

GUATEMALA



JOURNEYS OF COURAGE

Pains and triumphs of diverse women and girls
in accessing and enjoying SRHR in Guatemala

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Foreword

Planting Seeds, Nurturing Change

This booklet brings together stories of resilience, leadership, and transformation led by young women and youth organizations in Guatemala. These stories are not only about reopening spaces or accessing services; they are about reclaiming rights, building community power, and demonstrating that collective action can create lasting change. At the heart of this booklet are the lived realities of young women whose voices have often been silenced in conversations around Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR).

In Guatemala, the challenges around SRHR remain significant. High rates of adolescent pregnancy, limited access to comprehensive sexuality education, and the persistent influence of conservative actors continue to shape young people's realities. For many adolescents, accessing quality, youth-friendly health services is still a privilege rather than a right. This context makes the stories presented here deeply relevant, as they show how young people are organizing, advocating, and transforming the systems meant to serve them.

One of the most powerful stories featured in this booklet is the reopening of the Comprehensive and Differentiated Care Clinic for Adolescents at the San Benito Hospital in Petén. For years, this clinic had been a lifeline for thousands of adolescents seeking confidential and respectful SRHR care. Since its establishment around 2010, with support from the Petén Development Council, it has provided medical services in adolescent medicine, gynecology, obstetrics, nutrition, laboratory testing, social work, and psychology.

However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the clinic's facilities were repurposed to attend to patients affected by the virus. When the health crisis ended, the space was not restored to its original function, leaving thousands of young people without specialized care.

The reopening of the clinic was therefore a major milestone for young people, thanks to the collective voice of the youth movement and the signatures of influential advocates such as Helen 

← Leiva (Director of Tan Ux'il Association), Carmen Reyes Alfaro (National Youth Council), Rolando Gómez (Departmental Delegate of CONJUVE), and congressional allies Samuel Pérez and Román Castellanos. The story of its reopening is one of determination and collaboration.

Another inspiring story in this booklet is how Trans Queens of the Night Organization (OTRANS-RN) promoted a transformative initiative to expand education and economic autonomy for eleven young trans women. Most of these women had dropped out of school during childhood or adolescence because of bullying and discrimination. But with the support of the We Lead program, OTRANS-RN was able to help change their lives.

Their story is one of the most inspiring examples of what community-based leadership can achieve. It shows that empowerment is not a one-time training or a temporary intervention; it is a continuous journey of learning, organizing, and transforming the conditions that limit people's potential. When trans women gain access to education and income, they are not only improving their personal situations, they are also redefining what inclusion means for the entire society.

As you engage with these pages, I invite you to see beyond statistics and policies. Feel the energy of their words, the strength of their dreams, and the hope they embody for a more just and inclusive Guatemala. They remind us that social transformation is not about giving voice to the marginalized; it is about creating spaces where their voices lead the way.

These narratives are more than isolated victories; they are building blocks for a future where every young person in Guatemala, and beyond, can access health services that are inclusive, respectful, and grounded in human rights. May these stories inspire you to listen, to act, and to believe in the transformative power of youth voices ■

Laura Isabel Ortiz

Action Community Facilitator

Guatemala

Acknowledgements

The Journeys of Courage booklet is a result of the collective vision, passion, and dedication of many individuals and organizations who have walked this journey with us. To the young women rightsholders: your courage lit the path, your voices stirred the winds of change. To our Host Organizations, and Community of Action (CoAs): you nurtured the soil where these seeds could grow. To every hand that wrote, photographed, designed, and dreamed: you gave this story its colors. This booklet is a celebration of us all.

Our immense gratitude to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who funded the We Lead program under the SRHR Partnership Fund, which is part of the Strengthening Civil Society subsidy framework. Without your support, these stories of change would not have been possible.

Many thanks to our consortium partners: Positive Vibes, Restless Development, Marsa, FEMNET, and the Central American Women's Fund. Your support and thoughts contributed to changing the lives of hundreds of women in the countries we intervened in. To the team at Hivos, the Lead consortium partner: thank you for your tireless efforts that ensured the program was implemented seamlessly. To M&C Saatchi World Services, thank you being our much-valued technical partner.

