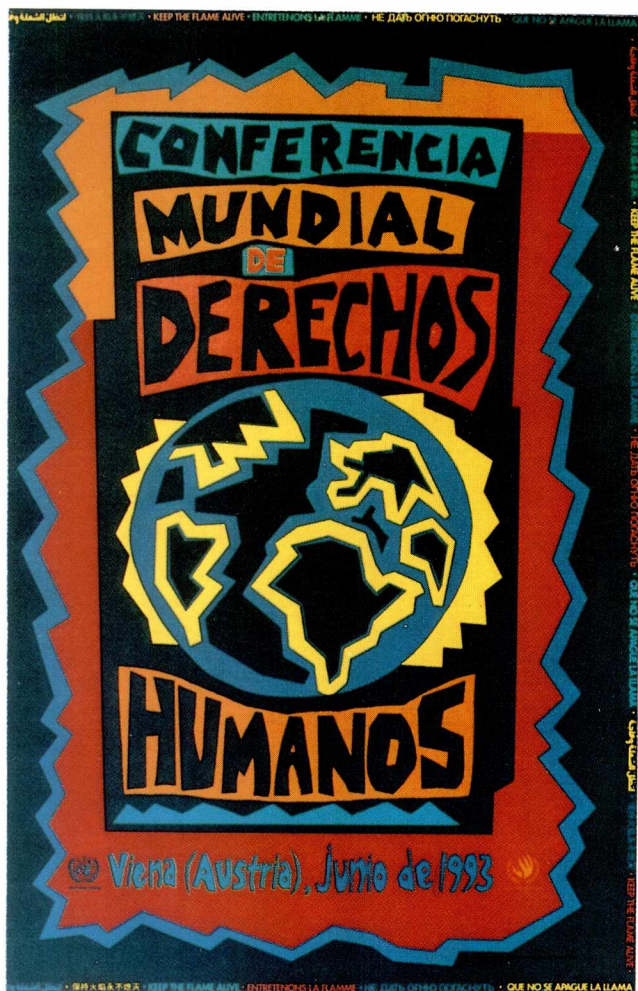


# HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION IN MEXICO AND LATIN AMERICA

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World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, Austria, 1993.

In 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed a *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* as “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, ...shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.” Education was thus established as the means to attaining a culture of respect and promotion of human rights.

The declaration emerged as a reaction to a context of widespread violation of human rights: two world wars and countless regional conflicts had mangled human dignity and forestalled the development of individuals and communities. Crimes against humanity had to be identified, prevented and punished. To the question, “How can all this be brought about?” the answers were: a new balance of world power, education, development and international agreement on issues of human rights and peaceful resolution of conflicts.

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Note: The posters used to illustrate this article were shown as part of the “Ten Years of Human Rights” exhibit, organized by the Mexican Academy of Human Rights.

Carried away by the enthusiasm born of the international support accorded to human rights at least formally and concerned mainly with the reconstruction of war-distorted economies, the members of the international community lost sight of the relevance of identifying sources of potential disagreement concerning human rights, even regarding those that seemed unquestionable or categorical, such as the right to life. In fact, the interpretation and applicability of the universal human rights established in the declaration depended upon the socio-political and cultural context of each nation.

During the decades after the declaration, several regions of the world suffered the effects of severe curtailment or flagrant violation of human rights. One of these regions was Latin America, despite economic growth and generalized higher enrollment on all educational levels.

Today, with the regional trend toward strengthening democracy and renewed public interest in fostering human rights, the question of promoting them effectively arises again.

#### ARE HUMAN RIGHTS UNIVERSAL?

Culturally, one of the salient characteristics of the late twentieth century is a heightened awareness of cultural relativism, which makes generalizations difficult to sustain. At the same time, all nations are defending their cultural traits and autonomy as an integral part of their political autonomy. In the face of such relativism and cultural autonomy, developing and defending a "common standard of achievement" such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is both a political and a cultural challenge.

To this end, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has fostered regional dialogue concerning the worldwide adoption of a human rights culture that responds to local and regional cultural and socio-political concerns. In Mexico, the National Autonomous University of Mexico's Political Science Department and the Mexican Academy of Human Rights, a non-governmental organization, host and sponsor the "UNESCO Human Rights Chair." The first Regional Seminar took place in Mexico, October 9-11, 1996. I will try to briefly give an account of the main concerns voiced by those who addressed the question of human rights in Latin America from the


point of view of their theoretical basis, their relevance and their pedagogical treatment.

First, we must explain the specificity of Latin America, the nations that emerged under the domination of Spain, Portugal and France from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Regarding historical conditions, seminar participants pointed out:

1. The region has had a long and rich tradition of human rights defense and promoting proposals from the onset of the dramatic violation of these rights that accompanied the Conquest and colonialization, both more than 500 years ago and in this century.

2. The history of systematic violation of human rights of indigenous populations has, nevertheless, gone largely unquestioned except at times of indigenous revolt.

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ANDEL PILAR CAMBRON MARTINEZ  
SUSANA MANZANES  
EMERENCIANA LOPEZ

Forum on Non-Sexist Education, Mexico, 1991.



Fourth World Conference on Women, u.n., China, 1995.



Second Latin American Conference. Human Rights Training Strategies, Aguascalientes, Mexico, 1994.

3. The historical processes of strengthening the nation states has given rise to the pressing need to defend the human rights of individuals and constantly growing communities.

4. In recent decades, authoritarian regimes, backed by the military and foreign aid, crushed dissent, an organic component of democracy.

5. In the Latin America, “civil society” has become an option for public political activity, outside political parties and government agencies.

6. Gradually, most countries have come to describe themselves as multicultural and pluriethnic, and educa-

tional systems are slowly responding to this shift of perspective.

Second, with regard to the status of democratic culture and education, regional experts stressed:

1. Despite constant legislative efforts and the mushrooming of human rights defense organizations, there is a sizeable gap between theory and practice.

2. At all levels where power relations are involved, whether between the state and the individual or, for example, teacher and student, the prevailing culture is predominantly authoritarian.

