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## **Making the invisible visible : the position of indigenous women in Mexico. A general overview of the challenges ahead**

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## VII. GENERAL CONCLUSION

Indigenous peoples' rights have been on the international political agenda for over fifty years. A major step forward was taken with the adoption of the almost universally endorsed *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) in 2007.

The UNDRIP stresses the need for specific measures for indigenous women, but remains very vague on the concrete issues indigenous women are confronted with. This illustrates the still limited attention given to indigenous women, even at international level. The absence of attention for women's issues is due to the lack of awareness and knowledge regarding the role women play in society and development of communities. It also illustrates the subordinated position women continue to have in society in general.

This research aims to contribute to the visibility of indigenous women and to give an overview of some of the challenges indigenous women are still facing, focusing on the specific case of Mexico. It is an effort to identify some of the fields in which indigenous women's rights are still not guaranteed and more action is needed.

Internationally, Mexico seems to subscribe to all agreements regarding indigenous peoples' and women's rights. At a national level, however, indigenous peoples are virtually ignored, and a very strong machismo still prevails. Except for limited ad hoc initiatives, few structural measures are taken by the national government to stimulate a real change in mentalities.

### A. Making the Invisible Visible

#### **Addressing the Male Bias**

In Mexican society, indigenous peoples are the most marginalized, and indigenous women are particularly vulnerable. The problems of the latter are often invisible and unknown because of a general lack of interest in these communities. Not only indigenous peoples themselves, but also anthropologists can and should commit to make the reality of being an indigenous woman visible, to give them a voice, and denounce the issues they are enduring on a daily basis. For the anthropologist, sharing this information and generally undertaking actions that benefit the community, should be part of professional ethics and social commitment.

Within Mexican academia, there is a reluctance to include a gender perspective in anthropology. Scholars do not seem aware of the importance of this approach, which is striking for a discipline focused on understanding human societies. Consequently, after more than forty years of feminist theory within academia, the accomplishments of feminism are far from being integrated in anthropological research on Mexico.

An important first step for scholars is to become gender sensitive, and not to take gender for granted. A gender perspective should not be limited to studies on topics specifically related to women, all social science research should give attention to gender. Gender should be one of the standard indicators for researchers to take into account. It needs to be emphasized that it is not about turning every study into a gender study, nor about including a specific chapter on women in every anthropological work, nor about excluding men; it is about awareness, about asking questions to prevent any gender bias and distorted views to get into the research. Who is the actor, who is talking? Is it a man or a woman, and why is it a man or a woman? Are women participating? If confirmed: what is their role and how do they experience their participation? Do they give the same information as men do? If not: why are they not present? What does this tell us about social relations, social hierarchies, gender roles, and the division of tasks within the community? These are questions that can be considered for most research. For example, when describing a ritual, the gender of the participants can be questioned. Who is participating? Why are the participants men (or women)? Why are certain women and men present and not others? What does the gender of the actors tell us about gender relations within the community? And how about the power structures and the social hierarchy within the community? How will social changes and changes in gender relations influence this ritual?

Postcolonial feminism offers an additional point of view by criticizing the Western bias in the discipline. Current research needs to include indigenous people's voices. Researchers need to become aware of the possible Western bias in their work, and keep questioning themselves.

Not taking gender for granted, and being critical towards a possible Western bias will lead to a new and more complete understanding of the studied societies as a whole, and will result in more inclusive research.

## **Women and Health Care in Mexico: The Need for Education, Prevention, and an Intercultural Approach**

Access to health care is one of the most fundamental issues indigenous women are confronted with in Mexico. The quality and availability of Mexican health care services vary considerably. People in rural and marginalized areas have most difficulties to access good health care, and women and children in these regions are particularly vulnerable. The most basic health risks for women are related to reproductive and maternal health.

The majority of teenage pregnancies and early marriages take place in indigenous communities. In addition to the health risks for young mothers, early marriage and teenage pregnancies significantly limit the emancipation of women. Girls quit school upon marriage or pregnancy, and do not continue further education, limiting their options of becoming economically independent in the future. There is a need for targeted campaigns to limit the number of teenage marriages and teenage pregnancies. Another important signal would be raising the minimum legal marriage age in the Civil Code. The Church should also engage on this subject and encourage girls to finish school before getting married.

Regarding abortion there has been a retrogression in Mexico. In 2014, more than half of the states penalized abortion. The legal impossibility to get an abortion by a certified medical practitioner leads to an increase in unsafe abortions. Women in marginalized situations, such as indigenous women, are again the most vulnerable in this regard.

A recurrent issue regarding reproductive health is the lack of effective sexual education and prevention. Especially in indigenous regions, people are not sufficiently informed about the inherent health risks and available options. There is thus an urgent need for more sexual education and prevention, not only to reduce the health risks for women, but also for the emancipation and empowerment of women and men that will lead to the improvement of the socio-economic development of the communities.

