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# 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.[1] 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[2] (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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[1] 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.

[2] 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.

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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 socioculturally 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 |

ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation and interviews, to establish the link between the education of young women and self-identified feelings of empowerment.

## 3. Research design and methods

In order to measure the efficacy of the WALC program and how young women experience empowerment, we chose to apply the conceptual framework developed by Murphy-Graham and Lloyd (shown in Table 1). Our research design endeavours to "capture [the] dynamic processes" of WALC and draw attention to the "less tangible [and] more contextual" dimensions of the program as experienced by young women (Alsop et al., 2006, 30). This could only be achieved through the use of a qualitative approach; participant observation and interviews were the two principle methods we chose to employ.

Interviews were conducted in Spanish, recorded, and transcribed. We began each interview with an explanation of our research and an explicit statement of our desire to learn what the young woman thought about the program; we made clear that nothing that she said would be shared with the directors of the program and that her decision to speak positively or negatively would have no bearing on her opportunity to participate in the future. The first set of questions concerned her age, village, grade, school, the number, gender, and educational attainment of her siblings, as well as that of her parents, and her educational goals. Once those facts were established, we asked how she learned about WALC, why she chose to participate, how many times she had participated, why it was important to her, how it has helped her education, and what part of the program that she enjoyed the most. These questions were asked of every young woman whom we interviewed. Depending on her level of engagement with the authors, and her specific responses, we asked follow-up questions such as what challenges she had overcome to continue her education, whether she sees herself as an inspiration to other young women in her village, and how she has implemented what she learned through WALC in her home.

Young women were randomly selected and chosen based on their willingness to be interviewed; five declined to be interviewed either because of their lack of facility in the Spanish language or because they were too shy. Our informants had participated in WALC between one and five years and their ages ranged from twelve to twenty-seven. Two-thirds of the young women had been participants and one-third were leaders. We believe that our sample represents a range of experiences with the program, but, as is often the case, some young women were more outgoing and had a lot to say, while others were more reserved, answering questions but failing to elaborate even when prompted. We have highlighted the words of those young women who gave explanations of their answers rather than simply repeating the statements of those who said that they enjoyed work in the garden or that they thought that Life Project was an important lesson. Collectively such statements support the contention that WALC is a valuable program, but they do not allow the reader to understand how young women benefit, or more precisely, experience empowerment.

Several months of participant observation also allow a more nuanced appreciation of WALC, and our observations were recorded in journals and through an extensive set of photographs which demonstrate the range of activities and instructional techniques. One author had the experience of working as a volunteer during two 25-day sessions, while the other observed individual weeks of sessions over the course of two years. This gave us ample opportunity to see what the young women were learning and how they were learning, experiences that we later examined through the lens of the competencies for empowerment framework. Our final source of data was provided by CCFC; it is a transcript, translated into English, of WALC leaders' evaluation of the 2016 program. The discussion focused on four questions: What did participants value the most? What were programmatic shortcomings? What was an unexpected outcome? and How can the program be advanced? This enables us to hear directly the ideas of WALC's leaders to improve and expand the program.

We analyzed the qualitative data by organizing it into themes, and then looked for examples of empowerment competencies focusing on keywords from Table 1. The most important source was the interview transcripts, but we also recognized many of the competencies from our experience as participant observers. Our notes and our photographs, and subsequent discussions of our individual experiences at different times, provide us with ample evidence to assess the WALC program and give voice to the young women who have been participants and leaders.

## 4. Women in agroecology leadership for conservation

CCFC, which works in dozens of remote villages, has designed an intensive 25-day program which teaches young women about conservation and agroecology, provides them with the opportunity to build their self-esteem, and promotes empowerment. The WALC program allows young women to make choices about their education, interact with others from different villages, gain an appreciation for what is possible in their lives, and acquire important life skills. WALC is available to any unmarried young woman living in the target region who is eligible to enter the seventh grade or beyond. At the completion of the program, participants earn scholarships of Q1000 (approximately US$135) which they may use towards paying school fees, books and other supplies, and transportation. The cost of the scholarship is US $150; the remainder is used to house, feed, and transport the students, and supply them with educational materials for the 25 days that they study at CCFC's agroecology center. WALC is multi-dimensional because it does seek to improve "the relevance of education for girls [and promote] the acquisition of a broader range of competencies" (Lloyd 2013, 5). Our participant observation revealed a sense of pride among young women because they are earning their own tuition; by taking ownership of their education, they become more motivated and confident in their abilities to make decisions about their futures. This focus provides them with an opportunity to become empowered young women with the skills, self-esteem, and networks to become leaders in their villages, equipped with tools to improve situations in their homes, and enabled to inspire change for younger siblings, friends, and neighbors.

