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GENDER ROLES AND SOCIAL CHANGE: A MEXICAN CASE STUDY[1]

C. H. Browner
University of California
Los Angeles

This paper contrasts the circumstances under which women will be receptive to programs which seek to promote social change and development with the circumstances under which they will not be.[2] The argument is grounded in the understanding that women are neither inherently more nor less conservative than men. Rather, like men's, women's attitudes are formed by the economic, political, and social structural conditions within which both groups live. Using case materials from a rural Mexican community, I will show that interest and opportunity must both be present for women to support social change. That is, even though women may perceive certain kinds of change efforts to be furthering their own interests and/or those of their families, they will not participate in these efforts if they lack opportunities to act on their own behalf. Although the women of any particular society are often depicted in the literature as an undifferentiated social group, their interests and experiences ordinarily vary dramatically (Molyneux 1985). Such variation may lead women to adopt divergent positions with regard both to socioeconomic development in the abstract, and to specific programs designed to promote social change.

The earliest development planners were concerned only about the male members of underdeveloped societies (Boserup 1970; Charlton 1984; Rogers 1980). They either assumed complete congruence between the interests, concerns, and needs of the two sexes, or they expected that the benefits of development projects would ultimately "trickle down" to women as well. When it became apparent that these assumptions were false, attention turned to discovering how women could be more effectively integrated into social change efforts and development processes, and how they could more fully realize the promised benefits of planned social change. Proposals toward this end sought ways to increase women's opportunities to vote or obtain education, health care, employment, credit, and needed technical assistance (for reviews, see Buvinić 1976; Carr 1981; Charlton 1984; Dauber and Cain 1981; Rihani 1978; Tinker and Bramsen 1976). Yet early optimism about the prospects for achieving sexually neutral socioeconomic development was tempered by those who saw larger obstacles to integrating women into development than their previous exclusion from formal development efforts (Bossen 1975; Elliott 1977; Nash 1977; Young et al. 1981). These scholars asserted that fundamental changes in the basic structure of society would have to occur before women and men experienced equal life chances and opportunities.

Although the general issues pertaining to women and development planning have by now been extensively discussed, there have been few analyses of why women might be more receptive than men to certain kinds of development efforts, or how internal dynamics within rural communities might limit women's ability to participate in change efforts that in principle they support. This account will therefore consider these two issues. I will show that over a ten-year period, a group of women in a small rural Mexican village persistently promoted a number of social change projects over the continuing objections of the all-male political leadership. Apart from this minority, no one else publicly supported these projects once the authorities had taken public stands against them. I will argue that the structure of the community's economic and social resources, and its distribution of political power, blocked the majority of the women and all of the men from taking advantage of the programs once the authorities had decided against them. Before presenting the data, I offer an extended description of the community's social and political organization to provide a context for understanding the community's responses to the change efforts.

RESEARCH METHODS AND CONTEXT

The data were collected during a 1980-81 community study in San Francisco (a pseudonym), a Chinantec-Spanish speaking *municipio* (township) located approximately 100 kms north of Oaxaca's capital in the Sierra de Juárez. A year's participant observation was combined with interviews with 180 women and the husbands of 126 of them.[3] The sample was selected to represent the age, residence, and linguistic background of the community's women.

The *municipio* consists of 306 households of subsistence cultivators, 39 per cent of which also produce and market coffee, now the main source of cash for community members other than wage labor. Of these, only 7 per cent (n=5) maintain substantial holdings of more than 10,000 coffee plants. Most of the rest (77 per cent) are small cultivators with 500 to 1,000 plants each. Nearly two-thirds of the farmers (65 per cent) cultivate the *municipio's* communal holdings which are located 25-40 kms east of the *cabecera* (head town) in the tropical lowlands. The remainder plant subsistence crops on small private holdings in or near the *cabecera,* or they cultivate a combination of private and communal lands. Only 5 per cent rely exclusively on wage labor, although 80 per cent of the households report some member who engaged in occasional wage labor. Most Franciscanos (68 per cent) either live permanently in the *cabecera* or divide their time between the *cabecera* and their lowland ranches. The rest reside in the lowlands the year around, except for when they are elected to political office. During these periods, they are compelled to move to the *cabecera* for year-long terms to fulfill their community service obligations.

Until recently San Francisco closely fit Wolf's (1955, 1957) criteria for a closed corporate peasant community including communal land tenure, the intensive practice of subsistence cultivation, limited needs for cash by community members, local government by consensus, and a strictly bounded social system maintaining structural integrity over time. Such communities were often depicted in the ethnographic literature as self sufficient, isolated and autonomous sociopolitical units. Although these communities also performed a variety of vital functions for the larger political entities of which they were a part (Dennis 1979; Young 1976, 1978), few residents had extensive regular contact with outsiders. Today, however, macrolevel socioeconomic and political forces have dramatically restructured communities like San Francisco, and they can no longer be considered "closed" on any dimension (Cardoso and Faletto 1969; Frank 1967; Smith 1977).