In addition to reproductive health risks, Mexican women also face serious risks related to maternal health. Pregnant women in indigenous communities in particular do not always get the necessary medical attention, resulting in high rates of maternal deaths. The lack of medical assistance for these women is an indicator of a larger problem in Mexican health care: the lack of adapted health care for indigenous peoples. To be able to guarantee adequate health care for indigenous peoples, two issues need to be addressed in parallel. Indigenous peoples have a right to equal access to good medical care within the existing institutional health care system. Therefore, the number and the quality of health care centers should be increased. In addition, it is essential to introduce an intercultural

approach to health care. Currently, indigenous peoples encounter difficulties when visiting allopath doctors, due to language and cultural obstacles. The mistrust and avoidance of allopath doctors can lead to serious health risks that could be reduced by implementing an intercultural approach to health care.

An intercultural approach to health care does not discard allopath medicine, nor does it favor traditional medicine. An intercultural approach wants to build bridges between two different sets of knowledge, including respect for local traditions and cooperation with traditional health practitioners. The *partera* could, for example, follow-up pregnant women and assist during standard deliveries, making it possible to reach more women, and reduce the numbers of maternal deaths. In addition, the approach of the *partera* could be introduced in allopath medicine in the process of the humanization of delivery. This would not only be beneficial for indigenous women, but for Mexican women in general.

The *parteras* need to be trained, but with respect for their traditional knowledge. More research is required to better understand traditional medicine, and to recognize those elements that are valuable both for Western and traditional medicine. This research needs to be done in cooperation with traditional experts.

The health risks of indigenous women are very basic health issues. An intercultural approach to health care would reduce at least part of the risks. Addressing these basic health issues should be a priority of the Mexican government. Currently, there are ad hoc initiatives and local actions, yet there is no consistent policy to address the health care situation in indigenous communities.

### **Female Political Participation: Conquering Spaces**

Political participation of women is an important indicator to measure the level of female emancipation. In Mexico, women and men do not have equal access to all political functions, despite existing legislative regulations and quota. Changes are occurring very slowly, but women are still underrepresented at all political levels. The biggest obstacles for women to participate in politics are still the patriarchal mentalities, and persisting stereotypes suggesting that women in general are not capable of participating at the highest levels of decision-making.

For indigenous women, being elected has been even more difficult. Only exceptionally indigenous female representatives have reached the national political level, or even state congresses. At a municipal level, political participation of indigenous women can vary widely, depending on the specific context of the community. In many cases, indigenous women have to face structural and cultural obstacles to be able to participate in local politics. In certain communities, the traditional

normative system of *'usos y costumbres'* has been denying women the right to participate. Therefore, the *'usos y costumbres'* system has been regarded as detrimental for gender equality and emancipation of indigenous women. However, changes are taking place in the communities, and there have been positive examples of women included in the traditional normative system and participating as a result of this inclusion. Indigenous women have taken a stand for the traditional system, and are willing to fight for equal rights within this system. They do not want to choose between tradition and modernity; they believe they can “remain the same while changing, and change while remaining the same”.

Shifts are indeed taking place in indigenous communities, and indigenous women themselves are agents of change in this process. They are looking for ways to gain a voice at the political level, and are conquering new spaces, finding alternative ways to participate, and building different forms of leadership. It is important to point out that these changes are supported by both women and men in the communities, showing a real, albeit slow, change in mentalities.

Yet it cannot be denied that indigenous women are still severely underrepresented in institutionalized political structures. Excluding them from the decision-making processes is a violation of their civil and human rights. The government and the political parties need to open up for indigenous women. The government should also invest more in sensitization and education regarding equal political rights, both of women and men, and actively enable and support the process of female political emancipation. Initiatives have to be taken to trigger a change in mentalities regarding gender equality. But the government also needs to develop specific policies that include indigenous peoples, and especially indigenous women, as full Mexican citizens. Until now, the government has been almost blind to the situation of indigenous women.

### **The Image of Women in Mexican Media: Fighting Stereotypes**

Another area where women, and in particular indigenous women, are under- and misrepresented is the media. The way women are portrayed in the media is an indicator of the way women are perceived more generally in Mexican society. This is also the case for the representation of indigenous women. The image of indigenous women in the media can influence the way non-indigenous viewers look at them, but it can also impact their self-image.

The historical evolution of the image of indigenous women in Mexican media tells us that it has been based on stereotypes since the beginning of the twentieth century. All these representations reveal one common characteristic: the indigenous woman was never conceived as an individual, but rather a symbol. The indigenous woman was a symbol of the Nation, of purity, and virginity. There was rarely a link between her image and the indigenous population. In the imagery there was also little

attention for the existing cultural diversity; indigenous peoples were considered one heterogeneous group. This stereotypical image made actual indigenous peoples invisible and subject to numerous prejudices.