The WALC curriculum consists of interactive lessons, training in agroecology, conservation, sustainability, environmental education, teamwork, confidence building, nutrition, health, and the completion of a Life Project. These activities are done in small groups, each led by a peer who previously participated in the program and demonstrated leadership potential. After working as a team leader, a young women may be hired as a teacher. The use of this peer tutorial system ensures that lessons are culturally contextualized in the local language and thought process. The lessons and the practical experience develop the personal, social, and productive competencies in an environment that encourages young women to think, explore, engage, and share.

### 4.1. WALC as empowerment

The lessons start with the basics: caring for one's physical, intellectual, and emotional health, which are key aspects of personal competencies. Agroecology training demonstrates how incorporating raised beds and contour planting in vegetable gardens, and on-site production of organic fertilizer can enhance crop yield and thus household income, as well as increase a family's food security, which are essential productive competencies. Discussion of traditional crops also emphasizes Q'eqchi' culture and values. There are lessons on the management of tree nurseries (both fruit and native cloud forest varieties for reforestation), traditional medicinal plants, grafting, and tree planting. Young women discuss how to become good leaders and community promoters, the role of women in conservation and community development, and the continued importance of education, reflecting the acquisition of social competencies. They learn that not only

are they capable of making decisions, but that young women have the right to make decisions, underscoring the idea that a process of new thinking, attitudes, and goals leads to empowerment (Kabeer, 2009). Classroom learning is complemented by planting, weeding, and harvesting in the gardens, collecting natural resources from the cloud forest, cooking new foods, and always working together. This supports the "learning by doing" dimension of empowerment that Murphy-Graham and Lloyd (2016, 561) argue is critical to the process.

Participants discuss the importance of women's involvement to create a strong community through relationship building, taking responsibility for her actions, including her education, and practicing sustainable development. Through WALC, students experience the importance of social connectedness, friendship groups and being in leader/participant roles. During these 25-days, WALC strives to raise awareness and consciousness about a complex and an interconnected world beyond the confines of a young woman's home village. This emphasis reinforces the second component of empowering education, the promotion of dignity (Murphy-Graham and Lloyd, 2016, 561).

Young women also have the opportunity to learn lucrative skills to boost their productive competencies. These activities include fruit tree planting, revitalization of traditional Q'eqchi' crops, and advantages of new crops, as well as preserving traditional agroforestry techniques such as candle-making and jam production. The students come from farms, based almost exclusively on subsistence corn and bean production, so an introduction to fruit trees and heirloom crops demonstrates positive environmental, nutritional, and economic improvements. WALC uses basic math lessons to explain how much money can be made from growing fruit trees. Using a 20 m square field, a family could care for thirty trees, the fruit from which would produce annual income of US$1200. A farmer needs to spend about six days over the course of the year to maintain the trees; the largest amount of labor would be required during the harvest. Because there is often a surplus of fresh fruit in local markets, which drives down the price, WALC teaches young women how to make jam and dried fruit; this value-adding is a means of preserving fruit for home consumption or sale in other months of the year. Such simple but revolutionary ideas develop productive competencies.

Understanding nutrition, a central part of the WALC program, helps to combat the variety of nutrient deficiencies that affect rural populations. Vitamin A, C, and iron deficiencies are significant public health problems in the central highlands. Students learn about plants such as *naranjilla*, which is in the tomato family, tastes like citrus, and contains large amounts of vitamins A and C. *Naranjilla* grows wild and can be harvested all year long, but must be propagated. At the center, the young women produce jam and make juice. Another plant, also growing wild in the cloud forest, is *Roq Tixl*, a dark leafy green abundant in iron. *Roq Tixl* is a perennial, so its leaves are harvested year round and the plant is multiplied by stock propagation. Putting this new knowledge to use not only can have long-term implications for nutrition, but it also provides another way for young women to demonstrate to their families and neighbors that what they know has value and can contribute to overall improvements in health.

