

**PEN | Vida | Count UNESCO**

**Women Seizing the Word**

**The Participation of Women Writers in Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua**

**Executive Summary**

PEN International, the worldwide association of writers, together with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, (UNESCO) and VIDA: Women in Literary Arts, are pleased to present this report whose goal is to show the reality of women writers and journalists in Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua, as an initial phase of a project that aims to include the rest of the region and the Caribbean.

This effort is inspired by PEN International Women's Manifesto, approved in 2017, in Lviv, Ukraine, under the premise that literature knows no borders, and that the right to freedom of speech and to creation should know no borders; however, in the case of women these universal human rights, including the right to education and culture, are still being severed globally, thus making up another form of gender-based violence.

The participation of UNESCO in this ambitious research is of great importance, not only because it aligns with the United Nations' 2030 Global Goals, but because since 1945 the organization has worked to promote gender equality as well as the rights and autonomy of women.

This report is possible thanks to the support of the 2020-2021 Participation Programme that UNESCO granted to the PEN International and its Civil Society Programmes, which enabled greater collaboration between PEN International and PEN Centers in Chiapas, México; Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua —the latter Centre unjustly censored by its own government.

This report benefited from the input of women writers, as many of them are also journalists. This has allowed contributors to reflect on the challenges in the publishing industry as well as the protocols of literary awards, including access to editorial catalogues, literary contests, festivals, specialized magazines, cultural supplements and either printed or online newspapers, among other spaces. The interviews tried to establish and pinpoint the conditions, within the literary sector,

which contribute to the exclusion of women authors from the literary space, in which their intersecting identities such as race, mother tongue, socioeconomic status, cultural codes, sexual orientation, or age, among others aggravate this discrimination.

In general terms, the report shows that the presence of women writers and columnists in literature and journalism continues to be a minority in Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua. However, this reality is changing: new generations of women writers, whether poets, short story writers, journalists or novelists, are making their voices heard more day by day. This is in part because of the nature of digital platforms, especially social networks, in which its' sharing features enable instant participation, and an immediate exchange of ideas. Virtual resources such as *Zoom* which, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, have ensured the continuation and recalibration of existing cultural and educational activities, including online conferences and international book fairs. Likewise, these women writers have taken advantage of the possibility of publishing their works on cloud-based applications, in author's editions or in joint publications with a new generation of so-called independent publishers. Unlike big publishing houses, these focus on the quality of publications rather than profits, and on ensuring gender equality, even though many of their directors are men.

The report highlights an average ratio of 70% - 30% of male and female writers. In other words: three men for each woman. Below is a summary of the main findings of each country study, in alphabetical order.

## **ECUADOR**

### **"Ecuadorian women writers break the silence"**

*By Carlos Vásconez and Rodrigo Aguilar Orejuela*

Ecuador shares with its neighbors, far and near, many of its cultural traits, its virtues as a people and also its shortcomings, sexism being one of the most visible. Nevertheless, in the last few years, the country has taken steps aimed at countering this overriding sexism, in an attempt to banish it from the public sphere (including homes and academic institutions). Challenging social norms in these spaces, — in which new generations are shaped, not only as receivers of information but also as reproducers of prejudices and inferiority complexes — is critical.

These norms have historically marginalised the work of women in general, and women writers in particular has remained invisible. In the case of a few exceptions, women's writing has been cataloged as minor work and rarely considered equal to that of male writers.

In the field of literature and journalism, women writers and columnists are also a minority. Recently, however, this historical pattern has begun to be challenged. Between 2016 and 2020, women writers from Ecuador have either been nominated for or won various international competitions. These awards and their visibility in the international media and global arena, have directed literary interest towards this small Andean country, prompting a realization that not only does Ecuador produce outstanding literary work, but the literary contribution of women writers, — as in other latitudes of the continent— is unprecedented and marks a historical moment of national literary creation.

In all the literary spaces analyzed in this report, there is a growing presence of women writers, although the balance continues to tip, in quantitative terms, towards male authors. However, the contrast is still positive if approached from the perspective of the terrain laid and conquered by women writers and journalists in Ecuador in recent decades. The data is surprising in some cases and the differences abysmal.

There is a perception that the voices and pens of its women writers and journalists are more valued in their country, in part because of their international visibility. 2016 and 2020 represents more than a transition or a simple change in the status of Ecuadorian literature. It is a revolution in its nature and representation, with changes to two elements that have characterized it until then: a literature almost unknown beyond the national boundaries —with some exceptions, — and one represented mostly by male writers.

Report indicators suggest a new reality for women writers in Ecuador. For example, in 2018, had a far-from-negligible participation of 40% in national literary awards, compared to 60% of prizes obtained by men. In the case of the opinion columns published by main national media, the space offered to women is considerably less than that reserved for men, with an average record of 65% to 55%.

