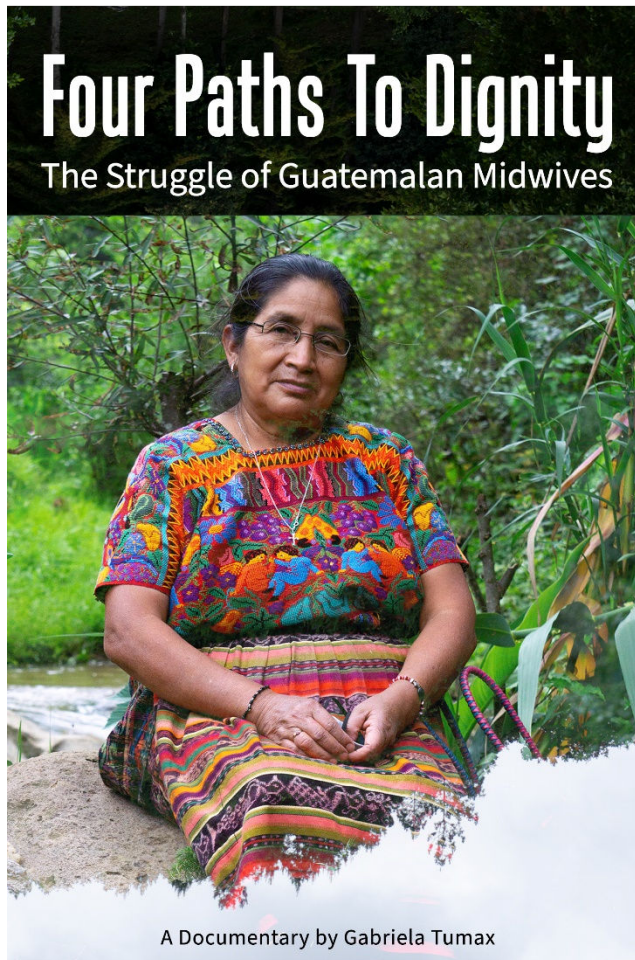




FOUR PATHS TO DIGNITY THE STRUGGLE OF GUATEMALAN MIDWIVES



STUDY GUIDE

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Four Paths to Dignity

Four Paths to Dignity profiles the pursuit of dignity for Guatemalan midwives. The midwives confront challenges, as they battle racism and a health establishment that strives to prevent them from providing care that is culturally appropriate. Although the midwives provide important services to their communities, they are opposed by a government that seeks to eliminate their practice. This film reveals their activism and their struggle to gain recognition by the medical establishment.

About Guatemala

Guatemala is a country in Central America. It is bordered by Mexico, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, the Gulf of Honduras, and the Pacific Ocean. Its official language is Spanish, and its capital city is Guatemala City. Thousands of years ago, Guatemala was home to a flourishing Maya civilization. In 1524, it became a Spanish colony, not gaining its independence from Spain until 1821. After gaining independence, the country was ruled by a number of military and authoritarian regimes. In 1985, it came under democratic rule. Guatemala is currently a constitutional democratic republic. The World Bank reports that Guatemala has Central America's largest economy in terms of population and economic activity, with a 2022 gross domestic product of US\$95 billion.¹

Guatemala is the most populous country in Central America, with a population of close to 18 million people. Many of these people are indigenous. The main ethnic groups are the Maya, and Ladino—or Mestizo—who are mixed Amerindian and Spanish. Estimates on the exact number of indigenous people in Guatemala vary. According to the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, about 43 percent of Guatemala's population is indigenous, with a total of 24 different ethnic groups.² Minority Rights Group International estimates that the total percentage is higher. It says, "According to official statistics, approximately 39.8 per cent are indigenous; however, according to indigenous peoples' representatives, the true figure is closer to 60 per cent."³

Midwives

A midwife is a person trained to help women in pregnancy and during and after childbirth. Some midwives have formal training, but others are trained more informally, for example through apprenticeships. In addition to helping with pregnancy, midwives often help women with all aspects of their overall reproductive health, including family planning and breast cancer screening. Frances McConville is a midwifery expert at the World Health Organization, and she explains that most midwives have a very strong personal connection to what they do. "These workers are proud to be midwives," she says, "You don't go into midwifery if you don't want to help other women.

¹ The World Bank, "Guatemala," updated October 4, 2023.

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/guatemala/overview>

² International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs, "Indigenous Peoples in Guatemala."

<https://www.iwgia.org/en/guatemala.html>

³ Minority Rights Group International, "Guatemala," updated January 2018.

<https://minorityrights.org/country/guatemala/>

There is an element of love here. We are clinicians, but this is about loving and caring for other women, their babies and their families at a very special time in their lives.”⁴

In addition to looking after women’s health, in many parts of the world midwives provide numerous other important services within the community; services that are often not being provided by the government. Midwife Marie Lynne Tyndall explains some of the many different roles of the midwife. She says, “They look after sick children; they clean and suture machete wounds; they teach family planning methods and give out condoms; they lend a hand to women enduring domestic violence; they support adolescent girls who find themselves pregnant; and they find food for hungry families. Around their kitchen tables, stories are told, advice is sought and given out, and hearts are mended.”⁵

There is widespread evidence that when midwives help women throughout their pregnancies, there are usually less complications overall. Petra ten Hoope-Bender is director for reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health at the Instituto de Cooperación Social Integrearb in Spain. She explains that women who see a midwife throughout their pregnancies are more likely to have a pregnancy without complications. She says, “When midwifery is in place, there is much less need for emergency interventions because problems requiring prompt attention are managed or referred before they become a life-threatening complication.”⁶

