

# WOMEN AND WORK IN LATIN AMERICA

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*THE CROSSROADS OF CLASS AND GENDER: INDUSTRIAL HOMEWORK, SUB-CONTRACTING, AND HOUSEHOLD DYNAMICS IN MEXICO.* By **LOURDES BENERIA** and **MARTHA ROLDAN**. Series on Women in Culture and Society. (Chicago Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1987. Pp. 204. \$42.00 cloth, \$15.95 paper.)

*RURAL WOMEN AND STATE POLICY: FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON LATIN AMERICAN AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT.* Edited by **CARMEN DIANA DEERE** and **MAGDALENA LEON**. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1987. Pp. 282. \$38.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.)

*WOMEN ON THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER: RESPONSES TO CHANGE.* Edited by **VICKI L. RUIZ** and **SUSAN TIANO**. (Boston, Mass.: Allen and Unwin, 1987. Pp. 247. \$37.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)

*SELLERS AND SERVANTS: WORKING WOMEN IN LIMA, PERU.* By **XIMENA BUNSTER** and **ELSA M. CHANEY**. (New York: Praeger, 1985. Pp. 259. \$35.95 cloth. South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1989. Pp. 259. \$18.95 paper. Now available from Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn.)

*WOMEN AND CHANGE IN LATIN AMERICA.* Edited by **JUNE NASH** and **HELEN SAFA**. (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1986. Pp. 372. \$29.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)

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 (Nash and Safa 1976). 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 (Benería 1982; Deere and León 1981). Some research pointed to the double load carried by women who worked both in and out of the home and argued that the gender division of labor underlies women's subordinate social position (Leacock and Safa 1986).

Recent research has built upon this pioneering work. Indeed, much of it has been conducted by the same individuals, who no longer need to justify a feminist perspective or to defend the significance of gender in society. The five books under review offer excellent examples of

the new wave of research on Latin American women and work: they examine the participation and decision making of women in work; they focus on the household as a critical unit of analysis but insist on disaggregating the household by gender; they draw essential connections between the local level of their studies and the broader level of state-policy formation and the international economy; and they consider the strategies of women and their families for surviving the current economic crises faced by Latin American nations. All these themes will be explored in this review essay.

The two case studies and three edited collections reviewed here include original field research by economists, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and historians. One study is based in urban Mexico while an edited collection considers the U.S.–Mexican border region. Another study examines urban women and work in Peru, and the remaining two collections include research on rural and urban women throughout Latin America. Although several of the articles in these books do not focus on work as their central concern, most of the research reviewed takes women's work in production and reproduction as a starting point for further analysis.

In *The Crossroads of Class and Gender*, Lourdes Benería and Martha Roldán analyze the results of a study of 140 industrial homeworkers whom they interviewed in Mexico City in 1981 and 1982. Publication of their research makes available one of the first extended studies of women in the urban "informal sector," which is beginning to claim attention in Latin America. They point out, however, that the concept is problematic and that although the women they interviewed perform underpaid and unregulated work, they are nonetheless piecework wage laborers and not the self-employed so often equated with informal activities. Throughout their book, Roldán and Benería delineate the intersections of formal and informal economies as well as class and gender in brilliant detail.

Ximena Bunster and Elsa Chaney, in *Sellers and Servants*, share somewhat more of the personal lives of the 150 working women they interviewed in Lima. The longer two of their four chapters are based on rich profiles of the women they studied. The remaining chapters consider the relationship of these women to their families and communities, and in some cases to their working children. The descriptive material and accompanying photographs make this study especially enjoyable reading. The book is nevertheless grounded in a solid theoretical framework, set forth in the introduction, that informs the entire work. Bunster and Chaney distance themselves from informal-sector analysis, yet the marketers and street vendors they studied are now under scrutiny as part of Peru's "informal problem." Their research could lend important insights to the current debates. Bunster and Chaney engage more directly in the ongoing debate over the future prospects of domestic servants. They argue

persuasively that upward mobility is rare among servants and that the most frequent move is a lateral one into street selling.

Of the three edited collections, *Rural Women and State Policy* is the most unified in focus. Carmen Diana Deere and Magdalena León present a useful introduction to the chapters, which were first presented as papers at two international conferences in 1985. They trace the emergence of rural women as a development issue during a period of economic crisis and political transition in Latin America. Along with their contributors, Deere and León argue that state policy and agrarian reform are not gender-neutral and that only in Cuba and Nicaragua have rural women benefited from reforms. Part One offers case studies from eight countries that lend support to the central thesis and lay the groundwork for the comparative and problem-oriented Part Two. The first part presents a contrast between the situation of rural women in six countries following a capitalist model and in two pursuing alternative development models. Another contrast may be perceived in the second part, between one author's positive assessment of some integrated rural development projects that have assisted rural women in subsistence production (Chaney) and another's emphasis on the empowerment of women through participation in income-generating projects (Cornelia Butler Flora).

