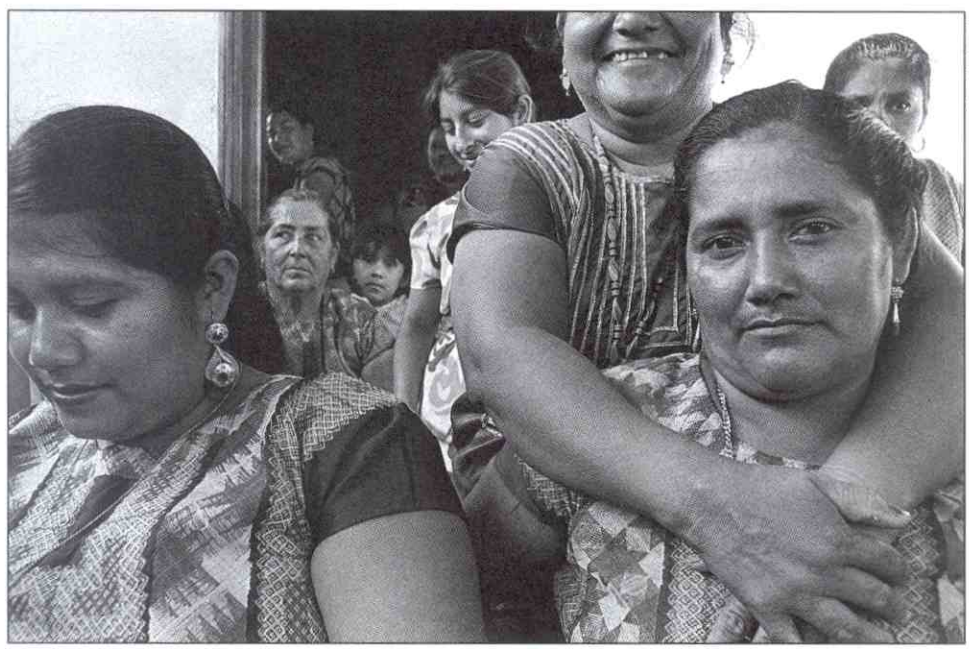
Gender Equality In Contemporary Mexico

*Estela Serret**



Graciela Iturbide

The term "gender equality" can have different meanings. However, according to the tradition from which it emerged, commonly called "feminist theory," the idea of gender equality is a normative reference for judging the objective state of the social relationship between men and women basically on two levels: the political-legal and the socio-cultural.

Usually, the degree of gender equality found in the legal and political order of a society is symptomatic of that society's effective level of equality (of opportunities, autonomy and prestige) between men and women. Certainly, the legal recognition of gender equality —not at all a simple subject, encompassing several different planes— cannot be considered a direct expression of the degree to which equality is a part of cultural values or translated into equitable forms of social interaction. Nevertheless, we can consider legal recognition a useful indicator that allows us to observe how the notion of gender equality itself is positively valued by important groups in a society, frequently cultural or political elites, who have decided to push for its cultural recognition and social practice. For this reason, any consideration of gender equality in Mexico must take into account both its formal expression in legal and political structures and specific indicators of inequality in the cultural and social sphere.

If we use this approach to begin examining the topic, prospects are rather pessimistic. Even if we avoid a detailed examination of the cultural perceptions in Mexico that continue to shore up clearly unequal patterns of gender representations in the collective consciousness, a simple review of a few facts pursuant to how inequality molds social relations between men and women in this country reveals its continued, sometimes dramatic, effect on the lives of millions of Mexican women.

In this respect, one of the most frequently mentioned issues is the feminization of poverty: our country is very

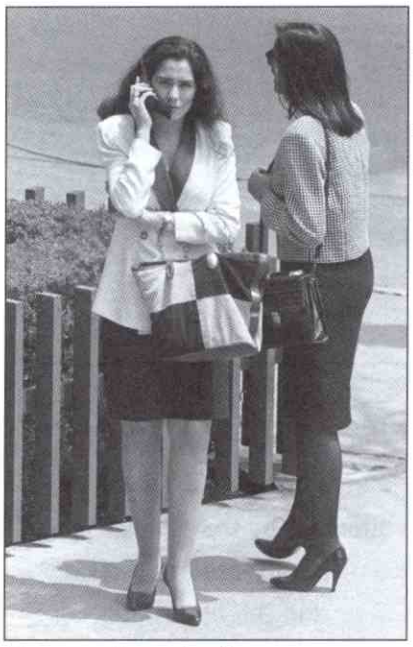
* Professor and researcher at the Autonomous Metropolitan University, Azcapotzalco campus.

close to the international mean of women being 70 percent of the world's poor, despite their creating a very important part of the country's —and the world's— wealth.[1] It is important to point out here that not only do women not appropriate all the wealth they create, but neither does the wealth they generate correspond to the amount of work they have to put in to create it. On the average, women of all ages work longer days than men though their economic productivity is significantly lower than that of their male counterparts. This is because women are usually assigned the worst paying, low prestige jobs, in sectors of the economy targeted for little or no investment to increase productivity. In Mexico, then, non-domestic jobs for women are centered in agriculture, the informal sector, services and manufacturing, areas with little social prestige and/or which drop in value socially when occupied by women.

