

Yo quiero Yo puedo – A proven approach for education and empowerment of indigenous girls



▾ EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During January 2016 to March 2018, Yo quiero Yo puedo carried out an education program in Acaxochitlán, Hidalgo, Mexico to empower indigenous girls and reduce the alarming rates of school drop-out. They worked with teachers, school authorities, parents, and girls and boys ages 10-14 to mitigate the risks that cause girls to drop out of school. Through teacher trainings and playful activities for kids build on a proven framework for enabling empowerment, the classroom environment changed: **girls felt safer and more comfortable in school and shared a desire and motivation to continue their studies.**



PROBLEM

Forty-four percent of Mexicans live in poverty¹, facing social disadvantages and vulnerability. In addition, 32% of Mexicans are between the ages of 12 and 29. Despite being a generation with greater access to education, information and communication resources than previous generations, many young people continue to face a social and economic inequality that prevents their development. For example, although almost all Mexican children attend primary school, the dropout rates later on are extremely high. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in 2017, only 55% of the youth aged 25 and under graduated from secondary education, and only 23% of those aged 25-34 graduated from tertiary education.

Causes for school dropout in girls include: marriage, cultural norms, teenage pregnancies, violence, poverty and ethnic diversity.

In the state of Hidalgo, **18%** of girls between the ages of 12 and 14 do not attend school. This number rises dramatically, to **72%**, for girls between 15 and 19 years. Some of the causes include **marriage and cultural norms**: girls begin to get married at age 12 and a staggering 25% of girls between 15 and 19 years of age are married. A woman's worth is derived from marrying and having children and, many times, her parents arrange her marriage at a young age. **Teenage pregnancy** plays an important role in preventing girls from finishing school. In 2017, 18% of all the pregnancies in the state were to teenage mothers. This is compounded by a high rate of **violence, poverty and ethnic diversity**

that limit their freedom to develop, El Grupo Estatal para la Prevención del Embarazo Adolescente of Hidalgo has identified: 32% of women have reported emotional violence, 25% economic violence, 10% physical violence and 6% sexual violence, with the last two figures being even higher in rural areas. **Language challenges** are also obstacles for the 37% of the girls aged 15 to 19 who are indigenous.

When women do not believe they can access a different future than the one at home, when they do not have a voice in the community or are forbidden to talk by their husbands, when they do not question this situation, women do not feel the need to study. As a consequence, girls often end up in poorly paid jobs where they earn, on average, 42% of what men make.

Hidalgo, and Mexico, cannot grow if half its population- if women- is left behind. **Education plays a major role in addressing poverty, violence, and gender equality.** It enhances individuals' expectations and motivations to achieve better standards of living and well-being. Ensuring equal opportunities at all levels of education is an element of social change, not only for the benefit of women, but also for their children, their families, and the community at large.



Girls learning about reproductive health

¹ Medición de la pobreza (CONEVAL, 2016). Retrieved from <https://www.coneval.org.mx/Medicion/Paginas/PobrezaInicio.aspx>

➤ SOLUTION

From January 2016 until March 2017 Yo quiero Yo puedo worked with school communities in Acaxochitlán, Hidalgo to mitigate the risks that cause indigenous girls to drop out of school by supporting life skills development, gender equality and changes in the norms and societal expectations around girls' future.

The main objectives of the "I want to, I can... develop my talents and be successful" program were to:

- Raise **awareness** among educational authorities and community leaders about the risks of girls dropping out of school;
- Strengthen the **capacity of teachers** through participatory, experiential and playful workshops;
- Provide **didactic tools** with a gender perspective to be used across various school activities;
- Build **capacity** for sexual education;
- Change **attitudes** and develop **resilience** behaviors for coexistence and human development with gender equality;
- Increase **support networks** in the community to prevent girls from dropping out of school;
- Increase **enrollment and retention** of girls in middle schools.

Firstly, the social and cultural characteristics of the school communities were identified and used to adapt and develop training material for the project. Educational authorities, as well as key persons in the communities, were onboarded to the project and its importance. Teachers participated on 40-hour workshops on different topics including life skills, gender equality, and prevention of violence and of risks related to sexual health.

Once teachers finished their training, they brought it into their classrooms. Yo quiero Yo puedo provided teachers with materials and games so that they could facilitate with their 10 to 14-year-old students such life skills as critical thinking, decision making and self-aware-

ness. These teachers were accompanied by Yo quiero Yo puedo facilitators as they implemented their newly-learned skills and utilized the tools and materials. Through these activities, girls and boys learned about their rights, different types of violence, their bodies and how to take care of themselves. Some of the activities included sexuality education and gender rights. In workshops with parents, the same topics were addressed with a focus on building a deep understanding among both fathers and mothers on why it is so important to educate girls.



Students learning about peer respect

➤ RESULTS

As a result, the **classroom became a friendlier space and a protective factor for girls**. Teachers changed the way they taught all contents and both boys and girls learned from their peers and to respect and get along with each other. They were **empowered** to make their own decisions about their future.

Yo quiero Yo puedo, with the support of Johnson & Johnson and the Resource Foundation, brought the program to over **1,300** children, **55** teachers and **700** parents in **17** communities.

