

A Seat at the Table: A Generational Approach to Gender Dynamic's in the Twin Cities of  
Western Belize

Toucan Education Programs, San Ignacio, Belize

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## Acknowledgments

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Thank you for the endless support and encouragement. The endless hours you have spent allowing causal conversations to shift into deep-rooted discussions pondering the meaning of life is not lost on me. For the moments that I have missed out on due to studying, working, school events, travelling, you have reminded me in my times of exhaustion just how far I can take the ideas and beliefs I have. Your support is my motivation when I am tired.

## Summary

The country of Belize is roughly comparable in size to the state of Massachusetts and includes eight major cultural groups, Maya, Mestizo, Kriol, Garifuna, East Indian, Mennonite, Arab and Chinese<sup>1</sup>. The countries people are as diverse as the region environment. During my internship between the twin cities of San Ignacio and Santa Elena in Western Belize, I encountered many of these cultural groups. My placement consisted of two collaborating organizations who expressed a desire to establish a sexual and reproductive health education youth group.

In San Ignacio I worked with Belize Family Life Association (BFLA). BFLA works to ensure that affordable, comprehensive, sexual and reproductive healthcare services are made accessible to all Belizeans. I spent every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 9am-4pm at the clinic and spoke with men and women mainly about their experiences with and reactions towards gender violence. I also spent time reading through books and pamphlet resources that were available in the clinics collection. The interviews were a large help in further understanding current issues with teen pregnancy, STI, and cancer rates in Belize. Nurse Dolly Witz my supervisor at BFLA was a vital component in my success conducting numerous interviews, through her I was able to achieve an initial level of trust with my interviewees. For my second placement located in Santa Elena, every Tuesday and Thursday from 9am-4pm I worked at the Santa Elena Belize Library (SEBL) with supervisor Mrs. Biatriz Moreno. SEBL, which was founded in

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<sup>1</sup> "Facts about Belize." TravelBelize.org. Belize Tourism Board, 2017. Web. 11 June 2017. <<https://www.travelbelize.org/facts-about-belize>>.

1997 and fully renovated in 2014, has worked to provide access to a multitude of resources that encourage efforts of improved literacy and goals of higher education for their community. At SEBL I began by sorting through Belizean history alongside the insight I was gaining from my interviews, and finally incorporating my own academic sources from previous classes while at MSU. The library later became the meeting place where the high-schoolers and I began discussing the questions they had and planning what they wanted their youth group to include. My goal for the nature of the youth group was to create an approachable, proactive conversation-style dynamic that varying ages of adolescents and young adults could feel confident interacting with and implementing into their own scripts. A large focus of this project was to provide hands on experience in your field and to develop further insights into the topics that would be at the center of a future career.

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On the afternoon of March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2017, while I began to prepare for the chaos of another concluding semester, I received an email from Dr. Fredy Rodriguez. Entitled casually, “New Pilot Program in Belize” half intrigued I also acknowledged the half-of-thought nagging me to close my email and refocus on the final papers I had so enthusiastically planned out months prior, now due in a few weeks. “Belize is awesome!”, stated the ending line of my Professors email. The next section of text was a forwarded message from an advisor named Oumatie Marajh. She had previously spoken to social science professors during a faculty meeting asking for any recommendations regarding students who would be interested in participating in the new service learning program set to run from May 12<sup>th</sup>-June 13<sup>th</sup>. If anyone, she instructed through the follow up email that I was now reading, had a good candidate in mind to respond with said student’s name and contact information. It wasn’t until the very bottom of her outline did I connect Dr. Rodriguez’s reason for the suggestion. Among the listed topics pertinent to the program, second to last included, “those interested in supporting organizational efforts to address social issues such as gender based violence.”

As I have progressed through my education as an Anthropology major I have gravitated towards a deeper focus within gender dynamics and public health. Gender violence is a pervasive, multi-variate, epidemic. While I learned more about the consistency in the overall structure of gender violence, read and observed the ways of women’s second class position to men in society, I began to question why males were largely responsible for the perpetration of violence time after time? *Why*, not to be confused with *how*, was violence against women an issue among the sexes seemingly regardless of age, financial status, education level, race or ethnicity? As a Women’s and Gendered Studies minor and a woman myself, I found the

