

The Impact of Neoliberalism on Women in Mexico:
A Survey of the Evidence and Prospects for the Future

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Introduction

Women's economic position in Mexico has been and continues to be one of disadvantage. From the countryside, where women often supply the lion's share of subsistence labor on ejidal plots without the legal rights of ejidatarios, to maquiladoras, which rely on a nearly completely female manual labor force at the same time as supporting a smaller but overwhelmingly male supervisory and managerial force, women's labor has been undervalued both legally and economically.

Are women economically disadvantaged because they have been excluded from development, government programs, and land distribution, or are they disadvantaged because they have been drawn too much **into** development, forced to give up whatever self-sustaining economic ability they might once have had, only to work long hours at difficult, even dangerous, jobs for wages that increasingly do not even reproduce their own labor power? While one side or the other might be emphasized in this potential debate, the answer is clearly that both processes are at work. It might be popular to romanticize the wholesome image of the rural Mexican woman, supporting her family from the land, eking out an existence but maintaining a certain control over her life, or to instead applaud the ability of women to break through past social barriers to find jobs in industry and even, perhaps, provide the bulk of income to their households. In either case, however, it is clear that women have suffered and are suffering from the historic inequities and inequalities which exist in Mexican society, as they do in most societies.

The object of this paper is not to reproduce evidence of these inequities nor to describe Mexican women's economic marginalization; that has been done admirably elsewhere (Arizpe and Botey, 1987; Chant, 1991; González de la Rocha, 1994). Rather, this paper poses a somewhat less pessimistic question than might be supposed, and surveys some recent research to suggest possible answers. The question is this: Given the dramatic economic and legal changes resulting from the neoliberal reforms instituted in recent years, and the grave economic crisis which Mexico is currently experiencing, is the space being created for women to gain more control over their economic lives and to emerge in a new and stronger position than ever before? Fully recognizing the devastating impact of many of the neoliberal reforms, is it possible that growth and advancement will come from crisis?

Neoliberal Reforms and Women's Work

There is no doubt that economic crises, neoliberal reforms, and structural adjustment programs produce dramatic changes in women's working lives. Most research has asserted these changes to be, on net, negative. As governments cut back on the provision of social services,

women lose employment as the often principle providers of those services (Waylen, 1997: 6-7). As previous consumers of those services, women now have to spend more time and money to replace what before was provided by the state. Female children are frequently taken out of school to contribute labor to the household as their mothers are forced into paid labor to make ends meet. On the other hand, changes in the structure of employment often are asserted to open up more opportunities for female workers, as employers search for ways to cut labor costs by hiring a more flexible, low cost labor force. This employment is often available only to young, childless women, however, leaving only informal sector work accessible to the rest of the female labor force.

Substantial evidence exists that, in urban Mexico, the economic crisis has caused women to increase their participation in the paid labor force, both formal and informal, at the same time that their domestic duties have been expanded. This increase in domestic responsibilities is due to survival strategies related to both increases in household size and the provision of goods and services previously purchased through the market or provided by the government (Benería, 1992; Gonzalez de la Rocha, 1988, 1994; Chant, 1991; Selby *et. al.*, 1990).

That growth and advancement **can** come from crisis is evident already in movements such as the Women's Regional Council of CONAMUP, the National Coordinating Committee of the Urban Popular Movement. CONAMUP was formed in 1981, bringing together sixty urban organizations which had sprung up in response to growing economic pressures. Out of the larger organization grew the Women's Regional Council, focusing on specific issues of women's political participation and economic survival as well as domestic and sexual violence. This organization has continued into the most recent era of economic crisis to be one of the most active and successful popular organizations, empowering women and pressuring government to gain control over gas distribution, subsidized milk, and tortilla programs (Stephen, 1996a: 170-74).

Is the Women's Regional Council an anomaly, or is it a sign of the possibilities which arise when crises open up spaces for change? One of the most important arenas to watch is in agriculture.

Reforms to Article 27

Women have effectively been excluded from Mexico's hallmark land redistribution program, first legally and later, as legal barriers were removed, culturally. Now that the 1992 alterations to Article 27 of the Constitution allow for privatization of ejidal land and the end of land redistribution, dramatic changes will surely occur in the Mexican countryside. Will this open the way for women to assert their rightful place in agricultural production, or will the net effect of these changes on women be negative?