The analysis of the representation of indigenous women in contemporary media first leads to the conclusion that there is a general absence of indigenous peoples on Mexican television. If we focus on indigenous women, we see that they are invisible both in informative and entertainment programs. Female television presenters are women who correspond to Western beauty ideals; women with indigenous or mestizo features are rarely seen. In *telenovelas* some characters could be recognized as indigenous, but these representations are mainly based on stereotypes. On the other hand, the image of indigenous peoples in news reports tends to be associated with negative news. The absence of a realistic image of indigenous women illustrates the lack of cultural diversity in Mexican media, this in contrast with the reality of Mexican society. The media perpetuate the negative perception and discrimination of indigenous peoples in Mexico.

In addition, the negative images and stereotypes have consequences for the self-esteem and self-image of the female indigenous viewers. Through the media they receive the message that as indigenous peoples they are evidently inferior to the white population, that they have neither access to the same jobs nor to the same spaces. They also learn that they do not correspond to the beauty ideal, and that they must be less intelligent than the white population. These different elements can result in a very low self-esteem, and lead to the internalization of this discrimination.

Television confirms their reality: they are on the fringes of Mexican society. How to motivate these women to engage and fight for a better future when their environment suggests that there is no way out? How to stimulate their social and economic development from within?

Media could play a positive role. In the eighties and nineties, the perception of women improved, among others by improving the image of women on Mexican television, showing for example more working women. Similar strategies should be developed for indigenous peoples. The correct representation of these minorities in national media would be a symbolic recognition of the fact that they are citizens, as worthy as the rest of the population; it would constitute legitimation of indigenous peoples as citizens with equal rights (Gripsrud, 2002:12). Furthermore, there is a need for positive role models: people or characters of indigenous origin that were able to get ahead in life, who have successful careers, and who fully belong to Mexican society, doctors, lawyers, engineers, etcetera.

Indigenous peoples not only need to be given a face, they also need to be given a voice in the media. Indigenous women are invisible in Mexican mainstream media, however, this does not mean they are not participating in alternative spaces. In the last decades, indigenous women have been actively collaborating in numerous indigenous and community media initiatives. Indigenous women do not lack motivation and do take action, but they have virtually no access to mainstream media. As a consequence they remain invisible in Mexican media. The indigenous population has to be taken out of this invisibility; they have to be included in the national project, and offered the respect they deserve. This process needs to be pursued in the communication media, as well as Mexican society in general.

### **Education in Mexico: Bringing About Change, or Reproducing Inequality?**

Changing stereotypes and mentalities starts at school. In the context of this research, it was therefore essential to look at how gender and cultural diversity are approached in Mexican education.

Mexican education faces multiple structural problems: the educational system is dominated by teachers' unions, the available resources are wasted and distributed unequally, the quality of education is poor, partly due to a lack of professionalization of the teachers, and the educational programs are not adapted to the varying teaching contexts. In order to develop effective actions to improve and guarantee the quality of Mexican education, a complete and correct evaluation of both schools and teachers is necessary.

Schools in rural communities in particular have deficient infrastructure, limited didactic material, and teachers that are often not prepared to teach in a rural context. The poor quality of education has a negative impact on the future perspectives of students in rural regions.

Indigenous education is one of the most neglected modalities of education. In addition to the lack of resources, the programs for indigenous education are designed at a national level, without input from the communities. Furthermore, very few textbooks in indigenous languages are available.

The lack of adapted indigenous education is more than a problem about educational content. It is a fundamental rights issue that illustrates how indigenous peoples are treated by the government, and by Mexican society as a whole. Indigenous students are denied the right to access education in their own languages. The existing programs are not adapted to the needs of indigenous students; students are expected to adapt and conform to a system that has no respect for their cultural identity and in which Spanish is the dominating language. The inadequate and poor education provided by the state

for indigenous students is an obstacle to their personal and intellectual development, limits their opportunities for the future, and only prejudices them by reinforcing negative stereotypes.

Indigenous students in all modalities of education are victims of discrimination and racism. They are confronted with negative stereotypes, and are treated as inferior and less intelligent. It is highly problematic that this discrimination comes not only from classmates, but also from teachers. This reflects how deeply rooted racism is within Mexican society. And up until now, virtually no actions have been taken to counter discrimination at school.

As this research focuses on indigenous women, special attention was given to the gender perspective in education. Analyzing how gender is approached in Mexican education gives an idea of how gender relations are defined in Mexican society, how they are perpetuated, and how they could be improved.

In general, Mexican girls and boys have equal access to education, even in disadvantaged regions. Gender equality policies have been developed for Mexican education, and both the institutional discourse and teaching materials include a gender perspective. However, this gender equality discourse has not reached all classrooms yet, and many teachers underestimate the importance of actively teaching and applying gender equality. Consciously or subconsciously, they continue to pass on stereotypical views on gender to their pupils.

It is very important to tackle these stereotypes affecting all girls and boys. In education, indigenous girls are most vulnerable, because they suffer from multiple discrimination. Additionally, in an indigenous context, traditional views on gender relations impact girls in particular. As women are expected to be caretakers in the first place, girls often drop out of school at a young age to support their parents, get married, or start a family. Yet, not finishing secondary education limits their opportunities for the future; they will only have access to precarious jobs, leading to poverty and exclusion. Furthermore, organizations such as the United Nations stress the fact that educating women is beneficial for their communities and the prospects of their children too.

