Family Life and the Subordination of Women in the Teaching Profession: The Case of Mexico City

by

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Abstract

This article examines the unionized teaching profession in Mexico and explores ways in which female subordination is maintained in the field of education. In particular, the article shows how cultural and material factors within the family affect women's participation in union politics and the educational profession. Focusing on the Ninth Section of the Teachers' Union, which includes preschool and elementary school teachers in Mexico City, the article shows how the situation of women in the family relates to the structure of female employment in education. The question of why women do not enjoy equal access to decision-making or leadership positions is explored by delving into the career paths of the women interviewed for this study, to examine the relationship between their life cycle and their careers within the profession. Building upon insights expressed by the interviewed women, the article describes the channels of mobility and the constraints that women face as they achieve leadership positions. These realities of gender, family life, and institutional constraints are mechanisms through which the continued division between men and women in educational employment is reproduced.

About the Author

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FAMILY LIFE AND THE SUBORDINATION OF WOMEN IN THE TEACHING PROFESSION: THE CASE OF MEXICO CITY

Although women have constituted the majority of schoolteachers in Mexico for most of this century, they have had, as in many other countries, little access to power and leadership roles in education. This article explores the question of why women remain in the lower ranks of the profession. The aim is to relate leadership patterns to the characteristics of employment in teaching, and then to examine how cultural and material factors within the family interact with women's participation in union politics and the educational profession.

Mexico offers a promising case study for understanding how arrangements of power and leadership in social institutions work together with the constraints that women face in their own lives, to maintain female subordination in the field of education. Teachers in Mexican public education are unionized state employees, organized in a single union, the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (hereafter called the Teachers' Union). This union, one of the largest in Mexico, comprises mainly teachers, and some other employees within the Ministry of Education. The Teachers' Union has become a dominant influence on the training, working conditions, and professional advancement of teachers. Significantly, the operation and organization of the Teachers' Union is integral to the political system of the nation. For labor leaders in the state's employee unions, the union is a channel to power within the political bureaucracy. Because of the close connection between the dominant political party -- the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) -- and the Teachers' Union, the characteristics of the political system and elite recruitment to leadership roles are crucial determinants which shape the career paths of women and men in Mexican public education.

The participation of women in the field of education must also be understood against the larger context of employment opportunities for women. Occupational choices for Mexican women are limited. Indeed, women comprise the large majority of those excluded from the formal occupational structure, and those who do work are generally in poorly paid, unstable occupations. Increasingly, women who find employment come from poor sectors of the population and are employed in occupations such as domestic service or food preparation in the cities. Young migrant women are being employed more and more as wage labor in the agricultural industry in rural areas, or in the *maquiladoras* (border industries) along the Mexico-U.S. border. Even most middle-class women who work in the cities are, as Lourdes Arizpe found, part of the informal labor market -- that is, in irregular and intermittent occupations.[1]

Within the formal occupational structure, women constituted 28 percent of the Mexican labor force in 1980. The white-collar jobs open to women, however, are relatively few, and they are mostly occupied by women with a high school education or less. Only a tiny minority of women in Mexico has the university education necessary for jobs of a professional kind. In the urban labor market, statistics describing the general pattern of women's

employment in Mexico show that the occupations with the highest rate of female participation are domestic service, teaching, nursing, and food preparation. Among these occupations, elementary and secondary school teaching and nursing are the highest-paying professions for women in Mexico.[2] Given the limited opportunities open to most women in the world of work, those employed in teaching are in a relatively advantaged position within Mexican society.

Since the beginning of the century, the teaching profession has been open to women. In fact, women have long held a majority among students in the normal schools, which train teachers. Today, women constitute 70 percent of the students in normal schools, while they constitute only 30 percent of those in high schools and bound for university training. As a result, only one-third of university students are women, and even at that level they are concentrated in traditionally female fields such as nursing and social work.[3] On the whole, little has been done by governmental policy to increase the participation of women in educational institutions or to help women move out of traditional fields. Despite this lack of support, their status in Mexican society has been improved through the teaching certificate, the most common educational degree for both urban and rural women. For a few Mexican women, teaching has even served as a road to politically successful careers.[4]

Teaching has played a central role in the quest of Mexican women for equal rights and better treatment as workers. As far back as the First Feminist Congress of Yucatan in 1916, when Mexican women came together to discuss their social and political rights, a large proportion of the participants were teachers. Among the issues discussed in the congress were the right of women to education and their right to work. Female teachers also stood out in the 1930s movement to obtain full citizenship and the right to vote for women. More than 50,000 women participated in the Frente Unico Pro Derechos de la Mujer (United Front for Women's Rights) between 1935 and 1938. As a consequence of the social progress of that period under President Lázaro Cárdenas, female teachers today have all social benefits provided by law and equal pay as unionized state employees. But forty years after these initial gains were made in the profession, women still have made only scant progress toward a greater share of power in directing their profession and influencing the course of public education in Mexico.[5]

The following interpretation of work and gender links the external constraints that women face in their professional careers to the family culture and personal values of women in the field of education. The purpose of this inquiry is to show how the politics of the teaching profession in Mexico interacts with the personal lives of women in education. The interpretation takes as its point of departure a new body of research which explores the links between the roles of women in the family and in paid work. To explain why women find themselves preponderantly situated in subordinate categories within the labor force, this approach will analyze (1) the economic and noneconomic factors that reproduce the subordination of women and (2) the division of work done by men and women, not only in paid work but also in domestic work.[6] Following this line of research, the

subordination of women can best be understood as a complex system of power relations that emerges from the division of work between men and women within the domestic unit, which in turn is supported by economic and political structures in society. The division between men and women in employment can be explained not only through male domination or machismo, but also through the economic and political structures that accentuate and reinforce inequalities related to class and gender, which are deeply rooted in the culture and in the ideology of the family.[7]

