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Voices of Vulnerable and Underserved Adolescents in Guatemala

A Summary of the Qualitative Study:
Understanding the Lives of Indigenous Young People in Guatemala

Introduction

There are over a billion adolescents in the developing world today, making up 16 percent of the population.¹ In Guatemala, where poverty, inequality, and ethnic and gender discrimination are prevalent and where over 40 percent of the country's 11 million inhabitants are under the age of 15, the transition from childhood to adulthood is often characterized by severe social, economic and health problems.² While there is limited demographic, health and lifestyle information currently available on adolescents in Guatemala, the existing data indicate that adolescent girls – most specifically indigenous girls – suffer from the highest rates of school desertion, early and unwanted pregnancy, malnutrition, illiteracy and limited life options.³ Within this context, indigenous adolescents in Guatemala live a difficult and often precarious reality where access to health, education and other services is lacking or inadequate and often plagued by barriers including lack of financial resources, language, discrimination and deeply engrained cultural traditions and beliefs that perpetuate gender inequity.

A qualitative study titled “Understanding the Lives of Indigenous Young People in Guatemala” was conducted by the Population Council as part of the Creating Opportunities for Vulnerable Young Mayan Females Project. The project forms part of the Population Council's global Transitions to Adulthood Program that is being implemented in eleven countries, covering each major region of the world. The intensive program of policy and intervention research is designed to improve our understanding of and ability to foster healthy, safe, and productive transitions to adulthood.

Rather than focusing narrowly on sexuality and fertility, we believe the solutions lie in investments in a broad range of gender-specific social and economic policies and programs that challenge the processes of isolation and disempowerment of young women and men and create the conditions for premature and unwanted sexual activity, poor educational outcomes, and early marriage and childbearing.

The qualitative study in Guatemala was fielded in four Mayan communities and was designed to improve our understanding of adolescents' daily lives and the factors influencing their education, possible and desired livelihoods, health and family formation, and the social and community contexts in which they grow and learn. The study also sought to better understand what alternatives exist for adolescents within and outside their communities, and what expectations they have for their futures. The primary goal of the research was to gain an understanding of the current situation in order to design appropriate, acceptable and feasible intervention strategies for implementation in Guatemala, which offer activities that are culturally sensitive and respond effectively to young people's self-defined priorities. Adolescents' responses are framed in the context of their family, community and social life to understand how these different spheres are interconnected and affect young people's decision making. The holistic nature of the research helped illustrate both alternatives and opportunities open to Mayan youth, as well as barriers to their positive and full development. The

qualitative study findings presented here also complement quantitative research conducted by the Population Council on these same themes in Guatemala, published under separate cover.³

The four Mayan communities chosen for the study are located in the Guatemalan Western Highlands. The region is predominantly indigenous and the economy is agrarian. Poverty levels are high and many families depend on subsistence agriculture to live. All four of the communities are located in areas of the highlands that were heavily afflicted by more than 30 years of armed civil conflict. The war dramatically impacted all aspects of people's lives, including their physical security, access to health and educational services, freedom of movement and association, and economic opportunities and growth.⁴ While the Peace Accords, signed in 1996, guarantee improved access to resources and services that meet the needs of the most war-damaged sub-populations, poverty continues to be a major barrier to Mayan people's development and well-being.⁵

The results presented here demonstrate the discrepancies and contradictions that exist between what rural, indigenous adolescents learn about development and adulthood, their own personal dreams and aspirations, and their day-to-day realities. The existence of barriers at both the family and community levels limit the opportunities for young people to safely transition into a secure and productive adulthood, particularly in the case of young girls. Additionally, the study demonstrates that change arrives slowly and that Mayan girls and young women continue to have the lowest expectations of what they might achieve in life and face significantly greater challenges than men and non-indigenous women in achieving even modest life goals.

The following is a report of qualitative, ethnographic research findings from a study conducted in 2003. The methods included individual in-depth interviews, group interviews, focus groups, social mapping and time use exercises conducted with young Mayan women and men aged 12-19. Research was conducted to report findings disaggregated by sex and age. Participatory methods were chosen to allow participants to explain in their own words what living and growing up in their communities is like, what they aspire to, what challenges they face and what opportunities they are able to identify. Additional research activities with parents and other local adult stakeholders, including youth employers, service providers and community leaders, helped identify not only some of the socio-cultural changes that have

occurred in recent years, but also the significant role of family and community in indigenous girls' and boys' development, life goal formation and attainment of those goals.



