

Chapter 37 Primary Source Activity



Most native Indians in Central America have long lived with poverty and oppression (textbook page 961). Movements for land reform and other changes were brutally suppressed by military governments. One courageous woman who emerged as a leader in Guatemala was a Quiche Indian, Rigoberta Menchu, who continued to work for human rights despite the murders of her family and others. She was given the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. Here Menchu tells part of her story. ♦ *As you read, consider how oppressed groups can organize to resist. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

I, Rigoberta Menchu. . .

Everything in our life is like a film. Constant suffering. We began thinking, with the help of other friends, other companeros, that our enemies were not only the landowners who lived near us, and above all not just the landowners who forced us to work and paid us little. It was not only now we were being killed; they had been killing us since we were children, through malnutrition, hunger, poverty. We started thinking about the roots of the problem and came to the conclusion that everything stemmed from the ownership of land. The best land was not in our hands. It belonged to the big landowners. Every time they see that we have new land, they try to throw us off it or steal it from us in other ways. . . .

I'd like to say here that I wasn't the only important one. I was part of a family, just like all my brothers and sisters. The whole community was important. We used to discuss many of the community's problems together, especially when someone was ill and we couldn't buy medicine, because we were getting poorer and poorer. We'd start discussing and heaping insults on the rich who'd made us suffer for so long. It was about then I began learning about politics. I tried to talk to people who could help me sort my ideas out. I wanted to know

what the world was like on the other side. I knew the finca [coffee farm], I knew the Altiplano. But what I didn't know was about the problems of the other Indians in Guatemala. I didn't know the problems other groups had holding on to their land. I knew there were lots of other Indians in other parts of the country, because I'd been meeting them in the finca since I was a child, but although we all worked together, we didn't know the names of the towns they came from, or how they lived, or what they ate. We just imagined that they were like us. . . .

I have to tell you that I didn't learn my politics at school. I just tried to turn my own experience into something which was common to a whole people. I was also very happy when I realized that it wasn't just my problem; that I wasn't the only little girl to have worried about not wanting to grow up. We were all worried about the harsh life awaiting us. The CUC [Peasant Unity Committee] started growing; it spread like fire among the peasants in Guatemala.

Source: *I, Rigoberta Menchu; An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, ed. Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, trans. Ann Wright (Verso, 1984).

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Questions to Think About

1. What did Menchu and the others conclude was the basic cause of their problems and poverty?
2. Where had she met Indians from other groups and other parts of Guatemala?
3. **Making Predictions** In this excerpt, Menchu mentions some of the things that would ham-
- per the various Indian groups from working together. What are they? What other barriers can you expect they would face?
4. **Activity** Think of a social problem that affects you or your community. Outline a plan for solving it, listing the people or groups you might include.