



Status of Indigenous Girls in Guatemala

Ri rub'anon ri tixten aj qach'amaqil pa Iximuleu



DEMI



LOOK AT ME!

Status of Indigenous Girls in Guatemala

Joint Publication of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Office for the Defense of Indigenous Women (DEMI).

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Presentation

The country owes a long-overdue debt to its indigenous girls. Correcting this historic omission is more than urgent to give these girls the same opportunities as girls who are born in a good environment, receive adequate nutrition, early care, preschool, primary and secondary education and all the other opportunities to ensure full respect of their basic rights.

Look at Me! The Status of Indigenous Girls in Guatemala, a report prepared by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Office of the Defender of Indigenous Women (DEMI), once more brings to the fore a reality that must change, at the same time as it proposes the decisions that will have to be taken in providing a solution.

We must go beyond diagnostics and take as a starting point the critical status of indigenous girls' rights that now prevails to advance collectively toward the required solutions.

There is room for everybody in this effort, beginning with the State, but also for a broad and diverse set of social players. These range from those who play a role in the family and the community, such as parents, teachers, leaders of the CODODES and

COMUDES, grass-roots organizations and municipal authorities, to national entities of all types, businesses, churches and academic centers, among many others.

The challenge is of such a magnitude that only a resolute political and civic will can reverse a status that has been building up for hundreds of years.

The time is more than ripe, because this appeal to Guatemalan citizens' conscience comes at a time when a new administration has just taken office, and the challenge for the new administration is to strengthen and give continuity to agendas that show the way forward.

Mírame (Look at Me!) seeks to draw attention and at the same time promote decisive action. Look at Me! means that you recognize my status and take action, wherever you are, to bring about changes and make discrimination and the lack of solutions a thing of the past.

When reviewing the status of indigenous girls in the areas of education, health, work, protection, participation and violence, it is obvious that there are unfair and unacceptable gaps that have prevented their full development and integration. Giving priority to indigenous girls is, above all, a reaffirmation of their rights and a moral commitment. Investing in indigenous girls is the most sustainable and fully justified way to catapult families', communities' and the country's development.

The country must prioritize comprehensive care of indigenous girls in every development area, allowing their participation as a certain way to revitalize and enforce the Peace Accords.

The time has come pay the historic debts of the Guatemalan people to its indigenous peoples and one of the most worthy ways of doing it is to provide direct and decisive attention to indigenous girls to break the vicious circles of poverty, hunger, discrimination, inequality and violence.

There is no excuse for not doing so. The knowledge, technical, financial and human resources needed to defend and promote the full exercise of indigenous girls' rights are available in Guatemala.

We thank Claudia Dary for preparing this report and Claudio Versiani, whose sensitive lens captured the delicate and expressive images that illustrate this paper.

Adriano González-Regueral
UNICEF Representative
for Guatemala



Introduction

This document is an appeal to everybody's sensitivity and commitment in the face of a reality that is not readily visible and appreciated: the status of indigenous girls in our country.

Guatemala has a mostly young population that has to contend with backwardness and gender, ethnic and class gaps in social areas and participation. These must be overcome so that the country can move forward and develop.

For historic and structural reasons, the indigenous peoples have been discriminated against and excluded from decision-making on topics of social interest that directly affect them. The status of indigenous girls and adolescents cannot be understood outside of this context, but rather as an integral part thereof.

The centuries of submission and subordination that the indigenous had to endure are reflected in the silence of Maya women, their fear of speaking out, of expressing their views and feelings. Many efforts have been made, however, and one of them is their fight to preserve communication in their own languages, to practice their own rites and ceremonies and to pass on to their daughters and sons their knowledge of nature, biodiversity and the cosmos. The upsurge in Maya organizations in the 90s also shows the native peoples' ability to respond, propose and resist.

That is why this paper analyzes the status of indigenous girls and adolescents based on their family, cultural and socioeconomic environment. It also addresses the obstacles that stand in the way of their formal education and the problem of malnutrition, which limit their overall development. It is clear that discrimination is a practice that affects indigenous girls in different areas and limits their full development. The somber picture of child labor, violence and child abuse is also shown in an effort to find legal mechanisms for their eradication and to bring the perpetrators to justice in accordance with the rule of law. In the framework of indigenous girls' diversity in urban and rural areas, it also shows how the promotion of inclusive policies allows under-age persons to make strides and contribute to their peoples' development.



It is important to note that when we mention indigenous girls, this category includes Maya, Garífuna and Xinka girls. White and/or mixed blood Guatemalan girls and boys are called Ladinno. We also use the definition of childhood and adolescence contained in the Comprehensive Law on Protection of children and adolescents, which defines “a girl or boy as any person from conception to the age of thirteen” and “an adolescent as any person aged thirteen to eighteen”. The term youth includes persons aged 14 – 24.



Discrimination against indigenous girls

The colorful güipil and the elegance of the skirt so proudly worn by an indigenous girl suddenly become a source of taunts at school. A look or gesture of rejection of their skin color or the sonority of their language will leave scars on their souls. Moreover, discrimination is structural in nature, because historically the Guatemalan State has marginalized indigenous peoples from essential public services, including health and education.

Thus, racial discrimination is a tangible and daily reality in Guatemala. It impacts the most vulnerable sectors of society: indigenous children and women. Exclusion, marginalization, restriction or limitation have different manifestations in social relations and begin to affect them since childhood. Thus, discrimination is experienced by indigenous girls in most inter-ethnic spaces: the street, the classroom, the schoolyard, the corridors, the market, the town square, the health center and other places..

Prejudices, stereotypes and intolerance

There are three constant factors among discriminatory social practices: prejudices, stereotypes and intolerance. The three are, at the same time, causes and effects. A stereotype is a rigid and generalized belief about certain groups of persons that leads to the belief that all the members of a group share the same characteristics.

Prejudice is an opinion or idea a person acquires with regard to another or a certain group, which frequently results in an attitude or conduct of rejection or reservation.

