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The Role of Women in Popular Education in Bolivia

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In the face of poverty and long-term political instability in Bolivia, many adult educators are working towards social justice, focusing students on economic opportunities and maintaining their indigenous culture. The process is complex and often compounded by the sociocultural context in which the learning takes place, particularly when examining education and justice for women and minorities. However, in cases when the educational model takes daily life within local cultures into account (popular education), true learning and change can be seen.

The purpose of this research is to examine the methods, practices and impacts of the Legal Promoter's Course at the *Oficina Jurídica Para la Mujer* (OJM) in Cochabamba, Bolivia, and the critical role women have played in its development and implementation. At the OJM, leadership training and education, in combination with legal assistance, aims to develop strong female leaders with a critical consciousness that allows them to affect personal and policy changes in Bolivian culture. We explored the challenges women faced in the traditionally male sphere of social action as well as the creative initiatives developed by women.

In order to understand the theoretical perspectives that frame this research, our literature review encompasses the different theoretical backgrounds and perspectives that shaped our understanding of the women's learning. These areas are *transformational learning and critical theory, feminist theory and pedagogy, popular education, and women and education in Bolivia*. We then examined these theories in respect to the educational practice at the OJM.

The experiences of the program participants revealed that the OJM Legal Promoters Course serves as a guide for popular education programs that seek to empower women and create long-term social change. The OJM course methodology allowed for technical and personal understandings, often leading to transformational learning. Through their course experiences, the course participants reached a point of critical consciousness in which they stopped blaming themselves for their problems and began to look outward at unjust social conditions. This examination led to active participation and efforts to create change. Herein, the education had an impact on the individual, the family, the community and the greater society.

The implications of this study for adult education are widespread. While there are many programs that seek to end domestic violence, teach human rights, and facilitate gender equality, the model a program utilizes determines the breadth of their impact. The OJM program not only addresses the immediate needs of participants but trains a force of critically conscious educators. The process is strengthened when women go beyond the domestic sphere, when they work together with men, and when there is a balance of power between teacher and student. As people become critically aware of the societal forces that shape their personal and political experiences, they realize that they themselves are creating a constantly changing "knowledge." Ideally, with continued academic study in popular education and with the expansion and refinement of

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successful programs, the individual and societal impacts of popular education programs can have an even broader impact in the fight for gender equality and an end to violence against women.

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