

## WOMEN: NEW PROTAGONISTS ON THE SOCIAL SCENE

**Women have a difficult struggle everywhere, but perhaps it is most difficult in Latin countries. Nevertheless, there are signs of change.**

*The emergence of women as protagonists in shaping their own futures and their countries' destinies is one of the most significant social transformations that the world has experienced in recent years. Most analyses, however, tend to emphasize the development of the feminist movement in industrialized countries. Latin nations, and Third World countries in general, have been stereotyped as hopelessly "macho." But things are also changing in Latin America, despite the label. VOICES OF MEXICO asked Elizabeth Maier, well-known feminist and social historian, to write about her view on the advances achieved by Mexican women and the challenges that still lie ahead.*

If Gertrude Stein had written "...a woman is a woman is a woman..." she would have been partly right and partly wrong. Right, because historically in almost every culture around the world, women have been put in second class roles, confronted with economic, social and political discrimination and oppressed by the mystification of motherhood. And wrong, because this abstract, universal condition of women takes on different forms in different cultures and countries. She becomes Mrs. Jones or Señora Perez whose lives have very little in common. A woman, then, is not only a woman; she is also a nationality, a religion, a culture, a race, a history, a way of working and a social class.

Mexico is a predominantly Catholic, multi-ethnic society. Its present day situation is fundamentally the result of three important heritages: its very rich pre-Colombian cultures, Spanish colonization and a contradictory modern development as a Third World country. For the majority of Mexican women, their femininity is fused with poverty and long hours of hard work, without the aid of many electrical appliances to lighten the burden of housework. Family structure is patriarchal, and the man is definitely the household head.

Gradually, however, with the emergence of a growing middle class and particularly during the past 12 years, Mexican women have begun to demand equal rights and to move into new spheres of activity. Slowly, they are changing the old ways of thinking that valued women as a function of the number of children they'd brought into the world. And slowly, too, they are becoming protagonists in modern society.

Yet, Mexican women's struggle for real—not just formal—equality must be analyzed within the context of Mexican reality, as a developing Third World country. For developing countries, the world economic crisis means a continuous reduction in the market prices for the raw materials that they produce and an exorbitant deficit due to financial dependency. For women in developing countries, the crisis affects their daily lives in ways that make their liberation extremely difficult.

When your energy is taken up in simply trying to survive, the struggle for sexual equality can easily take a second place behind the immediate needs of working class families. Thus, it is not surprising that the consensus among Third World women at the 1985 international conference in Nairobi was that the achievement of women's equality is conditioned by the possibility of achieving peace and social well-being in all nations of the world.

In Mexico, women's inequality dates back to pre-Columbian times, to the development of diverse autoctonous groups and the expansionist activities of The Aztec empire. Although women played an important role in pre-Columbian society, with rights to own businesses and property, their major social value was nonetheless judged in terms of their maternal capacity.

Coatlicue, the principal goddess and mother of all the gods in the Aztec religion, may represent the passage from a non-patriarchal society to a patriarchal one. Coatlicue, the dual goddess, the great birth-giver and goddess of death, the principal beginning and end, achieves her true importance when she gives birth to Huitzilopochtli, the Sun and god of war. The story of Coatlicue is, then, the story of Aztec women.

"One day, Coatlicue, the mother of all the gods and all the stars, was sweeping a mountain named Coatepec, when a feather slowly floated down from the sky, and pierced her breast. The feather imbued her with new life, but when her children realized that she was pregnant, they became furious and decided to kill her. Coyolxauqui, in particular, thought that his pregnant mother disgraced the family, and incited his brothers to join him in matricide. Coatlicue was terrified, but her unborn child spoke to her from the womb. He told her not to be afraid and to trust in his protection. Just as her other children, armed to kill her, came close to Coatlicue, Huitzilopochtli was born. He killed Coyolxauqui with the help of a snake, and then assassinated almost all of his other brothers, ignoring their pleas for mercy."



With her charge out front. Photo by Ruben Pax.

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The birth of the Sun, Huitzilopochtli, in Aztec mythology, most likely symbolizes a very definite moment in the development of a society of warriors, in which patriarchal structures became institutionalized, and women were relegated to, and venerated for, their capacity to procreate.

With the Spanish conquest, native social and economic structures were radically transformed, along with ancient religious beliefs and practices. Coatlicue and Tonantzin, the goddesses of life and maternity, became Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus Christ. Christianity introduced the concept of original sin to local ethnic groups. Hand in hand came the idea that there are just two kinds of women, good ones and bad ones.

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Since the conquest, Mexican folklore also includes the story of Malinche, Cortez' natives wife, portraying her as the symbol

symbol of the struggle for freedom from Spain. Father Hidalgo, one of Mexico's founders, gave the cry of "death to the Spaniards, long live the Virgin of Guadalupe" and with that gave the signal to begin the insurrection. Thus, Guadalupe is not only a religious figure. She is also a symbol of Mexico, itself, and is the epitome of Mexican femininity.