The *municipio's* political system is structurally and organizationally similar to others found throughout rural Mesoamerica in that it is a civil-religious hierarchy

or *cargo* system (Cancian 1967a; DeWalt 1975a; Lees 1973). All married men are required to serve in a series of hierarchically ranked positions as unremunerated municipal authorities. Civil authorities are charged with overseeing all internal community affairs, protecting the community's integrity, and negotiating with external entities. Religious authorities maintain the Church's buildings, celebrate daily rosaries, and organize Saint's day celebrations and other holiday fiestas. Both groups of authorities are expected to devote themselves to their obligations every day of the year, and they spend most of each day in the vicinity of the town hall or the Church, returning home only for meals and sleep.

All matters that affect the welfare of the collectivity as a whole are resolved in public assemblies made up of all male *municipio* members between 18 and 50 years of age. (Older men may attend if they wish, but they are not obligated to do so.) Assemblies are held throughout the year at irregular intervals. Decisions made there must be unanimous before action can be taken. Both types of authorities are selected at an annual assembly, normally for a one year term. They are usually allowed to "rest" for some years between offices before being asked to serve again in another position.

Married women are not required to perform independent community service but are informally credited by public recognition for duties they perform during their husbands' terms (Slade 1975). Some of the women's duties are supportive; for example, many economically sustain their households singlehandedly during their husbands' terms of service. Other duties are explicit requirements of a particular *cargo,* such as cleaning the Church and keeping its many vases stocked with fresh flowers when their husbands serve as Church authorities.

Among the ways that San Francisco's *cargo* system differs from that in many other rural *municipios* is the fact that the civil and religious hierarchies there were separated some 40 years ago so that all men are not considered eligible for all positions. In many other communities, men are still expected to alternate between civil and religious posts until they have completed their service obligations. In San Francisco, however, men who are literate and who control Spanish are exclusively named to the higher ranking civil offices such as municipal secretary and president. They serve no religious *cargos* whatsoever. Monolingual Chinantec speakers are chosen for *cargos* primarily on the religious side of the hierarchy. And men who are minimally conversant in Spanish and minimally literate serve a combination of religious and low ranking civil *cargo* posts such as messenger and policeman but not necessarily in an alternating fashion. Furthermore, unlike some communities where many men refuse to accept *cargoes* they have been named to for religious or other reasons, (e.g., Paul and Paul 1963; Young 1976:155-158); rarely do Franciscanos refuse to serve although they may seek to delay their terms until a more favorable time.

Maintaining the *municipio* as a single, unified community is one of the authorities' primary responsibilities, and unlike the situation in a number of other Oaxaca *municipios,* San Francisco's authorities have been generally successful to date. Many other communities in the region are beset by factional splits, some dating as far back as the 19th century (de la Fuente 1949), others severe enough to result in permanent segmentation (Chiñas 1973; see also Stebbens 1984; Ugalde 1973). In San Francisco, pressures toward fission are also ubiquitous and powerful, as will be discussed in more detail below. External threats come from neighboring communities covetous of San Francisco's lands and from efforts by the state government to consolidate the community with some of the neighboring ones. The community is also experiencing growing internal religious and economic differentiation as well as agitation for autonomy from residents of some of the outlying *ranchos.* Yet Franciscanos clearly recognize that a unified community is more likely to successfully defend itself against attacks by neighbors and to resist government intervention (Rubel 1983; Friedrich 1962). They attribute

their endurance as an independent political entity to their ability to have resisted the emergence of factions, and they minimize the role of other factors such as the interests of the state (Dennis 1976). As a result, those who create internal dissention are seen as threatening the community's vital interests.

One way that San Francisco maintains community unity in the face of opposition is by requiring consensus from male household heads in all civic affairs. As a result the authorities' judgements and pronouncements are rarely challenged or even extensively questioned in public. Although as Dennis (1973:422) observes, the authorities cannot force their will upon the rest simply by virtue of their positions, Franciscanos will support the authorities when they understand them to be acting on their behalf.[4] Therefore, should a matter with the potential for dividing the community emerge, Franciscanos rally behind the official line, regardless of their personal opinions. It is the authority of the office, not its holder, which commands respect (Slade 1975:133). The man whose proclamations were willingly obeyed while he was in office becomes little more than an ordinary citizen the day after his term expires. When that individual speaks at subsequent town meetings, he will be no more successful at carrying his position than the rest. There are no men in the *municipio* who are assured they will be consistently acknowledged as leaders by their peers. As throughout much of rural Oaxaca, there is little socioeconomic stratification in San Francisco of the type seen throughout most of the rest of Mexico (Diskin 1983), so that no class of wealthy, influential citizens has emerged. Elders are respected for their age and past community service, but their actual power is eclipsed by the elected authorities. And while the ability of some men *(caracterizados)* to understand and propose reasonable solutions to community problems is recognized and respected, these men do not form a cohesive group, nor are their recommendations always followed.

This consensus model of political organization exerts relentless collective pressure on individual men to conform (Paddock 1979:18-19; Whitecotton 1977:250). And, as household heads, men are further expected to exact similar compliance from the other members of their households. Yet the willingness of male villagers to unite behind the office rather than the individual derives not from social pressure or a sense of civic responsibility alone. It also stems from the expectation that they will receive equivalent support from their peers when they themselves serve as authorities.