We sincerely thank the review team, specifically, Cynthia Omondi, Mary Kuira, Nyambura Gathumbi, Catherine Ferrer, Mickey Andeweg and Mark Schleedoorn for their time, insights, and thoughtful feedback, which enriched the quality and depth of the stories. Your keen eye and commitment ensured that the booklet truly reflects the spirit and impact of the We Lead programme.

Special appreciation goes to Arthur Okwemba, Faith Muiruri, and Ruth Omukhango, who worked tirelessly to compile, edit, and design the booklet. Your creativity, persistence, and teamwork have made this product both inspiring and memorable.

Finally, we would like to thank the 12 organizations of the Guatemala Community of Action for all the strength, conviction, and tenderness they brought to We Lead. As Central American women, feminists, and activists, we believe that investing in community is the solution. We are also grateful to the Guatemala team, Sara Mux, Esther Alcahe, and Alejandra Solano, for their follow-up and creative ideas ■

Because when We Lead, change blossoms.

Comic book pushes boundaries of SRHR enjoyment for Guatemalan women with disabilities



Many people in Guatemala never expected them to produce a book that would tell their own stories about sexual and reproductive health and rights. They weren't expected to undertake a project that was intellectually demanding either. They proved everyone wrong.

These are the women with disabilities of Guatemala who produced the first-ever

comic book of its kind in their country, telling their personal stories and experiences while addressing their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

Known as Las Super Lemuras, the book promotes inclusive sexual and SRHR education for women with disabilities in all their diversity and uniqueness. It is also valuable for young people who are not disabled. Topics covered



← include SRHR, LGBTIQ+ rights, gender-based violence, and the undignified way health care providers often treat women with disabilities.

The book presents problems around these topics and then provides solutions to increase learning and challenge stereotypes and attitudes about women with disabilities.

More than just a document, it's a powerful expression of freedom by women with disabilities, speaking about their emotions, desires, their bodies, hopes, and expectations. It contains conversations these women have been shut out from for far too long.

A collective genesis

The idea for the book was born in 2023, following several presentations made at The Interactive House, a playful space designed to teach and raise awareness among the general public and the families of women with disabilities about the human rights and SRHR of these women.

Further presentations took place at Casa Joven, CECADA, and CRI on how to present the voices and stories of women with disabilities in an engaging manner. These sessions were followed by another meeting in Palencia, where young women with disabilities from various regions of Guatemala took part.

They agreed to continue the conversation at the spaces of the Benevolent Committee for the Blind and Deaf of Guatemala, where the decision to create the comic book was made. In May 2024, two We Lead partners worked with women with disabilities to produce the comic book, the Integral Rehabilitation Centre (CRI) of the Benevolent Committee for the Blind and Deaf of Guatemala and Casa Joven.

Time to exhale

The heroines who developed the book were inspired by fellow women who are part of the We Lead program. As content creators, the women said the process of writing the book was empowering for many of them. They have now become leading advocates for SRHR in their communities.

"At first, I was scared," one of the women with disabilities admitted. "But expressing myself through drawing helped me to set new boundaries as a deaf woman."

"People think we don't have questions, desires, or rights, and now we are the ones giving the answers," one of the women said.

"This book has enabled us to raise awareness about the importance of respecting the right to sexual and reproductive health of young women with disabilities," added a member of Collective Las Lemuras.

Changing the narrative

When the comic book was launched, it communicated a powerful message: when women with disabilities control their narratives, everyone listens and learns. The book has been widely distributed in 19 public and private spaces to reach as many people as possible.

Las Lemuras Collective, which facilitated this work, says the publication of the comic book is a ground-breaking step in inclusive SRHR education, ensuring that young people with disabilities have a voice in shaping narratives about their own rights.

The book is now being used as a tool to raise awareness about the challenges and violations many women with disabilities face, including stigma and exclusion ■

Youth advocacy forces a Guatemalan hospital to reopen their SRHR clinic



When the management at the San Benito Hospital in Petén closed the Comprehensive and Differentiated Care Clinic for Adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, they never expected this would spark massive resistance from young people.

During the pandemic, the clinic had been turned into a facility to cater for people who were infected by the corona virus. But after

the crisis was over, the management refused to reopen it to continue offering sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services to young people. They planned to put it to other uses.

