

MAKING WOMEN VISIBLE:
New Works on Latin American and Caribbean Women

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SILENT LOOMS: WOMEN AND PRODUCTION IN A GUATEMALAN TOWN. By Tracy Bachrach Ehlers. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990. Pp. 177. \$27.50 paper.)

WOMEN OF THE CARIBBEAN. Edited by Pat Ellis. (London: Zed Books, 1986. Pp. 165. \$35.00 cloth, \$9.95 paper.)

THE WOMEN OF AZUA: WORK AND FAMILY IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC. By Barbara Finlay. (New York: Praeger, 1989. Pp. 190. \$35.00.)

GENDER AND WORK IN THE THIRD WORLD: SEXUAL DIVISIONS IN BRAZILIAN INDUSTRY. By John Humphrey. (London: Tavistock Publications, 1987. Pp. 229. \$69.95.)

WOMEN AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN LATIN AMERICA. Edited by Elizabeth Jelin. (London: Zed Books, 1990. Pp. 226. \$49.95 cloth, \$15.00 paper.)

BRAZILIAN WOMEN SPEAK: CONTEMPORARY LIFE STORIES. By Daphne Patai. (New Brunswick, N.J., and London: Rutgers University Press, 1988. Pp. 398. \$37.00 cloth, \$13.95 paper.)

In a recent review essay in this journal, Florence Babb wrote, "A decade ago, studies of Latin American women and work generally called for a critique of the prevailing analytical frameworks of modernization and dependency theory. . . . Many went on to provide a reassessment of women's work in the rural and urban sectors, demonstrating the serious underestimation of women's economic contributions."¹

It may be well more than a decade since we recognized the need to study women's economic role, and a good number of carefully researched ground-breaking studies may have been published over that period. But to judge from the sense of urgency expressed by the authors under review here, scholars still do not know nearly enough about women's contribution to the economy, their political participation, their perception of the world in which they live, or the impact of development on women's lives and families.

Although these six books differ in many respects, their authors

1. Florence Babb, "Women and Work in Latin America," *LARR* 25, no. 2 (1990):236.

share a common concern. Each expresses a determination to bring to readers' attention those who have so long been invisible and thus to give to women's activities and attitudes the significance previously denied. As Tracy Bachrach Ehlers's work in Guatemala and Barbara Finlay's in the Dominican Republic show, even in fields like ethnography where women's role has long been studied as a separate and significant category, the complexity and centrality of women's activities have been poorly understood. All these works attempt to supply key pieces of a puzzle that, when fully assembled, should present a clearer picture of how both women and men confront a changing world in which subsistence agriculture is being replaced by agribusiness, cottage industry by factory production, barter by modern commercial relations, political parties by new social movements, and military dictatorships by unstable democratic regimes.

Among the books reviewed here, Pat Ellis's *Women of the Caribbean* and Barbara Finlay's *The Women of Azua* belong to the literature generated by a common sense of dismay at the obtuseness of planners of national and international development. Both call for a "women's perspective" on standard development policies. This critique centers on the tendency of planners to ignore women's role and the impact of policy on women's lives, a shortcoming that grows out of policymakers' undervaluation of women's contribution to family survival and to the economy as a whole.

In the introduction to her edited volume, Ellis argues, "Caribbean women have always been integrally involved in the social and economic development of their societies; but their contribution to the development of the region has not been fully appreciated by planners and policymakers" (p. 19). She asserts that the failure of the development strategies that have been implemented in the Caribbean underscores the need to conceive "a more people-centred approach" that will force "governments and development planners to pay attention to the development of human resources," especially those represented by women's productive capabilities (p. 19).

It is hard to dispute Ellis's claim that development policy must be defined more broadly to go beyond economic growth to include concern for distributing resources more equitably, reducing poverty and unemployment, and improving the quality of life for the majority of the population. Ellis is also convincing in arguing that women perceive and experience the development process in ways that differ significantly from men.