Methodology

Fieldwork was conducted in two geographic departments of the Guatemalan Highlands, Sololá and Totonicapán. Two of the communities were Kaqchikel speaking and two were K'iche speaking; these are two of the larger ethno-linguistic groups in Guatemala. Within each language area, two communities were purposefully chosen to represent different points along the "traditional-modern" spectrum of Mayan communities in Guatemala. The criteria used to determine whether a community was more "traditional" or more "modern" included:

- access to educational resources
- presence of institutions (health and educational NGOs, government services, etc.)
- percentage of bilingual men and women in the community
- accessibility to other, larger towns and their resources

The communities of San Antonio Pasajoc in Totonicapán and San Miguel las Canoas in Sololá were characterized as "more modern" and the communities of Barreneche and Los Talbones, in Totonicapán and Sololá respectively, characterized as "more traditional." Participants between twelve and nineteen years of age (broken into sub-groups of 12-14 and 15-19) were selected in order to capture both adolescents who were in and out of school. Data were disaggregated by sex and age to identify differences in perspectives and perceptions regarding education, work, social participation, and desires for family formation. Previous Council analysis of national survey data highlighted the 12-14 and 15-19 age

groups as important transition periods between childhood and adulthood.

While the language, modernization, sex, and age groupings helped ensure data validity, there were several key challenges faced during the fieldwork and early analysis of these data. Because the principal investigators were not able to supervise the entire duration of the fieldwork, it was later determined that a cross-section of the study methods were not carried out as designed and therefore proved less informative than initially conceived. As a result, they were excluded from the analysis. Through quality control during the data analysis, we also found that some of the information gleaned from study participants was not translated verbatim and several of the transcriptions from Mayan languages to Spanish were of poor quality. We, therefore, decided to seek a more experienced and qualified anthropologist to go back to the original tapes and re-conduct the analysis. The quality control problems were costly and led to the unfortunate delay in the dissemination of study results.

Study Results and Key Findings

The results from this study indicate that there are gaps between what young people articulate as their desires in life and what actually occurs within their communities and families. In all four of our chosen thematic areas relating to adolescent transition to adulthood - **education, livelihoods, sexual and reproductive health and family formation, and social and community life** – there are important differences between the perceived “ideal” versus “real” life situation. Many Mayan adolescents have unsurprisingly learned to have traditional and fairly limited goals and aspirations based on what they see around them. Conflicts surrounding “real and ideal” were repeatedly revealed in the data. For example, some young people expressed the desire for a university degree, but that sometimes contrasted with what they expressed as a desirable age for marriage. In addition, many who said they wanted to go to university could not express what they wanted to study or what type of professional options such a degree would offer. Very few young people interviewed in the study had the individual or family resources to fulfill their articulated desire to attend university. Such contradictions indicate discrepancies between development discourse and local realities.

The study also finds numerous barriers within the family and community contexts that limit young people, especially girls, from achieving a healthy and safe transition to adulthood. While both boys and girls

are confronted by barriers (specific barriers are discussed in the sections below) to education, employment, health services, and social participation, girls appear to suffer disproportionately. In general, girls have very limited freedom of movement and many of the young women interviewed identified this as a major limitation to acquiring formal education, employment, choosing a spouse, and participating in community activities.

Key Findings by Study Theme

Education

Under Guatemalan law, public education is “free” and mandatory until the completion of high school. Yet many rural, indigenous families lack the financial resources to pay for the books, uniforms and transportation costs associated with attending public school. Additionally, while the law^a states that attendance is mandatory, it is rarely enforced. As a result, almost two-thirds of young people in Guatemala between the ages of 15 and 19 are not actually attending school.³ Among girls 15-19 living in rural communities, only 26% of girls even finish elementary school.³ Most participants, in both traditional and modern communities, spoke of the importance of education in general as a means of creating a secure future, but also noted that there are multiple barriers to receiving an education and attitudes of support tended to vary depending on the sex of the child.

