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Article

Intersectionality and Access to Higher Education in Honduras

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ABSTRACT

Intersectionality groups the categories of gender, social class, and place of residence or locality as determinants of inequalities that limit access to higher education; therefore, the objective was to estimate the effect and impact of intersectional factors on higher education in Honduras. A quantitative study was conducted using data from the 2023 Permanent Multipurpose Household Survey in Honduras as the primary source, which includes the variables considered for this study, allowing for identification through a specific model. The results reveal that only 11.68% of the population aged 18 to 70 has access to higher education; the majority are women, with people from urban areas predominating over those from rural areas, and most live in poverty. Additionally, the generalized linear model analysis shows that gender plays an important role: men are slightly less likely to access higher education compared to women; likewise, it is observed that people with disabilities and those in precarious economic situations have a significantly lower probability of access; finally, the conditional inference tree analysis reveals how the intersections between place of origin, poverty, disability, and gender generate significant disparities in opportunities for access to higher education. In light of the above, the discussion section argues for the need to review policies on access to higher education, their relevance, and their connection to social demands in Honduras.
Keywords: education; university; exclusion; categories; access.

RESUMEN

La interseccionalidad agrupa las categorías género, clase social y lugar de residencia o localidad, como determinantes de desigualdades que limitan el acceso a la educación superior, por lo que se propuso como objetivo estimar el efecto e impacto de los factores interseccionales en la educación superior hondureña. Se realizó una investigación de naturaleza cuantitativa empleando como fuente principal los datos de la Encuesta Permanente de Hogares para Propósitos Múltiples del año 2023, en Honduras que recoge las variables consideradas para este estudio permitiendo identificar mediante modelo específico. Los resultados revelan que solo el 11.68% de la población entre 18 a 70 años de edad acceden al nivel superior, la mayoría son mujeres, predominan las personas de zonas urbanas sobre las rurales, la mayoría vive en situación de pobreza, adicionalmente el análisis del modelo lineal generalizado muestra que el sexo juega un rol importante: los hombres tienen una probabilidad ligeramente menor de acceder a la educación superior en comparación con las mujeres, así mismo se observa que las personas con discapacidad y las que cuya situación económica representa precariedad tienen una probabilidad significativamente menor de acceso, finalmente; el análisis del árbol de inferencia condicional revela cómo las intersecciones entre procedencia, pobreza, discapacidad y sexo generan disparidades significativas en las oportunidades de acceso a la educación superior. En virtud de lo anterior a nivel de discusión se argumenta la necesidad de revisar las políticas de acceso a la educación superior, su pertinencia y su vinculación con las demandas sociales en Honduras.
Palavras-chave: educación; universidad; exclusión; categorías; acceso.

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Introduction

Research on access to higher education—understood as the opportunity for individuals to enter and participate in postsecondary educational programs (Sit 2024)—reveals inequalities despite rising enrollment. The countries where inequality in access to higher education decreased the most were Venezuela, Argentina, and Chile (IESALC 2020); however, in Chile, socioeconomic disparities in access persist despite policy efforts to improve equity (Espinoza et al. 2007). Equally notable is the increase in access to higher education in Brazil, which is explained by the growth in academic institutions and programs.

Overall, Latin America has seen an increase in access to higher education over the past two decades, rising from 19% to 38% (IESALC 2020). However, it is important to consider the variables that influence access, including parental education, academic support, and individual characteristics (Guerrero 2013).

In terms of the transition from secondary to higher education, challenges have arisen for students, requiring institutional support and resources (Rose-Parra and Larreal 2023). Policies aimed at democratizing access have shown limited success in Argentina (Suasnábar and Rovelli 2016) and Ecuador (Mila et al. 2020). Researchers advocate for a more comprehensive approach to equity in access to higher education, taking socioeconomic variables into account and allocating resources specifically for disadvantaged groups (Briceño 2011; Silva and Veloso 2013).

Meanwhile, in the Central American region, although there are approximately 225 universities—25 of which are public and nearly 200 are private (Xinia 2019)—access to higher education remains low, with an average of 27.5% across the region (Dickerson et al. 2019).

In Honduras, access to higher education remains limited by intersectional factors such as gender, social class, and membership in rural communities, which underscores the need to study these variables to inform policies that promote equity (Pérez-Esparrells et al. 2022). Identifying the intersectional determinants that influence the completion of studies is essential for improving student retention and academic success (Hammoodi and Al-Azawei 2022).

