

**Masculinities and Femininities in the Mexican Secundaria: Notes Toward an
Institutional Practice of Gender Equity**

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Feminist researchers of education in Latin America have frequently found their best efforts to achieve gender parity vexed by the intransigence of deeply rooted gender ideologies. In the introduction to her oft-cited volume, Stromquist (1992:4-5) notes that progressive educational changes, such as increased women's enrollments across all levels of schooling, or a gender-neutral overt curriculum, may be offset by the practices of a hidden curriculum informed by the negative social markings of gender. Women may thus be entering schools in greater numbers, and they may be faced with less obvious forms of institutional marginalization, only to encounter the obstacles of subtle and pervasive discrimination. Ironically, the greater influx of women into education and the workforce may not substantially alter the social and political arrangements which continue to subordinate them.

In a more recent address, Stromquist (1995:452) emphasizes the need to examine and challenge the "ideological mechanisms" in schools which stifle both students' questioning of such arrangements and the imagining of alternatives. There is in this formulation a common assumption that teachers, textbooks, and administrators—those responsible for the "official" pedagogical activities of the school—bring these ideological mechanisms to life. Yet, it must be said that the discrimination and ideological messages do not only issue from teachers. Often they take the form of normative sanctions or gender stereotyping communicated through the informal networks of student culture. Drawing on the gender ideologies which circulate in and out of school, students are active participants in appropriating and shaping the discourses that come to define the horizons of their life opportunities and ambitions. This work of appropriation and cultural production usually takes place in small informal groups, and helps create the intersubjective matrix for identity formation in the school. This is a crucial point, since so much critical work on the State's role in education assumes that teachers act as its agents, uncritically transmitting the conservative gender images presumably imparted to them in normal schools and other professional agencies. Important work has now opened up a more complex view of teachers' biographies and their contradictory relation to the State (Cortina 1992; Ginsburg 1995; Rockwell and Mercado 1986; Rockwell 1995). In my own ethnographic research at a provincial Mexican secundaria (Levinson 1997a, in press), I found that many teachers--men included--expressed strong commitments to women's empowerment, and often conducted a remarkably progressive gender practice. For instance, they tended to call on women to participate more than men, and they tended to favor women for positions of leadership in the school. Many of the students, however, tended to reproduce conservative gender ideologies in spite of these efforts by teachers.

The gender ideologies which students appropriate and produce often involve normative statements about proper ways of being masculine and feminine. Often these ideologies take on a more embodied, practical form, beyond explicit statements, involving gestures or actions which situationally enact masculine and feminine styles and concomitantly assert the relative values of such behaviors. In the social science literature on gender, there has been a veritable explosion of studies on masculinities and femininities (Connell 1995), much of it in the field of education (Mac an Ghail 1994; Raissiguier 1994; Kenway 1994). This scholarly attention reflects the growing recognition that

progressive social and educational change for women's emancipation must reckon with the continuing power of retrograde ideologies of masculinity and femininity. Across many national and local contexts, dominant ideologies of femininity tend to disidentify women with the domain of public power, while ideologies of masculinity tend to justify aggressive male activity. Thus, educational work for gender equity must challenge the tendency to privilege aggressive masculinities in the public sphere, revalorize and redefine the nature of femininities, and propose a more flexible template for gender identities in the school. Indeed, no amount of legislative, administrative, and organizational reform can fully address the hold of such ideologies rooted in popular culture. Rather, our work should focus on the interactional environment of the school. As Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994:5) observe, "notions of masculinity are fluid...so we must explore how various masculinities are defined and redefined in social interaction...The shifting and contingent relation between 'masculinity' and 'men' becomes clear when we examine the *enactment* of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities in a single setting." So too for femininity. Without losing sight of the historical and structural dimensions of gender ideologies, it is still possible to examine, and make progressive interventions into, the local and shifting features of gender ideologies in settings such as the school. As Connell (1987) argues, a reconfiguration of power in local "gender regimes," often accomplished through challenges to hegemonic masculinities and femininities, may come to have a significant impact on power relations in the broader "gender order." I will return to reflect on this point in my conclusions.

In this paper, I shall briefly review some of my findings about masculinities and femininities from my ethnographic study of student culture at a Mexican secundaria, which I call Escuela Secundaria Federal--ESF (Levinson 1993; 1996; 1997a; in press). In these previous publications, I explored the ways in which masculinities and femininities were constructed and contested in student culture, as well as some of the consequences of such cultural constructions, especially for women's aspirations and identities. Here my aim is rather to assess the historical and cultural roots of such practical ideologies; to interrogate the role of the State and the secondary school as institutional forms vis-a-vis the reproduction of such ideologies; and to propose some possible means of intervention for challenging prevalent ideologies and creating conditions for more thoroughgoing gender equity in the school.

