

**Maya Market Women's Sales Strategies
in a Stationary *Artesania* Market and
Responses to Changing Gender Relations
in Highland Chiapas, Mexico**

by

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Abstract: While the literature on women's participation in the informal economy as marketers is vast, much of it focuses on the larger forces that drive women to adopt this economic strategy. Because such women become familiar with the market and understand its cycles, I further suggest that women in the informal economy learn to adapt their products, attendance, and pricing accordingly. Based on data collected during four field seasons in a stationary *artesanía* (crafts) market in highland Chiapas, Mexico, I show how Tzotzil Maya *vendedoras* (market women) adapt to seasonal fluctuations in the market. Population counts, price and commodity surveys, and informal interviews are used to illustrate that women are sensitive to the volatility of the tourist market and adapt their own economic strategies accordingly. I further note how participation in the market has contributed to changing patterns in indigenous gender relations.

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Maya Market Women's Sales Strategies in a Stationary Artesania Market and Responses to Changing Gender Relations in Highland Chiapas, Mexico¹

Introduction

In San Cristóbal de las Casas², Chiapas, Mexico, Maya women are increasingly entering the informal economy as producers and marketers of indigenous *artesánias* (crafts) in an attempt to respond to the rapidly changing local economy. These *vendedoras* (market women) rapidly adapt to new situations, adopting different selling strategies and incorporating new items into their productive repertoires. They learn the cycles of the tourist season and respond to seasonal peaks by selling more often and by increasing the number of popular goods they customarily sell.

This paper argues that women build and share their knowledge of the market to succeed as *vendedoras*. Beginning with a theoretical overview of marketing as an economic strategy pursued by women in developing countries, the activities of Maya *vendedoras* are explored in San Cristóbal de las Casas. The traditional ethnographic setting is described, as well as the factors that alter Maya life and draw Maya women into productive work. The analysis concludes that women, rather than behaving as passive victims, use the knowledge they gain in *artesania* marketing to respond to changes in the tourist market. These changes alter Maya gender relations as well. Because women now contribute an important part of family income they become increasingly aware of the imbalance between the genders. Their greater income may give them a greater voice in negotiating changes in the household. In some instances, women will tolerate less abuse and/or leave a violent husband. In other instances, men become active participants in their wives' economic activities.

Women and Markets

Throughout the developing world, women adapt their traditional skills to the demands of the informal economy in order to provide cash for their families and themselves (Bossen 1984; Nash 1993b; Stephen 1992). Because the informal economy is permeable, if risky, women can enter and leave it quickly, exploiting it for cash income. Marketing is a common strategy and the literature on market women is extensive. While the African case is well-known (see for example Clark 1988; Sudarkasa 1973), marketing is also common among women in Latin America. Florence Babb (1989) and Ximina Bunster and her colleagues (1989) examine the role of Peruvian women marketers in large produce markets and in street vending. Beverly Chiñas (1976) has examined Zapotec market women who market Oaxacan crafts and other goods in Mexico. Several scholars, including Lourdes Arizpe (1977), have examined petty marketing in Mexico City's informal economy.

Throughout the development literature, many scholars (Dwyer and Bruce 1987; Mies 1982; Young, Wolkowitz, and McCullagh 1981) focus on the role of the market as it pulls women into its orbit, often marginalizing them in low-skill, low-income activities. The nexus of household, gender, and capitalism creates a situation in which women extend traditional domestic work into the productive sphere. This is especially true in the informal economy (Babb 1989; Benería and Sen 1981), where the lack of taxes and fees allows anyone willing to bear the risk to enter it. Women are able to enter the informal economy using skills acquired in the household, such as weaving, embroidering, cooking, cleaning, and child care. They adopt this strategy as the traditional

subsistence economy becomes increasingly unable to support their families or when they are forced to leave their traditional communities in search of work, or to escape violence or oppression.

Women who enter such markets rapidly learn how they function and become perceptive *vendedoras* who understand and use the cycles that typically occur in markets. This process, however, has not been the primary focus of research on women's productive work. Scholars have been concerned to understand the processes that draw women into the market (e.g., Boserup 1971), but only recently have scholars begun to address women's marketing strategies and techniques (Babb 1989; Clark 1995; Ehlers 1990; Horn 1994).