This perspective offers a point of departure for inquiry into female subordination in teaching. Focusing on the Ninth Section of the Teachers' Union, which includes preschool and elementary school teachers in Mexico City, the following interpretation develops two central themes to characterize female employment in education: first, the question of why women do not experience equal access to decision-making or leadership positions is explored by delving into the career paths of the women interviewed for this study and by examining the relationship between their life cycle and their careers within the profession; the second theme builds upon insights expressed by the interviewed women to describe the channels of mobility and the constraints that women face, as a very few have achieved leadership positions. This article is based primarily on personal interviews of women: teachers, officials and supervisors in the Ministry of Education, and labor leaders in the Ninth Section of the Teachers' Union in Mexico City.[8]

Family Life and Women in the Teaching Profession

The career of most Mexican teachers starts in the lower grades -- women at the preschool or elementary school level, men at the elementary school level. With time and experience they can slowly advance, first becoming school principals at the lower levels, then teachers in the junior high schools, and then principals at this level. After that, if they advance further, they become supervisors for schools in an area. From there they might continue to advance to administrative positions in the Ministry of Education or to leadership positions in the Teachers' Union. Careers within the Ministry allow a slow passage from inferior positions to some of greater responsibility. Only a few women ever rise to the higher levels of the Ministry, and these women are generally political appointees with a university background. Most teachers, male and female alike, do not have the university degree that is necessary for high-level positions in the Ministry. There are two career paths for labor leaders, whether male or female: Some follow an administrative career within public education and are either called upon or decide themselves to participate more actively in union activities; others follow a political career within the union.

Like most female teachers in Mexico, the women whose life histories are used in the description below came from an urban middle-class background.[9] Their family origin influenced the educational opportunities that were open to them and is an important variable in explaining their situation within the labor market at the time of the interview. Eighteen of the twenty-two women interviewed were born in Mexico City, and the rest in different state

capitals. Fifteen of them began their careers as elementary school teachers and seven as preschool teachers. Five of them continued to work at the level they originally entered because they chose to do so, and ten of them, having long left the classroom, were working as administrators or union representatives for that level. Those women who withdrew from the workforce upon marriage or motherhood do not show up in this sample of current teachers.

The interviewed women have had a lifelong pattern of participation in the teaching profession. Five of them had more than thirty years of service and were beyond retirement age, an option available to those with thirty years of service. Ten of them had more than twenty years of service and seven had approximately ten years. These long terms of service reflected the average age of forty to forty-five characteristic of administrators and union representatives; teachers are typically younger. Because the system puts such emphasis on seniority as the criterion for advancement, years of experience explain important variations in the situation of these women within the system. The most striking similarity that emerged in their accounts was that all but two were trained in public normal schools.

Eighteen women said they entered teaching because they lacked economic resources to take advantage of other educational opportunities, or they gave family pressures as a reason for choosing teaching as a career. Three of them said they would have preferred to attend the university. After their common experience in basic normal schools, the participation of the interviewed women in the teaching profession developed in different ways. Seventeen women continued their education. Five of them went on to the university after normal school, while the other twelve followed a more usual path for teachers. Eight continued their education within teacher training institutions, either at the superior normal school or through the former baccalaureate of Mejoramiento Profesional del Magisterio (Professional Improvement of Teachers), which since 1979 has become the open university system in the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional. Four of the women were, when interviewed, still part-time students in the open university system.

In Mexico, the participation of women in the urban labor market is deeply influenced by marital status. The greatest rate of participation is among women who were divorced or separated; the next is among those who never married; and the smallest rate is among those who are married or living with a man.[10] At the time of the interviews, 40 percent of the interviewed women were married. Of the remaining 60 percent, half had never been married and the other half were divorced with children. There is a close relationship between the marital status of women and their career advancement. Of the interviewed women who remained and advanced within the profession, 40 percent were divorced or separated. These women, all of whom became heads of households with children, were the ones who showed greater dedication to their work, primarily because they needed to work to support their children. These women had been able to secure the most prominent leadership positions within the Ministry of Education and the Teachers' Union.

Among the women interviewed, those who never married form the next largest group among the teachers who left the classroom to achieve decision-making positions. This group of women is characterized in the sample by being of younger average age, more educated, and by having more free time to devote to career. The smallest group of women who advanced to decision-making positions is composed of married women. It is interesting to note that the majority of women in this group within the sample did not have children. The differences in marital status bear some relation to the educational attainments of the professional women, which in turn are generally related to their advancement in the profession. Of the five women who went to the university, four were single and one was married without children. For the majority of women interviewed, the possibility of pursuing a university degree tended to diminish when they got married and/or had children. These women had pursued their education at a slower rate within teacher training institutions or in the open university system.

For those women within the sample who were married or divorced and who had children, their family responsibilities along with their professional careers became a double life where they lacked adequate means of reducing the demands of either. Only three of the ten women who had children interrupted their work for a few years when the children were small.[11] Although all of them were able to combine their family responsibilities and professional life, most of them were not able to rely upon the free child care provided by the Ministry to bring up their families. One of the complaints expressed in the interviews was that day-care centers had rigid time schedules which were often difficult of the women to meet -- especially those advanced women who had routine obligations to attend meetings or to remain in the office beyond normal work hours. For the most part, the interviewed women used informal support provided by the extended family or else hired domestic help. Among those women who were divorced, half of them relied on domestic service, and the remaining women returned to their parents' house with their children so that their mother or grandmother could provide the needed child care. Only one woman reported that she had been able to handle child care on her own by interrupting her work and then by working only when the children were in school.