Intolerance is the result of misunderstanding, fear and rejection of what is perceived as different, and results in a lack of respect for others' opinions, customs, traditions and lifestyles, which promotes the adoption of discriminatory behaviors.

"Discrimination of Indigenous Women", a statement by Marisol Melesio Nolasco, Mexico, 2001.





In a paper entitled “Ethnic and Cultural Diversity – Citizenship in a Pluralistic State”, UNDP states: “racism permeates (...) all social conduct, not only personally but also institutionally, since, to varying degrees and with different expressions, it is part of the ideological construct in which one has grown up and contributes to the perpetuation of a status of domination and inequality”.

In that regard, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination states that this problem manifests itself in “any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on grounds of race, color, lineage or national or ethnic origin for the purpose of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other sphere of public life”.

In July 2004, the United Nations Special Rapporteur against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Associated Forms of Intolerance visited Guatemala and concluded that racism and racial discrimination are a deeply-rooted reality in the country, although they are not institutionalized.

According to the Special Rapporteur, there are several types of racial discrimination: legal, interpersonal, institutional and structural.

1. Legal: refers to gaps in legal provisions, the omission of positive statements on the human rights of indigenous peoples in the laws and insufficient adaptation of domestic legislation to international instruments ratified by Guatemala. In the case of indigenous girls, it results in the lack of specific laws that favor indigenous girls whose families live in poverty and extreme poverty.
2. Interpersonal: seen in attitudes of rejection and exclusion of indigenous peoples on the part of the mixed-blood and white population. It is also known as day-to-day racism, since it is perpetuated largely through routine and daily practices in public places: schools, the media, the street, etc. In most cases, these racist attitudes are the ones that induce indigenous girls to drop out of school, because their classmates make fun of them and their culture. In interpersonal relations, indigenous girls are also looked down upon, which affects their self-esteem.







3. Institutional: it manifests itself through an unfavorable bias toward indigenous peoples in the distribution of public expenditures and collective goods. It is expressed, inter alia, by low socioeconomic indices; limited participation in public administration, particularly in decision-making positions; limited access to health, education, justice, basic public services and the lack of job opportunities or access to land.

In the case of indigenous girls, it is obvious that the above problems affect their development. This is aggravated by the nonexistence of disaggregated statistics that can shed light on their status in specific areas, such as education, health and child labor, in which they are worse off than boys are.

4. Structural: it rests on the above-mentioned historic mechanisms, through which indigenous peoples were excluded from the economic, political and institutional resources needed in order to coexist in equal conditions with the rest of the Guatemalan population. Indigenous children are most affected at the long term by this absence of public policies that promote their comprehensive development and their access to health and education.

Unfortunately, according to the Defender of Indigenous Women, there is a tendency in State power spheres and in society to overlook and render invisible the problems of racism and discrimination, which contributes directly and indirectly to the perpetuation of these practices.

In spite of this, the fight against racial discrimination has begun to take hold in recent years. For instance, in October 2006 the Government of Guatemala introduced the Public Policy on Coexistence and Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which shows that the State is interested in eradicating discriminatory practices.

In Guatemalan society there also seems to be a greater awareness in this regard. In August 2005, the newspaper Prensa Libre published a survey conducted by Vox Latina indicating that 94.3 percent of those surveyed said that they were aware of the existence of discrimination against the indigenous population. 77.2 percent stated that the indigenous are discriminated because of their appearance and 50.9 percent said that it is because of their skin color.

Unfortunately, the same field study shows that discrimination is still taboo. 51 percent of those surveyed stated that very little is said about the subject in their homes. 37.2 percent said that they do not talk about it a lot and only 9.6 percent replied that they speak a lot about it. With regard to State policies, 49.5 percent said that they

There is a tendency to minimize and overlook problems of racism and discrimination.



thought the State has done little to fight intolerance and 35.2 percent said that it has done nothing in that regard.

In conclusion, the most salient points of this section are:

- Racial discrimination is a negative practice affecting interethnic relations, particularly those that have to do with indigenous girls, because they are detrimental to their comprehensive development and undermine their self-esteem.
- Racial discrimination is a crosscutting problem that affects economic, political, social and cultural areas and daily coexistence. It manifests itself in legal, interpersonal, institutional and structural ways.
- It is clear that the State and society must promote campaigns and discussions to raise awareness regarding the need to eradicate discriminatory practices against the indigenous population, particularly against indigenous girls.





The invisible indigenous girl

The existence of indigenous women is overlooked from their infancy onwards.

At the age of fourteen, Juanita has never attended school. Her duty is to stay at home and do household chores. She lives in the village of Los Izotes, in the indigenous community of Santa María Xalapán, Jalapa. With her family, she lives in a house made of bamboo-like sticks, rough boards, a tin roof and straw. It lacks electricity, drinking water and sewers.*

Her mother, Ana Luisa, did not want the girl, now in her teens, to go to school, because she needs her at home to carry water, do errands, knead tortilla meal, light the fire and get the clay with which she makes tortilla griddles. Ana Luisa also says that because the school is not appropriate for her people's needs, the girls who attend school acquire "bad habits" and if they do, later they refuse to work. At the end of each year, Juanita has to help support her family and must accompany her parents and her six older brothers and sisters to Colís, a coffee-growing region in Santa Rosa, where she earns 25 quetzals for every hundred pounds of coffee she picks. She can pick up to two hundred pounds a day.*

Juanita's story illustrates how indigenous girls are limited in their comprehensive development beginning with their families, because they live in a patriarchal structure where women are second-rate citizens. That is why the process that renders indigenous women invisible starts in infancy, at home, where it is believed that is what women were meant to do domestic chores, unlike men, who are educated to perform other tasks. This patriarchal system renders women's contribution invisible and leads to the belief that girls do not need to attend school because their place is next to the jar for carrying water, the grinding stone and the fire where the family's food is cooked.

* Names have been changed to protect people's identities.