Recent Anthropological and Historical Contributions to the Study of Gender Ideologies in Mexico

First, a note of definition: As an anthropologist, I understand the enactment and valuation of masculinities and femininities as a cultural process in which differently sexed bodies are attributed a range of possible behaviors and dispositions. The members of any given society do not necessarily "share" all the meanings and values attributed to different masculinities and femininities, but they do share a framework, a "discourse," if you will, within which they might **argue** about values and meanings.¹ Different masculinities and femininities represent different kinds of **value** within this discourse, and such values are

¹ Stern (1995) advances a notion of "culture as argument" very much in accord with my discussion here.

negotiated in specific moments and spaces of a society's or institution's social life. Moreover, the cultural framework within which masculinities and femininities are negotiated has historical, material, and regionally/institutionally differentiated dimensions; that is, it evolves over time and acquires new elements as it drops old ones, it is intimately bound up with relations of power, including processes of state and nation formation (Bourque 1989), which determine the control of labor and resources in a society; and it gets nuanced or transformed in the regional spaces constituting relations between the "intimate cultures" of a complex society (Lomnitz-Adler 1992). As Connell (1993a, 1995) has argued so masterfully, not all societies, historical or contemporary, even have distinct categories of masculinity and femininity. Even the celebrated "North Atlantic masculinities" now hegemonic in U.S. and European societies—and to some extent shared by former Spanish colonial societies like Mexico—have their origins in "challenges to the gender order by women, the logic of the gendered accumulation process in industrial capitalism, and the power relations of empire" (Connell 1995:191). Before these processes kicked into gear, homosexual relationships, for example, were not understood to define specific types of men (hence masculinities), and women did not have well-defined femininities in relation to some masculine ideal. Connell helps us to grasp the outlines of a uniquely modern process of economic and political concentration of power which had extensive repercussions in the field of everyday gender relations.

A number of recent English-language studies of gender relations and ideologies in Mexico may help us to sort out the historical and institutional legacies which impact the play of masculinities and femininities at ESF. Marjorie Becker's (1995) historical study of relations between peasants and the regime of Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s highlights the gendered imagery involved in political struggle. On the one hand, Becker traces the gendered ideological foundations of popular Catholicism in this region. Priests encouraged women to adopt the Virgin Mary as their model of "purity and obedience" (16), and to practice self-denial. The corresponding traits of abnegation and modesty were transformed into specific practices which, in the manner of a "behavioral architecture," served to protect "an inequitable social order" (28), to "nurture the status quo" (100). Like other authors (Alonso 1995; Mallon 1994), Becker notes the powerful, albeit circumscribed rewards such abnegation offered women: as "clerical lieutenants," they ruled over the spiritual life of the domestic unit, and could find gratification in the moral power they asserted in the home. When the anti-clerical Cardenistas attempted to impose the agenda of the centralizing State by challenging the power of the Church, they had to reckon with this aspect of social life. According to Becker, the Cardenistas accomplished "a political refabrication of clerical imagery," developing specific messages for men and for women (100). Cardenistas assumed that women's specific "interests and activities stemmed from their reproductive abilities" (115), and that "revolutionary" policy should be directed at them accordingly... What we see in Becker's work is the contradictory place of women in the historical and political clash between male-dominated institutional orders (State and Church), where notions of proper femininity, in the end strikingly similar between the two orders, are used to justify the ongoing subordination of women.

Ana Alonso's (1995) historical ethnography is extremely helpful for teasing out the varied meanings of masculinity and femininity as these are put into play in the evolving

relation between the Northern “frontier” community of Namiquipa and the central Mexican State. Alonso is fundamentally concerned with the role played by the naturalizing “tropes of gender” (74) in the structuring of relations of domination—between men and women, but also between “civilized and savage,” rich and poor, and so on. For our purposes here, I will stick to her discussion of the tropes which constitute relations between men and women. Drawing on a half-century of scholarship on the Mediterranean “shame-honor complex,” Alonso unpacks the rather stereotyped image of the Mexican “macho” to identify two key components of “masculine honor” put into play in the social life of Namiquipa. The first, which she calls “honor-precedence,” constitutes the “natural” component of masculine honor and the “natural” foundation for male power in society. This aspect of honor is based above all on conceptions of physical force, and expressions of “valor, virility, autonomy, and mastery” (Alonso 1995:80). The naturally forceful man is a true “macho,” but the macho is not the most valued form of masculinity. Rather, the most culturally prized form of masculinity, the true “*hombre*,” must temper the physical force of the macho with the “civilized” attributes of *verguenza* and *respeto*. This “cultural” basis of masculine honor, called “honor-virtue,” signifies the successful “ordering and control of instincts and passions by reason (*razón*) and morality (*moral*)” (81). Honor-virtue includes the “recognition of social obligations...honesty, generosity, the ability to reciprocate, the capacity to respect others’ rights to honor, the dedication to work, and the fulfillment of responsibilities to one’s family and community” (81). Importantly, legitimate authority is only conferred upon those men who achieve a balance between honor-precedence and honor-virtue. As Alonso (1995:82) sums up, “True masculine honor presupposes both virtue and precedence, both natural and cultural qualities and attributes.”