WOMEN'S ATTEMPTS TO FACILITATE CHANGE AND THEIR OUTCOME

Geographically and culturally distant from Mexico's state and federal capitals, San Francisco has, until now, lagged behind many other parts of the nation in the number of change and development programs directed toward it. The past fifteen years, however, have seen a significant increase in the role that externally-based change agents have come to play in local affairs. This penetration by outsiders has been ambivalently met by each successive group of authorities who, in some cases, have withdrawn support for programs previously solicited or opposed new ones proposed by external agencies. No men have publicly countered the authorities' ambivalence about the role of outsiders in San Francisco. However, a group of eight women have consistently and outspokenly supported particular change agents and their efforts. Various authorities have responded by censuring the women for this support through public condemnation and fines. In addition, the eight women have been targets of extreme slander, and both male and female members of the *municipio* see the authorities as its source. None of these attempts to control the women have yet been successful, and they continue to be considered by the authorities to be a community threat.

Four cases will document this struggle between the authorities and the women over the community's relationship to outside sources of social change. Since these

events occurred over a several-year period, the authorities that are referred to are different individuals in each case. The women, however, are all part of the same group, although not all are involved in each example. It should be emphasized, however, that for the community and authorities, this tiny group of women had far more power than their absolute numbers would suggest, for they represented an emergent faction. Community members referred to them as a "group" *(este groupito de mujeres)* and as the women became progressively marginated from their neighbors, they looked increasingly to one another for friendship and support. As a result, although all eight women were not involved in each of the four cases, all were perceived as blameworthy each time any one of them acted.

1. In 1973, after several years of negotiations between San Francisco's municipal authorities and the federal government, the Ministry of Health through the State Coordinator of Public Health Services *(Salubridad)* agreed to provide San Francisco with a health care facility. Community support for the project was initially high. They had repeatedly petitioned the government for a health center in San Francisco and felt extremely fortunate when they finally won approval (Rubel 1982). The center was to be staffed by a rotating physician, who would be fulfilling his or her obligatory year of community service, and a permanent auxiliary nurse.

Shortly after its opening, at the joint request of health center personnel and the local authorities, six of the above-mentioned women volunteered to serve as informal auxiliary workers to the doctor and the nurse. Years later they explained that they were pleased with the opportunity to learn some practical health skills and to provide a community service. But within five years, the death of a number of children who had been treated at the facility led the authorities to try to close down the center. Nevertheless, two of the six women continued to work with the health personnel, and they actively campaigned for the center's continued functioning. Local gossip had it that the two were the doctor's lovers and, for that reason, did not want the center removed.

To retaliate against the health workers, the authorities lodged a complaint with their regional supervisor charging them with misuse of clinic supplies. When the supervisor came to San Francisco to conduct an audit, however, the authorities refused to attend, citing the importance of their presence at matters of a more pressing, though unspecified, nature. Since the presence of community representatives is mandatory at a government audit, the doctor then asked the six local women with whom he had previously worked to attend. Only the two who had continued their work in the health center did so. They said they feared that their attendance would lead fellow villagers to question their loyalty to the community, but that the doctor and the nurse also deserved their support. The day after the audit, the women were summoned to appear at a special assembly of household heads called by the authorities. There they were publicly censured for working against the community by attending the audit which the authorities had boycotted.

2. Because San Francisco's priest felt the community was not properly prepared to take Church sacraments, he asked a local woman, one of the eight, to study the catechism so she could teach it to the rest. She was chosen in part for her excellent Spanish and in part because she had long been active in Church affairs. She eagerly took to the task and both the priest and the townspeople were initially very satisfied with her work. Within a few years, however, one group of authorities' anticlerical attitudes led to overt conflict between the *municipio* and the priest. But the catechist did not waver in her public support for the priest and she even induced some of the other eight women to work with him as well. During a national charity drive, the catechist was given a quantity of food and medicines by a Church agency to distribute to the needy of the community. Town gossip, attributed to the authorities, was that she had been given the supplies

because she was the priest's lover. She was called before the town council. There, she was informed that she was prohibited from distributing the supplies because she would show favoritism, which would divide the community and generate factions. Despite appeals from the priest and the agency, the authorities would not reverse their decision. Nevertheless, long after the shipment had been returned to the Church, some townswomen periodically ignored the authorities' prohibition and secretly visited the catechist in search of particular medicines that they thought she might have kept.

3. Social workers from Mexico's Department of Family Integration *(DIF)* came to San Francisco to propose that the women there form a "Mother's Club." The government's goal with this program was to encourage rural women to engage in co-operative activities that would simultaneously benefit their community as a whole while allowing individual club members to earn cash. Although a large number of women attended the early planning meetings, in the end only the activists—and a handful of their female friends—remained involved. In informal interviews after the fact, some of the others told me that they left because they doubted that the club would be successful, or because they were too busy with other family obligations.