A diverse, multilingual and multicultural country

In Guatemala, there are four main population groups: the Maya, Garífuna, Xinka and the ladino of European and mixed descent. From a sociolinguistic standpoint, there are 24 communities. 22 of them are Maya, one is Garífuna and one is Xinka. This provides cultural wealth but one should not lose sight of the fact that these peoples coexist in unequal conditions. The universal human rights and of those of the indigenous peoples, as recognized by the Covenant on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples, International Labor Organization (ILO) Agreement 169 on the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples of Independent Countries and other international conventions, should be respected in recognition of this cultural diversity.

According to the 2000 population census, the indigenous population was 41 percent of the total population, whereas the sector known as “ladino”, which is extremely diverse, was estimated at 59%. However, independent Maya organizations affirm that the indigenous population is as high as 60 percent. Among the indigenous, the National Statistics Institute (INE) recognizes the Maya, Garífuna and Xinka. The Maya population accounts for 39 percent of the Guatemalan population and is made up of four main groups, the k’iche’ (28.8 %); the q’eqchi (19.3%); the kaqchikel (18.9%) and the mam (14%). These four communities represent 80.99% of the country’s Maya population.

In Mesoamerican cultures, descent and inheritance are transmitted through the father. This patriarchal system begins from the time a couple decides to form a family. The residential pattern establishes that the new couple, whether married or living together, must live with or near the home of the groom’s parents. In political terms, this patriarchal system means that civil and religious authority in indigenous communities has been and still is in the hands of the adult men of the communities.

At the household level, indigenous families “are patriarchal, because the father is usually the authority figure. Each member of the family has a place and a specific responsibility; there are assigned roles and an established hierarchy”, as stated by Emma Delfina Chirix in *Alas y Raíces: Afectividad de las mujeres mayas*.

This explains why activities carried out by indigenous men are more appreciated than those carried out by women are. This is also because Mesoamerican cultures are agricultural and base their subsistence on the Maya food trilogy (corn, beans and squash). Planting, cultivating and harvesting these crops are men’s responsibility, although women take part in many associated activities. Hence, male indigenous farmers are the “providers” of food for the family, whereas women process it in different ways.





It is important to understand how indigenous girls are seen at home even before birth.

Aside from the cultural component of the rural nature of indigenous families, the high dependence on agriculture as the only source of work and resources limits the quality of girls' and boys' lives in rural areas.

It is important, however, to understand how indigenous girls are perceived in the home even before birth. The historic, cultural and ethno-linguistic context has to be considered in order to understand this.

According to the Maya world vision, the date of conception and the date of birth are the starting point of a person's mission on earth, since the "nahual" of the day on which a girl is born will determine her character, her temperament and her future potential. The nahual is conceived as the spirit of an animal that is responsible for protecting and guiding a person.

When the mother is pregnant, there are certain customs that are fo-





allowed to ensure the quality of a girl's life. That is why the mother must eat a certain diet. If the mother is tired, she is sent to rest, because the culture dictates that a pregnant woman should not be overburdened with work. The life the mother is carrying must be cared for. The support given to the mother-to-be by her mother, mother-in-law and midwife are also very important, especially if she is a first-time mother.

Ideally, the father should be present at childbirth. If there were disagreements or problems before the birth, this is the time for reconciliation. The father must also help the woman when things get difficult and be at hand in case there is an emergency.

When a baby girl is born, the midwife gives her a little tap on the back, which means "the breath of life". She tells the newborn baby, "Look! This is your star, this is your nahual and you were born for this. We hope this star will shine and that you will go beyond where we went. You were not born to destroy. We hope you will build and recreate." The midwife tells the little girl this while she bathes her and dresses her. This is the first advice the baby receives. The indigenous girl or boy enters what the k'iche' call the great pixab.

Thus, the nahual is a person's spiritual, psychological and physical starting point, the one that will determine her "true face and true heart". When the girl grows up, she will be told what her nahual is. However, this custom is being lost, because people no longer know what their nahual is.

Ideally, people who are not part of the nuclear family cannot see or hold the baby girl until she is 20 or 40 days old and she has been presented in public. The indigenous believe that there are people who have negative energy that can harm the little girl and affect her emotionally. That is why the baby is covered for several days after she is born, to allow her to gain strength and to protect her. An ear of corn is placed on her chest, between her little hands, so that she will learn to love and respect it. A candle is also lit.

Look! This is your star, this is your nahual and you were born for this. We hope your star will shine.



From early childhood to adolescence

In the 0-3 age group, parents are most concerned about a girl's safety. They believe that it is important to carry her on their backs with a "rebozo" (shawl). Physical contact between the mother and the baby girl is important. Close to her mother's back, the baby feels warm, she hears her mother's heart and can be breast-fed quickly and practically. Indigenous girls and boys do not have many toys but being close to their mother's huipil (native blouse), they enjoy looking at its bright colors.

When a girl is born, she is often seen as a burden for the family, but this has to do with the family's relationships, the way the husband



acts and other factors. “We have to remember that a man’s mindset changes when he has been in the Army; he becomes much more “macho”, says the spiritual guide.

Until recently, a midwife was paid twice as much if the baby was a boy than if it was a girl. Fortunately, this is changing a lot these days and one often hears midwives say that the life of a girl is worth just as much as that of a boy.

Until the age of 6 or 7, an indigenous girl plays most of the time and starts to learn a few chores.

Poor indigenous girls and boys play with objects near them: plants, soil, bottle tops and bits of wood. This develops girls’ creativity and imagination. “I used to play with corncobs (what is left after the corn is husked). Corncobs were my dolls. With them, I could create a family. We could build stalls for the horse and other animals, little houses and other things with them. Children need to invent and not have everything done for them,” said Virginia Ajxup, who adds that buying unnecessary plastic toys limits children’s creativity.



Girls are entitled to play

“Through the competent authorities, the State should promote and respect girls’, boys’ and adolescents’ right to age-appropriate rest, leisure, play and recreational and sports activities, and to participate freely and fully in their community’s cultural and artistic life. Favorable conditions should be created for them to enjoy this right under equal opportunity conditions.”