It is nevertheless quite a leap to claim, as she does, that "the human factor" in development planning (defined by Ellis as concern for the provision of "basic needs for all families, a more equal distribution and sharing of resources, an improvement in the quality of life for the poor and disadvantaged in society and in the peaceful coexistence of all peoples") is a vision of the world that is essentially female (p. 20). The

problem with insisting on the existence of a specific women's perspective on development (as is found in a number of other feminist critiques) is that women as a group or feminists in particular are not the only ones or necessarily even the first to notice the deficiencies of development policies that are clumsy and expensive, ignore the strengths and skills of poor people, benefit the already better-off, and make a shambles of the environment and a mess of people's lives. Moreover, even the briefest reflection on the programs fostered by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher should dispel the notion that women are by nature intrinsically more sensitive to the human costs of public policy or that if women (rather than the "male planners and researchers" of whom Ellis is understandably critical) were in charge of development, public policy would necessarily be more humane. Ellis is nonetheless on target in asserting that, given the distinct roles of men and women, public policy may impact on them differently.

Apart from Ellis's stimulating introductory essay, *Women of the Caribbean* leaves the reader less than satisfied, not because the contributions are of poor quality but because the range is so great, and the coverage of each topic so cursory. Ellis's relatively lengthy overview is followed by what is called Chapter 1, consisting of half a page on Nanny, the great Jamaican maroon leader, and then by a two-page second chapter by Rhoda Reddock entitled "Factors Affecting Women in the Caribbean Past and Present." These three pages comprise the entire section labeled "Part One: Women and History." The "chapters" that make up the rest of the book (on women and labor, the family, education, culture, and development) are scarcely more satisfying in offering only a two-page contribution by Peggy Antrobus on women's employment and a page and a half by Beryl Carasco on education. Five pages would appear to be the average length of the articles, and anyone familiar with the careful research of many of these authors can only be frustrated that the contributors were not encouraged to elaborate on their topics at greater length. Notwithstanding the obvious limitations of such a broad range of short pieces, the collection should be a valuable starting point for anyone interested in the changing condition of women in the English-speaking Caribbean.

In *The Women of Azua*, Barbara Finlay focuses on six rural Dominican communities in assessing the impact of women's employment in the export food-processing industry on their attitudes and their status in the family and community. Like Ellis, Finlay is eager to correct the mistaken assumption that development projects that improve the economic condition of men automatically serve the interests of women. On the contrary, Finlay finds that planners' assumption that women are supported by husbands and fathers rather than forming part of the economically active population is not affirmed by the evidence. Moreover, she finds that development projects "can cause changes in the traditional balance of

resources and/or power within the family, often leaving the women more dependent than ever on their husbands” while depriving them of formerly meaningful and productive economic roles (p. 3).

Finlay analyzes the traditional division of labor and decision making within households and traces the changes that occur when women move from traditional roles into the market economy as wage earners. Her method was to conduct a survey of two groups of women: a representative sample of the women in the six rural communities and a special sample of women employed in nearby multinational food-processing plants. This comparison enables her to highlight the differences in age, fertility, marital status, household composition, religious participation, organization of domestic labor, education, diet and health, housing, migration patterns, and attitudes between the two groups of women.

Comparing the two populations, Finlay finds that working women express more negative assessments of men and marriage and have less stable marital relations, more help from other (female) family members in performing domestic tasks, and more power and control over resources within the family. They are more likely to limit fertility through contraception and enjoy a far greater sense of control over their lives when compared to the sample group of women who do not work outside the home. Notwithstanding the positive findings about the impact of women’s employment, Finlay closes by underscoring the well-known limitations of the kinds of jobs offered by multinational agribusiness firms. In particular, she notes the stressful and unskilled nature of the work and the insecurity generated by the likelihood that the multinationals may pull up stakes and move their operations at any time.

Tracy Ehlers’s sensitive and complex rendering of the lives of women in San Pedro Sacatepequez, Guatemala, explores what June Nash has called the paradox of gender relations in a society that gives power and authority to men while assigning the major responsibility for child care and the family’s economic survival to women. As Nash notes in her introduction to *Silent Looms*, “most monographs on Maya populations have either ignored women’s contributions to the indigenous economy” or, when they have examined women’s work, “ignored the contradiction between patriarchal ideology and observed behavior that is increasingly sharpened by the political and economic transformations taking place” (p. xi).