conversation at some points in my WS courses to be counterintuitive. The discussions focused largely on either historical injustices, legal trajectories, or circled around assigned books that detailed accounts of sexual abuse and stages during someone's healing processes. While rhetoric was discussed I tried to bring a critical lens to what was being uniformly accepted among my classmates. I felt stuck, frustrated. The empowered attitude I was hoping to claim from these courses remained out of reach. Having the career goal to become a Professor, I saw this trip to Belize as a chance to gain hands on ethnographic experience, to develop insight on the new questions surrounding gender dynamics that my classes had been challenged by, and would help with defining myself as a graduate student. The pilot through a series of questions would aim to individually assess the students current research goals. The unique chance at what would result as one of three students accepted would allow for a more flexible and personalized intimacy while studying. The program for Belize could not have come at a better time. At this point in my life I had achieved confidence as a driven, assertive student, but I had also reached a place of self-assurance as an individual.

## TEP Learning Outcomes: The Successes and Challenges

Catholicism has a very large presence in Belize and the majority of education is in the form of catholic schooling. When walking around town it was easy to observe the different uniforms worn by children, the variety of styles and colors representing different primary and secondary schools. Religion was a frequent theme during my interviews. People referencing bible passages for added explanation was common when discussing opinions and beliefs during the majority of the interviews. The accessibility of education is a concern for the country and my supervisors stressed the issues of overcrowded schools, traditional lifestyles and beliefs, and poverty levels. Remaining conscious of how faith influenced the lives of the people I was speaking with I knew I would need to include a faith based message along-side stigma releasing rhetoric on sex and reproduction. I was raised catholic, going to church every Sunday morning and holidays, my mother reinforcing to me and my two younger sisters on being committed to living as close to the word of God as we could, I even attended two years of catholic high-school. My experience however was not in the same encompassing climate that I felt present in Belize. Religion seems to be much more a part of the collective Belizean identity than for Americans as a whole. I at first felt unsure with this situation.

I found an ease and familiarity speaking with the young ladies I spent time with at SEBL. Group 1 as I will reference them included a group of six young women who I became very close with. They showed a truly invested curiosity and understanding towards the issues among their community and gender violence in Belize. During my interviews at BFLA I told Nurse Witz that I was equally interested in speaking with men and women. My women's studies courses had only one or two men that attended class... about half of that statistic would be talkative on a good day. I will never forget one of my professors stating that most men felt "powerless" according to



a study. A statement I would later hear, “men rape because they can” said during a class discussion about legal uphill battles again made me take notice. I disagreed with the latter conclusion instantly. If the female sex was not genetically wired to be soft spoken than the male sex could not be pitted as sexually deviant. Some of the questions I had found myself fumbling around the previous semester were, what about masculinities perspective in this dynamic? What are men saying? What is their reasoning? I had spoken to Rhondine one night while at dinner explaining my stance that there is importance in giving men and boys a place in the discussion, a seat at the table if we are truly wanting to see a solution to gender violence and to my relief she joyously agreed. Nurse Witz having two sons herself understood better than I could have hoped for. Having unfiltered conversations with men, who admitted to abuse, cheating, who were working through relationship issues, as well as men who were just coming in to the clinic for its testing and check-up services (a more-rare occurrence), I was able to expose myself to a new perspective, a new starting place. Approaching the traditional family lifestyle, where the father works and the mother stays home as the caretaker pushed me to deepen my understanding of the give-and-take of this dynamic in order to discuss with men their current expressed situations of frustration, unhappiness, and confusion.

One of the largest challenges I faced was preparing to speak with the primary school. I wanted to remain within the bounds of their comprehension. I decided on a precursor to the topics of sex and gender dynamics that could appropriately engage younger age ranges from 8-12 years old. Mrs. Moreno was able to schedule a talk with a primary school and I spoke to about 40 students for just under an hour. I put together questions to guide a small discussion with a short video to follow. My goal was to focus on the children’s personal interests, friendships, and the importance of respectful, non-violent, communication between one another regardless of

difference. Mrs. Moreno and I agreed this age group was an important demographic. Within this age range boys and girls are beginning to see changes in themselves and their peers due to puberty. Along with understanding the importance of these physical changes, social changes also occur for both boys and girls. The primary school was where the only issue concerning a language barrier occurred. The children were still finding confidence with speaking English and even more so with writing the language. We spent a little more time writing than having time for discussion. I found it interesting that during my first few moments in the school courtyard while the children were playing and racing towards a building that supplied juices and quickly made snacks I heard one girl who could have been no more than nine years of age run by me with her friends and exclaim “look a Mennonite is here!”. Contacting the schools proved to be a difficult endeavor. Time was always the main enemy. Letters were sent from SEBL detailing the program topics, intern’s background, and the youth group goals. We did not hear back from the secondary school, scheduling conflicts, we decided on our own with finals, prom, parent’s night, and graduation were taking the focus.

