BALLARD BRIEF

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Lack of Access to Quality Education for Rural Indigenous Communities in Chiapas, Mexico

Elizabeth Sanchez

Key Takeaways

- Government neglect due to corruption in government and the isolation of indigenous communities fuels indigenous educational inaccessibility.

- Latin America is the only region in the world where child marriage is on the rise, and 83% of married Mexican girls leave school.

- In Chiapanec localities, where 70% or more of the population speak an indigenous language, 55.24% are illiterate, compared to the state's overall illiteracy rate of 13.6%.

- Chiapas has an adolescent pregnancy rate above 75% of the average distribution which is the highest in Mexico. This rate is commonly associated with indigenous heritage, household poverty, and rural location.

- Non-indigenous households in Mexico are 2–3 times as wealthy as indigenous ones.

- Indigenous-centered education programs help indigenous students achieve higher education in a way that values their students' unique cultural heritage, helps preserve culture and language, and promotes development in indigenous communities.

- Only 43% of rural indigenous peoples will complete primary school, 5% will complete secondary school, and 0.7% will attend university.

Summary

The Mexican state of Chiapas has the highest indigenous population in the country and the least educated population of any state. The confluence of historical government neglect (in infrastructure and politics), gender inequality, language barriers, and low family income of these populations seriously hinders indigenous Chiapanecos from receiving a high-quality education—if any education at all. A history of indigenous marginalization and government unwillingness to recognize and remedy this creates a serious roadblock to any permanent change in indigenous education levels. These low levels of education lead to an increase in reproductive health illiteracy, lower occupational attainment and advancement, and decreased political participation in indigenous communities. One practice to begin remedying this issue is to implement Bilingual-Intercultural Education in Intercultural Universities to give indigenous communities greater access

to an education that values their cultural background.

Key Terms

Chiapanec/o/a—Living in, coming from, or having ancestral roots in the Mexican state of Chiapas.[1]

Collectivist society—Collectivist cultures emphasize the needs and goals of the group over the needs and desires of each individual. In such cultures, relationships with other members of the group and the interconnectedness between people play a central role in personal identity.[2]

Formal education—Refers to the learning conducted in a structured education system that runs from primary school to university and includes specialized vocational, technical, and professional training programs. Includes assessments of the learners' acquired learning on a curriculum and usually leads to recognition and certification.[3] It facilitates the structured transmission of basic skills such as reading and writing, as well as social values and knowledge.[4]

Indigenous—The people who are local, original, or native to a geographic region.[5] For many decades, the Mexican government defined indigenous status in the national census based on the language spoken—if one spoke an indigenous language, they were legally classified as indigenous.[6] We recognize that this has led to an under-reporting of ethnically indigenous populations for decades.[7] Currently, the Mexican government allows citizens to self-report indigenous status in the census.[8]

Informal sector— All work for financial gain (for instance, both self-employment and wage employment) that is not registered, regulated, or protected by existing legal or regulatory frameworks. Informal workers do not have secure employment contracts, workers' benefits, social protection, or workers' representation.[9]

Internal colonialism— The uneven effects of economic development on a regional basis, otherwise known as "uneven development," as a result of the exploitation of minority groups in a society, which leads to political and economic inequalities between regions within a state or nation.[10]

Multidimensional poverty— Encompasses the various deprivations experienced by poor individuals in their daily lives, including

consumption or income, educational attainment and enrollment, drinking water, sanitation, and electricity.[11,12]

Political participation—An individual's participation in political activities, including staying politically informed, voting in elections, or running for political office. Any activities that necessitate cooperation with formal political institutions (e.g., political parties, the state, interest groups).[13]

Rural—Fewer than 2,500 inhabitants, marked by further distance from and without easy access to urban areas, large or small, and the goods, services, and infrastructure provided there.[14,15]

Self-advocacy—An individual's ability to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate, or assert their interests, desires, needs, and rights. Self-advocacy involves making informed decisions and taking responsibility for those decisions.[16]

Social mobility—Non-dependence between the initial position of an individual (or household) in the distribution of income and its final position.[17] Change in a person's socio-economic situation about their parents (intergenerational mobility) or throughout their lifetime (intra-generational mobility).[18]

Subsistence farming—A class of farming

where farmers must use nearly all crops or livestock raised to maintain their survival, leaving little, if any, surplus for sale or trade.[19]

Uneducated— Equal to or less than early elementary school education experience. For Chiapas' indigenous people who speak other languages, it includes the inability to read or speak Spanish properly.

Usos y costumbres— A term for indigenous customary law in Latin America, with indigenous autonomy in governing internal and local affairs.[20,21] Since the era of Spanish colonialism, authorities have recognized local forms of rulership, self-governance, and juridical practices with varying degrees of acceptance and formality.[22] The term is often used in English without translation and is an umbrella term for Indigenous traditional practices in other areas.[23]

Zapatistas— Members of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), an indigenous armed organization from Chiapas. This group declared war on the Mexican government, demanding "work, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice and peace" for indigenous populations after the establishment of the North American

Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994.[24] This group remains a strong

Context

Q: What constitutes a quality education for indigenous communities?

A: In the scope of this brief, a "quality" education is one that not only prioritizes accessibility for indigenous communities but also honors and nurtures their diverse identities and cultures.[26] Access to quality education takes on various meanings. For impoverished indigenous populations residing in remote areas like those in Chiapas, Mexico, it entails access for everyone of any age or gender, minimal cost, adequate funding for high-quality educators and educational materials, and convenient and safe transportation options to and from school.[27,28,29] A key measure of a "quality" education, according to the United Nations, lies in its relevance to students' status as a member of an indigenous community (for example, it must be culturally appropriate, be uplifting, and preserve communal ways of life and cooperation, and teaching relevant skills suitable for both indigenous and global economies), thereby ensuring its potential to

sociopolitical presence in Chiapas.[25]