Article 45, Law on the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents; Decree Number 27-2003

It is a student’s right to “take part in educational, recreational, sports and cultural opportunities during their free and vacation time”.

Chapter II, article 39, paragraph I, National Education Act.





The expectations and responsibilities assigned to girls and boys vary depending on the culture. However, the Guatemalan indigenous peoples' vision of childhood has changed with time. Indigenous girls are now raised differently from the way they were raised in the 1950s, but the notions of duty and respect of others, especially adults, have not changed.

The notion of childhood and personhood is important from the standpoint of the indigenous culture, although it has not been adequately explored until now. Behaviors and rules regarding what is and is not socially correct, as well as gender roles, are learned inside the family.

Girls are socialized since infancy and they are taught values such as obedience and service to others. When one watches indigenous girls at play, one can see what is expected of them in the future. As they play, indigenous girls are effectively helping at home. From the time they are small, when their mothers wash clothes at the river or the sink, girls are given a little piece of soap and a small item of clothing to play at "washing". The same thing happens in the kitchen.

Indigenous girls' responsibilities and workload depend on several factors: the family's financial status and their position among the siblings. The oldest indigenous girl bears a heavier burden than the *ch'ip* (the last of the brothers and sisters). If the girl is the oldest sibling, she has to look after her little brothers and sisters while the mother cares for the youngest baby or attends to other household chores. That is why the oldest indigenous girl often does not attend school and, if she does, she only goes as far as the second or third grade. This girl has to carry her brothers and sisters on her back, help wash the clothes, do errands, carry firewood and light the fire. In contrast, the *ch'ip* is spoiled, the chores she has to do are lighter and the mistakes she makes are condoned.

From the time they are small, girls learn that the males eat first. The father eats first, then the brothers, then the girl and her little siblings, and lastly the mother. This learned cultural pattern is quite common in Guatemalan rural areas, where the family eats by turns near the kitchen stove or at the table.

Although there have been changes, the pattern for raising indigenous girls has to do with the notion that they must become good



An indigenous girl's educational patterns have to do with the notion of becoming a good worker, a good homemaker and a good mother.



workers, good homemakers and good mothers. This pattern can change depending on the area where the girl is growing up, in rural or urban areas. It also depends on her parents' financial standing with regard to other families.

In rural areas, especially in villages, and particularly in homes that lack running water, girls have to help their mothers carry water in plastic jars (which used to be made of clay) or metal cans. The boys help their fathers to work the soil with a hoe, cultivate corn, carry cords of firewood and perform other tasks. It is said that a girl becomes a woman when the tortillas she makes are perfect, she can light the fire by herself, serve her father and her brothers, and her weaving is well made.

Facing a very bleak future

For many indigenous families, the chores performed by girls are part of their rearing as women. This is how they are taught to survive in case they lose their parents. They are taught a work ethic that is different from the Western one. This perspective is often not shared by professionals or activists who feel that girls and boys should be free from responsibilities and must study and play during most of the day, as priority activities during this period of life.

The passage from childhood to adolescence is not an easy process, because it not only involves physical but also emotional, psychological and behavioral changes. One of the difficulties faced by preadolescent indigenous girls is the lack of sex education. When many girls get their first menstrual period, they are ignorant of the physiological process they are undergoing. Many problems and premature pregnancies could be prevented if these young girls had received accurate, full and timely information.

A girl's body changes, and so does the treatment she gets from other family members. Her share of the household chores increases and is more demanding. More responsibility is placed on her shoulders.

The passage into adolescence means that the young woman must take on household chores, no longer as a game, but as effective and efficient help for her parents and siblings. Young indigenous girls get up earlier than their brothers do, because they have to light the fire, grind the corn and prepare breakfast for them. They have to help the mother wash the brothers' clothes because it would not do for them





to perform this chore, let alone at the public fountain, where women congregate. The immediate consequence of this domestic labor pattern is that young girls have less time for themselves and work harder than their brothers do.

Adolescence is the age when courtship begins. This is a difficult stage and restrictions depend on whether the environment is rural or urban. An indigenous girl runs the risk of conflict with her parents because of her interaction with young men, whether at a remote village, on the street, on the town square or at school. Hence, to prevent possible pregnancy or rape, the parents will start to limit their outings and even deny them “permission” to go to school. This will happen especially if the young woman lives in a community that is remote from urban areas, since going to school would take too long, in addition to the dangers that lie on the way to school.

The mother plays an important role in a young girl’s informal education. The mother is responsible for educating her daughters and sons. The father is generally not responsible for teaching the girl how to get along and defend herself in life. If the young woman is polite and hard working, the mother is rewarded with praise. If the girl does not behave the way the culture expects her to, the mother is responsible. The mother is blamed for everything. “If the girl is raped, it is the mother’s fault; if the girl becomes pregnant, it is the mother’s fault,” says Chirix.

Despite the parent’s surveillance, young girls finally manage to leave the house. They usually migrate to urban areas of the country. The Social and Economic Research Institute (IDIES) of Rafael Landívar University (URL) conducted a brief characterization of internal migration in Guatemala in 2004. The study profiled Guatemalans who migrate from the country to the city. “They are young, usually aged between 17 and 18, although they range from 14 to 24. They have completed elementary school and, if married, have fewer than three children. Their work experience has to do with agriculture.”

Most young people come from the poorest municipalities that lack job opportunities, which is the case of San Marcos. According to UNDP estimates, each week the capital city receives an average of 40 people from San Marcos, most of them male and female adolescents. For this population, migrating to the city means earning twice as much as they earned in their native village, and often a lot more. Many go to the city with the idea of sending part of their wages to their parents, who often also take care of a single mother’s children.

The immediate consequence of this household work pattern is that young girls have less time for themselves and they suffer more physical exhaustion than their brothers.

With regard to international migration, the Migration Institute of Mexico (IMM) has detained and deported a large number of Guatemalan young people, most aged 15 – 18. When they are interviewed, most of them agree that they wanted to “fight for life” and be reunited with their relatives in different cities of the United States. Many also run away from home due to family problems.