Like the development literature, anthropological studies of women's marketing analyze the larger economic processes that drive women into the marketplace. In their examination of Peruvian street *vendedoras*, Bunster, Chaney, and Young (1989) note that many women learned to vend as girls, like their mothers before them. Street vending is concentrated among the poorest indigenous women and is a common strategy among single mothers (Bunster, Chaney, and Young 1989: 88-90). Poor indigenous women, burdened by ethnic discrimination, illiteracy, and poverty, are able to enter street vending fairly easily, while manufacturing and clerical jobs are closed to them. But *vendedoras* also value the "independence" and flexibility of their work because it allows them to complete household chores and care for their children (Bunster, Chaney, and Young 1989: 93). Babb (1989) reached similar conclusions in her study of Peruvian *vendedoras* who work in large produce markets. She argues that the larger process of capital accumulation leaves Third World countries dependent and underdeveloped, and as sites of production or resources for developed countries. While such processes also draw Third World populations into the informal economy, structural factors limit their access to important resources such as capital and leave them vulnerable to exploitation by the government or larger competing enterprises. Still, Babb notes that the women she studied pursued marketing because the flexibility and independence allowed them to combine market activities with child care and domestic duties.

Writing about *artesania* producers and marketers in highland Chiapas, Mexico, June Nash (1993a:6) notes that the absence of men in many communities, drawn away by migratory wage labor, has prompted increasing numbers of women to go directly to the city to sell their goods. Nash (1993a:7) also notes that increased participation in the *artesania* market allows young women to control their own incomes and, increasingly, to control such decisions as when to marry. Because a woman's income may contribute to her own upkeep or to that of the entire household, she is able to make such arguments to her father or brothers and sometimes negotiate increased power in the household. For married women, a greater productive role allows them greater say in how money is spent, but there is sometimes increased tension as well, when men, increasingly unable to provide for their families, see their wives' economic productivity as a threat.

Sidney Mintz (1971) presents a positive view of marketing, arguing that it provides women with equality and independence, and rewards successful market women for their intelligence and business acumen. In contrast, John Swetnam (1988) has attacked this assumption, suggesting that market women remain more marginal than male traders. Essentially, Swetnam suggests that marketing is not the viable strategy that earlier scholars had assumed because women do not sell the higher-quality goods or earn as much money as men. Swetnam's argument, however, appears to conflate Third World gender norms with those from the U.S., suggesting that market women's success should be based upon their success in male activities. He appears to assume that such market women would have the same skills or advantages as do male marketers, even though, for

example, men may speak the national language while women speak only the indigenous language, or men have greater access to transportation, know how to drive, or are able to travel. I suggest that both Mintz and Swetnam were asking the wrong question: are men and women equal in marketing? More crucial issues relate to why many women become marketers, even when their returns are low; how structural factors restrict women to narrower and less remunerative sectors; and, if women *are* marketers, to what extent they are merely extending their domestic skills into the market, or are in fact adapting *to* the market, learning how it works, and responding to its demands.

Methods

My discussion is based on data collected over four field seasons: July and August 1988, August and September 1990, June through mid-September 1991, and March and April 1992. These field seasons encompassed the peak of the tourist seasons in August and during *Semana Santa* (Holy Week).³ Research was conducted in a stationary *artesanía* market in San Cristóbal de las Casas as part of a larger project comparing Maya women's domestic and productive work (O'Brian 1994). Observations were made of randomly selected *vendedoras* in the market for set periods of time and their activities were recorded in detail. I also kept a running log of the changing population of churchyard *vendedoras*, the changing nature of the goods for sale, and price fluctuations throughout the field season.

For population counts, I visited the *artesanía* market every two or three days and counted the number of *vendedoras* present. For price fluctuation studies, I went through the churchyard and asked sellers for the prices of selected and popular goods, such as *pulseras* (bracelets), Guatemalan skirts, Zinacantecan *servilletas* (tortilla cloths), and Pantelhó blouses. To understand commodity fluctuations, I merely walked through the churchyard and noted what everyone was selling. I also conducted informal interviews with *vendedoras* about their goods, their home communities, and their families.

