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education - health - gender inequality - racial inequality

# Indigenous Adult Illiteracy in the Andean Region of South America



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## + Summary

Indigenous adult illiteracy is often prevalent in poorer, less economically stable regions, such as the Andean Region of South America, specifically Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru. The issue stems from several factors, such as language discrepancies, high dropout rates, and lack of access to quality education. Consequently, illiterate indigenous adults are more likely to suffer from poor health and low-quality employment. Women are more likely to suffer domestic violence and discrimination, and in general, illiteracy for both men and women contributes to decreased civic engagement and economic stability.

Several programs currently exist to help illiterate individuals in the Andean Region, such as the PAEBA-Peru Program, the "Si, Yo Puedo" or "Yes, I Can" program, and "Minga Por La Esperanza." These programs focus on helping illiterate individuals through common-denominator symbols, technology, and government aid.

## + Key Takeaways

- The Andean Region of South America is subject to higher levels of indigenous adult illiteracy due to historical discrimination and perpetual challenges indigenous peoples continue to face.
- Perhaps the greatest contributing factors to indigenous adult illiteracy in the Andean Region are language discrepancies between Spanish and native languages and difficulties related to education.
- Poor health is a leading consequence of indigenous adult illiteracy among mothers and their young children.
- Indigenous adult illiteracy negatively affects national economic stability, employment, and participation in society.
- Among the programs in place to help adult illiteracy in the Andean Region, one of the most successful practices has been to teach illiterate individuals the alphabet through numbers. While many programs have done much good to combat indigenous adult illiteracy and its negative consequences, much still remains to be solved.

## + Key Terms

**Illiterate** - Those age 15 years and older who cannot read, write, and understand a short simple written statement in his or her everyday life.<sup>1</sup>

**Functionally illiterate** - Those age 15 years and older who can read, write, and understand a short written statement but not at a level that allows them to actively contribute to their employment, communities, or economy.<sup>2</sup>

**The Andean Region** - A region of South America where the Andean Mountains are found.<sup>3</sup> Several countries make up the Andean Region, but Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru will be discussed in this brief due to their central location.<sup>4</sup>

**Indigenous peoples** - Descendants of those who inhabited a country or region before other groups from other cultures or locations arrived.<sup>5</sup>

**Femicide** - The killing of women or girls, usually by men.<sup>6</sup>

**Toxic Stressors** - Problems in a child's life such as abuse, hunger and poverty that create significant physiological or physical impairments later on in a child's life.<sup>7</sup>

## Context

Illiteracy is a widespread, complex issue that spans back decades. In the 1960s, as the spread of formal education began to increase worldwide, the idea of being "literate" began to form, and cultures and societies established norms to help gauge general and basic understanding of reading and writing comprehension. Consequently, the term "illiterate" was also formed and began to be used widely<sup>8</sup> to identify those who lack the ability to read, write,<sup>9</sup> and understand a short simple written statement in his or her everyday life;<sup>10</sup> illiteracy is often divided by age into adult and child illiteracy. Adult illiteracy refers to those 15 years and older, and child illiteracy to those 15 years and younger.<sup>11</sup> Additional studies further specify these groupings, adding "mature adult illiteracy" for those 65 years and older.<sup>12</sup> For the purposes of this brief, the child, adult, and mature adult groupings will be used.

While illiteracy is a worldwide issue, poorer and less economically stable regions are often more susceptible to lower literacy rates. For example, the Andean region of South America—comprising Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Perú, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina—is vulnerable to low literacy, especially among the rural populations that are frequently inhabited by indigenous peoples. According to UNESCO statistics, adult literacy is around 92% in Bolivia,<sup>13</sup> 93% in Ecuador,<sup>14</sup> and 94% in Peru.<sup>15</sup> While these numbers are relatively high compared to some areas of the world, certain Andean populations have much lower literacy rates than the adult average.

Specifically, some age groups in the Andean region have much lower literacy rates than the national "averages" suggest. In the same report that listed the average adult literacy rates above, the mature adult literacy rates were listed at 68% in Bolivia,<sup>16</sup> 73% in Ecuador,<sup>17</sup> and 79% in Peru.<sup>18</sup> Further, UNESCO statistics show a gap between 3 adult age groups' (young adult, adult, and elderly) literacy rates within Latin America. In 2018, young adults aged 15–24 had an overall literacy rate of 98.54%. However, an average including all adults age 15+ was about five percent lower at 93.87%. The largest gap between these groups was the mature group, age 65+, whose literacy rate was only 81.42%.<sup>19</sup> In addition, many of the high literacy rates recorded have been debated because of vast differences in how illiteracy is measured or

reported across different programs and in different countries. Data is also likely covered up and misrepresented, especially by programs whose missions are to improve rates and functionality of literacy.