It was as if we didn't matter anymore

For the youth, this change of use was not going to just pass, since the clinic meant a lot to them. They decided to put up a spirited fight to get a clinic they considered a →

← lifeline for their sexual and reproductive health needs to resume services.

"For those who had found that clinic a safe and dignified space to discuss their sexual and reproductive health, its closure was more than an obstacle. It was a denial of their rights," says Tan UX'il, a youth-led local organization.

"It was as if we suddenly didn't matter anymore," adds a young woman who used to visit the clinic for family planning services and psychological support.

A spirited fight

At first the youth decided to use diplomatic engagements and pleas to implore the hospital management to reopen the clinic. That didn't work. The management would not hear of it.

Realizing this route was not taking them anywhere, TAN UX'IL and the youth decided to reach out to other actors to help apply pressure on the hospital management.

In March 2022, the organization, with the support of the We Lead program, →



← called a meeting with the Petén Social Organizations Movement to seek their partnership in getting the clinic to return to serving adolescents' SRHR needs.

The result was that the youth submitted a formal petition, signed by dozens of organizations present at the meeting, to the Director of the San Benito Regional Hospital.

Going public and getting political

But TAN UX'iL knew handing over a petition in a boardroom might not catalyze other interested parties and the community to join in the fight. The petition had to be made public using multiple communication platforms.

Press briefings and community forums were held to read out the petition, making hundreds of people aware of the issue. TAN UX'iL and young activists engaged in mass civic education to pile pressure on the hospital management to reopen the clinic. Still, the management ignored their pleas.

TAN UX'iL had to think of other ways to get the hospital management to listen. They contacted Members of Congress from the opposition Semilla Party for help. Their main request was for the Members to conduct oversight visits at the clinic and demand the resumption of the services.

During the visits, the Members not only demanded the clinic reopen but advocated for a change in the attitudes and approaches used by public service health providers when dealing with young people and their sexual and reproductive health needs.

For those who had found that clinic a safe and dignified space to discuss their sexual and reproductive health, its closure was more than an obstacle. It was a denial of their rights.

The strength of coalitions

In the end, Dr Cesar Augusto Ortiz, the general director of the San Benito Regional Hospital, agreed with TAN UX'iL and the deputies on the need to reopen the clinic. In September 2022, what the youth had been demanding for so long finally came to pass. The clinic opened its doors to adolescents to receive sexual and reproductive health services for free.

The excitement among young people was beyond measure. In their hundreds, they trooped to the clinic to receive services that had been denied them for more than two years.

The success of their advocacy shows how effective young people can be when working with a coalition of organizations and decision makers to demand their sexual and reproductive health and rights ■

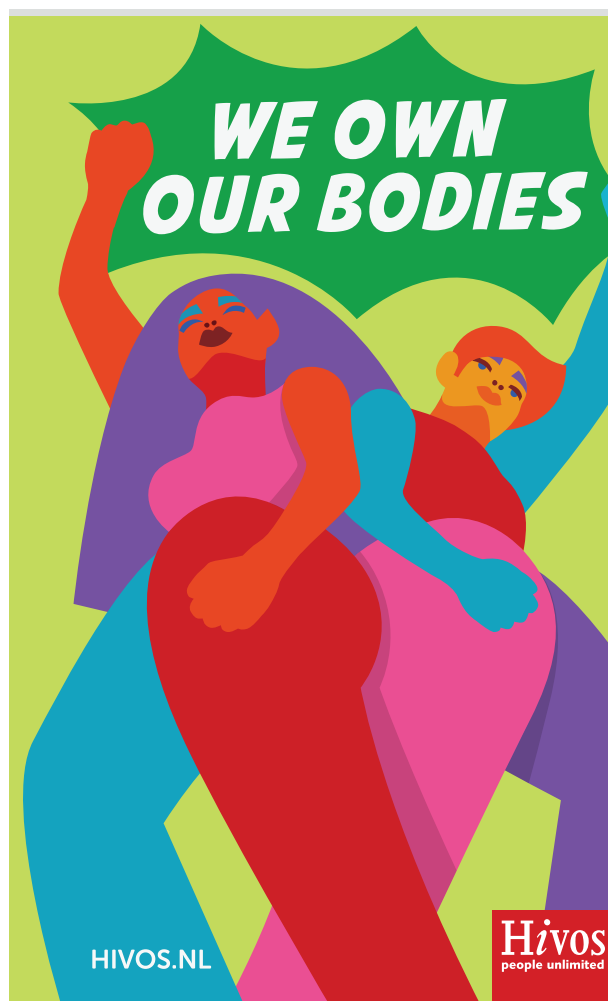
It is carnival when the LGBTIQ+ Pride and Visibility Parade reclaims its place

