



## **Discrimination, gender and access to higher education: a research among the Mayas of the Yucatan, Mexico**

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### **Abstract**

With this study we present two ideas that previous investigations in Mexico regarding dropout do not consider: first, approaching the subject from a qualitative and gender perspective (Lamas, 2003; Ruíz, 2002), since usually the existing information in Mexico is presented basically through statistical data. This allow us, using Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1999), to discover the strategies used by men and women, Mayan speakers, who overcame the obstacles in their path towards higher education and avoided dropping out. The second innovative aspect of our research consists of considering the Mayan speakers that do reach higher education as competent evaluators of the dropout problem among the Mayas, since they have journeyed through all the levels of education and have experienced the problems that their particular ethnic condition raises within a context that discriminates against them.

This qualitative investigation was developed using semi-structured interviews and focus groups (Taylor & Bogdan, 1987; Krueger & Casey, 2000) in 19 municipalities and seven small villages of the state of Yucatan, Mexico with 173 men and 114 women who declared Mayan language as their first language or who learned Maya at the same time as Spanish. All of them reached at least some level of higher education.

In this paper we analyze the results of interviews with 50 of the women and 70 of the men.

We define higher education as the professional formation equivalent to undergraduate level studies, which in Mexico includes: college, superior technical schools, and teacher training schools. In the term higher education we also include master and PhD degrees.

To define “dropout” we use the parameter set by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática [INEGI], 2004): An individual who is 15 years old or older and has not concluded the mandatory basic education, which in the case of Mexico is equivalent to having concluded secondary school.

### **Methodology**

We applied the Grounded Theory methodology of Glaser and Strauss (1999), consisting of an integrated theoretical formulation. This approach helps us to develop explanations deriving from the form in which people, organizations or communities explain themselves and their responses to the phenomena.

The snowball technique was used to find and a posteriori interview 1115 subjects Mayan speakers who had reached higher education.

The interview, designed by Mijangos (2006), includes the following questions:

- What did you do to overcome the obstacles that were appearing in your path to reach higher education?
- Did your family play a role in that process? If the answer is yes, please let us know what that role was.

- What other factors allowed you to finish secondary school and to advance to higher education?

### **Results**

The first research evidence we gathered which helps us to deconstruct the myth of the objectified indigenous women was the finding that in a universe of 1115 Mayan speakers who reach higher education, 53.27 % are women and 46.72 % are men.

Regarding the strategies used by the Mayan men and women we interviewed, the following findings were obtained: each man and woman developed, at each educative level, strategies that helped them in entering, continuing, and succeeding at school. In order to understand the previous assertion, it is important to take into consideration the following observations:

- a) The dynamics of formation and the strategies used by Mayan girls and boys, women and men, in school do not happen in isolation; they are products of the conjunction of familiar, cultural and social conditions in which the individuals have lived from their first years of life. These strategies are modified as the individual advances to superior levels of education.
- b) The successful graduates changed their strategies as the circumstances of their schooling changed. Once we identified the strategies of each Mayan person we interviewed for this investigation, we then analyzed and interpreted each person's strategies in the context of the person's respective processes of schooling. From this analysis of their speech a new recognition of the variety of strategies arose for us. In particular, we recognized behaviors and strategies that differ according to the educational level and scholastic community involved. Using these analyses as an input allowed us to make some "generalizations," generalizations which are very closely related to this studied context and do not pretend to be valid for other contexts.

All the strategies seem to coincide in one consideration: the recognition that studying a career would be a tool to avoid remaining in conditions of marginalization, poverty and social inequality and yet remain a member of the Mayan cultural and

ethnic group, at least in the closest community context. The advantage gained by being educated is the diminishment of discrimination from the dominant society. But to be able to fully receive this “advantage,” the Mayan speakers who reach higher education hide themselves: they do not speak the Mayan language in school and even deny knowing their mother tongue.

### **Conclusions**

On the basis of the gathered evidence, it is possible to assume that the commonplace idea of a predominantly patriarchal family system among the Mayan is now, in actuality, more a product created by the dominant culture and instilled by prejudices and stereotypes against the indigenous communities. In other words, the presumption that the machismo is greater and more intense among the indigenous people than among other sectors of the Mexican society, such as in this case the general population of the Yucatan, is not supported by the evidence, which actually provides the fact that Mayan women reach higher education more frequently than men.