Each week, the Migrant Shelter “Nuestras Raíces”, in Quetzaltenango, assists 120 young migrants who are returned by the Mexican authorities to Guatemala. Of these, 75% are males who come from San Marcos, Huehuetenango, Quetzaltenango, Quiché and Sololá. This shelter reports having received pregnant young women who were traveling to the United States and were unaware that they were pregnant until they were examined by medical staff during the deportation process, as reported by Carlos Loarca in the newspaper *Prensa Libre* on June 18, 2007.



Invisible for the laws of the country

Indigenous girls encounter other obstacles, some of them linked to the fate of their mother. That is the case of Andrea* and Lucía*, two of girls from the poqoman ethnic group who live in the village of El Camarón, San Luis Jilotepeque, Jalapa. Their grandmother, a traditional potter, says that the children have not been registered in the Register of Vital Statistics because their mother, who is 22, has been unable to obtain an identity card, which is required for that purpose.

“You have to have *pisto* (money) for everything: to get your picture taken, for the bus fare to the village of San Luis. Moreover, who will take care of the girls if the *tata* (father) is away working at a farm in Petén?” complains Andrea and Lucía’s mother. This young indigenous woman does not exist in the eyes of the public authorities; she cannot exercise her citizen rights. If her daughters’ status remains the same, they will be in the same position as their mother.

This case exemplifies the situation of under-registration in the country, especially in rural areas. Some of the sectors most affected by the lack of identity papers are women, especially those who live in remote indigenous communities. Aside from having to contend with cultural patterns, such as machismo, they have had to overcome discrimination and marginalization, because many of them simply do not exist in the country’s legal records.

“In my village there were women 50 years old or older who were not even registered,” says Humberta Suchité, who lives in Matasano, in the municipality of Jocotán, Chiquimula, and is aware of the obstacles women who have no identity papers encounter in identifying themselves.

The importance of registering births

“Although it is true that registration, in itself, does not offer a child any guarantees, it gives it a name and nationality, which contribute to the efforts made to combat the various forms of child exploitation, such as illegal adoptions and forced recruitment. It is also useful as a protective measure in the juvenile criminal justice system”.

*Inter American Human Rights Commission,
Organization of American States, 2003.*

* Not their real names.



The new Act on the National Register of Persons “constitutes a challenge for the implementation of public policies that ensure the registration of all the girls and boys of the country,” says UNICEF.

At the same time, however, there is statistical ethnocide when many persons who for different reasons do not speak a Maya language or have stopped wearing a native costume but still identify themselves as “indigenous” or “native” are identified as “non-indigenous” or ladino. The way in which they identify themselves should be respected. In other words, it is not the State, represented by a census taker, who should assign a category. It is the person who should report it to the State,” as indicated by the report entitled *Diversidad étnico nacional: la ciudadanía en un Estado plural (Ethnic and National Diversity: Citizenship in a Pluralistic State)*, by UNDP.

There are situations of abuse or exploitation of indigenous girls that are hidden explicitly or implicitly. There is covert abuse, ill treatment and sexual trafficking in minors, as well as child labor in rural and urban areas. The chores girls do are looked down on or rendered invisible by treating them as “helping the parents or relatives” and as payment for “the favor” of keeping them at home. In many cases, employers take advantage of them by not reporting that they have hired minors, since they are paid less and girls or young women with little education are unaware of their rights and cannot complain.

Girls, especially indigenous girls, who are not registered in the Register of Vital Statistics, are unable to exercise their rights.

The most important points in this section are as follows:

- Because of certain learned socio-cultural patterns, the chores performed by indigenous girls are still seen as a woman’s job, and not as a socially learned and internalized attitude. What a girl does for the other members of her family is socially underestimated and rendered invisible by calling it “helping parents or relatives” and as “naturally” female tasks.
- Guatemalan society therefore tends to consider that indigenous girls and women are not “naturally” made for studying and having a profession but for the home or, if they are lucky, for commerce. According to indigenous cultural patterns, this female child “help” at home is training for life, a tool a girl is offered so that she can get by in the future.
- We have also seen that indigenous adolescent girls spend a lot of time doing household chores and are watched more closely than boys are. The immediate consequence of this household work pattern is that the girls have less time for themselves and the work they do is more





physically exhausting than their brothers' is. Although attitudes are changing, social pressure is exerted on daughters to reproduce the traditional patterns of female behavior of their community.

- Under the patriarchal system that prevails in Guatemala, women's abilities in many facets of life are underestimated. This status determines the quality and quantity of the food women eat; it also determines parents' attitude towards adolescents' schooling. Indigenous girls are allowed to study if there is money available and if they get their parents' "permission". These usually do not understand that studying is a right and not a gracious concession.
- With regard to under-registration of infant births, this has been seen as a serious problem for the country. Girls, especially indigenous girls, who do not appear in the Register of Vital Statistics, cannot exercise their rights. Moreover, they are in a highly vulnerable position because they are easy prey for kidnapping, abduction and change of identity, as well as labor and sexual exploitation.



Difficult access to education

Alejandra started going to school when she was five, at the Estancia Grande village, municipality of San Juan Sacatepéquez, near the capital city. The little girl did well in school because she liked to keep her schoolbooks and her book bag neat and tidy. She loved to talk to her teacher and was a member of the girls' soccer team.*

However, one day her mother had a stroke and Alejandra had to leave school and help at home. She had to sweep the floor, light the fire, wash in the river and do errands. Her older sister was already married and had her own home. The other children, except for the youngest one, were boys, so housework was Alejandra's responsibility until her mother recovered. When she turned 13, and to pay the debt the family had incurred for medical services, Alejandra went to work at a tortilla factory in zone 7 of Guatemala City, where tortillas were sold for breakfast, lunch and dinner. She started working at 5 a.m. and ended around 6 p.m. for a monthly wage of Q600. Her work included doing the laundry and cleaning house for the owner of the business.