Ethnographic Context

There is a small but growing literature on Maya women's economic activities and cultural change in Chiapas, including the impact on women of *artesanía* cooperatives (Chen 1994; Eber and Rosenbaum 1993; Nash 1993b), and women's role in *artesanía* marketing (Gómez Pérez 1990; Morris 1987, 1991; O'Brian 1992). Maya women have entered these activities in response to numerous cultural and economic changes in southern Mexico as they are increasingly incorporated into the world market.

The Traditional Context

The highland Maya of Chiapas are well-represented in the anthropological literature as the subjects of numerous community studies (e.g., Cancian 1965; Gossen 1974; Vogt 1994) and ethnological works (Collier 1973; Nash 1985). Contemporary Maya still identify primarily with their communities of origin, in which membership is marked by clothing style, a specific dialect of the local Maya language (either Tzotzil or Tzeltal), and some degree of economic specialization. In these traditional communities, many Maya attempt to pursue their traditional way of life. Most families maintain small *milpas* (maize fields) intercropped with squash and beans. Women in the higher-altitude communities of Chamula and Zinacantán maintain herds of sheep which provide wool for traditional woollen clothing.

Maya men have traditionally been farmers, growing the familiar Mesoamerican triad of corn, beans, and squash. Maya women have remained in their traditional communities, caring for children, preparing the tortillas, beans, and corn drink that comprise the greater part of the Maya diet, herding sheep if they keep them, and spinning, weaving, and embroidering traditional Maya clothing. Women also participate with their husbands in the civil-religious system, where they organize and finance fiestas for particular saints.

Social and Economic Change

In recent years a combination of factors has eroded traditional Maya life. First, the land available to Maya farmers has decreased due to population growth and the decision of large landowners to put their land into pasturage. Most Maya can no longer provide for a family through farming alone. Moreover, Maya farmers have become increasingly dependent on the use of chemical fertilizers in the fields they do farm, and are therefore increasingly involved in the cash economy (Cancian 1992; Collier and Mountjoy 1988). More recently men have pursued a combination of strategies, farming on their own lands, sharecropping, and/or seeking manual wage-labor to meet their families' needs.

Second, the highland center of Chiapas, the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas, has become a popular tourist destination, particularly among Europeans and, increasingly, Americans. Tourists are drawn by the Spanish colonial architecture, the temperate climate, and the presence of traditional indigenous culture. Residents of the local Maya communities, because of their unique dress, language, and way of life, are part of the attraction; but most tourists remain unaware of the difficulties of contemporary Maya life. Many indigenous people work as maids, gardeners, and laborers in the city as an economic strategy. As another cash-earning activity, many Maya women have taken advantage of the tourist market through production and sale of Maya *artesanias* (Eber and Rosenbaum 1993; McVey-Dow 1986; Rus 1988; Van den Berge 1994).

Religious Change

A final significant factor in understanding the contemporary highland Maya of Chiapas is the complexity of religious change. While traditional Maya still follow a syncretic Catholicism that combines pre-Columbian elements with the Catholic liturgy, in recent years a more standard Catholicism, introduced through *Accion Católica*, has become popular (Eber 1995:209-242). Also, over the past 20 years, the region has been the target of evangelical Protestant missionizing, and many Maya, seeing the social relations associated with the new religions as an alternative to their present poverty, have left their traditional Catholicism to become *evangelistas*. Some have actually moved from their traditional communities to form new evangelical towns (Aubry 1991; Rosenbaum 1993). Others have been driven out, as in the community of San Juan Chamula, where after much inter-religious hostility, several men were murdered and the community government expelled the Protestants (Gossen 1989). Many of the *expulsados* now live in small settlements around San Cristóbal and relations between these settlements and Chamula are tense. One confrontation between Chamula and the evangelical town of La Hormiga during my 1992 field season led to violence⁴, and tensions have remained high since the 1994 uprising.