For the dominating criollo class, independence from Spain brought enormous changes in the country's economic and social structure. But for the vast majority of the population—the impoverished native peasants—liberation from Spain brought no significant changes to their lives. The men continued to work the land, planting, tending the fields and harvesting the crop. Yet they could only keep a part of the harvest; the larger part of what they reaped went to the lan-



Students. Photo by Fabrizio León.

of female betrayal and immorality. Malinche is the opportunist woman who prefers foreigners to her own people, who gives herself to the conquering enemy because she is weak and lustful. Oddly enough, in Mexican folklore there are no native male figures who represent a similar form of betrayal, although there must have been many examples of similar behavior.

In contrast to this historical symbol of the "bad woman," is the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the most important of the Mexican expressions of Mary. The Virgin of Guadalupe is the sweet, patient, infinitely loving and submissive woman. She is both the mother of Christ and the symbol of the Mexican spirit, who during the Independence War became the

downers as payment in kind for the right to use his fields. The women did the household chores, cooking on a rustic fire, walking long distance to get water and wash clothes and tending the family vegetable garden. Of course, they also raised the numerous children, which for a peasant family represented more hands to help with the work, and they worked one or two days a week in the main house of the hacienda as part of the services to be rendered in exchange for the use of land.

The population was composed mostly of poor, landless peasants whose hard work earned them only the most meager subsistence. Medical attention was non-existent for peasant families and the infant and maternal mortality rates were ex-

tremely high. The elevated child mortality explains why couples had so many children: they could expect three of four of them to die in the first years of life.

The private educational system was only for the upper class, and in particular, for upper class men. Neither peasant women nor wealthy women were permitted the benefits of a formal education. The belief, which still persists in many parts of Mexico today, was that education is wasted on women because their only future is marriage, housework and raising a family.

A few upper class women raised their voices in protest against the discrimination that was formalized in the new Civil Code of 1884. Their objection were not shared by many other women, however, and men took them as a sort of social folly, just a few local rebels without a true cause.

The 1884 Code, based on the Napoleonic code, considered women to be minors, dependent for life on one man or another. A woman was only legally considered responsible for herself if her husband and her sons were mentally incapable. The husband was his wife's legitimate representative, and she was obliged to obey him in domestic matters, in relation to their children's education and to the administration of any property. Women needed written permission from their husbands to testify in court, even if the event in question took place before they were married. An unmarried woman under 30 years of age was not allowed to leave her parents' home without their permission. Any infraction by a woman of the accepted monogamous marriage relationship was cause for legal separation, if the husband so desired; however, women could get a separation because of a husband's infidelity only if the husband had committed the act in the household shared by the couple, exhibited scandalous behavior and publically insulted his wife.

The Civil Code wasn't really a male plot to keep women in their place. Rather it reflected the ideology of the dominant Mexican classes, accepted by men and women alike. It had very little to do with the masses of Mexican peasants, who had no property to administer, rarely were legally married and didn't know what the inside of a courthouse looked like.

During the Porfirio Diaz dictatorship, the everyday lives of rural peasant families became increasingly difficult. The big land owners expanded their own holdings by taking over the smaller properties of well-off peasants, forcing them to become wage laborers. Poverty and misery were synonymous with the human condition of the majority of the population. At the same time, the country's elites were building luxurious, French-style houses and spending enormous sums on extravaganzas and foreign travel. The Mexican revolution grew out of this situation of profound contrasts; of unfilled human needs and a population kept down by state-sponsored political repression.

It was not only men who participated in the social effervescence. Women began to organize, sometimes together with men, sometimes in their own political organizations. In 1904 Maria Sandoval de Zarco and Laura Mendez de Cuenca formed the Society for the Protection of Women, the first feminist organization in Mexico, dedicated to changing the second-class image of Mexican women. In 1907 women union members participated actively in the famous strike at Rio Blanco, Veracruz. Carmen Serdan, together with other members of the Female League for Political Propaganda, continually voiced their opposition to Porfirio Diaz' reelection.

Along with these names that have become part of history, many women, whose names are now forgotten, formed organizations to protect their rights as workers, particularly in the growing textile industry where women have always been the majority of the labor force. And many women joined the Mexican Liberal Party, led by the Flores Magon brothers, demanding a more just society, fair labor conditions, and agrarian reform. Still other women organized to demand legal rights, including the right to vote.

By 1913 women were incorporated into the revolutionary movement, carrying out a great variety of tasks. The widely

accepted notion that the Mexican women who participated in the revolution were just the faithful followers of their menfolk, cooking, washing clothes and in general, making the war easier for the men, is not true. Many women were organizers, messengers, hospital workers, propagandists and soldiers, and a few even became generals.