Alejandra's case shows that indigenous girls have fewer opportunities to go to school and to continue studying. This is due to a number of socioeconomic factors, the lack of public services and social security, the place of residence, cultural patterns, the patriarchal system and macho attitudes.

For indigenous parents who live in poverty, buying notebooks, pencils, crayons, a school bag and other school supplies constitute a huge expense. Families do not have the money to pay for school meals, so girls attend school on an empty stomach.

However, significant strides are beginning to be made in education. These include an increase in girls' enrollment in the first grade. According to the UNICEF "Analysis of the Status of Early Childhood in Guatemala, 2007", enrollment in preschool and elementary school increased between 2001 and 2005.

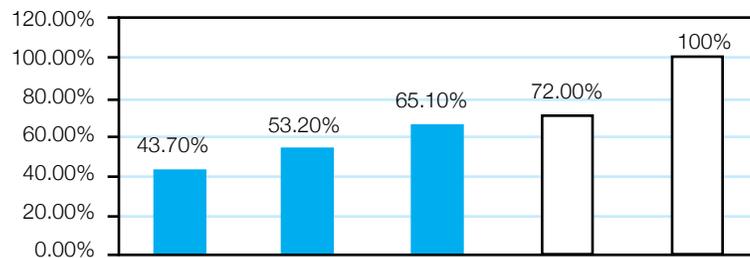
* Not her real name.

Indigenous girls have fewer opportunities to attend school and to remain in it.

The net rate of school attendance increased from 85% to 93.5%. More importantly, the gender gap was reduced in primary school, from 8% in 1994 to 4% in 2004.

Progress has been achieved in expanding primary education, which reached coverage of more than 90% beginning in 2004. However, the dropout rate and grade repetition rate are still so high that the country is far from reaching the third goal of the Millennium Development Objectives, "Ensuring that all girls and boys can finish primary school".

Graph 1
Students who start the first grade and finish the sixth grade



Source: Second Report on Progress toward fulfillment of the Millennium Development Goals, Segeplan, 2006



Education as a right

Access to education is a right all Guatemalan girls and boys have, independently from their ethnic origin and social class. Section Four of Chapter Two (articles 71 to 81) of the Constitution of Guatemala is dedicated to education. It clearly indicates that the State must provide free and compulsory education to all the children and young people of the country. Article 71 states: “The State is under the obligation to provide and facilitate education for its inhabitants without any discrimination”.

The National Education Law, Decree 12-91, establishes the principles and purposes of education. Article 1, paragraph a, states that education “is a right inherent to human beings and an obligation for the State” and paragraph b states that education must be based “on respect for human dignity and effective fulfillment of human rights”.

Likewise, section two of the Law on Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents, enacted in 2003, sets out the rights of students, the obligations of the State, Government authorities and society as a whole.

Illiteracy also affects the young. In 2000, the illiteracy level of the Guatemalan population aged 15 and over was 68.2%. When literacy is analyzed along ethnic lines, the data are striking. 79.4% of non-indigenous people are literate, whereas only 49.9% of the indigenous can read and write. When these figures are disaggregated by gender, the gap increases even further, since 94% of non-indigenous and urban men are literate, in contrast with only 31.1% of rural indigenous women, according to a United Nations System report.

Regarding the level of education, the indicator is 4.5 years for the population aged 15 or older. Non-indigenous and urban males have the highest level (8.9 years), or three years of secondary school. Indigenous women who live in rural areas are least able to attend and remain in school, since their education rate only reaches 1.2 years, or the first grade of primary school, according to the United Nations report.





Social attitude towards girls' education

Benefits of primary education

It has been determined that six years of formal primary school would allow girls to:

1. Improve family health.
2. Give girls and boys better nutrition.
3. Reduce child morbidity and mortality.
4. Increase life expectancy.
5. Improve the standard of living of the population.
6. Acquire abilities and skills that would provide work opportunities and increase family, community and national productivity.
7. Promote a change in the attitudes and behaviors of girls and the people who surround them.

Otilia Lux de Cotí

Alejandra's status, whose story was told earlier, took a positive turn soon afterwards because she was able to go back to school. During the time when she worked at the tortilla factory, she was not even able to study on weekends since the owner of the business did not let her go out on Saturdays or Sundays, claiming that she was looking out for her safety. When the teenager was able to leave the tortilla factory, she got a job at a cafeteria and later went back to her village, Estancia Grande.

At 17, she enrolled in the sixth grade in a school she attends on Saturdays. The rest of the time she "helps" at home, has a vegetable stand at the market and cooperates with the Women's Association in San Juan Sacatepéquez. Her participation in this association has allowed Alejandra to play a leadership role in her community.

Although there have been changes in social and gender relations in indigenous communities, in general terms the reality is that cultural stereotypes are perpetuated. These start in the home, are reinforced by the media and force girls to continue playing their traditional gender roles.

* Not her real name.



The educational background of an indigenous girl's parents also determines the value given to education in the home.

Anthropologist Irma Alicia Velásquez has studied this phenomenon in the k'iche' community, but it is common to other ethnic groups in the country. She states that until this patriarchal system is collectively challenged and changed by men and women, it will be difficult for indigenous women to reach full equality.

The prevailing idea is that boys “are smart enough to study”, but girls “are not”. One often hears the members of indigenous families say that girls should not be allowed to study too much because “they become lazy” and do not want to do housework. The situation is very different when the parents understand that education is a right for their sons and daughters. “The father becomes aware of his obligation to provide schooling for his daughter, which implies that she is regarded more positively. This appreciation can result in affection (for the young girl), states Chirix.

The educational background of an indigenous girl's mother and father also determine the value given to education in the home. If the parents were unable to attend school, it is very likely that they are unaware of its value and the opportunities it offers in society. However, mindsets are starting to change and it is assumed that the disadvantage the parents had makes them want to avoid following the same model with their children. For example, a poqomchi' artisan



from Tactic, who only went as far as the second grade, changed his attitude towards education. One of his daughters, who is now a business administrator, says that her father did not want her and her siblings to suffer like he had to. That is why he made a financial effort and sent them all to school until they graduated from college.