Ehlers’s colorfully written and engaging study squarely addresses this problem as she focuses on the household production system and the role of women in sustaining their families through their work as weavers, knitters, marketwomen, shopkeepers, and traders. She finds that family productive systems—cottage industry, market activity, and commercial trade—rest on the managerial capabilities of women. But during the period under study, the traditional economy of San Pedro, which had

been based on smallholding cultivation and handicrafts, was undergoing a transition to trade and trucking. Ehlers asks how relations between men and women are affected by these changes and finds that once-autonomous female producers are increasingly becoming a dependent working class.

In the Dominican Republic, Finlay found that a rise in men's earning power generally led to increased expenditure on drinking, gambling, and other women rather than to improvement in the economic well-being of the family. Likewise, in highland Guatemala, Ehlers noted that San Pedro's rising standard of living "did not necessarily distribute the benefits of development equally by sex or class" (p. 4). A clear consequence of development in San Pedro has been displacement of the traditional cottage industry by piecework employment and a shift in business and small industry to sites outside the home, away from traditional family productive systems. This shift inevitably produces a loss of status and control for the women involved.

Overall, Ehlers finds that the modernizing trends she observed in San Pedro impacted on women in varied and contradictory ways. She shows how the diversity of productive opportunities accompanying modernization have given some women a chance to take part in the multifaceted commercial relations that have made the town a center of trade for the highlands. Moreover, more women now study and learn new skills, and many have diversified their market trade to meet the more sophisticated demands of the town's consumers.

On balance, however, Ehlers finds that the greater San Pedro's integration with the national and international economy, the greater the obstacles to women's economic independence. In the end, women find that they no longer play as significant a role in production as they did before: "Not only is their economic influence abating with the decline of the market for traditional female-based goods, but control over their own production—and the production of their children—has diminished as well" (p. 5). Ehlers notes that those who benefit most from the economic changes underway in San Pedro are the middle-class, educated, and urban women. As for men, those who engage in cottage industries as brickmakers, carpenters, or tanners are better capitalized, more mobile, and less occupationally segregated than women. As a consequence, "male homeworkers are more flexible and can . . . adjust to market fluctuations while women cannot" (p. 111). When women commercialize their skills, the clothing, soap, bread, and candles that they make at home are more susceptible to being replaced by modern factory goods than are the products manufactured at home by men.

On the topics of courtship and marital relations, work organization, domestic labor, and consumption, Ehlers weaves a lively tale as colorful as the *huipiles* worn by the women she studies. She embroiders the small details that bring to life a whole town of women and children.

Particularly skillful is the way in which the theoretical and methodological discussion is interwoven with the ethnographic description rather than set aside in separate introductory and concluding sections.

Like Ehlers and Finlay, John Humphrey focuses on women's work. But his *Gender and Work in the Third World* takes as its object of study Brazilian women who have moved out of the home to work in the electrical, motor components, and pharmaceutical industries. Where Ellis or Finlay were moved to write in order to correct development planners' erroneous concepts about women's productive roles, Humphrey is stimulated by what he regards as the failure of economic theorists to understand the importance of gender in structuring employment, labor markets, and the organization of work. His study challenges the neoclassical economic theory that assumes that the market operates according to economic laws that are gender-blind and that the sources of women's disadvantage in the labor market are to be found outside the market sphere in personal or family decisions.

Humphrey's survey of female workers in seven factories in southern Brazil shows that the policies adopted by large, multinational companies do not reflect a "rational" capitalist logic that rejects discrimination based on gender or race but rather are deeply influenced by the prejudices characterizing the larger society. In this society, men are defined as "breadwinners" while women are viewed as temporary workers who lack long-term commitment to their jobs. Humphrey demonstrates how gender stereotypes carry over into the workplace and are reinforced by management practices limiting the kinds of jobs that women are permitted to perform. Thus while the employment of women in factory jobs increased steadily through the 1970s and 1980s, the incorporation of women into industry remains skewed because women are overwhelmingly classified as unskilled and are segregated in exclusively female jobs at the bottom of the job hierarchy and pay scale.

Using an approach similar to Finlay's in studying Dominican women, Humphrey looks at the relationship between the workers' domestic situations and their employment in the factories, highlighting the impact of actual and anticipated family responsibilities on the working patterns of the women interviewed. Here Humphrey focuses not only on the workers' attitudes, intentions, and experiences but also on how management constructs employment policies around these patterns and the stereotypes attached to them.