Therefore, the main objective of this study is to estimate the combined effect of intersectional factors (gender, social class, place of residence, and disability) in Honduras on access to higher education.

Below, we present two theoretical sections that provide an overview of the approaches underpinning the study of this phenomenon, followed by the contextual framework that facilitates an understanding of the various elements underlying the study of exclusion in higher education.

Theoretical Foundations of Studies on Access to Higher Education

Research on student access to higher education is grounded in several theoretical frameworks. Theories of justice, including Rawls's and Sen's capabilities approach, emphasize the need for equitable access policies (Briceño 2011).

Sociological perspectives, such as those of Bourdieu, Passeron, and Boudon, examine how social background and individual decisions influence educational opportunities (Castañeda López 2021). Bourdieu and Passeron's theory of social reproduction posits that the educational system reproduces social inequalities rather than mitigating them (de Sousa Santos and Meneses, 2019; Laverán and Bley 2015), involving concepts such as habitus, field, and capital, which explain how educational institutions favor the ruling class.

Meanwhile, other humanistic approaches, such as that proposed by Cortina (2020)—who introduces a concept related to exclusion called aporophobia (rejection of the poor)—place special emphasis on recognizing the other free from mechanisms of social pressure; Equally important, and along the same lines, are the arguments of Nussbaum (2020), who emphasizes exclusion from education—particularly of women—as well as the limitations on the development of critical thinking and social relations.

In this context, intersectionality emerges as an essential theoretical framework for understanding how various social categories—such as gender, social class, and membership in indigenous and Afro-descendant population groups—intertwine and generate complex inequalities that affect opportunities in higher education (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 2000). This approach recognizes that individuals' experiences cannot be analyzed based on a single dimension of their identity, as they are shaped by multiple converging axes of oppression.

Although intersectionality is not directly addressed in Bourdieu's theory, the concept of cultural capital is crucial for understanding how social inequalities—especially class-based ones—are perpetuated within the educational system, limiting the educational trajectories of certain groups (Bourdieu 1979).

Studies have shown that young people from higher social strata not only possess more cultural capital but also derive greater benefits from it, which supports the model of cultural reproduction (Valdés 2022). However, these approaches often lack coherence in effectively theorizing the intersections of class, gender, and membership in population groups, as they tend to oversimplify experiences by treating oppressions as the sum of independent factors (Carby 1982; May and Ferri 2005).

Human capital theory posits that education increases an individual's productivity and future earning potential (Albano 2005; Giménez et al. 2016). Several studies have examined this theory in relation to access to and outcomes of higher education. However, some scholars question the rational actor model underlying human capital theory, arguing that it ignores the structures of oppression that constrain individual decisions (Gil Villa 1995). Here, intersectionality offers a broader lens for understanding how educational decisions are influenced not only by economic calculations but also by power dynamics and social inequality.

Inequalities in Higher Education

The literature highlights how identities defined by discourses of marginalization interact within the educational context. Furthermore, the intersection between social class and membership in demographic groups (Hill 1994; Stuart 1992, 1994), demographic groups and gender (Collins 1993, 2000), and gender and social class (Begum 1992; Garland-Thomson 1997; Wendell 1996). However, there is little consensus on how to effectively theorize these intersections, and it has been noted that approaches that treat oppressions as the sum of independent factors are insufficient to capture the complexity of these experiences (Carby 1982; May and Ferri 2005).

Research conducted in other contexts offers relevant insights. In Canada, Quebec's educational structure demonstrates that social, cultural, and educational factors have a differentiated impact on various transitions to university, highlighting the importance of considering intersections of identity (Doray et al. 2022). In Australia, meanwhile, parental expectations play a crucial role in young people's participation in higher education, influenced by socioeconomic factors and perceptions of academic ability, which highlights the intersection of class and gender (Koshy et al. 2017).

Studies on access to higher education in Latin America underscore the importance of promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion to ensure equal educational opportunities (UNESCO 2022); furthermore, several knowledge gaps have been identified, particularly regarding the understanding of intersectional factors affecting access. In the case of Ecuador, it has been observed that policies aimed at improving equity have had limited success because they do not adequately consider intersections of identity (Mila et al. 2020).

Another South American experience is that of Argentina, where disparities in access persist despite efforts to democratize higher education, suggesting the need for approaches that integrate intersectionality into policy design (Suasnábar and Rovelli 2016). Similarly, in Colombia, there is a lack of clear understanding of how students' experiences and perceptions, influenced by multiple marginalized identities, affect their sense of belonging and risk of discrimination (García-Vita et al. 2021).

