Women as Proactive Transmitters of Culture:
Implications from Local Leadership to the Pan-Mayan
Movement

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ABSTRACT
This three-week field research project examines the relationship between the projects and goals of women leaders in the community of Santa Catarina Palopó and, on a broader level, women’s social status as “protectors” or “guardians” of their local Mayan culture. Through discussions with women working in the municipal government, in an Evangelical women’s group, and at a local non-profit organization, I determined what issues women in the community find most pressing and in what ways women leaders working to resolve these issues exemplify and contradict their identity as guardians of their local culture. I will then apply this local case study to the Pan-Mayan movement in Guatemala to determine what role, if any, women can have in protecting Mayan culture beyond the local level.

INTRODUCTION
One of the most interesting dichotomies in the study of indigenous identity in Latin America as a whole, and in Guatemala in particular, is that between the struggle for the recognition of indigenous rights and culture and the simultaneous absence of generally culturally-conservative women from these movements. The Pan-Mayan movement of Guatemala encourages the development of Mayan languages and bilingual schools and has fought to reform the state’s perception of its indigenous minorities since the peace process of the 1990s after a long and violent civil war. They succeeded in opening the discussion of the role of indigenous peoples in the nation, but in doing so have used language and identity as the prime motivators of organization, as opposed to encouraging mobilization by class, and have increased the challenges the movement faces. Differences in language, experiences of violence during the civil war, exposure to globalization, and religious conversion all must be resolved or at least addressed by the leadership of the movement in order to unite the indigenous people of Guatemala into one shared experience (Rubin 2004: 126).

One way that Pan-Mayanists have sought to address this problem is through essentialization. Jean Jackson and Kay Warren criticize essentialism for “freezing and reifying an identity in a way that hides the historical processes and politics when it develops” and for ignoring whose interests that identity creation serves (Jackson and
This is often done by anthropologists, academics, and critics outside indigenous communities to, for example, question the authenticity of “modernized” or “Westernized” leaders of indigenous movements, who tend to come from larger urban centers rather than more isolated rural towns. By setting in stone the definition of indigenous identity without leaving room for necessary changes or exceptions, people in power use these definitions in racist ways to “justify violence, perpetuate hierarchies of human value…and leave unquestioned the neglect of certain sectors of their populations as something less than human” (Jackson and Warren 2005: 559). However, they also address “self-essentialization” in which it is indigenous communities and not outsiders who apply strict definitions of what their culture means or entails.

In the same way that indigenous Guatemalans can be essentialized or self-essentialize, so too can indigenous women within these groups be confined to strict definitions of behavior and identity imposed by outsiders or by their own communities. According to Carol Smith, “more often than not, women bear the burden of displaying the identifying symbols of their ethnic identity to the outside world, whether these be items of dress, aspects of language, or distinctive behavior” (Smith 1995: 723). In many communities, women are considered “more Indian” than their male counterparts because they are less likely to speak Spanish or to travel to urban centers from their pueblos (Jackson and Warren 2005: 560). At the same time, they are more likely to wear traditional Indian clothing (or traje) long after men adopt Westernized clothing styles and haircuts and to perform traditional duties, such as staying at home to take care of children and make tortillas, while men are going to school and taking jobs outside of the home environment.
Maya women, in particular, “are the triply oppressed in terms of race, class, and gender” (Smith 1995: 733): as Indians, they are looked down upon by other Guatemalans as racially inferior and make up the vast majority of the poorest and lowest class of the population. Furthermore, indigenous women are immediately identifiable as such to outsiders of the community through their traditional traje and use of their local language, whereas the majority of indigenous men do not differ drastically in dress or language from Ladinos. In societies where identity is highly community-specific, it is “women who bore the burden of maintaining the main markers of Mayan ethnic identity” and, through their children, were “seen to be (and were) reproducers of the Maya community, both culturally and biologically” (Smith 1995: 738). This essentialized idea of women and their role in society held at both at the national and local level has held them back from participating in many activities outside the home, including organizing into movements at the local level or beyond.