As previously mentioned, illiteracy rates in rural communities (where many indigenous people reside) are much lower than the country averages and consequently are misrepresented in nation-wide polls or measuring techniques. Numbers assessing wide-region or country illiteracy can be skewed by many factors including poor first- or third-party assessments with incorrect measuring techniques<sup>20</sup> and different definitions of literacy. One study discussing these discrepancies showed that 70% of Bolivians in rural populations and 30% in urban areas were actually absolutely or functionally illiterate, instead of fully literate as they were reported.<sup>21</sup> In 2008, Bolivia's president declared Bolivia "free of illiteracy" after the completion of a country-wide literacy program; however, there were many who disagreed and presented individuals who were still illiterate, even after completing the program.<sup>22</sup> Because of averaging data and different measurements of literacy, data is difficult to find that adequately expresses the illiteracy issue that still exists in the Andean Region. However, data still shows that a significant literacy gap exists between indigenous populations and others in the Andean Region. Because of this large difference between indigenous and nonindigenous literacy rates, this brief will focus on indigenous adult illiteracy.

## The Andean Region

The Andean region, or Andean countries, generally includes the countries that the Andean Mountain Range borders or runs through: Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina.<sup>23</sup> By one classification, the South American countries near the Andean Mountains are divided into three sections: the northern Andean area, including Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador; the central Andean area, comprised of Peru and the northern Bolivia; and the south Andean area, with the rest of Bolivia, northern Chile and northwest Argentina— each divided based on different archaeological culture distinctions.<sup>24</sup> These regions differ economically, culturally and physically. In addition to these geographic distinctions, there is a "geopolitical" Andean region that includes only Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. For the purposes of this brief, the Andean Region will refer to the "heartland" of the geopolitical Andean

countries, specifically Ecuador, Bolivia, and Peru, where most of the struggles with illiteracy among indigenous peoples occur. The sources and information in this brief come primarily from these three countries but may include studies and data drawn from all Andean countries.

## Languages and Indigenous Population of the Andean Countries

Language plays an important role in the development of literacy as well as accessibility to resources that help with literacy. There are several languages spoken in the Andean Region that are varied, complex, and often the first languages indigenous individuals learn in the home. The most common indigenous language spoken among these groups is Quechua.<sup>25</sup> Although indigenous languages are still spoken today, Spanish has become more prevalent since Europeans arrived in the early 16th century.<sup>26</sup> For indigenous peoples living in the Andean Region who do not speak Spanish, studies show they would be "much more likely to prosper" if they spoke Spanish; however, the means of learning are difficult.<sup>27</sup> Because of the cultural shift towards Spanish as a majority language, schools and other entities have recently made efforts to keep Quechua alive not only among those who already speak it but by teaching it to nonnative speakers as well.<sup>28</sup> Many people who speak an indigenous language only do so orally, meaning that they have not yet learned the alphabet or how to write in that language.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, while many indigenous peoples tend to be illiterate in both Spanish and their native/indigenous language, society tends to be more concerned about their illiteracy in Spanish since it is viewed as more economically and culturally advantageous to be literate in Spanish. All reported literacy rates are, therefore, referring to these people's literacy in Spanish.

Within the Andean Region, countries have many official languages. In Ecuador, over a dozen languages are spoken alongside Spanish.<sup>30</sup> In Bolivia, the country's constitution recognizes 36 indigenous languages, with Spanish being the primary and most frequently spoken.<sup>31</sup> In Peru, Spanish is also the most frequently spoken, and Aymara and Quechua are also official languages.<sup>32</sup>

A large portion of those who speak indigenous languages are people of indigenous descent. Eight percent of the world's indigenous population lives in Latin America,<sup>33</sup> and within the Andean Region, the majority of the rural population is considered indigenous. In Bolivia, 78% of the rural population is considered indigenous.<sup>34</sup> Of six provinces of Ecuador, 87.5% of the indigenous population was reported to be living in rural areas.<sup>35</sup> Because indigenous populations often correlate to rural living, this brief will use measurements and statistics gathered based on both rural and indigenous populations to indicate the prevalence of illiteracy among indigenous people.