One of the most serious constraints to professional advancement, as seen by the interviewed women, is that even though the participation of women in the labor market has increased, there has been no compensating increase in the participation of men in performing household duties. Half of the interviewed women had children in the household; on the average, they had small families of two children each. All of the women in this group regretted that they had found no opportunity to share domestic responsibilities. Those who were divorced pointed out that they had never had support from their husbands for domestic responsibilities or child care; their husbands had opposed their involvement in the teaching profession, and their persistence on this issue had contributed to separation and divorce. Those who were still married, even if they had faced opposition from their husbands, had been able to work out the conflict within the marriage and were still employed. But these women, who were able to reach an accord with their husbands about working outside the home, were not equally successful

in persuading their husbands to share household duties in order to liberate time and energy for professional advancement.

Teaching is attractive to women in Mexico because it offers a half-time job, giving them the opportunity to work in employment and in the family simultaneously. Moreover, the life of a teacher provides income, social benefits, and paid vacations. But despite the opportunity of combining work with family life, women are constrained in their opportunities for advancement to positions that require the more demanding full-time commitment, which in turn requires changes in their participation in the home. Often the aspirations of professional women are thwarted because the existing duties of family life in Mexico make it difficult for women to take promotions even when they are offered. A divorced teacher describes the conflict between being a school principal with teaching responsibilities and being the head of her household with two little girls:

> I decided to resign from the position of school principal because it became too stressful for me . . . I was feeling guilty about abandoning my children . . . and guilty for the low achievement of the group under my charge at the school . . . But it had nothing to do with incompetence on my part . . . I just did not have enough time . . . I had too many responsibilities at the school and also I had my own family to take care of.[12]

For women, time devoted to family life is influenced not only by cultural expectations about the traditional role of women but also by the enormous time requirements of the material aspects of housework. Researchers studying the influence of family life on the participation of women in the Mexican labor market have argued that the amount of housework done by women is incompatible with numerous occupational activities; this constraint is especially severe for women who want to advance in the professions.[13] In a study of the domestic work of urban middle-class women in Mexico City, Teresita de Barbieri found that middle-class women must invest a tremendous amount of time in domestic work to maintain the family standard of living. Women can participate fully in the labor market only in cases where the salary level makes it possible because of the probability of needing to hire domestic labor. In such cases, de Barbieri argues, women's participation in the labor force is closely tied to personal aspirations related to postsecondary levels of education.[14] But women with a university degree represent only 1.7 percent of the female labor force in Mexico City.[15] In the case of interviewed women, those who had advanced to leadership positions within education were able to pay for domestic help because they had higher salaries. For those who had remained classroom teachers, the time devoted to domestic responsibilities made it difficult to also invest the time necessary to advance within the profession.

The professional achievement of women is affected by their situation in the family. A middle-aged woman explains this relationship by pointing out that "the family responsibility of women hinders them from fully incorporating themselves into work, and those who remain are the men." Behind this perception is the reality that gender hierarchies are embedded

in the shared meanings that give each culture its identity. The cultural definition of masculinity and femininity within the Mexican family is central to the disproportionate distribution of family responsibility between the sexes.[16] This inequality is a major factor behind trends in labor participation, because it binds up the free time that women might otherwise have for professional activities, union participation, and other activities outside the home. The unequal pattern simultaneously liberates men from responsibility in the home and facilitates their career development. The pattern affects especially those women who are competing with men for positions within the leadership. A woman in the Ministry who worked for ten years and had finished a university degree remarked:

> The opportunity to have a position requires vast amounts of time on the past of women. That is the ways things are. To get a job you need to be part of what's going on, and every day you need to invest your time. Women who have children do not have so much time to invest in these things. Men have this kind of time and they invest it. Culturally, it is all right for the man to arrive very late to his house, very late. Men do not spend any time with the children. They hardly are at home, but nothing happens -- they do not feel guilt, because it is not their responsibility . . . I don't want a higher position now because it would force me to spend much more time at work than I do now, which is already a great deal . . . That would increase my work to the point of slavery.[17]

Men limit their participation in family life in order to advance professionally as is the case for women who have been able to advance. But most of the women who were interviewed for this study expressed a desire for a more balanced life, a life different from that of the men around them who held power, even if it meant that it would take longer to advance to the job level that men currently dominated. Women have chosen to have a family life -- and wish to be there -- but they are also searching for ways to balance family life and work life. Classroom teaching is an occupation that is compatible with family life and the domestic work of women, but the demands of professional advancement require far more time than what is compatible with their desire to maintain a family life.

Reinforcing women's personal constraints within the family, the avenues for their professional advancement are controlled, and to a large degree curtailed, by the politics of the education profession. Caught in the struggle between leadership elites of the Ministry of Education and the Teachers' Union, most teachers have little to say about how decisions that affect their working conditions are made. Moreover, the style of union leadership has not favored all teachers equally, and the Teachers' Union plays a central role in the training and career patterns of teachers. The union intervenes directly in the assignment of jobs and the promotion of teachers; this could be an advantage to women if the union actively promoted equality and if it genuinely sought to overcome the constraints of family culture for working women. But the present system does not provide for teacher participation in decision-making and thus does not effectively represent the interests of women. The result is that women who seek

advancement in the field of education face professional constraints that exacerbate, rather than alleviate, the constraints growing out of family life.

One of the administrators of elementary education in Mexico City, with more than 30 years of service, argued that before the Lopez Portillo administration (1976-1982), very few opportunities were given to women to manage educational affairs. Referring in contrast to a more open policy toward increasing women's opportunities, after the international women's conference of 1975, she noted: "In this [Lopez Portillo] administration, we have been promoted to positions to which we had not even aspired before."[18] Nonetheless, this policy affected only an extremely small number of women in the leadership. Despite their numerical dominance of the education profession, during the Lopez Portillo administration only seven women served as general directors in the Ministry of Education out of 45 such positions. The opportunities for women to advance to higher levels in the education profession continue to be severely constricted. This reality is nowhere more clear than in one of the nation's most powerful educational organizations, the Teachers' Union.

