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## UNIVERSITY-BASED LITERACY FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE AUTONOMY OF GIRLS, ADOLESCENTS, WOMEN AND INDIGENOUS WOMEN

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**Abstract:** The research problem presented consists of socially influencing the reduction of illiteracy among girls, adolescents, women and indigenous women from the University. The main objective consisted in the development of strategic literacy projects through lectures, courses and literacy brigades aimed at the language training of people belonging to the municipality of Toluca de Lerdo, an entity with the highest concentration of illiterate population, mainly women and indigenous women. The work method was field practice and work with teaching communities at different educational levels. Among the main documented results are: 1) it is confirmed that the population of girls, adolescents, women and indigenous women registers a higher illiteracy condition with respect to men in the entity; 2) in particular, during the development of the brigades, it was identified that the male presence hinders the right of girls, adolescents, women and indigenous women to *be* and to *be* literate; 3) one of the main obstacles to the development of literacy activities that were documented was the lack of time and interest of the target population in developing literacy practices; and 4) the inequality documented and recorded between the degree of illiteracy among women and men is related to symbolic gender violence. Therefore, it is suggested to emphasize the design of public policies with a gender perspective that address this social urgency for the full development of human capabilities.

**Keywords:** Social incidence, illiteracy, autonomy, women, symbolic gender violence.

## INTRODUCTION

In Mexico, one of the National Strategic Programs (Pronace) of CONAHCyT (National Council for Humanities, Science and Technology) to help reverse the impact of educational policies on educational backwardness, exclusion and discrimination is Pronace 'Education'. Through this Program, Mexico promotes a national research and intervention agenda oriented "towards the understanding, attention and solution of multiple educational problems, among which illiteracy and social exclusion stand out, mainly of historically marginalized groups" (CONAHCyT, 2024); and particularly illiteracy of girls, adolescents, women and indigenous women. Likewise, and as part of the main areas of emphasis and research in Pronace 'Education', we have the following premises for action and social impact:

1. The formation of reading competence,
2. Literacy for citizen participation and in multilingual contexts,
3. Horizontal assessment of literacy,
4. Functional and creative writing,
5. Alternative processes in literacy training (CONAHCyT, 2024).

It is worth mentioning that two of the central objectives of these policies are: a) the reduction of illiteracy and, b) the promotion of socio-educational inclusion considering the cultural and geographic diversity of the country. Now, within the framework arising from the need to implement actions with social impact to change the education of peoples, and particularly of indigenous communities, it is identified that the greatest area of opportunity lies in the need for the development of effective educational and linguistic policies for the promotion, maintenance, conservation and revitalization of indigenous national languages, as well as the strengthening of linguistic skills in the mother tongue. In particular, re-

1. According to INEGI (2020), "illiterate: a person 15 years of age or older who cannot read or write an errand".

garding the literacy process of the adult population, Freire (2022) points out: "[...] as in post-literacy, the mastery of oral and written language constitutes one of the dimensions of the process of expressiveness" (p. 45). That is, the right to the word, which is understood as the ultimate goal of any formative process of individuals for the full development of their human capacities.

In the light of these arguments, the article analyzes the social problem of illiteracy among women, adolescents and girls in the municipality of Toluca de Lerdo, an entity where there is a high rate of illiterate population. As a result, strategic literacy projects from the University are documented, which have been aimed at reducing illiteracy in the population, as it represents a condition that limits and obstructs the full development and enjoyment of rights of this vulnerable sector of the population (girls, women and indigenous women), through courses, workshops and literacy brigades from the university as part of a social advocacy project in the entity.

## ILLITERACY: A PENDING SOCIAL PROJECT OF THE MEXICAN STATE

One of the main pending tasks of the Mexican State from the 20th century to the present day is the literacy of the population in both mother tongues and second languages (Autor, 2019a). In a plural and diverse country, Mexico must address the condition of illiteracy<sup>1</sup> in which 4, 456, 431 million people aged 15 and over are found (INEGI, 2020), through strategic actions; development and implementation of public policies; as well as the design and implementation of national and regional literacy programs that help to reduce the percentage of the illiterate population that, due to this condition, is in backwardness and social risk due to the little or no possibility of using their mother tongues.