Indigenous-language speakers often experience various forms of discrimination, lack of access to economic benefits, poverty, and various impediments to literacy.<sup>36</sup> Poverty rates among indigenous people can be explained, largely, by their socioeconomic status. Indigenous peoples are often more susceptible to poverty and make up 15% of the world's "extreme poor."<sup>37</sup> In Latin America, nearly 50% of indigenous peoples now live in urban areas but still struggle with poverty and diverse discrimination.<sup>38</sup> Poverty gaps between indigenous groups and non-indigenous groups are also steadily increasing. Over roughly an 11 year span, the annual change in poverty rates for indigenous peoples versus non-indigenous peoples was -0.8% and -2.4% in Bolivia, -0.2% and -0.6% in Ecuador, and 0% and -1.2% in Peru, respectively.<sup>39</sup> The poverty gap between indigenous and non-indigenous poverty continues to affect indigenous adults today.

## Education in the Andean Countries

Education is directly tied to literacy rates and will be discussed further in this brief. The education systems among the different countries in the Andean Region vary.

In the majority of studies focused on illiteracy, illiteracy is so strongly linked to education (or the lack thereof) that many times the two terms are used interchangeably. Because there is such strong evidence suggesting that attaining higher levels of education is directly responsible for higher levels of literacy, education data will occasionally be used to describe illiteracy throughout this brief.

## Contributing Factors

### Language Discrepancies

Illiteracy in the Andean Region has many root causes, several of which stem from the existence of many native tongues among the indigenous populations.<sup>56</sup> Language barriers often create difficulties for those learning to read and write. The indigenous language is often spoken in the home and is the first language children learn. Many times, classes in the Andean Region's education system are taught exclusively in



Spanish and not offered in indigenous languages.<sup>57 58</sup> It is extremely difficult for a person who has spoken only an indigenous language to master reading, writing, and oral skills in Spanish.<sup>59</sup> Consequently, when children are integrated into the school system with little to no previous exposure to the Spanish language, learning to effectively understand, read, and write in Spanish is very difficult. However, learning Spanish is still focused on because it would provide them with important opportunities to engage in the workplace and communities in the future.

Although more than one official language exists in each Andean country, governmental programs and education still continue to operate mostly in Spanish—further inhibiting the ability of indigenous language speakers to become literate. In Bolivia, for example, Spanish is spoken by around half the population, while the other half of the population speaks an indigenous language like Quechua or Aymara.<sup>60</sup> Programs instituted to teach illiterate adults to read and write are often only offered in Spanish, making it difficult to reach the indigenous people.<sup>61</sup> For those who successfully become literate, follow-up later found that they were actually only "functionally illiterate," meaning that they could only read and write at a basic level. Their low level of literacy still continued to impede success in day-to-day activities like employment and home life. Similarly, one study in Ecuador found that although education from age six to fourteen is mandatory, all classes taught in the "sierra" (or rural areas) were in Spanish, making it difficult for those who only spoke native languages to gain an education.<sup>62</sup> Bilingual teachers who are able to speak Spanish and a native language would be better able to better help indigenous individuals become bilingual as well. Unfortunately, there is a large shortage of bilingual teachers in many Andean countries despite experts indicating the need for more bilingual teachers over a decade ago.<sup>63</sup> For example, Cochabamba, one of the largest Bolivian cities with 600,000 people, currently only offers instruction in Spanish at all schools.<sup>64</sup>

Indigenous children and women are often the most affected groups when it comes to language discrepancies. They often only speak a native language, and women and children generally have a lower exposure to any written language or business and social interactions with spoken language. Thus the process of learning Spanish is exceptionally difficult and the journey to literacy is described by some as almost impossible.<sup>65</sup> Language discrepancies are among the top reasons for why children drop out of school and fall into a pattern of illiteracy, affecting adults for generations to come.<sup>66</sup>

## High Dropout Rates

High dropout rates in the Andean Region contribute to low literacy levels because students who do not complete their education lose access to resources that would help them become literate. In Ecuador, the current secondary school

dropout rate is 18%.<sup>67</sup> In comparison, the current dropout for students aged 16–24 in the United States is 5.3%.<sup>68</sup> One study also showed that many Ecuadorian children drop out before age 15 and that "only about one-third complete sixth grade."<sup>69</sup> Ecuador's dropout rates were also particularly high in 1993, when numbers peaked at 64%.<sup>70</sup> This peak contributes to a higher illiteracy rate among today's adults whose age group experienced this major education withdrawal 30 years ago, since studies have shown that it is not only enrollment in school but a completed cycle of primary schooling that leads to high rates of literacy among populations.<sup>71</sup>

