



## Education, leadership, and conservation: Empowering young Q'eqchi' women in Guatemala



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### ABSTRACT

Programs to keep young women in school across the developing world have become widespread. Education is key to improving their quality of life, but keeping them in school is a significant challenge. This article examines a scholarship program that provides 25 days of intensive leadership training for young indigenous women using a peer tutorial system. The program offers a unique experience, a variety of practical training, opportunities for personal growth, and evidence of empowerment. This study demonstrates that social change is occurring and that young women are promoting change in their own lives, as well as those of their families and communities.

### 1. Introduction

In the central highlands of Guatemala, the indigenous Q'eqchi' Maya population has been driven from their land, exploited for their labor, and increasingly alienated from their cultural traditions.<sup>1</sup> Although never conquered by the Spanish, the Q'eqchi' were pushed higher into the mountains when German settlers arrived to plant coffee in the nineteenth century; by the late twentieth century, a fierce Civil War resulted in wide-spread massacres of innocent civilians and the displacement of entire communities. As a result of dislocation and continued discrimination, the overwhelming majority of Q'eqchi' people find themselves living in dire poverty, struggling to maintain a system of subsistence agriculture on increasingly degraded land parcels. It is against this background that the underdevelopment of the Q'eqchi' people must be considered. The promotion of holistic community development to improve Q'eqchi' quality of life in this context is essential. Education is one tool that can redress the historical wrongs and allow the Q'eqchi' to increase their standard of living. Access to education – both formal and informal – provides opportunities for skills to be acquired, new agricultural practices learned, improvements to nutrition and health advanced, and young people to have a voice in their future. This is even more true for indigenous females who live in isolated villages where many perceive education to have little value. To achieve long term sustainable development, education is fundamental.

Community Cloud Forest Conservation<sup>2</sup> (CCFC), a small NGO operating in the Department of Alta Verapaz, has developed an environmental education and leadership program for young women, known as Women in Agroecology Leadership for Conservation (WALC). In the inaugural year, 2007, seven students participated and earned small scholarships to help them continue their secondary education. In 2016, with support from individual donors and two significant grants, 219 young women participated. CCFC has also moved from borrowed space to an 860 ha campus (to which it has usage rights) with two newly constructed buildings, which has enabled the curriculum to evolve, incorporating more hands-on instruction and practical activities. The scholarships are an incentive, but young women clearly point to lessons learned, experiences shared, and confidence gained as the reason why they choose to spend 25 days at the center. Most importantly, the WALC program's theory of change is to educate to empower young women to make sustainable changes in their lives.

Building on the existing literature of women's education, this article incorporates insights from three dozen semi-structured interviews with young women, using their words to explain the benefits of the experience, and, between the two authors, five months of participant observation with the program in order to assess its outcomes. The questions that we address are how is the program designed to promote empowerment and what the young women gain from this experience. We use qualitative methods because we believe that the empowerment

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<sup>1</sup> The Q'eqchi' are one of twenty Maya groups in Guatemala. Each has its own distinct culture, language, and a specific geographic area of residence, although the Civil War and subsequent migration has resulted in some redistribution.

<sup>2</sup> CCFC was organized in 2008, but its directors have worked in Guatemala since 2001 with a specific mission to promote sustainable development and food security through the use of agroecological techniques. As the NGO continued to work toward this goal, it became clear that a focus on supporting young women and their education would have a more significant impact. For more information, visit <http://cloudforestconservation.org>.

of individuals is best measured through self-assessment. The measurement of empowerment is highly problematic (Bishop and Bowman, 2014) and this is even more true when examining young women who do not yet have tangible assets or contribute to household decision-making (Ross et al., 2011). Most evaluations rely quantitative analysis of asset acquisition such as land or equipment, yet researchers acknowledge that attempts to measure empowerment must “capture dynamic processes and relational changes that are less predictable, less tangible, more contextual, and more difficult to quantify in data collection and analysis” (Alsop et al., 2006, 30). It is important to recognize that there are few programs like WALC, fewer still have been the focus of scholarly attention, and thus it is a challenge to compare it with other projects. We argue, however, that this experience benefits young women and is demonstrative of the type of action required to make education a possibility for this new generation.

## 2. Empowering young women through education

Within the development literature, the importance of educating women in the Global South has been clear for several decades. Ackerman (2015, 1) “addresses the multiplier effect of education for young women, which is associated with increased contraception use; less underage premarital sex; ... reduced child marriage, early births, and fertility rates. Educating girls also yields intergenerational benefits because the children of educated mothers tend to be healthier and better-educated themselves.”