Unlike my experience in the U.S, Belizean activists through organizations like BFLA and SEBL are acknowledging the importance of childhood perspectives when battling gender violence. SEBL became the space for where I began meeting and conversing with a group of students from ages 15-17. As I began to meet with what I will reference as group 1 I was able to listen to their views and ask them about their ideas for this youth program. One young woman, \*Alex, exclaimed “it has been my dream to make this group, you have no idea I just have never known how” while holding her hands expressively over her heart. One day while we sat in the computer lab of the library Alex expressed to me along with her friend \*Dana the “rules” that “good girls” must follow in order to avoid a bad reputation or trouble. These included an array of

limitations with no clear line of demarcation. While we sat there at the long singular table in the middle of the room, thankful for the air conditioning in this part of the library, the two of them continued to explain the frustration with their situation. They explained how in their view the guys had all the freedom. They could go to “every party and no one cares like they do about us girls”. Alex and Dana made it clear that guys did not have the same restrictions when it came to sex as they did. I presented a series of questions I had upon my first meeting with the group. I aimed to understand their opinions of current female and male dynamics. This was not only for my benefit but also so they could develop a base for themselves to reference during later conversation. The group initially was all female with a male later attending the last two meetings. As we progressed, the questions were placed in a way to dig deeper at their previous statements they had given. The “why” to their “what’s”. I watched as they doubled back. Without me explaining they began to look at me, all at once I saw it, they made the connection that I had hoped for. Alex with Dana echoing her friend instantly exclaimed, “Now I understand why you were asking those earlier questions!! It’s all connected!!” As one girl began cycling her hands while speaking, “we are connected! It’s a cycle that takes both men AND women changing their understandings of one another. It begins when we are little, it’s in the little things we unknowingly reinforce every day.” Gender violence is a generational issue in the sense that children learn about the dynamics of relationships from the examples and influences they observe before them. If female’s positions in the current gender binary shift from a previous role, then this in turn will affect male position.

#### Academic Relevance of the Experience

One of the first notions taught in anthropology is that a person’s experience connects them to how they define reality. A course I took, *Anthropology of the Environment and Development*

(ANP 325) allowed me a space to begin questioning the dynamics of sex and gender. The difference between child-bearing bodies compared to non-childbearing bodies cannot be overlooked when discussing the social constructions of gender. There are different experiences that go along with having different reproductive roles, different bodies that require different care. This is not to say that every male experience's being a male the same or that every female experience's being a female the same way but they have in common if at the very least a biological categorization.

This led me to focus on a project that would end up spanning across two courses. *Ethnographic Methods* (ANP 429), and ANP 490 – an independent study I formed to further explore gender after feeling dissatisfied over the available courses that I felt would be beneficial for my future plans. For ANP 429, our task was to form our own ethnographic study for the semester which would culminate into a presentation reflecting on overall experiences conducting research and our findings. I hypothesized that as women continue to enter the workforce alongside their male counterparts, family dynamics of childrearing shift. Using data from open-ended interviews with 3 sets of parents and 2 teachers, they detailed their first experiences with “crush-like” behavior displayed by their child(ren). I found the core complaint of the parents I spoke with to be the lack of family time they have with their child(ren). This strain on interpersonal communication may contribute in the expressed emotional barrier felt between the parent and child. In the acknowledgement from the parents that school was a place where their children spent the majority of their time, the next logical source was to interview teachers. The teachers involved with this study made a key point in detailing the uncertainty as educators they face over deciding what constitutes as appropriate situations for them to voice opinion or provide counsel with to the children under their care. The teachers I spoke with recognized they have a

specific influence on the children due to their role in the child's life. My research showed that while parents expressed worries about the time spent with their children due to work demands teachers expressed spending a large amount of time with these children but due to legal obligations were unable to confidently provide guidance for the observed behaviors they believe to be connected to sexual adolescent frustrations. This results in a lack of sexual education that goes beyond basic anatomy for the adolescents involved.