The small San Francisco Mother's Club that remained decided it would prepare and sell food at community functions. Half the profits would be turned over to the community fund and half would be divided among club members. As soon as the club began to function, however, attacks on its members began and all but the activist women promptly resigned. The activists continued with the club for several months more but eventually they, too, abandoned it. Members said they left the club because of the gossip about them. Some of it was sexual slander while other gossip attacked the "selfish" motives of the members who were accused of dividing the community by engaging in activities that benefited only themselves. Although the previous members continued to see a need for such an organization, they felt that maintaining it was not worth the personal cost.

4. In early 1981, the National Indigenous Institute *(INI)* petitioned San Francisco's authorities for permission to establish a bilingual pre-school program to give children an early start in Spanish instruction, since Chinantec is the language spoken in most homes. The authorities were reluctant to authorize the program. They said they considered it to be unnecessary state intervention and that the existing educational programs were adequate for the community's needs. On the other hand, responding to government pressure, they gave two *INI* teachers permission to conduct a month-long pilot program, after which time the municipal authorities would assess the extent of community need for bilingual instruction. Although the teachers frequently asked the authorities to publicize their school over the loudspeakers in the town hall, the authorities did so only once during the program's lifetime. Only fifteen pre-schoolers attended the pre-school, just a fraction of those eligible to do so. Prominent among them, however, were the children of four of the activist women. (The other four did not have children of eligible age.) These women backed the program unequivocally, for they said they wanted their children to know Spanish before starting primary school.

At the month's close, the authorities told the teachers that the program must be abandoned. They explained that community members apparently saw little need for such a program for only a very small proportion of the eligible pre-schoolers had attended. It was with disappointment and regret that the school teachers informed the mothers of the authorities' decision. Angered, and in direct defiance of the authorities' official edict, the four mothers vowed to personally recruit more pupils. Privately, however, they expressed doubts that the program would continue, regardless of how many children they could enroll. The matter was unresolved when I left the village.

DISCUSSION

Writing of Mexican state-local political relations, Corbett (1977:77) observes that "from the earliest days of the colonial period a critical and recurring political issue has been the maintenance of local government as a viable institution and the preservation of local autonomy from the centralist desires of national regimes." From this perspective, San Franciscano's authorities were carrying out their designated functions of preserving community unity and limiting external intervention when they tried to stop the eight activist women from working with outside agents. While Franciscanos recognize that there are advantages to maintaining closer ties with external agencies and with the State, they also fear that close ties will lead to further loss of autonomy and independence. Caught between conflicting pressures emanating from the federal government and local populations, municipal authorities such as those in San Francisco often react ambivalently when they are subject to efforts at state incorporation through the establishment of health and welfare programs or development projects (Corbett and Whiteford 1983; Dennis 1973).

The eight activist women were criticized, publicly attacked, and censured therefore not because they were women acting outside the limits of the conventional female role but because they were dividing the community and threatening its independence. A former municipal president explained, "That little group of women cared only about their own families . . . I know that they said they were working for the *pueblo* but it was all lies." It would therefore be expected that men who acted as the women did would be sanctioned in similar ways. But no men—and only a handful of women—risked opprobrium. The vast majority of both sexes followed the lead of authorities and took no part in the projects I have described. Some of the reasons for these differing responses to outsiders working in the community will now be considered.

Women's Roles in Socio-Political Context

The explanation is to be found, in part, in the social organization of San Francisco where, as in other rural Meso-American communities, women do not have equal access to positions of power and authority, nor are they afforded the same control as men over their existence (e.g., Arizpe 1975; Bossen 1984; Cancian 1965; Lewis 1951; Paul 1974). In such situations, women may have less interest than men in maintaining the traditional balance of power. In acknowledging this fact, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women observed that "Experts in social development and change have noted that . . . women are, on the whole, receptive to change for one explicable reason: they usually have more to gain by changes brought about by community development than by clinging to the status quo. It has [also] been observed . . . that rural women . . . have frequently shown more desire for innovation and change in this respect than men" (Nash 1980:10). It was, then, these dynamics in part that contributed to the activist women's willingness to work with the outside change agents.

Women's and men's life experiences in rural Mesoamerica differ on many dimensions leaving women relatively disadvantaged. All men participate extensively in town governance through which they may earn recognition and establish alliances which will allow them to further their own goals. Women are excluded from the political system: they do not vote, attend assemblies, nor do they hold office within the civil-religious hierarchy. Men also benefit from an androcentric social system which affords them freedom of movement throughout the community and control over their own households. Writing of a similar highland Oaxaca community, one of Young's informants (1982:169) characterizes the advantages of rural life for peasant men: "*aquí soy jefe, nadie me manda* (here I'm boss, no one

orders me around)." In contrast, women live under direct male authority throughout their entire lives, unless they live completely alone, which few do. They are held to stricter standards of personal behavior and have less freedom of movement. Therefore because women are excluded from all formal political roles and are subordinated even within their own households, they may have less interest in maintaining the traditional system.