At the end of the revolution, however, women returned to their homes and to their traditional roles as mothers and housewives, or in the case of peasant women, to their roles in the integrated peasant family unit.

The Constitution of 1921 partially reflects women's demands from the period of revolutionary fervor. Women gained in social benefits and achieved equal rights with men in the areas of education and labor (except for certain restrictions

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due to protective clauses). Nonetheless, according to the law, they had yet to come of political age; the right to vote was not granted to women until 1953.

The revolution in and of itself did not bring an end to the discrimination of women in Mexico. Nonetheless, through the agrarian reform and growing industrial development, women, as members of peasant families, and as salaried workers, did receive the general benefits of this new stage of social and economic development. In most cases, however, discrimination remained unchanged.

The end of the revolutionary war marks the real take-off of industrial development in Mexico. Yet industrialization in Mexico did not follow the same path that characterized the process of industrialization in the already developed countries. Mexico continued to be fundamentally a producer of raw materials, dependent on the prices fixed for its products in the world market. Industrial development in Mexico was also dependent on the technological know-how of the advanced countries (especially the U.S.) and generally only accessible with foreign currency.

Home made products, such as clothing, dishes and pots, furniture and tools, have generally been replaced by manufactured goods. Other items, such as radios, stoves, televisions, refrigerators and sewing machines are now coveted commodities. These changes have created a greater need for cash among the rural population, at levels far higher than their subsistence farming could ever produce. This, in turn, has fed into a growing process of rural proletarianization and or rural-urban migration.

Nonetheless, industrial growth has not been sufficient to absorb the number of people who have migrated to the cities looking for jobs, and as a result, an under-employed sector of the urban population has developed rapidly. For women from poor families, industrial growth has brought changes in their traditional roles, but more than anything else, it has meant an even greater work load for them. In rural areas, men often

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migrate alone to the cities looking for work. The women are left to take the man's place in agricultural production, at the same time that they continue to keep up their homes and raise their children.

In the 60s and 70s a new migrational phenomenon was detected. Young women accounted for the largest percentage of rural-urban migration, as they sought jobs as domestic workers or in the informal sector (as street vendors, for example). Despite the fact that these young migrants usually send part of their earnings home to the family, their absence is often greatly felt by their mothers. In traditional rural families, a woman's daughters are her principal helpers and the only hope for retirement. When the daughters leave, the mother's work load increases, and she may also face a longer lifetime of work since her traditional substitutes are no longer in the household.

Urban male unemployment and under-employment have also implied a double work load for women. They must seek work outside of the home to support their families, at the same time that they continue to work within the family structure as housewives and mothers.

But the contradictions of modernization in Mexico have also stimulated the growth of a middle class, which, at least until recently, has been able to satisfy its educational, health, housing, cultural and consumer needs. The first modern Mexican feminists appear on the social scene in the 70s, precisely from the ranks of the middle class. They organized small consciousness-raising groups, discussed their problems as women in a sexist society, appeared on radio and TV and wrote hundreds of articles in newspapers and magazines. They organized activities in support of legal abortions, to demand women's rights to control their bodies and against the many forms of violence directed against women.

The feminist movement in Mexico is not a mass movement. It

has had, nonetheless, an enormous impact on the consciousness of most political leaders, the mass media and to a lesser extent, on the population, in general. Perhaps, its most serious limitation has been its middle class character.

Constitutional reforms in 1974 eradicated all remnants of legal sexual discrimination. While it would be difficult to attribute these modifications solely to the efforts of Mexican feminists, it is undeniable that they greatly influenced the changes in the law.

The specific effects of the current world economic crisis on Mexican women's lives has yet to be studied; however, they are not difficult to deduce. The drastic reduction in oil prices (Mexico's principal export product), the high interest rates on the foreign debt, the imposition of specific conditions—among them, cutbacks in social programs and reductions in federal spending, with serious implications for employment possibilities—for continued foreign financing, the spiralling inflation and the constant loss of buying power all contribute to a social mosaic in which daily survival is the foremost concern for the majority of the population.

Under these conditions it is difficult to imagine that sexual equality can be achieved. Senator Guadalupe Gomez Maganda de Anaya, representative of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), put it this way: "It is not possible to advance toward the objectives suggested by the United Nations for women unless a New International Order is established based on equality, sovereignty, interdependence and common interests; it is impossible unless new, realistic and responsible criteria for meeting foreign debt obligations are agreed upon by debtor and creditor nations, alike, and it is impossible unless we eliminate areas of international tension through political negotiation."

In countries like Mexico, women's equality is intimately tied to the possibilities of national development. ★



Middle class women's role. Photo by Fabrizio León.