Despite good intentions at national level, gender stereotypes and stereotypes concerning indigenous peoples are still being perpetuated and even reinforced in Mexican classrooms. Overall, the general level and quality of Mexican educational services need to be improved, but special attention needs to be given to the implementation of gender equality and non-discrimination policies in classrooms. Results will only be obtained if these policies effectively reach teachers and students.

And yet, education is only a first step. At present, there is a lack of opportunities for educated young people in rural communities. Many people who have studied, move to the cities. This illustrates that

the problem with education is part of a larger and complex issue regarding the development of communities within Mexican society. For years now, Mexican government has only been providing assistentialist and clientelistic aid programs to rural communities. These programs make communities dependent on government help, instead of empowering them and stimulating their development. Efforts should be made to create decent employment opportunities within the communities. We should not be naïve; not all professions can be practiced in small communities. However, at this moment, the national authorities have not been taking the necessary structural measures. The government should support local initiatives and businesses that create economic potential, and in general invest in the social and economic development of the communities, always in consultation with the latter.

It is clear that the challenges indigenous women are facing touch every aspect of life. To better understand, it is therefore important to approach their situation from different angles. For example, the testimony of Adriana Márquez, regarding education, teaches us that in her Zapotec community<sup>303</sup>, girls often only finish primary school, and then get married (Márquez, personal communication, 2011). However, when we look at the political participation of women, we see that in the principal town of La Pe of that same community, a woman was able to become municipal president between 2011 and 2013<sup>304</sup> (INAFED, 2015). Thus, all factors need to be taken into account to assess the level of female emancipation in this community. This example also serves to illustrate that every community has its own characteristics, and that policies to improve the situation of indigenous women cannot simply be copied from one community to another. To really understand the challenges indigenous women encounter, to be able to contextualize these challenges, and to have a global overview of their situation, it is indispensable to analyze their position from different perspectives.

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<sup>303</sup> The Zapotec community of La Guadalupe, a locality of La Pe in the District of Ejutla in the state of Oaxaca.

<sup>304</sup> Telma Adriana Chavez, municipal president of La Pe between 2011 and 2013 (INAFED, 2015).

## B. For Future Research

For this work, certain topics were selected. However, future research needs to discuss many other subjects that have an impact on the lives of indigenous women.

### **Gender Based Violence**

An important subject, is violence, and more particular gender based violence, topics that due to this research's scope and purpose could not be included in this study. During the last decade, the levels of violence have risen exponentially in Mexico. The violence brought about by drug trafficking and the war on drugs has expanded to Mexican society as a whole, including a gruesome increase of violence against women. Best known are the feminicides<sup>305</sup> in the border town of Ciudad Juarez, but feminicides are taking place across the entire Republic. The national observatory for femicide (Observatorio Ciudadano Nacional del Femicidio) estimates that between 2012 and 2013, 3.892 women were murdered in Mexico, this is more than five women per day (OCNF, 2014: 199). Furthermore, there are worrisome numbers of abductions, sexual violence, and of harassment of women and girls. In the private sphere, domestic violence is also very present. One of the problems in this regard is that domestic violence is not always rejected in Mexican society, on the contrary, it is even accepted by many women and men. Although certainly true in lower social classes, this phenomenon is prevalent in all layers of Mexican society, including the highest classes. It has to be pointed out that indigenous women are particularly vulnerable to all forms of gender based violence. Within their communities, domestic violence is considered to be normal. Outside their communities, indigenous women are discriminated and considered inferior; therefore they are easy targets for violence in public spaces, on the street, in a work environment, etcetera.

Official statistics on gender based violence in Mexico are almost nonexistent, and the majority of cases are never reported to the authorities. Although legislation exists to prevent violence against women, such as the *Ley General de Acceso de las Mujeres a una Vida Libre de Violencia* of 2007, there are hardly any programs for victims and perpetrators. Therefore, in practice, these laws cannot be made effective (Aldaz Vélez, 2008). Moreover, the authorities are neither trained nor do they have the resources to deal with victims of gender based violence. Few women find the courage to go to the authorities to file a complaint; only to discover that they are rarely taken seriously. María del Rosario Martínez, coordinator of the Casa de la Mujer "Rosario Castellanos" in Oaxaca, testifies how these women are sent back home, asking them to be calm and behave, because it was probably only a mistake, or maybe she did do something wrong. No follow-up is provided for these victims. This

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<sup>305</sup> A femicide or femicide is a gender based homicide. It is the murder of a woman because she is female.

does not encourage women to file a complaint (Martínez, personal communication, 2011). In the case of massive abductions of women and girls, the authorities most often send worried family members home, telling them their daughter probably just ran away, or blaming the mother for losing sight of her child. Such disappearances are often not even investigated. It is believed that some of these disappeared girls are murdered, some are forced into large prostitution networks. Women are rarely rescued by the authorities; perpetrators are hardly ever incriminated. A culture of violence and impunity reigns in Mexican society.