The magazine *Rocinante*, committed to promoting culture, appears as the most equitable space in this sample, being the publication that offers the most space to interviews and reviews of books by women writers, with 47% compared to 53% for men.

## **GUATEMALA**

### **“Inequality and disadvantages: the challenges”**

*By Edilma Marianela Godínez Socoy, Karla Martina Olascoaga Dávila and Ana Lucía García Ruano*

This report constitutes the first national study into situations of disadvantage, disparity, or inequality experienced by Guatemalan women writers as they try to achieve recognition both at personal and professional levels.

Guatemala is a country with more than 16 million inhabitants: it defines itself as multilingual, multicultural, and multiethnic, with 55% of its population being indigenous, and a poverty rate close to 45%. Whilst its official language is Spanish, Guatemala has 21 Mayan languages, in addition to Xinka and the Garífuna. Its socioeconomic context is complex; access to public education is uneven for boys and girls, especially in rural areas; society produces and reproduces a colonial patriarchal model, and gender policies needed to tackle the unequal distribution of roles and responsibilities within Guatemalan families —and, therefore, within society— are non-existent.

The lack of equal opportunities, is evident in pre-elementary and elementary education and rampantly reinforced in almost all areas of society. It negatively affects the development of women, putting them in a position of disadvantage compared to men. To this should be added the linguistic and cultural complexity of a country whose official language is often used as a second language, since the mother tongue of any given inhabitant could be any of the 23 languages spoken in Guatemala. In an attempt to redress this imbalance however, a number of private entities have for decades promoted programs and projects to support the development of girls from an early age.

For centuries, in countries with latent remnants of colonialism such as Guatemala, the image of the writer is that of a wealthy, upper-class, highly educated, elderly man, who is able to dedicate most of his time to the arts. This preconceived image has its roots in Europe, and it later moved into Guatemala, finding a place there thanks to the stereotypes that are reinforced in society and in government institutions.

Being a woman in Guatemala entails a series of challenges. The statistics disclosed by the country's Public Ministry Observatory are alarming. During 2021, 158 complaints of violence against women were received every day. In addition, it is estimated that in Guatemala, five women disappear and two women are murdered each day; highlighting the precarious vulnerability of women.

The lack of private and state financial support to cultural organizations makes it difficult for literary contests of national or regional relevance to exist. Thus, the opportunities to find spaces to make women writers visible are reduced.

However, as the report indicates, women writers in Guatemala have found a greater opening to be read in virtual spaces. New generation of young women writers are choosing to self-publish and self-disseminate their works on social networks, digital literary anthologies, personal or collective blogs, among others. This is setting a precedent whose results will be seen in the coming years. We believe that these developments, should catalyse governmental institutions, such as the Ministry of Culture and Sports, into reviewing these cultural developments, and adopt necessary measures to renew the presence of literary and artistic competitions in general. In terms of representativeness, the report shows an average ratio of 79% to 21% in the case of male and female writers, respectively, taking into account all the areas analyzed, such as literary awards, editorial publications and interviews.

## **HONDURAS**

### **“There is a backwardness in giving voice to women writers”**

*By Dina Meza, Rosa Rodríguez Morazán and Cesario Alejandro Félix Padilla*

It is striking that, in its 69 years of history, the Ramón Rosa National Literature Award has only been granted to five women in Honduras; this is not because women lack skills in the field of literature, but because there is a very high wall that does not allow women to show up, and the few cracks that have been opened in it have been done so due to the pressure of those who do not accept being invisible.

Thanks to the PEN | Vida | Count UNESCO project "Women Seizing the Word", we have had the opportunity to account for the state of visibility of women in our country in relation to literature. This experience gave us the opportunity not only to count the number of women who are visible

thanks to their writing but also assess gender inequality in the literary field, and reflect on mechanisms by which we can promote change, in which more than half of the population is being denied their right to be read.

Undoubtedly, the lack of space enabling the visibility of women authors and their work also hinders the ability to raise awareness and transformative ability of literary production.

We cannot stop saying it: being a woman in Honduras is in itself an obstacle for development, and if you are a woman writer, you must have a lot of strength to resist mobbing, even in the same literary spaces dominated by men.

In her interview with the Honduras PEN Centre, poet, political scientist and university professor Yolanda Alvarenga, founder of the National Association of Women Writers of Honduras, asserts, “Honduran literature has been a pendulum tilted towards male authors. However, women writers are gaining spaces and it is not that they intend to take spaces away from men, but for there to be equal opportunities”. She adds that the State of Honduras, as a government, has taken great care of male writers and very little of its female writers. Despite this, its female authors are determined to win their own space. Furthermore, marginalization not only affects the majority of women, but also indigenous, sexually diverse, and disabled writers. Alvarenga also adds that “the pendulum is in favor of this misogynistic and androcentric vision, where men dominate the public field, because we women have written throughout our whole lives, but we have done so in secrecy. Sexism and patriarchy continue to dominate the different forms of knowledge in the world.”