In 2024, the streets of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, pulsed with carnival energy even though it was June. Long lines of people in colorful outfits marched through the city, dancing to music amongst street entertainers, while curious crowds lined the sidewalks to watch the LGBTIQ+ community create awareness about their rights and needs.

For the over 1,500 participants, this wasn't just a celebration; it was a declaration. This community, known to suffer numerous rights violations in silence and denied chances to express themselves, voice their concerns, or tell their own stories, had refused to be muzzled any longer. Their determination filled the streets of Quetzaltenango as they demanded their human rights and respect in the community.

For many years, this march had been absent from Guatemala's streets. The drums and music fell silent following Covid-19 restrictions imposed throughout the country, as in many other nations.

Even after health restrictions were lifted, limitations imposed by the political establishment followed. The right-wing government that took power →



closed the spaces and platforms where LGBTQ+ people had made themselves visible, delaying the return of the march by more than three years.

A defining moment returns

In June 2024, the determination to fight for rights resurfaced with the reinstatement of the LGBTQ+ Pride and Visibility Parade. This day will be remembered by many as a defining moment in the lives of the LGBTQ+ community.

The massive importance of this parade wasn't lost on participants. This wasn't just a parade; it was a platform to make themselves and their issues visible, celebrate their identity, advocate for LGBTQ+ community rights, and push for inclusion in public discourse on social, economic, and political matters affecting them.

The march also served as a crucial platform for communicating the needs and rights of young lesbians and bisexual women related to sexual and reproductive health. It tackled discrimination, promoted acceptance, and facilitated discussions about sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR).

Stronger than ever

In 2024, the LGBTQ+ community reclaimed the streets with a stronger presence than before thanks to the tenacity of local organizations that built alliances and developed innovative strategies: Grupo de Apoyo Xela (GAX), BeRadFem, Asociación IDEI, the Kabawil clinic, and Asociación Iniciativa por la Diversidad Sexual de Occidente (IDSO).

Vidas Paralelas, with support from We Lead, played a key role in reactivating the Pride Parade

march and creating significant awareness about LGBTQ+ community issues and needs with their activities. These initiatives included empowering LGBTQ+ people to appreciate their rights, learn how to express them, and demand justice. The organizations used International Women's Day on March 8 to create awareness about community rights, and set up safe spaces where LGBTQ+ people could discuss issues affecting them and propose solutions to the challenges they faced.

Vidas Paralelas has been a frontrunner in using innovative strategies to keep the community visible. On April 26, 2024, they used Lesbian Visibility Day to transform Central Park into a space for open dialogue with artistic performances about rights. This parade helped strengthen and enhance solidarity among organizations and rightsholders, particularly young lesbian and bisexual women, ensuring that issues affecting these marginalized groups became part of public discourse and policy agendas.

Growing momentum

The march's revival strengthened solidarity and collaboration among local organizations advancing LGBTQ+ community rights. In 2025, participation grew again, with new groups including university students and youth organizations joining the march.

According to Vidas Paralelas, the return of the Pride and Visibility Parade forms part of broader strategies including content creation and recreational activities that happen on key international dates such as Lesbian Visibility Day and International Women's Day. These occasions are used to promote visibility, awareness, and pride within the LGBTQ+ community ■

A letter that turned the wheels of justice

Access to justice for young people in Guatemala experiencing sexual, gender-based, and other forms of violence has for many years remained a pipe dream.

Their voices and needs are rarely heard in cases seeking accountability for the perpetrators. This has led to a feeling of exclusion and the perception of a justice system that was problematic and unfriendly.

The long court processes and the impenetrable criminal justice system have made many young Guatemalans give up seeking justice.

The TAN UX'IL Association, a local youth-led organization and partner of the We Lead program, stepped in to answer the calls of young people and other marginalized groups for a more friendly and accessible justice system.