Women in the Leadership of the Teachers' Union

In Mexico the Teachers' Union is generally seen as a man's world. Very few women ever become part of the leadership of the union. A woman who has been teaching since 1929 and who has been a supervisor for the last twenty years explained the lack of female participation in the union leadership as follows: "Men act in other spheres where women cannot go -- because women have not lost all their decorum, and they cannot go to meet with men in the cantina to deal with certain problems, or they cannot be in many other places. There has always been a fence that hinders women from taking part."[19]

To examine the participation of women in the leadership of the union, we now delve into the Ninth Section of the Teachers' Union, consisting of preschool and elementary school teachers in Mexico City. The Ninth Section is located in downtown Mexico City, a few blocks from the Ministry and from the national office of the union. It is on the fourth floor of a building that belongs to the union; on the floor below is the Tenth Section, for secondary school teachers in Mexico City. These two sections are the most powerful sections within the union, and the Ninth Section for elementary and preschool teachers is also the largest section. Union statistics show that in 1977-78 the Ninth Section had 42,918 members, 74 percent of whom were women.[20] During the six-year period from 1976 to 1982, only two women in the first triennium and one woman in the second triennium served as elected members on the 25-member national executive committee of the Teachers' Union. In the Ninth Section, five women were on the section's 28-member executive committee in both triennia.

Participation within union activities occurs at two levels: among the rank-and-file and within the leadership. Because of the historical conditions under which the union emerged in the 1940s and the fact that it

was an organization created from the top down, there always has been a wide gulf between the rank-and-file and the leadership. As in other unions in Mexico, rank-and-file participation in the life of the organization is limited. Women have always participated from below, from the rank-and-file, and they have shown great solidarity with opposition movements even when there has been little direct participation by women in the leadership of these movements.

The careers of most union leaders begin at the school level. They are elected by their co-workers at school and become union representatives at the delegation level. The delegations, which are the smallest units of the union, are organized by school zone or work place. After a successful career at the school and delegation levels, union representatives are selected by the section for active participation within it. The sections represent delegations in a state of the country or in the Federal District. Within the section there are four levels of participation. First, the executive committee is formed by the general secretary of the section and more than twenty other secretaries. Second, each secretary has assistants and negotiators who work on solving teachers' problems in the different government offices. Third, the positions of assistants and negotiators are used as a training ground for the future secretaries. Fourth, the coordinators are teachers directly involved in the schools who act as a link between the schools and the executive committees at the delegation level with the union. The identification of the leaders with the rank-and-file comes from their having advanced from within the system -- they know the feeling of being teachers. It takes many years' investment of one's time and energy to achieve these positions of leadership.

Referring to the participation of women in the leadership of the union from the male leaders' point of view, a former general secretary of the union said "they do not want, or did not want, to be elected into the leadership of the union."[21] At the same time, as a school principal asserted, "women are the ones who have given men the political power within the union. All male leaders have been launched by women, and they know that."[22] A female leader of the union pointed out that women have been blocked from positions of responsibility, and that only inferior positions, never decision-making positions, have been open to them; nevertheless, this leader thought that the participation of women in union activities had changed, since before "our only role was to listen."[23]

Most of the power within the union has been concentrated in the hands of men, even though most of the teachers are women. For this reason, and because women feel uncomfortable with the ways men use their power as union leaders, they have not felt welcome in the union. Indeed, it has been traditionally true that women have not felt at home within their union and its leadership. In the interviews women tend to agree that union leaders are too ready to exchange sexual favors for services. A young woman working as an assistant in the union recounted that older female teachers were constantly telling her that "in the union we only suffer disrespect." She added that things have changed for women in the union.[24] Most young women today will go alone to the union offices on professional business, although some of them still go accompanied by their father or brother.

In the past, preschool teachers tended to see their work as temporary, and they tended to remain as teachers only until marriage or motherhood. But in the view of both labor leaders and officals from the Ministry, this pattern has changed rapidly in the last few years as public education has expanded and as the social class differences between preschool and elementary school teachers have decreased. In the case of elementary school teaching there is a lifelong pattern of participation within the teaching profession. Repeatedly, the interviewed leaders pointed out that there is a difference between elementary and preschool teachers in their higher union participation. Preschool teachers are mostly women from a slightly higher social background than elementary school teachers. Among preschool teachers there has not been a tradition of union participation. A preschool teacher and leader of the union said, "Preschool teachers are not politically conscious because they come from more privileged groups and they do not have a working-class consciousness." She added, "I left the normal school without knowing that there was a union."[25] Even though union leaders and teachers like to describe themselves as belonging to the working class, for the most part they have middle-class backgrounds in the cities today. As members of the teaching profession, their level of education and income situate them in the middle classes.