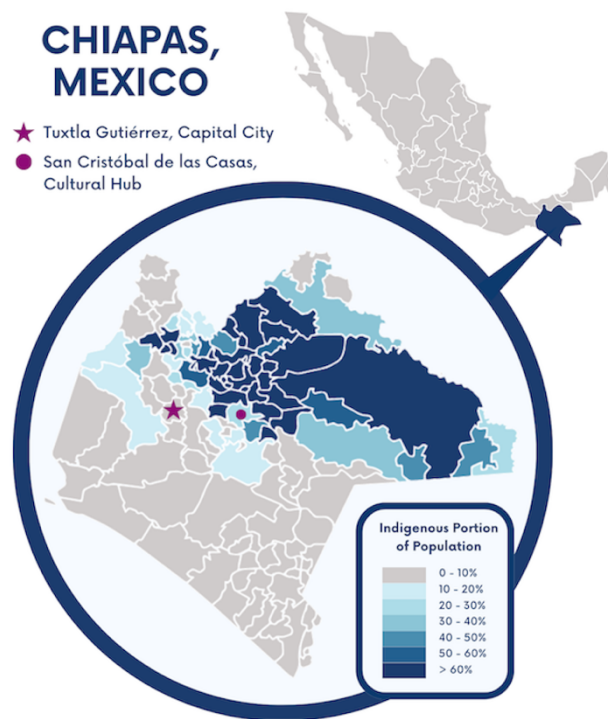positively impact a student's future opportunities for socioeconomic advancement.[30]

Q: Why is Chiapas a relevant location in the discussion of indigenous access to education?

A: Chiapas is the southernmost state in Mexico, located at the border with Guatemala. Mexico has the largest indigenous population of any Latin American country, and Chiapas is the state with the third highest indigenous population in Mexico.[31] Additionally, Chiapas has the most multicultural and multi-ethnic population of Mexico's 31 states, with more than 12 indigenous groups representing 28.3% of the total population.[32] The state comprises a rural majority (51% of the population lives in rural communities, as opposed to 23% nationwide[33]), and 46% of indigenous people live in rural communities.[34] Chiapas is also the state with the highest poverty rate in Mexico (76.4%), the highest extreme poverty rate (46.7%), and the highest child poverty rate (83.6%).[35,36] It ranks the lowest of any state

on the Human Development Index, a statistical composite index of life expectancy, education, and per capita income indicators.[37]

Education is a proven pathway out of poverty, increasing individual earnings, reducing economic inequalities, promoting economic growth of communities, providing a support network for students, and increasing future employment opportunities.[38,39] Yet in 2020, just 36.3% of the Chiapas population completed primary school and only 12.5% had a bachelor's degree.[40] Compared to the adjacent state of Oaxaca, which is similar to Chiapas in terrain, history, political leanings, and economy, 26.5% of the population earned a bachelor's degree as of 2020.[41] Oaxaca has a much higher percentage of indigenous population members than Chiapas, by 40.88%, yet its poverty rate is lower than that of Chiapas by 14.5%.[42] Much of this difference is attributed to Oaxacan reforms promoting indigenous self-governance, which helps preserve social cohesion in small communities and raises the overall standard of living.[43] Contrastingly, in Chiapas, the richer soil brings more large-scale agricultural exporters who overrun the small indigenous farmers, keeping the

indigenous population of Chiapas the poorer of the two agricultural states.[44] These key differences illustrate why Chiapas needs better education to help guide people out of poverty and lead the state to greater equity.

CHIAPAS, MEXICO

★ Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Capital City
● San Cristóbal de las Casas, Cultural Hub

Indigenous Portion of Population

0 - 10%
10 - 20%
20 - 30%
30 - 40%
40 - 50%
50 - 60%
> 60%

Q: What do current systems of education in Chiapas look like?

A: The present structure of the Mexican education system requires governmental provision of free public school for kinder (preschool), primaria (elementary school), and secundaria (middle school) education, with obligatory primaria and secundaria attendance.[45,46] Government entities work

alongside private education and social organizations to provide different educational avenues.

Most indigenous communities have kinder through secundaria available within the community or via some form of commute, taught by teachers from within the communities or provided by the government.[47] Depending on the resources available, teachers hold classes in either a bilingual (indigenous language or Spanish) or monolingual (indigenous language) format.[48] Once students reach high school (preparatoria), classes are fully in Spanish.

Additionally, some schools in more isolated regions use technology to more efficiently deliver school lessons through telesecundarias, where lessons are transmitted via television or radio.[49] Because the Mexican government does not provide nor facilitate universal and free high school or university-level education, there are fewer resources available to facilitate this level of schooling. This struggle to facilitate schooling means that the most severe education gap for Chiapas' entire population, including indigenous groups, happens during higher education.

## Q: What do past systems of education in Chiapas look like?

A: The Catholic Church controlled the provision of education in Mexico beginning after the Spanish conquest in 1522 and lasting until Mexican independence in 1821. After 1821, the Church generally ceded educational control to the central government.[50] In 1867, primaria was declared free and obligatory, and during the presidency of Porfirio Díaz, educational reforms and programs boomed.[51] After the Mexican Revolution in 1910, and under a new constitution, Mexico decentralized education, founded secundarias, and implemented one of the first major reform programs directly targeting indigenous populations.[52] Subsequent presidencies continued expanding and refining educational programs, although their long-term effectiveness was questionable due to their cost and inapplicability to indigenous culture.[53] Consequently, the famed 1994 Zapatista uprising (indigenous peasant movement) brought global attention to the plight of indigenous peoples. After 11 days of conflict, the Zapatistas entered into negotiations with the Mexican government, pushing for the country to provide a "better

quality of life for the indigenous peoples of Chiapas by incorporating their political, economic, and social rights to the Mexican constitution."[54] In the context of the 1994 Zapatista uprising, many indigenous communities in Chiapas promoted long-awaited reform in their local schools.[55] Still, tensions between Zapatistas and the government have created areas of the state where the government still has no presence and no facilities to provide support. Hence, the extent to which these reforms led to tangible results remains an open question.[56] Most recently, The New Educational Model (Nuevo Modelo Educativo), introduced in 2017, restructured the education system "to provide quality education with equity and prepare all students for the 21st century" and give schools more autonomy over curriculum."[57]

Q: Who are the indigenous Chiapanecan groups most affected by this issue, and how are they singled out as a demographic?

