

Ancianas

of San Antonio Palopó.

San Antonio Palopó

*A small Maya village on the shore of
Lake Atitlan, Guatemala*



The Ancianas

In 2018, Melina Cortina Castro, a University of Victoria Sociology student, chose to do her Co-Op Practicum placement for 3 months at **La Casita** in San Antonio Palopó, Guatemala. **La Casita** - a centre of learning and support for Guatemalan children, youth and vulnerable elders - is an initiative of Innovative Communities.Org. Melina quickly became an integral part of the Learning Centre and Library - working with the young children as well as teaching English to the older students. She also developed a very special connection with the Ancianas (vulnerable elders) and eventually, along with a group of interpreters gathered the life stories of quite a few elderly women. The following stories were first told in *Kaqchikal*, a traditional Mayan language, translated into Spanish and then again into English.



Innovative Communities. Org - At Work in Guatemala





THE ANCIANAS FROM SAN ANTONIO PALOPÓ

By Melina E. Cortina Castro

In these pages there are the stories and words of nine elderly women from the village of San Antonio Palopó, Guatemala. Twice a week they gather together to enjoy a free hot lunch, activities and social time provided by **La Casita**.

Most of these women live alone and are widows; although there are some of them who live with their daughters or grandchildren. The age range of this group of women – who are all native of San Antonio Palopó – goes from sixty to over eighty. All of them wear the traditional güipil, some wear the red and white one, which is the one that all women used to dress several years ago, and others wear the blue one, which is what most women from the village wear nowadays. Over their güipiles, they all wear one or more golden-coloured necklaces, and some of them also wear a pendant with a religious image; they complement it with golden-coloured earrings. Some of them do not wear any shoes, others wear sandals – mostly plastic sandals.

To gather their stories, I visited each one of them – who wanted to participate – in their homes. They all acted happy to welcome me at their homes, and were very hospitable.



REGINA PEREZ

Doña Regina's house is just a few steps away from the village's Municipal buildings. Her house has a wooden door, but no fence. We greeted a couple of young people when we entered her home; apparently, she lives with some of her family members. Regina is 71 years old, or at least that is what she thinks, she is not so sure. When I ask her about her husband and her family, she says she is still married, although her husband has passed away. She has seven children, of which six live in San Antonio Palopó, and one went to Guatemala City to work. It is with great sorrow that she tells me that it has been a long time since she last heard from that son; she does not know if he is alive or dead.

When she was a kid, Regina worked hard everyday helping her mother with the house chores. She remembers that during those childhood years she had to follow her father's orders – who would always tell her what to do – without complaint. Then she grew older, got married, and went to live to her husband's parent's house, where she also had to do all the house chores. For her wedding, she weaved her and her husband's clothes. Her husband worked growing corn and beans, and, to help him, she would clean and fix that which he had cultivated so it would be in good conditions to sell. She tells us that, in the past, all women in the village worked helping their husbands in their jobs, but now, she says, many women look for their own jobs.

As she remembered how life was in the village many years ago, Regina told me – pointing to the faucet on her yard – that people did not have running water in their homes, so everyone had to gather water from the lake or the water well in the center of the village. She says she really likes that nowadays each family can have access to water in their homes, because it was too hard and tiring to have to gather water elsewhere. She is also happy to have water and a '*pila*' to wash her clothes, because, in earlier years, women had to go to the lake to do the washing on the stones by the shore. Regina also remembers the times when they did not have the looms for weaving; people would weave using only their hands, and on the floor. Moreover, the yarn that people now use to weave their clothes, and that is easily found in shops, did not exist when she was younger; they had to make and prepare the yarn from scratch to make their clothes. Back then it was not a tradition to make the now-characteristic (cloth) bracelets and ribbons that women wear and sell.

Regina is not very talkative, and, like other *ancianitas*, she tends to cover her mouth when she speaks. But when she tells me about the local traditions she smiles widely. She remembers how, years ago, the tradition during the celebration of the Patronal Fiesta was to make a special lunch for the whole family, and for this they killed a turkey or rooster, then they went to mass and the procession. There used to be different types of dances – more complex than the dances that exist today – and people used to dance them during the Fiesta; but now not many people dance anymore, she says. Back then, it was also a custom for everybody to wear masks for dancing and dress with similar colours, as if they were wearing uniforms. Now people don't wear masks, she says, but there is a new tradition: that of the election of a Queen.