In Honduras, knowledge gaps are even more pronounced. The lack of a comprehensive understanding of the intersectional factors affecting young people's access to higher education remains a significant concern (Pozo-Burgos et al. 2022). Despite efforts to democratize access, socioeconomic, gender, and ethnic inequalities continue to affect student participation and academic performance (Richardson and Mittelmeier 2020). Recent studies indicate that institutional and dispositional barriers prevent non-traditional adult students, often situated at intersections of marginalization, from accessing higher education (Carp 1974). Therefore, it is essential to adopt an intersectional approach to understand and address these inequalities.

Method

Type of Research

This study is quantitative, cross-sectional, and descriptive, drawing on data from the Permanent Multipurpose Household Survey (EPHPM), which is characterized by its collection of data on the living conditions of the population (Grosh 1967). This allows for the generalization of results to the total population, while the cross-sectional nature enables the analysis of households' socioeconomic and labor conditions over a specific period.

a. Population and Sample

The population frame considered for this study was the country's total population, as this study was designed using a complex probability sample with national representativeness, as it constitutes the best available assessment of a country's sociodemographic, economic, and educational characteristics, as well as the spatial location, structure, and composition of the population and its living conditions (Agudelo, et al., 2023). In this regard, the population considered was 9,744,745 according to the latest population estimate (INE 2023). The sample segment was critically defined as individuals in the 18- to 70-year-old age group, justified by the self-reported age range evident in the EPHPM, as well as structural factors such as the regular enrollment of individuals in higher education between the ages of 18 and 24, in addition to older ages or late enrollment due to the very effects of exclusion from the system, resulting from non-linear educational trajectories (Haas and Hadjar 2020).

b. Methodology

As mentioned above, the Permanent Multi-Purpose Household Survey (EPHPM) was used, which, for the Honduran case, includes information on: demographics, migration, education, household composition, housing, income, the labor market by gender, people with employment problems, and child and youth labor (INE 2023). The survey groups the questions into ten indicators, including educational level (INE 2023).

This required a review and adjustments to the survey form, training of field staff, field tests, and data collection (INE 2023); as suggested in the literature, these procedures are necessary prior to the final implementation (Bertolino et al. 2021).

c. Data Processing

Regarding the data processing considered for the EPHPM, three procedures are carried out (INE 2023), which are: a) Data coding and digitization, where codes are assigned to responses and the data are digitized using CSPRO software, b) Data cleaning and verification, which involves cleaning the data to identify and correct inconsistencies; and c) Publication of valid results through output tables using SPSS. These steps ensured the quality and validity of the collected data, guaranteeing that the results would be useful for public policy formulation and subsequent studies, as is the case here (Pilowsky et al. 2024).

It should also be noted that the intersectionality approach guided the construction of variables based on a modeling strategy conceived as the result of the interaction of multiple structural axes of differentiation that

operate simultaneously in the production of social opportunities and constraints, for which we examined not only the independent effects of each social dimension but also the social configurations emerging from their intersection, as expressed in the conditional inference tree.

d. Analysis of Results

The analysis uses descriptive statistics to explore access to higher education through key demographic and socioeconomic variables (gender, origin, poverty, and disability). The frequency and percentage of the sample for each category are calculated, as well as the number and percentage of individuals with a higher education level within each group, allowing for the identification of patterns of inequality in specific subgroups.

A generalized linear model was applied to analyze access to higher education based on sociodemographic factors such as origin, disability, poverty, and gender. This inferential analysis allows for the evaluation of the influence of each independent variable on the probability of educational access, with coefficients reflecting the direction and magnitude of these relationships and Odds Ratios (OR) interpreting the relative probability of access in each group compared to a reference category. The confidence intervals (95% CI) of the ORs add precision to the estimates, facilitating a detailed understanding of structural inequalities in educational access.

Analysis using a conditional inference tree (Ctree) allows for the identification of intersectionalities in access to higher education in Honduras, examining how the combination of variables such as origin, poverty, sex, and disability influences educational opportunities. This statistical method generates a decision tree that selects only the branches with statistically significant associations, revealing complex patterns of inequality. Thus, the Ctree facilitates the identification of specific pathways and helps to understand how the intersections between sociodemographic factors differentially affect educational access, providing a detailed view of structural inequities across various population groups.