Although urban evangelical Maya communities have no land base, they resemble small Indian towns with thatched homes, sheep and chickens, and tiny cornfields underscoring their rural origins. The reality, however, is that there is no land for farming, and *expulsados* usually work at menial

jobs in San Cristóbal. In particular, women and girls from these communities have found opportunities to work as *vendedoras*, making and selling *artesanias* throughout San Cristóbal (McVey-Dow 1986; O’Brian 1994). These market activities are taking on new social and economic importance in *expulsado* communities as many men have become disenchanted with the new religions and have returned to their natal communities, leaving behind women who now must bear sole responsibility for family support (Garza Caligaris and Ruiz Ortiz 1992).

In sum, economic and social changes have affected traditional Maya in numerous ways, from the reduction of farmlands as these are put into pasture to the increasing need for families to purchase household commodities they formerly made or grew themselves. In addition, religious conflict has driven many Maya from their traditional towns into the city. The changing economy has also drawn tourists to the region as they search for unusual experiences and seek to purchase traditionally produced items as mementos of their visits. The limited resources of many Maya women, both rural and urban, and the presence of tourists eager to buy, have drawn women into the tourist market as *vendedoras*. Finally, women’s presence and activities in the market change their relationships with male relatives, who seek to control them, or alternatively, join them in their new endeavors.

The Artesania Market

The *artesanía* market in San Cristóbal occupies the courtyards of the Ex-Convent⁵ and the Church of Santo Domingo as well as the smaller Church of La Caridad just south of the Ex-Convent. *Vendedoras* pay a small daily rental fee of M\$400⁶ to a representative of the Ministry of Health in order to obtain a space in the yard. Each day women begin arriving at 6:00 a.m. and continue to arrive until about 9:30 a.m. During the time that I was in the field, some women were allowed to store their goods in some of the Ex-Convent buildings by one of the women working there. This woman was considering eliminating the practice, however, citing complaints by other occupants of the building. Other *vendedoras* who did not know the woman carried their goods back and forth each day, coming by bus or on foot.

Most women work in small groups of related kin or acquaintances, and many also bring their children, particularly their daughters, with them. Groups from individual communities tend to cluster together, with women from Chamula, the *expulsado* communities, and the few Zinacanteca *vendedoras* occupying specific locations within the churchyard. When a group arrives at the church one woman begins sweeping her section of the courtyard. She then spreads out a length of plastic sheeting and arranges her different *artesanias*. Women are sensitive to the placement of the sheeting and will note the locations of sellers on either side of them. They tend not to encroach on each other’s space, and will complain if a woman lets her plastic slide over into the next area. Women also pay close attention to the organization of their wares, grouping them by item type, style, and color. When a *vendedora* acquires a new or unusual item it is often placed at the front of her display to attract customers. During slack periods, *vendedoras* reorganize and tidy up their displays, smoothing and straightening them.

There is a distinct cycle to the Santo Domingo market: during colder periods of the year, and when tourism declines, so too do *artesanía* production and selling. As tourism rises during the busy summer months, larger numbers of women participate. During the peak tourist season—in July and August and during *Semana Santa* (Holy Week)—the patios and lawns in front of each church are crowded with *artesanía* marketers. Many women sell only during these heavy periods and carry

mass-produced items designed strictly for the tourist trade. This latter group declines rapidly as tourist season ends, indicating that such women regard marketing only as a temporary strategy rather than a full-time occupation.

Women from the community of Chamula and from the various Protestant communities surrounding San Cristóbal predominate in the market, but there are several groups of women from Zinacantán and less frequent visits by women from other highland communities, including Tenejapa, Oxchuc, San Pedro Chenalhó, San Andrés Larrainzar, and Amatenango del Valle. Women from different indigenous communities sell both their own craft items and tourist items imported from Guatemala and others parts of Mexico. Non-regional items include machine-made Guatemalan clothing, tablecloths, and coin purses, as well as hairbands, small wall hangings, and eyeglass cases. Many women also carry products from different local communities—small clay pots and figurines are sold from the Tzeltal potting village of Amatenango, and most Chamula and Protestant women sell shawls from Zinacantán, traditional blouses from Pantelhó and El Bosque, and clay or fabric dolls (of both genders) attired in traditional Chamula dress.

