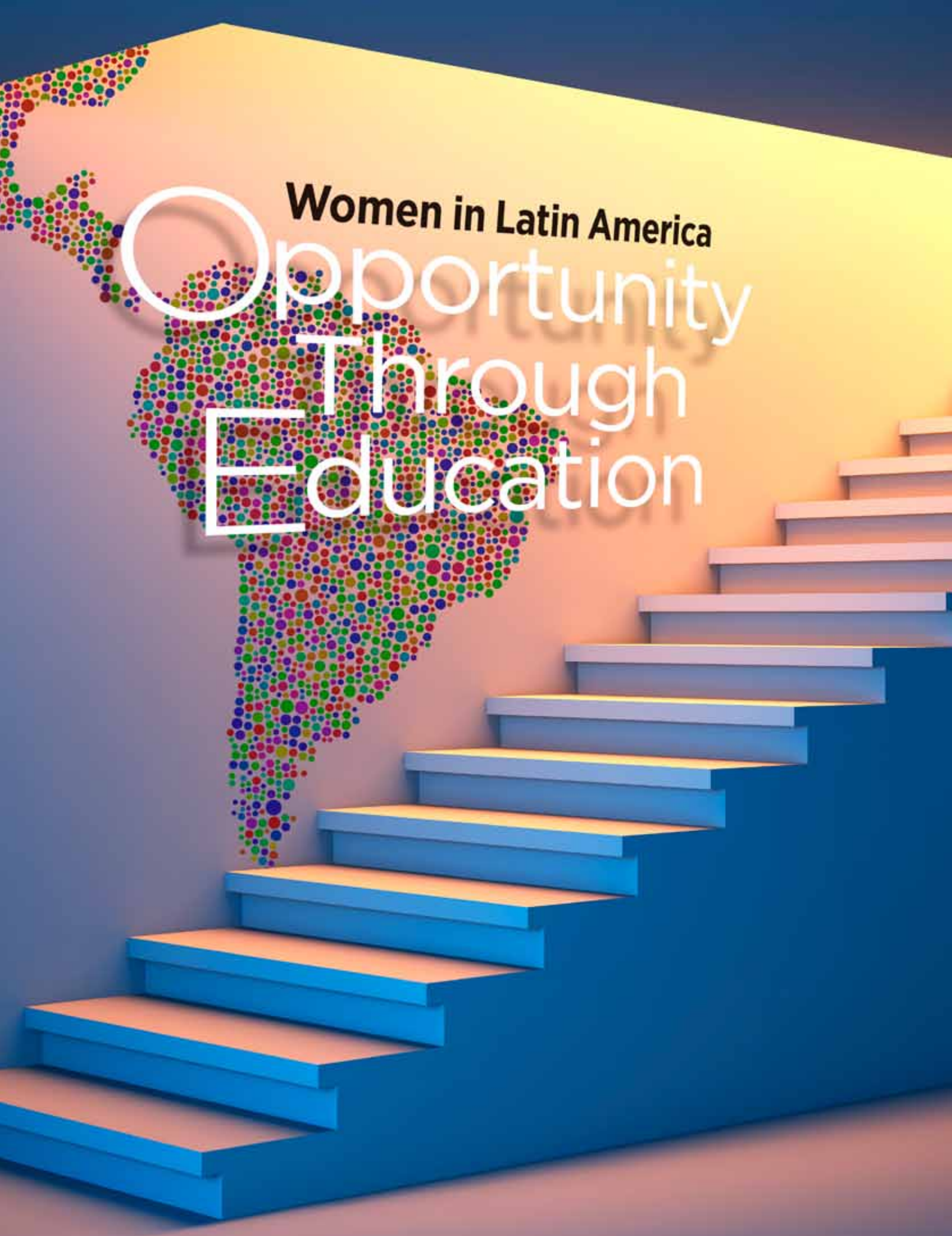


Women in Latin America

Opportunity Through Education



By Susan Ladika

Latin America is a varied tapestry of cultures and customs, but a consistent theme in many countries is a growing awareness that women can, and should, have the same educational opportunities as men.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the third article in an occasional series on improving education for girls in and women in developing regions. The first was "Women's Work," which focused on the Middle East and published in the September/October 2009 issue, the second was "An Unprivileged Child," which focused on Africa and published in the January/February 2010 issue.