My case study *The Parental Navigation of Adolescent Sexuality*, aimed to better understand the experiences of adolescent sexuality from a parental viewpoint. After participant observation, semi-structured interviews and producing an ethnographic text I decided to develop further questions based off of this experience. My second focus was to further understand the implications of the female adolescents experience & how these experiences including the dynamic of specific actors possibly later tie into a female's understanding of her own sexuality. During the doc-series, *WOMEN* Gloria Steinem is quoted, "the greatest indicator of the world's stability, wealth, and safety is the status of women,". In the recession of 2007 spanning through 2009 the number of stay at home mothers dramatically declined. In seeing this trend, I questioned what actors were playing what roles in the American adolescent's life. Writing from the adolescent's point of view was my original aim but found very limited access to minors and their point of views to create an accurate picture. During this time, I was confronted with a debate over what is referenced as the anthropology of childhoods. The question asks if it is possible or beneficial to study adolescent perspectives ethnographically. The debate is a methodological issue that has been argued upon for years. The question being asked is does giving children agency and labeling them as conscious actors who make their own decisions strip them of their vulnerability and thus protection? One researcher explains that England and Europe

as a whole has largely heeded this call to allow children a voice outside of the adult perspective. The United States has not taken to this trend of giving children a voice, the premise being child protection.

With having the support of TEP, MSU, BFLA, and SEBL while in Belize I was able to push further into the questions I was previously unable to explore while in a classroom or when researching in the U.S. By being able to listen to adolescents and young adults speak on topics of sex, reproduction, and gender violence I learned more about where they are at than I ever have before and just how aware they truly are.

A video by John Kalin that I had previously watched became a vital tool in explaining to individuals the importance of listening and involving themselves in the effort to combat gender violence through bystander intervention. Bystander intervention is important in our efforts to help stop sexual assault by making individuals aware and able to intervene in situations where others need help. The message that bystander intervention sends is a powerful one. In exhibiting less complicity perpetrators are theoretically less likely to commit sexual assault due to social intolerance. John Kalin explains that there is a difference between advocacy and prevention. Kalin begins by explaining his “why’s”. This is important, an individual must have a “why” to initially become an advocate and help with prevention. When people share their “why’s” for advocating against sexual assault (challenging in many cases) it has a humanizing effect where relatability can become possible. Individuals instill a reason for their friends to have a “why” and the ripple effect continues. Advocacy becomes a larger focus as people begin to question why events like sexual assault happen and how they can support the efforts against it. Each individual has a special role through their own unique intersectionality.

Kalin however makes a crucial observation that in raising support for advocacy people who are not already passionate about sexual assault can become overwhelmed with large rallies or copious amounts of information, thus the phrase of “meeting people where they are”. In order to create a larger influence approaches cannot be overwhelming, this can instill a sense of helpless or hopeless demeanor. Increasing your audience by changing expectations can be as simple as changing the question. This is where positive prevention comes in. Instead of telling people what they must be fearful of or scared of in abstracts, like asking question “how do we make sexual assault stop?” into “how do we make prevention cool?”. The answer is to begin simple and approachable through accessibility. In doing this, conversations become more approachable. These discussions are then brought into the homes and lives of the people who engage in them and this instills a greater awareness of the daily issues of sexual assault.

Even though I expressed previous frustration from my past WS courses I am immensely thankful for them. The exposure to such raw and detailed stories such as *The Obsidian Mirror* by Louise M. Wisechild, a deeply emotional, unnerving, and finally triumphant story of a women’s journey dealing with a life of molestation, incest, and abuse prepared me in a way that I did not realize until I was sitting at BFLA and hearing the stories of the women survivors. Another reading I brought with me was written by Gloria Cowan entitled *Women’s Hostility Towards Women and Rape and Sexual Harassment Myths*, was a strong influence. I believe there is a large responsibility not only to your participants but also to your own health when conducting research on topics such as gender violence. Reading *The Obsidian Mirror* I had a very emotional response I did not expect. I remember putting off other work in order to finish the book, crying as I read the chapters. The story became so important for me that nothing mattered until I reached the end. Wisechild allowed me to listen for the first time to the atrocities that are realities

for so many in an overwhelming personal way. She allowed me to work through my own emotions and relate to certain dynamics when confronting inner turmoil before facing and attempting to be a resource of help for others who are in need of steady strength, assurance, and understanding. Cowan's piece became a cornerstone in speaking to youth. Through her I was able to explain to group 1 how it will take both men and women re-understanding their roles in relation to one another to create equality in the form of equity.