Most *vendedoras* increase the variety of their merchandise by purchasing *artesanias* from women who do not sell wares to tourists. In particular, women from Zinacantán are more apt to sell to other *vendedoras*. It is fairly common to see Zinacanteca women traveling from one *vendedora* to another, offering them traditional *artesanias*. Zinacantecas are a minority among *vendedoras* at the churchyard, representing at most only four to six out of an average of 125 participant groups. Zinacantecas rarely if ever sell goods from other communities, instead specializing in their own *artesanias*.

Vendedoras have minimum requirements for acceptable quality, measuring goods for length using the length of their arms (a traditional method of measurement), pulling weavings taut to check the tightness of the weave, and scrutinizing the intricacy of embroidered or brocaded designs. They will reject work that does not meet their standards and a woman with such an item may not be able to sell it to any churchyard *vendedora*. Some women visit the market several days each week and sell their *artesanias* to the same *vendedoras*; other women visit only occasionally, sometimes with only one or two items to sell. These latter women often have their items repeatedly rejected, suggesting that the more successful women have established ongoing social relationships with those *vendedoras* who consistently buy from them.

All *vendedoras* make items specifically for the tourist market. Most Chamula and Protestant women make macramé *cinturones* (belts) and *pulseras*. Women and girls make these items continuously throughout the day, stopping only to eat or to sell to customers. Zinacantecas also occasionally make these items, but more often they sell woven and embroidered *servilletas* that tourists use as placemats and napkins. All of these items are similarly cheap and easy to produce. *Cinturones* and *pulseras* are the easiest to make, needing only thread and the technique of macramé. Zinacanteca *servilletas* are more complicated to produce because they are woven on a backstrap loom; once the pieces have been woven, women carry them about to embroider them as time permits.

Although most of the products available for sale have been produced explicitly for the market, on rare occasions ceremonial blouses from the highland communities of Chenalhó or Tenejapa will be among the wares of a *vendedora*. The channels of production and exchange through which these pieces find their way to the *artesanía* market remain unclear. *Vendedoras* were reluctant to tell me

where they obtained such items. They would sometimes try to convince me that they had done all the weaving themselves, although when pressed, most admitted that the items were purchased from other producers. One *vendedora* laughed when I asked her where the ceremonial blouses came from, saying, “I don’t know, I don’t know where they come from, I’m only selling them here.” During later visits to the churchyard market, I observed different people approaching the woman with traditional ceremonial blouses for sale, suggesting that her evasion of my question hides important market relationships.

Some weavers will also sell to *artesanía* stores but most dislike this strategy because of the low prices such stores offer them. As one woman told me, “The stores don’t pay enough. They pay very little and then charge much more. It’s exploitation. They exploit us because we are poor.” But ironically, when weavers sell to *vendedoras*, these women also buy the items at similarly low prices and then mark them up. During my 1992 visit, Santo Domingo *vendedoras* offered wholesale prices that paralleled those in commercial *artesanía* stores. For example, a *servilleta* was purchased by a *vendedora* for M\$5,000 and then sold to tourists for M\$10,000 or more.

Discussion

Vendedoras are familiar with the vagaries of *artesanía* manufacture and marketing, and they adapt their marketing both to the tourist season and to tourist tastes. The tourist season in highland Chiapas is cyclical, with peaks during *Semana Santa*, the vacation month of August, and *Navidad* (Christmas) season. While there are always a few women selling *artesanías*, the population increases dramatically as the tourist season gets underway: the number of *vendedoras* in the Santo Domingo churchyard *artesanía* market can be seen to ebb and flow over the course of the tourist season as ever-greater numbers of women seek to capture a portion of the tourist market. But the dynamics of tourism are not the only factors influencing the scale of craft-related production and marketing. Conditions in the homes and lives of *vendedoras* can disrupt craft-related activities. Notably, the religious conflict discussed above resulted in numerous women from the involved *expulsado* communities missing a market day to attend a meeting with other community members and state officials. In this instance, a community-wide issue that did not affect traditional *vendedoras* prompted women from the *expulsado* communities to miss a day of selling.