Differences in women's and men's hopes for their childrens' futures provide evidence for this assertion. Although I lack quantitative data to prove it, my impression is that more men than women wanted their offspring to become peasants and spend their lives in the community as they themselves had. Many fathers were therefore unsympathetic to their childrens' educational aspirations, for they saw secondary school as an extravagance for peasant children. Post-primary education is an expensive endeavor, for in addition to the inscription fees there is the cost of books, supplies, clothing, and transportation. Room and board must be purchased as well, since there are no secondary schools in San Francisco. Yet, many children from the community did continue their education, over the objections of the fathers of some and sometimes without their financial assistance. Their mothers' earnings paid all their school expenses. These women regard education as their childrens' future inheritance, the only one they themselves can provide, since very few women own private lands. An important short term outcome, however, is that by working to finance their children's education such women are drawn more fully into the extracommunity economy and into greater contact with the world outside. A longer range effect of higher education is to all but guarantee their childrens' permanent migration and foster the depopulation of San Francisco. Aside from a few jobs as school teachers in the community, there is no work for educated Franciscanos at this time.

The two sexes often also had different ideas about their childrens' migration, and about how they themselves wished to spend their declining years. Today, educated and uneducated young people alike are leaving San Francisco in such dramatic numbers that it is not uncommon for all the grown children of some couples to permanently reside outside the community. Of the 180 women interviewed, 81 had adult children. Nearly two-thirds of these (53/81) had at least one child living outside the *municipio,* almost always in either Oaxaca City, Mexico City, or the U.S.A. But, nearly half (23/53) had all their adult children living and working outside of San Francisco. Women in this situation betrayed no anxiety about it. They assumed that when they could no longer care for themselves they would follow their children and take up an urban life. Men were not as satisfied with this prospect, and some who left, in fact, returned because they could not adjust.[5] Although men who come back to San Francisco emphasize their reluctance to abandon their peasant style of life, other factors are also operating. By migrating into the larger society in old age, peasant men trade the authority, power, and status they have earned through years of community service for the anonymity of an urban lower class existence. Women have less to lose by leaving the community and by encouraging their childrens' departure. They lack the recognition and influence afforded men, either in the community or outside.

These differences between the sexes regarding their attitudes toward the larger community and their own place within it provide some basis for understanding why some women worked with a particular group of outside change agents despite the authorities' objections and why no men would do so. This phenomenon is not unique to San Francisco, but has been observed in other parts of the developing world. For instance, working in several African countries, deWilde (1967:191-192) found some of the most "progressive" farmers were women who were much more receptive than most men were to the advice and instructions of externally-based agricultural development agents. Similarly, Germain observed in

Bangladesh that, despite male opposition, women participated in development programs outside their homes when these programs promised them concrete economic benefits (Rogers 1980:104).

However, we cannot assume that rural women will accept innovations that rural men will not, simply because they hold an abstract conviction that any modification in the *status quo* will work to their advantage. For example, neither men nor women in San Francisco were receptive to requests from government agricultural development agents to try a new type of corn seed in the mid-1970s. Although a number of women had the authority to make such a decision because they headed their own households, neither sex was willing to take the risk. Therefore, if we wish to understand why the eight women, but no men, supported the change agents and programs I have described, we must remember that these changes were primarily directed toward the health, educational, and social needs of children. Although health services and supplies in principle benefit all, their most frequent users are the young (Stebbens 1984). Similarly, cash earned from the activities of the Mothers' Club could theoretically be used for purchases of any type, but, in fact, it was used by club members almost exclusively for their children. And the bilingual pre-school program was designed to make formal education more accessible to Indian children.

Gender Conflicts Over Directions and Goals for Children

Differences in the essence of maternal and paternal roles in San Francisco and similar communities, and differences in women's and men's extraparental responsibilities provide a second set of factors that help explain why the two genders responded differently to outside change agents, particularly those promoting programs that benefit children. A spate of recent research has compellingly shown that the primacy of women's roles as mothers must be taken fully into account in any attempt to understand their choices, alliances, and positions (see Benería 1979; Benería and Sen 1982; Edholm et al. 1977; O'Brien 1981; Trebilcot 1984). Typically excluded from formal political rewards, a self sufficient economic existence, and even from control over their own persons, childrearing may offer women a domain over which they can effectively exert control. In strongly male dominated societies in particular where women are excluded from independent access to economic resources, they may invest extraordinary energy in building relationships with their children who they hope will guarantee their own security later in life (Lamphere 1974:104-106; Llewelyn-Davies 1982; 1982:192-193; Wolf 1972). In such cases maternal altruism and self sacrifice can have important instrumental effects. For example, in a study of maternal strategies among Latinas in northern California, Lewin observed that women used maternal altruism, selfless dedication, and guilt to insure their children's future loyalty and support. One informant was explicit when she said, "If your children know what you've given up on their account, they are bound to do what you want them to for the rest of their lives" (Browner and Lewin 1982:67). While the eight activist women did not co-operate with the outside change agents only because their programs promised benefits for their children, this motive undoubtedly played a part. For Franciscanas, like women elsewhere who are denied direct access to their society's sources of influence, wealth, and prestige, seek to build unshakable alliances with their children, partly with their own futures in mind. They were therefore willing to endure gossip and public condemnation in exchange for advantages they hoped would accrue directly to their offspring, and indirectly to themselves.