When the women of these communities do organize, they do so in intrinsically different ways than women of first world countries. “Feminist” first world women’s movements seek to change a society’s whole way of structuring women’s roles; on the other hand, third world women’s movements are motivated far more by “practical gender interests” (Ray and Korteweg 1999: 49). These interests include, fundamentally, the ability to fulfil their roles as wives and mothers and perform their portion of their communities’ division of labor. For example, the organization of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina consists of mothers motivated by wanting closure for the disappearances and murders of their children. States such as Argentina can essentialize and “valorize” traditional women’s gender role as a mother, but some women’s movements, in response, have inverted the meaning of that definition to serve their own interests. In this way, the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo used their motherhood to
advocate and agitate against the state on behalf of their disappeared or murdered children (Ray and Korteweg 1999: 54). This is one of many examples of ways that women are “reclaiming” their rights to participate in movements. Instead of positioning themselves as having the weighty responsibility of being “guardians” of their culture, they are instead important “transmitters and reproducers of culture, allowing them a level of active self-determination instead of passive victimhood. In this way, they are advancing their demands for greater participation and independence by using their status as traditional women instead of giving it up (Jackson and Warren 2005: 560).

Considering how women are essentialized in almost every way as the bearers and protectors of Mayan culture, I find it interesting that women are not utilized or found prominently in the Pan-Mayan movement in Guatemala. Aside from the very notable exception who is Rigoberta Menchú, an indigenous woman who in 1992 won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work fighting for indigenous rights in Guatemala, there numbers of indigenous women fighting for their rights at a national level is not representative of the number of number of Guatemalan indigenous women who could be involved in this movement. When viewed as guardians and protectors of their culture, both insiders and outsiders to their communities reject their ability to participate actively in these movements without losing what makes them “Indian” – unless the women can harness their identity and use it as a means for advocacy rather than as an obstacle holding them back. In this paper, I will examine which aspects of identity indigenous women in positions of leadership are embracing and which they are contradicting or reclaiming in order to take a larger role in the public sphere. Gong from the micro to the macro level, I will also argue that women’s insubstantial presence in the Pan-Mayan movement can, in part, be explained by the fact that women leaders
and their organizations are occupied with local battles for security and survival rather than the more distant idea of cultural rights.

METHODOLOGY

Keeping this background literature in mind, this paper seeks to address three overarching questions: Who is the modern indigenous woman of Santa Catarina Palopó?, For what reasons do women leaders organize?, and Why are there so few women involved in the Pan-Mayan movement?

In my original conception of this field research project, I had planned to talk mainly to women politicians or those involved in formal politics in the community and then augment these interviews with discussions with women in leadership positions in churches, cooperatives, and other local organizations in order to look at many aspects of leadership in the town. However, upon arriving in Santa Catarina Palopó for three weeks of field study from February twelfth through March fifth, I discovered that there was a widespread lack of indigenous women in the local municipal government, apart from one woman who was the coordinator of the Municipal Office for Women (OMM in its Spanish acronym). I adjusted my research accordingly and made contact with the woman in the municipality, but also formed relationships with the organized women’s group from the “Assembly of God” Evangelical Church and a local non-profit organization dedicated to issues of women’s development. I selected these organizations – and the women who headed them – specifically because they were operating in very different spheres from each other and involved women from different ages and backgrounds, but were all attempting to affect change for the better in their communities. They are also all aware of each other’s presence and work in a very loosely connected network of organized women in the community. I also, in
constructing my network of women to talk to, asked women in the community who were and were not members of these groups who they thought the most powerful, influential, or well-known women in the community were, and these same names and organizations came up in conversation often.

Because I wanted to ascertain not only how women leaders operate in Santa Catarina, but also how they either exemplify or contradict the traditional identity of Mayan women, I also observed these women leaders in their working and home environments, when possible, and conducted formal and informal interviews with each of them. In my participant observations, I noted how the women dressed (in full *traje* or not at all), the structure and size of their family, what language they spoke predominantly in their activities outside the home, what language they spoke with their families, and whether their families and children dressed in *traje*. Especially concerning the more personal questions about marriage and children, I would wait for them to ask the inevitable question of whether I was married or had kids and use that as an opening to learn more about them and their families. In light of some personal information that I did discover, I will use only the first names of these women to protect their privacy.