A: There are 12 federally recognized indigenous groups residing in Chiapas (although each contains numerous subgroups). The two most numerous groups are the Tzotzil and Tzeltal, which comprise about half of the total indigenous population.[58] An estimated 46% of the indigenous population lives in the state's northern half, mainly in mountainous regions.[59,60] The people who live in these isolated, mountainous communities are the most affected by this issue because these communities have less access to educational resources and essential services, such as electricity, needed to run educational facilities.[61] Studies have found that the poorer the indigenous community, the less educated they are.[62] For example, "the indigenous population in Mexico lags far behind" the rest of the population's education level: only 43% of rural indigenous peoples will complete primaria, 5% will complete secundaria, and 0.7% will attend university.[63]

43%
of rural indigenous
peoples will complete
primaria

5%
of rural indigenous
peoples will complete
secundaria

0.7%
of rural indigenous
peoples will attend
university
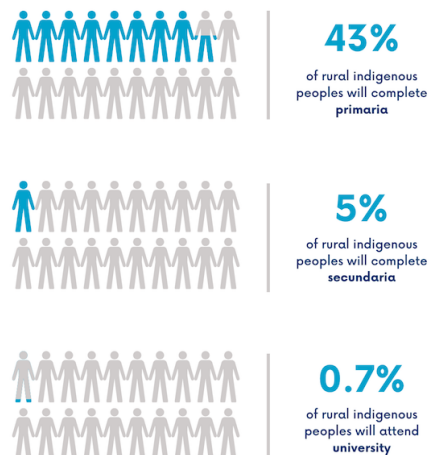
There is also a disparity between the education rates between males and females in indigenous communities, as females obtained a 25% lower rate of education (measured by illiteracy rates in this study).[64] Opportunity for universal early education has increased in Mexico, so the most significant education gap currently appears in higher education for students attending high school and university.[65] Many indigenous Chiapaneco parents express concerns about the benefits and drawbacks of learning indigenous languages versus Spanish (or vice versa), of having teachers from outside or within the communities, or of future effects on ancestral and traditional practices.[66,67] Subsequently, attempting to bridge this gap can often be difficult due to the attitudes of these communities toward the implementation of different education programs.

The indigenous populations of Chiapas are also very quickly singled out as a demographic on both individual and institutional levels. They have distinct phenotypic and linguistic differences from Mexicans of Spanish and Portuguese descent, as well as unique and commonly worn traditional dress that varies by group.[68] These conspicuous differences make indigenous people easily subject to poor and racist treatment.[69] In a survey by the National Council to Prevent Discrimination, interviewees pointed out that there is deeply ingrained racism in Mexican society—44% of the respondents thought that the rights of indigenous peoples were not respected.[70] These groups tend to be concentrated in certain areas, making them easy to single out by location as well.[71] The indigenous population of Chiapas has also experienced disenfranchisement and lack of involvement in the political sphere throughout most of Mexico's history, remaining underrepresented and underserved for centuries.[72]

Q: Who are the indigenous Chiapanecan groups most affected by this issue, and how are they singled out as a demographic?

A: Mistreatment and disenfranchisement of indigenous Chiapanecos can be traced back to the root of Spanish conquest through indigenous enslavement and exploitation.[73] There was strong resistance to cultural change from the indigenous peoples, so rural groups increasingly self-isolated to enable themselves to retain some degree of control over their lives.[74] However, they still relied almost entirely on the dominant group of Spaniards to sustain the structure of their economic independence, inland access, political channels, and education.[75]

The Spanish mistreated and misunderstood the native people of Chiapas to the point where the prevailing social view was of their natural inferiority, exemplified by their "barbarous manners" and "lack of intelligence," as described by Spanish writers and philosophers of the era.[76] This contempt, neglect, and desire to use indigenous people as a natural resource for labor exploitation

excluded them even further.[77] Today, this legacy of internal colonialism has created an "uneven development" of the social classes in Chiapas, meaning that the lower indigenous class, who began with virtually nothing, has had to work off of nothing to advance.[78,79] Consequently, they have made very little socioeconomic progress.[80] The Chiapas population overall experiences better social mobility than 25% of the country, indicating a higher socioeconomic position compared to only a quarter of the rest of Mexico.[81] According to Mexico's 2022 National Survey on Discrimination, 71.5% of the indigenous population 12 years and older feel that indigenous peoples are valued poorly by the majority of Mexican society.[82] This same report, but from the year 2017, reported that 34.1% of the Mexican population 18 years and older believed that indigenous populations place little value on continuing education and that 34.8% of that same population believed there should not be spaces automatically reserved for indigenous candidates to take part in popular elections.[83] As shown, the higher education essential for indigenous peoples is made even more challenging to attain due to their social exclusion and continued marginalization.[84]

Contributing Factors

Government Neglect

Corruption

DISCLAIMER: Though the connective research does not explicitly show Chiapas' governmental corruption affecting access to and quality of indigenous education, multiple studies prove that 1) corruption leads to a decrease in access to and quality of education,[85] and 2) that there is ample research pointing to corruption within the Mexican government.[86,87,88] Therefore, we will talk about the high rates of corruption in this region at all levels of government affecting indigenous education.

A contributing factor to the lack of access to quality education for
rural indigenous populations in Chiapas is historical and continuing corruption at all levels of government, leading to governmental neglect of the region and subsequent unavailability of educational resources and programs. Historically, indigenous Mexicans have been mistreated and marginalized by majority political groups, such as wealthy landowners and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which was the dominant party in Mexican politics for the majority of the 20th century.[89] The alliances created within these groups at both national and local levels monopolized governmental interests, leaving indigenous groups overlooked and unprotected.[90] These corrupt government officials blocked educational reforms that might have benefitted the state's indigenous population for their own greed and benefit.[91] They used tactics such as ballot-box stuffing, voter intimidation, disqualifying candidates and poll workers of the opposite parties, relocating polling places at the last minute, tampering with vote counts, and letting their supporters vote multiple times.[92] These tactics contributed to the Mexican public's deep-seated distrust of elections and their government through their history of successfully committing electoral fraud.[93] Programs meant to improve infrastructure (such as education) and strengthen indigenous communities were "hampered by mismanagement and corruption and did not really change anything in Chiapas except to put more money into the pockets of local politicians and contractors."[94] Some PRI-controlled municipal powers even went so far as to torture and harass indigenous populations.[95] Corruption harms the quality and accessibility of education provided in emerging economies such as Mexico.[96] As the level of