Results

The analysis of results was conducted using the June 2023 household survey database. The software used was R, applying a generalized linear model (the "survey" package) and a Conditional Inference Tree (the "partykit" package) (Hothorn and Zeileis 2015). The "*survey*" package was used for the survey design, allowing for weighted estimates and adjusted analysis of variance (Lumley 2004; Ellis and Schneider 2017).

Table 1. Characterization of the sample population

Variable	Frequency	Percentage of the sample	Number of people with a college degree	Percentage of people with a college degree
Gender				
Male	2,673,163	45.73%	282,184	4.83%
Female	3,172,086	54.27%	400,363	6.85%
Origin				
Urban	3,384,041	57.89%	589,540	10.09%
Rural	2,461,208	42.11%	93,007	1.59%
Poverty				
Poor	3,767,515	64.45%	240,410	4.11%
Not poor	2,077,734	35.55%	442,137	7.57%
Disability				
Yes	463,447	7.93%	26,184	0.45%
No	5,381,802	92.07%	656,363	11.23%

Note: The figures represent individuals who participated in the 2023 Household Survey and meet the study's inclusion and exclusion criteria. Source: Permanent Multi-Purpose Household Survey, 2023

Table 1 presents the characteristics of a population sample of individuals aged 18 to 70, based on variables such as sex, place of origin, poverty, and disability, with an emphasis on access to higher education. Women account for 54.27% of the sample, surpassing the 45.73% of men. In terms of place of origin, 57.89% come from urban areas, while 42.11% come from rural areas. The majority live in poverty (64.45%), and 7.93% have a disability.

The last column of the table highlights marked inequalities in access to higher education. Only 4.83% of men have a higher education degree, compared to 6.85% of women. People in urban areas have a higher rate of higher education (10.09%) compared to those in rural areas (1.59%), reflecting a significant disparity. Socioeconomic status also plays a role: only 4.11% of poor people have attained higher education, compared to 7.57% of non-poor people. Finally, access among people with disabilities is just 0.45%, compared to 11.23% of those without disabilities, highlighting additional barriers for this group.

Table 2. Generalized linear model analysis for access to higher education

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	p-value	Odds Ratio	95% CI Odds Ratio
Intercept	-0.6753	0.06609	<0.000000002 ***	0.51	0.45–0.58
Origin (urban vs. rural)	-1.7257	0.09136	<0.000000002 ***	0.18	0.15–0.21
Poverty (non-poor vs. extreme/relative poverty)	-1.40611	0.07916	<0.000000002 ***	0.25	0.21–0.28
People with disabilities (non-disabled vs. disabled)	-0.77748	0.20622	0.000164 ***	0.46	0.31
Gender (female vs. male)	-0.29491	0.07909	0.000193 ***	0.74	0.63–0.87

Source: Permanent Multi-Purpose Household Survey, 2023

Table 2 shows the results of a generalized linear model that examines access to higher education in Honduras, considering factors such as gender, disability, poverty, and place of origin. The coefficients and odds ratios, which allow for the interpretation of the magnitude and direction of relationships in logistic models and are essential for regression analysis (Hosmer et al. 2013), indicate significant differences in access to higher education for certain population groups.

According to the model, gender plays an important role: men are slightly less likely to access higher education compared to women; therefore, women have a greater advantage in this regard. The odds ratio of 0.74, with a 95% confidence interval between 0.63 and 0.87, reflects a disadvantage for men in terms of access to higher education.