Indigenous populations are most susceptible to high dropout rates. In Bolivia, dropout rates were calculated as much higher for rural students as well as girls.<sup>72</sup> For rural schools in Peru, among girls aged 12–16, only 63.7% go to school and only 35% finish secondary school.<sup>73</sup> Some reasons for the vulnerability of these indigenous populations include problems that tend to be common in especially impoverished populations. A Harvard study found that those living in poverty tend to drop out of school after a few grades.<sup>74</sup> Among these impoverished indigenous populations within the Andean Region, dropout rates are particularly high due to toxic stressors such as abuse, low parent support, and hunger. These stressors impact development, strain home-based support, and hinder learning abilities, which can contribute to illiteracy. There is a direct link to those children who suffer from these toxic stressors in early childhood to those who drop out of school.<sup>75</sup> High dropout rates among the indigenous population can stunt literacy development for indigenous adults and create an illiteracy cycle more difficult to break with each continuing generation.

## Low Access to Quality Education

In the grand majority of studies conducted on illiteracy across all cultural and ethnic groups and geographic locations, illiteracy and poor education are so closely associated that they are often interchangeable. There is a strong, positive correlation between illiteracy and poor education that proves that access to education directly affects literacy.

The location of many of the Andean Region's school-age indigenous children presents unique challenges in accessing quality education and thus improved literacy rates. Pressing responsibilities from the home or demands of work life make it difficult for these children to get to school regularly. A study conducted in

1991 in Bolivia showed that in rural locations, only 52.5% of males and 50.3% of females ages 6–14 attended school "exclusively" while the other half worked, with nearly 20% combining their education with herding and agriculture.<sup>76</sup> Perhaps because illiterate adults were children during the time that this study was recorded, adult literacy is strikingly lower than child or young adult literacy. Families located in rural locations also encourage their children to stay home and work. Daughters may be asked to stay home to help with housework and chores, negatively affecting the already existing gap between male and female education, while sons may be asked to forgo their education in exchange for help making extra income.<sup>77</sup>

In general, school attendance is typically lower in rural areas as opposed to urban areas. In Bolivia's urban areas, the average person attends school for ten years, while Spanish-speaking indigenous people average only six years of schooling. For those who do not speak Spanish, this rate has been found to be even lower at an average of 0.4 years of schooling.<sup>78</sup> Schools for rural and indigenous students are often far away and difficult to get to. For some rural students in Peru, school is three hours away, while others are required to walk eight hours to get there.<sup>79</sup> The 2019 documentary "Most Dangerous Ways to School [BOLIVIA]" shows featured stories of children crossing through poisonous snake beds and ravines and riding makeshift zip lines above 600 foot quarries, in order to attend school.<sup>80</sup>

Additionally, indigenous families living in poverty often cannot afford to send their children to schools that offer a higher quality of education. There are three types of education systems in the Andean region: public, private, and private-religious institutions. Private schools offer a higher quality education than overcrowded, government-run public schools. Children whose parents are more financially stable are often able to attend private schools or private-religious schools because parents pay a high price for a private education.<sup>81</sup> In one Peruvian report, some parents were willing to pay two to three thousand pesos (the US dollar equivalent of \$500–\$800) per month for their child's education.<sup>82</sup> For many indigenous families already living in poverty, this expense is out of the question and often leaves children at the mercy of poorly funded, poor quality institutions that directly contribute to their literacy levels. Education at public schools is often lower quality because of low funding, contributing to inadequate resources and lower-quality teachers. Students who study in public schools could, therefore, be less likely to have quality education than those in private institutions, which likely leads to lower levels of literacy.

## Consequences

### Low Quality Employment

Studies consistently show a strong tie between low quality employment and high levels of illiteracy. A study in Peru and other parts of Latin America found that those who drop out of school prematurely (and thus are less likely to be fully literate) tend to obtain "second-rate, low-quality jobs" because they are not familiar with their marketable skills or their individual rights due to a lack of education.<sup>83</sup>

If these barriers are overcome and quality employment is found, illiterate adults have difficulty remaining employed due to their inability to read or write. This challenge is due to a "low level of knowledge and expertise" that frequently accompany those who drop out of school or receive poor quality education.<sup>84</sup> Workspace hazards, work-related injury, and employment-related illnesses are shown to increase with higher levels of illiteracy<sup>85</sup> due to inability to read machinery and operation manuals.<sup>86</sup> Additionally, lower-quality jobs typically means a lower salary, pointing to perpetual poverty as an additional consequence of illiteracy.

Women are disproportionately affected by illiteracy in the job field. In Ecuador, literacy levels run higher for males than females, and females are continually pushed to careers that "limit their future opportunities" and that do not allow them to participate fully in the workplace.<sup>87</sup> In addition to being paid less than their male coworkers, illiteracy adds another level of difficulty for some women to obtain and excel in quality employment.

