections on the Future

The commitment of local governments must translate into concrete actions that transform the social norms that perpetuate inequality, ensuring that communities are strengthened and that all voices are heard and all spaces are visible for local democracy.

Social transformation in Leticia and Panajachel is not an event, but a process of “small steps” that requires political will and a decentralized budget. Changing social norms demands a commitment to non-extractive action research, in which the knowledge generated is returned to the community.

The act of collectively “feeling and thinking” is not just a method; it is the path for Indigenous women to redefine the meaning of their territory for the benefit of society.

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