Change Starts With Us

Mama Cash grantee Asociación de Trabajadoras del Hogar, a Domicilio y de Maquila, Guatemala reflects on the ingredients for impact
By Esther Vonk for Mama Cash
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Founded in 2007, the Guatemalan Asociación de Trabajadoras del Hogar, a Domicilio y de Maquila (Association of Domestic, Home Based and Maquila Female Workers, ATRAHDOM) has become a leader in the struggle for Guatemalan women workers’ rights in the domestic work, garment, agricultural, and home-based industry sectors.

The challenge

More than 60% of women employed in Guatemala are home-based workers. When ATRAHDOM began its activities, domestic workers had no minimum wage or social benefits. The only legal regulation protecting them was a maximum 14 hour work day. In practice, their working days averaged 18 hours.

In the factories, where 60 to 80% of all workers are women, the response to women who tried to organise for better working conditions was violent, sometimes fatally so. There was no unified voice speaking up for women workers’ rights. The feminist movement did not consider labour rights a priority issue and the male-dominated unions did not take up the issues women workers faced in their industries.

The story

According to ATRAHDOM, “the fact that we speak and work from experience, that we have the experience of working in the sectors we represent – as domestic workers, as maquila workers – and combine this with knowledge of labour rights and experience working in unions, is essential in doing effective advocacy.” In the group’s experience, being self-led brings strength to the organisation and its messaging.

Initially, the fact that ATRAHDOM was addressing an issue that other feminist organisations and labour unions do not prioritise – women’s labour rights – proved to be an obstacle to effective advocacy. To bring about change, the group concentrated on forming allies and within a few years achieved considerable success. In 2010 ATRAHDOM gathered its main allies and formed the Consorcio de Organizaciones Sociales y Sindicales de Mujeres en la Economía (COSME), a coalition of organisations working for women’s labour rights, led and hosted by ATRAHDOM. The reason for forming COSME was to have a coalition that is strategically positioned to lobby the government for legal and policy change. The COSME coalition represents over 180,000 women workers from the domestic, maquila, and agro-industry sectors. ATRAHDOM has also formed and is involved in a new joint advocacy initiative with other feminist organisations. More organisations now see the importance of women’s labour rights and are joining the initiative, which is helping increase pressure on the government.

ATRAHDOM’s relationship with unions has also considerably improved since its founding. Initially, the organisation was largely ignored by the male-dominated unions and was even considered a threat. But by 2009 this began to change. ATRAHDOM now provides training for women workers connected to trade unions such as the Federation of Food and Allied Workers and the National Trade Union of Judiciary Workers. Work with the latter union led to ATRAHDOM’s participation in a joint committee on a minimum wage for workers in the maquila and export industries in May 2010.

When ATRAHDOM started, its goal was to provide support to working women in defending and claiming their rights as workers.
The group started by sending out press releases and connecting with representatives of the government. But ATRAHDOM quickly saw that this did not lead to much influence. What was missing was a solid base: they were too few women for their voice to be considered meaningful and worth listening to. What they needed was to be representative — to be the collective voice of many women workers.

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In parks, at the market, outside factories. This is how women workers got to know of us, got to know what we could offer in support, and, eventually, women got involved. We won cases and women stayed with us after they won their legal case. We became opinion makers. We made statements about the rights violations women reported. Then it was picked up by mainstream media. In turn, more women came to us. This is how we built our base.”

ATRAHDOM has nurtured the foundation of ‘Sindicato de Trabajadoras Independientes de Trabajo Domestico’ (Labour Union of Independent Domestic Workers, SITRADOMSA), a union of domestic workers that was established in 2011 and officially registered in 2012. SITRADOMSA has joined the COSME labour rights coalition and receives ongoing support and mentoring from ATRAHDOM.

The change

In 2010 ATRAHDOM secured a commitment from the Guatemalan Ministry of Labour for a minimum wage standard for domestic workers. In the same year, it was invited to join members of the Ministry and Parliament in creating a national social security programme for domestic workers. After securing an on-going dialogue with the National Union of Judicial Workers and the School of Legal Studies on issues facing women workers, ATRAHDOM began providing trainings to judiciary officials and labour inspectors from 11 national departments. ATRAHDOM was part of the state and civil society commission that drafted the Statute to Prevent Conflicts in Maquila Factories in 2010 and participated in monitoring the amendment of the bill to reform Labour Code No. 4075 on benefits for domestic and farm workers.