## Poor Health

Many facets of health among indigenous adults are negatively affected by low literacy levels. A study in Latin America and the Caribbean demonstrated that illiterate persons or those with low levels of education struggle to understand and put in practice "messages designed to encourage healthy behavior and the risk prevention in various areas of daily life."<sup>88</sup> This same study showed that illiteracy among women limited their knowledge of practices used to maintain their own health and hygiene. Households with literate mothers engaged in better health practices than those with illiterate mothers, as well as accessed vaccinations and doctor visits at a higher rate.<sup>89</sup> For example, a study in Bolivia found that illiteracy had a significant impact on attaining health knowledge and developing the habits to put that knowledge into

practice.<sup>90</sup> This claim was backed by a study in Mexico, which stated that illiteracy is the largest impediment to understanding "explanations and recommendations" given by medical personnel.<sup>91</sup>

A United States study found that individuals who are less literate are at a greater risk for heart failure and diabetes, in addition to reporting lower health in general. Hospital visits, doctor's visits, and prescriptions are sometimes avoided by illiterate individuals due to embarrassment or fear of their inability to read prescriptions or diagnoses.<sup>92</sup> Misread prescriptions can cause major problems for persons who receive over- or under-dosages of these medications and can have harmful or even fatal effects.<sup>93</sup> In addition to general health problems, illiteracy contributes to poor outcomes in several specific aspects of health as outlined below.

## *Sexual Health*

Illiteracy can lead to poor sexual health. The ability to acquire knowledge and information regarding contraceptives, unsafe sexual activity, and sexually transmitted diseases is significantly limited by a person's ability to read or write. According to one study among women across 32 countries, illiterate women were one third as likely as literate women to recognize that a healthy person can contract AIDS, and one quarter as likely to know basic prevention practices to protect themselves from contracting AIDS.<sup>94</sup>

## *Children's Health*

Adult illiteracy also affects children's health. As previously discussed, problems with prescription dosages can affect children if illiterate parents, when their children are sick, experience difficulty in reading and understanding over-the-counter medicine information, causing them to allocate improper dosages or otherwise misunderstand prescription instructions.<sup>95</sup> Additionally, the weight of a newborn is affected by illiteracy. A study from Peru found that the literacy level of the mother has a direct positive correlation with the weight of her newborn—likely due to the better prenatal care that literate mothers access and receive. The weight of the newborn also increases with the increased level of the mother's education. Newborns of illiterate mothers weighed on average 116 grams less than the general population. General education also impacts health outcomes such as nutrition and

overarching health knowledge.<sup>96</sup> Since children gain their nutrition habits from their parents, malnutrition and poor hygiene habits found among illiterate adults continue on to the next generation.<sup>97</sup> Although this data uses education measures rather than literacy specifically, higher education strongly suggests higher literacy levels and vice versa, suggesting that parents with low literacy levels are likely to have children with poorer health outcomes as well.

## ***Cognitive Health among the Elderly***

Literacy and education are critical to high cognitive function among adults in old age. Beginning at an early age, a combination of exercising cognitive brain functions (such as learning to read and think critically) and access to adequate teaching methods and a proper learning environment show an increase in an adult's cognitive skills that possibly decrease dementia in old age. These findings were drawn from a study conducted in Peru among a group of elderly adults living in rural areas and classified as extremely poor. Among the roughly 4000 individuals in the study, around 50% of women were illiterate as opposed to only 11% of men. The study concluded that there was a direct "transla[tion] to men having a better score of total cognitive functioning and mental intactness than women," perhaps related to the difference in literacy levels.<sup>98</sup> In addition, it concluded that in general, higher levels of literacy are directly tied to better brain functionality,<sup>99</sup> meaning that the illiteracy that many indigenous people face can be detrimental to their long-term cognitive abilities.

## **Perpetuated Violence and Discrimination against Women**

General inequalities between Latin American men and women already exist, but many risks associated with these inequalities are heightened for indigenous, illiterate women in the Andean region. In general, illiterate women are treated unfairly and unequally, leading to an increase in violence towards them. Increased levels of illiteracy may also increase this violence already aimed towards women, given that they generally face greater discrimination, inequality and suffering than men,<sup>100</sup> and are often targets of sexual abuse.<sup>101</sup> One factor in this violence may be low literacy rates.