This unequal access to the labor market is due to two fundamental factors, associated in turn with others: the low levels of training Mexican women have access to in a milieu that puts the priority on education for men and earmarks most family income destined for education to their training as providers, and the socially accepted idea that women do not work,[2] or, if they do, it is only as a way to supplement male labor.

But women's low income in Mexico is not explained solely by the kind of jobs they hold: despite the Constitution, it is still common to find women who earn less than men even in equivalent posts. In 1992, then, Mexican women's wages in the formal sector, even in exactly the same posts, were still 93 percent of those of men.

Figures on women's marginalization in education are equally harsh: one-third of adult women in marginalized areas are illiterate and almost 80 percent of all illiterate adults in our country are women. Similarly, almost 60 percent of those who have no formal education after the age of 12 are women.



Omar Meneses/La Jornada

Women usually earn less than men.

Some authors maintain that, except for wartime, the most dangerous place for women is the home. This is probably true in Mexico, where 65 percent of women of all ages are subject to domestic violence. Of this overall figure, only in a very small percentage of cases do women bring charges, and of those, only a few result in the aggressor being penalized in any way.

The violence women and girls are subjected to by members of their own families varies widely. It goes from physical abuse ending in anything from slight injuries to death, to psychological mistreatment and sexual violence. Even though women in Mexico are commonly subjected to a broad gamut of sexual innuendos and attacks in public and in their places of study and work, the greatest number of rapes continue to occur in the family circle. It hardly needs pointing out that the different kinds of mistreatment women and girls are subjected to at home are often considered a private problem, something linked inevitably to masculine behavior and in most cases conceived of as the legitimate exercise of "natural" authority.

The cultural mores that feed ideas like these also give rise to other expressions of gender inequality, sometimes with dramatic repercussions: for example, the frequent practice in rural areas of women eating the males' left-overs —when there are any— or of sending only little boys to school while the little girls work to pay for their brothers' education.

If we weigh the effect on political representation of the inequality of men and women, the outcome is the same. Just to cite a few examples, in today's Fifty-seventh Congress, only 13.7 percent of senators and 17.2 percent of federal deputies are women; there have been only six female cabinet ministers since 1981; only 4.5 percent of Mexico's municipalities are headed by women; and of the 4,200 seats in the Chamber of Deputies since 1953 (when equal political rights were established for men and women), only 398 have been held by women. All this despite the fact that 52 percent of all registered voters are women.

The panorama sketched by this brief review is far from an ideal picture of gender equality. Nevertheless, and despite the great challenges that these figures point to, we believe that there are reasons for optimism about the future because in recent years different indicators have emerged

Antonio Nava/AVE

Figures on women's marginalization are harsh.

that make it possible to hope that the brutal results of this kind of inequality that millions of women are subjected to, particularly among Mexico's marginalized population, could be dealt with effectively in the next few years. These indicators come basically from the growing attention that gender inequality is being paid by the political class, both those in power and the opposition.

This attention is engendering different measures, suggested, supported and implemented by different groups of Mexico's academic and political feminists with the aim of getting at the root and the manifestations of inequality. As I mentioned above, while public policy design, the passage of laws and the creation of institutions with the aim of fostering gender equality do not immediately translate into a change in the mentality and social relations that generate and reproduce inequality, these measures have proven to be an indispensable condition and driving force behind more profound transformations. Let us review them, and evaluate the formal changes that will surely bear fruit in the short and medium term.

Gender inequality is being paid growing attention by the political class, both those in power and the opposition.

In the first place, we should examine the factors that have led to the progressive incorporation of the question of women's subordination on the agendas of a political class as attached to traditional ideology on the matter as Mexico's.

Undoubtedly, 1975 can be considered the starting point for official positions on women's condition in Mexico as well as the context for the origins of this surprising concern. Not only was 1975 International Women's Year, but it also marked the first of a series of conferences held by the highest international bodies that began to periodically analyze problems and share experiences and solutions to women's subordination worldwide. Then, as now, the balance of forces inside these bodies meant the more influential countries conditioned different kinds of aid to developing countries on the basis of the latter subscribing to certain agreements about social, economic, cultural or health policy.

In this context, Mexico asked to be the host country for the first international women's conference and in that same vein some of the most important successes in gender equality public policy have been accomplished in recent times. Today, the most important expression of these achievements is the National Women's Program and the Chamber of Deputy's Equality and Gender Commission. Both institutions embody the spirit of the 1995 Beijing Conference, where Mexico was represented by both official and independent delegations.