The State has the constitutional obligation<sup>2</sup> to provide education to the entire population (DOF, 2024) and, as an initial step, to make a break with the culture of silence<sup>3</sup> by promoting and ensuring the use of and access to written culture. According to Freire and Shor (2014), the culture of silence is defined as “[...] a passive tolerance of domination” (p. 193). And they add that, literacy as “a negative aspect of class” (p. 193), as elite advantages are hidden behind the myth of ‘equality of opportunity’ (Freire and Shor, 2014, p. 194). That is, historically only the privileged classes can and have had access to the word or else to expressiveness. Whereas, in the case of the Mexican population, it is still in an illiterate condition. On the other hand, Arendt (2016, p. 31) in her text entitled *The Promise of Politics* sustains the following working thesis: “Action and discourse are the two most outstanding political activities, distinction and equality are the two constitutive elements of political bodies”. And he adds:

Living in a real world and talking to one another about it are basically one and the same thing [...] The freedom to become independent and to undertake something new and never before seen or, [...] the freedom to interact through discourse with many others and to experience the diversity in which the world as a whole consists: this was, and certainly is no longer, the ultimate purpose of politics [...] (Arendt, 2016, pp. 34-35)

In light of these arguments, the following question arises: What type of intervention and social advocacy projects could strengthen the development of the capacities or functioning of girls, adolescents, women and indigenous women through literacy? To this end, it is argued that literacy represents a universal and inescapable

2. Article 3. “Every person has the right to education. The State -Federation, States, Mexico City and Municipalities- shall provide and guarantee initial, preschool, primary, secondary, high school and higher education. Initial, preschool, primary and secondary education make up basic education; this and higher secondary education will be compulsory, and higher education will be compulsory in terms of section X of this article. Initial education is a child’s right and it will be the State’s responsibility to raise awareness of its importance” (DOF, 2024).

3. In the text ‘Fear and Daring’, Freire and Ira Shor (2014) interpret the category *culture of silence* as part of a condition of inequality among individuals due to the lack of access to written culture, and specifically, to the word. To this end, the authors consider that “[...] inequality is presented as natural, just and, also, as conquered given the different ‘aptitudes’ and ‘results’ of the various groups” (p. 194).

able human right of all individuals. The right to *be* literate and to *be* literate is, in addition, an inescapable capacity for the development of diverse and multiple functionings of people with the objective of achieving autonomy and freedom in a scheme of social justice.

## LITERACY OF THE POPULATION AS A HUMAN RIGHT

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms [...] by promoting understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial and religious groups (UN, 1948).

In this regard, Article 3 of the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States establishes that:

Everyone has the right to education [...] Education shall be based on unrestricted respect for the dignity of the individual, with a focus on human rights and substantive equality. It shall tend to develop harmoniously all the faculties of the human being and shall foster in him/her, at the same time, love for the homeland, respect for all rights, freedoms, the culture of peace and awareness of international solidarity, independence and justice [...] (DOF, 2024).

Therefore, it is an obligation of the State to guarantee and observe that there is no direct or indirect discrimination in the laws or in the public or private sphere for the enjoyment of human rights such as the right to speak; that is, the right to *be* and to *be* literate. This would promote the creation of conditions for the exercise of freedom and autonomy of people.

## **BACKGROUND ON THE PROBLEM OF ILLITERACY AMONG GIRLS, ADOLESCENTS, WOMEN AND INDIGENOUS WOMEN**

*“Language and reality are dynamically linked”.*  
(Freire, 2022)

As part of the resolutions adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, the following numbers (12 and 13, respectively) were considered as part of the Declaration of the Platform for Action signed on September 15, 1995:

12. Promote the empowerment and advancement of women, including the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, which contributes to the fulfillment of the moral, ethical, spiritual and intellectual needs of women and men, individually or in community with others, thereby guaranteeing them the possibility of realizing their full potential in society by shaping their lives in accordance with their own aspirations.

We are convinced that:

13. The empowerment of women and the full and equal participation of women in all spheres of society, including participation in decision-making processes and access to power. (UN, 1995, p. 3).

In addition, among the 12 central areas included in this Declaration on the rights of women, the following actions stand out: “women and poverty; education and training of women; women and health; [...] women and the economy; women in the exercise of power and decision-making; institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women; women’s human rights” (CNDH, 2017). Finally, in the Platform for Action of the Beijing Declaration, emanating from this International Women’s Conference, the importance of maximizing the capabilities of women and girls was highlighted with the aim of ensuring their full participation, on equal terms, in building a better

world and promoting their role in the development process; as well as the elimination of all forms of exclusion, discrimination and violence (UN, 2018). In the Platform for Action of the Beijing Declaration, the following section on women’s specific rights is added:

Violence against women impedes the achievement of the goals of equality, development and peace. Violence against women violates and impairs or impedes their enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms [...] Women’s low social and economic status can be both a cause and a consequence of the violence they experience. (UN, 2018, p. 51)

Subsequently, in 2015, the Global Agenda for 2030 was agreed upon, in which the 17 Sustainable Development Goals were established with the aim of eliminating poverty, hunger, the deterioration of climate change, guaranteeing the right to education, health, women’s equality and the development of cities. However, and with 20 years of distance between the World Conference on Women, Beijing (1995) and the signing of the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015), inequality between men and women still represents a monumental challenge to achieve world peace in an environment of justice and full enjoyment of freedom in all peoples of the planet.