Feminine honor in Namiquipa has similarly natural and cultural dimensions. Echoing Becker, Alonso says that the image of the Virgin Mary has provided one important source of imagery for a “natural” femininity, consisting of sexual purity, spiritual virtue, and the sacredness of motherhood. Indeed, “motherhood is the fulfillment of female ‘nature’ (1995:85), and women tend “naturally” toward the qualities of chastity, modesty, self-sacrifice, and submissiveness. Ironically, though, the “natural” aspect of femininity is simultaneously compromised by the invasive quality of biological conception. In a contradictory counterpoint to the image of purity, Alonso notes that “the penetrable ‘nature’ of the female body becomes seen as the cause of women’s vulnerability, pollution, openness, shame, powerlessness, reduced autonomy, and diminished self-control” (86). If this is the ambiguous picture of “natural” femininity, the “cultural” dimension of female honor, achieved through strategies of social control, attempts to recover and reinstate the positive aspect of natural honor. Thus, women are educated to emphasize sexual modesty and to maintain a “collected, withdrawn, and chaste demeanor that is a sign of corporal closure” (86). Women are also enjoined to restrict their appearances in the public domain. Only through this kind of cultural control can the natural aspect of women’s purity be safeguarded. The cultural construction of femininity in Namiquipa “simultaneously subjects and empowers women. On the one hand, women’s sacred virtues give them a measure of moral authority over men. On the other hand, the irredeemable permeability of the female body...places women under male control. The ideology of gender honor has

prevented women from holding political office and from voting in elections and has limited their opportunities to work outside the home and to participate in the public sphere” (87).

What truly lends analytic power to Alonso’s account of the cultural logic behind gender relations in Namiquipa is its historical and extra-local character. For Alonso wishes to show how these local constructions of masculinity and femininity have evolved historically in the context of Namiquipa’s relation to Spanish colonial government and, later, the Mexican State. Namiquipa was first established as a frontier military village in the Spanish colonial struggle against the “barbaric” Apache. The colonial State invested significant ideological and material resources in these frontier communities, and tended to premise masculine honor on the legitimate use of violence against the savage Apache, while glorifying female honor as the basis for the production and reproduction of “civilized” colonial subjects on the “savage” frontier. The poor peasants who came to populate Namiquipa took up the State’s discourse and valorized these components of masculinity and femininity, while simultaneously constructing gendered ethnic borders between themselves and the Apache. Indeed, military honor was one of the only ways in which subalterns could achieve recognition vis-a-vis the State. Yet over time, and with the achievement of Mexican independence, Namiquipans came to understand their gender constructs as much in relation to the welfare of the local community, the “*patria chica*,” as in relation to the nationally defined *patria*. It is for this reason that, in later epochs, such as that of the Mexican Revolution, Namiquipans found themselves at odds with the agenda of the national State, and drew on masculinities and femininities formed in previous epochs, and committed to the welfare of the *patria chica*, to contest the new proposals of the federal State. Alonso thus demonstrates the complex historical interplay between state and local discourses, and the ways in which gender ideologies get taken up or forged in relations of domination and resistance between ethnic groups and larger polities.

Steve Stern’s new book on the “secret history of gender” in late colonial Mexico also has much to tell us about gender ideologies across local and national contexts. Stern attempts to chart an opening toward a history of “patriarchal traditions” in Latin America, and he chooses to do so through a fine-grained analysis of family and community-based gender relations in three regions of late colonial Mexico. He chooses Mexico not least because it is the “Latin American country where archetypes of masculinity and femininity are most intensely interwoven with mythologies of national self-definition” (1995:20). Among Stern’s striking insights that may be of use to my analysis here, I will highlight just a few. Stern insists that in the “prefeminist” times of colonial Mexico, women still participated in a “bitterly contested world of gender right and obligation” (1995:7). Against the “myth of complicity” that would accord women little insight into their own condition, Stern suggests that women worked out “practical life adaptations” (76, *passim*) in which they asserted, above all, their “contingent gender rights” within a kind of contractual patriarchal system. Even if they would not or could not challenge the fundamental principles of patriarchal authority, women did indeed attempt to maneuver local patriarchs (husbands, brothers, fathers, community elders) into honoring their reciprocal commitments (shades of Alonso’s honor-virtue) to women under patriarchy. Even more, the manner of women’s assertion of these rights problematizes the typical view of a unitary “code of gender right, obligation, and honor,” and brings into view the more dynamic character of a continually contested gender order, where there in fact have