WHEN Jodi Finkel, associate professor of political science at Loyola Marymount University, heard a report on National Public Radio (NPR) about a 41-year-old prostitute in Guatemala who dreamed of learning to read, she was immediately moved to help.

Her first thought was to board a plane to Guatemala City, track the woman down, and offer to teach her to read.

Her second thought was to connect with student Ana Moraga, a Guatemala native who immigrated to the United States at age 12 and was very active in the school's Center for Service and Action, which encourages students to get involved in community service projects.

Moraga and her roommate Tania Torres were about to graduate and, within months, the two young women were heading from the classrooms of Los Angeles to the red light district of Guatemala City to try to help the prostitute, named Susi, and others like her, realize her dream.

But things didn't go quite as planned. It turned out Susi was distrustful of the young women, and refused their offer to help. Not about to give up, Moraga and Torres set about winning over the women in the red light district, assisting them with things crucial to their daily lives, like arranging doctors' visits for the women and their children, and providing them with access to their cell phones.

"We realized we needed to get to know them, instead of imposing on them what we want," Moraga recalls.

Eventually one woman said she wanted to read, and MuJER (short for Mujeres por la Justicia, Educacion y el Reconocimiento, or Women for Justice, Education and Awareness) got off the ground. Even Susi, the original inspiration for the project, joined in.

Students participating in Institute for Study Abroad-Butler University program in Lima, where students work directly with girls and women from different towns and impoverished areas of the city promoting education as a tool for improving their lives. They do it with the help of an NGO called La Casa de Panchita (The House of Panchita) that works with female teenagers (with workshops that develop their leadership skills), children who are at risk or are already domestic workers (they work in both their physical development as well as their education) and with women who are domestic workers.





A Fresh Start

Many of the women had been trafficked from other Latin American countries or sold into prostitution by the families. “We had to convince them they do deserve better,” Finkel says.

Now, five years later, more than 200 women have taken classes at MuJER, learning to read and write, or honing their skills through computer, hair styling, or jewelry-making courses.

Some have even left the red light district to make a life for themselves using their new skills, and two have taken the university entrance exams. “Our idea is not to necessarily take women out of the sex trade, but to give the women tools so they can make good decisions for themselves,” Moraga says.

A key tool for women in the red light district of Guatemala, along with many other places in the region, is the ability to read and write.

While basic literacy has soared in much of Latin America in recent decades, thanks to concerted



Luther College students and a local girl at a village school outside Leon, Nicaragua, where they were helping mix cement and carrying blocks to the block layers for new classrooms.

efforts by national governments, international agencies, and nongovernmental organizations, pockets of illiteracy remain.

“Latin America is not a homogeneous group of countries,” says Chingboon Lee, Latin American sector manager for education with the World Bank in Washington, D.C. While some countries’ female literacy rates rival those of the United

States or Europe, others lag dramatically. It’s a particular problem for those from lower income groups and indigenous populations, where “girls are under-represented compared to boys,” Lee says.

It’s also an issue in places where “boys are still viewed as more important as an economic force in society,” says David Ives, executive director of the Albert Schweitzer Institute, a nonprofit organization that conducts U.S. and international programs that link education, ethics, and voluntarism and is based at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Connecticut.

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What Research Reveals

Research has shown that providing girls with a basic education results in fewer maternal deaths and reduced infant mortality; having healthier, better educated children; improved parenting skills; and more economic opportunity, says Ana Gil-Garcia, a professor of education leadership at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago, who has spoken in the region, urging girls to continue their educations.

Yet female illiteracy rates remain stubbornly high in places like Guatemala, where it stood at nearly 40 percent in 2000, and in Nicaragua, where it remained at 33 percent in 2000. The ensuing decade has done little to decrease the rate.

As a result, a number of U.S. universities have established programs to assist those most disadvantaged members of society.

At Quinnipiac University, intense efforts are under way to help education efforts in both Nicaragua and Guatemala.