Before we said goodbye to her, she wanted to send a message of advice to the young people of the village; she advises them not to get drunk, not to be violent or aggressive, and if someone else is talking bad about them to their backs, that it is best not to listen. She asks the youth to listen to the words of experience of the elders, who would say, with wisdom, that they should not bother others, and they should ignore those who are bad in order to follow a good path in life. After this advice, she thanks us for our visit to her home, and, with her wide smile, we say

ROSARIO SICAJÁN SICAY

Doña Rosario greeted us and invited us to sit in a small kitchen. From the moment we arrived she expressed her gratitude towards us for visiting her in her home. She is 64 years old, a widow, and had eight children, of which six have passed away. One of her children is already married, and the other one lives with her.

When she was a kid, she lived with her parents and her eight siblings. Her family was very poor. Her mom taught her to clean the onions, to prepare the yarn, and to weave. When she was 18 years old she got married, and, once married, she had to continue doing the same type of jobs and house chores. Her husband worked growing onions and so she cleaned them and she also weaved bracelets. Until this day, that is still her job because she cannot do other things, she says. Her husband was very poor, and she used to wake up very early to prepare his breakfast, grinding the corn in a stone to make the dough for the tortillas – each woman had to grind their own corn over a stone – and after that, her husband would leave to go to work. She tells us that her parents have already passed away, as well as her husband, who died on new years (last year). Before he died, her husband became blind; he was blind for eight years, and he never found any help, nothing. He used to beg on the streets and by the lake shore, which sometimes made her feel a bit embarrassed, but that is what he had to do out of necessity. Rosario says that he would spend the little money that people gave him on alcohol, and he would get drunk on the streets instead of taking that money home. She had to put up with all of that while he lived. Then, he died very quickly, she says; he was ill only for one day and one night and then he passed. Now she is left alone, and lives only with one of her daughters, who works in weaving in order to provide corn and sugar for their home. They live together because she is now a widow, so she says that her daughter is now taking the place of her late husband in sharing the expenses of the home.

When I asked her what things she has noticed that have changed in the village over her lifetime she says that, in the past, there were not as many illnesses as there are now; people would only suffer from headaches and stomach-aches. But now, she says, there are so many illnesses, as she suffers from knee and back pain, which makes it hard for her to sit on the ground. She also remembers that, before, there were no cars or roads in the village, and people would only have the *cayucos* (canoes) to go to Panajachel. Talking about the customs of past years, Rosario remembers that there used to be a tradition called *cofradía*, but now there are no more *cofrades*, for the village's customs have changed. There used to be *mayordomos*, who normally were twelve middle-aged people who would come together in meetings to decide how they would gather money for the Fiestas and who would get the *marimba*; the *mayordomo's* wives had to dance in the Fiestas, but not anymore. In the past,

everything was sacred, but now there is almost nothing of that left. Now, everything has become more religious, and the customs of the past, such as the *cofrades*, are no longer a traditional practice. Every activity is now part of the church.

Before we finish our talk, I ask Rosario if she has any advice for the youth of San Antonio Palopó, but she says that she cannot give any advice to them because she only has two daughters who are now adults, so she doesn't know much about today's youth, what they do, or how they are. But she has heard that most of the things they do are bad things, they smoke and they drink. She has no experience with young boys, as she only knows about girls.





NICOLASA DÍAS LÓPEZ

Doña Nicolasa invited us to sit in a room where she has a small altar (shrine) with a couple of religious images, a glass of water, a cross, and a clay vase with copal on the floor. On the other side of the room there is a small apparatus to weave bracelets. She offers a couple of little chairs for us to sit. Nicolasa is 62 years old, a widow, and mother of four children. However, one of her sons died in the lake.

When she was little, she had two different fathers because her mom remarried. She was only two years old when her parents separated. Then, they went to live to her stepfather's house. She called her stepfather 'dad' because she grew up in his house, she shared happy memories there; her stepfather was there on her baptism and her birthday parties. Nicolasa had four stepsisters, who she sees as her own sisters because they are very nice, she says. Nicolasa's only job is weaving, and she is busier in June because of the Fiesta Patronal and the *feria*, as well as in Christmas and in Easter. She weaves blouses (*güipiles*), shirts, and *servilletas* (the traditional cloths that women use to carry their belongings). But, in the past, she would only earn thirty cents for each *güipil*.

