



## Case Study: Root Causes related to Education and Gender Equality in the Apurímac Learning Communities

### Introduction

The cultural, environmental and communal realities of the Abancay and Cusco districts of Peru's Apurímac region are significant factors that lead to widespread discrimination of underserved communities, particularly in regard to gender. Despite this inherent challenge, The Resource Foundation (TRF) and its local implementing partner in Peru, Centro Andino de Educación y Promoción "José María Arguedas" (CADEP), have worked with community schools through the Caterpillar Foundation-funded Regional Education and Gender Equity Program to successfully address these issues and improve the quality of education available to their children. By responding to intolerant societal norms and practices that contribute to poor academic performance in girls, the program strives to eradicate barriers that stunt this demographic's advancement and long-term success.



### Root Causes

In order to effectively work towards quality education, the root causes, challenges and deficiencies of the local communities must be addressed. Discrimination is an undeniable part of life in Abancay and Cusco due to a dominant culture of *machismo*, alcoholism, and domestic violence, which work in tandem to further perpetuate and exaggerate the already gaping gender disparity. Families and children internalize these standards, thereby reinforcing a system that perpetuates women and girls' lack of inclusion and success in society. This serves to not only reduce opportunities, but to also cause many women and girls to struggle with issues like low self-esteem, personal and cultural identity, abuse, bullying and addiction.

*"No! Girls aren't worth playing with...they're just going to scream and cry."*

When students of both sexes encounter this way of thinking in their homes, on the street, at the market and with family members and friends, this behavior unsurprisingly translates to the classroom as well. If this discriminatory thinking, whether conscious or subconscious, is further sustained at school, the consequence is natural: a deepening and extension of prejudice. In order to improve education and gender equity in Latin America and the Caribbean, these judgmental norms must be not only challenged, but overpowered.

*"Anita, wash the cups."*

A teacher, urgently attending to the needs of another student, unthinkingly asks one of her female students for assistance. Such discourses are common and rarely conscious; however, when boys and girls are together in a room and only the girls are called on to perform such tasks, teachers unwittingly reinforce gender stereotypes.

In the face of the misguided paradigms and behaviors to which students are exposed, schools work to promote gender equality by building awareness and reinforcing good practices among the children. Change with the students however,



comes with increased emphasis on teachers' roles in breaking gender barriers in the classroom. The Regional Program methodology includes training for educational staff, not only on innovative teaching techniques and classroom management, but also on subtly weaving human rights and gender equity concepts into all classroom activities. Teachers are consequently better equipped to incorporate communication, reflection, analysis and cultural identity conversations into lessons as means of enhancing educational performance and vital life skills for future success through a human rights context. Teachers integrate these concepts, for example, by being intentional in how they pick books to be used in lessons; selected stories convey messages of self-esteem, personal responsibility and values, and oftentimes include both strong female *and* male characters. Overall, participating teachers have exhibited an increased interest in gender equity topics through these professional development workshops, and many have exhibited a heightened understanding of the issues facing their students at home. This awareness has further resulted in a collective motivation to continue challenging gender disparities by reinforcing these concepts in their classrooms.

To this end, teachers have also begun to seek more democratic and teamwork-focused strategies for assigning classroom leadership positions. Some schools have implemented a rotational system for choosing student councils, class leaders and group coordinators, while other schools encourage these individuals to be selected by the group so as to encourage further collaboration and unity. One male and one female class leader from each classroom is appointed to participate in a school council network made up of other class leaders, where each participant has equal say and responsibility. The same ideals have been effectively applied to charging students with temporary roles, like cleaning, sweeping, organizing, decorating, etc. These strategies promote a gender focus that is not directly related to violence, mistreatment or aggression against women, but rather in a symbolic fashion that implicitly educates and fosters positive values among its target audience. Children are therefore presented with an alternative way of thinking and behaving during all aspects of the school day rather than only at a designated workshop or discussion. Although boys often bring their biases into the classroom, support and reinforcement from teachers regarding the equality between boys and girls has begun to form new standards: girls are now more assertive in their right to equitable participation and boys are more aware of stereotyped gender roles.