corruption increases within a country, the country spends less money on education: if a country moves up the corruption index from 8 to 6 (increasing the level of corruption by one standard deviation), government spending on education decreases by around 0.5% of the GDP.[97] Additionally, this money government spending on education is often allocated inefficiently, resulting in excessive expenditures in executing substandard or failed projects.[98] Infrastructural resources that cement the longevity of these educational institutions, such as electricity systems, hospitals, and roads, suffer as well.[99] Bribery and connections play an important role in the development and implementation of educational programs, as well as the appointment of teachers, and this results in a decrease in the quality of the education offered.[100] Poor, underrepresented populations, such as the indigenous communities of Chiapas, suffer the most from this limited access and low-quality learning environments, worsening inequality.[101]

Corruption in education threatens the well-being of indigenous students and worsens their education outcomes.[102] A one-unit increase in the aforementioned corruption index reduces enrollment rates by almost 10 percentage points and decreases average years of schooling by 0.25 years.[103] Embezzlement or diversion of school funds deprives already underfunded rural schools of resources.[104] Nepotism can lead to hiring poor quality and underqualified teachers, which significantly affects indigenous populations because their teachers are often required to be bilingual, culturally competent, and with other such specific qualifications.[105,106] Often, families must pay fraudulent "fees" for education services, such as enrollment or supplies, that should be free.[107,108] This combination of factors puts poor students, such as Chiapas' rural indigenous population, at a disadvantage.[109]

Geographic Inequalities

The complex nature of Chiapas' geography and terrain naturally isolates it from the surrounding regions. This creates a low incentive for establishing educational centers and public works programs, leading to governmental neglect of the region and a subsequent lack of educational resources.[110]

Chiapas is crossed by two large mountain ranges which are almost entirely forested, in addition to the dense Lacandon rainforest in the east of the state.[111,112] This terrain creates severe dispersion of rural communities: 51% of Chiapas inhabitants live in rural areas compared to 23% in the rest of Mexico. As recently as 1992, this number was as high as 70% for

Chiapas.[113,114] The issue for these rural indigenous communities is that the terrain of Chiapas is and has been a massive challenge to implementing and maintaining infrastructure in the state.[115] Historically, this difficulty and the small size of these communities offered no incentive for development. For example, there were no roads, schools, or hospitals in Chiapas until the 1930s.[116] From then on, continuing development has been inconsistent.[117]


Photo by David Trujillo on Flickr

In the present day, this under-development offers little more incentive for future growth, leading to a persistent cycle of neglect towards this region.[118] Many indigenous communities are still unconnected to the public road system and each other and, therefore, remain isolated.[119] Just two-thirds of indigenous municipalities have paved or partially paved roads, and 12,000 rural communities are only accessible by mountain trails.[120] For many indigenous children, a school may be relatively close by, but a road may not exist to connect them there.[121] Other students may have to walk great distances to get to their schools, severely limiting their access to education.[122]

A minimal, incomplete road system impedes the development of all other public works, especially those that facilitate school operations, such as electricity, water, and sewage facilities. For example, about three-fourths of indigenous households lack electricity, and two-thirds lack potable water.[123,124] This lack of basic household services in indigenous communities severely limits the resources available to run indigenous schools, limiting the access to and quality of education available.

Ruraal Households in Chiapas, Mexico

44% Have Cell Phones

47.4% Have Internet Access

18% Have Computers
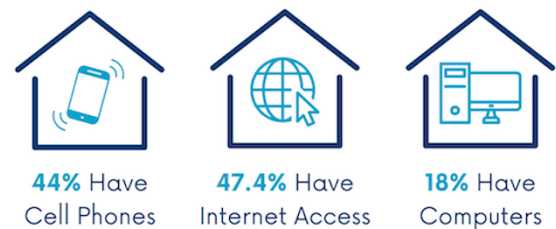
Many indigenous communities also lack access to the most basic means of communication: phones (which are only accessible to 44% of communities),[125] post offices, and radio stations.[126] In rural areas, the percentage of the population with Internet access is 47.7%, but

only 19% of households in rural areas have an Internet connection, and only 18% have computers.[127,128] Thereby, modes of rural education that rely on these telecommunications to provide schooling, like the aforementioned telesecundarias, lose all efficacy.

Gender Roles

Access to quality education in Chiapanec communities is restricted based on gender, often due to religious beliefs, definitive gender norms, and sociocultural patterns, leading to the under-enrollment of indigenous boys and (overwhelmingly) girls in school. indigenous Mexican views on gender roles are informed by long-standing sociocultural norms based on indigenous spiritual traditions. Gender duality constitutes a contrast essential to these traditions, which center around the balancing and opposing forces of masculine and feminine and dictate the importance of these gender differences.[129] In Collectivist cultures like the Indigenous of Southern Mexico, men and women are understood in terms of the roles they fulfill.[130] Gender equality thereby becomes an irrelevant and unnecessary concept to this traditional way of thinking where everyone has their role and place, enforced by tradition.[131] For example, in agricultural indigenous communities, men raise crops for consumption and sell their surpluses in faraway city markets.[132] Women are expected to care for the home, cooking, weaving, and raising children.[133] As a result of this generally unquestioned acceptance of adult gender roles, indigenous children and teenagers follow "circumscribed developmental pathways that replicate traditional practices and gender roles" on their way to adulthood.[134]

These traditional roles make their way into many facets of indigenous life, and it is evident the effect they have on indigenous children's access to education. Currently, gender gaps in primaria have been remedied or are closing in most Latin American countries.[135] However, they reopen when secundaria begins, as boys frequently start working along with their schooling, and many girls stay at home doing domestic work.[136] Indigenous households have a lower school attendance rate and higher work participation rate than the rest of the population. For instance, the average number of years of schooling among children of agricultural day laborers is 3 years below that of the national population.[137,138] Boys are more likely to work and go to school, girls are less likely to go to both school and work, and older children are more likely to work and not attend school.[139] Eldest

daughters are particularly disadvantaged, as they take up more domestic responsibility to enable their younger siblings to attend school.[140] This is especially true for girls who live in economically disadvantaged Mexican states, such as Chiapas, who are more likely to be involved in domestic tasks than boys in impoverished states or girls in wealthier states.[141] One study found that 18% of women interviewed in Chiapas said that unpaid caregiving in the home affected their education negatively.[142]