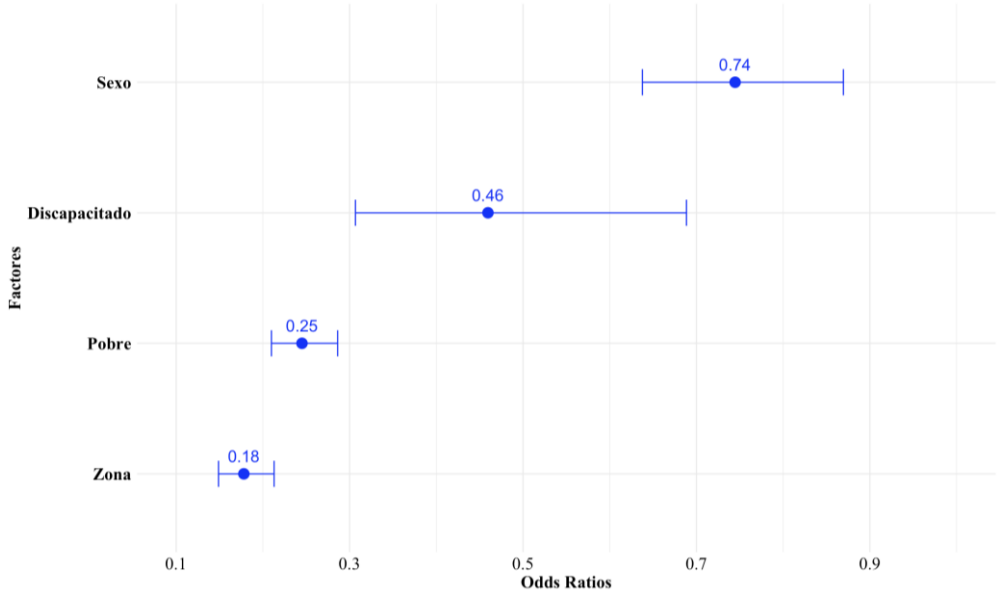

Figure 1. Confidence intervals for the odds ratios of the generalized linear model. Source: Permanent Multi-Purpose Household Survey, 2023

The presence of a disability is another determining factor. People with disabilities are significantly less likely to access higher education, as evidenced by an odds ratio of 0.46 (95% CI: 0.31–0.69). This result indicates the existence of additional barriers for people with disabilities, who face greater difficulties in advancing their education.

Individuals' economic situation also has a substantial impact on access to higher education. Those living in extreme or relative poverty are less likely to gain access compared to people who are not living in poverty. The odds ratio of 0.25 (95% CI: 0.21–0.28) highlights the profound disadvantage faced by the poorest sectors, demonstrating how economic constraints limit educational opportunities.

Geographic origin, meanwhile, reveals one of the most marked disparities. People from rural areas have significantly less access to higher education compared to those from urban areas. With an Odds Ratio of 0.18 (95% CI: 0.15–0.21), this factor underscores territorial inequality in access to education, where living in a rural area represents a considerable barrier to educational advancement.

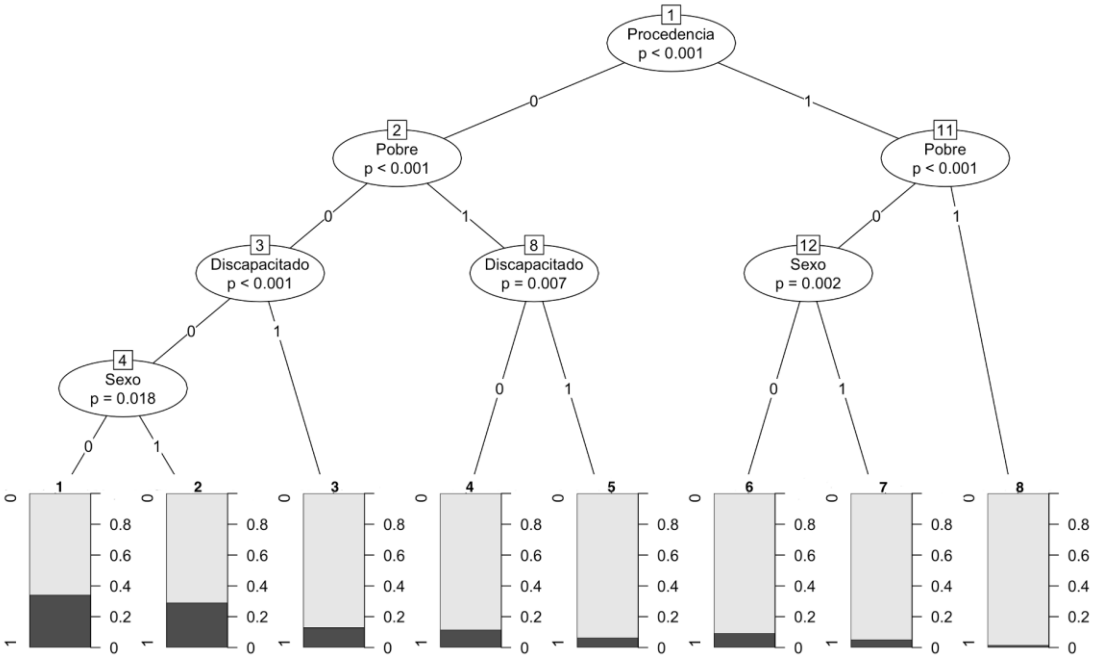

Figure 2. Conditional Inference Tree for Access to Higher Education. Source: Permanent Multi-Purpose Household Survey, 2023.

