

# School Achievement and the Labour Market Insertion of Young Beneficiaries of the Oportunidades Programme

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**With the notion** that educational achievement is related with a wider spectrum of labour market opportunities as its guiding premise, the objective of the *Oportunidades* Programme is to prolong educational trajectories and thus help break the intergenerational transmission of poverty. González de la Rocha (2012) assesses the validity of this poverty reduction strategy by analyzing the Programme's impact on the labour performance of rural Mexican indigenous and mestizo peoples, comparing those who became grant holders upon the Programme's inception in 1998 with those who did not.

Her analysis was based on a 2008 field research study that covered a number of ethnically diverse areas in Mexico in which a population of indigenous and mestizo peoples have similar access to public services. With a specific interest in these historically marginalized populations, González gathered a sample of 192 households, approximately half of which were long-term beneficiaries and the other half non-beneficiaries. A pre-condition for selection was that each indigenous or mestizo household had a son or daughter who in 1998 was attending the third or the fourth grade in primary school. Further, in half of these households the school-going child was first-born while in the other half the child, of an equivalent school age, was the youngest in their family at the time of joining the Programme. The reason for making this second 'split' was because it allowed González to give due regard to the culturally embedded privileges that children who are the youngest members of their families typically enjoy as compared with those who are first-born, who frequently leave school in order to devote themselves to work. About 80 per cent of her sample of young people of both genders were between 18 and 22 years of age (the boys and girls who in 1998 were approximately 8 to 12 years old and started as grant-holders of the Programme) because this cohort received greater exposure to the Programme as beneficiaries relative to people outside this age range.

Comparison of these two sample sets reveals a strong correlation between school achievement and grant holding. The greatest improvement occurred among indigenous peoples, especially women. The generational gap in school achievement increased in all cases but that between indigenous mothers and their daughters is particularly marked.

The generation of the parents is characterized by two kinds of inequality: ethnic and gender. The ethnic gap, says González, has narrowed—i.e., for boys it still slightly favours mestizo, but for girls it has changed in favour of indigenous people. In terms of gender gap, it appears that girls are now more educated than boys, which is effectively opposite of the way things were in the parents' time.

As it is, a significant percentage of beneficiaries between 15 and 25 years of age now indicate 'formal study' to be their main occupation. This is especially the case among young indigenous people (men: 26.6 per cent; women: 28 per cent) and among mestizo women (32.7 per cent).

Likewise, there is an increasing number of university students, especially among indigenous and mestizo women. What this shows, says González, is that the Programme has had some success in keeping young people in school, in turn delaying the age in which they typically enter the labour market.

In order to weigh length of schooling against occupational achievement, González constructed an occupational scale. Categories of 'achievement' were aggregated in terms of occupational strata. Young people who had not been exposed to the *Oportunidades* Programme thus ended up clustered in the lowest stratum; a circumstance which did see a high representation of males. Occupational change was concentrated in the middle stratum, with a significant presence of indigenous men and women who were beneficiaries. Ultimately, female indigenous beneficiaries emerged with the highest representation in the top stratum (though their presence here is still relatively limited).

In addition to length of time spent in the school system, the position a given beneficiary occupied in the reproductive cycle of their household (first born/last born) also had a significant influence on occupational achievement. First born children, González finds, tend to enter earlier into the labour market, whereas their counterparts—last born children—tend to continue to their studies and thus delay the onset of their working lives.

Altogether, despite indigenous peoples facing more difficulties than mestizos with respect to continuing as beneficiaries of the *Oportunidades* Programme, the Programme's operation in Mexico has generally proved to be a milestone at the local level in the lives of families and young people who held a grant. The most significant results were the bridging of the gender-based educational gap so that trends now favour indigenous women, the reduction of the ethnic educational gap between male beneficiaries and female beneficiaries, and the fact that the educational gap in the case of women has shifted in favour of indigenous women. Such a phenomenon has not occurred in the segment of the population that is not exposed to the programme.

#### Reference:

González de la Rocha, M. (en prensa), "Escolaridad e inserción laboral de los jóvenes becarios del Programa Oportunidades: un análisis de impacto", in M. González de la Rocha y A. Escobar (eds.), *Pobreza, transferencias condicionadas y sociedad*. México DF: CIESAS.