Again, this pattern is not unique to San Francisco, but can be understood as consistent with more fundamental differences in the economic and social priorities of women and men. Kidd found in Malawi, for example, that female household heads invested in commercial crops of medium to low profitability

while male household heads planted commercial crops only if they promised a high cash return (Rogers 1980:189). Lele (1975:26) observed the same phenomenon in other parts of Africa, while Nash working in Mexico, McCarthy in Bangladesh, and Jain in India have all documented differences in female and male economic strategies. Summarizing their findings, Nelson (1979:60) concludes that "in contrast to men, women are more likely to translate their economic resources . . . into basic needs for the family than into consumer and prestige goods." Additional evidence surprisingly shows that although female headed households are more likely to be economically disadvantaged, they tend to have relatively fewer than average underweight children. This unexpected association led Safilios-Rothschild (1980:46) to observe that "overall household income is not as significant a factor in the status of child nutrition as the income of the mother. Because women's income is most often used to buy food . . . increases in this income tend to improve the quality and quantity of food, but increases in men's income do not." Other research shows that in addition to food, women's income is used for health care, education, children's clothing and other basic household needs whether or not the woman is the households' sole source of income (Nelson 1979:60).

The eight women were, in fact, quite explicit regarding their own motivations for supporting the social change projects. When asked why they risked angering the authorities, they justified their behavior in terms of the benefits the programs would directly or indirectly provide their children, rather than themselves. Said one, for instance, when explaining why she had joined the Mother's Club, "Women are far more interested than men in finding ways to earn money. That's because they're home all the time and they see what their children need. The men aren't always around so they don't see." Another put her continued support of the health center and its staff in terms of the needs of children as well: "We need the center here for our children. We get sick, too, but we can usually cure ourselves. But, when the children get sick, we don't always know what to give them. We need trained people who can tell us what they need."

It could, however, be argued that eight activists is such a small proportion of the 336 women who resided in San Francisco that their actions should not be interpreted as representing fundamental differences in the interests of women and men. Yet it must be re-emphasized that no group of men, no matter how small, regularly opposed the authorities on any consistent set of issues or concerns. On occasion, the two male Franciscanos who taught in the local federal school went contrary to the unified public stand. But, they did not regularly counter the authorities over specific types of issues, nor did the two consistently work together in an effort to achieve common goals.

For the situation for male Franciscanos was somewhat more complex. While their children's welfare was important, it was not their only concern. They also had to think of their political careers and their place within the community's political system. That system, based on consensus, constantly pressures men to conform. And as participants in a system which provides them with a measure of prestige, power, and authority within their own community, men were more readily swayed than were the activist women by peer pressure and the desire to maintain alliances which would enable them to further their own political ambitions, careers and goals. For these reasons, even those who personally favored working with the outside change agents did not publicly express their support once the authorities had taken an opposing position. To do so would have challenged the system, called into question their own place within it, and risked alienation from their peers. This action was far more radical than any man was willing to take.

Women and Innovation

I have described some of the circumstances under which the interests of women and men in a rural Mexican community diverge, and explained why only women challenged the official authority structure. I have argued that the change programs explicitly addressed women's interests as mothers and that while they similarly addressed men's interests as fathers, the men were faced with conflicting expectations between their paternal and their public political roles (Corbett 1977; Sarbin and Allen 1968). Excluded from the established political structure, the women experienced no role conflict. Yet why, if the programs addressed the interests of women as mothers, did only a handful support them? This question will now be considered.

Research on the diffusion of innovations has shown that innovators can be differentiated from the rest of a population on a number of economic and social dimensions. For example, Mencher's (1977:252) survey of the adoption of a new type of seed in rural India found that the more affluent, politically powerful farmers were significantly more likely than the rest to obtain and use the seed. Everett Rogers's research in Colombia and other parts of the developing world supports Mencher's finding that innovators are more likely to be economically better off and adds that they are also on the average, younger and better educated, with greater exposure to mass media and more extensive contact with outsiders (Rogers 1962, 1969; Cancian 1967b; DeWalt 1975b).

The eight activist women differed along many of the dimensions Rogers and others identify as characteristic of people who innovate (Table 1). They were substantially younger than average (median age = 34.5 for activists; 44 for the larger female population). Although not appreciably better off then others in their community in terms of overall access to economic resources (mean = 2.13 for the activist women, 1.89 for the total sample)[6], the resources of the activist women were more likely to derive from the modern (e.g., wage labor, cultivation of cash crops) as opposed to the traditional economic sector (e.g., landholdings). Furthermore the women themselves were much more likely to be involved in activities which generated cash. This afforded them economic bases independent of their husbands and greater freedom of action (Elu de Leñero 1969). All eight had, at some point in their lives, worked for cash; seven (90 per cent) were, in fact, earning cash during the field work period. This compares with more than 60 per cent of the larger women's sample who had never worked for cash, and more than 70 per cent who were not earning during the field work period.

As a group, the eight also had far better access to the world outside of San Francisco and considerably more experience with it. They had completed most or all of primary school and spoke Spanish well. Seven of the eight had lived outside of San Francisco for several months or more. In the larger sample, more than 60 per cent had never lived outside the community, more than 70 per cent either lacked formal schooling completely or had attended only briefly, and more than 80 per cent were unable to speak Spanish well. The eight activists' extensive experience with outsiders prior to contact with the change agents certainly facilitated their ability to interact with the change agents and their receptivity to their proposals. Moreover, the alliances the women established with the outsiders may have reduced their own sense of dependency on the community thereby enabling them to more freely ignore the authorities' proscriptions.