She married 'late', at 32, but she had four children. She suffered a lot during her marriage, for she and her husband were constantly fighting and he would beat her. Her husband used to drink a lot – for more than twenty-one years, she says – and they were separated for a while, but then they got together again. After their son's death, however, she was only five more months with him and then they separated for good. She says that her husband would think bad things of her, believing that each time she went out she was looking for other

men, but that is not true; she was looking to earn some food. There was a day when the police went to their home to talk to her husband and warn him not to beat his wife. He passed away six years ago, and now she is happy because she can get back to working and earning her own money. Only her daughter lives with her now, and her sons live in their father's house, looking after themselves.

When her son died she would not stop crying and asking the authorities for help. She tells us that she wanted to dig up her son's body when she found out that the authorities knew about certain irregularities about his death that they had not shared with her. Now, she says, all of the troubles and pains of her past are stuck on her mind, that is why she does not want to stay all day alone in her house, for she has a great pain in her heart. She will never forget her son, he is always in her mind; it is her sacrifice and her suffering, she says. For this reason, she began to cry while telling this. Another one of her sufferings is that one of her other sons drinks a lot and does not want to come live with her. This son once got hit on the head for drinking too much. To calm the suffering she gets for staying too long alone in her house, she goes to clean onions at other people's houses, and so she manages to stay outside most of the day.

Nicolasa is a very religious woman and her faith is with God. She attends the temple of *Renovación Carismática*, where she praises and sings. She says she gives good advice to her sons, but they do not understand her. Now, she is happy to see that the youth have more access to solutions to their problems because they can find the word of God everywhere, not like in the past. She trusts that the easy access to religion that young people have nowadays helps them.

When I asked her if she knew any legends or stories from the village she told me that one day that she was feeling upset she went to the streets looking for a job. That same day, while she was on the lake shore, she heard that something was calling her name so she fainted. She was very scared because a boy had died near that shore many years ago and she says that he spoke to her that day. In another occasion, she went to look for her husband – who was out drinking – at midnight, and then she saw four women wearing very elegant and shiny robes entering the church. Speaking of customs and traditions, Nicolasa says she misses the *cofradía* and the *mayordomos*, those were customs that she only saw when she was little. However, she says that back in those days, when someone did not accept the role of *mayordomo* he would go to jail, that is why she is relieved that people are not forced to follow a custom anymore. She is also happy that everything is more religious now. Despite everything that she has told us, she argues that she has not seen many things in her lifetime.

The advice that Nicolasa gives to San Antonio's youth is that they respect everything and that they do not drink alcohol, for it is bad for their health. It saddens her to see young men drinking. They must respect their fathers and mothers so they can enjoy a long life. She also asks them to go to church, any church, but to look for the word of God so the village can change. Nicolasa says that she is old now but trying to show the good path to the youth. She also says that she has a gift that God gave her, which is to sing in the church, and even though she cannot read, she keeps all of the chorus in her mind. She wishes that all the people in San Antonio Palopó would change for good; that all of the young people would change their mindsets. We are waiting for God's will in everything, she says.

NASARIA XAJIL PÉREZ

Doña Nasaria is 72 years old, a widow, and lives with her daughter and her grandson in a house made of a few small rooms. She invited us to seat outside of what seemed to be her bedroom, in a small space that they use for a kitchen. Nasaria, as many other *ancianitas*, puts her hands in her face while she speaks, but she is very expressive in her body language.

She remembers her childhood as very difficult times, she would wake up everyday at three in the morning to grind and prepare the corn. She would always help her stepmother with that and many other chores. Everyday, at six in the morning – when the tortillas were ready – her father would go to the mount to work, and it was her time to clean up the house and pick up the chicken eggs. At eleven they would start preparing food again and she would walk all the way up the mountain to where her father was to give him his lunch. When she turned 15 she married, and she had her first kid at the age of 16. She had six children in total, but with two different husbands.

During her first marriage her routine did not change much to that in her father's house; she would wake up at four in the morning everyday to make the tortillas, and would spend the rest of the morning weaving. Later in the day she would go to the mountain to look for firewood and then to clean onions in people's houses to earn some money. With the money she earned doing those jobs, and with her husband's money from the field work, they were able to build a small house for them and their four children. Nasaria remembers that those years were very hard for her, until her husband died and then, a while later, she married another man, and together they had a son. It has been over ten years since her second husband passed away; she was happier with him, she recalls. Before he died, they bought land to grow corn to sell. Her husband left half of the land to their son, but after his death there was a small conflict with his will, which left her with no part of the land. She fought her son for the land, but now they have made peace with each other, and she is very happy because her son is working and has earned money to build a new house.