One aspect that I struggled with was finding a Pan-Mayan perspective with which to compare my local data. As a movement that is led largely by intellectuals from large urban centers like Guatemala City, it was extremely difficult to find local people with an opinion on the movement, simply because many people were not aware that a movement for a Pan-Mayan identity existed. For this reason, I also spoke with Dolores Ratzun who lives in the nearby Santiago Atitlán to give me some perspective on women’s role, presence, and potential in the Pan-Mayan movement at both the local and national levels.
Another difficulty I had was with language: not only was I not a native Spanish speaker, and thus my questions could have been misunderstood or interpreted in ways that I couldn’t anticipate, but many of the women I talked to were non-native Spanish-speakers as well. They could have understood my questions in ways I did not intend them, and the fact that many were much more conversant in the local language of Kakchiquel, a language I do not speak, excluded me from many conversations in which it could have been possible for me to collect more valuable data. Also, I was welcomed into many groups because I was a woman eager to understand women’s lives in Santa Catarina, but it is important I recognize that the fact that I was a foreigner made it much more difficult to do so. Considering I have an unavoidable bias as a Western woman and also as a feminist, I entered the community with many ideas of what women’s organizing looked like in the Western world that I slowly overcame as I worked with the women of Santa Catarina throughout my three weeks of field research.

ORGANIZATIONS AND THEIR LEADERS

*Evangelical Women’s Council: Irma and Sonia*

I made first contact with the Evangelical women’s Council easily because my host mother Rosa was not only a member but had been elected Treasurer of the group. Each week after the kids were packed away to school and the lunch dishes washed, we would set off for a different woman’s home around town. Sitting in the cool shade of a courtyard, entryway, or patio, the between ten and twenty would sing, pray, take turns giving teachings from the Bible, plan future activities of the group, and just chat with each other. “All women do is *work* in the house all day; it is nice to get out of the house for an hour because we need and deserve a break,” Rosa told me when I asked her why she enjoyed attending the group meetings so much (Field Notes, 16 Feb 2012). Besides
these meetings, the women meet once or twice a week to visit members of the church who are sick, going through a difficult time, or faltering in their faith. The women in the Concilio were the oldest I talked to, and also the most conservative. All of them worked only within the house, had children early and often, and had had little to no schooling.

These meetings are led by the pastor’s wife, Irma, and the President of the council, Sonia. Irma is originally from San Lucas, like her husband the pastor, but unlike him speaks Kakchiquel and thus can communicate freely with all the women in the Church. She is in her thirties, and has five children and a grandchild. As the pastor’s wife, her role in the Council is to help the other women, give them advice, pray, and give teachings from the Bible. Sonia, the President of the Council, is the youngest member of the group at 20 years old and has one three-year-old daughter with her husband. She is has only been the President since January, when she was unanimously elected because “Before, there were no meetings in the women’s houses, we didn’t look at each other at church and didn’t talk, so I started weekly meetings so we could all be together, and the women like the idea” (Field Notes, 1 March 2012). She spoke both Spanish and Kakchiquel fluently and easily, and was one of the few women I talked to who would quickly correct any errors I made in Spanish.

ADEMKAN: Silvia and Lucy

I learned about the Asociación de Desarrollo de la Mujer¹ K’ak’a Na² (ADEMKAN in its Spanish acronym) from one of the women’s Council meetings where they discussed violence against women. I visited the office, full of balconies and

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¹ Association for Women’s Development
² “Nuevos conocimientos,” or new knowledge/consciousness in the local language Kakchiquel
sunlight located on the upper level of the town’s main street, to find out more about their organization and the women who worked there. The director is a woman named Silvia who oversees an office of around five women and three men. I had some trouble connecting with the women of the organization at first because they were constantly in and out of the office, chatting on the phone, and conducting women’s meetings in nearby towns, but after a week of visiting ADEMKAN nearly every day I was told a schedule of upcoming events and attended several internal office meetings, a visit to the neighbouring town of San Antonio to liaise with women there, and a workshop on gender issues and legislation from a woman they brought in from the capital.