## **PROBLEMATIZATION**

According to estimates provided by the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2017, p. 10): “Women make up 40 percent of the global workforce. Likewise, the report “Women in Business Management, argues the following:

[...] Education has played an important role here along with certain freedoms for women to exercise leadership. Eastern European countries also tend to have high ranks in the proportion of women in management, again due to women’s education, but also due to a long tradition of promoting equality in the workplace and technical training for women. (ILO, 2017, pp. 4-5)

The accentuation of educational policies and, particularly access to education for women, in countries such as Colombia and the Philippines, has favored the participation of women in management and decision-making positions at the corporate level (ILO, 2017). Another strategy, although limiting to a certain extent, is the search for equal conditions through technical training for the work of women and adolescents. Now, as part of the current Agenda of the National Human Rights Commission, the work on equality of men and women is identified in the face of a national reality of discrimination, violence and exclusion practices derived from old training schemes among the Mexican population, “[...] presenting anachronistic patterns, for example, the fact of belonging to an indigenous ethnicity or lack of education” (CNDH, 2017, p. 71).

An example of the inequality between men and women is the illiteracy rate among the Mexican population. According to data from INEGI (2020), the last five-yearly census recorded the following regarding the illiterate population aged 5 years and older:

	Total	Men	Women
Total	63, 225	15, 750	47, 475
From 5 to 9 years old	2, 107	1, 009	1, 098

Table 1. Illiterate population aged 5 years and older in Mexico

Source: INEGI (2020)

	Total	Men	Women
Total	126, 014, 024	61, 473, 390	64, 540, 634
15 years and older	4, 456, 431	1, 779, 239	2, 677, 192

Table 2. Illiterate population 15 years and older in Mexico

Source: INEGI (2020)

Tables 1 and 2 show that women are unequal in relation to the number of illiterate men. The percentage of the total illiterate Mexican population is 4.7%. Initially, this

4. n= number of speakers

approach emphasizes the need to investigate not only the causes of illiteracy that have led to the educational and social backwardness of the population; to discrimination and violence against girls, adolescents, women and indigenous women; but also the search for solutions from the field of research and actions (strategic projects) of urgent social impact to address this problem from the university.

Now, with respect to illiteracy in the State of Mexico, the following is observed:

Federal State	Total	Alphabet	Illiterate	Not specified
Mexico	12,862,124	12,458,140	372,454	31,530

Table 3 Population aged 15 years and over by state according to literacy status, 2020

Source: Information taken from INEGI (2020b).

The illiteracy rate in the State of Mexico is 2.89% among the population 15 years of age and older. According to these data, 3 out of every 100 Mexicans aged 15 years and older do not know how to read or write and are therefore in a situation of absolute illiteracy. The total number of illiterate women in the State of Mexico is 248, 391, while the total number of illiterate men is 124, 063 (INEGI, 2020b, 2021b). Now, with respect to the municipalities that register a higher illiteracy rate, the following stand out:

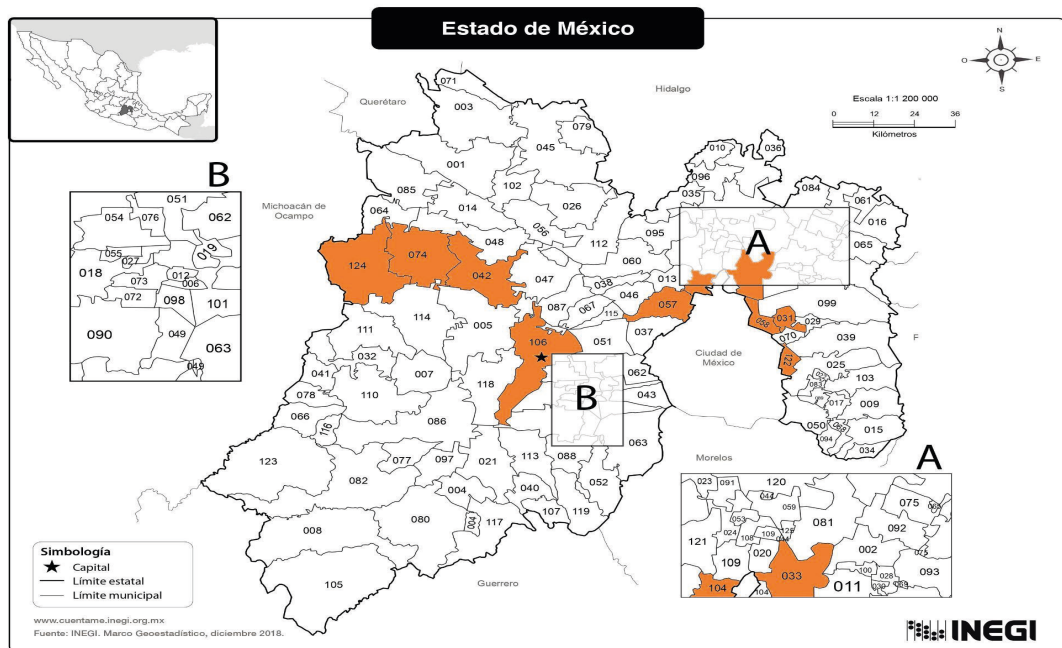
From this list of municipalities in the State of Mexico with the highest percentage of illiteracy, the following stand out: San José del Rincón with 13.4%, San Felipe del Progreso with 10.8%, Ixtlahuaca with 7.1%, Valle de Chalco Solidaridad with 3.1% and Toluca de Lerdo with 2.6%.