Now, she works cleaning onions, and sometimes weaving bracelets. She also takes care of her children's chickens. She is used to hard work, and she says she is not used to resting and relaxing. She is currently growing *milpa* (corn). She tells us that she pushed her son to find a job and save money so he could buy his own terrain. In the past, no one was used to saving money because people would only earn a few cents. She says that things and food used to cost only cents, but now everything has very high costs. The terrain her husband bought, for example, only cost ninety cents, but now everything is so expensive that they cannot buy anything. Nasaria insists that young people have to save, and, if they are a couple, they should both work together to save and buy a terrain.

I ask Nasaria if she can tell me about the customs and stories of the village, and she tells us about *Semana Santa* (Easter). During Easter they celebrate the body of God and make a procession in his

honour. When she was little, her mother would take her to the Holy Mass, and would always tell her not to have tantrums or commit sins so she would not harm Jesus any further. She remembers that back in those days people did not own shoes so they would go barefoot over the rocky and muddy land. And even though some people had money, there were no paved streets and roads so they all had to walk in the mud. Nowadays, it is a blessing that people can have shoes, she tells us. Then, when I ask her about the legends, she tells me that she has had various encounters with ghosts and with *la Llorona*. One night, she recalls, she and her kids went out to look for her husband – who would drink too much and get lost in the streets – when she suddenly saw *la Llorona* in front of the church; *la Llorona* had long black hair covering her face – Nasaria covered her own face with her hair to show me. She says she has seen eight *Lloronas* in her life. In another occasion, she heard a cry coming from the mountain near her land, so she looked trying to find what was making that noise and there she saw the shadow of a big animal between the trees, and the leaves moving with the wind. She says that that must have been a bad spirit.





ANONYMOUS

This Señora lives by the lake shore, near La Casita. She preferred not to mention her name, although she did let me take a picture of her. Her bedroom is wide, with white walls and occupied only by a bed, a small wooden closet, some *copal* and religious images. When we asked her age, she took out her ID which shows she is 70 years old. She is now living alone because her husband passed away eight years ago. She says that the house where she lives now is not the same house she used to lived in with him, but she had to move due to a conflict. She had seven children, but two of them have died. Her husband used to work growing corn and onion, and for a period of time he worked weaving *chalin*as.

When she was a kid she was only for two years at school; on her first year she did not have a notebook, but a small blackboard. When she was at school she had to prepare her father's meal before going to class. After her second year she could not keep studying, but she did not mention why. She had four sisters named Lucía, Ana, Tomasa and Juana, and two brothers, named Sebastián and Salomón. Her siblings are from two different mothers, because her father's first wife died, so he later remarried. In her case, she had two daughters who are now married, sometimes they visit her but not often. When she was younger, her father would take her and her siblings fishing, for which they used a type of basket to catch the fish. She says that back then there were many more fish in the lake – and they were also bigger. Her father would also take them to the mount to gather firewood. When she married she would do the same things with her husband; they would go to the mount to gather firewood and herbs, and take food with them so they would eat up there.

Her husband had a terrain to grow corn, but it was near San Lucas, so to get there they would normally walk, or use a *cayuco*, and sometimes her father-in-law would take her on a horse. She mentions that when they went there by foot they would suffer because they could only drink small amounts of water, and would get very exhausted and hungry because it was a long way to walk. And when they would travel back in the evenings in the *cayuco*, the lake was not in rest and she constantly feared that they would drown. They would leave San Antonio Palopó at six in the morning and come back at five in the afternoon, and then it was time to prepare dinner. Sometimes she would not accompany her husband and so she would stay home weaving and washing their clothes on the lake. She would normally weave the traditional men's shirt. When she had her children she could no longer do a lot of work because she had to take care of them.

She remembers that back in her days there were no soaps or detergents to wash the clothes; they would use a plant. And back then, the lake was not as contaminated as today because of the plant they used to wash and because people would use baskets to carry their food and things, not plastic; also, they would only have organic trash, which they would use as fertilizer. In those days there were no packed (processed) juices, candy, or *atol*, it wasn't until she had her children that those products arrived in the village. There was no beef meat in San Antonio either, only when a man from Agua Escondida would come to the village to sell. She also comments that she never got used to eating fried chicken and French fries; she is only used to eating herbs and eggs. She mentions the lack of potable water, as well, so they had to gather water from the village's water well or the lake, then boil it to drink it. People would also make their own clothes, and yarn, not like today where they can just buy it.