Garífuna researcher and writer Maira Cacho claims that in Honduras “women are no longer locked up, and they want an open participation”, although backwardness continues to be great among the different ethnic communities of the country, as well as in rural areas. Cacho says that, although men currently still have many more options than women, “women today are more involved, more empowered, and we continue to fight for spaces, because we still cannot break the patriarchy, we have yet to achieve a total break from patriarchy, which is always there.”

The aforementioned is confirmed by the findings of this report. The monitoring of the opinion columns of the four media outlets with the largest circulation in Honduras, shows that more than

80% of participation is credited to men and less than 20%, on average, to female journalists or writers (181 publications were signed by men, while 19 publications were signed by women).

The same is true for the most important literary contest in the country, the Ramón Rosa National Literature Award, which throughout its 52 installments has only been won by five women writers (almost 3%). On the other hand, the Los Confines Festival, created in 2017, has rewarded three men and two women (40%) in the poetry field.

In the publishing industry, works written by men take up an average of 70% of the space, while 30% is taken up by women.

## MEXICO

### **“Winning the war against being invisible”**

*By Angélica G. Altuzar Constantino, María Elizabeth Sáenz Díaz, Mary Carmen Salgado Espinoza, Juana Peñate Montejo, Marvey Altuzar Figueroa, Juana Angélica Gómez and Alejandro González Alonzo.*

The wide gap that has historically separated men and women in Mexico regarding access to education and opportunities in other areas of life, is also reflected in relation to literary activity. In a country where poverty and illiteracy are greater among the female population, it is only likely that there will be fewer women writers. What is unusual is that existing women writers are not referenced in the national dictionaries, in the institutional directories, nor in the public and private publishing catalogues; nor are their works reviewed and disseminated on par with those of their male counterparts.

These types of omissions are not the result of ill faith —perhaps there is not even an awareness of the fact. They are a consequence of the old custom of excluding and dismissing the feminine presence; of the custom of not recognizing the constant and resounding participation of women in matters that have been considered exclusive to men; and of the habit of not taking them into account when designing public policies and editorial criteria.

In Mexico, making women invisible and sidestepping their efforts to earn a place in any field of knowledge and practice is common. This is true to the extent that a high percentage of academic and cultural institutions, the publishing industry, and the media are just starting to become aware of the inequalities that they have perpetuated for years.

Those who have discovered and laid bare that the current reality does not correspond to the founding principles of such corporations, are women themselves. As this report demonstrates, it is through the creation of websites, women-owned publishing houses, women writers' conferences, and book fairs displaying works by women, or through the holding of public office, that they find the opportunity to research, review, publish and promote the work of Mexican female writers. This is beginning to level out this playing field.

The individual efforts of Mexico's women authors range from the search for a better intellectual education to a greater participation in forums, published editions and literary contests. Collective energies have been concentrated on researching and revising the work of women writers from past years, on recording the names of contemporary women writers from all over the country, on creating digital connections that are open to dialogue between female authors, and on opening spaces for publishing and disseminating literature written by women.

A gradual change towards a greater balance is also being fostered by institutions, especially those led by women or by allied agents. Some of the literary awards granted by the Mexican government which bore the name of the convening states, now bear the name of a female author who comes from such states. Such is the case of the Amparo Dávila Fantasy Short Story National Prize, known from its foundation in 1974 until 2018 as the San Luis Potosí Fantasy Short Story National Prize.

In the printed or digital pages of Mexico's cultural supplements, women writers and columnists comment on, review or recommend other female writers. In Mexican and foreign universities, women researchers, essayists, and editors publish the results of their important surveys and investigative work about women writers of their country.

New blogs, podcasts, fan pages and editorials, created by the women writers themselves, are beginning to document the presence of women writers in Mexico and across the world. The

networks of female authors are expanding day by day thanks to the reach of digital media. Their contents enrich and clarify the insubstantive articles that appear on an every-day basis on websites such as hotbook.mx and mascultura.mx. These sites regularly publish articles on the best-known and most frequently cited female authors, often labelled by current authors as "the usual ones." This approach though not intended to be disdainful, is an allusion to the denial of the cluster of female voices that make up a considerable number in the national context of today.

In our monitoring of the four cultural supplements (which have the largest circulation in the country), the counting of the editorial novelties of a prestigious national bookstore with a specific offer of male and female Mexican authors, and the assessment of the 14 most relevant literary prizes, points to an average of 30% women as compared to 70% male writers.