From the DA to the Public Prosecutor

The organization started by sending the District Attorney's Office formal statements about young Guatemalan's inability to access justice and requesting the DA's action.

The DA facilitated several meetings with the Public Prosecutor's Office on how best to address these issues of access to justice for victims/survivors of sexual violence. The Public Prosecutor agreed the problem needed a structural response.

“Victim referral policies and protocols are now functioning as they should, making justice more effective and culturally relevant. And communities have become active agents with the power to audit, suggest, and improve the justice system from within.”

The result was a signed Letter of Commitment between TAN UX'IL and the Public Prosecutor's Office detailing what would be done to improve justice for various marginalized rightsholders.

Some of the key points included: a regional referral network for crime victims in Petén; a framework for including opinions and recommendations of rightsholders on how justice institutions should deliver services and follow up on cases; and avenues for directly listening to the complaints and needs of the population.

Signed, sealed, and delivered

Tangible results did not take long to appear.





← Relationships between rightsholders and key actors in the justice system significantly improved, with TAN UX'IL as a crucial link between the young people experiencing violations and the justice system.

Victim referral policies and protocols are now functioning as they should, making justice more effective and culturally relevant. And communities have become active agents with the power to audit, suggest, and improve the justice system from within.

Another positive outcome is the creation of a channel for coordination between civil society and the government to streamline access to justice.

TAN UX'IL believes signing such agreements is an effective way to realize even greater gains in access to justice for youth and other marginalized groups targeted by sexual and gender-based violations.

"The signing of this Letter of Commitment between TAN UX'IL and the Public Prosecutor's Office of Petén is an exemplary milestone of how civil society and the State can collaborate to democratize access to justice."

TAN UX'IL sums this major success as evidence that "when institutions open their doors to the community, the result is a justice system that is stronger, more transparent, and, above all, more just." ■

Transwomen in Guatemala upbeat as dreams come true

Life for transwomen in Guatemala is filled with great anxiety, exclusion, and lost opportunities.

From early childhood, their gender identity creates a crisis in their lives. Stories of those who have dropped out of school because of bullying and discrimination abound.

Leaving school early almost always ends in social and economic disempowerment. With little or no education, job opportunities are limited and it's difficult to know or demand your rights.

This state of powerlessness makes transwomen particularly vulnerable to the abuse of their rights. Yet not many people or organizations are aware of their predicament or their desires in life. And this has been the way things are for years.

Trans Queens of the Night

But one organization in Guatemala, Trans Reinas de la Noche (Trans Queens of the Night,

OTRANS-RN), did understand what transwomen needed.

That is why it decided to provide the proper environment and support for transwomen to take the lead in initiatives to change their lives.

In 2023, OTRANS-RN, with the support of the We Lead program, created safe spaces where

transwomen could discuss what they felt was needed to improve their lives. Their input was important in developing relevant programs to address their situation.

The two main takeaways from these discussions were access to education and economic opportunities. They would also need some leadership skills training to advocate for their rights.

A rare opportunity to reclaim and realize their dreams

A cohort of 11 transwomen selected by OTRANS-RN followed a tailor-made capacity building program focused on education and economic empowerment. The educational component included scholarships for the 11 transwomen to complete their studies in primary, secondary, and technical colleges, depending on when each one had dropped out of school.

Now they had the rare opportunity to reclaim and realize their dreams of living productive lives in their communities. It also cleared the way to seize jobs and other economic opportunities that require an education.

The second component was economic support. The transwomen were trained in business administration, tax regulations, and entrepreneurial models. Those → who started



← businesses received expert advice and were constantly guided to ensure their businesses did not collapse.

Flying colors

The results were inspiring. All 11 transwomen graduated at various levels, redefining their future. On the economic front, all 11 are now running businesses that generate income to sustain themselves and their families. Those who went through training in leadership are now engaging in advocacy to demand their rights.

Empowerment is transformational

"This project shows that the path to real equality is built by inclusion and equity. By closing the education and economic gap, we have not only changed the lives of 11 women; we've invested in agents of change who will use their knowledge and economic power to strengthen community support networks," says OTRANS-RN.

"This model," adds OTRANS-RN, "proves that when rightsholders are empowered to change their own destiny, the results are transformative and sustainable" ■