The blaming of female victims of gender based violence is a recurrent issue in Mexico. The media, for example, often question whether women, who disappeared or were sexually abused, dressed appropriately or provoked the aggressor. The perpetrator, on the other hand, is always partly excused as his actions are attributed to external factors, such as the temporary effects of alcohol or drugs, or a surge of passionate jealousy caused by the victim. If the aggressor is judged, the sentence for the perpetrators of gender based violence is most often disproportionately light compared to the offenses committed.

This approach of cases of gendered based violence illustrates the disparate relation of power between women and men, the double moral standard, and the way these points of view are ingrained in Mexican society.

The authorities seem to support this position. Little effort is made to protect women against gender based violence; it is considered a minor issue, and many politicians and judiciary officials are not even convinced of it being a real problem. The case of the feminicides exemplifies this situation. Only in 14 out of the 32 federal entities the crime of femicide is properly defined, in the other states offenses are impossible to prove due to the inadequate way femicide is typified. The result is that out of the 3.892 cases of murdered women between 2012 and 2013, merely 613 (15.75%) were investigated as feminicides (OCNF, 2014: 199-200).

All women in Mexico are vulnerable to this situation of violence, but women in marginalized areas, and especially indigenous women, are even more exposed. First, they would probably not even consider filing a complaint, seeing such violence as part of daily life. But when they do, they first need to be able to physically get to the authorities. Furthermore, if they do not speak Spanish they will have troubles filing a complaint, because no services are offered in indigenous languages. Then, because of their indigenous background, they face the risk of being ignored, discriminated, or abused by the officials. Thus, in comparison to non-indigenous women, they will be even less capable of convincing the authorities to help them.

More research is needed on all forms of gender based violence in Mexico. In-depth research is necessary to have better estimates of the number of women suffering from violence. Studies are also required to better understand the contexts of violence indigenous women are living in, and to find ways to prevent violence from happening. These studies are also essential to try to convince the Mexican government of the importance of these topics in the lives of women, of the negative impact this has on the well-being of communities and Mexican society as a whole, and of the urgent need to address these matters with concrete and effective policies.

### **Migration: Shifts and Evolutions in Gender Relations**

In the last decades there have been significant migration flows in Mexico, from rural areas to urban areas, but also abroad, and especially to the U.S.A. This phenomenon can certainly be noted in indigenous communities. Land conflicts, the difficulties of trying to be self-sufficient in the current economy, the lack of non-agricultural labor in the communities, and the growing levels of violence, are some of the factors that have forced people to leave their town to try to find a job in the larger cities or abroad.

Although women have also moved, the majority of indigenous migrants have been men. These men leave their home for months, for years, or never come back at all. While men left the communities, women often stayed behind. The absence of men has resulted in shifts within the traditional gender structures. An increasing number of women had to take up the role of head of the household for example. In certain communities women seem to have been at least partly in charge. It would be interesting to conduct research on the real impact of migration on traditional gender structures. It is unclear to what extent shifts have taken place. Are there really changes in the mentalities of people? Are the remaining men in the communities and the men abroad accepting these changes? And also, are these changes going to stand? During the last two or three years there have been reports of more migrant men and women returning permanently to their communities. Will this return result in a restoration of traditional gender structures? And also, to what extent did the experience of life in another cultural context impact these men and women's perspectives on gender relations?

## **Domestic Work**

The situation of domestic workers was briefly discussed in the chapter on education. However, more specific research on this topic is needed. Domestic workers are omnipresent in Mexican society, but invisible and unprotected. They are among the most vulnerable employees in the Mexican economy. But for many indigenous women, domestic work is one of the few options to join the labor market and earn an income. Mexican government needs to take its responsibility and provide legal and social protection for these workers.

Furthermore, it is not acceptable that the economic emancipation of women of higher social classes happens at the expense of other women that are forced into precarious employment. Women in lower social classes also have the right to access decently paid jobs with the necessary legal and social protection. Other than the government, households employing domestic workers need to take responsibility in this matter. Improving the situation of domestic workers involves Mexican society as a whole, and will require a change in mentality.