Due to the adverse effects of these rigid gender roles, education levels for indigenous women are extremely low, most only go to school for an average of 6 years.[143] Their school attendance rate is 6.3 percentage points less than the male attendance rate, a gap twice that of Chiapas' overall population.[144] In comparison with non-indigenous women from urban areas with much more accessible schooling, rural indigenous females have a 48% illiteracy rate, while only 7% of the former group is illiterate.[145] The males from these very same rural indigenous communities, who are given preferential access to education, have an illiteracy rate of 28% compared to 4% for non-indigenous males from urban areas.[146]

Photo by Lenawurm on Istock

As shown, educational gender inequality persists in poorer contexts, especially for females, and this limited access to education helps to transmit status and income inequality.[147] When these children have their own families in the future, research proves that the education of a child's parents increases their probability of going to school and decreases the likelihood of working, breaking the vicious cycle of educational deprivation.[148,149]

Low Family Income

The extremely low income level of indigenous families in rural communities restricts their access to education by perpetuating the under-enrollment of indigenous children. Half of Chiapas' indigenous population "reports no income at all, and another 42% make less than $5 [USD] a

day."[150] In comparison, the average daily income in all of Mexico equates to $30.[151] In Mexico, the average income was 14% lower among people who belong to a rural indigenous group.[152] These families live from subsistence farming, making only as much as they need to survive daily.[153] These subsistence farming communities have stayed so poor because Chiapas' rich natural resources attract large-scale international exporters who overrun the efforts of small indigenous farmers.[154] The disconnect between the 21st-century economy and traditional indigenous forms of subsistence living keeps indigenous families, the original inhabitants of this rich land, down in extremely low-income brackets, making under the legal minimum wage.[155] To help their parents make ends meet, many indigenous Chiapaneco children must farm and complete household chores before they can make the trek to school.[156] These children often do not have enough time to do both, especially during busy harvest seasons, so they drop out of school.[157] School enrollment rates decrease by 23%[158] after primaria once students are old enough to contribute more substantially to their family's funds.[159] Unfortunately, only 7 out of 20 students in the poorest rural areas of Chiapas continue to high school because families cannot pay for enrollment, supplies, or transportation to sustain their children's educational journeys.[160]

Language Barriers

Indigenous language speakers still face poorer outcomes in education due to the prioritization of Spanish over indigenous languages in the Mexican school system. In Chiapas, 1.57 million people (28.3% of the state's population) speak an estimated 68 indigenous dialects, including Tzeltal, Tzotzil, and Ch'ol.[161,162] Thirty-four percent of the state's indigenous speakers are monolingual, with no Spanish skills, and many more have only basic Spanish skills.[163] The 1994 Zapatista Uprising highlighted Indigenous language rights, resulting in the 2003 General Law on the Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which "guaranteed linguistic equality in education, public services, and mass media."[164] However, the 2000 Census shows that, of children aged 12–14 living in rural communities with under 2,500 inhabitants, only 44% of the indigenous language speakers have finished primaria. This percentage was 20% lower than that of Spanish speakers.[165]

Illiteracy rate in the State of Chiapas

13.6%
Illiteracy rate among the entire population

55.2%
Illiteracy rate among indigenous speakers
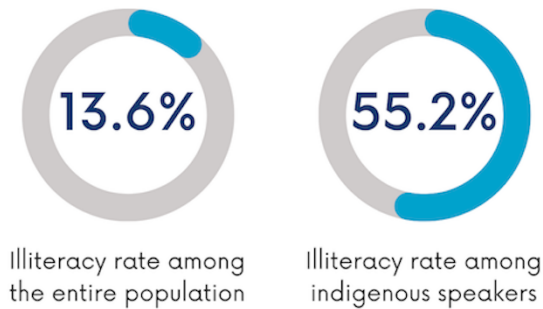
Being an indigenous language speaker also decreased the probability of enrolling in secundaria, a trend that has been consistent since 1970.[166] Less than half the rural indigenous population was enrolled in secundaria.[167] The World Bank found that in 2015, 95.1% of the illiterate population in Mexico were indigenous language speakers.[168] According to Mexico's 1990 General Census, in Chiapanec localities where 70% or more of the population spoke an indigenous language, 55.24% were illiterate, compared to the 2020 illiteracy rate of 13.6% for the whole state.[169] These poorer educational outcomes result from the prioritization of Spanish over indigenous languages in schooling.

This prioritization of Spanish over indigenous languages in schooling happens in many different ways in Chiapas' schools.[170] Educational texts are written in Spanish, and teachers are state-hired Spanish speakers who often teach multiple grades simultaneously within the same classroom.[171,172] This setup is not conducive to learning in an indigenous language or bilingual learning. When schools do have texts provided in indigenous languages, these texts teach indigenous language literacy based on Spanish learning models, and they are used much less often than the Spanish versions of textbooks.[173] Indigenous students are often taught Spanish quickly, prioritizing it over indigenous language speaking.[174] This lack of infrastructure for students who speak indigenous languages results in low performance from indigenous students on standardized testing (which is developed assuming Spanish proficiency of students).[175] From 2006–2013, indigenous schools had 65.9% of primaria students at insufficient or basic achievement levels in mathematics, compared to the national average of 51.2%.[176] These schools also have 77.4% of primaria students at insufficient or basic achievement levels in Spanish, compared to the national average of 57.2%.[177] Due to the Spanish-centric infrastructure of many schools in Chiapas, including majority-indigenous schools, indigenous students face learning challenges due to a language barrier.