Midwives in Guatemala

Many people argue that Guatemala’s midwives, or *comadronas*, are important because there are so many indigenous women in rural communities who don’t have access to health care, and these women rely on midwives for help with their pregnancies and deliveries. According to *National Geographic*, Guatemalan midwives deliver half of the births in the country.⁷ Edgar Kestler is the director of Guatemala’s Epidemiological Research Center in Sexual and Reproductive Health. “Traditional midwives here are incredibly important, and will be incredibly important in the next 50 years. But not because there’s a health policy recognizing that,” he says, “Rather, it’s the exact opposite. The health system is so fragmented, with such little focus on primary care, and that’s where *comadronas* get their importance.”⁸ Midwife Epifanía Elías agrees. We’re doing what the health system doesn’t,” she says, “We work more than the doctors, and we’re the ones helping

⁴ Quoted in Bulletin of the World Health Organization, “More Midwives Needed to Improve Maternal and Newborn Survival,” 2013. <https://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/91/11/13-021113.pdf>

⁵ Marie Lynne Tyndall, “Stories of Extraordinary Central American Midwives,” *Midwifery Today*, Autumn 2019. <https://midwiferytoday.com/mt-articles/stories-of-extraordinary-central-american-midwives/>

⁶ Quoted in Bulletin of the World Health Organization, “More Midwives Needed to Improve Maternal and Newborn Survival,” 2013. <https://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/91/11/13-021113.pdf>

⁷ Megan Janetsky, “To Save Lives, Midwives Mix Mayan Heritage with Western Medicine,” *National Geographic*, March 29, 2022. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/to-save-lives-midwives-mix-mayan-heritage-with-western-medicine>

⁸ Edgar Kestler, quoted in Megan Janetsky, “To Save Lives, Midwives Mix Mayan Heritage with Western Medicine,” *National Geographic*, March 29, 2022. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/to-save-lives-midwives-mix-mayan-heritage-with-western-medicine>

women. Midnight. 1 a.m., 2 a.m., at any hour. When they call. . . . you have to go to the patient.”⁹

Not only do many indigenous women have limited access to formal medical care, but there is widespread evidence that they do when visit doctors or hospitals, they often have negative experiences, leading many to avoid these situations. In a recent journal article, Michel Juarez, Kirsten Austad, and Peter Rohloff, who work with the Maya Health Alliance explain, “Indigenous Maya women experience endemic levels of disrespectful and even abusive care in public referral hospitals. This disrespectful care can sometimes be quite overt. For example, most physicians and nurses in public hospitals are not indigenous, and they may directly discriminate against indigenous patients. Similarly, most hospital staff do not speak indigenous Mayan languages, nor do hospitals have language interpreters on staff, so opportunities for misunderstandings and non-consented care abound.”¹⁰

Unfortunately, while Guatemalan midwives are relied on by so many women, these midwives often lack essential resources. According to a recent *National Geographic* article, “Midwives . . . often lack basic resources including stethoscopes, oximeters, and ultrasound machines, essential tools in detecting complications early on.”¹¹ The World Bank argues that midwives in Guatemala need more training and support. In a recent report, it says, “Guatemala has the highest rate of maternal mortality in Latin America, with 115 per 100,000 live births, compared to the regional average of 87. . . . Almost three-quarters of maternal deaths are among women of indigenous ancestry.” Further, it finds that many of these deaths are in women who were attended by an indigenous midwife rather than a formally-trained medical professional. It argues, “Many of these *comadronas* lack the training and critical skills needed to recognize or properly attend to high-risk pregnancies.”¹²

⁹ Epifanía Elías, quoted in Megan Janetsky, “To Save Lives, Midwives Mix Mayan Heritage with Western Medicine,” *National Geographic*, March 29, 2022. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/to-save-lives-midwives-mix-mayan-heritage-with-western-medicine>

¹⁰ Michel Juarez, Kirsten Austad, and Peter Rohloff, “Lay Midwives: On the Front Lines of the Fight Against Maternal Mortality in Rural Guatemala,” *American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, February 2019. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6367602/>

¹¹ Megan Janetsky, “To Save Lives, Midwives Mix Mayan Heritage with Western Medicine,” *National Geographic*, March 29, 2022. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/to-save-lives-midwives-mix-mayan-heritage-with-western-medicine>

¹² The World Bank, “Improving Maternal and Neonatal Health in the Department of Sololá, Guatemala,” March 23, 2017. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2017/03/23/improving-maternal-neonatal-health-solola#:~:text=Guatemala%20has%20the%20highest%20rate,the%20regional%20average%20of%2087.>

Additional Resources

- Every Mother Counts, “Inequality Impacts the Maternal Health of Indigenous Guatemalans.”
<https://everymothercounts.org/grants/guatemala-a-deeper-dive>
- Megan Janetsky, “To Save Lives, Midwives Mix Mayan Heritage with Western Medicine,” *National Geographic*, March 29, 2022.
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/to-save-lives-midwives-mix-mayan-heritage-with-western-medicine>
- Sarah Johnson, “These Guatemalan Women Save Mothers and Babies. Why Are They Treated So Badly?” *Guardian*, June 20, 2018.
<https://www.theguardian.com/healthcare-network/2018/jun/20/guatemala-women-pregnant-indigenous-discrimination-comadronas>
- Michel Juarez, Kirsten Austad, and Peter Rohloff, “Lay Midwives: On the Front Lines of the Fight Against Maternal Mortality in Rural Guatemala,” *American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, February 2019.
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Contact

For inquiries, please contact:

EPF Media

(888) 570-5400; (323) 301-3663

info@epfmedia.com

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