Silvia was loud, confident, and commanding in ways that no other woman I met in Santa Catarina was. I asked multiple times for the opportunity to interview her, but was rebuffed every time because of her busy schedule, and she arrived at every event I attended late and left early so I never had a free moment to speak with her about her life. However, I had many opportunities to observe her in action in her working environment, and also had the opportunity to get to know Lucy, another prominent woman in the organization who works specifically educating women on family planning and sex education. She is 22 years old and married with no children, though she told me she would very much like to have a family one day and to continue working at ADEMKAN when she did. She also studies on the weekends at the university in Sololá to earn a degree in social organizing.

Municipality: Sandra

While the coordinator of the Municipal Women’ Office was a ladina in the neighboring town of Santa Antonio, the coordinator in Santa Catarina was an indigenous woman named Sandra. She is in her twenties, is married with a five-month-
old, working full-time, and studying on the weekends at the university in Sololá. She was not elected to her position, but rather applied for the job and was selected by the mayor and the town council to fill the position; she has been working at the municipality for three years and has survived the post-election regime change in January to continue working for another couple years. The programs she runs out of her office include both educational and economic initiatives to increase women’s levels of education and literacy, as well as improve their economic stability by teaching them how to start their own businesses and helping them find markets to sell their artisan work or weaving.

EXEMPLIFYING MAYAN IDENTITY

Many of the women exhibit characteristics and identifying symbols previously outlined by Carol Smith: “her distinctive and colorful dress, her tendency to speak only a local dialect of the Maya language, and her modest demeanor in public settings, especially those involving non-Maya” (Smith 1995: 723) are all characteristics of the essentialized Mayan woman. In general, the women of the Evangelical Concilio are older and conform to this definition much more strictly than the younger women of the municipality and ADEMKAN. In the next section I will discuss how the women leaders I talked to also contradict or reclaim certain aspects of this essentialized identity in order to participate more fully in public life in Santa Catarina.

Traje

Every woman I spoke to, from the generally older Evangelical women to the younger women working at the municipality and at ADEMKAN, dressed in their local traje. In the case of Irma and Sonia, who were from San Lucas and Panajachel respectively, both they and their daughters wore the traje from their original
communities and remained identifiable as members of those communities rather than convert to the dress of their new homes. The wearing of their local *traje* is just one aspect of women’s deep attachment to their culture and their home. Irma mentioned leaving her family and home community in San Lucas as the greatest sacrifice she has made in her life, because “the culture is very different” and she finds it difficult that she only gets to see her family every three months (Irma, Field Notes 27 Feb 2012). The other women are also very connected to their families, in every case choosing a husband from within the community to which they were born and in nearly every case remaining there to start a family.

Though wearing their *traje* is extremely important to each of the women I spoke with, it is also a concern of men in the community that women maintain their visible, outward signs of their culture. In a conversation with Irma’s husband Pedro, the pastor of the Evangelical Church, he said that the Church strongly supported local customs unless those customs are bad for the community. “The style of dressing in the *traje* of other countries is dressing dishonestly; we are Guatemalans and we have to preserve our identity” (Field Notes 27 Feb 2012). However, it is only “dressing dishonestly” if the women in his congregation choose to dress differently – every man I observed at the worship services I attended with my host family once or twice a week was dressed in neatly-pressed Western-style slacks, collared shirts, and ties, including Pedro himself. I never saw a single man wearing *traje* to these services, just as I never witnessed a woman wearing anything but the traditional clothing. This does not mean, of course, that men do not take pride in their identity, but there is not the same expectation that they actively strive to “preserve our identity” through dress that they expect their wives and daughters to uphold.
The majority of the women also spend most of their days speaking Kakchiquel, both within and outside the home. This has a lot to do with the fact that the majority of women’s interactions outside of the family are with other women, from the weekly meetings and visits of the Evangelical women to the majority of visitors to Sandra’s office at the municipality. Sandra and the women of ADEM KAN speak Kakchiquel with other women whenever they can, but switch easily to Spanish when their jobs necessitate that they speak with the men that they work with. Among the older women of the Evangelical group, Kakchiquel is spoken almost exclusively, but very few of them have more than a basic command of Spanish because they did not attend school as children and have never worked outside the home where they can speak the local language with their families. It is such a widespread phenomenon among the women of this community that Sonia, their president, told me that despite her great admiration for her Spanish-speaking pastor, “It would be much better if we could have a pastor who spoke Kakchiquel; it would be much better for the women” (Sonia, Interview 1 March 2012). Even the young women I spoke to, who had attended school and university for many years and had a perfect command of Spanish, cherished their Kakchiquel and actively taught it to their children or planned to do so when they had kids. Sandra summed up many women’s opinions neatly: “It is very important to me that [my five-month-old son] learn Kakchiquel. Some parents (fathers) don’t want their children to learn Kakchiquel, just Spanish, but that’s not the way it should be. We are from here, and we have to conserve our culture” (Sandra, Interview 28 Feb 2012).