### Personal Development

Going to Belize was the first time I travelled overseas outside of a U.S. territory. The nervous energy I felt upon landing in the country made me smile, even if I was already sweating from the new climate within five minutes of arrival. I knew I was not going to be the same person leaving Belize as I was arriving. For the first time as a student having a month to totally dedicate towards one focus allowed me to witness how much I can accomplish in a short amount of time. This emotion of drive is what solidified for me my purpose in this life. My work does not feel like work. Do I get tired at times? yes, discourage? of course, but I cannot imagine doing any other work than this. The connection I felt towards people I have never met is what feeds me. This experience pushed me to develop a deeper confidence speaking about gender violence and using the knowledge I have worked so hard in the past years to claim. One of my fondest memories on the very first day of our trip was the scavenger hunt. I remember as Nora, Tyesha and I all nervously looked at one another thinking, "there are no street signs! How on earth will we find our way to these places?!". I would be lying if I did not acknowledge the very real panicked emotion I uncomfortably swallowed to put on my best, "this will be fun!" face. That exercise is now my starting story when I tell people about my trip. How my friends and I ran around in



circles, jumped over a wall for a shortcut that ended up taking longer than going around, having locals reach out and point us in the right direction, laughing as we tried to explain what we needed help with, and having a family check our entire list for errors. I was able to shed the restriction of feeling self-consciousness. What did I care if I looked like I did not have everything under control? I was in a new country and it was okay to not be completely sure. This taught me to be even less uneasy about having to ask for help.

Although English was Belize's official language, creole and Spanish were more favorably spoken. This required listening with a new intensity and asking questions even more so for clarification if I wanted to get anywhere remotely on time. During my interviews, I wanted to ensure I was understanding their meaning and not assuming because we shared the ability to both speak English. Terms in creole have different meanings and may sound similar to English but only in their sound. Through listening in this way, I found my ability to ask questions grew, I saw as my interviews became more and more fruitful, I learned to quiet my mind and be present. While this was happening I also developed a sense of calmness. I no longer felt like I was trying to prove to myself that I am good enough to do this work. During a special moment with group 1 as I watched them explore on their own with topics we had been talking about and come to the conclusions I had once come to when I began reading about gender was when I proved to myself that I could effectively listen to the voices of our future and guide them to deeper avenues of understanding gender relations.

The sense of community I also felt during my time was something I will also be forever grateful for. In the U.S a common practice I see among my peers is to put headphones in while walking from place to place. Multiple times I have heard and even been guilty of myself, putting headphones in without music to avoid "being bothered". I no longer accept this practice and I

wish to stop this mindset within the people around me. Each morning as I would walk to my placement, to lunch, as well as weekends while with Nora and Tyesha, we would be greeted with good mornings, good evenings, and goodnights. This small gesture was something I began to look forward to. I began waving to the familiar faces along my walks. I even began to make friends with those people and would stop by asking about their mornings, playing with their puppies, and wishing them a good rest of their day. This sense of community is powerful and something I will continue to emulate in my own country. I have often times felt that the U.S socially is falling behind, little actions of simply saying hello to one another can be a great benefit I believe.

#### Conclusion

Due to the continued issue of adolescent and high teen pregnancy rates in Belize, issues of social development and kin structure I argue have been effected. Organization like BFLA and SEBL working to combat gender violence from a proactive and preventative way verses a reactive approach will be key in the success to seeing any type of alleviation. I am thankful to have met such strong individuals committed to bettering their countries dynamics for the future generations of Belize and it has given me hope when studying in my own country. During my time speaking with youth and adults I came to observe their questions and frustrations towards gender dynamics are really not that different. Young girls expressed the same issues among boys their age as older women did with men their age. That tells me these issues begin young, so the solutions must be looked at and implemented when individuals are young. The level of importance in acknowledging biological differences has been strengthened and I believe “meeting people where they are at” can help in understanding this main difference between the sexes.

The focus I have within my field has been revitalized. The experiences I have had have allowed me to first hand put into practice what I have been studying. There is no greater confidence than being able to share and learn with others who are actively seeking to implement changes in their culture. I have grown as a student and this trip as allowed me confidence acting as an anthropologist. I confidently and calmly find myself articulating dynamics within situations of gender dynamics, as well as how I communicate my knowledge in a more approachable way. The ability to listen has been a skill I have greatly refined while abroad. I have learned to slow my mind and digest what is being said before jumping to another idea or concept I want to explain. As a student, I feel more mature in my title as researcher and anthropologist.