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Assessing the multiple disadvantages of Mayan girls: The effects of gender, ethnicity, poverty, and residence on education in Guatemala

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Access to primary education in Guatemala has increased in recent years, particularly in rural areas (Anderson 2001). Nevertheless, rates of primary-school completion and literacy for young people remain among the lowest in Latin America, and such problems as late entry, grade repetition, and early dropout persist (UNESCO 2003 and 2006). Adult literacy is estimated to be 85 percent in Latin America as a whole, compared with only 70 percent in Guatemala (UNDP 2004). Although indigenous peoples in Latin America generally have less schooling than nonindigenous peoples, ethnic differences are greatest in Guatemala, where indigenous (Mayan) adults have less than half the level of schooling of nonindigenous (Ladino) adults: 2.5 years versus 5.7 years (Hall and Patrinos 2005). Recent trends show that the ethnic gap is narrowing among young people, but large inequalities remain. Among 10–19-year-olds, the Mayan literacy rate is four-fifths the Ladino rate: 74 percent versus 90 percent (Shapiro 2005).

Sex differences in literacy and education are also large in Guatemala. The female-to-male literacy ratio is 0.77 among adults and 0.86 among 15–24-year-olds. Furthermore, although the girl-to-boy primary-school enrollment ratio of 0.95 in 2000 indicates great improvements in school-entry rates, the female-to-male ratio of primary-school completion for 15–24-year-olds is substantially lower at 0.82 (ENCOVI 2000).

Mayan females are the most disadvantaged group by far. Only 39 percent of 15–64-year-old Mayan women in Guatemala are literate (versus 68, 77, and 87 percent of Mayan males, Ladina females, and Ladino males, respectively), and just two-



thirds of 10–19-year-old Mayan females are literate (versus 80 percent of Mayan males and 90 percent of Ladino females and males) (Shapiro 2005).

Mayans account for 42 percent of Guatemala's population, reside primarily in rural areas, and are politically underrepresented. Three-fourths of Mayans are poor, compared with 40 percent of Ladinos (ENCOVI 2000).

Mayan Girls' Enrollment

Data from the 2000 Guatemala Living Standards Measurement Survey (in Spanish, Encuesta Nacional sobre Condiciones de Vida, ENCOVI) permit us to study the determinants of school enrollment, grade progression, and educational attainment among 7–24-year-olds. The analysis starts with children at age seven, the compulsory age of primary-school enrollment in

Guatemala. By age 24, the majority of Guatemalans have finished their schooling, hence 24 is the upper age limit in the analysis. A detailed consumption/expenditure section of the survey allows the calculation of national poverty levels. The National Institute for Statistics collected the ENCOVI data between 1999 and 2000 from a nationally representative sample of 11,170 households, 3,544 urban and 7,626 rural.

Figure 1 shows current enrollment status by ethnicity, sex, and age. At each increasing year of age, Mayan girls are the least likely to be enrolled. At age seven, only 54 percent of Mayan girls are in school, compared with 71 percent of Mayan boys and 75 percent of Ladina girls. For all four sex-ethnicity groups, enrollment levels are highest between ages nine and 11, with a sharp decline occurring at age 12. This drop is especially steep for Mayan girls: at age 16 only 25 percent of Mayan girls are enrolled, compared with about half of Mayan boys and Ladino girls and boys. Mayan female enrollment in younger cohorts is rising both absolutely and relatively, however: the sex-ethnicity gap is smaller for children aged 12 years and younger than for adolescents.

Mayan girls are not a homogeneous group, however. The ENCOVI data reveal that the one-fourth of Mayan girls who are classified as not poor have primary-school enrollment rates and grade-for-age levels equal to those of Ladina girls, and, among those completing primary school, have secondary-school enrollment levels of about 80 percent of those of Ladina girls. The one-fourth of Mayan girls who are classified as extremely poor, on the other hand, have the worst educational outcomes of all: only one-half of such girls of primary-school age have entered school, fewer than 10 percent of girls aged 13–24 who entered primary school have completed that level, and just 14 percent of these primary-school graduates have ever enrolled in secondary school. Figure 2 shows the proportion of Mayan girls enrolled in school by economic status.

