



RELATIVE POVERTY : SELFRESPECT AND DIGNITY
AMONG MEXICAN PEASANT WOMEN.

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Women's lifestyles and well-being do influence the future
of new generations.

Many undertakings have begun with the naive supposition, that the better the economic development of a community, and only because of this factor, the greater will the participation of women be, and the larger the possibility of equalitarian sharing between the sexes. Oposit to these studies we have found evidence (1) that demonstrate that the results of economic development, per se, are not always conducive to these aims; It is now, and only recently, clear that statistics of economic resources in general do not reflect the conditions with which people, and most especificaly women, really deal in their daily lives.(2)

Mexican peasant women, as we will see, do not benefit from "modern economic development". It does not better in any way their lifestyles not their children's.

The relevance of mother-child ties in early infancy, previous and much more relevant than the edipical relation postulated by Freud in ortodox psychoanalitic theory, has been pointed out as fundamental to mental health by Erich



Fromm (3), and it has found multiple theoretical, clinical and experimental indorsment (4). By recognizing the maternal relation as one that shapes all future emotional development of the child, modern psychoanalytic thought points out the importance of women's role in society through the influence they exercise in the future of new generations.

Economic development is not always conducive to equalitarian sharing between the sexes.

[A study, carried through psychoanalytic interviews with peasant women from two small Mexican villages has clearly shown that the way in which women are treated in what was once, and not too long ago, a traditional patriarchal village, and which even today is little frequented and far from "modern" urban centers, is much more understanding, supportive, and non-authoritarian than in another one, much closer to "civilization", that has the benefit of greater economic resources and close contact with the facilities of large urban centers.)

The social structure of the former village, seems to have favored a process that permits the women to openly confront their difficulties, overcoming them in the context of daily



life. In this setting, women have been changing. It appears that a previous wellstructured patriarchal setting, by giving its members a strong sense of unity, concern for the welfare of the family group, and thus, a basis for cooperation, has functioned precisely as a " point of departure", inabling the women to make use of recent new material conditions (knitting machines) for their own profit. They have managed to be able to participate in the financial support of the family, without leaving their homes. In the later and much more modern village, despite great economic advantages (e. g., irrigation systems for fertile land, jobs and constant contact with the city), the women remain so backward, oppressed, and self-alienated that their only outlet lies in resentment and possessiveness toward their children. The destructiveness that this implies to the well-being of the children they are raising, adds social relevance to the conflict that the women' live.

Femenine change has been carried out in Tierra Alta, the apparently more "primitive" community, on the basis of evolved personal values, ultimately rooted in cultural tradition. Nevertheless further exploration and mutual effort should yield in the future to a new equilibrium in the women's relationships with men, since they are, for the moment, in crisis.



The women have used the knitting machines of the "modern" world as instruments of change, thereby acquiring a personal income and some independence. Through their work they have gained a larger appreciation of their own worth, of their possibilities and those of their children. In order to effect this metamorphosis, they have had to continually deal with the opposition of their husbands, which emanates from the men's fear of being displaced and therefore an often deep-seated resistance to change. Some of the women, . . . a few but at least some of them, have already come to discover the possibility of a trusting, more equalitarian relationship, one in which both pain and joy can be shared. Most of them are women in transition, women who suffer, who struggle, and look for a new form of being. They cannot keep on acting, not even for the sake of appearances, like little girls; they have rather developed their own convictions, considering themselves capable and useful, taking part openly in decisions and contributing to the family's maintenance. Even though their participation has always been basic to the family, it was formerly exercised in subtle ways, almost in secret. Now, aware of their position, they strongly defend their rights.

In contrast, the impact of "modernization" on the community of Santa María and its greater economic resources, has not



been assimilated by the women. Three centuries of oppression, during which the men worked as laborers on a hacienda with fertile land, imposed a quite unstructured way of life on these people. It involved then complete submission to the "authorities" and to power. Being structured from the outside. Today, this attitude has been applied to money itself and the possibilities of consumption. A failed patriarchy, in which male authority only referred to that of the landowner, has led to a desperate machismo in which pathology, violence, and alcoholism flourish. The villagers live disorientedly: work, life, and their own individual importance have lost meaning. Only material goods and their acquisition are of any consequence. A lack of integration, absence of a self-evolved value system and therefore, of community oriented activities are the rule.