Yet not every woman who satisfied the criteria for being innovators responded affirmatively to the change agents. Another constraint on their freedom of action prevailed: women who lived in male headed families could not easily disobey the authorities, and male headed families are by far San Francisco's most common domestic form. Ninety one per cent of Franciscanas live in families headed by

Table 1

Economic and Social Resources of the San Francisco Study Population

and the Eight Activist Women

	Activist Women		Women[1]		Men[1]	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Presently earning cash:						
Yes	7	87.5	50	29.1	88	69.8
No	1	12.5	122	70.9	38	30.2
	8	100.0	172	100.0	126	100.0
Ever earned cash:						
Yes	8	100.0	63	38.9	Missing Data	
No	0	0.0	99	61.1		
	8	100.0	162	100.0		
Education:						
4 or more years	8	100.0	51	29.5	78	61.9
0 - 3 years	0	0.0	122	70.5	48	38.1
	8	100.0	173	100.0	126	100.0
Spanish competence:						
much	8	100.0	31	17.8	53	42.1
some to none	0	0.0	143	82.2	73	57.9
	8	100.0	174	100.0	126	100.0
Ever resided outside community:						
Yes	7	87.5	63	37.7	41	33.9
No	1	12.5	104	62.3	80	66.1
	8	100.0	167	100.0	121	100.0

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[1] n is less than 174 for the women and 126 for the men when data are missing. Six of eight of the activist women were part of the larger sample.

men. (In 56 per cent of the cases the head is their husband; in the rest it is their father-in-law, son, or other male kin.)

In San Francisco married men are ordinarily considered heads of their own families, despite the fact that two or more nuclear families may share a common dwelling. Absolute domestic responsibility and authority rests with the male head. He represents his family in all external matters from disputes with neighbors to the payment of taxes and fines to attendance at assemblies. This means, for example, that a father may be jailed for an infraction his unmarried son commits and that men cast two votes in state and federal elections: one for themselves and a second for their wives.

Although postmarriage residence is normally patrilocal for at least the couple's first few married years, men become family heads as soon as they marry, even though they may continue to reside in their father's homes. Women, on the other

hand, are recognized as family heads only when there is no adult male member. In cases where a widow or a woman otherwise without a husband lives with a married daughter and her spouse in the elder women's home, although she is *de jure* head of her own family, her son-in-law is *de facto* head in that he represents his mother-in-law as well as his wife and children in all community-wide affairs.

As described above and like the political systems of other Mesoamerican communities (Downing 1979:162-167; Kearney 1972:16-21; Nader 1964:252-264), San Francisco's consists of all male family heads who represent their households in public affairs, including assemblies, where each man has one vote, and community service obligations. Men thus learn to regard the defense of their community as an important a part of the male social role as is the defense of their own families. Because the system demands unity in the face of external opposition, after the authorities have publicly taken a position, men will not act otherwise because they do not wish to be accused of compromising the community's interests. And individual male family heads are responsible for evoking similar compliance from those in their charge. But such a political system works best when every community member lives under the authority of a male family head, for men genuinely believe that the community must be maintained at all costs, and that public unity is fundamental to achieving this goal.

The eight women who supported the change agents were not controlled by husbands or other male family heads, and hence fell outside the formal political system (Nelson 1979:46-47). All but one were family heads themselves. The husbands of six were labor migrants, while the seventh was a single mother who had never married. The eighth was married to an incapacitated alcoholic who neither supported his family economically nor participated in the *municipio's* political affairs so that she headed her own household by default. These women's freedom from male domestic authority blocked the means by which the authorities could control them, for the established technique which was through the male family head, was absent.[7]

The authorities, therefore, lacked means to compel conformity from the eight activist women. The women were not persuaded by appeals to community unity, for as I have shown, they had less interest than men in seeing their community endure in its traditional form. Nor could the authorities gain compliance from the women by threatening to withhold support during the women's own *cargo* service terms, for women, of course, do not serve. And public censure, the community's strongest means of public sanction, did not cause the women to obey the authorities when subsequent opportunities to work with outsiders emerged. These conventional social control techniques which work well with men were ineffective with the women because their own relationship to the *municipio's* political system is mediated rather than direct. Such a political system which controls women through men, allows them greater freedom of action when they live in families without male heads.

Yet few Franciscanas live outside male domestic authority. As previously indicated, only 9 per cent lived in female headed households. But the overwhelming majority of these were elderly, poor, monolingual Chinantec speaking widows with grown children who did not regard either alienating the authorities or the social change efforts themselves to be in their interests. I know of only one woman who based on social attributes could have worked with the outsiders but chose not to. She was a mother in her late twenties who had lived outside the community for a year and spoke excellent Spanish. Her husband was a long term labor migrant who sent home regular remittances; she headed their household in his absence. But she was also an isolate who was suspicious of all social activities and instead devoted herself to running her store.