Since 1972, when Vanguardia Revolucionaria, the dominant faction within the union, took control of the union leadership, the leaders have been attempting to change the image that the rank-and-file has of them. Their efforts are also devoted to increasing the participation of women within the life of the union, to change the women's view of the union, and to make women feel at ease when they go to the union to conduct their professional business. A female leader in the union said that for Carlos Jonguitud Barrios, the president of Vanguardia Revolucionaria, the participation of women in the union is deeply important. He told her that the "time has arrived for women to assume strength to defend the position of women, of union women, of political women. This does not conflict with their functions as mother and teacher, nor with their femininity . . . Women can struggle side by side with men without losing their femininity."[26]

Describing the rise of women to the leadership of the union, a school principal said, "Women arrive through the same channels that men do, and with the same alliances."[27] What this means is that the female leaders as well as the male leaders form part of Vanguardia Revolucionaria, the power bloc that controls the union. As is true of the male leaders, the same women have tended to rotate in the positions of leadership within the union and the section. Three of the women who were on the executive committee of the Ninth Section when they were interviewed had been secretaries in the same section during the previous triennium. The other two had been assistants and negotiators being trained for leadership roles. As in the case of the males, they were chosen by the leadership for these positions; and as with most of the cadres of Vanguardia Revolucionaria, they came from the middle-level positions such as school principals and supervisors. All of them agreed that, within the section executive committee, men and women participated equally. Women who spoke up and were not relegated to secondary functions. These women leaders, however, were a small minority on

the executive committee, which represents a section of the union in which the vast majority of the rank-and-file are women.

In the literature on the participation of women in politics in Latin America, it has generally been argued that the marginalization of women from power occurs because of the traditional values and socialization within the institution of the family; these factors limit behavior and serve as a barrier to increasing the participation of women in public and political institutions.[28] A female leader of the Ninth Section, representing the sensibility of a woman who had managed to advance with difficulty to a position of power, went beyond the explanation of female socialization when describing her personal experience within the union:

> Years ago, when I began going to the organization, the atmosphere was not healthy, although we cannot say that today it is excellent . . . For this reason, in those years I did not want to participate directly. I liked to participate in congresses, academic meetings, and sports events organized by the union . . . but not direct participation. I felt that it was not the moment yet for a woman to be there . . . sometimes women were not treated with respect . . . the males as leaders felt very powerful and were domineering and behaved improperly toward women. Things have changed, they have improved, women have increased their participation in the union. The latest general secretary of the union has attempted to erase the image that existed, that within the union there was no respect for women teachers. The affection, good treatment, and respect toward women teachers have increased.[29]

In describing this improved treatment, she also expressed the limited perspective of the union leadership and its emphasis on domesticity and motherhood. For example, the female leader observed, "a special celebration for those who are mothers is organized by the union on Mothers Day . . . to give women the place they deserve, because if she is not honored among us, then even less within society at large."

The same leader explained how the structure of opportunity for advancement to leadership positions has changed with the increasing importance of educational credentials. "When I began participating in the leadership of the union," she recalled, "I did it through my academic credentials; I did not advance only through a political career. This was helpful because I was able to get involved without having to put up with the unhealthy environment that existed."[30]

As Peter H. Smith found in his study of the political elite in Mexico, one way to become part of the political elite is to be classmates in the university, preferably the National University. The same pattern appears in the case of women. The male political culture that surrounds power, however, means that women routinely encounter barriers to that culture which are not barriers for men.[31] A secretary of the Ninth Section of the union remembered how, after several years of participating in union-sponsored events for teachers, she decided to participate more directly in the

leadership of the union, on the encouragement of a former fellow student in the normal school who was now a member of the executive committee of the Ninth Section:

> An old friend on mine, who was on the executive committee and had known me since we were students, insisted that I participate more and assured me that the men there were going to respect me as a woman. I was having doubts about becoming more deeply involved in the union because I was different. For example, the leaders of the union used to party a lot . . . after the meetings they always got together, drank and stayed until very late at night. I used to stay only for a little while -- because you have to do it in order to find your way in. But it is a world of men . . . I could have succumbed to their ways. My goal was to become part of a working team, both as a professional and within the union, without having to give up my image and convictions.[32]

In contrast, other female leaders have decided to follow men's ways as a path to professional advancement, while many more women have been reluctant even to try, thus limiting their aspirations and careers.

Just as women were beginning in very small numbers to enter the leadership of the Teachers' Union, the male-dominated leadership decided in 1977 to break up the women's office of the union. This office has existed in all unions in Mexico, as well as in PRI, since the Cardenas administration of the 1930s. The Teachers' Union is the only union in Mexico that has made this decision, and it is also the union with the largest percentage of women. The female leaders within the Ninth Section were not involved in the controversy. The women's office was dissolved, though when interviewed about it later, the leaders could not remember when or why. One of them explained why there should not be a women's office within the union: "The organization has set hierarchies in terms of the importance of the struggle for all teachers. That is why I cannot struggle according to my own interest . . . and I cannot work with groups of women only."[33]

The leadership of the Teachers' Union dissolved the women's union office on the grounds that, since most of the rank-and-file are women, they do not need a separate bureau. This ironic proclamation of the equality of men and women in union affairs brings up difficult questions. Do women need separate representation? As a group, do women benefit from the entry of individual women to token positions in the ruling elite? What role do female teachers play within the union? How can women as a subordinated group gain power in existing institutions and within the political structure of Mexico? The interviews with union leaders did not provide any evidence that female leaders were concerned with these questions. Meanwhile, at the party level, there is a controversy over the continued existence of the women's office. For some female party leaders the political participation of women cannot come about within separate organizations. For other leaders women are not yet in a condition of equality and thus need an organization to support them.