Mexican peasant women in their daily lives:

The accounts of two women from Tierra Alta and two from Santa María have been selected to illustrate, though briefly, the differences that exist between one lifestyle and the other.



Domestic and professional activities seem complementary to Doña Sofía, a midwife in Tierra Alta.

Doña Sofía, fifty years old, has been a midwife in Tierra Alta for more than two decades. Although she has had thirteen children, eleven of whom are living, she appears to be a jovial woman of less than forty. Assertive, affectionate, hard-working, enthusiastic, she hasn't encountered conflict between her domestic and professional activities; rather, they seem to her to be complementary. Her children help in different ways: the older, some of whom live away from home, contribute with part of their income; others are studying in larger towns since the local school only offers six grades (primaria); and the rest, still young, have tasks at home when they return from school. Her fifteen-year-old daughter knits with the machine.

In the past, it was necessary that her husband augment the family income by working elsewhere in or outside the country; he would come and go. However, for the last six or seven years he had remained at home, cultivating his small property. By increasing her practice little by little (the financial resources of her clients determine her fee), her income has risen until it is now superior to that of her husband. She became very sad when he went away again, this time without



there being any economic necessity. In leaving, he said, " I couldn't wait here with folded arms watching her provide for the children." She was fearfull thinking that " when they go away, anything might happen. " She was even afraid to lose him, before he came back, because she considered and always will consider him as " the authority in the home."

Besides participating actively and with interest in the life of her family, Doña Sofia has helped other women during pregnancy and birth, long before the knitting machines made an appearance in the village, five years ago. She has been and is a fundamentally productive person who enjoys her work and is full of admiration for her guides, midwives of greater experience, who taught her, and with whom she discusses her cases. Satisfied, proud of her work, and of " not having committed any serious mistakes", she has simple vital dreams, such as those about her patients giving birth and "turning out well" which express her own constant renewal. She understands her patients " as women" and is touched by their experiences, sympathizing with them "in their ignorance" and " in their suffering." "When" the cases warrant it; she sends them to the village doctor, for she knows that there are some patients whom she can help as a result of her experience, but not all.

Crocheting, sewing, embroidering, and " making all kinds



of pretty things" are pleasures for her: " when I see them, I really like to make them if I can". Her "greatest happiness" is when all the family is reunited, when she has " all the children together"! Her oldest daughter, who has worked as a servant in Mexico City for seven years, worries her by not having married, a strange situation which Doña Sofia does not understand. It would seem that she is thus expressing her disapproval over her way of life as a woman, one that involves working at a distance, with independence, in solitude and homeless.

She contrasts her daughter's life with that of her own and her parents, each of whom had always sought ways to take care of their children. Her father did this " as a merchant, traveling over the Sierra, trading animals". When " he was given enough reason, he got angry. Other times he would merely give advice". Only rarely did he hit them. Her mother, now an old woman, was " very good, doing everything possible" to look after them. " Everything possible", since they were very poor and she had to raise seven children. "If one misbehaved, they brought it to your attention, but didn't punish you very much". For this reason, she never did anything against their will.

About herself, she says, " Others know, what I'm like. .I



can say that I'm a good person ... you know, I feel that I try as best as I can to behave myself, not to be egotistical in anything, although as far as anger goes, I do get mad at times but only occasionally, and then, slowly, my temper goes away". Her life has been cantered on the people about her: family, husband, patients. She feels that it is important for people to help one another . She was very saddened over the departure of her husband, even though "he left on good terms". "He arranged it so that we get half the money from the crop that someone else was taking care of".* She was not really sure that he would return, but he afterwards did.

Although Sofía was once an exception, I believe that her story demonstrates how, within that traditional patriarchal system, there were elements that allowed a woman to find selffulfillment. Thus, she could directly participate in domestic work with dignity and interest, in the context of a structured family and community life that, as we shall see later, permitted others to eventually widen their horizons in the same way.

* A common practice in Mexican farming villages.



Forty-four-year-old Juana gave birth to fifteen children of whom thirteen are alive.