existed “multiple codes” (18-19). In other words, even in the absence of any explicitly feminist analysis of patriarchy, women found (regionally distinctive) ways of manipulating, challenging, and in some cases altering existing patriarchal arrangements.

Stern also manages to astutely trace the connections between local “gender cultures” and the broader political culture of a society. He suggests that patriarchal and authoritarian political cultures writ large rest themselves ultimately on the mediating structures of local patriarchal control, but not without quite a bit of contradictory interference. In Mexico, for instance, he finds that local peasant culture was in fact “marked by a deep contradiction between egalitarian or democratic values that stressed reciprocities and likenesses among families and citizens who shared a rough similarity of economic condition...and more hierarchical values that stressed obedience to constituted authority and legitimate differentiation of circumstances and privilege according to barrio or lineage, economic base, or political status” (303). As a result, and just as women within communities often sought to “pluralize patriarchs” as a strategy for asserting their contingent gender rights against a violation of gender codes by a husband or other adult male, most peasants “proved receptive to a vision that equated legitimate authority with a responsible brand of patriarchalism (paternalism)” —and they made corresponding appeals to a superordinate “good patriarch,” a “metafather” who might protect or redeem them (307). Finally, Stern ends his book with a suggestive discussion of the “reconstitution of old dynamics in new social contexts” (326). This is where he draws out some of the implications of his work on colonial Mexico for understanding the gender struggles of the present moment. He acknowledges that the Liberal reforms of the 19th century, the military and political revolution of 1910-1920, and the “silent revolution” wrought by urbanization and modernization throughout the 20th century have brought about entirely new conditions for gender relations at the local level, and new life options for women—not least through education (see Levine 1993). Despite the distinctly patriarchal tone of the political revolution itself, the changes it spawned have in fact opened up striking social spaces for female participation (Fowler-Salamini and Vaughan 1994). Yet many of the same struggles for women’s rights must continue. Stern is hopeful that the persistence of quarrels, tensions, and acts of violence which had previously been endemic to a patriarchal culture in full bloom now represent the “desperate stopgaps, rearguard actions, and breakups of a patriarchal regime under siege” (330). As he puts it, the present moment may indeed harbor a “partial transition from cultural argument about mutuality among unequals, an argument about the absolute or contingent qualities of gender right within a vertically ordered world that divides male and female into distinct spheres and roles, toward cultural argument about mutuality among equals or near-equals...in a world where male and female spheres and roles might overlap considerably” (340).

Matthew Gutmann’s (1996) contemporary ethnographic study of the “meanings of macho” in a working-class Mexico City neighborhood takes up where Stern leaves off. For Gutmann, the image of the Mexican macho has always been an exaggerated stereotype, not adequate to understanding the real complexity, and the full continuum, of Mexican masculinities. Especially in a modern world of plural and “contradictory convictions” (22), akin perhaps to Stern’s world of “overlapping” male and female spheres, men and women are forced to reformulate the gender codes of the past in negotiating identities for themselves. Of course, men still “continue to benefit as a group

from aspects of the subordination of women” (23), but their dominance is far more tenuous than one might expect. For one thing, women in the colonia of Santo Domingo played a powerful role at the outset of the community, serving as squatters and pressing their claims for municipal services. With these same women and their daughters entering the workforce in greater numbers and pursuing higher levels of education, outright male dominance has become more difficult to secure. Indeed, Gutmann demonstrates how women’s leadership in many aspects of community life, as well as their immersion in the broader ideological field constituted by modern feminism, has led them to take the lead in challenging expressions of male dominance and securing male participation in a variety of household tasks previously thought to be only the province of women, especially the care of babies and young children. Perhaps ironically, most of the colonia’s residents construct their own urban gender identities and childrearing practices as progressive in relation to what one would find in rural areas, where patterns more tend to reflect the hold of the past. In the final analysis, Gutmann critiques the social science tendency to portray Mexicans as inexorably bound to a monolithic standard of macho or marianista behavior; instead, he emphasizes the “cultural creativity” of men and women, in varying economic and social circumstances, to fashion and re-fashion the cultural scripts for masculine and feminine behavior.

