

*Women, Poverty
and Education
in Mexico*



Project

Women, Poverty and Education in Mexico is a community-based education program that will facilitate the entry of low-income Mexican women into higher education institutions. This pilot project will test alternative ways of bridging adult basic education with higher education. If successful, the approaches may be adopted throughout Mexico and abroad. Over a five-year period we will work with over 150 women. Depending on their individual grade level upon entry, the majority of women will receive their grade twelve equivalency as well as government certified credentials in community development.

Participants

Our initial focus will be women who work/volunteer in the community. They are known as *promotoras* or community promoters. Throughout Latin America, these women play an integral role in the grassroots community development movement. In Tijuana alone, there are over 600 *promotoras* volunteering for non-governmental organizations. They live and work in communities whose members, like themselves, experience low literacy levels, poverty, gender discrimination, and racism. Because of the *promotoras*' role as community leaders, we anticipate that their participation in the program will facilitate the eventual recruitment of other women who may not be community promoters.

The *promotoras* have claimed their right to participate both in the planning, delivery, and management of the project. Key areas of participation include representation on the site planning selection teams, program design team and employment as local site coordinators and instructors.

Place

Our project will be based in Tijuana in the state of Baja California. Because of the city's proximity to the US, the cost of living here is 40% higher than in Mexico City. Despite the fact that unemployment is almost non-existent, most jobs are



Participant Perspectives

very low paying. The income of four working adults is required to support the average household. Furthermore, low-income people live in areas that have few public services and enormous educational deficiencies. These factors have a negative effect on the quality of life, which is reflected most noticeably on health, and particularly on children's growth.

Problem

Unmet basic needs and lack of education have had a disproportionate effect on Latin American women. In addition to the very arduous work associated with household-labour in a developing country, Mexican women have been forced to find work outside the home. Because of their minimal educational levels and lack of basic skills, they only have access to low paying jobs, often in the informal sector of the economy. Numerous studies point to the double and triple workday that women are subjected to: the 90-hour work week is more the norm than the exception.

Furthermore, it is estimated that about 6 million Mexicans are illiterate of the country's 100 million people. 18.5 million have not completed elementary education, and 37.4 million have incomplete high school. As a result, about 62% have no hope of access to higher education, women being the most disadvantaged among these.



"I started teaching classes to children and later on continued with women. I have given classes on vegetable gardens, and nutrition and health. The organization has given me the opportunity to get better acquainted with the needs of my community and at the same time I have been able to collaborate in the solutions of these problems. It wouldn't be any good to know about these problems and not try to remedy them."

~ unknown

"I have always looked for a way to study, but I never had the opportunity... But I have not stopped in my determination to know more, to prepare and improve myself" ~ *promotora*

“Our group (of non-profit organizations) recognized that we share a concern, Where do the *promotoras* want to or can they go? Within their process of becoming *promotoras*, they develop capacity to do a lot and gain experience in community development. But the next steps to continuing education do not exist. It is important to define a program on the needs and realities of a *promotora*.” ~ *UIAN professor*

“We have learned a lot, we offer communities many things, yet (without education) we are teachers of nothing”
~ *community promoter's comments during an initial presentation.*

“Maybe you could say, well what does this woman have to share with us? But it's a very rich experience, that is process by process, step by step. I see that it is magnificent... Everyday I learn new things, and everyday I will continue to learn... and I know this process will not end.” ~ *Sara Fiesco de Una 1996*

“When we arrived at our house in Tijuana we said, “This is where we are going to live? Not there, this is ugly and horrible!” Where we used to live they had clean places with paved streets and services. This was too difficult. But little by little I got used to it. Now I think my place is pretty.” ~ *Gloria Urbina Olguin*

Program

The design and methodology are developed around three strategies. They take into consideration the realities of Mexican women's daily lives and the barriers they encounter in regard to education. These strategies are:

- a) develop course content that is relevant to participants' personal lives and to their community work;
- b) utilize program designs and pedagogical approaches appropriate to the learning styles of the participants;
- c) design a program that bridges the gap between basic and higher education.

Several aspects of the project design have now been defined. There will be four sites in Tijuana. The sites are situated in communities close to the homes and community work of the *promotoras*. Each site will have a local coordinator (an experienced *promotora*) and an instructor.

Each site will select a community project based on a critical community need that they will carry out over the next four years. The curriculum will combine literacy, community development, human development, ecology, health and administration, and will be integrated into the community project activities.

As they are ready the women will be coached to complete high school equivalency exams and will receive certification in specific areas of specialization.

Partners

Our project, located in Tijuana, Mexico, relies on Simon Fraser University's partnership amongst a Universidad Iberoamericana Noroeste (UIAN) and NGO partner, Los Ninos de Baja California.

Possibilities

The project will:

- accommodate and address basic literacy needs;
- offer an educational stream of technical specialization that will enable women to secure employment or start small businesses;
- teach community development and organizing skills so that the *promotoras* are better able to support their communities in their work to improve the quality of daily life.

Our evaluation will include a variety of qualitative and quantitative measures that will capture effectively the benefits of the project. It will use an extensive baseline survey in the design stage, and will monitor participants' progress throughout the program.

“I could see my brothers read magazines... and they would ask me what I thought of the stories. I would tell them that they were fine, but I was embarrassed because I did not understand what they were about. ...During my son's first years of school he would tell me that he did not understand some things... being so young and an inexperienced mother I would hit him so that he would understand the books. Then I began to study with him all the time and when he finished elementary school I was so proud. Now I have two objectives: first to finish elementary school myself, and second to motivate my children to study and learn.” ~ *Juana Valencia Martinez*

“As a *promotora* I have an opportunity (to learn) and I do not waste time doing anything else” ~ *promotora*



PROPOSAL

Women, Poverty, and Education in Mexico is a 5 year pilot project which officially started March 6, 2001. The cost of the project is \$633,166 (USD). We have been awarded \$269,095 (USD) from the Canadian International Development Association (CIDA). We seek support to cover the project shortfall, as well as to set-up an endowment to ensure the ongoing operation of the program. We are asking you to provide a scholarship for a program participant at \$633 (USD)/year for the next three years. This contribution makes you part of the program and we will keep you informed of the progress of the person you are supporting.

“But this thing (the education program) a dream coming true is something very moving. To all those behind all this. I tell them do not give up, keep on supporting us and know that giving is something very beautiful. It is just like when we gave classes to some ladies, and they are putting it into practice, one feels very happy and proud.” ~ *Maria Elena Perez Munoz*

“I think that all of us are like little box that contains a lot of treasures, a little box that contains many things that we can offer. But if the box is closed those treasures will not come out. The beauty is to open those treasure boxes we carry inside and share them with those around us, share all the experiences and knowledge we carry inside.” ~ *Maria de los Angeles Luna*

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