



Twelve Years of Impact

Creating a Safer, More Equitable Future for Indigenous
Women and Girls

2011 - 2023



Women's
Justice Initiative



Our Mission

The Women's Justice Initiative improves the lives of indigenous women and girls through education, access to legal services, and gender-based violence prevention in rural communities.

Our Programs

Women's Rights Education Program

Established: 2011

A legal literacy and empowerment course that educates women on asserting and protecting their rights. Women receive training on key issues, including intimate partner violence, sexual and reproductive rights, and property rights, while developing their leadership, decision-making, and communication skills.

Community Advocates Program

Established: 2012

A two-year leadership course to develop women's capacity as grassroots paralegals and drivers of female empowerment. Advocates receive in-depth training on women's rights, violence prevention, leadership skills, and community-based advocacy.

Legal Services Program

Established: 2013

WJI provides free legal services directly to rural indigenous women by bringing lawyers and paralegals to their communities and offering resources in the local language. The team advises clients on issues ranging from intimate partner violence to family law and property rights.

Adolescent Girls Program

Established: 2015

WJI teaches girls the skills to assert their rights, delay marriage, and achieve their personal goals, while workshops with parents and key stakeholders focus on the implementation of community-based protection mechanisms.

Strengthening Institutions

Established: 2016

WJI partners with government entities and justice operators to improve institutional responses to survivors of gender-based violence. WJI works with Advocates and local leaders to develop community-based prevention and response referral systems.

Twelve Years of Success



In 2011, WJI began working in one community with fifteen women in rural Guatemala, in response to high rates of gender-based violence and an absence of legal resources. Today, WJI's team of 38 individuals implements our comprehensive, community-driven programming in 85 communities across six municipalities, and shares our methodology with organizations in three countries.

Impact By the Numbers

10,000

More than 10,000 women and girls directly participated in WJI's programs.

4,669

4,669 women received legal representation from WJI, 67% of whom are survivors of violence.

5,600

More than 5,600 women increased their knowledge of their rights through the Women's Rights Education Program.

160

160 Community Advocates acquired leadership and advocacy skills, multiplying WJI's impact.

1,337

1,337 girls gained skills and knowledge to delay marriage and achieve their goals.

79%

79% of our staff are Maya Kaqchikel, ensuring women do not face linguistic and cultural barriers when seeking services.

3,315

WJI secured women's economic rights in 3,315 cases, including 137 land titles, increasing female land ownership.

64

WJI expanded its work to new regions of Guatemala, Mexico, and Honduras, by providing technical assistance and training to 64 civil society organizations.

2,997

Engaged 2,997 community leaders and justice operators, including judges, prosecutors, and police officers, through gender-based violence training.

Community-Driven Approach

WJI's unique legal empowerment methodology equips indigenous women and girls, and their communities, with the tools to prevent and address gender-based violence.

Individual

- Women and girls increase their knowledge of their rights and improve their agency.
- Women and girls assert their rights through legal action.

Family

- Fathers and mothers attend workshops oriented towards the reduction of child, early, and forced marriage and unions.
- Radio programming engages men and boys in violence prevention and healthy relationships.

Community

- Women and girls build social networks that foster solidarity.
- Local women become leaders and peer educators in their communities.
- Municipal service providers and community leaders improve their responses to cases of violence.

Increase in access to justice and reduction of impunity.