For the first fifty years of land reform in Mexico, women were eligible to become members of ejidos only if they were widows or single women supporting a family. As an obvious result,

ejidal rights were given overwhelmingly to males. This is especially important because ejidal "property rights," as pointed out by Luin Goldring (1996), went far beyond the actual use rights of the land. Ejidal "property rights" included voting rights in ejidal decisions and a whole package of access to government programs, subsidies, credit, etc. Thus, women could and, in many cases, did have access to ejidal production without actually being ejidatarias, but were disadvantaged by being excluded from the rest of the "property rights" package. It can be observed throughout Latin America that women without formal land rights are also legally excluded from cooperatives, credit, and technical assistance (Deere and León, 1997: 4).

In 1971, the Mexican law was changed to remove gender as a qualifying category, and to allow women to hold positions of authority in ejidos (Stephen, 1996b: 292). Though ostensibly a progressive change to the law, the twenty intervening years between these changes and the 1992 reforms to Article 27 saw little real progress in women's position in the ejidos. This occurred for many reasons. For one, even though the Mexican government remained committed to land redistribution on the books, much less land was actually redistributed during this time period. In addition, ejidal production had become so marginalized through lack of resources and poor state support that even male ejidatarios could often only maintain their agricultural holdings through other sources of income. Finally, though the law had changed in 1971, cultural norms did not change as fast. It was still expected that ejidal rights fell to the male members of the household (Arizpe and Botey, 1987). This attitude was reproduced in government policy, such as the provision in the 1971 law that set up what was known as UAIMs, Agro-Industrial Units for Women, which allowed groups of women to collectively hold ejidal rights equivalent to a single ejidatario's, thereby allowing women a small entry into the ejido without having to grant them full status as ejidatarias.

Whether the 1992 reforms will benefit a woman's position in the ejido largely depends upon whether she is an ejidataria or not. Ejidatarias might be afforded some small degree of protection from the law by certifying and titling their land and being allowed to sell it legally if they so choose. For the much larger group of women who are not ejidatarias, the effect of the law is likely to exacerbate pre-existing inequities and worsen their economic position (Preibisch, 1997: 3). For one, gone is any hope of actually receiving ejidal rights from the government. Land redistribution is now officially over. For another, ejidal plots are converted into private property, giving ejidatarios (overwhelmingly male) the legal right to sell for their personal gain what had previously been a family resource. Also, it is no longer guaranteed that women will inherit ejidal plots upon the death of their ejidatario husbands. Along with the land certification process comes the right to designate any beneficiary they choose. Thus, women who have lived and worked on ejidos without being ejidatarias are likely to be the worse off as a result of the Article 27 reforms.

Several case studies of ejidos which are located close to urban areas have shown that these ejidos are the ones most prone to privatization and sales (Goldring, 1996; Vázquez, 1997). Local agricultural activities are diminished and local economies destroyed, and along with them the economic livelihood of many (non-ejidataria) ejidal women. Jobs created through the transformation of the ejidal lands are primarily female, but employers prefer young, childless

workers, leaving many older women without their traditional means of survival, but also without anything local to take its place.

Deere and León (1997) assert that land titling programs, such as Mexico's, could actually improve women's access to land. Particularly in areas where rural land records are known to be poor, many disputes over land rights and boundaries are sure to arise in the certification and titling process. This is likely to be especially true in cases where ejidal land has been rented or sharecropped extensively prior to the 1992 reforms (Goldring, 1996). If government policy were to proactively take the side of women in these disputed claims, women's access to land might even improve. Government programs prioritizing the titling of land to women are in existence in Chile and Nicaragua, however, there is no evidence that this is a priority in Mexico.

Once land is certified and titled, the market takes over. So, the ultimate impact on women will depend upon how "gender neutral" the market is (Deere and León, 1997: 2-3). Will the market be more favorable to women than state policy has been? Or, as Deere and León (1997: 2-3) ask, "is the market also conditioned by legal, structural, and/or ideological impediments which result in restricting women's access to land?" Certainly, women are at a disadvantage as buyers in the land market, commanding substantially lower levels of income than men and having fewer sources of credit. In the ultimate analysis, as both men and women have been learning over the past decade, legal title to land might not mean much with the withdrawal of the government support and subsidies which made it possible to survive as agriculturalists in previous years.

Female Migrants

Migration to the United States is still predominantly a male activity. The economic hardship of recent years, however, has sent more women into the migrant stream. There is also a perception that job opportunities for women have increased in the United States. These include the care of children and elders, domestic labor, and restaurant work (Cebada, 1997: 6-7). While this might have positive implications in terms of increased opportunities for higher wage employment and economic freedom for women, research has shown that women's migrant experiences are tightly controlled by their families, especially young women's by their fathers, even when they are physically absent (Cebada, 1997: 7). Far from being an individual decision made by the woman, the decision to migrate is most often made by the woman's family and is based upon having trustworthy relatives on the other side who can both ease the young migrant into her new environment, but also assume familial control over her (Crummet, 1986).