For the past five years, students from the School of Education have spent their spring breaks in Nicaragua, where they've taken part in a conference designed to offer new teaching strategies to teachers from rural districts in the area around Leon.

Colleen Kennedy, who is enrolled in Quinnipiac's master of arts in teaching program and was the student leader for the 2010 trip, says she has always been interested in community service, and jumped at the chance to hone her teaching skills in Nicaragua. The students spent every Sunday from fall through spring preparing lesson plans that they presented to the teachers.

"As soon as you go there, you're welcomed with open arms," says Kennedy, who has traveled to Nicaragua three times. "I really feel like it's my community, too."

In 2010 about 60 local teachers attended the conference, along with representatives from the Ministry of Education.

The students presented their lesson plans, but also shared ideas with the local teachers. "I learned so much more from them," Kennedy says.

Tamar Bender, who also is in the master of arts teaching program, says the Nicaraguan teachers "have an unbelievable amount of strength. They pour their heart and soul into teaching."

The Quinnipiac students didn't try to teach the experienced educators about their subject areas, but instead focused on how they could make the best use of their limited resources. For example, with no copy machine and little paper, lessons could be done outside using chalk on pavement, Bender says.

The experience "made me realize how much I want to become a teacher," says Bender, who would like to use her skills in an inner-city school in the United States, or teaching English in Nicaragua after graduation.

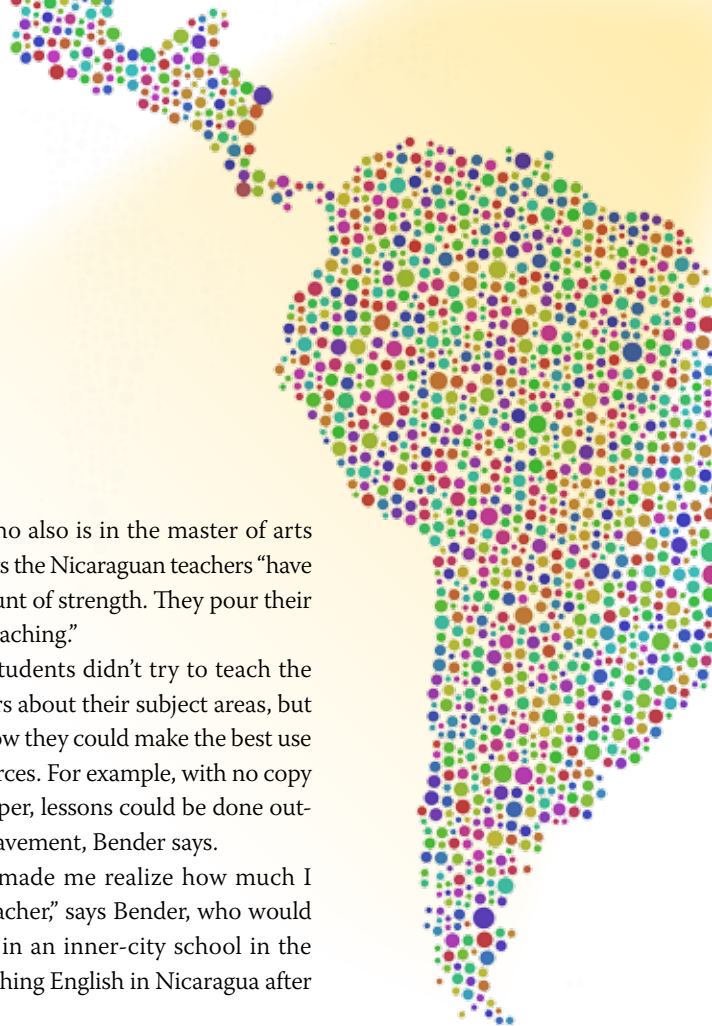
Ives says that whenever the university goes into a community, it looks at the situation holistically, so students from other departments at Quinnipiac have built classrooms and planted a garden in the Leon area for the local youngsters to have a roof over their heads when they study, and fresh food to supplement their diets.