From this information, the municipality of San José del Rincón has a majority of speakers of Mazahua (n<sup>4</sup> =9,556), Nahuatl (n=95), Otomí (n=51), Mazatec (n=30), Zoque (n=10), Mixteco (n=10) and Totonaco (n=8) (Data México, 2024). In the municipality of

Municipality	Population Total	Population illiterate	Percentage of illiterate population
Ecatepec de Morelos (33)	1, 285, 180	24, 718	1, 9%
Toluca (106)	692, 006	18,162	2, 6%
Nezahualcoyotl (58)	860, 754	15,929	1, 8%
Chimalhuacán (31)	512, 876	16, 018	3, 1%
Naucalpan de Juarez (57)	660,141	13, 390	2, 0%
Tlalnepantla de Baz (104)	545, 225	9,606	1.7%
San Felipe del Progreso (74)	97, 548	10, 536	10, 8%
Valle de Chalco Solidaridad (122)	287, 132	8, 995	3, 1%
Ixtlahuaca (42)	115, 576	8, 259	7, 1%
San José del Rincón (124)	65, 418	8, 826	13, 4%

Table 4 Population with the highest percentage of illiteracy in the State of Mexico

Source: Own elaboration with INEGI information extracted from the Population and Housing Census. (2021a)



Graph 1. Municipalities with the highest illiteracy rates in the State of Mexico

Source: Own elaboration with data from INEGI (2021a).

San Felipe del Progreso, there are speakers of Mazahua (n= 28, 584), Otomi (n= 162), Nahuatl (n= 118), Mixteco (n= 64); Mazateco (n= 36), Tarasco (n= 14), Totonaco (n= 14), Tseltal (n= 14) and Maya (n= 14). In Toluca de Lerdo, speakers of Otomi (n=24,862), Mazahua (n=1,872), Nahuatl (n=615), Zapotec

(n=268), Totonaco (n=240), Mixtec (n=239), Chinantec (n=176), Huastec (n=149), Matlazinca (n=122), and Mixe (n=113) are registered. From these figures, a possible relationship between the indigenous status present in these municipalities and the illiteracy status of the population in these localities can be deduced.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE AUTONOMY OF GIRLS, ADOLESCENTS, WOMEN AND INDIGENOUS WOMEN, AND THE CONCEPT OF FREEDOM

The search for and pursuit of ‘non-discrimination’ is an inescapable principle for the achievement of equality among individuals. Human development is possible if and only if the enjoyment of human rights such as the right to education is pursued. In particular, the principle of ‘non-discrimination’ on the basis of sex was established in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), concluded in December 1979, which stated that:

Any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field. (UN, 1979).

This leads to the following statement: all forms or manifestations of discrimination, exclusion and marginalization of girls, adolescents, women and indigenous women limit and reduce their capacities for the full enjoyment of their fundamental rights, such as the right to education, health, housing, food, political participation and decision-making, and a life free of violence. Without equal treatment, it is not possible to achieve the full development of human capabilities. Likewise, without equality, there is no freedom and, therefore, it conditions and, in most cases, makes it impossible for people to develop their autonomy. The Observatory of Gender Equality in Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) states that:

5. In this article, the following definition of the concept of *capability* is taken up: “[...] Sen chose the term capabilities to represent the different alternative combinations that a person can do or be [...] This expression was chosen to represent the alternative combinations that a person can do or be: the different functionings that can be achieved (Urquijo, 2014, pp. 65-66). For his part, Urquijo (2014) defines capabilities as “an intention to explore a particular approach to well-being in terms of a person’s ability to do valued acts” (p. 66).

