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Discrimination and Intolerance Remains Prevalent in Mexico, Studies Find

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Recent studies from Mexico’s anti-discrimination council (Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación, CONAPRED), the semi-independent human rights commission (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, CNDH), and other organizations indicate that high levels of discrimination persist in Mexico against certain groups: those of indigenous origin, disabled populations, women in general, and homosexuals.

In particular, the studies pointed to the continuing discrimination against indigenous people, particularly those who reside in cities and towns away from their traditional communities. "Indigenous Mexicans face discrimination in our country through both our attitudes toward them and by actions, which not only hurt their dignity but also prevent individuals from enjoying basic rights such as access to health care, which often results in death," CNNMéxico said in a special report published just ahead of this year’s commemoration of the International Day of the World’s Indigenous People’s on Aug. 9.

Wide discrimination against indigenous peoples

Article 1 of the Mexican Constitution guarantees the protection of indigenous individuals and communities from "all types of discrimination based on ethnic or national origin, gender, disabilities, health condition, sexual preferences, marital status, or any other factor that violates human dignity and which has as an objective to annul or undermine the rights and the liberties of persons."

"Nevertheless, there are numerous instances where this constitutional mandate is not met," said CNNMéxico, which offered several examples of cases that occurred in the past year. CONAPRED, the CNDH, and other sources provided the information. Among the examples was the death of an indigenous woman and her unborn child in a hospital that refused her gynecological treatment. In Oaxaca, a 13-year-old youth was refused treatment for a bullet wound in the abdomen. In Jalisco, a video recording showed the owner of a gas station expelling an indigenous couple from his property while verbally abusing them. In Chiapas, a municipal official accosted a 10-year-old boy of Tzotzil origin who was selling candy to buy school supplies, scattering his merchandise on the ground.

"Socioeconomic inequality appears to be an important factor behind the discriminatory attitudes," said a report that CONAPRED published in 2010, which the commission still uses as a major reference for discussions around the country. "It seems like this is a situation that we must urgently rectify."

Yet, a CONAPRED poll conducted among residents of Mexico’s 10 major cities found that the public generally rejects the misconception that people of indigenous origin are lazy. "In all the metropolitan areas, there is broad disagreement with the common phrase that "indigenous peoples are poor because they do not work enough," said the CONAPRED study, which was conducted in 2010 but which continues to be cited during forums and public presentations.
Despite the responses in the survey, the prejudice against indigenous people is engrained in the attitudes of many Mexicans, and the problem is that a large segment of the population sees the condition of extreme poverty as normal for this population. Because of this, there is no sense of urgency to address the problem. "People are accustomed to accept [indigenous people] in this manner," said CONAPRED president Antonio Bucio Mujica.

Women continue to face obstacles
CONAPRED and the CNDH have also highlighted the unequal treatment that most women face in Mexican society (SourceMex, March 5, 2014). Bucio Mujica said that the type of discrimination prevalent throughout society is gender-based. "[The negative attitudes] against women are omnipresent," said the CONAPRED president.

"About 40% of the women interviewed said they have to ask permission from their husbands to go out at night, and 8.6% said they have to do the same to take contraceptives," CONAPRED said in its 2010 report.

"Furthermore, 27% of all respondents said they agree that a woman should be punished for having an abortion," added the report. "For women, this implies an erosion of freedom and the autonomy to make decisions about their own bodies, as well as the inability to gain access to opportunities for development."

Women have frequently also been the victims of violence and inaction by society to address situations such as femicides (SourceMex, July 30, 2003, and March 5, 2014).

Women of indigenous origin face double discrimination because of both their ethnicity and their gender. This is especially illustrated in the lack of access to health care. "These women not only lack the basic material necessities but are denied basic services for their development and health," said the CNDH.

A couple studies indicate that hundreds of indigenous women around the country live on the streets without an official identity, which presents major difficulties in gaining access to education, health, social programs, and formal employment. The Mexico City-based organization Commenta says that at least 500 women and girls are in this situation in the Mexican capital. Another report, from the Instituto de Asistencia e Integración Social (Iasis), puts the number of women and girls without official identity at slightly more than 4,000.

The Iasis report also indicated that 63 indigenous women who had no official identification died on the street of a city between 1995 and 2006. Many of these women were pregnant when they died and could have survived if treated in time.

CONAPRED said tending to the needs of indigenous women and girls who live on city streets is a question of human rights. "We have to make them visible, tell society that they exist, learn about their conditions, and adjust our policies to create mechanisms that provide for inclusion and also sanction abuse of authority," said the anti-discrimination council. "Our message should be clear: We will not continue to allow violations of human rights."