She remembers the absence of cars and motored boats in her childhood years; the only means of transport were the *cayucos* and horses, but as they were poor they could not afford to rent a horse, so they would travel by foot to nearby villages to visit other markets because there was no market in San Antonio back then. Her father-in-law's house was made out of tile, and now the houses are made with metal *lámina*, which makes them accumulate more heat. In the past, mass was not an everyday event, it occurred only once a month, and there was no specific day for mass. She is happy that now mass is celebrated every Sunday, so she can thank God more often. Back then, men would only earn twenty-five cents for manual labour, and they had to go by foot to work. Every family would grow and harvest almost everything they needed, but in the rainy season, when there was shortage of food, they would trade – between families – corn or beans, for example, because money was not something people used. And each family would have their chickens.

She remembers when the *guerrilleros* and the soldiers came to the village. The soldiers camped up in the mount because they thought that is where they would find *guerrilleros*; they would stay hidden in the woods, looking and spying on people, and if they saw people who did not dress with the typical clothes of the village, or if they had long hair, they would take them away. Her father was taken away by the soldiers. When the war began, the church closed down, and her family – and many other families in San Antonio – had many problems, but she does not remember too much. Before we finished our visit, she wanted to add a little of advice to the youth, telling them to take good care of their money, that they don't spend it in bad things, and that they don't push their friends into doing bad things. Also, she asks them not to drink. But the youth now think they know everything, and sometimes they do not listen to the elders, she adds.

MARÍA PÉREZ TOVAR

Doña María lives by herself very high up in the mountain. She is 80 years old, although she says that she is not sure, but that is the age her children told her.

She was married twice; her first husband was the father of her two children, and she was married to him for twelve years. Then, she married again, and this marriage lasted much longer; her second husband passed away just a few months ago. She had a very good relationship with her second husband, they would share everything and support each other. But now, nobody helps her with the firewood, the chores, or any other thing. There was a time when her husband struggled to find a job, and sometimes they would not have enough food, but they persevered and would work to sustain themselves. She recalls how, in the past, there were no institutions to give aid to families; it was only the husband who had to go out to work and bring food. Now, it is hard for the elders to find a job.

She says she misses when she could work; now she cannot do anything, and the only thing she does is weave bracelets. She used to be able to weave *güipiles* by hand, but she sold all of her materials and now she cries because if she had not sold them she could still make them and sell them to buy food. But her children tell her not to cry because she has bad eyesight, anyway, and she cannot do the work she did before. She misses her husband because they used to take walks together, but now she spends most of her time at her house. She used to work sometimes making and fixing yarn, but that type of job does not exist anymore. María tells us that everyday she cries in her house, for she is very sad that she cannot earn money anymore. She has illnesses, her hand hurts a lot, and she cannot weave *güipiles*. She can barely kneel in her kitchen to cook. To ease her pain, she goes down to the market – but without money. She likes to be able to go to La Casita because when she goes she can forget about all her problems and sorrows that ‘attack’ her when she is home. She has now accepted that her husband is gone, and that she is alone, but despite that she still feels a lot of sorrow. She has just recently started to weave bracelets to get a little money, but she does not know how much she should charge for each one. The yarn she uses to make the bracelets is the yarn she saved from when she did *güipiles*.

When we ask her about what has changed in the village during her lifetime, she says that, before, the lake had never gotten ‘sick’, and there were many fish even though people would wash their clothes in the lakeshore. There were always big and small fish, and each person would go to fish in order to take food home – they would each make their own traps to catch the fish. Now the lake is contaminated, and people say is due to all the washing, but she does not believe this is the real reason because washing in the lake is an activity that has happened for

many, many years. Now, there are not many fish, so people have to buy them. In the past, people would bathe in the lake and would not catch any sickness, but now they do.

She advises the youth to respect their parents, and asks them to think how painful it is to be alone when one is old; so they should go visit their parents so they know they are there. It hurts to be alone and not speak to anyone, she says. But a parent is happy when their children come to visit, it is like they lift away the pain in their hearts. She also tells the youth that they should ask and thank God, and to go and participate in the church because it is something important in life. She comments that it is very hard to educate a child, that is why they should value and take advantage of their studies, because back in her time almost no one had the opportunity to study. They should value and thank their parents' efforts to give them education, which is a good inheritance. She says that when she was little, parents would hide their children so they didn't go to school, but now she realizes that was not right because now that she is sick and wants to ask for medicines she cannot talk to the doctors in Spanish. She also asks the youth to work.