Overall, girls, more than boys, are affected by the many barriers described by participants. Factors including scarce family resources and geographic isolation, a relatively low value of girls’ education and heavy workload at home, combine to severely limit girls’ opportunities to attain an education. The risks of violence – both physical and sexual – are also higher for girls. The combination of these factors along with parental fears of out of wedlock pregnancy and the realities of early marriage within Mayan communities, produces an environment where Mayan girls are at a severe disadvantage when setting and achieving educational goals.

Although some positive changes regarding access to and availability of education have occurred since the end of the armed civil conflict in Guatemala, many gender and culture-related barriers to education still persist in Mayan communities. During the “education” module of the interviews, most parents did not differentiate greatly between boys and girls when it came to the right to education. However, the discrepancies between what participants initially stated

and how they truly feel became apparent further on in the interview process when fieldworkers probed about the value of girls' education, women's roles in the family and decisions about marriage.

When it comes to deciding whose education to support, some parents continue to choose boys over girls because of traditional perceptions that men are more intelligent than women and that girls are needed at home to cook, clean and take care of younger siblings. Some participants stated that it is a waste of limited resources to send girls to school because they just get married and stay at home taking care of the children. Therefore, it was expressed by some that girls do not need an education. A young girl from a modern Kaqchikel spoke to these issues:

“At times it’s just because we’re women that they won’t pay for our education, and they say that only boys should [study], because they’re more intelligent.”

“Some people tell my father, ‘don’t support her studies because she won’t do what you want, you’ll only waste your money and she’ll get married and won’t finish school, you better not send her to school.’”

Parents from modern and traditional communities alike fear that sending their daughters to school gives girls the opportunity to be alone with boys and that this could lead to pregnancy. Consequently, the risk of pregnancy and marriage presents a three-fold barrier against girls' education – the risk of early pregnancy and the reality of early marriage deters parents from supporting their daughter's education, and once pregnant, girls rarely have the chance to return to school. A mother from a modern K'iche community stated:

“Girls sometimes get tricked by young men and then they get pregnant and won’t complete school. Girls who attend school frequently end up pregnant and that’s why they [parents] think it is better not to attend school, because going to school makes them act in that way and parents’ investment is wasted.”

Another set of notable study findings were the contradictions among participants' initial answers about the perceived benefits of education, their educational goals, and their actual plans for achieving those goals. Both fathers and mothers spoke of the importance of education for their children, and when talking about their sons, education as a means to find better jobs. Upon further probing, few participants could specify how education could improve the lives



of their daughters. Additionally, when young people were asked about their desired level of education, most said they thought that under “favorable conditions” they would be able to finish middle school – many participants talked about the possibility of attending a vocational school or university. Not surprisingly, the same participants could not give concrete examples of how to achieve their educational goals, though most stated, “...hard work and finding a scholarship,” were a means to completing their education. Consistent with other gender-specific findings, boys tended to be more articulate and concrete than girls when expressing their educational and vocational desires.

Livelihoods

Historically, and today, Mayan families tend to form a tight economic unit in which each member contributes in some form to the household's financial well-being. Young people's daily tasks (at home or at work) are heavily influenced by what are perceived as appropriate gender roles for men and women within Mayan culture. A young woman from a traditional Kaqchikel community explained:

“Young men and young women perform different roles because young men pick up and carry firewood, work on agricultural fields with hoes, and women don’t. Women’s work is different than men’s because men use machetes and women don’t. Young women’s work is similar to their mother’s except that daughters do more than their mothers.”

In general, young women and girls, especially the oldest daughter, carry the double burden of doing much of the housework, as well as working in the fields and/or family business. Though girls often play an integral part in the economic stability of the family (frequently by making and selling handicrafts in addition to doing domestic chores), their important contribution is seldom recognized or financially remunerated. Whether in the fields, in the home, at a

wood shop, or small store, parents expect their children to contribute, and admit that family work often interferes with schoolwork and social participation, and on occasion is the determining factor in adolescents, more often girls, dropping out of school.



The traditional livelihoods available in rural Mayan communities contrast not only with the subjects taught in school but also with the expectations created by the educational system. Desired education level and career paths mentioned by youth and parents mostly referred to professions traditionally practiced in urban settings. While some participants talked about desiring professional training (doctor, lawyer, “licenciado^b”), they admitted that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain jobs within those fields in their communities. Professional role models in the communities are scarce, so alternatives to the traditional livelihoods of Mayan communities are unsurprisingly difficult for young people to envision or articulate. When girls were able to express their professional aspirations, they usually said they wanted to be teachers, nurses, secretaries or domestic housemaids. In contrast, boys were able to describe a wider range of possible professions and were more expressive about what they wanted to become.

