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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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## ENGLISH SUMMARY

### **Making the Invisible Visible: The Position of Indigenous Women in Mexico**

#### **A General Overview of the Challenges Ahead**

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 *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) in 2007. Yet, very limited attention has been given to indigenous women. Among indigenous peoples, women are one of the most vulnerable groups, because they are subject to multiple discrimination: for being a woman, indigenous, and often, because of the stigma of poverty. The absence of attention for women's issues is due to a lack of awareness and knowledge regarding the role women play in society and in the development of communities, and it illustrates the subordinated position women continue to have in society in general.

This research wants to contribute to the visibility of indigenous women. Therefore, it provides an overview of some of the challenges indigenous women are still facing, focusing on the case of Mexico. It analyzes the position of indigenous women in Mexican society, to identify some of the fields in which indigenous women's rights are still not guaranteed and therefore require more action.

Mexico subscribed to all international 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. Few structural measures are taken by the national government to trigger a positive change in mentalities.

The real situation of indigenous women is still poorly known. One of the reasons is that within anthropology there is a certain reluctance to include a gender perspective. 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, which continues to have a strong male bias. Postcolonial feminism offers an additional point of view, 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.

Present research analyzes the position of Mexican women, and more particularly indigenous women, regarding four specific topics: health care, political participation, media, and education. These four topics were selected because of the major influence they have on the situation of women within society. The analysis of these subjects gives an image of the level of emancipation Mexican women have been able to reach. Furthermore, these subjects are all relevant, not only for women, but for their communities as a whole.

The first topic addressed in this research is health care. The limited access to adequate 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, and access is most difficult in rural and marginalized areas. Women and children in these regions are particularly vulnerable. The most basic health risks for women are related to reproductive and maternal health.

To reduce the risks related to reproductive health, more effective sexual education and prevention is needed, especially in indigenous regions. This will not only reduce the health risks for women, but also foster the emancipation and empowerment of women and men, which in turn will lead to the improvement of the socio-economic development of the communities.

Indigenous communities also continue to have high rates of maternal deaths. The limited 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 need to get equal access to good medical care within the existing institutional health care system, and an intercultural approach to health care needs to be introduced. Implementing an intercultural approach to health care, that brings together allopath and traditional medicine and respects local knowledge and traditions, can help reduce the risks. Including the knowledge of traditional health practitioners in the institutionalized Mexican health care system, such as the traditional midwives or *parteras*, can also be beneficial, both for indigenous and non-indigenous patients.

A second subject discussed in this work is the political participation of women, which is an important indicator of the level of female emancipation. Changes are occurring very slowly, but Mexican women are still underrepresented at all political levels. Patriarchal mentalities and persisting stereotypes, suggesting that women are not capable of participating at decision-making, are still the biggest obstacles for female political participation.

For indigenous women, being elected is even more difficult. They are invisible in Mexican politics; only exceptionally indigenous female representatives have reached the national or regional political

level. At a municipal level, indigenous women face structural and cultural obstacles that hinder their participation in local politics. In certain communities, women are denied the right to participate based on the traditional normative system of *'usos y costumbres'*. 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 being included in the traditional normative system. 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.

Another area where women, and indigenous women in particular, are under- and misrepresented is the media. The image of women in the media is an indicator of the way women are perceived more generally in Mexican society. This is also true for the representation of indigenous women. In the past, the image of indigenous women in Mexican media was based on stereotypes. All representations had one common characteristic: the indigenous woman was never conceived as an individual, but rather a symbol. This stereotypical image made actual indigenous peoples invisible and subject to numerous prejudices.

In Mexican contemporary media, there is a general absence of indigenous peoples. When indigenous peoples are represented, it continues to be in a stereotypical way. The media perpetuate the negative perception and discrimination of indigenous peoples in Mexico. In addition, the negative images and stereotypes have an impact on the self-esteem and self-image of the female indigenous viewers, resulting in a very low self-esteem, and leading to the internalization of this discrimination.

Changing stereotypes and mentalities starts at school, therefore the approach to gender and cultural diversity in Mexican education was also analyzed, with special attention to rural and indigenous education. Mexican education faces multiple structural problems, and 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. 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. In addition, indigenous students in all modalities of education are victims of discrimination and racism, reflecting how deeply rooted racism is within Mexican society. Until now, virtually no actions have been taken to counter discrimination at school.

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. 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.

Indigenous peoples continue to be discriminated in Mexican society. When it comes to indigenous women, very basic rights are still to be met; not only where specific indigenous rights are concerned, but also constitutional, and even human rights. The Mexican government continues to ignore its indigenous citizens and fails to take necessary actions.

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 considered part of this society.

Within academia, more sources of knowledge need to be valorized, and the active participation of indigenous peoples should be part of the scientific agenda. Anthropology should also strive to become a more socially engaged discipline.

Indigenous women need to become visible. They need to be allowed to speak up for themselves, to be able to let their voices be heard, 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.

Mexican society continues to be highly racist and sexist, both at a social and political level. 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.