María says that it hurts her that her children do not come visit her, that is why she hopes that young people are more considerate. Young people before were more respectful, they would always greet the elders, but it is not like that anymore; she says sometimes they just walk by without greeting them, so the respect has been lost. She also says that children should not say mean things, or bad words, to their parents. She remembers that when she was little she learnt that when a child would say something mean to their parents, Virgin Mary's clothes would tear because of it, and so children were scared because they did not want to do that to the Virgin; they would also tell them that they had a demon on their back that would push them to say bad words.





MARCELA SULUGÜI SICAJÁN

Doña Marcela is 64 years old and lives with her family in a house made of a few individual rooms in a small terrain. When we arrived at her home she invited us to sit on a bed without a mattress inside a small room. She was very thankful for our visit to her home, stressing how thankful she was that I was there even though I come from a far off place.

When she was a kid, around 10 years old, her father died. After that, her two bigger sisters left their home in search of a job and so she was left alone with her mother, for she was the youngest one. Her mother was not able to send her to school, that is why she cannot speak Spanish, she says. After her father's death, she and her mother went to the coast to work at the coffee plantations. They also worked packing beans and tomatoes, and doing other types of jobs. She mentions that her parents did not let her study because they saw that some young people would get married while they were studying and then they would not finish their education.

When she was 15 years old she got married, and it has been over twenty-four years since her husband passed away. They had a daughter, who, in turn, had seven children, but four died. Of the three children (Marcela's grandchildren) who are still alive, two of them are already married and the third one has a disability. Her youngest granddaughter is living with her. Every time her other granddaughters visit her they all stay at her house.

Marcela tells us that when she was little there was no electricity in the village, so, at night, they would use torches, candles and *candil* (gas torch). Back then, there were no windmills (or specific places to grind the corn), so each family would grind their own corn in a stone in their house. The roads were barely built and there were no cars; only the merchants would use horses to carry their products. For this reason, they could only eat meat once a month. To make the typical clothing (like the *güipil*) in the past, they would have to work with the cotton first in order to make the yarn, then they would paint the yarn red (which was the only colour that existed for yarn back then). Each woman would make their own yarn and weaving for herself, her husband, and her family. She says that a woman would take between one and two months in make a *güipil* (or another piece of clothing), beginning with the raw cotton. She also tells us that back in 'her days' there existed the *brujos* (sorcerers), but it was not God the one who gave them the gift, or power, to be *brujos*, but they had learnt to become one. She says that, sometimes, people who would study sorcery would end up crazy, and so she is happy to be a normal person. Sorcery would occur during nighttime, and because she was not allowed to go out – even during daytime – she almost never encountered any cases of sorcery. Because she stayed most of the day in her house, she would weave many bracelets or clothes.

Marcela wants to advise the youth to not do any bad actions and that they take good care of themselves, staying away from bad people. They also need to pick well the person who they want to be with, because there are women who may have good or bad intentions, so you never know the intention of a woman (she also mentioned that there were women who also practiced sorcery). When she was little, she was told not to befriend, or come close, to just any person that she did not know because, as she has mentioned, you never know the real intention of those people, and there are people who may want to give you bad advice. She hopes that today's youth do not engage in bad things so they do not end up in jail. She also advises them to keep studying because nowadays it is hard to find a job if one does not have an education. They also need to obey their parents and grandparents, so they can have a good life. Marcela tells us that she suffered a great deal because she did not have an education, so she does not wish the same suffering to the youth. In the past, most women were not allowed to study because it was a male role; men were the ones who had to work hard and bring food home, and women would stay in their homes. Marcela says that if someone wants to get married in the actuality, they have to have a good family planning for the family, because back in her time people would marry when they were 14 or 15 years old, and by the age of 16 or 17 they would have their first children. She says that family planning is important because she has seen families that have many children and not enough food for everyone, and then some children grow with malnutrition (they would only eat herbs). Marcela is happy, and thankful, to see that young women today have the opportunity to study, and she advises them that they always put priority to their studies. If one has studies, one can find a job anywhere, she says.