Humphrey finds that the assumption that the female labor force is younger and less stable than the male is not borne out in a situation where male workers, particularly the unskilled, are also unstable in their employment. He notes that domestic situations weigh on the choices of male as well as female workers and that "workers do not shed the expectations and norms of their gender upon entering the factory" (p. 6). From the time

they walk through the factory gates, workers are classified and treated as either male or female, and on the basis of that classification, they develop expectations about their own behavior and that of the other workers they encounter. For example, male and female workers are subjected to very different levels of supervision and time constraints in the factory. In short, specific worker identities are constructed along gender lines within the factory itself: women are excluded from prestigious jobs, and the jobs that they are permitted to hold are disdained as unskilled. Moreover, Humphrey finds, segregation by sex becomes a key control mechanism in maintaining this hierarchy because women must be prevented from testing the proposition that they are incapable of doing the work normally performed by men.

While this valuable and insightful study is clearly written, Humphrey's apparent squeamishness at using the first-person pronoun traps him in convoluted constructions that rob his writing of dynamism. In *Gender and Work in the Third World*, the passive voice reigns. While reading through strings of "it has been seen" and "it has been established," wishing all the while that the author would stand up and argue a point in his own name, the reader gets the impression (quite likely unjustified) that the writer is disengaged from the people he has so capably studied. At a time when engagement with research subjects has gained acceptance among the most serious social scientists, it seems a shame that Humphrey writes in a way that establishes so much distance between himself, the reader, and the subjects.

If anything, Daphne Patai's *Brazilian Women Speak* suffers from the opposite problem. Patai is so immersed in the experiences of her subjects that she renounces the role of interpreter and analyst in favor of providing (in edited version, to be sure) the autobiographical accounts of twenty Brazilian women told in their own voices. These varying "life histories," taken one at a time, are rich and gripping. They cover the everyday experiences, the sometimes cherished but often terrible reminiscences, hopes, doubts, and longings of an assortment of Brazilian women. Patai's interviewees range from Sister Denise, a Catholic nun, to Angela, a *candomblé* priestess, Teresa, a laundress, Cristina, an entrepreneur, the educated Maria Helena, and her servant Marta. Along the way, readers also meet a prostitute, a factory worker, a seamstress, a secretary, a hairdresser, and a student.

A few of the accounts are preceded by brief introductions that provide descriptive and statistical data on the Brazilian Catholic Church, the condition of blacks in Brazilian society, women in the labor force, Afro-Brazilian religious practices, political parties and *apertura*, and the socioeconomic conditions of the Northeast. But the majority of the life histories are presented with only a paragraph or two to set the scene. Through Patai's skillful selection and editing, most of the stories stand on

their own, movingly conveying at least some of the complexity, contradictions, and humanity that Patai obviously came to prize in the women she interviewed. Yet lacking an analytical framework in which to place these women's lives and their sufferings, the stories begin to blur in the reader's mind. The bits of background information that Patai supplies are not always sufficient to contextualize the stories that follow. She does not compare or contrast the experiences of the women she studied nor explain why she chose to focus on these twenty individuals out of the more than sixty she systematically interviewed. Thus while virtually every story in the volume is entertaining or moving reading in itself, *Brazilian Women Speak* as a whole does not reveal as much as it might have about the condition of Brazilian women and the dynamics of change in their lives.

Patai's reluctance to play the role of analyst and interpreter, to propose generalizations, or to draw conclusions about the women she studied seems even more regrettable given the insight she displays in the lengthy introductory essay, "Constructing a Self." It includes a thoughtful discussion of the ethical and methodological problems raised by the collection of oral histories. Here Patai addresses the question of the reliability of material supplied by a subject who herself has selected and organized themes, incidents, and recollections. Patai is also alert to the problems that arise for the researcher when the "objects" of her research come from a different socioeconomic level or culture. In particular, Patai cautions about the responsibility of the interviewer when what is being elicited is not merely a folktale or even a personal narrative focused on particular aspects of a subject's life but a life story in which the speaker "is in a sense offering up herself for her own and her listener's scrutiny" (p. 8).