The evidence found in the interviews showed that there is little communication between the female leaders and the female rank-and-file. Nonetheless, the female leaders are serving a purpose in the attempt of the leadership to improve its image vis-a-vis the rank-and-file. One female leader recalled that Carlos Jonguitud Barrios, the president of Vanguardia Revolucionaria, said to her that "the image of the organization will change greatly when women enter and participate with all the honesty and devotion that characterize them."[34] An opposition leader noted, "In the promotion of social trade-unionism and its style of politics, they [Vanguardia Revolucionaria] have women play a central role."[35]

This expedient use of female leadership in a male-dominated institution does not mean that women's situation has failed to change. The original conception of women's political participation was that of voluntary public assistance; today, real but limited opportunities are given to women. Still, as one male opposition leader asserted, "It is more a treatment of courtesy than of equality."[36] The entrance of women into the leadership for the first time -- into a man's world as it is currently set up -- has not been without problems, but as one of the interviewed women said, "I have been on several teams in which all were men but me. It is difficult because they want you to follow their ways instead of letting you follow your own, and as a woman you need to search for new ways of participating." She continued by saying that in the Ninth Section there is only one place for female leaders to be if they wish to gain more power within the executive committee, and that place is in the chair of the general secretary. "All of us want that position," she added, but "who knows if the moment has arrived yet for a woman to be there?"[37]

More than half of the interviewed women had participated in union activities in one way or another during their careers. Except for the leaders of the Ninth Section, they had participated primarily in union-sponsored events or at the delegation level. Others participated in the opposition movement. Most women were not so concerned with power relations within the profession as they were interested in their school and in the children they taught. A woman working in the Ministry of Education remembered that, in her days as an elementary school teacher in the early 1970s, the union for women "was something remote, a group of male teachers who were fighting each other and every two or three years, I don't remember, we had a free day and we had to go vote . . . I was never interested." One of her memories was the time when someone had to be elected as representative for the union delegation:

> We chose a male professor of the school across from us. We chose him because we -- I and all the other women who taught in our school -- did not want to do it. Nobody was attracted by the position of union representative. It was an annoyance because you had to go to the union and pay attention to teachers' problems, all of which meant extra work. We proposed the man instead. He was very happy, and we elected him.[38]

It is revealing that gender relations, expressed in the everyday language of the profession, designate women teachers maestras and men teachers profesores, the latter term indicating greater status.

The leadership has been attempting to construct a carefully limited sphere for increased participation of women in the union. Most of the union efforts are designed to attract women in traditional ways, such as the celebration of Mother's Day and other social events. There is also a tendency toward using the union as a center for innocuous social activities; this is reflected in an increase in the number of breakfasts and lunches organized by the union. Most female teachers can attend these activities without any constraints, but such participation is misleading; it has replaced the function of union assemblies which bring together the leadership and the rank-and-file to discuss issues of general concern in employment and union politics. The use of the union for social activities has been a way of maintaining the legitimacy of the organization while at the same time restricting rank-and-file participation in union decisions and policies. Limiting women's role helps to constrain workers' power in a section of the union in which the majority of its members are women.[39]

Along similar lines, the number of women who go to the national congress may well have increased in recent years, but it is evident from looking at congress photographs that women are involved in activities different from those of men. Women serve coffee, handle the microphones, act as hostesses -- roles that show a constricted view of women's participation in the life of the union, and one that maintains traditional functions such as domestic chores associated with the home. "The participation of women in the union is decorative," said a young teacher referring to the union congresses. Challenging these practices in the culture of the union, an opposition leader said that the union leadership has a "perverted view" of women's participation in union politics.[40]

The officially sanctioned participation of women in the Teachers' Union is only one part of their participation. Women have been actively involved in opposition movements. In 1958, when teachers demonstrated in favor of a democratization of the leadership of the Teachers' Union, women participated actively. A leader at the time described the vehemence with which women participated and the central role they had in launching the movement. "The movement of 1958," he explained

> had a strong moral overtone. We were seeking to purify the ruling body, not to change the political structure. This had a special effect on the female rank-and-file, which was fighting against the abuses of the "gun-slingers" [casta pistoleril] who used women, who gave them permanent jobs in exchange for going out with them, against all the disdain and ill treatment heaped upon women. We had important and decisive participation by women and enthusiasm of women in the struggle, in the brigades, even though it was more difficult for women because of their family responsibilities. During the sit-in of 1958, the female teachers went even with their children and their families.[41]

Since the late 1950s, no other movement of such scope has arisen in the Ninth Section, but in the late 1970s protesting teachers created the Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educacion, an organization to represent them and to mobilize their discontent. As the leadership of the union sees it, there has not been a more broadly based protest movement in the Ninth Section because of the beneficial work that the union does in each school to minimize tension. In the view of the opposition leaders, it is because of the tight control that is placed upon teachers by the union. One section where great mobilization has occurred is Section 36 of Valle de Mexico, north of Mexico City. This section is in the working-class neighborhoods surrounding Mexico City. A teacher relates her history of participation in the movements taking place there:

> There is much fear . . . but a large majority of women are participating in politics now . . . I have had intense political participation . . . although not openly because I think I don't have enough knowledge to do it . . . I see other fellow teachers standing up in meetings and speaking . . . they can be strongly criticized. You need to be very centered and have a good knowledge of the situation, and I do not have enough time to prepare myself for that . . . I have been a political dissident because I see it is necessary . . . because those are my ideals. As a working-class person, I have suffered in my own skin all the injustices, the wages of hunger . . . This is what has led me to participate in politics . . . in order to defend my rights. In the school where I work, we are all dissidents for the same reasons . . . we have been struggling and fighting for years to secure a permanent job that was opened up to us by the Ministry and then taken away by the union because they said we were not worthy of it. One problem after another has led us to keep on with the struggle . . . I have been in demonstrations, meetings, brigades, and sit-ins. Last November we sat down in the street, right in front of the riot police for three days and two nights. I told my mother that if something happens to me, please take care of my children. I know it is dangerous, but I am defending my rights and I am struggling for them.[42]

Conclusion

The interpretation presented in this study has shown how gender limits the possibilities of advancement for women in the teaching profession of Mexico. The cultural and material subordination of women within the family both reinforces and is reinforced by the male-dominated institutional and political processes that impede the advancement of women. Because of this pattern of mutual reinforcement, the political influence of female teachers and their ability to advance professionally have been largely immobilized. Not only does the profession fail to alleviate traditional demands rooted in the conventions of family life, but the present structure of the Mexican educational profession actively uses gender to sustain existing patterns of authority and control.

Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that women employed in teaching are a somewhat privileged group among women workers in Mexican society. Teaching has given women stable employment in which they earn the same as men in the same job categories, though most women in Mexico earn markedly less than men with the same level of education. Moreover, the union does not differentiate between its members as men or women when protecting wage levels and social benefits. Thus, unionization can be seen as one factor that explains the relative advantage of women in the teaching profession when compared with other occupational opportunities for women. But in spite of the relative success of female teachers when compared to other women, their gender has acted as a barrier by restricting the educational and occupational opportunities open to them. In particular, the lack of governmental policy to increase educational opportunities for women shapes their careers within the profession and limits their participation in power and decision-making positions.[43]

Current perceptions of sex-role differences have the effect of decreasing women's power as professionals in education. Even though women as a group are not organized, they do play a carefully circumscribed role in union policy-making. The leadership uses cultural stereotypes about women when promoting their participation as rank-and-file members, and in numerous ways it relegates women to secondary positions. Similarly, the few women who have advanced to leadership roles have been promoted because of their traditionally female image of honesty and devotion, and as a way of legitimizing the leadership in front of the rank-and-file.

While cultural stereotypes are used within the union to restrict the role of women as professionals, the positions of leadership within the Teachers' Union are a channel for political recruitment to positions within PRI and the political bureaucracy. This channel is highly competitive and male-dominated. Similarly, the power and decision-making positions within the Ministry of Education have been relatively closed to women, since the top positions in the bureaucracy are given to individuals -- mostly males -- with a university education and experience within the political culture of the state. Such practices act as a ceiling limiting how high women can advance within the system. Reinforced by the constraints of family life, these are major reasons for the fact that women, who provide most of the services in education, have had little access to power and leadership in the teaching profession.

NOTES

1. Lourdes Arizpe, "Women in the Informal Labor Sector: The Case of Mexico City," Signs 3 (Autumn 1977):25-37. On women employed in the agro-industries, see Lourdes Arizpe and Josefina Aranda, "The Comparative Advantages of Women's Disadvantages: Women Workers in the Strawberry Export Agribusiness in Mexico," Signs 7 (Winter 1981):453-73; Martha Roldan, "Subordinacion generica y proletarizacion rural: Un estudio de caso en el Noroeste Mexicano," in Magdalena Leon, ed., Debate sobre la Mujer en America Latina y el Caribe (Bogota, Colombia: ACEP, 1982), vol. 2, pp. 75-101. On women in the maquiladoras, see Maria Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, For We are Sold, I and My People: Women and Industry in Mexico's Frontier (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983).

2. On the percentage of women in the labor market, see Instituto Nacional de Estadistica Geografia e Informatica, X Censo General de Población y Vivienda, 1980 (Mexico City: Secretaría de Programación y Presupuesto, 1984). On the employment of women in the urban labor market, see Mercedes Pedrero and Teresa Rendón, "El trabajo de la mujer en México en los setentas," Estudios sobre la mujer (Mexico City: Secretaría de Programación y Presupuesto, 1982), pp. 437-56.

3. For the percentage of women and men in high school and basic normal schools in 1978-1979, see Secretaría de Educación Pública, "Estadísticas básicas del sistema educativo nacional: Inicio de cursos 1978-79." For the percentage of women and men students in the university, see Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Institutos de Enseñanza Superior, Anuario Estadístico 1983 (Mexico City: ANUIES, 1984). On the concentration on women in a few disciplines within the university, see Rodolfo Lara y Jorge Madrazo, "La mujer en la universidad: El caso de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México," Deslinde 121 (1980):3-17.

4. Roderic A. Camp, "Women and Political Leadership in Mexico: A Comparative Study of Female and Male Political Elites," The Journal of Politics 41 (1979):417-41.

5. On the participation of teachers in the feminist movement in the first half of the century, see Anna Macias, Against All Odds: The Feminist Movement in Mexico to 1940 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982).

6. For a critique of economic theories of occupational segregation and an appraisal of the need for a broader approach, see Maureen Mackintosh, "Gender and Economics: The Sexual Division of Labour and the Subordination of Women," in Kate Young, Carol Wolkowitz, and Roslyn McCullagh, Of Marriage and the Market (London: CSE Books, 1981), pp. 1-15.

7. For examples of this line of research, see Lourdes Beneria, "Reproduction, Production and the Sexual Division of Labour," Cambridge Journal of Economics 3 (September 1979):203-225; Verena Stolcke,

"Women's Labours: The Naturalisation of Social Inequality and Women's Subordination," in Kate Young et al., Of Marriage and the Market, pp. 30-48. For a theoretical discussion of the role of economic and political structures in supporting the subordination of women, see Beneria, "Reproduction," and the Introduction by Beneria in Women and Development: The Sexual Division of Labor in Rural Societies, edited by Lourdes Beneria (New York: Praeger, 1982), pp. 149-77.

8. All interviews cited in this article are from the author's Ph.D. dissertation, "Power, Gender and Education: Unionized Teachers in Mexico City," School of Education, Stanford University, May 1985. The dissertation uses documents, printed materials, and secondary literature; and 43 interviews with officials, union leaders, teachers, and other informed sources such as people who have done research on Mexican education. The interviews were necessary because of the lack of traditional sources of documentation on the participation of women in Mexican education. The author's 43 interviews are complemented by 32 life history interviews of teachers conducted by Centro de Estudios Contemporaneos of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia. An additional source of evidence was the direct observation of activities that occurred in addition to the interviews, such as daily activities in the union, interactions between rank-and-file and leaders in the union, and activities in the Ministry and in the schools. Taken together, the interviews formed a rich source of evidence to evaluate in detail the issues under investigation, covering a range of topics but aimed primarily at illuminating the careers of men and women in teaching and educational leadership.