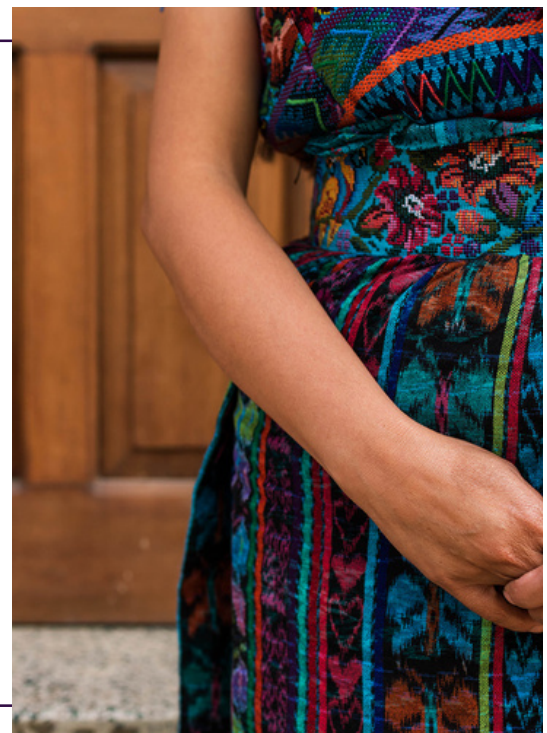
Shift in social norms related to women's rights and gender-based violence.

Our work propels social change, building safer, more equitable communities and brighter futures for women and girls.

Sustainable impact through community-centered solutions

Each of WJI's culturally responsive programs is designed and led by our programmatic team, who are all Maya Kaqchikel women and who offer 100% of our programs and services in Kaqchikel. Their expertise is fundamental to the organization as they possess a profound understanding of the local context and the challenges that many indigenous women face, including ethnic and linguistic discrimination.

WJI's approach recognizes rural indigenous women as the experts and leaders best equipped to prevent and respond to gender-based violence in their communities. We prioritize participants' voices and input in our work and program design. We ask women what they want to achieve in their lives and align their goals with how we define organizational success.



Proximate Leadership: A Conversation with WJI Directors



Elvia Raquec, Programs Director and Viviana Patal, Legal Director.

Centering Indigenous Women at the Core of Our Work

Elvia: We tailor our programs to fit the needs of indigenous Maya women and their lived experiences. Our first success was creating a safe, empathetic space where women felt comfortable talking about violence against women and girls with one another. From there, we became more ambitious, but also more intentional. Our greatest fear was that women would learn and talk about their rights but not have a mechanism to exercise them. So, Viviana joined the team as our Legal Director.

Viviana: Our responsiveness to the needs of communities is what has allowed us to be so successful. The programmatic staff is inextricably tied to the communities because we are from them and we have all lived the shared inequalities that indigenous women face. We have experienced a lack of access to education and social services, few economic opportunities, and *machismo*. This gives us credibility and cultivates trust with women. WJI is not just an organization that works in indigenous communities - the organization becomes part of the communities.

Elvia: Our Kaqchikel team makes women in the communities feel seen and understood. We proudly identify as indigenous women, wearing our traditional clothing and speaking our language. Once women learn who we are and why we are personally motivated to do this work, it all comes together for them. I never thought that we would grow to the size that we have. As the organization has grown, so has my vision of how far we can go, because of the commitment and genuine interest of the team. It is not just a job to them.

Viviana: In the early years, we created a really strong foundation to conscientiously grow our team. We created and tested our methodology, identified the community and municipal actors we needed to work with, and found the most effective ways to implement the work. Everyone has a very socially conscious approach to the work that we do. And that's what the communities need.



Highlight: Adolescent Girls Program

Programmatic Design Rooted in the Needs of the Next Generation

WJI's Adolescent Girls Program employs a holistic approach to prevent child, early and forced marriages and unions by implementing community-based interventions and protection mechanisms. The program improves adolescent girls' knowledge of their rights, transforms social norms, and encourages parents and community leaders to take action to delay early unions.

In 2012, WJI began programming in the municipality of Patzún, providing rights education and legal services to women. WJI launched the Adolescent Girls Program in 2015 in response to requests from program participants to provide age-appropriate programming for adolescent girls. To date, more than 1,300 adolescent girls from over 20 communities have graduated from the program.