The National Women's Program 1995-2000, Alliance for Equality (Pronam) was created to respond to the chief executive's concern voiced in the National Development Plan about the problem of gender inequality and the resulting women's subordination. The program, developed by the Ministry of the Interior and approved by presidential decree August 21, 1996, is based on a minute diagnostic analysis of the causes, characteristics and consequences of gender inequality in Mexico. The basic arguments for the program and its objectives testify to the participation of specialists in the question called upon to participate on different levels of the program's development and implementation. This is significant because it attests to the consolidation of institutional participation of independent feminists who for many years were excluded (and self-excluded) from government policy making.

A national program, Pronam has aimed to establish a diagnostic analysis of women's condition in Mexico that would make it possible to draw up appropriate objectives and strategies to fight the causes and lessen the effects of women's subordination. The presidential decree that created it states that all policies designed in this area will use Pronam guidelines and be coordinated by it, with the aim of implementing them effectively and coordinating them with other government programs, as well as involving social organizations, particularly those that carry out different kinds of work with and about women.

The National Women's Commission (Conmujer) was created in 1998 as an decentralized administrative body under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior. Its founding regulations state that among Conmujer's main functions are "establishing the policies, guidelines and criteria for setting up the National Women's Program..., [monitoring their observation] by federal institutions..., fostering implementation of the policies, strategies and actions included in said program to promote equal opportunities for women and full equality in the exercise of their political, economic, social and civil rights, underlining the importance of human, reproductive, health and educational rights as well as their access to training, social security and work in the framework of the National Development Plan."[3]

Federal government policies carried out under the current administration to deal with problems derived from gender inequality are characterized both by their emphasis on the seriousness of the problem and the language and mechanisms used to fight its impact. The current administration has distinguished itself in its use and dissemination of language that avoids the supposed gender neutrality of Spanish and makes women's presence felt explicitly in all facets of life. This is important because while this way of using language has become commonplace elsewhere, it is novel in our country, where it was only partially exercised in some circles of the left in the last decade. Therefore, despite the enormous resistance —expressed almost always through mockery— to ending the inclusion of women in masculine forms of speech under the pretense of neutrality, the use of careful language by the chief executive himself in a country with a strong presidentialist tradition has clearly had the effect of spreading its use in both federal and local government milieus.

Carlos Cisneros/La Jornada

The future of the fight against inequality is promising.

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On the other hand, Mexico's process of democratization has also made it clear to both opposition forces and the party in government itself how important women are in different social movements and their decisive weight as voters. In contrast to just a few years ago, today political parties, civic organizations and the media are significantly receptive to the question of inequality, which often becomes at least an incipient attempt to change the sexist use of language.

Perhaps what is most significant in this context has been the recent creation of the Chamber of Deputies Equity and Gender Commission. While its creation was prompted by an international initiative signed by the Mexican government in 1997, this multipartisan commission's activities have begun to bear fruit that goes beyond the boundaries of institutional formality. Despite its not being a permanent commission and its activities being seriously limited in terms of drafting bills to be discussed on the chamber floor, the

Equity and Gender Commission, through the executive branch, has already been able to organize and present a bill on preventing domestic violence, the approval of which represents a significant transformation of official thinking on the question. But perhaps the commission's most important impact in the medium and long terms will be related to something that although subtle, is no less decisive in changing the cultural mores that favor gender inequality: a gradual sensitization of Mexico's political class as to the seriousness and importance of this kind of inequality.

In this way, despite the gravity of the social effects (not to mention the ethical, political and cultural effects) of women's subordination in Mexico, the future of the fight against inequality has never looked as promising. This does not imply, of course, that simple solutions or immediate results are in the offing. Undoubtedly, any process leading to a change in society's perception of the relationship between men and women making them more equal in all aspects of life directly affects discriminatory practices.

The unprecedented media attention given to the celebration of International Women's Day in 1999 is a good example of how society's way of looking at women's subordination has begun to change. At least —and this is no small thing in this country— it has begun to be perceived by some sectors as a social problem that should be given consideration other than just misogynist jokes and conservative protests about the damage feminism does to family unity. VM

NOTES

[1] See the following sources, among others, for the data presented in the following paragraph: V. Maqueira and M.J. Vara, *Género, clase y etnia en los nuevos procesos de globalización* (Madrid: Instituto Universitario de Estudios de la Mujer, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 1997); GIMTRAP, *Las mujeres en la pobreza* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1994); "Discusión parlamentaria en torno a la creación de una comisión de equidad y género," *Diario de Debates* (Mexico City: Cámara de Diputados del Congreso de la Unión, Poder Legislativo Federal LVII Legislatura, 24 September 1997); Ma. Luisa González Marín, comp., *Mitos y realidades del mundo laboral y familiar de las mujeres mexicanas* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI and the UNAM Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1996).

[2] This is because housework is not considered work, but a natural, essentially feminine activity that creates no prestige, recognition or pay. See Mercedes Barquet, "Condicionantes de género sobre la pobreza de las mujeres," GIMTRAP, *Las mujeres en la pobreza* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1994), pp. 73-89.

[3] Reglamento interno de la Secretaría de Gobernación, *Diario oficial de la Federación* (Mexico City, 21 August 1998).