Women and Risk

Women pursue a number of strategies to minimize risk in the market. Historically, risk and uncertainty have been differentiated: risk refers to a situation in which one knows the likelihood of the different outcomes, while uncertainty exists where the outcomes are unknown (Knight 1921). When women enter the market they gradually replace uncertainty with risk. As they learn about the market and about other economic strategies, they are able to successfully take greater risks, including acquiring a new product to sell, incorporating new designs into weaving, or expanding marketing networks to include both cooperatives and street sales. Although peasant women are often seen as culturally conservative, bounded and embedded in the household, they manage risky situations just as their male counterparts (Cancian 1972, 1980).

As women become increasingly familiar with how the market works, they may combine different occupations or productive strategies to minimize the risks they bear as *vendedoras*. For example, a woman will sometimes combine membership in a weaving cooperative with street and/or churchyard sales and occasional sales to *artesanía* shops. A woman may use *artesanía* sales

as a safety net, adopting it if she loses another job, for example as a maid or a laundress (O'Brian 1994). One *vendedora*, who had returned to craft selling after losing a job as a washerwoman, told me, "Yes, it is easier to sell than to wash clothes. It is very hard to wash clothes and I get pains in my back each day." Although she could probably find another washing job, this woman preferred to sell *artesanias* rather than return to washing.

Vendedoras also spread risk by expanding and diversifying their wares to attract buyers. This strategy may change to reflect fluctuations in the market. *Vendedoras* often acquire a wider range of goods during peak tourist seasons while minimizing acquisition and variety when tourism drops off. This allows the *vendedora* to avoid tying up scarce resources during the slack season. Women also stock mass-produced items designed specifically for the tourist market. These are typically machine-made imports, usually from Guatemala. These goods include skirts, vests, shorts, shirts, and jackets made of foot-loom woven Guatemalan cloth; small purses, wallets, and eyeglass cases of the same cloth; and lengths of machine-embroidered cloth sold as tablecloths. During my 1991 field season, traditional Maya blouses from Guatemalan communities were rarely seen; by 1992, such blouses were an increasingly popular item, particularly during *Semana Santa*. In addition, Yucatecan blouses were also becoming more common.

Vendedoras have increasingly adopted local Chiapan *artesanias* that were not previously sold in the *artesanía* market. During my 1991 field season, Zinacanteca women, who had previously sold *servilletas* and traditional Zinacantecan shawls and ponchos, began selling their own traditional embroidered blouses. Chamula women, who have a history of commercial activity, at least since the 1970s, and who are thus more sensitive to tourist tastes, began selling macramé hairbands that resembled long *pulseras*, and small embroidered woollen purses. At the same time, *vendedoras* continued to sell *pulseras* and *cinturones*, although at reduced prices. In 1992, some women had begun selling tablecloths from Chenalhó, *servilletas* from Pantelhó, and wool vests from Chamula. In post-Zapatista San Cristóbal, some enterprising *vendedoras* have begun to put masks on Chamula dolls and sell them as representations of Subcommandantes Marcos and Ramona, spokespersons of the Zapatista rebellion.

Women rapidly learn that tourists value "hand-made" or "traditional" *artesanias*, and present their wares accordingly. When I interviewed *vendedoras*, I sometimes asked if they had sewing machines, or if they really hand-sewed zippers into the Guatemalan skirts they sold. They would laugh and admit that the items were from Guatemala, but most customers were unaware of the differences. I often observed a *vendedora* telling two or three tourists how she wove and stitched machine-made Guatemalan clothing. "It's very hard," she would say, "I weave and weave all day." Young girls are particularly adept at this approach, telling customers that every item was woven by their mamá at home. Such embellishment and misrepresentation fit with the tourists' naive perception of the *vendedoras* and their products, and also help to reinforce the market for *artesanía* production.