One study among indigenous populations in Asia demonstrates that low literacy rates contribute to domestic violence; the study stated that since education is linked to literacy levels, women who are uneducated are less economically productive and have less "bargaining power" with their husbands.<sup>102</sup>

Women are left feeling inferior and more vulnerable to their male counterparts, often resulting in abuse or domestic violence. Although there is not specific data gathered on this in the Andean region, circumstances are likely very similar for the uneducated or illiterate women living in these countries. It is to be noted, however, that as literacy levels have risen in indigenous communities in Asia, domestic violence has stayed the same, pointing to other possible causes of domestic violence in the home. Even with these statistics however, domestic violence still remains an issue in relation to illiteracy and education. A study in Ecuador noted the disparity between literacy levels among women and men and suggested the need for literacy classes in order to eliminate "socially and culturally induced patterns of discrimination" that can ultimately decreasing domestic violence.<sup>103</sup> Higher levels of illiteracy for both men and women was also noted as a factor that increased risk for intimate partner violence.<sup>104</sup> In the most extreme circumstances, femicide is a common threat to indigenous women. In Peru, where domestic violence runs high, statistics show a 33% increase in femicide from 2015 to 2016 and a 38% increase in attempted femicides in the same year.<sup>105</sup>

Even as women seek to escape cycles of illiteracy and poor education, domestic violence towards them often increases. Women are sometimes asked to perform certain services, such as sexual favors, in return for higher grades in school.<sup>106</sup> In the home, Peruvian women are often abused by alcoholic husbands, and their low literacy levels prevent them from developing personally, escaping, or being able to improve their own situations.<sup>107</sup>

## Decreased Civic Engagement

A lack of civil contribution is a direct consequence of illiteracy within societies in the Andean Region. In Peru, illiterate individuals (a disproportionate number of whom were indigenous) were not allowed to vote until 1979.<sup>108 109</sup> The current elderly population in Peru was part of these early political restrictions; because of these restrictions, they did not have the opportunity to vote early in life, often decreasing their current political involvement. This effect on political involvement has been observed among many populations who were once denied the right to vote, including women in the US during the mid-twentieth century. Studies showed that once those women were permitted to vote, they still voted in lower numbers than men born during the same period.<sup>110</sup> A similar thing has happened among the illiterate Peruvians mentioned previously, as well as the Ecuadorian

women who were formally and implicitly banned from voting due to illiteracy and gender discrimination.<sup>111</sup> With time, restrictions were eased and voting was extended to literate women and "peasants" in 1929, but the emphasis on literacy as being a requirement to vote still continued to exclude indigenous peoples from voting and accessing other rights.<sup>112</sup>

Example of an Andean region voting ballot,  
with images representing each political  
party

Today, to enable illiterate adults to vote in the majority of the Andean Region, government officials are assigned to read ballots and candidates' names aloud,<sup>113</sup> or pictures and graphics representing each party are displayed on the ballot next to each candidate to allow easy, visual recognition.<sup>114</sup> However, these measures still do not ensure that every illiterate individual can vote. In Ecuador, for example, illiteracy is even a reason for voting excusal, meaning that if one meets certain qualifications for illiteracy, they are given a card and are not required to participate in the obligatory vote for individuals 18 to 65 years old.<sup>115</sup> Due to their illiteracy, these people will not have a say in policies and practices that may affect their lives.

Additionally, illiterate individuals have difficulty taking full advantage of other civic and government entities, including public education, police, and the legal and justice system.<sup>117</sup> Literacy skills are critical in decision-making, active and passive participation in all areas of social-life, personal competence, and autonomy.<sup>118</sup> These types of functions of literacy skills were shown as driving motives for many who chose to participate in literacy programs, who said they wanted to increase their own competency and did not want to be cheated.<sup>119</sup> In order to promote their rights, individuals must be literate and have an understanding of how laws function.

Illiterate indigenous women also lag behind men in terms of literacy, are less familiar with their rights, and are not able to actively defend themselves. False accusations from their husbands, such as infidelity, are common issues women deal with that lead to an increase in domestic violence,<sup>120</sup> and many face difficulty defending themselves from such accusations due to their illiteracy. Illiteracy specifically has been reported as a factor that further weakens women's access to legal justice.<sup>121</sup>

Consequently, women can lose child retention rights or property-owning rights in legal disputes.<sup>122</sup> They also lack the ability to defend themselves in court against false claims or charges and are therefore



sometimes subjected to negative consequences of judicial rulings.<sup>123</sup>

Without the participation of all parties both literate and illiterate, a governing body cannot fully function, or at least cannot adequately address the needs of all individuals due to a lack of representation. Literacy acts as a common unifier and "enables [individuals] to actively promote the collective rights which are essential to human dignity."<sup>124</sup> Literate individuals have more access to the laws of the country and the individual rights they possess and have the capabilities to better defend them.<sup>125</sup>