Consequences

Reproductive Health Illiteracy and its Effects

A lack of education and literacy prevents indigenous women from obtaining and understanding vital information about their sexual and reproductive health. This issue uniquely affects young women and girls ages 12–18. Schooling leads to more accurate health beliefs, personal health knowledge, and awareness of health resources.[178] Education also leads to better health-related lifestyle choices and increases self-advocacy skills, which are essential for young adults in relationships and expecting mothers.[179] As of 2022, only 36.3% of the Chiapas population completed primaria,[180] and Chiapas has the highest rate of adolescent pregnancy for any state in Mexico.[181] Mexico has the highest rate of teenage pregnancies among countries in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development), exhibiting a fertility rate of 70.6 births for every 1,000 adolescents.[182] In a Mexican classroom of 30 teenagers, on average, 2 of them would be pregnant.[183] However, the rate for Chiapas falls 75% above this average distribution,[184] signifying a rate of 123.55 births for every 1,000 adolescents.[185] Thus, in a typical Chiapas classroom of 30 teenagers, 4 of them would be pregnant.[186] According to the World

Bank, these rates are mainly associated with indigenous heritage, household poverty, and rural location.[187] Poor, rural, indigenous communities experience high numbers of unmarried adolescent mothers, as well as pregnant adolescent brides.[188]

Indigenous young women are more likely than their counterparts to leave school early due to pregnancy.[189] In Latin America at large, 36% of school dropout cases were attributed to teen pregnancy or motherhood, and this percentage increases for indigenous groups.[190] Early pregnancy rates and other inequalities that indigenous young women face undermine their access to sexual and reproductive education, as well as healthcare.[191] A low schooling level is associated with lower contraceptive knowledge and a lower age at the first sexual encounter.[192] Adolescent girls in Chiapas have more children on average and have a higher unmet need for birth control when compared to young women nationally.[193]
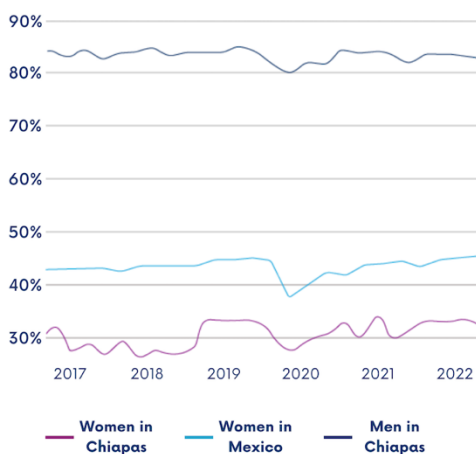
Speaking an indigenous language in Chiapas reduces the likelihood of adequate knowledge about contraceptive methods by 55%,[194] and physicians reported misconceptions or illiteracy about birth control methods as one of the most significant barriers to contraception use among rural indigenous communities in Chiapas.[195] For example, only 54.4% and 31.3% of indigenous adolescents in Chiapas know where they can obtain condoms and contraceptive pills, respectively.[196] Chiapas has the nation's lowest rate of contraception use among women 15–49 years old (44.6%),[197] which leads to younger women becoming pregnant during adolescence.[198] This creates a cycle where poor schooling leads to teenage pregnancy, pushing young women to drop out of school due to pregnancy and exacerbating their low educational attainment.

Portion of Population which is Economically Active

Legend: Women in Chiapas, Women in Mexico, Men in Chiapas

Many of these young pregnant women marry during their teenage years (either before or after pregnancy), and these marriages are another risk factor for early dropout, restricting access to sexual and reproductive education and healthcare.[199] Latin America is the only region in the world where child marriage is on the rise, and 83% of married Mexican girls leave school.[200] Child marriage exacerbates the cycle of gender inequality in education and economic status, as girls are more likely to go to school if their mothers are educated.[201] According to the World Bank, fewer years of education eventually reduces the income of these women and their chances of being employed in the long term, increasing the gender divide in economic attainment.[202] Chiapas' female labor participation rate is the lowest of all Mexican states, at 22%, compared to the national average of 33%, or the state's male labor participation rate of 82.4%.[203,204]

According to a study by Geronimus and Korenman (1992), "Teenage childbearing has been described as a cause of persistent poverty, and poverty that is transmitted intergenerationally."[205] Seventy-five percent of Chiapanecos already live in poverty, and teenage childbearing has the potential to increase this number.[206] Children born into poverty are consistently enrolled at lower rates in schools and perform worse in academic assessments than children born into higher socioeconomic status,[207] perpetuating the cycle of low education

status leading to teenage childbearing.

Lower Socioeconomic Mobility

The lack of education keeps families in a low socioeconomic standing and reduces upward mobility in occupation. This consequence occurs because limited education deprives indigenous populations of opportunities for professional growth. Education enhances social mobility by providing people with skills and resources to take advantage of greater educational and business opportunities for career and income growth and provide a better quality of life.[208] Because of this, the Human Development Index markers are centered around education, tracking literacy rates, school attendance, and more, to study the mean years of education received and the estimated educational attainment for a country or region.[209] It was found that the Human Development Index (HDI) for the indigenous population in Mexico is 15% lower than for the non-indigenous population.[210] Chiapas also has the lowest HDI in the country, at 0.69 (compared to 0.87 in the county's most prosperous district).[211] This means that most indigenous children, hundreds of thousands of whom live in subsistence or low-wage farming communities, will not have the opportunity or means to move past their parents' socioeconomic

status.[212,213] For instance, 52% of Mexican adults with a father in the agricultural sector who now work in the agricultural sector or other similar areas of low-skilled manual labor.[214] These findings highlight the intense generational social immobility in Mexico.[215]

Chiapas also has the lowest mobility in education compared to other regions in Mexico.[216] Children in indigenous schools have the lowest achievement levels of all Mexican schoolchildren, with more than 80% falling below the basic level needed to progress further in their education.[217] Approximately 63% of Chiapas' population did not complete primaria as of 2022.[218] Of their children, 20.1% will end up unschooled or with incomplete primaria education (an additional 56.3% will complete primaria only).[219] Fewer than 1% of the indigenous population that accessed primaria attended university, demonstrating a higher risk of being caught in this generational cycle of poverty than other groups.[220] A study also showed that individuals from a lower social class (like many indigenous groups) generally have 30% less career-related ambition and assertiveness than individuals from high socioeconomic status (measured by the expectation to complete higher education).[221] Researchers found that "only around half of 15-year-olds from households of

low socioeconomic status expect to complete higher education, compared to over 80% from high-status households."[222]