Evidences shows, also, that although in some Mayan families the education of the men is privileged, in other families the women benefit more. Such decisions respect to whom studies and who does not do they are not perceived as a species of discrimination by gender, but rather as a pragmatic decision that looks for the most available options for improving the conditions of life of the family, not just the individual. Even now, economic marginalization usually is a more powerful obstacle than discrimination by gender.

With this study we present two ideas that previous investigations in Mexico regarding dropout do not consider: first, approaching the subject from a qualitative and gender perspective (Lamas, 2003; Ruíz, 2002), since usually the existing information in Mexico is presented basically through statistical data. This allow us, using Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1999), to discover the strategies used by men and women, Mayan speakers, who overcame the obstacles in their path towards higher education and avoided dropping out. The second innovative aspect of our research consists of considering the Mayan speakers that do reach higher education as competent evaluators of the dropout problem among the Mayas, since they have journeyed

through all the levels of education and have experienced the problems that their particular ethnic condition raises within a context that discriminates against them.

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According to the INEGI (2006), in Mexico there are 6 million speakers of an indigenous language, of which 1,7 million are between 15 to 29 years old: 808.000 men and 860.000 women. Of these 15-to-29-year-old speakers of an indigenous language, 86,4% know how to read and write: 89,8% of the men and 83,2% of the women. The average length of schooling of the youngest adult population of indigenous languages is 6,5 years: 6,9 years for men and 6,1 years for women. In the state of Yucatan just 5,6% of the natives who speak the Mayan language reach high school and of these only 1,5% accede to higher education. We observe from this data that Mayan speakers’ schooling tends to stop and become marginalized in the upper educational levels (Bracamonte & Lizama, 2005).

Data related to gender indicates that 30 of every 100 men attend school compared to 27 out of every 100 women.

### **Gender and ethnic groups**

Along with the concept of gender (Lamas, 2003) comes the need for understanding the notions of femininity and masculinity in relation to one another. Cultures outline what it is to be a woman and what it is to be a man, and each culture proposes specific ways of relating between them. This relationship could be one of equality, complementariness, or inequality, according to the variations in social hierarchies, the economic participation and the symbols emerging from each group (Ruiz, 2002).

About the issues of gender and ethnic identity in Latin America, Alberti (1994) points out the existence of two myths in the ideology of the dominant culture: the myth of the indigenous women objectified and the myth of the “ankylosis” of ethnic groups. The first myth considers indigenous women as beings who assume without criticism their gender situation. The second myth perceives the ethnic groups as organizations that are not modified nor adapted to the social circumstances. Our investigation found evidence that the discriminatory stereotypes previously assigned to men and Mayan women still exist. These stereotypes are, however, no longer openly declared in public spaces--at least not with the same intensity as years ago. The Mayan people interviewed, particularly women and their families, show an impressive capacity to adapt their strategies in order to reach higher education.

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The snowball technique was used to find and a posteriori interview 1115 subjects Mayan speakers who had reached higher education. We interviewed in the municipalities of Mérida, Umán, Muna, Ticul, Oxkutzcab, Tekax, Ticum, Tzucacab, Peto, Kopomá, Maxcanú, Hocabá, Sacalum, Tixméhuac, Valladolid, Chapab, Telchaquillo, Acanceh and Halachó.

The interview, designed by Mijangos (2006), includes the following questions:

- What did you do to overcome the obstacles that were appearing in your path to reach higher education?

- Did your family play a role in that process? If the answer is yes, please let us know what that role was.
- What other factors allowed you to finish secondary school and to advance to higher education?

During the interviews, we added other questions in order to obtain a more profound understanding of the gender strategies used by men and women in reaching higher education.

With the informants' authorization we recorded interviews on video and audio, and the data was analyzed using Max QDA software.

## Results

The first research evidence we gathered which helps us to deconstruct the myth of the objectified indigenous women was the finding that in a universe of 1115 Mayan speakers who reach higher education, 53.27 % are women and 46.72 % are men.