These recent English-language historical and ethnographic studies of gender and culture in Mexico shed important light on the construction of masculinities and femininities across regions, communities, and epochs. In highlighting some of the key insights of these works, I want to suggest that they are important for understanding the contemporary configuration of gender relations at the Mexican *secundaria* I have been studying, and by extension, to other schools in Mexico. These studies show how local conceptions of gendered comportment—conceptions of valued and devalued masculinities and femininities—are negotiated, contested, and transformed over time, even as they retain important continuities. They provide us with helpful glimpses into the differences and similarities between gender ideologies across diverse popular cultures. However, the studies do tend to examine the relation between a region (Becker, Stern) and/or a community (Gutmann, Alonso) and the State, interpreting the region or community as a kind of crucible for changes in gender ideologies and relations vis-a-vis the State. While these regional and community studies have much to offer us, I will suggest that the analysis of gender relations within a socializing agency of the State itself must attend to other factors. As a component of the State policy apparatus itself, the school requires special attention to the contradictory position of teachers as simultaneously state employees and members of the popular classes, as well as to the often popular character of its socioeducational offerings.

The Secundaria, the State, and the Institutional Possibilities for Gender Equity

As noted by many scholars of contemporary Mexican history and society (Brachet-Marquez 1994; Joseph and Nugent 1994; Lomnitz-Adler 1992), the postrevolutionary State has sought to selectively incorporate popular demands and styles into its mode of rule. Formal education, as one component of this rule, is especially susceptible to popular

intervention, both in the form of teacher subjectivities and the negotiations of everyday life at the level of the school (Mercado 1985; Rockwell and Mercado 1986). Secondary schools are perhaps less permeable to this kind of popular influence, as they typically do not have the same kind of intimate presence in a community as primary schools, and its teachers are less likely to have followed a popular educational trajectory. Still, historically and actually, one can observe a quite vital interplay between the prerogatives and meanings of popular cultures and the ideological messages that help constitute the secondary school's pedagogical activities. This interplay must be acknowledged when considering the possibilities of change in gender relations and ideologies in secondary schools.

As I discuss elsewhere (Levinson 1997b), the history of the *secundaria* in Mexico is entwined with conceptions of adolescent development, and the notion of adolescence as a distinct lifestage often provides a cultural template for school actors--teachers, students, and parents alike--to order and interpret their respective behaviors. Yet interestingly, and in contrast with the highly gendered character of most Western discourses on adolescence, official programs and study plans for Mexican secondary education rarely make reference to gender differences in adolescence. With the possible exception of the Cardenista period of socialist education in the 1930s, official discourse on secondary education has maintained a virtual institutional silence on the issue of gender differences in adolescence. Clearly, however, teachers in secondary schools develop their own situated interpretations of gendered adolescent behavior, and their own values on masculinities and femininities. From their experience teaching, they develop a sense for the cognitive and emotional development of their charges; they are keenly aware that the *secundaria* corresponds to a time when sexuality blossoms and gender identities come to have a new and more charged salience, and that their students may for the first time seriously consider substantive and socially evaluated erotic attachments to others. Teachers thus put into play their understandings of "adolescent" masculinities and femininities, and students in part draw on these understandings to elaborate their own practices and norms for gender.

At Escuela Secundaria Federal (ESF), a dynamic interplay of hegemonic masculinities and femininities provided the tenor of what Connell (1987) calls an institution's "gender regime" (Levinson 1997a, in press). To summarize briefly for the student culture, hegemonic femininity seemed to be constituted on a kind of "middle ground" ("*ni santitas ni relajadas*") of academic engagement and romantic involvement. Dominant norms in the student culture, which appeared to derive most of their power from liberal modern discourses in the popular media, stipulated that young women should express interest in seeking romantic attachments with young men, but stop short of aggressive courting or open expressions of sexuality. Young women were also encouraged to pursue a **moderate** involvement with school knowledge and activities, but excessive interest in studies was proscribed as inordinately "serious," and often stigmatized as masculine. Finally, young women were encouraged to pursue **modest** involvement in school leadership roles, as long as they managed the impression of forcefulness they might give off. These dominant norms, of course, were not endorsed by all students, nor were they fully in agreement with the norms for student behavior espoused by most of the teachers. Indeed, many of the female students from poorer neighborhoods or rural areas appeared to resist these norms based on their adherence to

Catholic patriarchal gender codes, often enforced by parents. They were among the most marginalized students in the school.

