



# Violation of the rights of indigenous youth in the highlands region of Veracruz, Mexico.

Pedagogical group “Totlahtol Yoltok”  
“Our word lives”\*

Photo: El Dictamen / Quadratin Agencies

The region of the highlands (*Montañas Altas*) has 61 municipalities, out of which 23 belong to native peoples. According to their geographical location, especially inside the mountain range, some of the localities preserve their original language, dress code and culture. Unfortunately, they are also the ones who suffer the greatest poverty and discrimination. The towns in the valley preserve their native language and clothes to a lesser extent, but they also share poverty, marginalization and social inequality.

### ***The difficulties of the indigenous youth to leave their environment and “infiltrate” mestizo society***

“I have always wanted to be a teacher in order to have a better life standard, and to be somebody, so that the *pinomeh* (mixed European and indigenous background) would not look down on me. But it is difficult for women to leave our communities and study, because an indigenous woman does not have the same opportunities, since we face a triple discrimination: for being a

\* Region of Orizaba and the High Mountains of Veracruz, México.

woman, indigenous and poor. It is tough, especially if you do not speak Spanish. You do not get the chance to study or work, not even as a store clerk. You have to be very strong to overcome your fears, and stop being you.” (A. Rafael, interviewed on February 22, 2016.)

Angela is a 22-year-old student who is currently studying the eight semester of an Industrial Engineering program at the Technological Institute of Orizaba (ITO). She dresses as any other young woman, and does not look indigenous at first sight. But she feels that if she spoke her native language as she used to when she was back home, or if she wore what she used to wear in her community, perhaps she would not be able to fulfill her dream of becoming a professional.

“It is easy for us to recognize who is indigenous. But when we are at school, we are all infiltrators: we dress, speak and try to think as they do, only to be accepted.

It frightens us to see how our people are treated out on the streets, because of how they dress or the language they speak. The hatred is easily seen, smelled and felt. Even if you are efficient in your work or at school, if you do not talk or think the way they do, your job opportunities are slim or non-existent. (A. Rafael, 2016 interview)

There are few studying opportunities for indigenous youth, since economic, geographic, political and educational exclusion factors work against them; in spite of the fact that the government’s 2011 National Study Plan promotes “linguistic, social and cultural diversity”, even if only in theory. In reality, schools and the educational system themselves promote an institutional violence, one that is legitimated and creates differential treatments, procedures, red tape, and conflict resolution that vary depending on the background of whoever they are dealing with.

The 2011 Study Plan proposes curricular standards that “establish a certain type of global citizenship [...] that will allow the country its entrance to the Economy of

Knowledge and become a part of the community of nations that base their development and growth on the progress of education.” (p. 42). But its definition of a global citizen is one that fits the profile of somebody who can live within the neoliberal economy and its consequences. For instance, the ruling economic system expects citizens to exploit their labour and the natural resources located in indigenous lands. But that goes against the indigenous cosmovision of living in harmony with the environment, one that they actively defend. Additionally, families take their young children to work with them, since they also contribute to the family budget. Thus, children are absent from school for certain seasons. Many times public schools refuse to take them back because of their absenteeism and they lose the school year and lag behind the rest. If children do not have to migrate with their parents, they stay with older siblings or grandparents so as not to lose the economic help given to them by governmental PROSPERA<sup>1</sup> program, because if they miss 3 consecutive school days without a justification, the amount they receive is reduced. If they accumulate 12 absences, their two-month support is withdrawn altogether. In smaller communities, schools are more tolerant towards children who attend schools irregularly, even if this causes a curricular lag. Thus, in standardized tests those districts always show lower achievement levels.

In indigenous rural communities there are schools for kinder-garden and elementary school, but none for higher levels, so the possibility to continue studying is considerably decreased. If these children want to get an education they have to migrate, and that exposes them to discrimination. Therefore, they become “infiltrators” or practice “invisibility of difference”, something which

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<sup>1</sup> PROSPERA is a program by the Ministry of Social Development which has two modalities: co-responsibility and non co-responsibility. It provides a subsidy to almost 7 million Mexican families to help them with food, health and education.



Photo: Geographic location of Las Altas Montañas Veracruz, Mexico

affects their identity. They have to adapt to a value system that is foreign to them, or as Angela describes it: “to infiltrate by hiding my identity to survive.”

### ***Educational policies contribute to the exclusion of the indigenous youth from school***

For the indigenous youth of the high mountains region of Veracruz, it is not easy to get a college education. Even if they do get it, it is hard for them to get a related job. In the case of women, the only option they have left is to start a family, do handcrafts in the style of their community or work out in the fields to support their families. In the case of men, if they were lucky enough to finish high school, they will have to decide whether to take on carpentry in a rustic workshop, do agricultural work or migrate to the US.

In November 2016, Public Education Minister Aurelio Nuño Mayer announced a program of “school re-concentration,” which included the transport of students

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who attend one hundred thousand small community schools to larger centralized ones. When he participated in the Social Mobility Summit of 2016, he highlighted that out of 200 thousand elementary schools in the country, 100 thousand held only 14% of the students in scattered communities, with the “worst results and the least investment”<sup>2</sup>.

This policy threatens the rights of indigenous peoples, since “concentrating” their youth in more urban areas - to receive a “better quality” education, according to the authorities, does not guarantee any respect for cultural diversity or local indigenous ways of knowing and learning. They are not capable of acknowledging diversity or looking after the needs of our peoples. The results could be ethnocide.

We will keep on fighting until our children and youth have access to an education that does not threaten the identity of our communities; and respects our cosmovisions, language, dress and traditions. Students require favorable conditions to be educated. It is essential to demand that schools allow them to receive an education that guarantees their full development as individuals, and as a people.

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2 <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/ultimas/2016/11/19/>

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