A very interesting observation was made by Cebada (1997) in her research on sending communities in Guanajuato. The economic position of the women left behind when both males and other females migrated to the United States didn't improve, even though vacated positions, economic as well as political, existed because of those migrations. Women left behind did not assume any more decision-making authority, for the most part, nor did they step into the traditionally male jobs which became available. The ejidos studied contracted with men from

nearby towns to perform necessary manual labor for agricultural production, with wages rising according to the relative scarcity of male workers, rather than employ local women (Cebada, 1997: 5). Responsibility for the ejidal plots of those who migrated was left in the hands of male relatives (fathers, brothers, etc.) rather than wives. The males left in the communities of origin retained decision-making authority, passing information to wives of the migrants to communicate to their absent husbands. Even those females who had migrated to the U.S. and later returned home, thus assuming a greater economic role in their families, were left out of decision-making processes.

Women's Political Movements

Thus far, the evidence implies that Mexico's economic crisis and neoliberal reforms have had a substantially negative impact on women. There are, however, in almost all instances surveyed enough "spaces," both economic and political, to suggest that, if women occupied those spaces to their advantage, the ultimate outcome could be reversed.

The example of the Women's Regional Council, discussed above, shows how women can turn the disadvantage of their worsening position into an advantage by mobilizing their collective voices in areas which make a difference (Stephen, 1996a: 171-73). This has included winning concessions from the state (a building to be used as a women's center, control over the distribution of essential goods, etc.) as well as developing their own grassroots initiatives (a women's school, health clinic, collective kitchen, and production workshops). More than a decade after its inception, the Women's Regional Council maintains a strong presence and has made an important difference in the lives of many women.

It would be harder to argue, though, that the Women's Regional Council has had much effect on either government policy or society at large. Its role, and an effective one it is, is best described as "women taking care of women." An interesting contrast to this is made by Stephen (1996a) in her description of women within the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN). Though a revolutionary organization rather than an official policy-making body, the impact that women have had in determining the direction, goals, procedures, and general functioning of the EZLN is astounding.

According to interviews conducted by Stephen (1996a), women are integrated into all levels of the EZLN, as combatants, commanders, participants in community committees, etc. Women within the organization demanded a "Women's Revolutionary Law," outlining women's rights and responsibilities. Many women hold positions of authority over men and are their direct commanders in battle. Phenomena such as these are likely to have widespread impacts, from raising men's consciousness within the organization to impressing local women with their own possibilities to potentially impacting government policies if an agreement with the Mexican government is ever reached. In fact, in the state of Chiapas, a statewide convention has been formed to promulgate the ideas contained within the Women's Revolutionary Law of the EZLN.

This type of dissemination could have the greatest impact of all since, as Stephen (1996a: 179) points out, "The vision of democracy projected by women in the EZLN demands democratization not only of formal political systems and political organizations but also of the daily-life arena of marriage, family life, and work."

Mexico has not seen a strong, national-level organization of rural women. Women have participated actively in land takeovers throughout the country in past decades, but their voices have not been heard nationally, and the 1992 reforms to Article 27 are a testament to that. If rural women have a chance of improving their access to land, modifications to the law must be made, particularly in two areas. First, inheritance provisions must ensure that widows become the beneficiaries of ejidal plots upon the death of their husbands. Second, ejidal plots must be maintained as family resources rather than subject to the individual gain of a single, titled landholder.

It is interesting to note that the character of recent changes in Latin American agrarian reform laws directly reflects the strength of rural women's organizations in those countries. In Colombia, for example, the existence of a strong national rural women's association, the Association of Peasant and Indigenous Women, was directly responsible for the passage of "gender-progressive" legislation (Deere and León, 1997:18-23). In Mexico, the lack of such an organization is apparent in the "gender-regressive" changes to Article 27.

It is an unavoidable irony that just as women's lives become stretched more thinly, when their labors of survival become more frenetic and seemingly overwhelming, that is when women must find the time and energy and space to come together in self-defense. When women's backs are to the wall is when women must finally realize that the only way out is to step forward and the only way to step forward is to step together. Neoliberalism removes the state as an active player in the economic sphere; the market forces that take over are not likely to be any more favorable to women than the state has been. It is up to women to take it upon themselves to redefine the parameters within which the market forces operate and to reshape the social and cultural expectations of both men and women participating in those markets.

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