## Poor National Economic Stability

A country's economy suffers with higher percentages of illiterate individuals. A study on adult illiteracy in Latin America and the Caribbean found that poor quality education significantly and negatively impacts a society's economic well-being. It stated that "literacy and increased schooling improve productivity and drive economic growth."<sup>126</sup>

Economies are constantly evolving and expanding with new expertise and knowledge, and those who have a higher level of education (and consequently are more literate) can drive these changes.<sup>127</sup> Literacy has been shown to positively impact individuals' economic prosperity, specifically financially and socially.<sup>128</sup> The Andean countries have been traditionally labelled as developing or underdeveloped areas,<sup>129 130</sup> and this may be due to the low education and literacy levels for much of the population in this region.

## Practices

### Using technology to reach and teach illiterate individuals

Technology is key in reaching small, rural, and indigenous communities in the Andean Region. Many indigenous peoples live in rural areas, but most of them have access to technology in some form, such as smartphones, television, or Internet cafes. By connecting virtually, they can have access to many

educational resources, which can both combat the lack of education that contributes to adult illiteracy and directly improve the literacy of presently illiterate adults.

One organization with the goal of educating illiterate individuals is the Project for Institutional Strengthening of the Ministry of Education of Peru (in the Area of Adult Education), or PAEBA-Peru. They achieve this goal using a series of beginning, intermediate, and advanced modules (seven in total) with the goal to increase communication skills, vocational skills training, social studies (family relations, the environment and community development), health promotion and awareness, and civic education (citizenship, rights and values, interculturalism and gender).<sup>131</sup> The main goal of PAEBA is to "integrate non-formal youth and adult education into the national educational systems of participating countries."<sup>132</sup> This program is specifically designed for Peruvians by Peru's government, where 14% of the population is impoverished and 24% of the population lives in rural areas.<sup>133</sup>

The key to PAEBA's success is technology. The classes are administered to individuals in remote or rural villages or communities that would not have been able to receive the training otherwise. The ways that PAEBA teaches include workbooks and classroom instruction; in areas where in-person lessons are not available, PAEBA uses online classrooms. Individuals can enroll in the program for \$6 USD a month with the promise that if they successfully complete the course, they will be refunded 50% of their initial investment. The individuals are able to access and work through the material at their own pace and are given more freedom to choose what courses they take. In addition to courses meant to directly improve literacy, courses in business entrepreneurship, ICT, education, and health are all offered.<sup>134</sup> These additional courses help individuals apply literacy skills to various facets of life and develop general life skills.

## *Impact*

As reported by UNESCO, in 2007, more than 85,000 individuals have participated in the PAEBA program, with 70% completing the initial and intermediate levels. In addition, 40% of participants have received a secondary school certificate from the Ministry of Education. About 18,811 individuals have participated in vocational training, which has a graduation rate of 74.2%. Virtual centers have had a total of 68.5% of participants complete their courses.<sup>135</sup> Unfortunately, this program was designed primarily in urban centers and was not customized for rural learners. This design error was recognized and plans are underway to include rural program participants. Similarly, these statistics do not adequately represent impact since the program does not track outcomes such as changes in income, education, or quality of life.

## Gaps

While the program itself has had significant results, plans to expand and continue development are limited due to "excessive bureaucracy and inefficient communication."<sup>136</sup> Low funding from the Peruvian government also impedes success and may be a contributing factor as to why no impact research exists. UNESCO also mentions a gap between rural and urban communities, stating that the PAEBA program was designed in an urban setting, making it difficult for instructors of the program in rural communities to adequately teach the assigned material and make it relevant for all students, including indigenous populations. Overall, PAEBA has sufficient outcomes to prove that it is an active program, but data beyond simple enrollment and completion percentages has not yet been measured.<sup>137</sup> Therefore, there is no definite information about the extent to which this program is actually improving literacy among indigenous populations.

## Using numbers to teach the alphabet

In order to improve adult literacy, some organizations use numbers to teach the alphabet. This idea was created in 1961, originating in Cuba during the revolution. The concept behind this practice is that many individuals who are illiterate still understand the basic number system due to daily life activities they participate in. Rural, indigenous peoples, especially, typically engage in activities such as bartering, trading, or purchasing things in the market in quantities. Using numbers as a common-ground, learning a new alphabet (usually Spanish) becomes much easier and accessible for many of these individuals.<sup>138</sup>