## **Discrimination of Indigenous Women Within the Mexican Justice System**

Discrimination of indigenous women within the Mexican justice system is a subject that has received almost no attention from scholars. Civil organizations, such as the Grupo de Estudios sobre la Mujer “Rosario Castellanos” in Oaxaca, report cases of indigenous women who were victims of questionable convictions and imprisonments. Some of these women were, for example, arrested for drug trafficking, and put in jail without any legal rights. The poignant stories are often about grandmothers travelling by bus to the city for some errands, and grandsons or nephews asking them to carry a bag with them for a good friend. These women are rarely aware that the bag contains drugs. When they are arrested, they are lost. Often Spanish is not these women’s mother tongue, and many of them are illiterate. They do not understand the officials, and they are forced to sign documents they cannot read, often signing a confession without knowing it. No translator is provided. Neither they nor their family have the financial means to pay for a lawyer or to post bail. As nobody informs them about their rights, they are vulnerable to unjust treatments, and are denied the right to a fair trial. As a result, they are thus stuck in jail for years, without being able to appeal, until their disproportionately long sentence is over (Gesmujer, 2004). The way indigenous women are treated is discriminatory, and it shows that the Mexican justice system is not only legally questionable, but also racist and classist. More research is required to have a comprehensive idea about the violations of the legal rights of indigenous women in Mexican justice, and to prevent such situations from happening.

## **C. Final Remarks**

Every subject discussed in this work has its specific challenges, but across the chapters certain recurring issues can be identified which deserve some final remarks.

### **Prevailing Machismo**

A first conclusion is that machismo still prevails in Mexican society. There are exceptions, and changes are happening slowly, but in general, Mexican women continue to be considered inferior to men. Gender equality has not yet been achieved. We have seen that women are underrepresented in the public sphere and in decision-making, for example in politics and the media. When they are present, they are most often pushed into the stereotypical role of either caretaker or sex symbol. At home, even educated women tend to revert to traditional gender roles, and accept their subordinated position compared to men. Many boys and girls continue to be educated in this same perspective. It is important to point out that this is the case in rural as well as in urban contexts, from the lowest to the highest social classes, and both in indigenous and non-indigenous communities.

A change of mentalities regarding gender relations and sexism is necessary in Mexican society. As we have seen across the different chapters, the national authorities, media, schools, the Church, etcetera, have a role to play. It is clear that all actors in Mexican society need to participate in fighting gender stereotypes and in changing mentalities.

### **Racism and Interiorized Discrimination**

Another recurrent element across the different chapters of this research is the persistent racism against indigenous peoples. They are systematically discriminated, ignored, and mistreated; the whiter the skin, the more superior, the darker the skin, the more inferior. Racism is deeply rooted in Mexican culture, yet it is never acknowledged. Non-indigenous Mexicans often proudly claim there is no racism in Mexico, but the contrary is true. This racism can be observed in public spaces on a daily base, in the way people are treated, in the way they are addressed, in the way they are looked at. It is also recurrent in the stories of indigenous women interviewed for this research. They all mention being confronted both with blunt and more subtle acts of racism. Based on this racism, indigenous peoples are largely excluded from Mexican society; they do not have equal access to public spaces, services, and ultimately, opportunities in life.

What is more, indigenous peoples themselves have interiorized this colonialism and discrimination. As we have seen, this feeling is currently only being reinforced by the media, in education, at an institutional level, and in society in general. Indigenous peoples have an interiorized sense of

inferiority with respect to the non-indigenous population. It is an obstacle to their personal development, and the recognition of their cultural identity. For indigenous women, a feeling of natural submission to men adds to the interiorized racism.

The fact that racism is not acknowledged in Mexico, is reflected in research. Very little research focuses on the discrimination of indigenous peoples and the racism they face. Yet racism can be a very influential factor in the lives of indigenous peoples. As an example, the young generations leaving their communities to study or work in non-indigenous communities, face unfair obstacles because of their cultural background. Persistent racism limits their opportunities on the labor market and in society in general. To raise awareness of the Mexican public and politicians regarding the need to stop all forms of racism and discrimination, more research is necessary to evaluate the impact on the lives of indigenous peoples. In this context it is important to listen to the experience of indigenous peoples, for example through the valuable work of the Zapotec Judith Bautista (2007, 2011), among others.

Furthermore, values of respect for cultural diversity and gender equality need to be embedded in education. Therefore teachers need to be sensitized about the importance of these topics. The media also have a crucial role in combatting stereotypes. The media should take up its responsibility and use its influence on society in a positive way by working towards inclusive and non-discriminatory media policies.

### **Institutionalized Discrimination**

At a political level, no efforts are made to incorporate indigenous demands or elaborate policies for indigenous peoples even though indigenous rights and the corresponding obligations of the government are clearly stated in the Mexican Constitution. These obligations are completely ignored. The commitments made at an international level only seem to serve the purpose of projecting a positive image to the outside world. At a national level these commitments are void. It is clear that indigenous peoples are not a priority for Mexican politicians. Indigenous peoples are often forgotten, deliberately or unintentionally. Mexican authorities fail to understand they are supposed to meet the basic demands of all their citizens. Mexican politicians prefer not to be bothered with the real problems of indigenous peoples. Protests of indigenous peoples are seen as a nuisance, to be silenced as soon as possible.