Women’s autonomy is a key factor in guaranteeing the exercise of their human rights in a context of full equality. Control over their bodies (physical autonomy), the capacity to generate their own income and resources (economic autonomy) and full participation in decision-making that affects their lives and their collectivity (autonomy in decision-making). These constitute three pillars for achieving greater gender equality in the region. (CNDH, 2022, p. 54).

For this reason, this document considers the principle of “non-discrimination” as a fundamental principle, which is its central objective:

[...] guarantee equality of treatment among individuals. All people, of all gender, social, economic and cultural conditions, have equal rights and equal dignity and no one should be discriminated against. Discrimination deteriorates coexistence among people and marginalizes those who are more likely to suffer it. It limits human development, as well as the enjoyment of human rights.(CNDH, 2017, p. 3).

In this sense, the problem of illiteracy is aggravated when the freedom of individuals is lost or limited for the exercise or realization of their diverse activities, either within an academic environment or in the development of people’s daily lives. The loss of freedom occurs when individuals do not have the skills and functionings due to the inability *to be* and *do* (Urquijo, 2014). For example, when people have a condition of illiteracy, their freedom to live and function within the life schemes they desire or require is limited due to limitations due to the inability to access or use their mother tongue.

Now, for Amartya Sen, from the capabilities approach<sup>5</sup>, he emphasizes that it should be sought at all times to preserve, maintain and promote the freedom of individuals to

choose the life they want or wish through the full development of capabilities such as: 'being' and 'being' literate. In this way, through literacy, the autonomy of individuals to participate fully in the exercise of public and private life of society would be achieved, and in the specific case, the literacy of women, adolescents and girls. In this order of ideas, the development of capabilities and functionings result in assessments to identify the degree of individual or collective well-being. However, Urquijo (2014), argues that the theory of capabilities does not refer to an explanation of poverty, inequality or well-being, but rather, it offers a normative and critical framework to conceptualize and evaluate social problems. Similarly, from this theoretical approach, it can be used as a tool for the design and evaluation of public and institutional policies.

According to the main constituent elements of the capabilities theory of the Indian philosopher and economist, Amartya Sen, capabilities represent an important valuation index since they allow evaluating and assessing the well-being of individuals within a given society (Urquijo 2014). With this, it is understood that, in order to achieve the welfare of the population, it is necessary to identify and recognize the possibilities of action and participation of individuals. As well as the degree of freedom, justice and equality they have to do so. From the capabilities approach it is possible to analyze and address social problems such as illiteracy of the population that negatively impact the welfare and development of people. Therefore, attention to the literacy of the population allows an approach and evaluation of the scope and limitations of a society that is free and just. Thus, the line of argument of this manuscript consists of proposing that "the fundamental criterion for evaluating the quality of literacy is the degree of autonomy that children achieve in their activity as readers and writers" (Ferreiro, 2007, p. 83).

Finally, the term autonomy as a tool and means for the full exercise of human rights is defined as "the capacity of individuals and peoples to govern or determine themselves; it includes non-dependence and the freedom to generate internal norms or criteria for decision making and action" (National Institute of Women, 2007, p. 24). In other words, autonomy is the ultimate goal to be achieved as a result and indicator of development and quality of life of people. For example, the literacy of women, adolescents and girls represents the capacity associated with decision-making activities; the full enjoyment and exercise of rights; physical autonomy, economic autonomy; as well as the capacity to influence socially and politically (political and citizen autonomy) in both the public and private spheres. This would help to reduce the inequality gaps that affect the region and the country.

## METHOD

The research design used for the development, implementation and monitoring of the strategic projects on illiteracy from the university was longitudinal and community-based. While the main tool was fieldwork and community work and interdisciplinary. The duration of the study was from 2018 to 2024. Among the strategic literacy projects from the university are the following: refresher courses for teachers, workshops, lecture series, master lectures and development of educational projects and applied research focused on the development of language education of people in both mother tongue (L1) and foreign language (L2).

The general objective consisted in the attention and intervention in the reduction of illiteracy and functional illiteracy as social problems that slow down and hinder the integral development of people, mainly women, through the updating and linguistic training of teachers at the basic, middle and higher le-

vels, and the design of literacy laboratories for undergraduate and graduate students. While the scope of the research is explanatory and interpretative with the purpose of understanding and documenting the importance of the development of articulated projects with social impact *in* and *from* the university that address one of the most urgent problems of society; that is, the improvement of the condition of illiteracy and functional illiteracy as an obstacle to the achievement of autonomy and functioning of people from a framework of freedom and social inclusion.