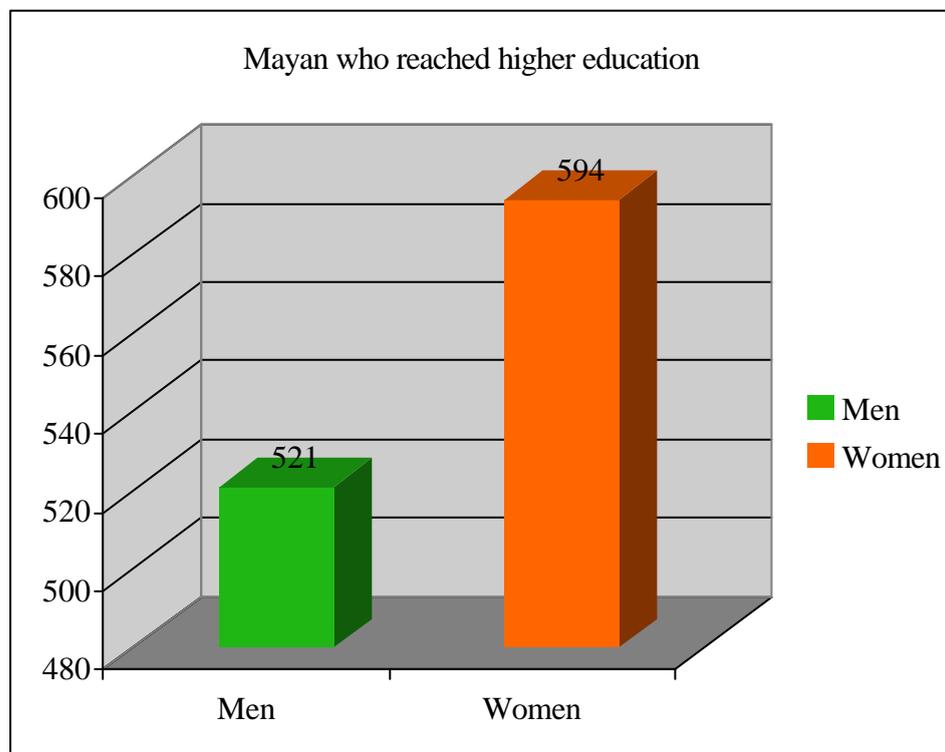


Figure1. *Mayas in higher education sorted by gender.*

Our data, in a certain sense, establishes a counterpoint with data presented by sources like the INEGI (2004), which shows that in the state of Yucatan 58,9 % of the population has dropped out of school, of which 56,3% are men and 61,3 % are women.

This data aroused our interest in answering questions such as the following: what is happening with the masculine gender in the indigenous communities? Could we talk about the feminization of higher education among Mayan people? Are the gender roles in the indigenous communities being redefined? If this is true: what new role does the Mayan woman play? What is the new masculine role? How do these new roles influence the process of dropping out? In which kinds of familiar, social, and cultural conditions do the Mayan, women and men, manage to attain higher education?

On the basis of the gathered evidence we can assume that the widespread stereotypical assumption that the predominance of the patriarchal familiar system is more common among the Mayans than other groups of Yucatecan and Mexican society is a fabrication of the dominant culture, instilled by prejudices and discriminatory attitudes against the indigenous communities (Alberti, 1994). The presumption that machismo pervades gender relationships among the indigenous (in this case Mayan) with greater intensity than in other sectors of the Mexican society, is not supported by the evidence. In fact, Mayan women and not Mayan men more frequently reach higher education.

Acknowledging this evidence of matriculation based on gender does not dispute the presence of patriarchal structures and practices in the Mayan families. It does highlight, however, that these patriarchal structures simply do not seem to be more intense than in non-indigenous families. What we identified in the indigenous communities is, in relation to the possibility of advancement within the scholastic system, that the gender issue is trumped by elements of economy that strongly condition who does or does not reach higher education.

Evidence shows that although in some Mayan families the education of the men is privileged, in others the educational opportunities favor the women. According to many of the men and women interviewed, these decisions regarding who goes to school and who does not are not perceived as gender determined, but rather as pragmatic decisions supporting the most viable option for improving the conditions of life of the entire family. That is to say, the general discrimination and economic

marginalization of Mayan people is often more important in the phenomena of dropout than the discrimination by gender. This is due to the parents' requirement for a work force to improve the condition of life of the family. In this situation of basic family survival, the person who can already augment the family's economic income sacrifices his or her education.