Forty-four-year-old Juana, living in Santa María, gave birth to fifteen children of whom thirteen survive. Her mother died forty days after her delivery, and she grew up with her maternal grandmother and an uncle who loved her dearly. When he died she was thirteen years old and felt "alone in the world." She began to work as a domestic servant in order to help her grandmother and continued to do so until she married. During that time, she frequently thought of her own death. " I longed for it as a last resort, so that I wouldn't have to continue like that-alone defenseless against whoever might ruin me." When she married at sixteen, she began a life of fertility which came to exhaust her. She feels that it is from this that she has pains all over her body and is "tired, without energy for anything." She says that it was very difficult to maintain her children, and despite the economic help that they now provide, she still finds herself limited. In speaking of them, she became very emotional.

Her husband, who travels daily by bicycle to the factory where he works, has succeeded in earning a " secure income" for the last two years. They still cannot move nearer, since



food, part of which they gather in the area - would be more difficult to obtain in that location. Several of her children have married, while others work in " what they can find for short periods". She "knows" that she relies on the help which the bosses (patrones) give her sons, whom she asks for assistance when she needs it. The elder daughters do most of the housework and otherwise help her.

She has suffered from "fainting spells" since the [^]murder of her brother, a young man who was given " a hard blow during a drinking bout". She felt "suffocated" when she learned of this event, a feeling which still frequently occurs. Now she knows a remedy, "go out into the open air and breath deeply," in order to avoid the onset of "fainting, an attack" such as the one she had suffered on that occasion. This is her anguish, her response to the omnipresence of death, violence, murder. She dreams of them, she fears them her feelings are contained, lived in secret, so that she won't "appear crazy" in front of the others. If she expressed them, they " would look at me as if I were mad"; she says that she would grab her children and " would embrace them and kiss them until I calmed down - an impossible thing to do". She must behave in a less effusive, more distant manner. Her greatest wish is to return



to visit the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico city, as she had done on a pilgrimage when she was ten years old.

Juana very much likes to listen to the radio soap operas that deal with " city life" and "rich people who, nevertheless, also have problems, feelings, doubts" . Her father, an alcoholic, abandoned his four children after his wife died, and they were subsequently taken in by relatives. " Every now and then he comes for a short while and that is that". Her grandmother "was good" and treated her well, although " she took no pleasure in any sort of diversion ... never going out ... except on Sunday to Mass and then back home". Thus, she was raised "very severely".

About herself, she says: " oof ... I'm very bad, very quicktempered, very griuchy. I don't even want to think any more about what will happen. I spend my days thinking now of one thing, then another - many things worry me, like my little ones who have no pants and I have no money to buy them". She believes that a mother demonstrates her love for her children by "telling them to be good and scolding them when they aren't".

Upon being asked about the duties of a father, she responded that her husband " often got drunk when his little girl was sick, so much did he love her" ."He said that he loved her



very much and didn't want her to die, and that he regretted not sending her to be cured. He said that he was ready to be taken to jail. He got drunk and thus drowned his grief over the death of his daughter whom he loved so very much."

Clearly, the remedy for insurmountable difficulties is resignation and trying to forget them through alcohol. It is desperation, pain. "When I am washing, I wash, but then I finish, and I cannot stand the pain. I do everything, but with great effort. I have to do everything. When I go to bed, I think it even gives me temperature. I tell you that I am not so old that I should have all these pains", She is always sad: "There is no end to difficulties". Juana is a woman who suffers, embodying the impossibility of moving ahead within an oppressive society where machismo, murder, indiscriminate violence, and alcoholism abound. Strong, hefty, and with a few white hairs, she exemplifies the type of life in which the only exit is motherhood, and where the only means of overcoming the lack of hope, communication, warm relationships and satisfying activities, is a deep longing to leave that environment, nourishing expectations of solutions which, naturally, will come from others.

Ofelia defends a new way of participating in life as a woman.

Thirty-six-year-old Ofelia, mother of six children, is one of the most enthusiastic and helpful inhabitants of Tierra



Alta. An active member of the Parents Association at the local school, she is very proud of the changes which have been achieved, of the van bought for the use of "whoever needs it," and of the clock in the central plaza. Formerly, she greatly enjoyed her work as a salesperson at the head of her father's business. Today, her daughter helps her by knitting with the machine and she uses it as well when she has the time. The major part of her day is spent presiding over the kitchen - she doesn't like "anyone else to do it". It pleases her also to see "after a short while, all the clothes hanging on the line" that have been washed by her.