### **RESEARCH DESIGN: COMMUNITY WORK WITH TEACHERS FROM DIFFERENT EDUCATIONAL LEVELS**

According to Dwyer (2006), community work is directly related to field work and practices. To this end, the following fundamental stages are highlighted as part of the planning of strategic projects from the university: 1) management with key informants (educational authorities and informants from different academic fields); 2) institutional linkage through collaboration agreements between stakeholders; 3) direct cooperation with the community and community actors <inside and outside the university>; 4) dissemination of strategic community practices and projects.

Among the strategic literacy projects from the university, in the period from 2018 to 2024, a total of 12 courses and workshops were registered for the linguistic training of teachers attached to the State Coordination of the Professional Teaching Service and the Undersecretary of Higher Secondary Education of the Government of the State of Mexico, the Undersecretary of Higher Secondary Education of the Government of the State of Mexico and university students (undergraduate and graduate). Through these actions, a total of 420 teachers of pre-school, elementary, middle school, high school and higher education were attended.

### **RESEARCH DESIGN: LITERACY AND ACADEMIC LITERACY NODES**

The practical part of the research consisted of field work under the scheme of interdisciplinary academic literacy nodes and trainers in topics for the reinforcement of people's linguistic training in L1 and L2. The interdisciplinary research groups attached to the Institute of University Studies participated continuously and permanently in the work days and field practices carried out in the educational spaces referred to in Table 5.

In these strategic projects for the promotion of reading, special emphasis was placed on creative, collective and academic reading and writing practices. To this end, we sought to adapt to the environment and problems of the target population (mainly girls, adolescents, women and indigenous women), considering the diversity of knowledge, place of origin and socio-cultural practices of each teaching community or focus group in question.

The purpose of this type of research design is to encourage the enjoyment and use of reading as part of their free time and as a vehicle for communication and expression of ideas in both public and private spaces. Therefore, we proceeded to work in educational contexts due to the concentration of female teachers that is regularly observed in the groups attended and that come from different municipalities and communities belonging to the State of Mexico. Participant observation was also considered (through the participation of students of the Bachelor's Degree in Social Anthropology in the field practices, as well as in the formation of the literacy brigades).

In addition, and complementary to the above strategic projects, literacy brigades were carried out with undergraduate students, as described below.

No.	Course/Workshop	Description	Year
1	“Strategies for reading comprehension.”	Department of Telesecundarias in the Toluca Valley. Inclusion and Educational Equity Program. Total number of participating teachers 80.	February, 2018
2	“Teaching Strategies for Comprehensive Learning Workshop.”	Secretary’s Office through the Academic Personnel Development Office. Total number of participating teachers 40	January 19, 2018
3	“Historical and Linguistic Education.”	Institute of University Studies for 50 elementary and high school teachers of the State Coordination of the Professional Teaching Service of the Government of the State of Mexico.	January 08, 2020
4	“Development of critical thinking and the social function of language.”	Institute of University Studies for 50 elementary and high school teachers of the State Coordination of the Professional Teaching Service of the Government of the State of Mexico.	January 22-24, 2020
5	“Language education and academic language development in basic education.”	Institute of University Studies for 50 elementary and high school teachers of the State Coordination of the Professional Teaching Service of the Government of the State of Mexico.	August 17-21, 2020
6	“Development of critical thinking in basic education”.	Aimed at 50 elementary school teachers through the State Coordination of Professional Teaching Service and the Institute of University Studies.	August 10-14, 2020
7	“To train higher level students in reading and writing skills, as well as in oral and written communication process and learning.”	Institute of University Studies for 10 students of professional studies at UAEM.	February 2022
8	“Course on the development of research protocols”.	Faculty of Anthropology UAEM directed to 10 students of professional studies of the UAEM.	june, july and august 2022
9	“Curso- Taller lectoescritura para la titulación”.	Institute of Studies about the University directed to 10 students of professional studies of the UAEM of the Faculty of Anthropology of the UAEM.	January 10 to 14, 2022
10	“Curso- Taller lectoescritura para la titulación”.	Institute of University Studies for 5 graduate students of the UAEM.	March 6 to May 30, 2023
11	“Workshop on linguistics applied to English language teaching.”	Instituto de Estudios sobre la Universidad y Escuela Normal de Ixtapan de la Sal, aimed at 45 students in teacher training.	October 22, 2024
12	“Strategies for the comprehension and management of academic texts in English for teachers at Nivel Medio Superior.”	Undersecretary of Higher Secondary Education of the Government of the State of Mexico addressed to 20 teachers of Plantel 370 of the Professional High School of Valle de Bravo.	november-december 2024

Table 5. Strategic literacy projects from the University from 2018-2024.