Lloyd and Young (2009, 39–40) find that the advantages of furthering a young woman’s education often come after she completes her schooling and starts her own family: “through safer health and hygiene practices, more time and resources for children’s health and education, more exposure to information that can be used to support children in various ways, better child nutrition, the use of contraceptives leading to smaller family size, improved household incomes through greater labor force participation and earnings, greater bargaining power within the household, and greater ability to act on preferences for investment in children.” These benefits are critically important from a development perspective as social and economic advancement will come from a better educated, healthier, and more equal society.

Examining the role of education as empowerment, Murphy-Graham and Lloyd (2016) present a framework of four competencies that “encompass knowledge, skills, attitudes and values” (see Table 1). The conceptual framework “seeks to clarify the linkages between education and empowerment” (Murphy-Graham and Lloyd 2016, 557). Lloyd (2013, 8) states that “‘competency’ encompasses knowledge, skills, attitudes and values,” and it is also necessary to reiterate that Murphy-Graham and Lloyd (2016, 563) recognize that the competencies “overlap and are difficult to disentangle.” The first competency, which following Lloyd (2013, 8), we simply denote as core; this includes knowledge acquisition that one would expect a student to learn in school – reading, writing, and arithmetic. This is modified to incorporate critical thinking because as Murphy-Graham and Lloyd (2016, 563) reason “thinking critically is key to the empowerment process because this competency will enable girls and boys to analyze gender relations and critique social norms that lead to exclusion.” The second competency, personal, includes “self-awareness, self-care, and personal development,” and most importantly, for young women to

“reflect on their *raison d’être*, the purpose of their existence,” with an expectation that they will recognize their “potential to positively contribute to society” (Murphy-Graham and Lloyd 2016, 563). The development of social competencies (being able to “develop friendships, networks, ... collaborative skills, ... [and] leadership,” among others) will be gained through experiential learning “if they are able to work and learn to form relationships with others both inside and outside of their communities” (Murphy-Graham and Lloyd 2016, 564). Finally, productive competencies include both the economic (“financial literacy, entrepreneurship, environmental stewardship, and agricultural/farming skills”) and here, too, Murphy-Graham and Lloyd (2016, 564) argue for experiential learning with “small businesses or experts in their community.”

Murphy-Graham and Lloyd (2016, 561) argue that the attainment of these competencies for empowerment revolve around a set of necessary conditions: 1) the setting must be “physically, materially, and socio-culturally conducive to learning”; 2) the nurturing of girls’ dignity and equality; and 3) education “requires action, or learning by doing.” Murphy-Graham (2012, 3) offers an additional perspective on empowerment – that it must embody recognition and action:

Empowered individuals come to recognize their inherent worth, the fundamental equality of all human beings, and their ability to contribute to personal and social betterment. They develop the capacity to critically examine their lives and broader society and to take action toward personal and social transformation.

Lloyd (2013, 7) notes that this “conception of empowerment demands even more of education than is typical” and that “many who voice a desire to see education become more ‘relevant’” hold similar views. Recognition of self-worth is analogous to the concept of dignity that Rowlands (1998, 24) argues is a core dimension of empowerment. These competencies, expressed in interviews and through our observation, inform this research and demonstrate that WALC is empowering young women through its practical and theoretical instruction.

In an introduction to a special issue on young women’s education and empowerment in the journal *Research in Comparative & International Education*, Monkman (2011, 10) notes that the articles make several key points, most especially that context matters: “numerical data, although useful in revealing patterns and trends, are inadequate for revealing the deeper and nuanced nature of empowerment processes.” She also explains that assessment, which focuses on “decontextualized proxy indicators,” fails to tie the educational experience to its sociocultural, political, and economic context. Monkman also demonstrates the need to recognize the value of informal education because it can provide important opportunities for interactions and personal growth. Two articles in the journal reflect this thinking. Seeberg (2011) examines rural, school-aged Chinese girls’ understanding of the choices that they can make in spite of restrictive cultural traditions. Using ethnographic research methods and in-depth interviews, Seeberg (2011, 47–48) assesses how these young women value their education and whether their self-expression demonstrates a process of empowerment. She concludes: they “developed a capability of self-expression and confidence, enough to formulate strategic life choices. They perceived the possibility of change ...” (Seeberg 2011, 57). Examining young women in an Indian residential school, Shah (2011) seeks to determine how empowerment is fostered in the specific setting of the school. She, too, utilizes

Table 1

Competencies for empowerment.

Source: Modified from Murphy-Graham and Lloyd 2016, 565, and Lloyd 2013, 8.

Core competencies	reading, writing and language fluency, number fluency, critical thinking and problem solving skills
Personal competencies	self-esteem, communication skills, health and nutrition, reproductive health, spirituality, resilience, perseverance
Social competencies	pro-social values, social connectedness, friendship networks, respect for human rights, collaborative skills, leadership skills
Productive competencies	financial literacy, entrepreneurship, agriculture/farming skills, environmental stewardship, community building

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