*"Sweetheart, you shouldn't play with the boys. Your place is with the girls."*

Such cautionary advice from an Abancay mother to her daughter is common in this region. Although teachers and schools are working to dismantle gender disparities, their work is futile if these norms are continuously reinforced at home. A key component of the Regional Education and Gender Equity Program is therefore external community engagement, particularly with parents. While adults in the community (teachers, educational staff and parents) exhibited initial resistance to outside organizations working to coordinate workshops with both themselves and their children, there has been great progress due to the multiyear timeline and inclusive nature of this program's activities; teachers are involved in the selection of pedagogical materials and parent participation in workshops is not only encouraged but directly requested. Parental involvement has evolved to include gender issues and human rights discussions, as well as life skills development and domestic violence prevention. Schools are additionally looking to the local community, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government agencies, health centers and universities, to address some of these and other aforementioned mental health issues through psychological counseling with both children and parents, especially mothers. Mothers have also begun asking for specialized workshops on similar topics geared specifically towards fathers. By increasing access to information and potential solutions related to self-esteem, identity, abuse, bullying, addiction and alcoholism, schools are addressing the root causes and community factors that directly influence the education and achievement of their students.



### **Empowerment through Advocacy**

TRF and its local partners recognize that advancement made at the micro-level with teachers, students and parents also needs to be applied in a larger context. In understanding the societal implications of its program, CADEP in particular has elected to include advocacy as a crucial part of its framework. Examples of this work include a forum held with candidates in the local and regional elections to present issues of gender equity and the need to emphasize this topic in schools, highlighting this project as an example. Similarly, CADEP representatives participated in the Cusco Regional Education Network and partook in conversations related to intercultural training and the immense potential that comes through providing professional development and continuing education opportunities for teachers.

CADEP has further expanded its advocacy efforts to include not only gender equity issues, but also prevention of child labor and promotion of children's rights. While participating in the Roundtable for the Fight against Poverty in Cusco and Abancay, the organization emphasized and exposed gender inequality and its inherent association with human rights violations related to indigenous groups, women and girls. CADEP also engaged local organizations and community actors to carry out a series of campaigns related to the prevention of domestic violence, bullying and addictions while maintaining a consistent and underlying focus on gender and self-identity.

### **Addressing External Factors**

School desertion and absence are prevalent problems in these communities not only because of child labor, but also because of issues related to health and hygiene. With chronic malnutrition and anemia affecting as many as 30% of children in Apurímac, these and other preventable conditions consistently keep children out of school. In recognizing these high-priority needs, the program has already worked to address childhood illnesses, especially in girls, in three (3) schools in Abancay through health and hygiene campaigns.

A particular health issue that arose was related to girls' menstrual cycles. In one of the schools located in Abancay, teachers noticed that girls were consistently absent or, if they were in school, that they were uncomfortable and constantly going to the bathroom. Upon further inquiry, it was determined that there was a high incidence of urinary tract infections among the female student population, which ultimately served to greatly hamper their effectiveness and participation in class both during and after their menstrual cycles. CADEP understood the need to directly address this situation in order to ensure the girls' continued active participation in school, and so it leveraged its contacts at the Ministry of Health to have a physician lead additional proper health and hygiene discussions with students. The girls were provided with medicated soap that helped to alleviate this issue, which ultimately helped them to continue dynamically participating in lessons.

The region also suffers from high rates of early pregnancy, which prohibits girls from completing their education and further relegates them to the background of society. TRF and CADEP recognize these additional health-related factors as issues that need to be directly addressed so as to increase awareness, improve beneficiaries' health and ultimately keep students in class. Additional possibilities for workshops have been raised by teachers, who have commented on the need to provide information on family planning and to facilitate access for these communities to sexual and reproductive education and to contraceptives.

### **Conclusion**

The schools and communities in these regions face a number of challenges, perhaps the most pressing of which is to offer a collaborative, integrative and value-added learning experience that addresses gender equality within a cultural and situational context that inherently promotes the opposite. In addition to exhibiting improved literacy and reading



comprehension skills, both boys and girls have shown an interest and increase in leadership, cooperation, solidarity, understanding of their rights, and a sense of both personal and collective responsibility. The TRF-Caterpillar Regional Education and Gender Equity Program is fundamental in advancing quality education through an innovative methodology that includes the entire education network; by workings to develop and reinforce positive values and virtues of coexistence among students, the program contributes to a diminishing gender gap and encourages children to become strong, successful and contributing members of society.