The analysis of the conditional inference tree allows for the identification of patterns in complex data (Hothorn et al. 2006) in this case, it shows that access to higher education, as a function of multiple sociodemographic factors and considering intersectionalities, allows us to visualize how the intersection of variables such as place of origin, poverty status, disability, and sex influences the probabilities of accessing higher education in Honduras, highlighting those combinations that generate greater or lesser opportunities. Additionally, the illustration shows that the terminal nodes indicate relevant relationships between the analyzed factors and educational access.

Table 3. Probability of access according to the most significant intersectionalities

Node	Intersectionality	Cases	Probability of access
1	Urban/non-poor/non-disabled/female	599,351	0.342
2	Urban / non-poor / non-disabled / male	572,387	0.292
3	Urban / non-poor / disabled	62,583	0.124
4	Urban / poor / non-disabled	1,948,519	0.113
5	Urban / poor / disabled	201,200	0.0656
6	Rural / non-poor / female	432,584	0.0912
7	Rural / non-poor / male	405,221	0.0509
8	Rural / poor	1,623,404	0.0162

Source: Permanent Multi-Purpose Household Survey, 2023.

Table 3, meanwhile, shows the associated probabilities and indicates that access probabilities vary significantly across nodes. The nodes with the highest probabilities of access correspond to individuals without accumulated vulnerabilities. For example, node 1, representing urban women who are neither poor nor disabled, shows the highest probability of access at 34.2%, followed by node 2 (urban men who are neither

poor nor disabled) at 29.2%. These results suggest that living in urban areas and not experiencing poverty or disability facilitates access to higher education, especially for women in this group.

In contrast, the probability of access decreases significantly in the nodes that reflect conditions of greater vulnerability. Node 8, which corresponds to people in rural areas living in poverty, has the lowest probability of access, at just 1.62%. Another group with a low probability is node 7, which represents non-poor rural men, with a probability of access of 5.09%. These findings underscore the deep structural inequalities in educational access, where rural origin and poverty constitute significant barriers.

Analysis of the conditional inference tree reveals how the intersections between place of origin, poverty, disability, and gender generate significant disparities in opportunities for access to higher education. This method allows for the identification of specific combinations of vulnerability that limit educational access, providing a detailed and well-founded view of inequities in the Honduran education system.

Discussion

The first finding indicates that access to higher education is low in Honduras, with only 11.68% of the population enrolled, compared to the global and regional averages. This is because, globally, the gross enrollment rate in higher education nearly doubled between 2000 and 2018, rising from 19% to 38%. in light of which it must be noted that it is men who have less access to higher education in Honduras, in contrast to trends in other regions, where women face greater barriers due to social norms and structural inequalities (Khethiwe, 2023; Almelhem et al., 2021). In Latin America, social exclusion limits women's access (Barrera-Corominas et al. 2018), warranting special attention to this trend to promote, in terms of public policy, hybrid and phased formats in higher education that are attractive to young people and have a vocational focus.

This study also demonstrates how factors such as place of origin (urban or rural), socioeconomic status (poor or non-poor), disability, and gender interact and affect educational opportunities. This reveals that living in urban areas and not facing poverty or disability significantly facilitates access, which aligns with previous research highlighting how urbanization and the absence of economic barriers contribute to greater educational mobility (Walker and Mathebula 2020); for this reason, higher education offerings must be extended to more underserved regions through programs adapted to that reality without compromising their quality.

Conclusion

It is concluded that the lowest access rates correspond to people living in rural areas and in poverty, especially those with disabilities or who are male, who are less likely to gain access and constitute a more vulnerable population in this regard. This finding indicates that the low allocation of resources and insufficient state funding in rural areas with lower access rates for minority and disadvantaged groups will impact future access to higher education.

The intersectionality in the interpretation of these data highlights how the geography of rural communities perpetuates inequalities and disadvantages for young people seeking access to higher education (Sansone 2023), requiring more inclusive and effective public policies to expand coverage and make educational offerings more attractive and aligned with employability demands.

Limitations

One of the limitations identified was that there is little consensus on how to effectively theorize these intersections, and it has been noted that approaches that treat oppressions as the sum of independent factors are insufficient to capture the complexity of these experiences (Carby 1982; May and Ferri 2005).

On the other hand, it should be noted that the data and its validity depend on the reports of the entity responsible for the EPHPM, which in this case is the INE (National Institute of Statistics), which requires verification of missing or anomalous cases, as well as the integration of modules for certain variables; which required using the 2023 database, since subsequent databases do not include a disability module.

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