The core values of WALC include respect for and responsibility to self, community and nature, social participation, women's rights, basic economics, as well as empowerment. Young women learn how to care for themselves physically, emotionally, and economically; they are taught how to make the most of their resources to continue improving their livelihoods. Each student dedicates her final days in this program to completing and then presenting her Life Project. The purpose of the Life Project is to challenge young women to answer: Where am I? Who am I? What are my goals? and How will I realize my goals? The first question has two dimensions: the physical, which includes environment, natural resources, and one's place in the ecosystem, and the social, which takes into consideration one's family, village, expectations, challenges, obstacles, and economic situation. Answering "Who am I?" requires young women to use a SWOT analysis and also makes them understand what they have in terms of resources. Once a young woman establishes her goals, she is expected to articulate specifically how she will realize her goals. Students are divided into small groups to discuss these powerful questions, demonstrating the importance of teamwork, sharing values, taking the lead, and discovering that as women they have worth and a future. The Life Project is the most concrete example from the WALC program that actively teaches and helps girls to internalize the importance of personal competencies by reinforcing values. Life Project also underscores Rowlands' expression of the concept of empowerment – a right to make decisions and the right to dignity (Rowlands, 1997,1998).

### 4.2. Learning from WALC

The authors' observations and analysis of individual interview transcripts, as well as the 2016 WALC program assessment, make it possible to discern what young women take away from their experience. We find the competencies for empowerment identified by Murphy-Graham and Lloyd (2016) woven throughout the classroom and field activities of the curriculum. While reading, writing, and math skills are not within the mandate of WALC, the program does emphasize personal, social, and productive competencies for empowerment that young women do not receive from their formal education. This focus provides participants with an opportunity to become empowered young women with the skills, confidence, and networks to become leaders and agents of positive change in their homes, villages, and society.

Culture plays a significant role in understanding the daily dynamics; Q'eqchi' young women are very shy and typically reluctant to voice their opinion in a large group setting, but that changes when they are learning in small groups. In those situations, they appear far more engaged with the material being presented and are more willing to speak. Over the course of 25 days, most of the young women begin demonstrating greater confidence by voicing opinions and engaging in practical work (such as weeding, harvesting, and cooking) with greater enthusiasm as they understand how such activities can benefit their home production. There are likely several reasons for this, including the fact that few have ever been in an environment where they are asked their opinions and able to speak their minds freely, as well as recognition that they have acquired skills that others in their families do not have. At the end of the program, they present their Life Project to the entire group; the most common theme was their desire to share what they had learned with others. The single lesson that many referenced was their newfound understanding of their individual rights to make decisions about their lives. It also appears that older participants tend to gain greater self-awareness and their value as young women, but all benefit from practical activities such as learning about crops, working in the gardens, and preparing nutritious foods.

One of the most important themes that emerged from interview transcripts was that young women believed that WALC provided them new perspectives. Lupe,[3] a 16 year old, explained that, for her, the first year offered a new way of thinking and convinced her that she wanted to come back to learn more. When asked what was the most important thing that she learned in the program, Irma, age 18, said that it was all important. She told us: "*What I have learned here, I have not learned any other place, like my school. We never even talk about the stuff that we learn here and all of that is really important for us because it is just not taught anywhere else.*" Her perspective was supported by another 18 year old, Maria, who noted: "*It teaches us so many important things that we don't learn other places. Learning that we have rights is important.*" Describing how the program has influenced their lives, Ana, age 15, declared: "*I have new insights and thoughts about my life from the program. The program has really inspired me to be more dedicated to studying because I see it as a*

[3] Interviews were conducted in March 2015, March 2016, and May 2016. All names have been changed in order to protect the identity of the informant.

*privilege*." Lupe, the young woman mentioned above, revealed that "*self esteem was something I worked on a lot in the program …. I tell the girls that it's really important and if they want to reach their goals or whatever they want to do in life that they need to go through life with a healthy, positive self-esteem*." These statements provide clear evidence that each young woman is achieving some measure of empowerment.

What also becomes clear is that young women who have participated in more than one WALC session demonstrate greater self-esteem and a stronger sense of community. Those whom we interviewed were more confident in speaking about what they had learned and how it was making a positive change in their own lives and in the lives of their families. They were learning from one another how to stand up for themselves and how they could take the WALC experience and replicate in their homes and communities. We are cognizant of the fact that saying and doing are two very different things, but when we visited a small sample of WALC participants' villages, we saw that about ninety percent of the homes had fruit trees and heirloom crops in the gardens. While these young women come from rather remote villages, they learn from one another that their experiences and challenges are similar and that through participation in WALC they can work together to promote change in their households and in their villages. The leaders (by definition, young women who had participated at least three times) were the most knowledgeable about their rights and responsibilities and the most eager to discuss how they have benefitted from the experience.