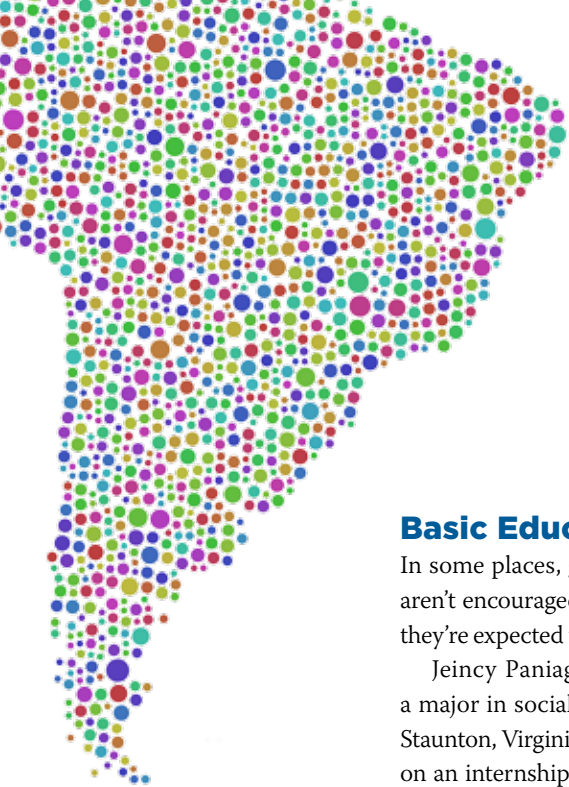
Now Quinnipiac has begun building classrooms in Guatemala to aid the Mayan people, working with Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu and her foundation. The next step will be providing teacher training.

Ives met Menchu at an event for Nobel Prize recipients in the mid-2000s, and started working in the area around San Marcos, Guatemala, four years ago. It's a place where "we need to work our way into the situation with the Mayan. They are more distrustful of outsiders."

In that region, Spanish is considered the second language, and men are far more likely to speak it than women. While boys tend to receive schooling, girls are seen as "only being at home, so they don't really need an education," Ives says.

But the young Mayan girls can look to Menchu as a role model. She was the first woman to run for president in Guatemala, and Ives says that although she only garnered a small percentage of the vote, "she really is a heck of an example for women, in my view."





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Basic Education Is Not Enough

In some places, girls receive a basic education, but aren't encouraged to continue their studies. Instead, they're expected to cook, clean, and care for children.

Jeincy Paniagua, who recently graduated with a major in social work at Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, Virginia, spent the spring of her senior year on an internship working with students in the OYE (Organization for Youth Empowerment) program in El Progreso, Honduras.

Through its scholarship program, OYE supports the students of El Progreso and allows them to continue their high school and university educations. They use the money for things like transportation and books. "It gives them an extra financial push," Paniagua says.

The students must have good grades and come from low-income families to receive the support. About 60 percent of the scholarship recipients are women and girls. The youngest is 13 and the oldest are women in their 30s who had to cut short their educations to care for their own children.

The students write articles for a magazine, which they sell to help raise funds. They also operate their own radio program, so they learn broadcasting skills. "They amazed me every day," Paniagua says.

OYE's goal is to help make the students into future leaders of the community. "They look for something special in each kid," Paniagua says, with the goal to "help break the cycle of poverty."

Keeping Girls in School

Gil-Garcia of Northeastern Illinois University also has been involved in efforts to keep girls in school. The Venezuela native received her master's degree from the University of Tennessee and her PhD at Western Michigan University, with teaching stints at home in between. The three-time Fulbright scholarship recipient was invited to come to Northeastern as a visiting professor 15 years ago, and has taught there ever since. Yet she remains active in promoting girls' literacy in Latin America.

In 2002 she went to Guatemala to instruct education officials on how to keep Mayan girls in school. She returned this year with the support of a U.S. State Department grant to do similar work, traveling to Belize and Guatemala.

In both places, girls are often kept home to do chores and care for their younger siblings. And schools may be located far from the girls' homes, so their families fear they may be kidnapped or raped on the way to school, Gil-Garcia says. There's also a fear that the girls' will lose touch with their indigenous culture if they're better educated.