When participants were questioned about the contradictions found between desired livelihoods and day-to-day reality, they said they would try to achieve their goals through “hard work, contacts outside the community, scholarships, and good fortune”. Unfortunately, girls, unlike boys, tend to have very little contact outside of the community – or even outside of the family - that would allow them the opportunity to achieve their goals. One of the more realistic alternatives mentioned by girls was achieving a teacher’s diploma, which not only opens up opportunities in education but may lead to better job opportunities in other fields. Regrettably, very few

adolescents, male or female, could articulate a feasible plan to achieve their career and life goals. There seems to be a clear discordance between what young people in Mayan communities aspire to be and what they can realistically achieve, as well as a lack of full understanding of strategies to achieve their desired goals.

There were marked differences in terms of desired work between those adolescents who planned to continue with their education and those who did not. The most common alternatives expressed by young men not enrolled in school were agricultural work and self-employment in small-scale commerce, working as apprentices with masons, bus and pickup drivers, carpenters, etc. For young women not enrolled in school, alternatives included weaving for sale, working in a market, or migrating to larger cities to work as domestic house keepers. A few young women talked about opening or operating food stalls on weekends, or aspiring to start a small retail business at home. A young woman from a traditional K’iche community stated:

“I would like to have my own business like a shoe and clothing store, since I have a small house where I could start a business.”

Overall, for both young men and women, the most common barrier to securing paid work was the lack of opportunities in the four communities. Adolescents in the 15 to 19 age range, as well as parents in the four communities brought up the need for vocational training for young men and women as an alternative to agricultural and domestic work. Parents, other adults, and adolescents were better able to make the training-work connection for vocational jobs than for professional degrees and university aspirations. An employer from the traditional K’iche community explained how vocational training can be a positive alternative for young men and women, although the types of training he described were clearly differentiated by sex:

“There was an institution... that came... to teach courses on electricity, leatherwork, they manufactured belts. Technicians would come to teach it. Young women were taught cooking, baking, sewing. The program failed due to bad management, but this type of center could be many youths’ salvation.”

While the availability of job training would no doubt be beneficial, it is not clear that the types of training described above would necessarily match market demand for goods and services. Moreover, adults and

^b Licenciado is a generic term used to refer to lawyers but also sometimes to anyone who acquires a university education that isn’t engineering or medicine.

young people in these communities often assume that job training should be gender-stratified, which may have the effect of perpetuating stereotyped gender roles. The repeatedly expressed gender segregation in the professional realm reinforces inherent limitations for Mayan girls and women; the few vocational training opportunities that are available to them fail to provide important sources of income, social status/prestige and opportunities for growth and advancement. Hence, Mayan females, even the select group who manage to obtain vocational training, often remain economically dependent and marginalized from professional opportunities that would allow them to reach their intellectual and professional potential.

Reproductive Health and Family Formation

As with previous study themes, the health and family formation results revealed discrepancies between the initial responses of the participants and the situations described with further probing. Although some local NGOs and the Guatemalan Ministry of Health have begun trying to improve the reproductive health of adolescents, there has been limited positive impact on indigenous girls and women. Multiple social, historical, cultural, economic and educational factors continue to influence the age of marriage, first birth, use of contraception and overall state of reproductive health among indigenous women. In this module of the study, fieldworkers asked respondents about marriage, desired family size, and family planning/child spacing.

Marriage

In each community, the majority of adolescents aged 15-19 of both sexes indicated a desire to marry and have a family. Marrying in the mid-twenties was considered ideal because people that age are perceived to be more mature and able to provide for their families. The most common responses related to why this is a desirable age to marry were “because people can think” and “they know what they’re doing.” A young woman from the traditional Kaqchikel community elaborates on the problems associated with marrying too young:

“The age to get married should be 22 or 23 because that’s when one can think, can reason. Those who get married here at age 16 aren’t thinking about their children, only about themselves. If they start living together they start making children, and one notices that these children suffer a lot, because there are days when they wander the streets, other days when they have no food, on other days they are

at other people’s houses, they don’t go to school. That’s the problem of marrying at a young age.”