9. On the middle-class position of teachers in Mexican society, see Carlos A. Sirvent, "La burocracia en México: El caso de la FSTSE," Estudios Políticos, no. 1 (1975):14-16. Soledad Loeza argues that in countries like Mexico, with an overall low educational level, the importance of education increases as a distinctive element of the middle classes. Loeza also suggests that teachers as wage workers can be considered as part of the middle classes; see Soledad Loeza, "El papel político de las clases medias en el México Contemporaneo," Revista Mexicana de Sociologia 45 (1983):407-39.

10. Pedrero and Rendón, "El trabajo de la mujer en México en los sententas," pp. 451-54.

11. On this subject there are no national data, but Sylvia Schmelkes found among preschool teachers that withdrawal from the labor market was infrequent; only 20 percent withdrew for three months on maternity leaves. See Sylvia Schmelkes, "Estimación de las tasas de participación, de permanencia y de reposicion de los egresados de la normal de nivel preescolar y estudio de su mercado laboral," in Carlos Muñoz Izquierdo y Sylvia Schmelkes, Los maestros de educación básica: Estudios de su mercado de trabajo (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, Centro de Estudios Educativos, A.C., 1983); see especially pp. 154-71.

12. Interview D-8, by the author, Mexico City, August 1982. Unless otherwise indicated, translations from Spanish are my own.

13. Brigida Garcia, Humberto Muñoz and Orlandina de Oliveira, Hogares y trabajadores en la Ciudad de México (Mexico City: Colegio de México/UNAM, 1982), p. 13. This hypothesis is presented in several other studies about labor force participation cited by these authors.

14. Teresita de Barbieri, "Mujeres y vida cotidiana: estudio exploratorio de sectores medios y obreros en la Ciudad de Mexico," Garcia et al., Hogares y Trabajadores, p. 14.

15. Pedrero and Rendón, "El trabajo de la mujer en México en los sententas," p. 454. The percentage for employed women 12 years and older was calculated; for this reason the authors think there might be a small distortion and the percentage might be slightly larger.

16. Quote from Interview D-11, Mexico City, September 1982. Several authors have addressed the issue of the influence of culture on gender hierarchies; see, for example, Alice Kessler-Harris, Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Jean Lipman-Blumen, Gender Roles and Power (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey; Prentice-Hall, 1984); and Elizabeth H. Pleck, "Two Worlds in One: Work and Family," Journal of Social History 10 (Winter 1976):178-95.

17. Interview D-12, Mexico City, September 1982.

18. Interview B-2, Mexico City, September 1982.

19. Interview C-1, Mexico City, July 1982.

20. Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, Secretaría de Estadística y Planeación, "Cúantos Somos?" Mexico City, July 1979, p. 15.

21. Interview with Professor Gaudencio Peraza, general secretary of the national executive committee of the Teachers' Union, 1945-1949. Departamento de Estudios Contemporaneo, INAH, interview PHO/3/21 by Marcela Tostada, June-August 1979, p. 395.

22. Interview C-2, Mexico City, July 1982.

23. Interview A-3, Mexico City, August 1982.

24. Interview D-13, Mexico City, July 1982.

25. Interview A-2, Mexico City, August 1982.

26. Interview A-3, Mexico City, August 1982.

27. Interview C-2, Mexico City, July 1982.

28. For a review article on the topic, see Jane S. Jaquette, "Female Political Participation in Latin America," in Sex and Class in Latin America, edited by June Nash and Helen I. Safa. (New York: Praeger, 1976), pp. 221-44. One of the few detailed studies of the political participation of women in Latin America is Elsa M. Chaney, Supermadre: Women in Politics in Latin America (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979). Chaney's conclusion is that Latin American societies "define women's political activity as an extension of their traditional family role to the public arena" (p. 158).

29. Interview A-3, Mexico City, July 1982.

30. Interview A-3, Mexico City, July 1982.

31. Peter H. Smith, Labyrinths of Power: Political Recruitment in Twentieth-Century Mexico (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); especially in chapter 9, "The Rules of the Game," see pp. 249-50.

32. Interview A-3, Mexico City, July 1982.

33. Interview A-2, Mexico City, August 1982. This point also was confirmed by Interview A-4, Mexico City, August 1982.

34. Interview A-3, Mexico City, July 1982.

35. Interview A-5, Mexico City, August 1982.

36. Interview A-5, Mexico City, August 1982.

37. Interview A-3, Mexico City, July 1982.

38. Interview D-12, Mexico City, September 1982.

39. To identify discrimination in union activities, union publications were closely examined to evaluate the image of women that is projected through these media. Two publications were closely examined: Reivindicacion and Magisterio. Reivindicacion served as the house organ for the Teachers' Union from the founding of the union until the teachers' conflict of 1958, at which time it was discontinued and the new magazine Magisterio emerged.

40. Interview D-3, Mexico City, August 1982.

41. Interview A-5, Mexico City, August 1982. For an account of teacher mobilization in 1958, see Aurora Loyo Brambila, El movimiento magisterial de 1958 en México (Mexico City: Era, 1979).

42. Interview D-8, Mexico City, August 1982. On the movement since 1979 see Luis Hernandez, comp., Las luchas magisteriales 1979-1981 (Mexico City: Macehual, 1981).

43. Fora detailed analysis of the impact of educational inequality on the professional advancement of women in Mexican education, see Regina Cortina, "Power, Gender and Education," pp. 84-120.

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