Without the advantages afforded by a higher level of education, indigenous communities are fixed within the informal sector of subsistence work, never earning enough to raise their families and communities out of deep poverty.[223,224,225] For instance, a striking difference exists between the per capita income of indigenous and non-indigenous households in Mexico: non-indigenous households are 2–3 times as wealthy.[226] According to the World Bank, just one extra year of schooling increases hourly earnings by 9.3% in developing countries.[227] The United Nations Development Program calculates that low education status contributes to 38.6% of multidimensional poverty, one of the indicators of which is educational attainment.[228] However, as previously discussed, the demands of subsistence farming in many of these communities restrict the time available for community members to receive schooling, lowering their education level.[229] A lack of education keeps many community members within this traditional agrarian economy, which offers little avenue for socioeconomic advancement.

Decreased Political Participation & Representation

Without a quality education, one lacks the knowledge and tools to make informed and meaningful political decisions.[230] Education is one of the most—if not the most—important predictor of political participation in any manner.[231] A study interviewing indigenous communities received the overwhelming response that illiteracy and a general lack of education were key elements hindering indigenous political participation.[232] Education fuels this participation because it creates avenues for open dialogues and constructive exchange of opinions in search of the best solutions for society.[233] It also enables constituents to be more informed about political happenings and improves one's ability to form ideas and make political decisions.[234] Political involvement by indigenous communities enables them to support and receive reforms needed to "realize the promise of education."[235]

It is well-documented that electoral participation increases at a higher level of schooling.[236] Up until 2006, voter turnout in Mexico's indigenous communities with lower rates of education ranged between 12.4–5.6% lower than in non-indigenous areas with higher

education.[237] According to the latest data from 2018, voter turnout in indigenous communities had increased by 14.6% since 2006 and was on par with, or higher than, turnout in non-indigenous communities,[238] correlating with an increase in academic performance and access nationwide due to education reforms.[239] However, there is no typical pattern of electoral behavior or political leaning among them.[240] In some communities, pressure from the dominant political parties elicits a strong indigenous vote to stay in good federal graces[241] and eliminate the threat of municipal administrators sent from the federal government to set up a repeat election (and embezzle community funds).[242] For example, a government grant program for people in poverty called the National Solidarity Program was headed by the leader of the era's dominant political party, the PRI.[243] Subsequently, these grants were generously allocated in poor, rural areas where the party faced difficult elections, and recipients were expected to become "loyal cogs in the PRI electoral machine."[244] Despite the high electoral participation of many Indigenous communities, there remained a significant gap in their legislative representation, fueled by this root cause of lower educational access.[245] Due to the low level of education in Indigenous communities, these communities also experienced lower levels of female participation in politics at the community level. This gender divide demonstrates the effects of the low level of education due to the aforementioned female student dropout rates. Many of these communities resisted change to this policy, stressing their normative community systems of usos y costumbres, or indigenous customary law, in place of support for political parties.[246] Most municipalities in Chiapas elect their governing body through this system, the laws of which sometimes exclude women from participation.[247] For example, in Chiapas' "sister state" of Oaxaca, where the usos and costumbres system is also common, 18% of municipalities had a ban on female participation as late as 2015.[248]

The low political representation of indigenous communities on state and federal levels is part of a vicious cycle: low education creates low participation, which in turn creates low representation, halting progress on educational policies to help remedy the root of these issues. indigenous municipal districts typically lack significant influence on regional or national matters due to their relatively small size, continuing indigenous exclusion from the political process at the federal level.[249] The level of indigenous participation in the national

government is very low. In 2016, only 14 out of 500 members (2%) of Mexico's Congress publicly identified as indigenous.[250,251] This translates into an indigenous representation gap of 81.33%—based on the proportion of Chiapas' population that is indigenous, there must be an additional 61 congresspeople who identify as indigenous to be fully representative of the population.[252] Representative governments are proven to pay more attention to minority issues.[253] Subsequently, the difficult conditions of Mexico's indigenous peoples, especially pertaining to education, receive little attention from government officials and national policymakers as a whole, reinforcing the lack of educational access that contributes to this issue.[254]

Practices

## Bilingual-Intercultural Education at Intercultural Universities

Currently, most education for indigenous peoples in Chiapas is imparted by schools that are known to have "one language, one culture" learning, designed for non-indigenous urban communities.[255] This method damages connections to traditional ways of life and makes education less appropriate and meaningful to rural indigenous societies.[256] It

necessitates educational reforms that emphasize Bilingual-Intercultural Education at all levels of education, but especially in university education, where the estimated indigenous enrollment was between 1–3%, to attain greater equity for indigenous students.[257] Equity is attained when indigenous students can study in mainstream institutions that offer them the curricular options, networks, and professional skills most valued by Western society while respecting and learning from their specific needs and traditional ways of knowing, speaking, and living.[258]

One organization that has prioritized this way of learning is the Intercultural University of Chiapas (UNICH), part of a federal system of 12 Intercultural Universities (IUs) in Mexico that take a decolonial stance on education by allowing indigenous communities to actively define and shape their own educational goals and development.[259,260] Founded in 2004 through negotiations between the Zapatistas and the federal government,[261] the mission of UNICH is to "train ethically responsible professionals committed to diversity, indigenous peoples and languages, community connection, scientific and traditional knowledge with the purpose of building a more prosperous, fair and equitable society."[262] UNICH is an academic space created explicitly for indigenous students, designed to be culturally and geographically close to these

students and their communities.[263] The students enrolled are mainly from rural indigenous communities, but enrollment is not limited to this demographic.[264]