These very visible exterior markers of cultural identity can serve as justification or legitimization of women’s other activities that they are deciding to take part in more and more outside the home. Pedro the pastor and other community members to may be
concerned that women may lose their significance in transmitting their culture can look at these educated, working women who proudly wear their traje and speak their language and be reassured. When I asked Dolores Ratzun how the communities of indigenous women politicians reacted when they went away to work in Congress, she told me “When the women return to their pueblos some say their communities don’t respect them, but many think it’s a good thing…they think it’s a good thing [only] if they don’t lose their culture” (Ratzun, Interview 5 March 2012). Even as women are leaving their communities more and more frequently, it is these external markers of their original identity that reassure the community they leave behind that they are continuing to embody and pass on their individual culture.

RECLAIMING MAYAN IDENTITY

Though the women leaders I spoke with all very much connected to their local or hometown identity, as I got to know them better – especially the younger women as opposed to those over 30 years of age – there were very subtle ways that they were breaking or modifying their society’s expectations and perception of women’s role. By utilizing some key external markers or identity but abandoning the parts of the definition of the essentialized Mayan woman that hold them back, they can participate more actively in public life than ever before while remaining true to their culture.

Education and Work

“I would have loved to go to school,” Rosa told me one day while we sat drinking tea and talking about her grandchildren’s school after dinner, “but I had to work around the house since I was a little girl and I never learned to read” (Field Notes, 15 Feb 2012). I was shocked when Rosa told me this, though I came to learn that her story was very similar to many other women her age in Santa Catarina. Fortunately,
though Sandra names the lack of educated and literate women in the town as her primary concern in the community, there are many more opportunities available for some younger women who are studying all the way through the schooling Santa Catarina has to offer and on to university. This means not only that women are more educated but, because of the lack of university in the surrounding area, women students have to travel several towns away to go to school, thus exposing them to communities outside of their own and to people who may not speak their language or follow their customs.

However, any additional schooling or work that the women decide to do outside of the home is taken on in addition to their household duties. Lucy works full-time at ADEMKAN and plans to do so even after she starts a family with her husband; she also attends university on the weekends to earn a degree in social organizing. Sandra also works full-time at the municipality, attends university on the weekends, and has a five-month-old son she has to take care of, though “my mother helps me a lot” she says (Interview, 28 Feb 2012). Women are increasingly able to have separate lives from working in their homes. For some, like the older women in the Evangelical group, there are small victories: after one meeting with particularly high attendance, Rosa expressed her happiness at the turnout considering “many husbands often don’t let their women out of the house to go to the meetings” (Field Notes, 29 Feb 2012). Though in many ways seeking an education and a job outside the home is just one more responsibility to take on in addition to taking care of children, cooking for the family, and attending to other household chores, many women are seizing opportunities to seek fulfilment in their lives outside of just maintaining the traditional role of house-bound mother that their mothers and grandmothers filled.
"Unlearning is important," Dalila told the semicircle of ADEMKAN women sitting around her in the chalet boathouse where she was leading a workshop, listening raptly (Field Notes, 29 Feb 2012). She has been leading workshops about gender throughout Guatemala for over ten years, and one of the topics her talk covers is how women are so much more than their role as “reproductoras.” She teaches that gender is a social construction, and even though their society tells women that their single most important job is to have baby after baby, and to not do so is “disobeying the rules of both nature and society” (Field Notes, 29 Feb 2012), they have the right to have fulfilling and meaningful lives outside of motherhood.

