



FLOR'S STORY

Keywords: Guatemala, Maya-Mam, Asylum

Flor is an indigenous woman from Guatemala who worked with EBSC to receive political asylum.

“I was born in a small village in Guatemala. I am Maya-Mam, an indigenous people who speak the Mam language. During the war in 1982, my parents fled to the mountains near the southern coast. The government sold them a small parcel of land with a 20-year loan. I had a very difficult childhood. I started to help my parents farm the land at age 4, and so I never really got to play very much. At first, we didn't have a house. I went to school, but only until seventh grade.

There was a lot of discrimination from Ladinos – people who speak Spanish - against indigenous people. Also, women do not have the same rights as men. There were so many problems from the government and they tried to take our land away. When I was a teenager, I joined an organization made up of internally displaced people in Guatemala. We helped people to fight for their rights to maintain their land and make official reports about abuse.

I was 19 years old and the Secretary for this grassroots group when I was raped by soldiers because of my activism. There was so much violence and rape of indigenous women. After it happened, I was in the hospital for ten days. They had beaten me so badly. I returned to my house and the soldiers threatened to kill me and my family. I had to stop filing complaints on behalf of land rights. After a month, I fled to the United States to seek safety.

Some people from the church told me about Santuario. They helped me submit my application for political asylum. After six months, I was granted asylum and I felt much safer. I was still a little afraid, but not as afraid as before. I still had a lot of





psychological trauma, but I felt more freedom. It was as if you were really hot and someone gave you a cool glass of water – I felt much more alive.

When staff at EBSC told me I could continue to go to school here in the US, I was so happy. I started to learn Spanish and then EBSC helped me get a scholarship from the English Studies Institute. I would travel for one hour each way on BART to go to school to study English. This helped me to get a better job – I am now working in a retail store - and communicate with my manager and customers. In 2016, I started taking GED classes three times per week. It's very difficult, but it's getting easier! My dream is to get my GED, go to college, and have a career as a nurse assistant. The other great thing is that Santuario helped me to start taking citizenship classes.

I appreciate Santuario so much. It is the best organization that is truly helping people!"

What message do you have for EBSC supporters to better understand the situation of indigenous women from Guatemala who are seeking political asylum?

"Truthfully, I want people to listen to us and understand us. Sometimes, it is hard for indigenous women to explain and express our situation. Sometimes we are afraid to share what happened to us. It is very painful. I want indigenous women to understand that they should not be ashamed, that they deserve to move forward in their lives and receive legal help and mental services. If people are traumatized, Santuario can help them find counseling. I would always like to help others who are seeking asylum, especially Mam women."

Context on Maya Mam:

[The Bay Area is home to 15,000+ Indigenous Guatemalans.](#)

Few speak English, many don't speak Spanish, and most are noncitizens. [Mam is now one of the top 10 languages in immigration courts.](#) [Since 2016, the number of students who speak Mam at home has doubled.](#) Mam-speaking people have been processed in immigration courts across the nation in higher numbers than any other indigenous Latin American group since 2014.



Maya people make up roughly half of Guatemala's population, and Mam is one of twenty-three Mayan languages spoken in Guatemala and an ethnic distinction within the broader Maya ethnic group. Only an estimated 500,000 people speak Mam worldwide, most of whom live in the highlands of northern Guatemala or in Chiapas. There are three broad regional dialects: Western, Northern and Southern. Most Mam people living in Oakland are from Todos Santos, a municipality in the department of Huehuetenango. This municipality continues to be deeply impacted by the aftermath of the 36-year civil war supported by the U.S. government. The direct legacy of military and state violence from the Guatemalan Civil War did not end in 1996 with the Peace Accords. Even though the civil war ended twenty-five years ago, the same people who formed the fabric of the state military continue to perpetuate the racist violence (including sexual violence) as police officers. Economic marginalization and land rights are particularly large challenges for Indigenous Guatemalans due to a long pattern of discrimination, violence, and segregation.

“In Guatemala, extremely limited employment opportunities force Indigenous Guatemalans to work on the large coffee and cotton plantations where they are abused by the supervisors and often cheated out of their starvation wages.”

– Michael Smith, Director of Refugee Rights, EBSC

“Interconnections between the war, post-war violence, out-migration, and remittances demonstrate the accumulated trauma that Mam immigrants in the Bay Area continue to live with every day.”

– Maya Kandell, EBSC Outreach Coordinator and ESL/
Citizenship Class Facilitator