After two years in the program, 10- and 11-year old girls and boys showed desire, confidence and motivation to continue studying until completing a university education that would allow them to practice a profession. They also showed an understanding of all types of violence.

Kids scored **90/100** in motivation for studying

One of the boys expressed: *"I learned that there are many types of violence in school and at home. Bullying can happen in many ways: hitting, offending or with bad words."*

"This program taught me that boys and girls can learn and play together and that if I want to play with cars, that doesn't make me less of a girl. When I finish school, I want to study something related to math or science," Denisse.

Teachers indicated that the program had strengthened their personal skills and had given them practical tools to work with their students on a range of topics in the classroom. They observed that boys and girls in class were working together much more and much better and treated each other more respectfully; there was less violence amongst their pupils.

Teachers scored **92/100** in their attitudes towards gender equality

Parents indicated that they would like their daughters as well as their sons to continue studying to build a better future. They said they were now better informed on sexuality. They now saw violence as an undesirable practice that exists in their families, in school and in the community at large. They disapproved of the prevalent strict division of gender roles, and pointed to the need for men to collaborate more at home. Additionally, mothers expressed the need for women to access paid jobs. They perceived their children safer, more communicative and cooperative at home, and recognized that the program had made them see the importance of collaborating.

"My daughter, Jazmín, learned how to manage her emotions, how to take care of herself and how to recognize if there's violence in the house or the community. This program also helped me loose the shame of talking about the changes in her body and sexual health and reproduction," Patricia V.

"I would love for my daughter to continue studying. She will be the one to decide what, but I am going to support her no matter what she decides, because women are worth the same as men and it is important that we teach them that." Lino V.

Parents increased **45%** their knowledge about gender equality



Girls play and learn through a participatory workshop

↳ LESSONS LEARNED

The program had positive impact on children, parents, teachers and the community. This was due to several factors:

1. The I want to I can methodology offers a solution for the Mexican Ministry of Education: The program is in line with the policy of the Ministry of Education that intends to teach students competencies for life. Creating alliances provided a platform to incorporate the objectives of the program into the school curriculum. Besides, teachers and school authorities were so happy with the program, that they requested activities to implement in all school events, beyond the participating classes, which enhanced program impact.



Girls share their learnings and experience in the program

2. Putting teachers and local leaders at the center best serves the needs of the community: Teachers and key persons in the communities know the context, the needs, the language and the way in which the communities are organized and, therefore, can adjust the program to best serve the needs of the communities. When teachers were made aware of the problem and the solution, they could roll out the program and work with their students.

3. Analyzing the needs of the community before the implementation of the program increased the effectiveness of the program: A participatory approach was carried out with teachers, children and parents to map out the needs of the communities. Afterwards, materials were developed according to those needs that would later be used by teachers to implement the program with the students in the classroom. For example, during the needs assessment it was discovered that the most present form of violence was the psychological one, through lack of respect or love. Besides, it became evident that there was a need to work on violence prevention not only in relationships, but, surprisingly, in classrooms as well. As a consequence, the materials were adapted to include topics on rights, bullying and respect to peers.

4. Play-based activities enable better assimilation of program concepts and peer learning: Teachers were provided with workbooks and games that contained theoretical information, exercises according to age group and themes of the program, as well as recreational and didactic support information. Introducing the concepts through playful activities allowed for a better reception and assimilation of the concepts and provided students with the opportunity to learn from each other and experience transformational learning through discovery rather than being "taught".

5. The other half of the population must also be engaged for the development of girls: Change can only happen when all actors are working together. Including teachers, parents and boys in the implementation guaranteed the success of the program. Through their training, teachers changed their teaching methods and their attitudes towards gender equality and violence, making it easier to teach these concepts to their students. Parents, the ultimate decision-makers on whether a girl goes to school or not, participated in conferences and changed their attitudes towards violence and gender equality.

6. There is an expressed need for starting programming earlier and providing support through secondary school. School authorities shared with Yo quiero Yo puedo their desire to bring this programming to girls even earlier, before kids mold their perceptions of gender, rights and opportunities for the future, so that the impact can be even greater and deeper. On the flip side, authorities were also concerned that as girls continued on to secondary school, they would face unsupportive teachers who had neither the perspective nor the ability to provide the follow-on support for these girls to face the growing pressures of marriage and pregnancy.

CONCLUSIONS

The “I want to, I can” program was built on a framework for enabling empowerment, where knowledge is complemented by life skills and psychosocial barrier reduction to lead immediately to behavior change and a sense of personal agency. Not only do the program results show the importance of working with the entire school community, but **the program has positively impacted the knowledge of and the attitudes and practices towards complex issues influencing the early dropout of school rates. Having received such a positive response from the school authorities themselves**, “I want to, I can ... develop my talents and be successful” offers a high-impact program for the Ministries of Education in Mexico and beyond to address 21st century educational objectives and build social and economic equality that enables youth development.




Since our creation in 1985, we have designed, implemented and evaluated programs with the aim of fostering personal development and reducing psychosocial barriers so individuals become agents of change in their own lives as well as in their families and communities.

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