Bargaining over the price of an item is common, but many women have a base price below which they will not go. The last price usually reflects a minimal profit above the production cost of the item. Although women do not appear to be directly calculating a wage or a true labor cost into their prices, *vendedoras* told me that the prices they charged for items needed to compensate them for the time they worked. "I have to have 25,000 pesos for this shawl, for the cost of the thread and because I worked three weeks on it. It was a long time to be working," one young weaver told me, suggesting that increased contact with the market indicates a growing tendency for *vendedoras* to

regard their labor as a commodity. The extent to which women are able to calculate or even charge a reasonable rate of return, however, remains unclear.

One of the factors negatively influencing women's ability to receive a fair return is that, as tourist products become increasingly popular, the tourist market quickly becomes saturated. During my first trip to San Cristóbal in 1988, a simple *pulsera* of acrylic yarn sold for about M\$3,000, or approximately US\$1.25. In 1991, such *pulseras* could be purchased at four for M\$1,000, or approximately eight U.S. cents each. Styles effloresced as *vendedoras* struggled to attract the tourist's eye, and multi-colored bracelets with openwork of fine cotton thread (called *hilasas*, after *hilo*/thread) still commanded prices of M\$3,000 to M\$6,000. A similar dynamic happened to *servilletas*, which consistently sold for M\$10,000 in June 1991 but could be found for as little as M\$5,000 in August 1991. At the beginning of the season, *servilletas* were a fairly new item but, as competition for customers increased, more *vendedoras* invested in *servilletas*. By mid-July, nearly all *vendedoras* had at least a few *servilletas* for sale and tourists seemed less interested in them. Although *vendedoras* cut prices in half, it is significant to note that *servilletas* almost never fell below \$5,000, the minimum price that *vendedoras* originally paid to buy them. While this allowed *vendedoras* to break even, they could no longer count on a profit from *servilletas*. By the end of the tourist season (mid-September) in 1991, *servilletas* were scarce but still selling well below June prices (see Table 1).

Although there is occasional risk in the market, as noted above, most women acquire a wide variety of *artesanias*, particularly the popular Guatemalan goods, as the tourist season intensifies. From spot checks made during three field seasons, I noted that, prior to the beginning of the season, Guatemalan goods were sold only by five or six groups. During the peak of the season, nearly every group sold some Guatemalan merchandise, although the original groups had the most and the widest variety. For example, during my 1992 visit only four to six groups had Guatemalan goods in March; by *Semana Santa* nearly every sales group had at least a few Guatemalan items.

The Market and Gender Relations

Women's increased participation in the market has also impacted traditional gender relations in Mexico. Among Protestant *vendedoras*, who are often single mothers abandoned by husbands who return to their natal villages or move to other cities (Garza Caligaris and Ruiz Ortiz 1992), selling provides a means to support a family. Should a woman have daughters, whose labor she can mobilize in *artesanía* production and sales, her household income will be even higher and more stable. Increasingly, women are involving their sons in *artesanía* production as well, although most boys still sell candy or shine shoes.

Some single women achieve a partial independence by entering the *artesanía* market and mobilizing their children's labor. These women are able to support their household without relying on husbands or other adult male kin. One *vendedora*, who preferred selling to the hard business of laundry, said, "When I sell I can feed my children. It's hard but we can eat. My husband did not work. He was just another mouth to feed."

In other instances, where women remain in intact families, men are increasingly drawn into women's vending businesses. While men were originally opposed to their wives' sales activities (e.g., Gómez Pérez 1990), a few men have begun to join their wives in watching over goods and conducting sales transactions. For example, during my first visit in 1988, I noted only two or three

men working with their wives; in 1992, I occasionally saw as many as ten. These men did not produce *artesanias*, but often took over child-care while their wives produced items for sale. Women recognize that the new relations created by the market can be difficult. One woman told me, “He has to watch all the children, but we need to buy our food. It’s bad that he has to do this but this way we can earn our money.”

Such women are aware that men want to fulfill their duties to feed their children by growing food and that the new duties they perform do not accord them the status that traditional farming does. Even for men who can farm, there may still be tension with their wives. Working men recognize the importance of their wives’ earnings but may also resent them. Couples may argue more frequently and men may attempt to tell their wives how to spend their new income. There is also some indication of increasing domestic violence in the traditional communities (Eber: personal communication).