Source: Own elaboration

### LITERACY BRIGADES AS A SOCIAL ADVOCACY PROJECT: DOCUMENTING THE EXPERIENCE

Through the work with the literacy brigades, we sought to address the problem of illiteracy of the population in the Municipality of Toluca, which ranks second in illiteracy in the state with 3.9% of the total population according to data referred to by the Ministry of Economy (2020). The main objective of the project was to encourage and promote the practice of reading and writing through activities such as reading short stories aloud or softly, reflections on what was read, sharing written ideas and participation in reflection circles.

Four high school students participated in the brigades and were involved in actions of retribution and social inclusion under the scheme of field practices, recovering the knowledge they have as a result of their professional training, in this case: social anthropologists. In the first week of field work of the literacy project, carried out in June in various locations in the State of Mexico, including the Children’s Hospital, Gynecology and Obstetrics Hospital, Monica Pretelini Maternal and Perinatal Hospital, as well as in the communities of Capultitlan and San Antonio Buenavista. During the first 4 weeks of field and community work, the reception of these acti-

vities was evaluated and the main barriers and opportunities for their effective implementation were identified since, according to the field diaries of the participating students, the male population resisted the participation of the targeted women and indigenous women in the literacy activities.

The brigades focused on the approach and promotion of literacy among girls, adolescents, women and indigenous women, mainly in public areas and hospital zones of Toluca, through a series of previously designed activities to promote written culture. During the preliminary research, data from INEGI (2021) and COESPO (2020) were consulted to document the illiterate population rate in the State of Mexico and, in particular, by municipality. Once the analysis and documentation was done, the volunteer brigadistas referred the following comments as part of their field notes:

-Something interesting is that when we approached with the intention of carrying out a literacy activity with a woman, the husbands or companions with whom they were with, answered for them and rejected us to the point of impeding the development of the activity [...]" (Volunteer Brigadier 2).

-It is understood that due to delicate situations or time constraints, being areas of public space close to general hospitals, it was complicated for the people gathered there to give us twenty minutes or more. However, despite the complications that the context involves, in general terms, the people who gave us a little of their time reported that they were satisfied with the readings, describing them as funny, amusing and, sensorially, they responded with grimaces, smiles and sometimes with a bit of bewilderment" (Volunteer Brigadier 3).

-We approached a group of 3 women [...] one of them mentioned to us that she had not attended school but that she could read. (Volunteer Brigadier 3).

-After a while we made a further approach with a woman, who was between 30 and 35 years old, who was very attentive from the beginning of the approach and agreed to carry out the activity. She mentioned that she had recently been deported from the United States to Mexico along with her husband. In this case, she showed interest in participating in the literacy activity because she wanted to practice her Spanish by reading aloud and thought this activity would help her do so. In general, her reading was fluent, using words that did not require complicated pronunciation. In addition, reading comprehension reflected a clear follow-through with the central idea of the text, which addressed the theme of education. During the follow-up and development of the activity, we discussed the differences that the person identified between the Mexican educational system and the U.S. educational system. After this, we thanked them for their participation and retired to another area close to the same hospital (Hospital for the Child)" (Volunteer Brigadier 3).

In another field diary note, the following is stated:

-A woman of approximately 50 years of age welcomed us by accessing the reading and writing activity. On her part, the reading interpretation was more ambiguous, without going deeper into the subject matter of the text, she only referred to basic and elementary concepts contained in the material. However, she shared with us that she thought it was a good method for us to take the readings, besides, while she was reading, we could notice some intrigue, some grimaces that reflected a certain response to the content of the reading. Without further ado, we tried to approach other families and groups of people (mainly women) but the heads of families were suspicious of our presence, and when we explained the activity, they simply rejected us" (Volunteer Brigadier 2).

-The rejection deeply marked the unfeasibility of reading and writing activities in most cases. In general, it was observed that the men (adults) accompanying the girls, adolescents and women outside the hospitals tried to prevent the brigadistas from approaching them. Although the women expressed their desire to participate, their companions refused to participate” (Brigadista 4).

-Later, we decided to talk with two other women between 40 and 45 years old (women from indigenous communities) who were embroidering. On this occasion, they were accompanied by a man, but when he saw us and listened to what we were doing, he left the place. On this occasion, the women agreed to participate in the activity and at the end they said that they found the project interesting and asked us to return with more reading material” (Volunteer Brigadier 3).

-On another day, we went to the Obstetrics and Gynecology Hospital, where we went to the area near the emergency room. At the beginning, we were not well received, but we continued extending the invitation to several groups of people who were outside the hospital. The situation was repeated, the men appeared as soon as we approached the women, preventing us from developing the reading and writing activities. After several attempts, a group of three women between 50 and 60 years of age agreed to participate. One of them said that she had no schooling but could read a little. We told her that this situation did not represent any impediment to participate in the activity. At the end of the day, we approached a family of three women and one man. From the beginning, they agreed to participate by brainstorming ideas, which led to an interesting dialogue about their interpretations of the shared material. It should be noted that the success of this practice was due to the authorization of the head of the family who accompanied the women participants” (Brigadista 1).