Building schools close to home, getting the community involved in education, and hiring female teachers are all strategies that can help keep girls in school, Gil-Garcia says. "Education is really the only way out" of a life with limited opportunities, she says.

Education Abroad Programs on Women in the Developing World Head to Latin America

While American students and educators are working to aid women and girls in Latin America, they can also learn from their Southern counterparts. Ann Highum, vice president and dean for student life at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, has taken three groups of students to the region, starting in 2004.

All but one of the students over the years has been female, with majors in subjects like education, nursing, social work, and political science. The group twice visited Chile and Nicaragua and has visited Chile and Guatemala once.

The focus of the January term abroad is on women in the developing world, Highum says, and is designed to "help students learn from women who are disadvantaged," whether it be educationally, politically, economically, or in terms of access to health care.

The groups visit thriving churches, women's organizations, and nongovernmental organizations that aid women and children. Along with observing the programs, the students learn about the history of the countries they visit. Even in a place like Chile, "long

after the dictator has left, there's still plenty of work to be done," Highum says.

And in Guatemala the students get to observe the impact of decades of civil war. "It just brings all those lessons home."

The students keep a daily journal and at the end of their travels put together a paper about the impact the experience has had on their lives.

Many wind up volunteering for the Peace Corps or joining AmeriCorps. "It makes a lasting difference in them. They really want to give," Highum says.

One of those who underwent a sea change is recent graduate Alyssa Telander, who had little knowledge of Hispanic life or culture before the trip during her sophomore year.

"It really was a jumping off point for me being interested in Hispanic culture and women's issues both," says Telander, who became a women and gender studies major after the trip and also became involved working with migrants in the United States. Now she's heading to El Paso to volunteer with the Texas Civil Rights Project, trying to attain fair compensation for migrant workers.



ANN HIGHUM



Alyssa Telander, below, and Elin Erickson working on a mural in downtown Santiago, Chile, that depicts men and women in various situations, affirming respect for one another. The mural, which includes E.P.E.S as the sponsor, is on a wall on a major intersection. The program uses these murals to provide a message, and also invite women and girls to consider issues of importance.

Volunteering Abroad

Others are doing their volunteer work with women in Latin America. Leah Thompson, a recent Spanish graduate from Smith College, spent a year in Peru from the summer of 2008 to the summer of 2009. She initially went to hone her Spanish-language skills, but began working with the La Casa de Panchita, which strives to assist and empower domestic workers in Lima.

The domestic workers are typically girls from the rural areas of Peru, and Thompson and students like her have the opportunity to help the girls learn English, develop self-esteem, and stand up for their human rights, says Laura Balbuena, director of the Peru Programs for Butler University's Institute for Study Abroad, but also works with students from a wide range of universities.

Balbuena is also a human rights activist in her homeland and a political science professor at Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. The university students who take part “meet girls of their same age and with the same dreams. Our students really grow from this,” Balbuena says.

In Peru, domestic workers are looked down upon, and seldom have enough time to study, so La Casa de Panchita works to boost the girls’ self-esteem and educational opportunities.

“It’s really an amazing place,” Thompson says. “It helps them cultivate an aspiration to do other things.” A few of the girls have even won university scholarships.

Education Quality Counts

In many places in Latin America, a big part of the challenge is improving the quality of education. “Access (to education) is the first step. Content of education matters as well,” says Erin Murphy-Graham, an assistant professor of international education at New York University.

Murphy-Graham currently is writing a book evaluating the success of an alternative secondary education

on effective business education. The Universidad del Valle de Guatemala and the Universidad Tecnológica de Panamá were selected to take part.

Each school sent 20 faculty members to Harvard. Before heading to the seminar they took an online course on pedagogy, says Angelica Natera, LASPAU’s program and development officer. At Harvard they worked with professors from various schools, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Brown, on topics like course design, active learning, and innovative teaching methods.

Now the educators are implementing what they learned, and their progress is being monitored.

LASPAU’s aim was to work with second-tier universities that were “en route to achieving top status,” Natera says. The schools selected were required to have a significant percentage of female students and faculty members, as well as initiatives in place to promote female educators.