Responses from young men didn’t vary greatly from those of young women. In response to a question about at what age he would like to get married, a male participant responded:

“25 or 30, because then I’ll know how to manage money well, or see what’s necessary. Moreover, what I have seen is that there are young people who marry at age 15 or 16 but have no place to live, they don’t have a house, nor a plot of land. What’s most problematic is that maybe one [of these young people] has a family and there’s no place to live.”

Being enrolled in school, particularly for those who were in high school, seemed to be a factor that increased desired marriage age. A young woman from a modern Kaqchikel community stated:

“I would like to get married when I am 25 or 27...because I have my goals, as I told you already, to graduate [from high school] and also graduate from the university.”



Even though participants in all four communities generally agreed on desired marriage age, when they were asked about what frequently happened in their communities, it became clear that there is a discrepancy between the ideal and actual age at marriage among selected adolescents. The participants talked about young men and women marrying in their teens, and leaving school because the woman became pregnant.

It is important to note that respondents in each community reported that it was up to the couple to decide when and with whom to marry. While many adolescents initially agreed that it was the couple’s decision, other interviewees admitted that parents still

influenced who and how their children marry. A young woman from a traditional Kaqchikel community explains:

“My father hasn’t allowed us or my brothers to elope, he has always married them at the municipality^c, to avoid later problems with the husband.”

Traditions around dating and marriage are viewed as outdated by some adolescents, however, young men and women are still expected to appear to comply with at least some dating and marriage customs. Participants in the four communities explained that dating was still taken seriously by their parents, and that marriage was the expected outcome of being seen in public as a couple. Meeting girls in secret is an alternative to the Mayan dating tradition known as “remate^d,” where marriage arrangements are made between young peoples’ families. While certain dating and marriage customs appear to be slowly changing in both the traditional and modern Mayan communities, a major difference between desired age at marriage and real age of marriage continues to exist in both.

Desired Family Size and Family Planning

The gap between desired family size and knowledge of family planning appeared repeatedly in the interviews. Participants appear to be aware of the difficulties of raising large families. In particular, many of the adolescents interviewed raised concerns about women's health and a woman's ability to recover from one pregnancy before becoming pregnant again. Mostly, economic explanations were given as reasons for having fewer children than in past generations. Adolescents appear to be more aware than their parents of a limited capacity to provide children with adequate food, clothing and education. The ability to support their children's education was mentioned as important by young men and women alike.

The variation between participants in terms of how many children they say they would be able to support is of interest. “Two or three at the most” was mentioned as often as “five or six at the most.” Some adolescents responded that religious beliefs prevented them from desiring smaller families, but a majority of them said that they would like to have smaller families than the ones they have grown up in. While most participants responded promptly that smaller families were better, they hesitated when fieldworkers asked them how this could be achieved. Few young people were able to explain how they planned to have fewer children than their parents did. Unspecific answers like “taking care of myself” or “speaking with my

partner about it” were more frequent than references to particular family planning alternatives. This vagueness may stem from the fact that participants lacked more profound knowledge, but also because contraception and reproduction are often considered embarrassing and inappropriate topics for discussion.

The following interview with a young woman from a traditional Kaqchikel community illustrates the contradictions between a desire to space pregnancies and the lack of information or services available to young women and men:

Fieldworker: How would you manage not to have a child for two years?

Participant: I would prevent it, telling my partner the reason why, they should understand.

Fieldworker: Have you heard about (contraceptive) methods?

Participant: No, I haven't heard about methods.

Fieldworker: Not even now in teachers' school?

Participant: Not even in middle school, or teacher's school. They haven't talked to us about family planning and how to prevent [pregnancies]

Fieldworker: Have you heard among young men about the use of condoms?

Participant: I have heard of the method of the condom for men, in our community this is little known, because those things just came out and that's why we don't know them.

Fieldwork confirmed that while there are some opportunities to learn about family planning and reproductive health, these occasions are rare and young people have little opportunity to talk with health educators or providers or gain access to reproductive health services. There are also important questions about the quality and comprehensiveness of reproductive health information and services available in Mayan communities. Limited existing reproductive health services tend to only be available to married couples.

This information illustrates the gap that persists between ideal marriage age, family size and use of family planning methods, and the actual reality of adolescents. This is similar to the gap identified for education: young people have assimilated ideals from school and sporadic contact with institutions and organizations, but the conditions within their families and communities limit their knowledge and their ability to control their destinies and fulfill their expectations.