She defends, even in front of her father, a new kind of relationship between men and women. Annoyed, he criticizes and admonishes his son-in-law for allowing Ofelia to participate in the administration of the house money. "He is very harsh, strict, hard-working, demanding. Even now he chides us, a married couple, telling my husband not to give me any money, not to let me waste time. He scolds the children a lot. He does work very hard in the fields and in the business. I have had to be told about my mother, because she died when I was five. She was good-natured, made tamales, worked in the business, and helped my father a great deal. He liked us all to work in the fields cultivating the corn, and for us to



bring him his food wherever he went. After the death of my mother, we were alone for about two months, and after the arrival of my stepmother, I stayed for eighteen years with them until I got married".

Ofelia is critical of her father and is angered by his heavy-handed attitudes. With "determination and work " she says to have succeeded, together with her husband, in making her family respect him, which was not the case when they married, because he was very poor. With him "is when things have been the happiest! For "the first time" in her life she feels confident, understood, and supported. When they have a problem, they discuss and resolve it together, even in matters concerning their children's education. They both make efforts to avoid frightening them and they believe that it is really important to encourage them to try out other possibilities when they have committed a mistake. This was for example the case not to long ago with one of their sons, who frequently hits others and would himself come home hurt, they thought that it would be good for him to learn his father's trade which he was taught over a period of time. Meanwhile, his help was asked in small matters which he was capable of doing. Afterwards, they put him in charge of a young goat that has become his companion and playmate . Many



of Ofelia's initiatives are considered to be innovations by the community. She in fact defends a new method of educating the children and a new way of participating in life as a woman.

She has used contraceptives and does not want any more children, a decision which her husband approves. Since taking the pill, she has had "fainting fits," blood pressure problems, and nervous attacks. She is determined to continue and says that she has no doubts whatever concerning them. "One wonders whether the symptoms which she suffers are caused by the medication alone or might also be an indication of the unconscious tension which she has to face in adopting such means, so unusual in her environment. She " would like to discuss the subject with other women;" and is very disappointed when she sees that they "take it as a joke." What truly enrages her are those who " let things go by and never get involved". Constantly, her ability and imagination are exercised in her daily life. In this she is accompanied by her husband, with whom she has achieved a trust and friendship which she never dreamed were possible. She also has doubts, and searches for alternatives, for solutions, while possessing a critical spirit and her own sense of values.

Margarita advises her friends to give in to everything in order to live in peace with their husbands.

Margarita, thirty-nine years old, has given birth to twelve



children in Santa María and nine are still living, She knows that in order to be able to endure her life, it is necessary to make her husband happy, " not to provoke him," to be tolerant, and above all, never to show annoyance.

As a child, she continually witnessed her father becoming angry; even now he becomes furious when special "appetizing" foods which are difficult to get are not prepared for him. Her mother " has to find a way to get them;" for if not, life is impossible between the two "even though he has stopped drinking". "She is a very good person and suffered a lot on account of my papa. He very much liked to drink and didn't give her his pay. He was very harsh. If by any chance one were standing nearby, one would have been assaulted by his screams that he wanted to eat until one became afraid, and then he would demand to be fed, and the meal wouldn't be ready yet. My mother is always going from one of her children to another to see if they can give her something". She tries to placate him and "always says that he is the one who gives the orders".

Margarita's husband, who works on his father's lands, which were given to him by the goverment to cultivate (ejido), provides for the family's livelihood. "I think, 'what are



we going to do with such a large family if it doesn't rain?' And then, some don't have shoes or pants and there are many things to worry about. I don't suffer - my husband is a good man who has given me no cause for distress. What he earns isn't enough for the whole family. He says that we are all going to work together to buy a washing machine. When? we will never buy it. The money is never enough for what one needs."