More and more women are embracing this message and taking control of their reproductive process. Though many women still marry at a relatively young age, they are limiting the number of children they have and in some cases putting off having children until they feel they are ready. Lucy, the coordinator of ADEMKAN’s family planning and sex education programs, has been married for two years but doesn’t plan to start a family soon. “It would be difficult to have a child right now because I am also studying at the university [in addition to working full-time at ADEMKAN],” she told me quietly but confidently when I asked her whether she wanted children soon (Field Notes, 28 Feb 2012). Both Sandra of the OMM and Sonia of the Concilio have a young child each on top of their other duties, but they are adamant supporters of family planning, for themselves and for the women they support. “Families don’t know family planning and then have too many children; there isn’t much talk about the subject...when we chat in our meetings we sometimes talk about this because there is a lot of trust within a group of women,” Sonia said, informing me of some of the subjects they talk about in Kakchiquel during their meetings (Interview, 1 March 2012). While
in the past it was not uncommon for women in Santa Catarina to have upwards of ten children, younger generations are more likely to have fewer children and to have them later.

*Role Models*

One of the most telling ways that we can observe this change of perspective between the older women who demonstrate their essentialized identity more fully than their younger counterparts working outside the home is by asking which women in their lives they admire most or view as role models for how they want to live their own lives. Irma, Sonia, and every other woman from the Concilio who answered this question for me named their mother as the most admired woman in their life without hesitation. Each woman painted a picture of a very strong -- though also very domestic -- mother figure. Irma’s mother “wakes up at four or five every morning and works all day, and she never complains about sickness or anything else” (Interview, 27 Feb 2012), while Sonia’s mother was not so traditional but was still the foundation of her large family: “When I was this age [motions to daughter, age 3], my father left my mother for another woman and my mother took care of us; she didn’t remarry and dedicated herself to us and I admire that a lot” (Interview, 1 March 2012). On the other hand, when I asked the same question of Sandra, she unhesitatingly named Rigoberta Menchú as her role model because “she has fought so much for indigenous rights,” the only one to name a woman not only outside of her family but outside the community of Santa Catarina (Interview, 28 Feb 2012). This, along with education and family planning, may not be outward or extremely visible symbols of societal change for women and their identity and role in Santa Catarina, but they are nevertheless allowing them, more than ever, to step out of the domestic sphere and take control of their lives in ways that their mothers and grandmothers couldn’t.
WHY WOMEN ORGANIZE: THE ISSUES

Having looked at how women have interacted with, accepted, and subtly altered different aspects of their perceived identity as Mayan women, I was interested in determining what these women and their organizations deemed the most important issues in their community to solve. Considering their role as “culture bearers” in the community, I was interested to see if their goals in organizing in Santa Catarina matched up with this identity, and if so what was holding them back from participating in the fight for the recognition of Mayan culture beyond the local level now that they were venturing ever further out of their communities to work and study. Despite the differences in age, family situation, education, and organizations they were apart of, there were three answers I received from all the women when asked what the most pressing or grave problems were in their community that each are striving to address in their own way: the descuido of children, violence against women, and women’s lack of education and economic means to take care of themselves.

The descuido of children arises largely from a lack of family planning and an absence of fathers who stay with their families to take care of their children, whether because they leave their wives, become alcoholics, or leave the community in search of a better economic future in another area of Guatemala or even in the United States. One women in the Concilio, Susana, told me that Irma and Sonia run a bible school throughout the morning on Saturday where they teach the children who attend “The Word,” but also community standards such as “don’t steal, don’t smoke and drink, take care of your family” and even provide a small snack of tamalitos for the children (Field Notes 25 Feb 2012). One of the main programs organized by Sandra’s office teaches

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3 Carelessness or neglect towards children by their parents

4 A snack of corn “dough” wrapped in a leaf with meat or beans and cooked
women in Santa Catarina how to start a business making crafts to sell such as bracelets or other artisan goods and find markets for them to sell their products so that they can support themselves and their many children economically in the case that their husband leaves or is unable to provide enough to support the family. All three organizations also provide discussions or workshops to educate women on their rights to family planning and as mothers, as discussed in the above section.