Mayan Girls in Primary School

As we mentioned above, enrollment rates drop sharply for all Guatemalan children at age 12. Although that age marks a transition between primary and secondary schooling for children who entered school at age seven and made good progress, most children aged 12 and older, especially Mayans, have very low grade attainment, and few have completed primary school. Although school attendance is compulsory in Guatemala starting at age seven, not all children enroll at this age. Parents' decision concerning when (and whether) to enroll their child in school has important implications for the child's future educational progress and achievement. According to ENCOVI data, Mayan children start school about half a year later than Ladino children. For Mayan girls, differences in starting age by economic status are wide: those in extremely poor households who have enrolled did so 0.73 years later than did girls in medium-poor households and 1.2 years later than girls in households classified as not poor. Primary-school entry age for Mayan girls who are not poor is about the same as that for Ladino children.

Along with the occurrence and timing of initial enrollment, continuation in school (retention) and grade repetition are the basic factors determining educational attainment. Further insight into the prevalence of overage students is gained by examining grade-for-age, which encompasses starting late, repeating grades, and dropout followed by re-enrollment. Mayan children have much lower grade-for-age levels than Ladinos. Among Mayans, female grade-for-age levels are lower than those for boys through age 15. Starting at 16, however, Mayan girls' grade-for-age levels are greater than those for Mayan boys; this turnaround may indicate that only the most academically qualified Mayan girls continue to study after age 15. Consistent with the findings for levels of primary-school enrollment and entry age, Mayan girls who are not poor have grade-for-age levels nearly equal to those of Ladino students. Most Mayan girls are

Figure 1. Proportion of Mayans and Ladinos currently enrolled in primary or secondary school, by age

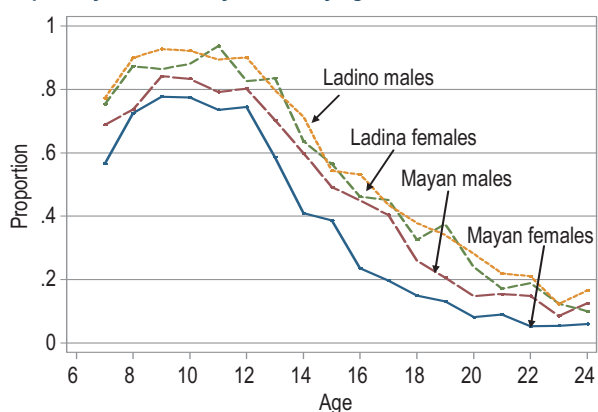
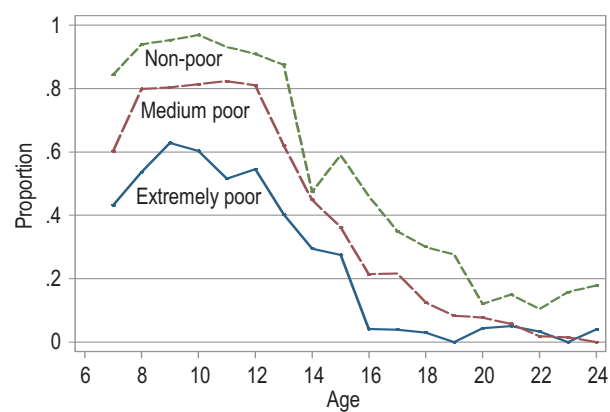


Figure 2. Proportion of Mayan females currently enrolled in primary or secondary school, by economic status



unable to finish primary school because of poverty, domestic work burdens, and cultural barriers.

For young people not enrolled at the time of the survey, ENCOVI asked the main reason for nonenrollment. For primary-age children (7–12 years), lack of money was the largest single factor identified, and its prevalence did not vary by sex–ethnicity status. Lack of interest in school was the second most frequently cited reason, followed by “age”—presumably being overage for grade. Among Mayan girls, age was more frequently named by the extremely poor.

In addition to marking the lifestage at which children begin to assume gender-based adult work roles, age 12 signals the onset of puberty and parental concerns about their daughters mixing with boys. In a related study of barriers and constraints to schooling and social participation among rural Mayan girls and boys, we found that parents feared adolescent girls’ interactions with boys as potentially damaging to their daughters’ reputations and subsequent marriage prospects and as putting girls at increased risk for early, out-of-wedlock pregnancy (Colom et al. 2004). (Birth outside of marriage/consensual union is uncommon and highly stigmatized in rural Mayan communities.)