To be close to urban centers and in constant contact with a wide range of consumer goods frequently provokes an even greater frustration and despair. Because "he gets for me all that he can," she feels that her marriage "has been good." Her children have grown up; the oldest are now working and contribute with their earnings. The younger ones do various tasks about the house. She feels most content when her husband is at home and her children "obey" her. When he leaves, she is apprehensive, knowing that "he is in danger," and fearful for what might happen to him. She dreams of "wars and the disappearance of my family," an unconscious representation of the violent world in which she lives. Frequently she dreams that she "flies, bouncing about like a little girl". It could be said that she is one, being so allows her marriage to work, which gives her satisfaction and makes her an example to her



friends, she advises them: "Give in to everything in order to live in peace." The most important thing is to avoid conflict.

To decide, to take an active part in life, to become an individual, implies a long process involving change with regard to the ideas concerning, and the realities of, life, family, children, husband, but above all - oneself. In a state of unconsciousness, everything that happens is taken as completely natural. The events of one's life are considered to be fixed by the immediate circumstances, and only with great difficulty can a person come to question, know or openly express her own desires and likes, as well as negative and positive feelings about what one does.

Even in conditions of poverty and want dignity can be maintained when the solution are ones own's .

Some women in Tierra Alta have begun to individuate themselves, supported by the experience of a well-structured environment. They have taken part during their development in the responsible and careful working together of both mother and father, who in tending to their tasks had seen to the fulfillment of their own needs through the resources at their disposal. Even in conditions of poverty and want,



dignity could be maintained because the solutions were one's own. The knitting machines could be absorbed into this social framework, and allow a more active and decisive participation on the part of the women. Some, still traditionalists, have not been able to assimilate this innovation, while others have changed and are capable of fighting, even to the points of confronting a man who is opposed, for what seems worthwhile. Some of the men, frightened by these events, have reacted with irritation and have wanted to bring back the past. Their protest takes the form of being absent from the home, drinking, ... Others have encouraged, supported, and participated in this new way of life. They have directly collaborated in the education of their children, and the affairs of the household are decided by mutual accord, developing a deep companionship with their spouses.

High visibility of consumers goods awaken insatiable appetites for consumption and mutilate tradition.

The situation in Santa María is quite different. Traditional masculine authority has suffered from the onslaughts of oppression for centuries, beginning with the Conquest. As unskilled laborers, dispossessed of the means for supporting



themselves, the necessity of contact with the outside world obliged them to assume attitudes of subordination and servility towards the owners of the haciendas. Even though economic circumstances are altered and farming land has been granted to him, the man of today hides his weakness behind machismo, and conceals his desperation and demoralization with violence. This behavior has the sole aim of venting fury, of dominating senselessly, endlessly. It is resentment and hopelessness. The proximity of urban centers and the high visibility of consumer goods, neither accessible nor useful in the fulfillment of actual needs, often only awaken insatiable appetites and mutilate their tradition.

The inhabitants of Santa María have attempted to passively adjust themselves to their recently improved situation, hungering for acquisition of goods that, while "satisfying" artificial necessities, can only lead to new forms of oppression and despair.

According to statistics, material conditions in Santa María are much better than those in Tierra Alta; nevertheless, nonadaptation and lack of hope are rampant in the former village.

Desperation can certainly induce people to seek the discharge of their discontent and rage by identifying with the aggressor,



to become destructive instead of enlisting available resources for their own ends in a rational way. Under these conditions, a very easy solution can be to give - in to the pressures of an ideology that involves indiscriminate and voracious consumption (5), one that does not conduce in any way to a better life nor to any kind of satisfaction or well-being. Only self respect and respect for tradition can, by its functioning as a slow but lively integrated and structured process, conduce to a change in women lives. It is worthwhile waiting and promoting the process as such with patience.

N O T E S

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- 2) See "The Adverse Impact of Development on Women" by Irene Tinker, " A Critical Analysis of Latin American Programs to Integrate Women in Development" by Teresa Orrego de Figueroa, and " The Moslem



World: Women Excluded from Development" by Fatima Mernissi, in Women and World Development, edited by Irene Tinker and Michele bo Bramsen, AAAS.

- 3) See E. Fromm's "The Crisis of Psychoanalysis", Holt Rinehart and Winston, The Heart of man, Harper and Row N.Y
- 4) See: John Bowlby's "Attachment", "Separation" and "Attachment and Loss", Hogarth press London.
- 5) See: Schumacher, E.F., Small is Beautiful: A study of economics as if people mattered (1978; Acacus London).