Many of their programs are designed to benefit entrepreneurs in the populations they serve. “Once you educate women you educate the family,” Natera says. By investing in women, “they give back to the community,”

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program known as Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial or SAT (Tutorial Learning System) in empowering marginalized women on the north coast of Honduras.

In rural areas, it’s hard to have teachers for each subject in secondary education, and many of those subjects are irrelevant for the students’ daily lives. The SAT system, which began in Colombia, is designed to focus on subjects that are of concern to students living in rural, agricultural areas. It also focuses on critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, rather than rote learning, and the students’ skills are put to use in community development projects.

Murphy-Graham found that the program not only improves female students’ knowledge, it also improves their self-confidence, helps them identify gender inequality, and encourages them to explore new business and educational opportunities.

Educating the Educators

LASPAU, Academic and Professional Programs for the Americas, is also working to improve the level of education in Latin America. In December 2009 it organized a five-day seminar at Harvard University

Learning How to Improve Education Back Home

Lee, of the World Bank, says it’s crucial that students learn analytical thinking and problem-solving techniques—skills that are necessary for success in the twenty-first century economy.

Monserrat Sepulveda, a freshman from Antofagasta, Chile, now studying at Soka University of America in Aliso Viejo, California, says she’s interested in studying education in the United States “precisely because I don’t like it at home.”

There, she says, the emphasis is on learning just to pass a test or earn a degree. At Soka, she’s seen a focus on thinking critically and asking questions. “We talk about issues that might make you relate whatever it is you are learning to the larger picture.”

Her dream is to one day use the skills she’s learning to create an alternative school in her homeland.

Paulina Perez, a Fulbright scholar in her second year of a PhD program at the University of Maryland in College Park, also came to the United States from Chile for the opportunities the U.S. higher education system affords.

Perez, a faculty member of the Universidad de Santiago de Chile, has a bachelor's degree in industrial engineering and a master's degree in engineering sciences from the Chilean university. Before coming to the University of Maryland, she served as chief of staff and executive assistant to the president of the Universidad de Santiago de Chile.

Perez says she always dreamed of teaching, but her parents discouraged her because the pay was so low. As she got older, "I was always interested in some way of linking engineering and education. It was always in my mind when studying."

She appreciates the flexibility of the U.S. system, where students can choose their courses, and those from different disciplines might end up in the same

The prevailing attitude is that young women are just going to marry and have children, so why should they bother studying. She also sees discrimination against women in the workforce.

To combat this, she wants a career dealing with human rights issues, particularly helping women from minority groups. "All people are entitled to the same universal human rights," Willches says.

Fulvia Rosemberg is a social psychology professor at Pontificia Universidade Católica in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and coordinator of a center that researches gender relations, race, and age at the university. She says that in Brazil, more women than men are enrolled in higher education, yet "discrimination against women persists in that university degrees pursued by men and women are

Two women from Fair Trade Sewing Cooperative with guide Xenia Barahona, (in the center with the monkey).



classroom. In her homeland, "our programs are really structured," while in the U.S. system, "there's so much freedom, sometimes you don't know what to do with that. We were always told what to do."

In addition, university is typically a place for students from better-off families. As a result, Perez aims to focus her doctoral studies on access to education in her home country for low-income students.

Inequity in Education Often Based on Income, Not Always Gender

In many places in Latin America, inequities in secondary and higher education are based on income, rather than gender, and it's not unusual for more young women than men to continue their educations. But even in countries where female education is on par—or higher—than that of males, inequities remain.

Stefanie Willches, a native of Ecuador who is studying international business at Berkeley College in Paramus, New Jersey, while also taking online law courses from Ecuador's Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja, which has a branch campus in New York, says in her homeland it's not unusual for people to make fun of women who go to university.

still very different." Women tend to obtain degrees in the humanities, education, social sciences, and similar fields, while men are more likely to focus on hard sciences.

"The labor market values these educations differently. Careers associated with hard sciences are more prestigious," she says.