Most of our informants noted the influence of the Life Project, with two in particular providing particularly poignant insight into how it enhances their personal competencies. Lidia, age 16, explained:

> *Asking who I am, understanding it and how that effects my self-esteem is really important. It is the basis for me to move forward in life and it starts with my self-concept: how I feel about myself and how I see myself*

Olga, age 18, responded:

> *Life Project is really important because it helps me envision because while I am going on in my life, I am thinking about where I want to be and what I want to do. This process of asking "who am I" and "where am I" helps me wisdom the future*. [She made a verb out of wisdom.]

The significance of the Life Project and its broader implications for young women also appeared in the 2016 program assessment; when asked what students valued the most from WALC, more than half of the leaders pointed to that specific part of the experience. Gilda, a 21 year old, said: "*As we develop our individual and collective Life Project visions and goals, we can rise up from under the obstacles of being undervalued indigenous young women, from rural villages, where lack of respect for women, poverty, chronic malnutrition and illiteracy [is the norm]*." Aurora, age 19, declared: "*Our learning and developing Life Project raises our self esteem and welcomes us to move ahead by valuing the important women's roles as leaders. We are strengthened as we link together chains of wisdom and knowledge.*" These comments shed light on what young women gain from participation in WALC and also indicate that while it does vary from one young woman to the next, empowerment has occurred as a result of the program. Young women are more aware, through their newly developed competencies, of their own opportunities and the responsibility that they have to help others along their own paths toward gaining control over their futures.

Most significant to the development of Life Project is that young women spend 25 days thinking about what they want in their lives, talking to one another about their dreams and what is possible for them to achieve. For the first time, they realize that they can do something for themselves; they have the power to determine their future and they have choices to make. When asked about her life goals, 17 year old Marta stated:

> *I set a goal for myself the first year I was in the program with the Life Project and that opened a path for me. The hope [I have] as a leader is that it will have a ripple effect on other people in my village. What I can do, other people know they can do. Other people can move on in education and in a more positive direction in life.*

She was not sure which career path that she wanted to pursue: nursing, social work, or teaching. What is important about this is that for the first time in her life she had choices. Marta's story is a significant testament to her empowerment; not only does she have options, but as Kabeer (2009) noted, she will make a conscious choice about her future.

It is also clear that young women appreciate the value of an education. When asked why it was important for them to study, Vilma, age 18, responded:

> *We have the right to study just like boys do. My grandma and mom didn't study and we see what that means for them. We, this generation, see what they endured and we don't want [that] and so we want to study and have a better life.*

Not only does Vilma understand that education is important, she also reveals a growing consciousness, as do her peers, about how women have historically struggled in their region and that now is the time for them to break that cycle. In another example of consciousness raising, Margarita, age 20, explained:

> *For me, it is more important because before women stayed in the house. Education allows women to leave the house to work and do different things and to have a profession. We can do many more things with an education.*

While these young women represent the first generation in the region who have increased opportunities, they realize that it will be a struggle to challenge deep-rooted beliefs about gender roles in Q'eqchi' society. Vilma and Margarita both demonstrate that they must break free from "negative social constructions," see themselves as capable of making decisions (Rowlands 1997, 14), and perhaps more importantly, believe that they can be agents of change. Another 18 year old, Rosa, also made clear the link between education and poverty: "*A girl that is not studying, that just marries, is just a recipe for poverty. People like that stay poor and become poorer. I believe that studying is a way out of poverty*."

One young woman, Claudia, who is now 29 years old, first joined WALC in 2010 and has a truly remarkable story. She finished grade six at age twelve but her parents could not afford to send her to secondary school and they also needed her to take care of her younger siblings. When she was 19, she knew that it was "now or never," so using her savings from the sale of chickens that she had been raising, she was able to pay the costs of completing seventh grade. She then learned about the WALC program and applied; in 2010, she earned her first scholarship by participating, and she returned in 2011 as a group leader. Impressed with Claudia's newfound self-confidence, CCFC invited her to teach in 2012. She demonstrated exceptional leadership potential and has returned each year as a teacher. She completed high school, earned a teaching degree, and is now one year shy of completing a university degree. CCFC promoted her Program Coordinator, a position that involves outreach to rural schools and spreading word about the WALC program.