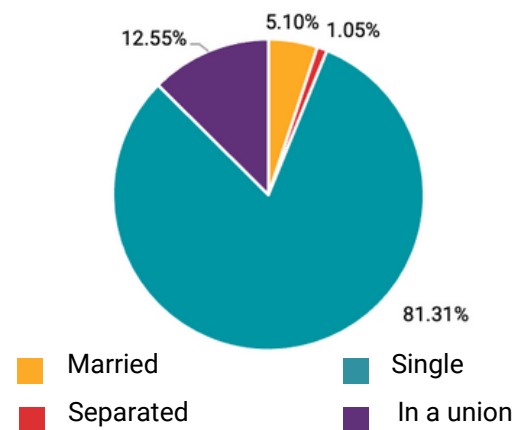
In 2022, WJI conducted an evaluation to measure the program's impact and effectiveness, and to identify areas for improvement. The evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach, analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data. For qualitative data collection, WJI brought together 54 graduates from 15 communities and facilitated dynamic, participatory activities to better understand graduates' experiences and the program's impact on their lives. To collect quantitative data, WJI staff and Community Advocates implemented comprehensive surveys with over 700 participants and family members.

The Results

The program successfully contributed to delaying child, early and forced marriages and unions among adolescent girls under 18.

Less than 3% of program participants under 18 years of age are or have been married or in unions, compared to the national average of 30%.¹

Marital Status of Graduates by Percentage



The average age of the participants at the time of the survey was 17.9 years old. The rate of singleness in the population surveyed is 81%, a strong indicator of success.

Participants continue to apply key learnings from the program: Adolescent girls identified delaying marriages and unions, personal empowerment, and the importance of education as positive lessons from the program.

Income generation: The embroidery and cross stitch skills acquired during the program provided income-generating opportunities for the participants.

1. Source: Girls Not Brides (2022). Child, Early and Forced Marriage and Unions in Guatemala. https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/1776/CEFMU_in_Guatemala.pdf

Community Impact Profile

El Llano, Patzún

When women learn their rights in legal literacy workshops, find support from the Community Advocates, or bravely seek legal recourse, they share this experience and create networks of empowered women within their community.

Twelve years ago, WJI began working in the community of El Llano. Since then, we have reached one-quarter of the female population. Through our educational programs 98 women and girls gained greater knowledge of their rights and increased their agency. WJI provided critical legal support in 75 cases, including securing land titles for 35 women, improving their long-term economic security.

The four women featured belong to an extended family from El Llano. They describe the transformative impact of WJI's programs on their lives, families, and community.



Lucy completed the Community Advocates Program in 2011. Now, she provides legal accompaniment to women from El Llano and is a leader serving on a local committee. Lucy credits WJI with increasing female leadership and participation in elected positions in her community. She knows that more women in leadership roles will lead to greater gender equality for future generations.

"El Llano is a great community, and the women here really stand out. Before WJI, women were afraid to express themselves, participate, make their own decisions, or share their opinions during community meetings. Women my age often talk about the impact WJI has had. Since WJI's arrival, the community leaders changed. They were trained on violence against women and women's rights, including our right to public participation. It really impacted them. The workshops opened their eyes and they now encourage women to participate and hold space for them.

Now, women in El Llano serve on the community development committee, the water committee, and the education committee – the president of the education council is a woman, and I am the secretary!"



Lucy and her daughter in El Llano.

Magaly's memories of her childhood are marked by feelings of exclusion and gender discrimination. Magaly participated in the Women's Rights Education Program, and with the help of WJI, she and her husband co-titled their land to have shared ownership. As a mother, she is adamant about breaking generational cycles of gender inequality and creating a brighter future for her daughters.



Doña Magaly in her garden in El Llano.

"WJI helped us acquire land titles for myself and my husband. I like that our land is not only in his name, because we both worked hard, struggled, and earned what we have."

*When I was young, I wanted to study, but my parents did not let me. Women were raised to prioritize the needs of the men. Boys received more food because they earned income for the home. The men in the family would tell me, "You didn't do anything today." To them, my work was invisible. **I learned through WJI's workshops that the work women do is valuable.** I now recognize the gender inequality that I experienced and I will not do that to my own children."*

Flora participated in both the Adolescent Girls Program and the Women's Rights Education Program. She recognizes the positive impact of delaying marriage, creating a life plan, and valuing her worth. Radiating with energy, Flora expressed excitement about the future – she graduated from high school and is looking for work opportunities where she can explore her interest in art.