^c A marriage certificate is considered a guarantee that a formal commitment was made between man and wife.

^d “Remate” is the process of establishing and finalizing marriage arrangements for two young people by their families.

Social and Community Life

Limits on girls' autonomy



Girls from the study communities report much less autonomy than boys. This breach increases as they grow older (becoming especially significant at the onset of puberty) and as the perceived risks of allowing girls freedom of movement and choice grow. Younger girls appeared to be more at ease with moving

around the community than older girls, and also reported fewer restrictions to their freedom and fewer worries about being seen outside the house. It is of particular importance to consider young women's limited opportunities to leave their house alone, even for short periods of time or to attend school. A mother from a traditional Kaqchikel community explains:

"Women, when they're younger, should make the best of being in school because when they turn fourteen and fifteen they can't go to class anymore."

Although this participant did not immediately elaborate on why the age of fourteen or fifteen marked a difference, later along the interview she referred to that age as the time when "girls became women" and also as the age in which young people started dating. The participant considered that girls shouldn't be allowed to date at such a young age and that the only way to prevent that from happening was keeping her daughters in the house. The prevalence of unmarried pregnancies among girls of this age feeds people's perceptions that young women shouldn't be allowed out, in some cases, not even to school. The fear of girls getting pregnant was repeatedly mentioned (directly and indirectly) by parents as a principal reason for keeping girls at home. Limitations to young women's autonomy were also spoken about in terms of the risk of developing a "bad reputation". A young woman from a modern K'iche community explains:

"If my workplace were far away, I would have to leave [the house] early and come back at night, that would be a problem...[my parents] wouldn't allow me because people would start speaking badly of me."

In general, girls who want to pursue goals that require physical autonomy face challenges to doing so in a society that believes that women's mobility should be limited. Parents who are supportive of their daughters'

educational and career aspirations must also deal with pressure that comes from neighbors and peers and justify their support for their daughters more than they would have to for their sons.

Social Participation

As with the other topics studied, discrepancies were noted between participant's discourses and their actual realities of social participation, especially with regard to sex. Participants said that women and men alike were involved in groups in their community, yet further inquiries into young people's activities beyond school and mainly unpaid work show that their social participation is limited, especially for girls. Traditional gender roles within the communities once again were reflected as participants described the roles young women and men tend to play in community-based activities. A young woman from a traditional Kaqchikel community stated:

"Young people hardly organize activities, only when there's a community festivity. Those in school participate more; they help with the cultural afternoons, sports, that's where they help the most. Women hardly participate, they go to cook. They make tortillas, tamalitos, that's the most common thing women do."

A mother from a traditional Kaqchikel community explains:

"When there are celebrations, young people can share certain activities... Women, when there is a party, share cleaning chores, prepare maize, prepare meals with their cousins, aunts, neighbors."

In all four communities, the recreational activities available to adolescents revolve around sports for boys, and church and community celebrations for boys and girls. While church and school-related activities were mentioned as perceived safe venues for participation, it was noted that the number of social/community activities for boys tends increase with age, while the opposite is true for girls. Girls in the 12-14 age range participated more frequently in church and school activities, but it appears that girls lose this freedom as they start leaving school and get older. In some cases, parents explicitly stated the onset of menstruation as the moment of change for young women with regard to their freedom of movement. As mentioned previously, many parents commented on the risks of dating, early marriage and pregnancy when allowing their teenage daughters out of the domestic sphere. A father from a traditional Kaqchikel community explains:

“Custom here is that women marry when they’re fourteen or fifteen and that’s a risk if they start dating at an early age, that’s the reason why parents don’t let their daughters go out.”

Furthermore, non-familial friendships are regarded suspiciously by parents, particularly where their daughters are concerned. As expected, young women who reported not being involved in church groups and not enrolled in school also reported having no friends. Parents are afraid their daughters will meet men while they’re out of the house and stated that peers are not as watchful as a relative would be. Parents are also concerned about friends overall influence on the obedience and discipline of their children. For adolescent boys, the principal risks are those related to drinking, smoking, and in the case of K’iche communities, gang activity. A mother from a modern Kaqchikel community explains:

“I think that adolescents prefer to be with their friends because one (a parent) scolds them, instead, their friends give them wings and then they (adolescents) get cocky and that’s a problem. Because sometimes when young people have problems, they don’t tell us but tell a friend, and sometimes friends say “don’t listen to your mother, do this and this” and then they prefer their friends.”