Problems in enrolling and remaining in school

Disparities in schooling

“... A boy who lives in a city, goes to school full-time and is ladino, whose parents have twelve years of schooling and do not belong to the poorest sector, has a 97% chance of attending school. In contrast, a girl in a rural area who works and belongs to an indigenous ethnic group, whose parents are illiterate and belong to the 20% poorest segment, has only a 22% chance of being part of the school system”.

Emilio Porter Pallais and José Ramón Laguna



These are some of the problems faced by the country's children and young people, particularly indigenous girls and adolescents, in enrolling in school and remaining in it until their schooling is complete:

(a) Being older and attending a lower grade. Indigenous girls attend lower grades because they enter school at a later age than boys. The consequence is that many indigenous girls and adolescents who could continue studying do not, even if their parents “let them”, because “they are embarrassed” to be in a class with younger girls and boys.

The possibility of entering the first grade at the appropriate age, seven, and that the girl is promoted to the next grade, has a positive effect on her remaining in school. This increases the prospects that she will finish the sixth grade. In contrast, it is likely that an overage girl will leave school before she finishes the sixth grade. However, k'iche' and kaqchikel primary school children are in a much better position than those of other socio-linguistic communities.

(b) Absenteeism and repeating grades. The indicators on school absenteeism and repeating grades are higher for the first grade, which has to do with the low coverage or inefficiency of preschool education. The problem might have to do with indigenous girls' and boys' difficulty in adapting to a school where a different language is spoken.



In 2000, of every ten girls and boys enrolled in the first grade, six reached the third grade and five finished the sixth grade in urban areas. In rural areas, however, only three finished the third grade and two finished primary school.

School Dropout Rate for girls aged 7 – 12	
Indigenous girls	Non-indigenous girls
19.4%	10.4%

Source: 9th National Population Census and 6th 2002 housing census.

The problem of school repetition is that it raises the investment costs for the State. A girl who repeats a grade is using the services twice, which reduces another girl's opportunities. Obviously, this is not her fault, but that of an environment of exclusion.

(c) Not attending school. An indigenous girl often does not attend school, not because she is not interested in her studies, but due to cultural, social and economic factors. Poverty is, without a do-





ubt, the determining factor that explains why girls drop out of school. The mother might need the girl to do domestic chores or she might have to leave home to work as a housekeeper or in a farm. Many parents take a girl out of school as soon as they realize that the child has learned to read and write, because they believe that she has acquired the necessary skills to get by in life. “She already knows how to write her name, add and subtract and she can now run errands without being tricked as easily” is something one often hears in rural areas. Many parents, given their precarious finances, feel that it is not necessary to “spend” more on the girl, because, after all, she will get married and a man will support her.

An indigenous girl who suffers discrimination in kindergarten or first grade will remember it all her life and she may be marked by it. In many cases, the girl will refuse to continue attending school.

Discrimination also plays an important role in girls’ dropout rates. At schools attended by students of different ethnic origins, indigenous girls are teased by non-indigenous children. They are discriminated against because they dress differently, speak a language that is not Spanish or have an accent. An indigenous girl who suffers from discrimination in kindergarten or the first grade will remember it all her life and she may be marked by it. In many cases, the girl might refuse to continue attending school.

Poor school facilities and the lack of adequate restrooms can affect indigenous girls more than boys. According to Porta and Laguna, “more than 85% of schools must be improved to meet the minimum standards; of these, 83% are in rural sectors”.

Girls’ lack of interest is another reason that might explain their dropping out and might have to do with poor nutrition during the first five years of life. Another very important reason is the culture shock experienced by an indigenous girl when she enters school. There are language communication barriers between the girl and her teacher that have not been overcome. If the study materials are unattractive or use objects and situations that do not belong to the indigenous culture or are foreign to the girl, she might lose interest in studying.

The geographic location of the school with respect to the indigenous girl’s home is an adverse factor she faces in attending school and finishing primary school. How rural the girl’s community is closely related to school coverage. Primary school coverage has been achieved in the departments of Guatemala, El Progreso, Jutiapa, Quetzaltenango and Santa Rosa, in contrast with Alta Verapaz, where 25% of children aged 7 – 12 do not attend school. Alta Verapaz is the most rural department, according to Porta and Laguna.



Reducing school dropout rates

At the Latin American level, the Program for Promotion of Educational Reform in Latin America and the Caribbean has determined that the following factors have helped reduce the number of children who drop out of school in the 1990s:

1. An increase in school enrollment coverage.
2. Adopting automatic promotion in primary school or the first years of school, which reduces the number of children who are overage.
3. The introduction or expansion of programs to improve school permanence (scholarships, school meals, etc.).
4. Improving the school infrastructure and the availability of schools in rural and remote areas.
5. Greater parental involvement and the introduction of incentives for parents to participate in school activities.

(d) Low educational coverage at the secondary level. In 2001, the gross schooling rate at the middle school level was 43.6% and the net rate was 28.4%. Only 24 of every 100 schools were in rural areas, where 60% of the school-age population lives. In the municipalities with a larger indigenous population, secondary school coverage only reaches 10.8%.

A drastic drop can be seen when initial, primary and middle school enrollment data are compared. 211,647 students enrolled in the first grade of middle school and 138,703 enrolled in the third grade. These data include students in the public and private school systems.

Due to their families' precarious economic status, young indigenous girls leave school to work as housekeepers, in tortilla factories, cafeterias and sexual commerce in Guatemala City. Adolescents who cannot find a job are attracted by the image of emigrants' success and the remittances they send from abroad. For this reason, many young women run the risk of migrating to the United States or Mexico illegally.

(e) Educational quality and cultural relevance. Because for many years educational programs and curricula were developed by non-indigenous teaching staffs, the knowledge and contribu-





Two-thirds of first-grade Maya students have teachers who do not understand or speak the children's mother tongue.

tions of the Maya, Garífuna and Xinka cultures were ignored. Paradoxically, the school system has operated as a transculturalization mechanism for the indigenous population and has threatened the survival of indigenous cultures.