MARÍA SICAJÁN SICAJÁN

Doña María is 70 years old and a widow. She lives by herself in a very small room that is less than 2.5 square meters; that is all her house and she shares the terrain with other neighbours. When we arrived to see her, we had to sit outside of the room while she sat inside – on the floor – because we could not fit inside. Her husband passed away over a year ago, and his terrain was divided between her children, leaving her with no land at all. And her old house was destroyed in a landslide by storm Agatha.

She tells us that when she was little she suffered with her parents, and it was the same bad situation when she got married, at the age of 14. During her marriage, she would wake up at three in the morning to grind the corn; that was her daily routine, she says. When her children were young, they would work cleaning onions and earned ten cents a day. She had five sons but she has lost two; one died when he was 15 days old, and the other one died one year ago, when he was 50 years old. She misses her family greatly, and sometimes she starts crying in the street because of that. The son that died a year ago loved her so much, and so she misses him, because he was the one who always cared for her the most. But he lost his life in accident in Guatemala City. She does not want to bother her other sons, that is why she lives alone.

Now she cannot work because she began working since a very young age and she has lost all her strength. The only work that she still does is the weaving. In the past, she would weave her clothes and her husband's clothes, but now she only weaves the typical *servilletas*. María says she misses the work she could do before, because now people do not pay the fair price for her weavings; she says that when she needs the money and she sells her weavings, people give her very little money for them. She also tried to look for another job with some people but she says people were mean to her most of the time. She says she still wishes to work but has no strength. She does not have much; she has no electricity, so she uses candles, and she only eats tortilla with tomato and drinks coffee.

María remembers when there were many trees by the lakeshore, and when the lake was very clean and had many fish in it. She used to go fishing when she was little – catching little fish inside glass bottles – even though her parents would not let her fish; she would sneak out of her house to go to the lake, and would bring fish back home for her mother to cook. However, when her parents got mad at her for doing that, they would throw away those fish. The fish that used to live in the lake a long time ago were much bigger and plentiful; so she says that when the current fish 'arrived' in the lake, the other fish died. She learnt to fish from her father, but he did not let her do that because he was scared she would have an accident by the lakeshore. She says that when she asked her father to give her some money he would not give her any, but he would take a candy out of a cupboard and give it to her.

The advice that she gives to the parents in the village is that they take good care and love their children, and that they do not punish them too much because one does not know when one could lose a son. And the advice that she gives to the youth is that they take care of their youthfulness and not do go the wrong



path. She also asks the youth to take care of their parents, and to love them, because they gave them life and so they should show them more respect. She says she prays a lot for young men and young women to have a good future. In this moment in the talk she comments that she is very saddened for the recent death of a young man that used to drive a *tuc-tuc* (who died the day before we visited her). María says that she stopped believing in God for a while after her first son died, but then she reconsidered and now she attends church.



BENITA PÉREZ

Doña Benita is 65 years old. She has been a widow for six years now, and she works selling fruit and other little things in San Antonio's market. She had nine children but she lost six of them in the landslide caused by storm Agatha. Now, she lives in a small wooden house, next to what seem to be the ruins of an old cement house.

Since she was six years old she began to work with her mother; they would prepare the cotton to make yarn for the typical clothing, and she would also clean onions. Her mother taught her how to weave *güipiles*, and how to gather firewood from the mountain. She would wake up at three in the morning to grind the corn. She told us that her father worked really hard to build a highway but he never got paid for that job, so her mother had to find a way to maintain the whole family and buy the food. Her father would cry a lot because he did not get to work on what he wanted, for he was forced to do 'volunteer' jobs and it pained him not to have earned any money. Benita's parents forbid her to study; they would threaten her or scare her so she would not have the wish to study. When she grew up her father changed his mind but she already was scared of school so she decided not to go, and now she says that decision affects her because she cannot speak Spanish. Therefore, Benita spent her childhood and youth doing house work with her mother. And what she

experienced in her home, she also experienced when she got married; the same lifestyle. She and her husband suffered a lot. Even though both worked they earned very little money. Her husband was an orphan so she brought him to live with her parents. He fought hard to build their own house, but after the storm they were left with nothing. She says that when her husband was alive, he worked hard to create a project in the village for the children, but many people did not like his project because they believed he would sell the children, but he really wanted a project for children in San Antonio. He worked hard all his life but was never compensated for that. He lived 63 years, but got very sick; he was hospitalized in Guatemala City and in Xela, but they could not find a remedy for his illness.