Rosemberg advocates for more child-care facilities and after-school programs so educated women have more opportunities in the workforce, and for companies to help women find ways to balance career and family responsibilities.

U.S. Universities Help With Entrepreneurship Education for Women

Several U.S. universities are working in the region to help women develop their entrepreneurial skills. Among them is State University of New York Geneseo, where a program was developed about four years ago to help strengthen business skills for the people around El Sauce, Nicaragua. Much of the emphasis has been directed at the women, with the aim "to empower women to be self-sustaining," says Rose McEwen, associate professor and department chair in foreign languages and literatures.

Originally begun as a practicum for SUNY-Geneseo's business school students, it now includes a wide range of students, who earn academic credit while doing field service, McEwen says.

"It's been a very organic way that the program has developed. It has developed from the mutual needs from the community in El Sauce and the need for the [UNY- Geneseo] students to do service for the global community," she says.

One facet of the program helps women from the community of El Cerro Colorado hone their skills making pine needle baskets, and then exporting them, says Kellan Morgan, resident director of the SUNY-Geneseo program.

Participant Erlinda Martinez Reyes, the married mother of three, says the program has helped the group of women refine their basket-making skills, so they are more marketable. With the income they bring in, she can help her husband with the family expenses.

And as treasurer of the group, called Fuente de Pino, "I'm learning about finances. This also helps my confidence," Martinez Reyes says.

Thunderbird and the Peruvian training company Aprenda.

Interestingly, it uses a telenovela—those famous Spanish-language TV soap operas—to help capture participants' attention and make the training relevant, which Thunderbird ultimately hopes will reach 100,000 women across Peru in the next four years, teaching them skills like budgeting, networking, and leadership, says Thunderbird program manager India Borba.

Thunderbird MBA students also are being sent to work with the women, who generally have about a sixth-grade education. The women's businesses include running food stands and beauty shops and making handicrafts.

The second phase of the program will involve providing in-depth training to 10,000 Peruvian women who run small- and medium-size businesses as Thunderbird works together with Peru's Universidad del Pacifico as part of Goldman Sachs' 10,000 Women project.

The women have to compete for admission into the program, which will involve spending 150 hours in the classroom. At the end they'll receive a "mini-MBA," Borba says. The participant must have a high

Programs such as these are exactly what are most needed in the region. While providing every girl with a basic education is a necessity, education needs to go further than that.

The women are also offered the opportunity to take computer classes, and because they must walk three hours just to attend each class, it's mostly 15- to 20-year-olds who take part, Morgan says. "It says something about their desire to learn," as well as their desire to develop a skill they hope to make use of in the future.

Kara Williams, a recent SUNY-Geneseo graduate, spent two weeks in El Sauce this winter, teaching the women very basic computer skills, like where to place their hands on the keyboard and how to use the mouse. "It was a pleasure seeing how excited they got with just the sight of a computer because most women didn't even have a television."

But to Williams, "this experience was most amazing because we promoted independence for the women."

The Thunderbird School of Global Management in Glendale, Arizona, is taking a similar approach—helping women strengthen their business schools in two different programs.

The first part of the program launched this summer, offering entrepreneurship training for women running microenterprises in Lima, Peru. The first session drew about 300 women to the three-hour seminar, called Proyecto Salta, developed by Thun-

school education and run a business with high growth potential, but "not be able to take it to the next level without training," Borba says.

Professors from Universidad del Pacifico will teach the courses, and the program aims to have 60 women graduates by year's end, she says. The women will have to design a business plan, and will have access to mentoring and networking events once they've completed their training.

Both programs are designed to start in Lima and eventually spread throughout the country.

Programs such as these are exactly what are most needed in the region. While providing every girl with a basic education is a necessity, education needs to go further than that. "The challenge is looking at what are the labor market outcomes," says Lee of the World Bank. "Girls' education, to me, has to go beyond just putting them in school, and really making sure they have the same skills and formal sector opportunities as boys." **IE**

SUSAN LADIKA has been a journalist for more than 20 years, working in both the United States and Europe. She is now based in Tampa, Florida. Her last article for *IE* was "The Unprivileged Child" in the January/February 2010 issue.