Among 13–24-year-old respondents, the most frequently cited reasons for nonenrollment in school were household chores (for females) and work (for males). Ladina females were more likely than Mayan females to cite market work, as opposed to household chores. Among both sexes, lack of money was the second most common reason, with few differences by ethnicity. Among nonenrolled Mayan females, responses varied by economic status. The poor were much more likely to refer to lack of money and housework, while others were more apt to mention work and lack of interest.

In developing countries generally, marriage before age 18 is associated with lower rates of school enrollment and educational attainment for females (Mensch 2005). Age at marriage in Guatemala is younger for Mayan than for Ladina women, and ethnic disparities begin to appear around age 15. By age 18, almost 40 percent of Mayan females are married—nearly twice the percentage of Ladina females of the same age. Despite this early age at marriage, a gap exists between mean age at leaving school and marriage age for Mayan girls. Also, because most fertility in Guatemala occurs within marriage, out-of-wedlock childbearing is not a likely cause of early school dropout. Even if the timing of girls’ school leaving does not directly coincide with their marriage, however, parental expectations of their daughters’ future life paths may influence their investments in daughters’ education. Our qualitative work in these communities (Colom et al. 2004) revealed that parents were reluctant to invest in daughters’ education beyond the age of puberty

because of high direct and opportunity costs and because most parents expected their daughters’ future roles to be mainly those of wife and mother—roles for which advanced education was not viewed as necessary.

Policies for Attracting and Keeping Mayan Girls in School

Our analysis indicates that Mayan females—particularly those who are poor and/or living in rural areas—are the most disadvantaged group in Guatemala in terms of education. They are less likely ever to enroll in school; and when they do enroll, they are more likely than other children to start later and drop out earlier. Among Guatemalan children who are enrolled, Mayan girls have the lowest grade-for-age levels. Despite the rising proportion of Mayan females who are participating in the educational system, dropout among young Guatemalans is common, particularly at age 12; dropout at this age is especially frequent among Mayan females. Although the proportion of Mayan males and females enrolled is approximately equal at age ten (at around 80 percent) according to ENCOVI, only 60 percent of Mayan males and 40 percent of Mayan females are still in school by age 14.

Age 12 marks a transition between primary and secondary levels for children who entered school on time and made regular progress. Most nonenrolled children between ages 12 and 18 have low grade attainment, however, and few have completed primary school. In addition to poverty-reduction programs, government efforts to encourage families to start their children’s schooling at age seven may lead to fewer competing interests with regard to time allocation as children approach puberty and are compelled to assume adult responsibilities.

The main reason cited by all Guatemalan children of primary-school age for not being currently enrolled was lack of money. “Age” (being overage for grade) and lack of interest were the second and third most common reasons. These findings point to the need to fund scholarships and other educational incentive programs more widely. Although the government’s approach of focusing on rural areas is positive, it may not be sufficiently precise. Even though extremely poor households are disproportionately located in rural areas, one-fourth of rural households surveyed in ENCOVI were not poor.

Earlier studies have shown that expanding access to bilingual education programs in the early grades reduces grade repetition and dropout among Mayan primary-school students (Morren 1988; Patrinos and Velez 1996; Enge and Chesterfield 1996). Currently, only one-third of rural children in Guatemala have access to such programs (Shapiro 2005). Suggestions have been made that the government should experiment with innovative programs—such as those operating in other Latin

American countries—that allow poor rural young people to attend school in unconventional ways that are culturally acceptable. Examples include video conferencing and correspondence courses. Our qualitative research in rural highland communities (Colom et al. 2004) revealed that nonenrolled Mayan girls—most of them engaged primarily in domestic activities—are socially isolated, with church groups being the only form of interaction most had outside their homes. Innovative programs for such girls that combine academic instruction with social interaction in safe local community spaces may increase girls' skills and broaden their social networks and sources of social support (Stromquist et al. 1999). Mobilizing the support of the community and working with trusted Mayan organizations are likely to improve the cultural acceptability, effectiveness, and sustainability of such programs.

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