While the other authors reviewed in this article are troubled by the underestimation of women's economic role inside and outside the home, Elizabeth Jelin and her collaborators are concerned about the lack of attention given to women as political actors. She writes in her introduction to *Women and Social Change in Latin America*, "Until a few years ago, women constituted a forgotten social category, invisible in analyses and diagnoses of popular movements and in the elaboration of strategies for them" (p. 6). Jelin believes that this lack of interest and appreciation of women's political capabilities stems from observers' acceptance of sexist stereotypes in which men are assumed to function in the public political sphere while Latin American women are thought to confine their activities to the private domestic world of the household.

Increasingly obvious to students of Latin American politics is the change carefully documented by the studies in *Women and Social Change in Latin America*: social movements, organized outside the framework of conventional political parties, are playing an increasingly important role in determining political outcomes in the region. And women's participa-

tion in popular organizations lies at the heart of the growing influence of these movements, their novel practices, and the challenge they represent to the existing social, economic, and political order.

Jelin argues, and the case studies that follow demonstrate, that a virtually total sexual division of labor continues to characterize the lives of Latin American men and women. Yet operating within the framework of their traditional roles as wives and mothers, women have extended their domestic role to make public what was once private by seeking collective responses to what used to be understood exclusively as individual domestic problems and tragedies. The shortage of food and the deficiencies in housing, transportation, schools, health care, and other social services have become starting points for women's mobilization. The manifest need to organize in order to provide their families with the basics has stimulated new forms of collective action and political participation for women in the popular sectors. Furthermore, in their roles as mothers and grandmothers, women in the Southern Cone in the 1970s became the rallying point for the long suppressed demand for a return to democratically elected, responsible government and an end to brutal military rule, disappearances, and other abuses of human rights.

Jelin recognizes that participating in groups that organize food distribution or press for potable water is not likely to undermine women's fundamental identification as housewives and mothers. She observes nevertheless that even a collective kitchen opens "a new space" for women, "enabling them to partake in social confrontation, decision-making and supervision as social and political subjects" (pp. 189-90). When individual domestic problems become socialized and women group together to seek collective solutions to their family needs, the result "can have complex, subversive implications," as shown by Teresa Caldeira's contribution on neighborhood movements in São Paulo (p. 190). Political activism thus becomes an extension of women's domestic role, and participation comes to be seen as a responsible mother's duty. As a new identity of "political mother" develops, the private domain is also altered. Women spend more time outside the home, and female competence is no longer defined solely on the basis of women's performance of domestic tasks. Moreover, Jelin argues, the activities of the neighborhood groups shatter the passive image of women and transform passivity into combativeness.

Four of the case studies clearly illustrate these trends. Cecilia Blondet discusses the development of mutual-aid networks among women who have migrated to a neighborhood in Lima from the Peruvian countryside. Teresa Caldeira examines the attitudes toward political parties and political participation of women in six popular neighborhoods in São Paulo. María del Carmen Feijóo and Mónica Gogna survey the history of women's mobilization and compare three forms of female participation in

Argentina—the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, the housewives' movement against price hikes, and feminist groups—considering autonomous groups as well as those affiliated with parties and unions. Rosario León analyzes the development of the Federación Bartolina Sisa among peasant women in Bolivia.

Valuable, but focused on phenomena other than those highlighted by Jelin in her introductory essay, are the essay contributed by the Andean Oral History Workshop, which uses the words of participants to reconstruct a history of Bolivian women's struggles, and Thelma Gálvez's and Rosalba Todaro's essay on Chile. The latter provides useful data on Chilean women's participation in the labor force and trade unions. Yet because the authors examine women in the workplace and the sexist nature of the Chilean labor movement, their contribution seems out of place in a collection that mainly analyzes new social movements and other innovative forms of struggle.

Women and Social Change in Latin America suffers from the contributors' tendency to go off in their own directions, making it difficult to compare cases. The book is also hampered by an often awkward translation that is far too literal. Nevertheless, anyone interested in Latin American women's political and economic activism or in theoretical discussions on new social movements will find a wealth of data and insightful analysis in this stimulating collection.

Surveying these six quite varied books on women, it becomes clear that women were invisible for so long that the attempt to bring to light the complexities and nuances of their changing economic, social, and political condition is proving to be a highly challenging task. Whatever may be the specific limitations of any of these studies, all form part of a collective effort to provide a baseline of data that will enable us to understand the central role that women play in every process of change underway today in Latin America.