ATRAHDOM has improved state mechanisms that working women use to register complaints against their employers for violations of their labour rights, including failure to provide wages, sexual harassment and violence in the workplace. The group has accomplished this through its training of state officials, as well as provision of legal support to women workers whose rights have been violated. This work began in 2010 when lawyers started to volunteer their time with ATRAHDOM. By 2014 the Ministry began to pay the lawyers’ fees – a significant step in its acknowledgment of responsibility for the defence of women workers’ rights and women’s access to justice.

A number of cases taken up by ATRAHDOM have been resolved through the General Labour Inspection. Twelve cases were taken to court because of unsuccessful resolution with the Inspection, and half of these have been won. The other six are still lingering in court, exceeding the official three month term to resolution – a problem ATRAHDOM is pushing to change.

ATRAHDOM has played a major role in advocacy for the International Labour Convention C189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers (Convention 189). The group organised a consultation with women workers and subsequently presented a statement on the main issues faced by working women to the 2011 Conference of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), dedicated to domestic work. ATRAHDOM represented Guatemalan domestic workers at the conference, bringing the experience and agenda of Guatemalan domestic workers to the main international policy space for labour rights. The conference resulted in the landmark ILO convention, Convention 189. The new ILO standards insist
that domestic workers must have the same basic labour rights as other workers.

ATRAHDOM has led the civil society lobbying effort aimed at the Guatemalan Ministry of Labour to press for ratification of the convention. On February 6, 2014 a three-part committee of government, employees and employers – tasked with providing the Ministry of Labour a mandate on the issue – resolved that the Minister should ratify the convention. Although this has not yet happened, ATRAHDOM and its allies continue to pressure the government, and the Minister in particular, by involving national and international allies and keeping the subject alive in public opinion and the media. The group also participates in regional efforts to pressure other Latin American governments to ratify the convention.

Organisational strengthening and the role of Mama Cash

When ATRAHDOM applied for funding from Mama Cash in 2009 it was the first time it had applied for funding from a source outside Guatemala. The group had previously sustained its work with its own resources and support from its allies. ATRAHDOM explains: “The Presidential Secretary of Women started referring to us on labour rights issues. We started a regular exchange and advised the Secretary, and then we got the courage to request financial support. In September 2009 we received a $3,000 grant from the local UNIFEM office for a series of workshops on violence and harassment against women in the workplace for community-based organisations in the outskirts of Guatemala City. We started negotiating with the government for small funds, too. And it was as if money attracted money, because we heard about Mama Cash, applied, and received our first grant from a donor outside Guatemala. This was December 2009. It was a turning point for ATRAHDOM. Our political significance grew. We became stronger and our team grew, we had our office space and we were respected.”

ATRAHDOM found Mama Cash’s support especially important in building the organisation’s capacities in the areas of advocacy and resource mobilisation. The group has participated in various Mama Cash grantee partner meetings, the regional feminist encounter in 2011, and the feminist encounter ‘Venir al Sur’ in 2012. It also participated in an initiative of Mama Cash and partner Semillas to support six grantee partners in Latin America to strengthen their resource mobilisation capacities and strategies. The five-day training took place in 2013. Since then ATRAHDOM has significantly increased its income.

Mama Cash uses its financial resources to support the growth of emerging groups that
cannot yet access other sources of funding. With ATRAHDOM having grown and strengthened significantly Mama Cash’s financial support will end in 2015. About Mama Cash, ATRAHDOM says: “We experience you as an ally, in all senses. This year, Mama Cash’s financial support will end. We have been preparing for this. It has not been easy, but we know that the relationship will continue after our grant ends. We are allies and partners and that does not end.” Indeed in the same year that Mama Cash’s funding of ATRAHDOM came to an end, Mama Cash began funding a new grantee, SITRADOMSA, the domestic workers union founded with ATRAHDOM’s support.

From 2009 to 2015, ATRAHDOM received a total of €256,300 from Mama Cash.

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[This story of change is based on documents ATRAHDOM submitted as part of Mama Cash’s monitoring and evaluation during the grant periods; notes of progress review conversations conducted over skype; written input submitted by ATRAHDOM staff; and an interview with Maritza Velasquez. All quotes are Maritza’s. The original case study was researched and compiled by Esther Vonk.]
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