In the case of the media, the Saturday cultural supplement *Laberinto*, of Milenio newspaper, turned out to be the most inclusive medium, registering a presence of 44% of women authors. Regarding the 14 literary awards that were analyzed, the summary shows an average relationship of 74% to 26% participation between men and women, respectively. In some cases, however, the equation tends to balance out, as shown by the Juan de la Cabada Children's Short Story Fine Arts Award (55%-45%); the José Revueltas Fine Arts Prize for Literary Essay (56%-42%); the Perla Szuchmacher Fine Arts Theater Play Award for Girls, Boys and Young People (56%-44%) or the Juan Rulfo Fine Arts Award for First Novel (58%-42%).

In editorial matters, the presence of Mexican women writers in all literary genres and all the publishing houses marketed by the bookstore chain selected for this sample reaches 25%.

NICARAGUA

**"Sexism continues to weigh on society and culture"**

*By Gioconda Belli*

The history of Nicaraguan literature since the 19th century, in which the poet Rubén Darío, regarded as the father of literary modernism in the Spanish language, stands out, shows a moorland empty of female names up until the 1950s.

Sergio Ramírez's work *Enciclopedia de Nicaragua (Nicaraguan literature)*, published by the Cervantes Institute Library, does not mention any women until 1960 and 1970, except for what he calls some notable antecedents of Nicaraguan poetry written by women, including Piedad Medrano Matus, María Teresa Sánchez, and Mariana Sansón Argüello. Claribel Alegría (1924-2018) who, although listed among Salvadoran writers for having emigrated to that country as a child, was born in Estelí and lived again in Nicaragua until her death, deserves special mention. The owner of a beautiful and sensitive poetic voice, which earned her the 2017 Reina Sofía Prize for Ibero-American Poetry, among other outstanding recognitions, Alegría always explored new paths which are embodied in her collections of poems *Anillo de Silencio*, *Huésped de mi tiempo*, *Sobrevivo*, *Suma y sigue* and *Luisa en el país de la realidad*, among others.

Yet, as Sergio Ramírez asserts, the Nicaraguan literary landscape was dominated by male authors, until, starting in the 1960s, a plethora of women broke out that would mark the following decades and whose commitment to poetry extended to the fight against the Somoza dictatorship, for in their works they proposed a double liberation: that of women and that of the country.

Most of the women writers of the 1970s generation became involved in the war against the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza and, in the following decade, during the Sandinista revolution, they became more visible, coming together and demanding to be recognized. They defined the Woman of the end of the 20th century.

As this report highlights, up until the 19th century, male literature defined what it meant to be a woman; today, female literature provides a different view of that concept, a view that had in the past been absent. Like most women in Latin America, Nicaraguan women have faced substantial obstacles in their creative work, since for a writer (male or female) to be recognized as such, the support and endorsement of renowned authors (male or female) is required. Another obstacle is the poor development of the publishing industry, which makes it very difficult for their books to be published.

Increasingly, new women authors self-publish on digital platforms to make their texts known. The biggest problem, however, continues to be the male domination of literary criticism and its scant development in Nicaragua, perhaps as a result of the disappearance of cultural supplements in

newspapers and, more recently, of printed newspapers themselves. The supplements were crucial in the 20th century to publicize and assess the literature that was produced in the country. Nowadays, digital alternatives have begun to emerge, but the pattern of a biased male judging eye continues to affect the dissemination and adequate bibliographic representation of women authors, even in the case of those who are best positioned internationally.

The results of the measuring of this report clearly show a male predominance in the cultural representations of Nicaraguan society. However, in recent years, the struggle of women has allowed them to occupy spaces previously denied to them. It also has increased the level of gender awareness in institutions and cultural media, forcing them to make a conscious effort to increase the presence and participation of women. Nonetheless, there is still a long way to go in a country where about 51% of the population is female.

In summary, from the sampling of two cultural magazines, one publishing house, two international literary festivals, one literary award and one journalistic award, as well as information from the Nicaraguan Academy of Language, it can be concluded that the average representativeness of male and female writers, as well as of women journalists, ranges between 70%-30% and 66%-44 percent. The *El Hilo Azul* magazine and the *Centroamérica Cuenta* Literary Festival, both founded and directed by writer Sergio Ramírez, recipient of the Cervantes Prize of Literature 2017, stand out for a greater representativeness of female writers in relation to men.

In the first case, 33% of the 20 issues published since its creation in 2010 were dedicated to women, whereas 67% were dedicated to men. In the second case, in its last edition in 2020, 45% of the participants were women writers and 55% were male writers.

Also, the Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal Prize for Journalistic Excellence, created in 2002 in homage to journalist Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, assassinated in 1978 by the Somoza dictatorship, had an average representation of 34% of recognized women journalists compared to 66% of men in its last two installments in 2020 and 2021.

Translation: Tanya Almada