Regarding the strategies used by the Mayan men and women we interviewed, the following findings were obtained: each man and woman developed, at each educative level, strategies that helped them in entering, continuing, and succeeding at school. In order to understand the previous assertion, it is important to take into consideration the following observations:

a) The dynamics of formation and the strategies used by Mayan girls and boys, women and men, in school do not happen in isolation; they are products of the conjunction of familiar, cultural and social conditions in which the individuals have lived from their first years of life. These strategies are modified as the individual advances to superior levels of education.

b) The successful graduates changed their strategies as the circumstances of their schooling changed. Once we identified the strategies of each Mayan person we interviewed for this investigation, we then analyzed and interpreted each person's strategies in the context of the person's respective processes of schooling. From this analysis of their speech a new recognition of the variety of strategies arose for us. In particular, we recognized behaviors and strategies that differ according to the educational level and scholastic community involved. Using these analyses as an input allowed us to make some "generalizations," generalizations which are very closely related to this studied context and do not pretend to be valid for other contexts.

All the strategies seem to coincide in one consideration: the recognition that studying a career would be a tool to avoid remaining in conditions of marginalization, poverty and social inequality and yet remain a member of the Mayan cultural and ethnic group, at least in the closest community context. The advantage gained by being educated is the diminishment of discrimination from the dominant society. But to be able to fully receive this "advantage," the Mayan speakers who reach higher education hide themselves: they do not speak the Mayan language in school and even deny knowing their mother tongue.

In the following lines we will focus, in a very general way, on the strategies used by Mayan individuals specifically in each educational level. Since the material is very abundant—each one of the 287 subjects interviewed gave us a lot of information impossible to tightly condense—we decided to offer a general understanding of these strategies.

In most of the cases the Mayan families, or at least one influential family member, realized that formal education would allow them better opportunities in life. Once in school, these Mayan speakers managed to develop, with remarkable skill, a series of solutions to face the diverse obstacles in reaching this goal. For instance, many of them identified, and do identify, the primary school as the educative level in which monolingual Mayan speakers must master the Spanish language.

In elementary school, the figure of the teacher plays an important role in the success of the student. With the situation of having a Spanish monolingual as teacher, the Mayan monolingual students resort to an “invisible” state that does not revealed their lack of knowledge of the Spanish language, since to be identified as monolingual in Maya puts them in a greater risk of discrimination by their classmates as well as by some of the teachers. Discrimination by teachers is often underground. In fact, in the Yucatan it is very infrequent to hear about open discrimination of Maya people although many people still use the word “Indio” (Indian) as a pejorative and an undetermined number of teachers still forbidden the Mayan language in classrooms.

Mayan students in elementary school develop the ability to associate images with the teacher’s explanations in order to understand the subject and simultaneously learn some words in Spanish. Another strategy detected among students who were monolinguals in Maya was asking for help from the classmates who spoke both Mayan and Spanish who were disposed to help them. This allowed the monolinguals to do their homework and pass. This implies that the Mayas who are bilingual have less difficulty in understanding the teacher’s explanations and completing assigned tasks.

Because of the discrimination against the Mayan language, many of Mayan parents who currently have children in elementary school request that the professor teach in Spanish. The follow dialogue recorded by Mijangos and Romero (2006) is an example:

? Why don’t you speak Mayan?

? Because I don't like it.

? In your house your family speaks Maya?

? My mother speaks Maya, but she speaks to me in Spanish; also my brothers speak Maya, but they speak to me in Spanish. My mother doesn't like I speak Maya (sic). (Mijangos & Romero, 2006)

In the special schools for Mayan children in the Yucatan, the teachers demonstrate the following range of capabilities:

a) Some of them know the oral Mayan language, but do not know how to read and write in that language.

b) An undetermined number of teachers do not know the Mayan language and are thus totally incapable of speaking, understanding, reading or writing in Maya. Because mastery of the Mayan language, at least in oral form, is a legal prerequisite for being a teacher in these schools for Mayan children, of course most of these teachers are registered as Mayan speakers in the official database. However, we discovered in this investigation that some of the teachers, although officially registered as Mayan speakers, do not actually understand even spoken Maya.

c) Just a few teachers have mastered the Mayan language in the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing.