-On the other hand, in the towns, mainly in Capultitlán, the attention was more hostile, people did not stop to discuss or simply listen to the reasons for the project in question, and that was because most of the women were very busy, or practically said they did not have time. On the other hand, in San Antonio Buenavista, “it was the town festival when we arrived there, and this partly complicated the development of the activities, since people were more busy with other activities and ignored our call (Collective Reflection of Volunteer Brigaders).

## ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

It is worth mentioning that, in the updating of the databases on the illiteracy condition of the population in the State of Mexico, the following is identified: 1) the concentration of the highest illiteracy rates in the entity (San José del Rincón, San Felipe del Progreso, and Chapa de Mota with 7, 3%), in most cases, coincides with the condition of indigeneity of the population. Autor (2015) considers that: “[...] factors such as growth, industrialization and urbanization of the Toluca Valley have accelerated the disappearance of indigenous languages; however, the growth of the indigenous population does not correspond to the increase in the number of speakers of indigenous languages in the region” (p. 635). Likewise, the processes associated with the educability of the subjects (literacy in Spanish, mainly) and the lack of opportunities and effective public policies have an impact on the fact that the areas with indigenous populations have the highest levels of illiteracy. 2) In this particular case, it was identified that the Toluca Metropolitan Zone, widely characterized by aspects such as mobility, migration of indigenous and non-indigenous population driven by the search for opportunities (employment, health services, commerce, among others) have influenced the municipality of Toluca de

Lerdo to occupy the third place of illiteracy in the population. In view of this, in the last phase of the study, field work was implemented targeting the general population through literacy brigades in the hospital areas located in

the Municipality of Toluca, where a significant participation and percentage concentration of indigenous and non-indigenous population was observed, mainly girls, adolescents, women and indigenous women.



Images of the literacy brigades

Source: Photographs in the field by volunteer brigadistas.

3) The brigades focused on the approach and promotion of literacy among girls, adolescents, women and indigenous women, mainly in public areas and hospital zones of Toluca, through a series of activities to promote written culture previously designed ; 4) In the initial phase of the literacy project (literacy brigades), varied results were documented regarding the reception and participation of women in the activities designed by the university participants. For example, in gene-

ral, it was identified that in the public hospital areas where the field work was carried out (literacy brigades for girls, adolescents, women and indigenous women), the response was positive, although limited not only by the time available for its implementation and the conditions of sensitivity of the target population in these environments, but also by the prohibitions presented by the male population that was identified as accompanying the groups of women with whom it was intended to work.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The objective of the research was to bring girls, adolescents, women and indigenous women closer to the written culture through strategic literacy projects (language education) with various teaching communities in order to favor and promote the development of their didactic and linguistic skills from the University. These projects consisted of courses, workshops and seminars for disciplinary updating on topics related to language training, the social function of language, strategies for reading comprehension, writing and management of academic texts, aimed mainly at teaching communities at different educational levels (pre-school, elementary, high school and higher education).

It should be noted that, in order to have an impact on the development of the capabilities of *being* and *being* literate, it was necessary to carry out a longitudinal and community-based research from 2018 to 2024. During this time, a total of 420 teachers, mostly women educators in the State of Mexico, were impacted. In this way, the study documents an interdisciplinary academic effort from the University that has been maintained with the purpose of socially influencing the reduction of illiteracy of girls, adolescents, women and indigenous women mainly, in a permanent and continuous way. To this effect, through socially responsible research, the University

is linked to society and the local environment in the attention to one of the greatest pending tasks of the Mexican State: the literacy of the population. The challenge remains monumental since illiteracy contributes to the condition of inequality in which 4.7% of the total population lives in Mexico, while in the State of Mexico the illiterate population is 2.89%. In other words, out of a total of 6,162,542 inhabitants, 124,063 men are illiterate (2.01%). Meanwhile, 248,391 are women (girls, adolescents and indigenous women), which is equivalent to 4.03%. Therefore, the level of illiteracy of girls, adolescents, women and indigenous women in the State of Mexico is double compared to that of men.

Finally, this research reaffirms that illiteracy represents a structural disadvantage based on gender that restricts the possibilities of full development of people and their capabilities, also limiting the freedoms and functions for the use and management of their mother tongue. In other words, the social condition of not *being* literate and *being* literate prevents the full development of women's economic, physical and decision-making autonomy. Therefore, bringing people closer to written culture, and particularly to people who are identified with some kind of social disadvantage, constitutes a break with the form of symbolic violence that reduces and excludes from any possibility of human development through access to and use of written culture.

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