Summary and Conclusion

Churchyard *vendedoras* pursue diverse sales strategies. Because they remain seated with their wares almost continuously throughout the day, women’s strategies are best seen in their selection and presentation of merchandise. A wide range of *artesanias* are sold, including machine-made and imported *artesanias* from Guatemala, as well as the ubiquitous macramé *cinturones* and *pulseras*, and other *artesanias* from a variety of Chiapan Maya communities. Women understand the diversity of the tourist market and know that a variety of products will draw more buyers. As the tourist season progresses, *vendedoras* thus increase the variety of goods they sell. The number of *vendedoras* selling in the market also fluctuates with the seasonal peaks of the tourist cycle. Some women choose to enter the market when it is least risky and when customers are most plentiful, therefore ensuring at least a modest success.

For Maya *vendedoras*, the market detracts from their responsibilities in the home, and may introduce tension into their relationships with men. For those women who are single mothers, the market affords them an opportunity to keep their families afloat, though at the cost of their own and their children’s labor. For married women, negotiating the changes in their relationships with their husbands can be difficult. Men sometimes object to their wives’ activities in the market, but increasingly, are joining their wives in selling.

By participating in the market, *vendedoras* learn what to sell, how to sell, and when the best times to sell occur. While further research is needed to establish women’s comprehension of the market and the choices they make in entering it, the Maya *vendedoras* in San Cristóbal are perceptive economic strategizers and make crucial economic decisions based on the knowledge they gain in the market.

Notes

1. Data from this paper are drawn from four field seasons in Chiapas, Mexico, during the time that I conducted dissertation fieldwork. I would like to acknowledge the support of Sigma Xi, Jacobs Research Funds, the UC Mexus Foundation, the UCLA Program on Mexico, the UCLA Center for the Study of Women and the UCLA Department of Anthropology for funding portions of this research. I thank Christine Eber, Allen Johnson, Gisele Maynard-Tucker, and an anonymous reviewer for insightful comments on previous iterations of this paper.
2. I have used the actual geographic place names of the city, buildings, towns, and settlements due to their wide use in the ethnographic literature but I do not identify individuals I quote to preserve their privacy.
3. While I was able to obtain data for three summer seasons and one *Semana Santa*/Holy Week season, I was not able to remain in the field during a Christmas season. Anecdotal evidence from others there during this period suggests that market women respond to the tourist season peak similarly to those I have described.
4. This conflict cut short my 1992 field season. Because the violence was covered extensively by both the Mexican and the international press (for example, the Los Angeles Times [1992], my hometown paper, ran a brief story), *vendedoras* became increasingly reluctant to talk to me and accused me of wanting to write bad stories about Indians to sell in my country.
5. The Ex-Convent is a deconsecrated Convent and a still-functioning Church. The building that previously housed the convent now includes a weaving cooperative store, a museum of anthropology and ecology, and a library. This building is referred to in tourist material (in both Spanish and English) as “the Ex-Convent.”
6. The peso-dollar exchange rate was relatively stable during the period that I was in the field, varying between M\$2,865 and M\$3,100 to the dollar between 1990 and 1992. For an approximate dollar value, figure M\$3,000 for the dollar. During my first visit in 1988, the peso was somewhat stronger at approximately M\$2,300 per dollar.

Table 1

**Price Fluctuations over Time
for Sample *Artesania* Commodities**

<u>Type of Craft</u>	<u>June 1991</u>	<u>August 1991</u>
<i>pulsera</i> (acrylic)	4/M\$1,000	4/M\$500-1000
<i>pulsera</i> (fine cotton)	M\$6,000	M\$3,000-4,000
Shawl/Zinacatán	M\$20-25,000	M\$20-30,000
Blouse/Pantelhó	M\$40-50,000	M\$30-40,000
Cotton Skirt (Guatemala)	M\$40-50,000	M\$60-80,000
<i>Servilleta</i>	M\$10,000	M\$5,000*

Data from 1991 Field Season

Unless otherwise indicated, prices are for one item

August is the peak of the tourist season

M\$=Pesos. US\$1.00 = M\$2900 at the time of research

Prices are given in Old Pesos

*Note that price drops due to market

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