The activists, therefore, differed from their peers along two essential dimensions which led them to support the efforts of outsiders working for change. They

possessed socioeconomic attributes characteristic of innovators and they were family heads. This later element afforded them sufficient autonomy to act in their own interests as they perceived them.

CONCLUSIONS

I have sought to show that women's responses to a group of change efforts in one rural community were influenced both by the character of the structural conditions that the women faced inside and outside their community, and by the nature of the mother-child tie as it is formed by these underlying conditions. Because women in many societies such as San Francisco, Mexico, lack direct access to economic and political resources, they must rely upon their relationships with others to meet their own basic needs. In such situations, women will elaborate a "strategy of motherhood" in which they seek to establish enduring ties with their offspring who they hope will insure their well-being in their old age (Browner and Lewin 1982). It was partially in this context that women in San Francisco considered the value of the change programs for children that were proposed. But although most said that they saw the programs' potential value, the vast majority were blocked from actively demonstrating their interest or their support. Only the handful who headed their own households were able to act according to their felt needs.

But Third World women will not support change efforts simply because those who promote them say the programs will help children in some concrete or abstract way. They may also refuse to participate in development programs if they feel the programs will undermine their relationships with their children. For example, reviewing Cornell University's development efforts in Vicos, Peru, Babb (1980:21, 30) found that many women refused to send their children to school because they saw education destroying traditional family unity. Bourque and Warren's (1981a, 1981b) work on development planning in Peru adds support to Babb's assertion, for they show that the rural women with whom they worked resisted changes that they believed threatened the women's access to vital resources. It therefore seems apparent that women are inherently neither more nor less conservative than men but instead will respond to social change initiatives based in part on how they perceive these initiatives will affect their instrumental ties to their children, and their children's ties to them.

In concluding I must stress that while women may be more receptive than men to change programs that deal explicitly with children's needs, it is not correct to assume that the direction development policy should take lies in the continued segregation within development agencies of women's interests and concerns as mothers. As Papanek's (1977, 1981) writings have compellingly shown, the present emphasis in development planning on isolated programs and projects for women impedes their integration into broader development processes by sustaining the institutional and conceptual barriers that exist. While women's and men's differential relationship to societal structures and power bases does require that specific means be established to deal with their particular situations, women's projects alone cannot overcome the underlying obstacles.

Gender-based economic and social asymmetry characterizes life throughout rural Mesoamerica, and women's and men's political interests often diverge as a result. Men typically seek to maintain economic and social dominance in part by monopolizing the political system and by designating themselves as guardians of the traditional community and its collective interests. Yet their hegemonic goals may force men to subordinate their family's interests to those of the community as those interests are defined by those in control.

Women often have less interest than men in seeing the traditional community endure, for they are secondary to them both economically and socially. Also excluded from formal political roles, they must further their own goals informally

by manipulating interpersonal ties. Within such constraints women place a priority on building strong relationships with their children, which they hope will ultimately be reciprocal. They do so not only for affective reasons but also in an effort to insure their own future economic well being. Under these circumstances conflicts between family and community interests will be resolved by women in favor of their children when they have opportunities to act on their own behalf. Development planners and others concerned with social change processes should recognize that when women are denied access to their society's valued resources, their ties to their children will serve vital instrumental roles.

NOTES

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2. In my use of the term "development," I follow Chaney and Schmink (1980:161-162) who say "our use of the terms 'development' and 'modernization' to stand for current attempts to transfer the effects of the industrial revolution to the less developed nations should not imply that we accept the development model as the ideal solution to the problems facing the Third World . . . But the development package associated with Western efforts to extend individual competence and participation, increase economic productivity, and reform social structures has such wide acceptance that we find it useful to employ this framework precisely because we wish to point out its contractions."

3. The remaining women in the sample were either widowed (N = 28), single (n = 9), had husbands who resided far from the community during the field study period (n = 11), or had husbands who were not available for other reasons (n = 6).

4. The following is a very small example of the working of this process. As the data collection period was ending, I met privately with the town president to ask whether I should publish my material using the community's real name or a pseudonym. He thought the matter over and replied that it would be better to use a pseudonym so "that the world outside will not learn how backward and poor we are," but that he would bring up the subject at the next town assembly so that the entire community could decide. I was invited to present my proposal at that meeting and then the president briefly spoke favoring the use of a pseudonym. His position was unanimously adopted without further discussion.

5. This differs from the typical pattern of return migration in Mexico and the rest of Latin America in that young single women are more likely to return than young single men (Young 1982:155).

6. The weighted sum of the responses to the following five questions. Do you or your husband or both work for cash? (no = 0; yes = 1). Have you any private landholdings? (none to 1/4 hectare = 0; up to one hectare = 1; more than one hectare = 2). Do you own draft animals? (no = 0; yes = 2). Do you own coffee plants? (no = 0; up to 10,000 plants = 1; more than 10,000 plants = 2). Do your children give or send you cash? (no = 0; yes = 1).

7. Although technically a wife may represent her absent husband at assemblies and other community service obligations, Franciscanas prefer to pay a fine instead. They say they are uncomfortable publically fulfilling these obligations.

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