Benita has divided her land between her daughters. After they lost their house in the landslide in the storm Agatha, they built another one with wood planks, but one day, while she was away and her daughter and grandson were in a meeting, someone went looking for them to tell them that their house was on fire. She was able to find a new place to live thanks to the help of a man in the village. She and her daughters hope to have a new house, but now because all her children that are alive are women, they cannot do anything to build a house, she says. Her daughters have suffered a lot as well, one of them lost a son, and the other lost her house. She always remembers her house and her husband, but even though she wishes she could build another house now, or keep working more hours, she can no longer do that due to her age and her bad health; she has back pains and bad eyesight. Benita is very thankful for the people that help her with something to eat or something to get by during the day.

When I ask her what she misses from the life in the village when she was younger, she says that when she lived with her parents they would celebrate parties or religious activities, and she misses that because she cannot longer celebrate that. In the past, there used to be many customs that people do not practice anymore; the elders would do community service, but now that has been lost. She remembers when all the chores that they had to do in the past was manual labour. There was also no soap so they had to wash their clothes with a red plant. She also tells me that the lake used to be bigger before, and that now there are houses where the lake use to be. Back then, men used to only work cultivating in the mountains; and they would go there by foot because there were no cars, and the fertilizers they used were more organic that what they use today, for there were no chemical fertilizers. Men used to work hard and everyday, but she says that nowadays, many men do not work, or do not have a desire to do better. She says that people in the past worked harder and were more enthusiastic with it because they would wake up very early to grind the corn, and they were used to those jobs.

A message that she wants to send to the youth is that they keep old customs and old manners alive, such as obeying their parents and working. She says that young people now live in debauchery, as they do as they please and do not obey their parents, so they are doomed. She also wishes that the they do not waste money, as she has seen that they do not appreciate that money does not come easy. She wishes for young women to take care of themselves and to be smart; because now, because of T.V., internet, or the radio, young women may go down the wrong paths, they get pregnant or get married at young ages. She says youth today do not respect their parents, they do not listen to them, and even she has a very disobedient daughter. In the past, there use to be a rule that said young women had a curfew at six in the evening,

otherwise they would get locked outside of their homes, and when they needed to go to the street they would always go with their mothers. Benita also says that parents should not presume that their children are doing the right things all the time because sometimes they are not there to watch them, so they do not know if they disobey or not. The last advice she wants to give to the youth is that they take care of themselves and do not listen to people who want to give bad advice, and for women to not fall into the lies of men.



Melina Cortina Castro standing at the back with the Ancianas

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La Casita
a centre of learning and support for
Guatemalan children, youth and vulnerable elders.

Lake Atitlan is a place of incredible beauty, edged by volcanoes, and surrounded by small picturesque Maya villages. But when you enter one of these villages you find very poor people trying to eke out a living through weaving and farming, on steep hillsides subject to torrential storms and occasional landslides. We work primarily in the Maya community of San Antonio Palopó, home to about 8,000 people.

In 2010, we supported a small community centre in San Antonio Palopó, offering a variety of programs for everyone from preschool to seniors. In 2012, ICO was given the 'casita' - a house and garden - to use for its programs. In 2017, learning that San Antonio's students were failing and dropping out of school, we worked with all sectors of the community to establish a multi-use learning centre and library. Now over 30 children a day arrive at the centre to receive extra assistance with their schoolwork from an enthusiastic young teacher-director, to use the computers for research, and just to read.

School fees, supplies and transportation costs make it impossible for most San Antonio students to continue past elementary school without help. We provide scholarships for poor, bright students to graduate from high school and in some cases to go on to university.

Twice a week, 25 - 30 frail, elderly women climb the stairs to ***La Casita*** to enjoy a nourishing lunch (possibly their only good meals during the week), and a social time together including games, exercises and art.

The ***La Casita*** team is a small group of volunteers working in the Lake Atitlan region in the Maya highlands of Guatemala. We're part of Innovative Communities.Org (ICO). We pay all our own travel and living expenses, so every penny we fundraise goes to support projects.

The ***La Casita*** Team:

Susan Gage, Mary Lynch, Kathy Coster, Linda Stanton,
Kim Haney, Sue Bailey, Penny Pattison



Innovative Communities. Org - At Work in Guatemala



24 Some of the many people of San Antonio Palopó learning, working and playing at La Casita.



These programs will continue with the help of our generous donors. As well as buying a handwoven scarf, you can also make a tax-receiptable donation (Charitable tax No. BN/871126249RR0001) to ensure that the work in San Antonio Palopó continues.

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