Hegemonic masculinity, on the other hand, placed a premium on boys being able to endure pain and being willing to fight to protect their reputation or honor. There was a high value placed on the performative expression of sexual interest in young women, as well as interest in aggressive sports such as boxing and soccer. Dominant norms of masculinity stipulated **modest** involvement with academics, and ironically, excessive attention to studies was occasionally stigmatized as effeminate (mainly because of the assumption that to do lots of after-school “*tarea*” meant spending more time in the feminine space of the home). Involvement in school leadership activities was only modestly encouraged, and those who did take on leadership roles had to guard against an impression of weakness. Since student power was so carefully circumscribed by adult authority at ESF, male students who took on the mostly symbolic leadership roles were subject to being seen as complicit in their own emasculating subordination.

Further reflection on the gendered qualities of “leadership” reveals a lot about the play of masculinities and femininities at ESF. In general, the *secundaria* in Mexico is designed to be the last stage of the basic cycle of “integral” education, and one of the key functions of this education is the development of qualities of leadership and cooperation for effective participation in democratic social life (see Levinson 1997b). In reality, the *secundaria* affords students numerous occasions for exercising leadership in both formal and informal roles, but the gendered meanings of leadership qualities are highly contested in student culture.

For instance, at ESF girls in fact took on many of the leadership roles in the *grupo escolar* (Levinson 1993) and elsewhere, though they often had to manage the implications of expressing “masculine” qualities of leadership. While many boys acknowledged the ability of girls to advance the common interests of students and discipline the group, in practice they would call the more forceful girls *marimachas*. Likewise, girls who excelled academically and aggressively pursued leadership roles in the school took the risk of censure, of accusations of “*fachosa*” or “*sangrona*” from male and female classmates alike. This was especially ironic in light of the fact that many girls defended their leadership on the grounds of their obviously greater discipline and moral superiority. It became clear to me that girls who adopted aggressive verbal tactics in advancing student interests were strategically combining a forceful male persona with the feminine qualities of discipline and morality seen as positive. Thus, girls who wished to exercise leadership in the public sphere had to contend with deeply embedded gender ideologies which did not stipulate such forceful public roles for women. Not surprisingly, girls who sought leadership roles tended to justify themselves on the basis of their “nurturing” or “healing” qualities, and their ability to bring diverse interests together for a common endeavor. Notoriously, girls played informal leadership roles within the *grupos escolares*, where they often carried the bulk of group work and intervened with teachers to protect male classmates from blame or punishment.

In other ways, too, students revealed the subtly gendered criteria by which they judged qualities of leadership. Candidates for office in student government were often culled from among existing *jefes de grupo*, which included a roughly equal number of girls and boys. In the 1990 election for student body president of the *turno matutino*, Iván ,

head of the *planilla blanca*, beat out two other *planillas* headed by girls. Iván's candidacy was disputed by a number of teachers and students alike. He had failed several subjects the previous year, and he had been expelled at one point for fighting. He clearly did not meet the criteria of good academic and social standing required to run. Yet mostly because of pressure from classmates, the principal eventually decided to let him run. Most students I spoke with seemed to agree that Iván had won because of a uniquely gendered campaign strategy: an older and popular boy with a reputation as a good street fighter and a fearless "man of the people" ("*brabucón del pueblo*"), Iván had drawn on his aura of masculine vigor and efficacy to convince students that he would confront the arbitrary authority of the principal and push through a number of student demands. His two female opponents, in the meantime, had been put forward on the basis of their general likeability, good records of discipline, and academic achievement. In comparison to Iván, they appeared to offer only the same kind of weak, deferring leadership the students had known in the past. Iván thus won the election in large part because he exuded the confidence and force judged necessary to advance student rights. By offering a kind of populist spectacle of contestatory leadership, he was perhaps tapping into masculinized conceptions of leadership which have their roots in deeper ideologies of honor-precedence and honor-virtue.

Moreover, the boys themselves, while they publicly endorsed girls' rights to serve in various leadership roles, would privately confide to me their reservations. In casual contexts with boys, I often heard them argue that girls were unfit to serve as student body president, carry the flag during parades, or otherwise fulfill leadership roles where masculine force was needed. The boys sometimes made reference to the all-male principalship of the school, and articulated a vision of masculine force as necessary to get the really tough jobs done. As Iván himself put it rather succinctly in assessing his chances for the presidency: "I'm going to win...I'm up against two women, and everyone knows that the women won't be able to organize dances well, they won't be able to do much of anything."