Location of UNICH Schools

Main Campus of UNICH

Other UNICH Campuses

Indigenous Population Density
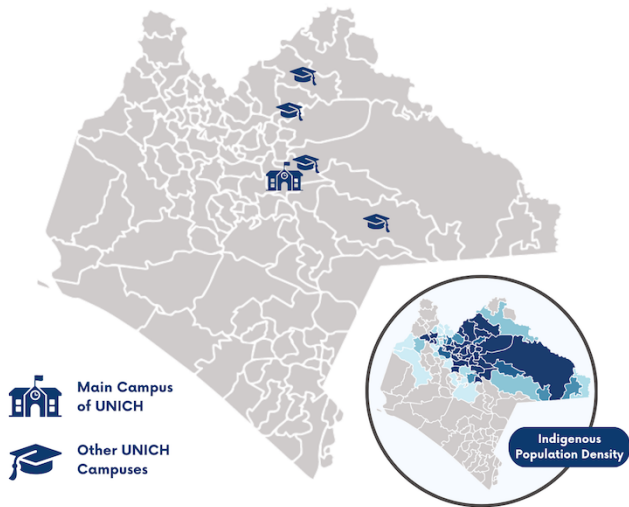
The goals of UNICH and other IUs are to "offer higher education options that are [culturally and linguistically] relevant to the development needs of indigenous peoples" [265] and "promote the [valuing] of local knowledges as complementary to scientific knowledge."[266] They highlight education and thinking from both a Western Capitalist viewpoint and a particular indigenous worldview, emphasizing the "processes and interactions which unite...the groups in relation to each other"[267] and aiming for mutual respect and inclusion.[268] UNICH provides 6 main degrees that promote attainable economic and social development for indigenous communities: Alternative Tourism, Sustainable Development,

Language and Culture, Intercultural Communication, Medical Surgery, and Intercultural Law.[269,270] To be accessible for rural indigenous communities, the main campus of UNICH lies in San Cristóbal de las Casas, a mountainous city that serves as a hub for indigenous communities that populate the surrounding highlands.[271] Four other campuses have been opened within indigenous municipalities themselves, in response to the needs and demands for quality public education in different areas.[272] These units offer in-person, virtual, and semi-virtual classes to accommodate more remote communities and working students.[273]

The class content, curricular pathways, and instruction style at UNICH center around the development of indigenous communities and culture.[274] Indigenous languages are not only taught, but prioritized, and learning is student and community-led.[275] For example, starting on day one of a student's studies, learning takes place in workshops and research projects in the local communities alongside community members and indigenous academics.[276] Class content varies from area to area depending on the distinct needs of the local communities, pairing unique development methods with local languages to focus on the sustainability of local development projects, protection of the

environment, and community engagement.[277] Teachers at IUs are called "teacher-researchers" and generally come from the surrounding regions.[278] IUs, like UNICH, work to create networks of local indigenous professionals, experts, students, and teacher-researchers, forming students into instruments for dialogue and learning between culturally and linguistically diverse individuals.[279]

Impact

Though bilingual-intercultural education at Intercultural Universities is used to increase the access to and quality of education for indigenous Chiapaneco communities, it is difficult to find detailed research into its impact. In 2022, the student enrollment at UNICH was 1,746, and its central campus experienced a 67.4% growth in enrollment since the previous year.[280] The whole UNICH system experienced a 32.6% growth in enrollment from 2018 to 2022.[281] Of the 9 IUs in Mexico that report their yearly enrollment statistics, 6 have experienced net growth in enrollment over the last year.[282,283,284,285,286] One study found that Intercultural Universities generally saw 1.5 times more female than male students,[287] and in 2022, UNICH specifically saw a 45% male student body and 55% female study body.[288] This trend demonstrates how

Intercultural Universities are remedying educational disparities in more areas than indigenous status. This study also found that around two-thirds of IU students were "native speakers of indigenous languages," demonstrating the potential for intercultural understanding and prioritization of indigenous languages in these schools.[289] Another investigation into the impact of these universities on their students found that students felt they had become able to navigate between different worlds: "the urban and rural, mestizo and indigenous, native language and Spanish."[290] These students were able to find job placement as translators and other positions within development projects at the local and governmental levels.[291] The communities working with Intercultural Universities have also seen "transformatory effects" in the promotion of sustainable livelihoods and the number of students entering higher education due to these strong relationships.[292] IUs have been able to create programs that are relevant to indigenous students, thereby reducing outmigration from their communities of origin.[293]

Gaps

While indigenous-centered education programs can effectively increase access to and quality of education for indigenous communities in

Chiapas, there is still room for improvement. As previously observed, there has been little research into the impact of these programs on students and their future outcomes. Universities have also faced difficulty implementing the lofty theories of intercultural tertiary education into practice.[294] Due to their status as public educational institutions created by the federal government, there is tension between their theories advancing decolonial education and equity and the fact that the program was created by a government institution that "traditionally privileges Western and neoliberal epistemologies and ideologies."[295] Despite these universities' focus on indigenous culture and knowledge, they also need to prepare students to navigate the mainstream Western world and meet global higher education standards, which adds to the tension in this form of education for indigenous people.[296] There is a need to strike a delicate balance between these ideals, which is a challenging and imperfect process. Due to the governmental influence and support that powers these universities, they may also face "bureaucratic, financial, academic and political" obstacles to their programs and goals.[297] These universities also have a limited number of programs for indigenous students to engage in, leaving an indigenous representation gap in some academic areas, particularly the natural sciences, health sciences, and engineering.[298] Some students at IUs reported dropping out before graduation due to the "lax" feeling and vagueness of the student-led learning method.[299] Graduates from these universities have also faced difficulty finding jobs in the labor market due to a lack of legitimacy conferred on their education. This lack of legitimacy stems from the recent accreditation of these universities and their "secondary role" in the system of higher education in Mexico (as seen by more mainstream branches).[300,301] Even when graduates are hired to implement development programs in their own communities, they may encounter disconnects and hesitancy from the locals towards their new intercultural theories, development practices, and integration with traditional practices.[302] Intercultural Universities may lack legitimacy in parents' eyes due to the concern that a child may not learn to succeed well enough in a 21st-century Western environment and labor market, which may be the parents' ideal of success.[303] Possibly one of the greatest challenges faced by Intercultural Universities and Bilingual-Intercultural education programs is the large target scale (nationwide, serving all indigenous communities) and current decentralization of programs. It is difficult for one state's university to reach the target scale effectively, so these

efforts are not as widespread as one would hope.[304]

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