She argues that the WALC program is important for young women:

> *The program really helps in the formation of a girl because in the villages, for example, many girls live in a big family. Therefore the fathers do not always offer education for the girls. This program helps give girls new possibilities and also helps them develop as women. This program is also important for the lives of the girls and how they think, for example, about the Life Project and learning the importance of studying. It has helped motivate me to meet my personal goals and has inspired my life dreams. I have gained many life skills including the lessons of family planning and also the great importance of women studying. This is how this program has helped me and I now see my life as a circle where everything is integrated.*

It is clear from Claudia's comments that she understands how

important the emphasis on developing personal and social competencies are, not only for herself when she was a participant, but now in her role as a teacher. As she has been part of the program since its early days and today plays a significant role in developing the curriculum, Claudia demonstrates considerable empowerment that she has gained by participating in and teaching the WALC program. In the summer of 2015, Claudia was invited to Cornell University to speak about CCFC's environmental education program at the Lab of Ornithology BirdSleuth Educators conference. Her development provides compelling evidence of the recognition and action components of empowerment advocated by Murphy-Graham (2012).

The young women who participate in WALC clearly appreciate the process of learning through the program and its tangible benefits in their lives. In their 2016 assessment, several leaders called for its expansion. Flora, a 21 year old, explained:

> *We need to promote the WALC program in the villages and in the village schools. We should send groups of us to the villages to teach what we have learned to other women. Sharing this project, we will motivate more people to study to be teachers, nurses, and gardeners. We need to form groups of those of us who have already been through the program to reach out to people in our villages. Together, we form a great community!*

That spirit of sharing was echoed by Carmelina, age 25: "*This program is not just for ourselves. We need to get out and teach in the villages what we have been learning and doing. We need to share with many more young women.*" Creating a village program is a goal of CCFC, but the organization is limited by funding. As such, it is incumbent on the young women to share their knowledge on an individual basis until WALC in the village is economically feasible.

## 5. Changing social norms

Education beyond the primary level is simply not an option for many, indeed most, young Q'eqchi' women. Lack of financial resources are a significant deterrent, but so are attitudes about gender roles, especially in rural areas. Carolina, age 17, noted:

> *My parents are very supportive of my efforts in education. My Grandmas are not. Since I am a woman, they say I should be married. Most of the moms and dads in my village would say that education is pretty useless, that man was made to swing a machete and to live by the sweat of his brow. Education is only for people who come from the urban areas. For us out here in the village, we just learn how to work hard and swing your machete and that's what most of the people in my village believe.*

Teresa, a 22 year old, added that initially her parents would not let her study because they believed that women should stay in the house until they marry, but she was able to change their minds by demonstrating what she had learned in WALC.

Teachers also recognize the struggle to promote the education girls. A female primary school teacher remarked:

> *What I have seen is that the parents do not give the girls 100 percent support that they need. And the girls arrive at a certain age where they look at other girls who already have a family. They are from this culture and they follow in the same way as those that have come before them. But in these last few years, half of the children that were in the sixth grade continued onto seventh, but some didn't finish for the same reason. Sometimes the parents need to work so the girls must stay at home.*

This is a clear challenge and one that is not easy to overcome. That being said, even if a girl has to stay home, it might be possible for her to alternate with a sister so that one stays home one year and the other the next. There is no question that the household must be maintained and mothers with large families also need additional hands to help with cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger children.

One man who is the sole primary school teacher in a small community made a similar comment:

> *The girls drop out of the most. The parents don't think it is important for them to go to school. The parents don't put priority on girls going to school. They see it as not necessary because the girls are going to get married when they are 14 anyway, so what is the point of education?*

This teacher clearly understood the larger social situation, but he also made clear that those values must change. Addressing the importance of education, he stressed that despite the inadequacy of infrastructure and too few economic resources devoted to schools,

> *We have to be conscientious that these kids out here are the ones that are going to be moving the country forward, moving their villages forward. What we can invest in them comes back to us in the form of better, more equipped, more capable people that through education can make better lives for themselves, for their families, for their villages, and ultimately for the country. We must do everything possible to find the materials that will help the kids in their education.*

What is the significance of education? For this teacher, it means the path to development, not only for individuals, but for the country as a whole. His perspective also underscores the goals of WALC: to provide the tools of empowerment for young women to become leaders.