It is important to note that styles of masculinity and femininity associated with leadership are often linked to ideological processes of state formation and national identity. While teachers often supported girls for positions of leadership, their own discourses on the nation occasionally privileged a hegemonic masculinity. In one case, for instance, the principal of ESF observed why it was important to have the boys take over as escorts of the flag for the Monday morning civic ceremony after the girls had performed this honor for many years.² I paraphrase his speech to the students assembled before him: "Hasta ahora, las mujeres han ganado [a los hombres], porque, es cierto, ellas saben [escortar a la bandera] perfectamente bien. Pero, nosotros, los hombres, los varones, hemos empezado a aprender y este grupo lo hizo muy bien el día de hoy...El punto es que nosotros, los varones, tenemos que demostrar que también somos capaces, tenemos que ser los líderes en todo. Somos quienes defenderemos a nuestra tierra y debemos estar listos en caso de que sea necesario asumir el papel defensivo. Además, somos quienes en la vida cívica estamos adelante en el servicio de la patria." Such discourses only

² It is likely that my own questioning about the all-female flag escort and the all-male drum and bugle corps ("*banda de guerra*") prompted the principal to institute this change.

encouraged the boys to continue asserting a forceful conception of the masculine prerogative in leadership.

In 1990, then, the rather authoritarian principal of ESF created an ethos which both privileged official expressions of hegemonic masculinity and generated a strong undercurrent of contestatory male bravado in the student culture. However, by 1992 a new principal had been appointed, and there were clear signs that the gender regime of the school had begun to change. This new principal had been a vice-principal at ESF in 1990, and he had heard my questioning about gender as well. When I returned in 1993 and 1995, he enthusiastically observed to me the presence of several girls in the *banda de guerra*, the continuing alternation of boys and girls comprising the flag escort, and the generally greater participation of students in classes and activities traditionally associated with the opposite sex. No doubt some of his enthusiasm was directed at me in particular, but the school had indeed changed.

An appreciation of the changes wrought by a new principal's style of leadership is one way of nuancing our sense of how the "State" works through schools. This is important, since so much critical writing on the role of the State in education continues to attribute to it a kind of monolithic intentionality, conceiving of schools as "instruments" of the State (Stromquist 1995:445). This view of the State often rests on an instrumentalist view of teachers that has been effectively challenged in recent years, both in Mexico (Rockwell 1995), and elsewhere (Ginsburg 1995). Moreover, it presupposes a kind of impermeability, hence a relation of naked imposition, between the school-as-State-agency and the popular groups that attend it. However, historical and ethnographic work has shed light on the mutually formative relations that exist between school cultures and broader popular cultures (Levinson 1996; Mercado 1985; Rockwell 1994, 1996). Teachers and administrators, if they are to have success, must often adapt themselves to elements of the popular cultures converging in the school.

Conclusions

It has long been known that even if textbooks and official school policy fail to designate gendered tasks and privileges, teachers may still enact or reinforce negative gender ideologies through their actions, assignments, and assumptions. As Subirats and Brullet (1988) discovered across a variety of coeducational schools in Spain, most teachers continued to discriminate against girls despite their commitment to equality and their belief that they were indeed treating all children the same. This discrimination took many subtle forms, including differential evaluation (1988:74-5) and attention (83 ff.), and tacit acceptance of boys' domination of classroom spaces and interactions (127-8). Similar patterns have been found by Mexican (Delgado 1993) and U.S. researchers (Eder (1995; Thorne 1993). Clearly, more work needs to be done in this area as well, and teachers must learn to evaluate their everyday practice in light of their ideals of gender equity (See Bonder 1992).

Thus, the establishment of "gender-neutral" curricula and teacher discourses is only the first step toward gender equity in the secondary school. As Stromquist (1995:441) puts it, we must move from a nonsexist education to an "antisexist education." At the level of curriculum, this means building into the presentations of history, literature,

geography, art and science the perspectives of women. As Connell argues in his book on *Schools and Social Justice* (1993b), curricular justice requires the organization of knowledge from the point of view of subordinate groups in society. This does not imply turning the typically unreflective celebration of hegemonic masculinity found in most textbooks into a cynical negation of it. Rather, it implies an examination of what that hegemonic masculinity has meant and looked like to those oppressed by it, as well as a revindication of more powerful and public forms of femininity which are seldom given public accord. This is fundamentally a proposal for pluralizing the sources of curriculum content, for creating a more inclusive curriculum which invites students to develop capacities for empathy and skills in adopting the perspectives of others in the analysis of diverse educational materials. Certainly, this goal of curricular democratization accords well with the stated intentions of secondary schooling in Mexico.