In Mexico, discrimination is institutionalized. As a first step, the government needs to raise awareness among its own officials. Most politicians are part of a mestizo elite that is clearly racist and classist, as illustrated recently by the case of Lorenzo Córdova Vianello, director of the National Electoral Institute (Instituto Nacional Electoral – INE). During intercepted phone calls, he completely

ridiculed indigenous Chichimeca leaders he had met, among others because of their accent in Spanish and their way of speaking (Animal Politico, 2015). This blatant racism by a high ranking official is an appalling illustration of the racism present among Mexican authorities.

The government has to start taking its responsibility; it needs to start considering indigenous peoples as full citizens, and develop policies in favor of their wellbeing, instead of denying them the rights they are entitled to as indigenous peoples, as Mexican citizens, and as human beings.

Yet, getting government attention is not enough. Several current policies and government programs are not adapted to the needs of indigenous peoples. A crucial element in designing policies is the involvement of the indigenous communities. It is indispensable for projects to be geared to the reality of indigenous peoples' lives. Only initiatives offering realistic outcomes will make a difference. The communities need to be involved as equal partners in projects that concern them. They know best which initiatives will be beneficial and meet their specific needs.

### **The Need for Reliable Official Statistics**

A common issue noted throughout this research is the lack of reliable statistical data. Good knowledge of difficult and complex situations is essential to develop effective policies. In Mexico, official statistics are available on a variety of topics, but these data may be incomplete or not representative of reality. Unfortunately, Mexican politicians sometimes prefer not to have exact numbers, or to inflate the results in order to avoid negative publicity, instead of addressing the problems.

If no data are available, certain matters remain unknown. The fact that no efforts have been made to collect data on essential topics, such as maternal mortality, illustrates the lack of commitment of the government. Collecting statistical data through surveys and local registers in such a large country as Mexico is not an easy task. Yet, for the government to address an issue, it is important to be able to estimate the extent of the problem. The Mexican government needs to establish a deliberate policy on data collection to identify problematic fields for which data are essential, both on specific topics and on intersecting subjects, such as the situation of indigenous peoples. Furthermore, if the government wants to show its commitment towards gender equality, all statistics on individuals, even at the local level (e.g. statistics on municipal presidents), should be disaggregated by gender. To obtain such numbers it is vital to raise awareness of the importance of reliable data collection among all administrative levels and other actors concerned – civil servants, hospitals, doctors, school directors, police officials, etcetera. In the end, the issues of indigenous peoples can be made more visible through reliable statistics.

## **Agency of Indigenous Women**

When analyzing the challenges, there is a risk of seeing indigenous women as mere victims and passive subjects. Yet, it is very important to stress the agency of indigenous women. Indigenous women do not need saving. They do not want to be treated as poor, pitiful, suffering creatures. They are strong and want to take action. For many years, they themselves have been actors of change, taking numerous initiatives to improve their situation, that of their children and communities. Indigenous women are active in politics, community media, civil organizations, as human and women's rights activists, artists, etcetera, at local as well as national, and international levels.

Indigenous women do not need saving, yet they remain invisible. The problem is not lack of participation of indigenous women, but limited access to mainstream spaces within Mexican society due to racism, discrimination, and negative stereotypes. They are always kept at the margin of society.

In the 1980s, Gayatri Spivak already pointed out that subaltern groups, marginalized by dominant Western culture, are not heard within the dominant culture. Spivak questions thus whether people with alternative forms of knowledge have a voice:

“On the other side of the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside *and* outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, *can the subaltern speak?*”  
(Spivak, 1988: 78. Emphasis in original.)”

This became very clear to me during this research. Talking with highly educated indigenous women, who are actors of change, was enlightening, because they illustrated how much they have to offer, and how little they are listened to. Their stories were filled with the discrimination they had to suffer, but also captured their strength to fight back, ultimately succeeding in conquering a space of their own.

One of the main changes necessary for indigenous peoples to be fully included in Mexican society is the opening up of more spaces, such as civil organizations, official institutions, higher education, etcetera. Indigenous peoples need to have equal access in order to be equally capable of participating, and become visible. This visibility is also crucial to fight stereotypes.

## **Valorization of Indigenous Knowledge**

Some anthropologists and other scholars criticize governments and authorities for not respecting indigenous peoples' rights. However, one of the spaces that urgently needs to open up for indigenous peoples is academia itself. Despite good intentions, academia can be racist, and is still characterized by a Western bias.

There have been critical voices, especially from non-Western scholars, about the persistent dichotomy 'We' against 'the Other', and the dominance and supposed superiority of Western academia.

Indigenous knowledge is usually still treated as what Michel Foucault called 'subjugated knowledge', which is:

"A whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity (Foucault, 1980: 82)".

Gayatri Spivak adds that in this process the imperialist knowledge and narrative have not been privileged as the best knowledge available, or the best description of reality. The imperialist narrative of reality was rather established as the norm, excluding all other knowledges (Spivak, 1988: 76).

Yet, despite these critiques, only small changes can be seen. When visiting conferences on indigenous cultures, very few scholars of these same cultures are invited to speak, hence their voices are rarely heard. Joint research projects between indigenous and non-indigenous scientists are exceptional too. This is not due to a complete absence of indigenous experts, but to the monopoly of Western knowledge.