Attitudes towards young women's education among Q'eqchi' parents are changing, albeit quite slowly. There are still many parents who want their daughters to stay home, but others want more for their children than they had. Dominga, age 16, said that her father wants her to go to school: "*He didn't study but he wants us to study and he wants his children and grandchildren to learn a lot. My father doesn't know how to read, neither of my parents know how to speak Spanish, but they want us to learn, my dad especially.*" This father has struggled with Spanish illiteracy and exemplifies some of the shifting beliefs about the importance of education and the opportunities it presents for the next generation.

Despite all that WALC encompasses, some may ask whether it is simply the financial incentive (a scholarship) that makes the program attractive to young women. Most participants acknowledged that this program was the only way for them to continue attending school. There is also clear evidence, at least after the first year, that young women choose to participate because of what they learn and their evolving self-esteem. Empowerment, emerging from a broad range of lessons, is an essential component of WALC and, we contend, the far more important benefit that accrues to young women. The emphasis placed on developing their leadership potential and encouraging them to become leaders in their villages are also critical outcomes. Providing young women with opportunities to acquire knowledge and learn practical skills contributes significantly to holistic community development. Interviews with young women makes it clear that a small economic reward brings them into the program, but when asked what they gain from participation, they point to the personal, social, and productive competencies of empowerment. Not one of more than thirty informants said that she gained money for her education, despite the fact that she did receive a scholarship, suggesting that the program is understood by participants as a source of knowledge and skills. Observing WALC activities underscores the significance that young women place on the acquisition of improved self-esteem, a commitment to working together, and the development of leadership skills. There is no doubt that the attraction of a scholarship attracts them to the program, but it is the theoretical and practical experiences of WALC that keeps young women engaged.

## 6. Concluding thoughts

For the last decade, CCFC has produced powerful change in the lives of many young Q'eqchi' women, families and communities in the Alta Verapaz region. How does one assess the influence of a program such as WALC? Between 2009 and 2015, nearly 500 young women participated in annual sessions. Thirty percent of those had returned for a second

year, and of those, half repeated a third, fourth or even fifth time.[4] Repetition of the program and another year in school, however, is not a clear indicator of empowerment. The most important evidence to support WALC comes from qualitative data: the words of the young women themselves provide persuasive evidence of what they have gained and how they have grown, in short how they have become empowered. A comprehensive evaluation of the WALC program could provide quantitative data, but the NGO is small and the task of locating all of the participants over the last decade to determine long-term benefits is currently beyond its capabilities. The experience of the authors with the program, however, and our analysis of discussions with its participants and leaders, leave no doubt that the experience of WALC provides young women with unimagined opportunities.

Through formal learning and practical training, WALC promotes social, personal, and economic competencies. Young women who would have otherwise left school, become young mothers, and continued the cycle of poverty are now equipped to make choices about their futures, and prove to themselves, their families, and their communities that they can be influential leaders capable of achieving their dreams. The ability to share lesson in their villages and opportunities to work at CCFC allow these young women to put their newfound skills into practice. The vision and goals of the Life Project appear to be the most influential aspect of the WALC program that will continue to promote change at the community level to produce a healthier and more equal society, to develop opportunities for sustainable use of cloud forest resources, and perhaps most importantly, create social transformation as young women realize their potential.

We argue that the framework of empowerment competencies conceptualized by Murphy-Graham and Lloyd is an insightful tool both for examining the role that informal education plays in the process of empowerment and by outlining clear criteria against which empowerment can be measured using qualitative methods. Its successful application to the WALC program provides further evidence of its utility. Murphy-Graham and Lloyd (2016, 570–571) note that "this is a field in its infancy" and acknowledge that existing programs must be evaluated in order to "the process by which (and if) empowerment takes place." While we are cognizant of the limitations of this case study, we believe that it makes a contribution to the emerging body of literature on the various programs across the world that are promoting the empowerment of young women in an educational setting.

[4] This data is somewhat skewed because of the large number of participants who joined the program in 2015, when 169 young women participated in the program. Seventy participants had their scholarships paid by another NGO and none of these young women had ever been in the WALC program. Between 2012 and 2014, approximately half of all participants each year had been part of WALC previously.

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