Girls and boys who speak Maya, Xinka and Garífuna languages face a traumatic reality in school when their teachers do not speak their indigenous language or speak it but teach their classes in Spanish. This is the case in the department of Quiché, where 90% of the children enter school speaking a Maya language (k'iche', uspanteko, sakapulteko or ixil). These children face a double difficulty: they must learn to read and write, but in a language that is not their own.

Indigenous girls also receive direct or indirect messages at school that say that their culture is not valued. For this reason, their performance is often poor and their self-esteem goes down. The study entitled "Greater Educational Access, Quality and Equality in Guatemala" by USAID states that "two-thirds of first-grade Maya students have teachers who do not understand or speak the children's native language, and only 19 percent of the students in primary schools have access to bilingual intercultural education".

The challenge of bilingual intercultural education

Twelve-year-old Elda Maritza Pérez Ruiz has already planned her future at Choaxán Village of the municipality of Chinique, Quiché. The girl explains, with great propriety and ease, that when she grows up she is going to become a middle school teacher to help the children of her village. Then, she proudly adds, she will study psychology or pedagogy at a university.

She finished the sixth grade and while on vacation she worked alongside her father, herding cattle and feeding the animals. She also helped her mother with the housework. Elda studied at her community's school, which is part of the New Bilingual Intercultural Unitarian School (NEUBI), promoted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the State of Guatemala.

The girl is the youngest sibling and perhaps the luckiest one, because now her family is aware of her education and desire to improve. With time, this girl will become a leader.

NEUBI is a pioneering effort to respond to the multicultural and multilingual nature of the country, since it establishes the basis for bilingual and intercultural education based on boys' and girls' linguistic and cultural reality, values the relationship between the community and the school and adapts to girls' lifestyles in rural areas.

What is important about this initiative, which should be promoted with state support, is that it is based on the premise that girls and boys learn better in their own culture, which includes language at the core. The program went beyond the teacher-student relationship and has incorporated local government leaders.

More than 645 schools in six departments in the country have adopted this active methodology, which gives the starring role to students in the learning process in their native language. The parents participate actively in this experience, whereas teachers receive special training and teaching materials. In Quiché, there are 156 NEUBI schools in 16 municipalities.





A new hope for education

“New Unitarian Bilingual Intercultural Schools (NEUBI) are an innovative educational modality in which the teaching-learning process is centered on the students. They utilize a participative methodology that fosters participation and promotes students’ creativity. At the same time, parents have an opportunity to participate in their children’s education through school boards or committees that support the teacher and the school. The girls and boys are the main players in their learning and the teacher becomes a guide, counselor and facilitator”.

Successful Schools, UNICEF

This program is one of the achievements of the Peace Accords, particularly the Accord on Indigenous Peoples’ Identity and Rights, signed on March 31, 1995. This commitment established the importance of respecting the indigenous cultures and led to the establishment of bilingual and intercultural education and other reforms. It is also contained in the LPINA Law (articles 18, 38 and 39).

Several pioneering programs such as NEUBI and the Project on Access to Bilingual and Intercultural Education (PAEBI) were created and developed during the peace process. Other efforts have been promoted by international cooperation agencies, foundations and non-governmental organizations but, in the interest of brevity, we will highlight the relationship between BIE and cooperation agencies, given its importance.

The Project on Access to Bilingual and Intercultural Education (PAEBI), of *World Learning* (1999-2005), consisted in training a large number of teachers who speak Maya languages in cooperation with DIGEBI. A multiple strategy was used: training teachers, producing culturally appropriate teaching materials for the target population, promoting community participation in the education of its girls and boys, and promoting women’s leadership roles, especially those of mothers.

Indigenous women’s leadership in educational aspects was promoted by training more than 800 women in fifty communities in Quiché.

Most of the initiatives designed to promote bilingual and intercultural education cannot be understood without mentioning international cooperation agencies, which have largely funded and promoted it. For instance, the training of thousands of bilingual teachers, which is a high-





If indigenous girls attend schools that offer quality, culturally relevant education, bilingual teachers and appropriate and decent facilities, they will remain longer in school.

cost project, has been financed through international cooperation and State resources. However, the Guatemalan State cannot continue to rely on international support, and must shoulder its responsibility to follow up these achievements.

The positive results achieved by bilingual intercultural education should be highlighted. According to Ministry of Education reports, the rate of school failure in Quiché has dropped from 57% to 33%. This example shows that indigenous girls learn better and faster when education is provided in their native language. Education that values and respects students' culture from the beginning can contribute to keeping them in school and reducing dropout rates.

It has been seen that for indigenous girls, acquisition of basic skills (comprehension, speaking, reading and writing) is faster and more effective when it begins in the mother tongue and continues in a second language. "This also contributes to their cognitive development, to self-esteem and to a greater cultural and linguistic identity", according to a USAID report.

The salient points of this section are:

→ If indigenous girls attend a school that offers quality, culturally relevant education, bilingual teachers and appropriate and decent facilities, they will remain longer in school. An indigenous girl or adolescent who studies the grade that corresponds to her age and is not discriminated against by teachers or students has a greater possibility of staying in school longer, which is a key element in lifting the country out of underdevelopment.



- The studies we consulted reveal that a system that starts teaching indigenous girls to read and write in their own language and values their culture can strengthen their self-esteem and encourage them to move to higher grades. This will also enhance the parents' trust in the national educational system.
- Although primary education coverage has been expanded in the last two decades, school statistics show that the ladino/mixed, male and urban population continues to have the highest education, literacy and high school completion rates. Redistribution of wealth should benefit those who are more marginalized and needy, particularly in the areas of education and health.
- Indigenous girls suffer from discrimination on the part of their classmates, who often make fun of their dress and indigenous language. Two-thirds of the teachers teach only in Spanish, which discriminates against indigenous girls and their culture. These practices can lower indigenous girls' self-esteem to the point that they drop out of school.