Community Members and Mentors

In addition to questions about social participation, adolescents were asked about people in their community whom they trusted and admired. Most responses regarding trust involved older family members, and some included teachers. Some participants’ first response was also “God.” Many young men and boys mentioned their friends among the people they trusted. Young women responded in similar fashion, however, less evidence was available on the subject because fewer young women reported having friends or being allowed to socialize. Even though young people appeared more trusting of friendships than their parents did, distinctions between bad and good company were made. When asked who they admired, some participants mentioned family members, but others were more specific, talking about a particular sibling or aunt or uncle.

The concept of mentors was also discussed with young participants. Among the mentors recognized were young adults who had completed high school or obtained a university degree. Good teachers were also considered mentors both in and out of the classroom.

Being active and serving one’s community was seen as admirable by younger participants. It is important to note that while young women and girls mentioned men and women among the people they admire, young men and boys only talked about admirable men.



Safe and Unsafe Spaces for Adolescents

Whether in an urban or rural setting, the issue of personal safety is a major concern for many Guatemalans. Participants were asked about places and venues within their communities where adolescents can meet and gather in a safe environment. In general, young people reported the safest meeting places as revolving around church activities (youth groups). People’s homes were also considered safe, particularly for young women and girls. A young girl from a modern Kaqchikel community stated:

“At a friend’s house (we feel safe) because boys won’t tease us there, because there are boys that tease us.”

Regarding unsafe places, the majority of participants mentioned “the road” or “the streets” as unsafe places to gather or socialize, largely because of the danger of being robbed. K’iche youth mentioned gangs as the main reason these places were unsafe. This coincides with young people’s comments on the presence of gangs in the K’iche communities. In addition to the above mentioned reasons, two participants explained why they think the streets are dangerous:

12-14 boy, traditional K’iche community - “We feel unsafe on the street, on the roads, because you don’t learn anything there. You only learn bad things, to use foul language, bad customs, or also you learn to beat up kids. Bad stuff, gang stuff.”

12-14 girl, modern Kaqchikel community - “On the roads and on the street (we feel unsafe) because there are men there that tease/harass you and we don’t like that.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this study reveal the discrepancies that exist between the desired and actual transition to adulthood for many indigenous adolescents in Guatemala. In all four thematic areas - education, livelihoods, sexual and reproductive health and family formation, and social and community life - it is evident that young girls tend to suffer most from the lack of educational and health services, employment options, life choices, and social interaction available to them. More specifically, unmarried girls not enrolled in school comprise the group with the most severe limitations regarding access to information, training, personal autonomy, and social participation. Once girls leave school, their opportunities for interaction with peers and mentors is extremely limited, mostly to church-based groups. For those not involved in or allowed to participate in church groups, contact with the world outside their homes is restricted to the few errands they run, community festivities, or religious celebrations. For many young girls, especially those from families with limited economic means and not able to attend school, early marriage appears to be the only feasible alternative to residing with their parents under very restrictive conditions that limit their social and physical mobility.

The information collected through the study indicates that while many participants, parents and adolescents alike, can articulate the importance of increased education, vocational and social opportunities for girls, the reality of their daily lives and cultural traditions continue to be barriers to significant change. The existing gaps between desired education and actual attendance, desired work and feasible opportunities, and desired family size and scarce reproductive health services available point to the need for multi-sectoral interventions. To address these deficiencies and help meet the needs of this vulnerable population, we propose the following as recommendations for community level interventions targeted toward young people and parents.

- Promote gender equity from the earliest possible ages
- Promote the value of girls' education and vocational/professional training for income generation
- Provide context-appropriate and gender-equitable education and vocational training and opportunities
- Increase access to reproductive health and family planning information and services



- Create opportunities for safe and culturally-accepted social interaction between girls and women and mixed sex groups
- Create safe spaces for girls to share, interact, learn and grow
- Cultivate and promote community role models and mentors, especially for girls

These general strategies aim to enable indigenous young people in Guatemala -- particularly girls -- to experience a safe and healthy transition to an adulthood in which they have control over their decisions and the right and opportunity to maximize their potential.

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