*"What I learned from the girls program is: **Above all else, we have to love ourselves. We have to respect ourselves as women.** I also lost my fear of public speaking. The legal literacy course was another level - we learned about our rights as women, about empowerment, and how to support one another and reject machismo. WJI's programs have really had an impact on my life."*



Flora at her family's home in El Llano.

Petrona is a skilled weaver who participated in the Women's Rights Education Program ten years ago. When Petrona separated from her abusive husband, WJI accompanied her through the process and secured child support, providing greater economic stability to her and her ten children.



Doña Petrona (far right) with two of her daughters and four granddaughters.

*"WJI's workshops helped me a lot. If I hadn't gone, I don't know how I'd still be here. **Everything taught was for us Kaqchikel women and the reality of what we go through.** I learned I didn't have to have more children just because my husband wanted to. [After we separated] my husband did not give me any money to raise the kids, and we suffered, so I sought child support to feed them. WJI's attorney [helped me] to know what my rights are and my children's rights. She helped us with all of the paperwork and accompanied me to court. She was always by my side and never left me to face the legal process alone."*

Reflections from WJI Partners



Alejandra Colom

Director, The Nature Conservancy, Co-Founder of Lab Etnografico, and Professor of Anthropology at Universidad del Valle de Guatemala

As one of WJI's founding board members, Alejandra Colom played an integral role in the early success of the organization. Reflecting on her ten years of board service, Alejandra shares her unique perspective on WJI's evolution and what excites her about the organization's future.

The Future is Bright

"Without institutions like WJI, many women and girls in Guatemala would have nowhere to go.

I was always confident in WJI because it was based on evidence and experience. It was grounded in community needs, cultural pertinence, and sensitivity. Women wanted and needed the programs and legal services WJI offered. They came forward immediately and demand for the services increased as soon as WJI started. Every case that was won in favor of women was a huge success in a country where 90% of cases are dismissed.

WJI's work on prevention is critically important - otherwise, the need will never end. Through WJI's programs, women who grew up with few opportunities and faced significant discrimination changed the way they see themselves. They are transforming the perspective of their peers and the larger society, essentially everyone responsible for ensuring that women have a full and happy life.

WJI's team is the organization's biggest asset.

WJI's first team members were confident that it was meeting a need in their communities. Investing in professionals who are from indigenous communities legitimized the work, they had experience, they were not afraid, and they were successful from the beginning.

WJI has invested in people, building their capacities and self-esteem so they can take on jobs that have historically been unattainable. Their organizational culture encourages women to communicate, ask questions, and share. WJI's focus on creating safe and inclusive spaces is so important for a team that is predominantly Maya Kaqchikel women.

I am very happy that WJI has ambitious plans for the future. As WJI establishes itself as a regional leader in the field it will set new standards and change the way services are provided and evaluated. **The future is bright."**

"WJI is committed to creating a better world for women and girls by making sure they have the same access to justice as men. Over the years, WJI has evolved its program and organization to reflect the needs and priorities that women, girls, and communities themselves have articulated. As a result, the team's approach to this work is inclusive, sensitive, and highly effective.

As a funder that strives to support systemic change, we believe WJI's work not only helps protect the rights of women and girls - an urgent priority in and of itself - but also is building momentum toward justice systems that work better for all."

Caroline Kronley

President, Tinker Foundation






The Women's Justice Initiative is incredibly proud of the success we have had over the past twelve years. While we celebrate these tremendous accomplishments, we recognize there is still much to be done. We look to the future with ambitious plans for growth and greater impact in the lives of women and girls in Mesoamerica.

Our work continues to be essential and so does your support. Please consider following our social media accounts, sharing our work, or making a tax-deductible donation online through our website or by mailing a check to:


Women's Justice Initiative
PO Box 21540
New York, NY 10087-1540

From all of us at WJI,

Thank you!

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