Data on indigenous cultures only seem to be acknowledged when presented by Western researchers. Western scholars tend to speak for indigenous peoples; indigenous experts are generally excluded from academic circles. Yet, as the interviews for this research illustrate, indigenous peoples have many valuable contributions to make; they have a voice that has to be heard and respected. They have the ability and capacities to conquer spaces, provided that their knowledge is valued.

Within academia there is an urgent need to valorize more sources of knowledge. The inclusion and participation of indigenous peoples in academia should therefore be part of the scientific agenda.

## **Towards a Socially Engaged Discipline**

The anthropological and historical disciplines could be improved in different ways. As discussed in this work, the male bias and Western bias need to be addressed, and alternative sources of knowledge need to be valorized. But, anthropologists should also strive for a more socially engaged discipline.

When writing about Mexico, most anthropologists (including archaeologists and historians) focus on ritual life, hierarchical structures, religion, etcetera. They focus on elements they consider to be 'traditional'. As a result, excellent monographs have been published, capturing an image of a large range of indigenous cultures. However, authors often fail to put the indigenous community in a larger context. For example, they hardly talk about the sometimes harsh social reality indigenous peoples are living in. They limit their research to specific rituals and traditions, and actually fail to give a complete image of indigenous reality. Furthermore, they rarely work together with indigenous experts as co-authors.

Anthropologists are in a privileged position; they are offered an exclusive view of daily life in an indigenous community. The position of privileged witnesses should be used more often to voice social injustices. As anthropologists have a social responsibility in this respect, they should commit themselves and try to give something back to the people who shared their knowledge with them. For example, they have the possibility to improve the visibility of indigenous women, but also to bring the problems these women are facing to the attention of a larger audience. They should report on discrimination, racism, and gender inequalities, but also on issues such as inadequate health services, cases of teenage marriages, deficient education, etcetera. The anthropologist can show the context specific situation of women in the studied community. Anthropologists should also contribute to making positive examples more visible, examples in which indigenous women speak up for themselves and manage to find a balance between tradition and modernity. This could inspire others to find a way to be heard. Through their work, anthropologists could propagate a more accurate image of indigenous communities and therefore indirectly have an impact on the improvement of their situation.

But there are also pitfalls. The anthropologist could profile him- or herself as 'the savior of the indigenous community'; bringing forward his or her own ideas on social justice and human rights, without taking into account the opinion of the communities themselves. This would be a patronizing position that is not acceptable as it replicates centuries of Western colonization and domination. On the other hand, the anthropologist should be careful that his or her commitment is not misused by others for their own private purposes, be it economic or political; he or she has thus to remain

critical at any time. Furthermore, anthropologists need to support indigenous peoples, but always be mindful not to speak for them. The anthropologist can provide an additional platform to make the voices of indigenous peoples heard.

In any case, anthropologists should show a more active engagement which transcends involvement merely for their own publications. It is about social engagement and about giving a scientifically complete and truthful image of the indigenous situation, with both its positive and negative sides, instead of perpetuating the idealized caricature of a romantic nature-centered life which dominated in anthropology far too long. Indigenous communities accept to share their life experiences with anthropologists; in return, it seems a small effort to engage in favor of their social situation. In general, anthropologists should strive to develop an inclusive and socially engaged discipline.

Already in the 1970's, Sally Slocum advocated:

“The male bias in anthropology that I have illustrated here is just as real as the white bias, the middle-class bias, and the academic bias that exist in the discipline. It is our task, as anthropologists, to create a “study of the human species” in spite of, or perhaps because of, or maybe even by means of, our individual biases and unique perspectives (Slocum, 1975: 50).”

Indigenous peoples continue to be discriminated in Mexican society. To comply with international indigenous rights, Mexican government needs to step up its efforts. Action is urgently needed in various areas of life. For indigenous women, very basic rights are still not met; not only where specific indigenous rights are concerned, but also constitutional, and even human rights.

Yet, other than the government, there is an important role to play for all actors in Mexican society: administrations, schools, media, the Church, civil society, academia, and all Mexicans in general. Indigenous women are currently invisible in Mexican society, and they face multiple discrimination. Indigenous women are ready to participate, but first Mexican society needs to open up to them. Conditions need to be created for indigenous women to be able to participate. They need to be granted equal access to all spaces; they need to be included and be considered part of this society.

Indigenous women need to be allowed to speak up for themselves, they need to be able to let their voices be heard, and they need to be listened to and reckoned with. Indigenous women are being actors of change; now they only need to get the necessary support to make significant progress.

As has become clear throughout this study, Mexican society continues to be highly racist and sexist. To address this prevailing racism and sexism, a change in mentalities is essential. Mexican society needs to start acknowledging its culturally diverse identity and accept this diversity as an asset. This change can only happen if all actors in society engage against discrimination and in favor of an inclusive society in which all citizens have the same rights, and are treated as equals.