The "Yes, I Can" program is structured by assigning a number to each letter in the alphabet, helping illiterate individuals establish a connection between the two.<sup>139</sup> Additionally, the program offers on-demand videos adapted for each country where the program operates.<sup>140</sup> Originally created in Cuba, several pilot studies proved the program effective enough that it now operates in over 30 countries, including Bolivia, Ecuador,<sup>141</sup> Venezuela, Spain, Canada, and Australia.<sup>142</sup>

The "Yes, I Can" program is extremely effective for one-on-one learning. Experts recognized that women, one of the demographics that most often suffers from illiteracy, lead busy lives in their cultures. A woman typically gets up at dawn, works all day to bring home a meager income, and still must attend to her family's food, school, and home needs. Because of this demand, instructors from the "Yes, I Can" program often teach these women in the workplace, such as in the market stalls between attending to customers.<sup>143</sup> Taking advantage of the time these women do have is a key component of the "Yes, I Can" program.<sup>144</sup>

## *Impact*

The "Yes, I Can" program has had much success in almost all the countries where the program operates. In Bolivia, the percent of those who classified themselves as illiterate dropped from 13.28% in 2001, prior to the program, to 3.8% in 2014, after the program.<sup>145</sup> The program has been similarly successful in other countries such as Ecuador, where 62,000 individuals reported that they became literate by the end of the program.<sup>146</sup> Similar to other programs, these measurements solely focus on tracking changes in illiteracy but not how such changes impact things such as improved income, education, or quality of life.

## *Gaps*

The gaps in the "Yes, I Can" program can mainly be found among the reporting methods. While the program itself seems to fit culturally among the participants by mirroring their lifestyle and allowing for them to integrate reading and writing rather seamlessly, there are many discrepancies over how the illiteracy rates are reported, as discussed earlier in this brief. Studies found that some of the reported individuals at the end of the program were still "functionally illiterate," even though they were reported as "fully literate." These discrepancies between what is considered "literate" and "illiterate" and what the program aims to do cause significant differences in reported success.<sup>147</sup>

Another gap in the program is that the donated materials are usually in Spanish, creating the necessary step of translation to indigenous languages before the materials can be fully utilized or taught from.<sup>148</sup> The indigenous population is therefore less represented and targeted in this program.

## National programs

Because of the varied indigenous languages spoken in the Andean Region, literacy programs must be tailored to the needs of the country in order to succeed in decreasing illiteracy. When each country individually implements programs that target its own needs (especially programs that address the indigenous populations), greater success can be achieved.

Minga por la Esperanza is an example of a local literacy program based in Ecuador. Created by the country's government, its goals are to reduce the percentage of illiterate individuals in order to ensure a higher participation among such groups in politics, the economy, and the social world.<sup>149</sup> The program consists of 30 lessons taught with videos, tapes, DVDs, workbooks and other "didactic resources" to help individuals learn to read and write. The program is designed to give flexibility to the participant, allowing them to study for one to three hours per day, with the goal to complete the program within a three-month time frame. If the participant successfully completes the program in that time, they are awarded a graduation certificate and are promoted to another ten-month literacy program.<sup>150</sup>

## Impact

In the first four months of the program's operation, they reported that 30,000 people had overcome illiteracy.<sup>151</sup> In a formal study conducted after the program finished, the results were mainly positive and successful. Unlike other programs, these results focused mainly on the social and psychological effects of improved literacy rather than numerical data. One report stated that while completing the program, individuals felt more self-esteem from making progress in the classroom that translated over to their daily life, especially in the home with their children's homework.<sup>152</sup> They also felt more confidence participating in society where they could better understand politics and public information. They additionally gained self- and social-respect for having completed the literacy program.<sup>153</sup>

## Gaps

Interestingly, the Minga por la Esperanza program was specifically designed as a "new" program that was not copied from any other existing programs. Miguel Serpétegui Jaramillo, director of Ecuador's National Permanent Education Organization, made this point clear in 2005 when he stated that he "believe[s] that the country's education must be Ecuadorian."<sup>154</sup> While this move to organically produce new material could be seen as beneficial, the decision proved to have some repercussions a year later when the program had to be modified in order to better help achieve success among all age groups.<sup>155</sup> It seemed that there needed to be a "trial and error" period before the program was able to fully become a worthwhile practice. In addition, not much information has been collected on the Minga por la Esperanza program since the program was first implemented. An official declaration from the country itself is still missing, making measuring outputs and impact difficult.

## Footnotes

## South America

Alexa Ballard

Alexa Ballard is a senior at BYU studying public relations, social impact, and Spanish. She discovered a passion for solving social issues, especially in South America, while living in Bolivia for 18 months. She plans to work in social impact focused in South America by telling others' stories and giving them a voice. She enjoys running, writing, and eating brownies.

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