The evidence gathered in this and previous researches help us to understand that the problem of dropping out it is incorrectly attributed to the use of the Mayan students mother tongue in school. From our researched point-of-view, the problem is actually the lack of trained teachers and adequate didactic material, which would permit a good elementary education in the Mayan language.

In relation with gender it is necessary recognize that it is precisely in the transit between elementary and secondary school when many women drop out of school. Having read the literature about the life cycle of Mayan women (Daltabuit, 1992; Elmendorf, 1972), we suggest that a woman's role in her early years as caretaker of her younger siblings is the main cause of this phenomenon. This assumption, however, must be proved through deeper interviews with the women participants.

Generally, the interviewed subjects state that in order to attend secondary school they were prompted to go outside their villages and communities because there were no secondary schools in their home communities. This change implied reframing,

sometimes in drastic ways, the strategies they had used to survive elementary school. In secondary school the circumstances are different. There is no special—even supposedly bilingual—school addressed to the Mayan population, so the Mayan students must survive in a system that offers classes only in Spanish. The testimony of one of the interviewed subjects offers an example to us:

When I was in the primary school, all the Spanish language that we spoke among the classmates sounded good to us. But already when I left the village to study secondary school, when I began to relate to the classmates of Tekax, the nearest and bigger municipality, there were some words that went away to me (sic) and (classmates) they laugh at me (Personal communication, November 2007).

Now the situation has changed some. Students in many Mayan villages can go to secondary school in their own village, but these schools are still only taught in Spanish, and taught by professors who usually do not speak the Mayan language.

Also, in secondary and higher grades the student must develop solutions for obtaining a scholastic performance similar to his or her classmates who in general have received a better academic preparation. The student develops strategies for understanding contents that are complex for him or her because they have not been studied in the previous level. Also, this transition implies the development of new forms of socialization within the new scholastic community, socialization with the obvious objective of avoiding the discriminatory jokes and attitudes of the non-Mayan classmates.

Preparatory school and college do not present the same obstacles, at least in relation to language, since at this point the Mayan student already dominates the Spanish language well enough. Nevertheless, some strategies remain identical to those employed while attending the previous educational levels: choosing to travel to the closest-available yet distant school despite the difficult travel conditions, or move to the nearest city to reach the available educational opportunities. Also continuing to combine work and study, and continuing to add support the family in the school vacations--the men in agricultural activities, women in housekeeping activities. Running for a scholarship is a strategy of economic nature that it is frequently used in these

levels. For many Mayan individuals a scholarship is the only chance to get higher education.

The testimony of Nora (a pseudonym), a Mayan woman who studied college abroad and later reached postgraduate studies, illuminates one aspect related to gender and schooling for Mayan people:

When I began to leave the village to go to the college, many people saw that behavior as awkward. People said things like "who knows where she is going, or what she does." People never saw it (go out of the village) as something good, because those cultural questions are not related with the traditional female role within the family, within the society. You must have children, be a housewife. (Nora, personal communication, June 2007)

But now those kind of cultural issues are less influential on the process of dropping out, as the statistics previously presented suggest more women take the opportunity to study. This is also affirmed by most of the men and women interviewed, who despite recognizing some ambivalent cultural issues in relation to the education of women, also recognizes that the most skilled person within a family tends to be the one supported in reaching higher education. So the main problem is economic; the secondary one, discrimination. For us, poverty is the most evident proof of discrimination against Mayan people in Yucatan, Mexico.

However, some questions have arisen as a result of the information collected in our research about the subject of gender: for a Mayan woman, does achieving higher education and thus being socially recognized as a successful woman socially implied a loss of the cultural role? What price must Mayan women pay in their passage towards higher education? What is happening with the socialization process that it is promoting changes in the cultural expectations of women that are now in favor of education? At this point of our investigation we are searching for answers to these questions, which have arisen from our interactions with highly educated Mayan women and men.



### **Conclusions**

On the basis of the gathered evidence, it is possible to assume that the commonplace idea of a predominantly patriarchal family system among the Mayan is now, in actuality, more a product created by the dominant culture and instilled by prejudices and stereotypes against the indigenous communities (Alberti, 1994). In other words, the presumption that the machismo is greater and more intense among the indigenous people than among other sectors of the Mexican society, such as in this case the general population of the Yucatan, is not supported by the evidence, which actually provides the fact that Mayan women reach higher education more frequently than men.

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