ADEMKAN has many goals for their community, but its overarching objective is to “empower women in their rights to diminish gender violence, with special attention to domestic violence” (ADEMKAN pamphlet, 20 Feb 2012). Domestic violence, due to a culture of simultaneous machismo and impunity, is a widespread problem that has touched nearly every family I talked to in some way, whether it was a mother, daughter, sister, or close friend affected. While the first Concilio meeting I attended involved a discussion on respect between husband and wife and how men do not have the right to hurt their wives, ADEMKAN does more concrete work in the community to support women who have been victims of domestic violence. One of their listed “specific objectives” is to “accompany and assist woman victims of violence in judicial, social, and psychological matters in order to diminish domestic violence” (ADEMKAN pamphlet, 20 Feb 2012). They bring in a woman lawyer from the nearby town of Panajachel to fight the abusers legally, provide translators for women who speak limited Spanish, and provide permanent psychological and social (but not economic) attention to woman victims who come to them for help. However, for a variety of reasons -- the inability to leave their husbands for economic reasons, lack of knowledge of the resources available to them, or just plain fear -- not as many women utilize ADEMKAN’s services who could. “Probably only about ten percent of women here know that they [ADEMKAN] can help them,” says Sonia, though she has a relative who
works for them going house to house to spread their message and goals, and she makes sure that the women she leads know about their work as well (Interview, 1 March 2012).

Finally, women in general receive less education than their brothers, tend to work within the home, speak much less Spanish than Kakchiquel, and have experienced little outside of their community -- all factors that limit their ability to participate in economic activities and provide for themselves independently from their husbands. This not only has a negative impact on the women themselves and on their development, but also on family structure and the future of the community. At one point in Dalila’s workshop for the women of ADEMKAN, she asked “If a family has two sons and two daughters but only enough money to send two children to school, who do you think gets to go? The sons,” she answered in unison with all the other women (Field Notes, 29 Feb 2012). But then it falls to these same daughters to educate their children, the next generation of citizens, and they can’t do a good job of preparing their children without a level of education and knowledge of the world. This is a prime example of a way women are reclaiming their identity as mothers in order to exercise their rights, in this case to education.

CONCLUSION: WOMEN AND THE PAN-MAYAN MOVEMENT

The nature of every single one of the issues that these organizations and their women leaders fight for is a basic need or a “practical gender interest” needed to fulfil their role as a mother (Ray and Korteweg 1999: 49). Their primary concerns are first taking care of basic needs that are not being taken care of by their government or other entities, namely physical and economic security for themselves and their families.

When compared to the ideals of the Pan-Mayan movement -- promoting the recognition
of indigenous language (often through bilingual schools), dress, and cosmovision on a national or pan-national level -- they can’t help but seem lofty and very distant to the gritty needs of day-to-day life for the women in Santa Catarina. In embarking on this study, I was interested in explaining why women, as the designated “guardians of culture” on a local level, were not utilized or involved more in the national fight for indigenous cultural rights in Guatemala. Though the aspects of their culture such as speaking Kakchiquel and dressing in their local traje are undoubtedly important to the women of Santa Catarina, it cannot be their primary concern while issues such as lack of care for children, domestic violence, lack of education, and poverty are impacting their lives so emphatically.

Nevertheless, the groups I encountered in Santa Catarina are having an impact. “A lot has changed around here [Lake Atitlán area where Santa Catarina is located] because of women’s groups,” Dalila told me with the accompanying shake of her hand to show emphasis on “a lot” (Field Notes, 29 Feb 2012). Dolores too is positive, stating that now more women are educated and getting careers; some have even been elected as representatives to Congress and proudly wear their traje to sessions. If situations continue improving for women at the local level at this rate and it becomes more common and accepted for women to attend school through university and work outside their communities, it is only a matter of time before women will be found at every level of the Pan-Mayan movement. Until that can be fully realized, it falls to governments and Pan-Mayanists themselves to meet the women working locally halfway. Governments need to improve their trustworthiness by following their campaign promises to provide effective services for women and children and Pan-Mayanists can work harder to raise strong, proud indigenous women leaders from the local level to
national and international spheres in order to strengthen their movement and improve
the situation of all indigenous people in Guatemala.
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