Another significant national problem, said CONAPRED, is the discrimination against people with disabilities. The council says the highest number of complaints that it receives every year comes from parents whose disabled children are not allowed or are unable to attend primary school. Similar problems exist for disabled children seeking to attend secondary schools.
The problem is only slightly better at colleges and universities, which generally lack facilities to accommodate people with disabilities. CONAPRED says only one institution of higher learning in Mexico (out of 2,200 universities) is fully equipped to cater to disabled people: Universidad Tecnológica Santa Catarina in Nuevo León state.

**Monterrey is the most intolerant city**

The CONAPRED survey of 10 metropolitan areas found the highest rate of discrimination against people with disabilities in Guadalajara. However, the survey found the highest overall level of discrimination in Monterrey. "Monterrey has a higher rate of intolerance against people of indigenous origin, people who come from outside the city, women, and homosexuals," Bucio Mujica said in a recent forum, where he discussed the 2010 survey. In addition to Monterrey and Guadalajara, the survey measured attitudes in the metropolitan areas of Mexico City, Ciudad Juárez, León, Puebla-Tlaxcala, Querétaro, Tijuana, Toluca, and Torreón.

CONAPRED said the surveys conducted in the 10 metropolitan areas provide a good sampling of attitudes in Mexico’s major cities. "Nearly 35 million inhabitants reside in these metropolitan areas, the equivalent of a one-third of the country’s population," said CONAPRED.

"These large metropolitan areas have some characteristics not necessarily found in other scenarios, including the manner in which people interact and create societal fabrics in areas such as family, school, and government institutions," the council said in its report.

The CONAPRED study found that the rate of intolerance against gays and lesbians was above the national norm in Monterrey and also the highest among the 10 metropolitan areas studied. "In this city, there is a higher rate of intolerance against people because of their sexual preference than at the national level," said Bucio Mujica.

The CONAPRED president suggested that the problem of discrimination against homosexuals and other groups could be partially rectified if Nuevo León passed legislation to protect the rights of individuals. "A state law against discrimination would compel individuals as well as authorities to counteract an attitude that has been engrained in culture and tradition," said Bucio Mujica.

**Intolerance against gays a nationwide concern**

While the rate of discrimination against gays and lesbians is relatively high in Monterrey, the CNDH says the problem is widespread nationally. The commission said authorities throughout the country investigated more than 700 complaints involving the violations of individual rights of people who identified themselves as gay or lesbian. Of the 700 cases filed between 1998 and 2010, some 160 involved the murder of an individual because of his or her sexual preference.

A second study by the CNDH between 2009 and 2013 shows that the number of complaints has risen, not declined, in recent years despite increased visibility of the gay-rights issue (SourceMex, Aug. 25, 2010, and May 25, 2011).

"In only four years, there were 414 cases where authorities were forced to investigate complaints of these types of violations," said Ricardo Hernández, director of the CNDH’s special program on HIV/AIDS. "Ninety-one of these cases involved homicides."
"We do not know whether there are more homicides related to homophobia or whether complaints have increased because more people are coming forward," Hernández cautioned.

Mexico’s cultural attitudes on homosexuality came to the forefront at the World Cup in Brazil this summer. Mexican soccer fans are accustomed to yelling out the expression ¡¡¡Ehhhh... puuuto!!!" to the opposing goalkeeper every time he kicks off, and Mexico’s match against Cameroon at the World Cup was no exception. The European-based anti-discrimination monitoring group Fare, which had spotters at most of the World Cup matches, brought the chants to the attention of FIFA, the international soccer governing body. Fare Network complained that the word puto in Mexico has traditionally been a slur against homosexual men.

Fare also filed complaints against Croatian and Russian fans for displaying neo-Nazi banners and against Brazilian fans for reportedly shouting out homophobic chants in a match against Mexico. Ironically, the Brazilian fans were emulating the Mexican fans by directing the ¡¡¡Ehhhh... puuuto!!!" expression against the Mexican goalkeeper.

"The word puto can be one of the most humiliating insults to all those citizens who have homosexual preferences," columnist Ricardo Alemán wrote in the daily newspaper El Universal. "Without a doubt, the word has a denigrating effect. It can represent a blow to all those individuals who might feel embarrassed by their sexual preference."

"Nevertheless, all those who still feel scandalized by this word and by its festive use in soccer stadiums forget that words are not the same as a law or a norm," said Alemán in pointing out that Fare’s complaint had no merit.

FIFA agreed to investigate Fare’s four complaints but ultimately declined to take any actions against Mexican soccer fans and the Mexican soccer association because there was no evidence that the chant called into question the sexual preferences of the opposing players. "The Disciplinary Committee has decided that the incident in question is not considered insulting in this specific context. All charges against the Mexican FA have been dismissed," FIFA said in a statement.

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