But there is more work to be done beyond curriculum, in the day-to-day social relations of the *secundaria*. Given the deeply rooted, historically informed, and institutionally structured privileging of hegemonic masculinities, teachers and school authorities ought to engage in more deliberate and systematic reflection with students. This means engaging in open discussion about the kinds of behaviors and statements that prevail in the school, as well as on the terrain the students know best: the informal spaces of conversation and play which get developed in the interstices of the classroom, on the playground, and beyond the school. Unfortunately, secondary teachers tend to deny or lament the power of popular culture, and want to push it out of the scope of official classroom activities. What they could and should do, however, is invite students into a dialogue about the kinds of gender messages being played out in the popular culture. Students bring to school the gender ideologies garnered in diverse extracurricular contexts, including the home, the church, the street and the workplace (especially for men), and various sites for the consumption of popular media. Part of any social studies and language curriculum should include the development of a critical media literacy, and much of this literacy could focus on the portrayal of masculinities and femininities in the popular media. Teachers could also encourage students to investigate and discuss the forms of masculinity and femininity, and the gendered division of labor, they find in their homes and communities.

Moreover, teachers can ask students to reflect more explicitly about the kinds of activities and relationships that get developed in the school itself. Why do so few boys take the class in secretarial skills or clothing design, and virtually no girls take the class in automotive mechanics or radio technician? What kinds of beliefs and expectations are in play here? Why do the boys play basketball and soccer at recess, while the girls generally stand and watch? What do the boys think of the occasional girl who ventures to play their games with them? Do the students think the gendered division of labor among teachers and school personnel is appropriate or universal? Why or why not? The kinds of discussions likely to ensue from these questions, though perhaps awkward at first, would probably go a long way toward challenging the mystique and loosening the stranglehold of tacit ideologies. Indeed, the first step toward change always involves this kind of reflexive opening toward a reality which previously had been only dimly perceived.

It might also bear fruit to intervene and suggest a greater variety of “crossover” coeducational activities, where boys and girls could explore new areas of experience.

With teachers setting the example, boys could serve as ushers (*edecanes*) for special events, or make and serve sandwiches in the cooperative store at lunch. Girls could help paint the school and play soccer. By encouraging students to participate across traditional gender divisions, school authorities would promote greater flexibility and acceptance of multiple gender identities.

Sara-Lafosse (1992) may be right in asserting that coeducational schools afford male and female students a greater appreciation of each other's strengths and perspectives than single-sex schools, but this kind of appreciation is by no means guaranteed. It requires encouragement and the provision of new spaces and structures for enactments of gender. Because the secondary level is the last cycle of compulsory basic education in Mexico, and because it is a time of intense identity formation for young students, explicit reflection about gender relations and ideologies could be an extremely apt method of instruction. Yet teachers must guard against the tendency to force solutions or impose draconian rules about the expression of masculinities and femininities in the school. As I've already noted, secondary instruction still tends to be premised on a notion of the "adolescent" student as an ill-formed being on the path to adult development (Levinson 1997b). The principal at ESF was fond of reminding students that they were in need of adult guidance, that they could scarcely be held responsible for their own conduct. As a result, teaching strategies have remained rather heavy-handed. Yet for a gender reflexive pedagogy to work, teachers must respect their students' attempts at self-determination. Because liberal modern discourses of youth and equality have already taken root in local popular culture, I believe this kind of self-determination would tend to lead in the direction of greater gender equity. On the other hand, if teachers were to continue flaunting their adult authority in favor of gender equity, I worry that a backlash of conservative resistance might be generated amongst the students.

I don't pretend this will be easy. Some parents are likely to complain, for not all with enrolled daughters actually wish for an emancipatory framework. Nor will all teachers, especially men, find themselves in agreement. And teachers, of course, must struggle against the kinds of expectations still embedded in the official curriculum and bureaucratic forms of control, such as the new *carrera magisterial*. Ultimately, we cannot allow ourselves to lose sight of the crucial struggles at the national and global levels, where hegemonic masculinities are deeply embedded in military and financial forms of power. Given the links between these forms of power and the political logic that governs educational policymaking, we cannot afford to be too sanguine about the prospects for transformative education from below, through schools. Still, there is an important warrant for this kind of educational work in Mexico, and most Latin American societies. Feminist struggles in this century have led to important constitutional and legal changes, and have accomplished crucial gains in educational achievement, including sex and health education. As Stromquist puts it (1995:454), the new discourses opened up by progressive gender legislation, while not sufficient in and of themselves, "open up a space for social claims." It is perhaps time to venture the risks of advancing these claims by reviving the transformative tradition of Latin American schooling for questions of gender.

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