A regional focus gives *Women on the U.S.–Mexican Border* a special coherence. Most of the articles in Vicki Ruiz's and Susan Tiano's anthology concern women's work, gender, and class consciousness. The last three chapters treat disparate cultural and historical topics that are not as well-integrated into the general theme of relations of production and reproduction. The editors' introduction and conclusion (as well as their chapters) dismantle the persistent stereotypes of border women as victims who make up one homogeneous population. Ruiz and Tiano point to a broad cultural tradition centering around the U.S.–Mexican border but show the diversity of women's experiences according to social class, age, marital status, and location north or south of the border. In presenting their analysis of women workers in Northern Mexico as an alternative to that of Patricia Fernández-Kelly's (1983) pioneering work, the editors overlook some of the subtleties of Fernández-Kelly's analysis and fail to underscore the way in which their own work builds on her earlier study.

Finally, June Nash and Helen Safa take stock of current research in *Women and Change in Latin America*, a decade after the appearance of their landmark *Sex and Class in Latin America* (1976). Their second anthology may have less impact than the first but only because so much research is now available on gender in Latin America. While neither collection cites "work" in its title, the two volumes are centrally concerned with production and reproduction in rural and urban contexts. *Women and Change in Latin America* devotes more attention to the effects of economic crisis on the lives of women and to women's strategies for change. Moreover, a

greater concentration of urban research is represented, reflecting a general trend toward investigating the outcome of rapid rural-urban migration—particularly women's entry into the formal and informal labor markets.

### *Economic Participation and Decision Making*

Whereas earlier studies documented the numerous and diverse forms of women's work in Latin America, these newer studies make an effort to theorize about women's work and gender relations. Deere and León note in the introduction to their book that in Latin America the UN Decade for Women (1976–1985) could have been called the “decade on measurement” (p. 3). They emphasize the importance of questioning not only women's part in productive activity but their part in economic decision making and control over the product of their labor. Research is revealing that rural women are often active participants in agriculture but, with few exceptions, hold unfavorable positions whether as subsistence farmers or wage laborers (p. 5). Jean Stubbs's and Mavis Alvarez's study of women in tobacco cooperatives in Cuba shows that even following a major program of agrarian reform in which women were made central participants, they had only a minor role in decision making (in Deere and León, p. 151). The articles in *Rural Women and State Policy* build on earlier research by Bourque and Warren (1981) on Peru and by Bossen (1984) on Guatemala, which showed the uneven and often contradictory relationship between women's economic contribution and their social and political standing.

Similar findings are discussed for urban Latin America. Increasing attention to women's participation in domestic service and in the informal economic sector demonstrates that despite their long hours and hard work, women are found in disproportionately large numbers among the poorest workers in Latin America. The two case studies considered here present ample evidence of the poverty and lack of control over their lives that urban women experience. In an ethnographic study of Lima's sellers and servants, Bunster and Chaney show that both wage-earning domestics and self-employed traders exist at the periphery of the urban work force. While sellers may enjoy a somewhat greater degree of independence in their work than do domestic servants, this “freedom” is strictly limited by the practical demands of petty commerce, in many cases dictated by wholesalers.

In their ground-breaking study of homeworkers in Mexico City, Benería and Roldán establish clearly that although women may be attracted to the “modern” world of industrial subcontracting by the advantage of working in their own homes and thus integrating domestic tasks and employment, they are poorly paid and have little job security. More-

over, piecework wages place controls on these women even when direct supervision is absent.

In Northern Mexico, young women are recruited for work in the *maquiladoras* (assembly plants), where they are hired as cheap, manageable labor. Contributors to the Ruiz and Tiano collection suggest that while these women may benefit in the short term from desired factory employment, their future prospects appear as dim as those of their counterparts elsewhere in Mexico and Latin America. Several authors, however, take issue with Fernández-Kelly's (1983) classic work on the topic, arguing (incorrectly, I believe) that it presented women solely as victims who are unlikely to organize or resist exploitation.

For rural women migrating to Latin American cities to seek employment, urbanization may mean more difficult conditions and lower social status. As Bunster and Chaney observe, "it is not the amount of work women do that determines their status, but the extent to which they control resources and earnings" (pp. 38-39). In the rural sector, women often have access to resources and productive roles that are unavailable to poor women in the cities. Urban employment in informal or formal manufacturing, commerce, and service sectors offers only marginal earnings and a tenuous social position. Nonetheless, in their studies of Lima and Mexico City, Bunster and Chaney as well as Benería and Roldán cite many examples of the resourcefulness of working women and children, despite extremely difficult life conditions.

### *The Household, Demography, and the Life Course*

Most of the authors reviewed here identify the household as a key unit of analysis mediating the interconnection of women's work inside and outside the home. Demographic variables such as geographic origin, age, marital status, number and ages of children, and education are considered along with social class and ethnicity in examining the specific constraints on women's lives. The life course enters the picture as a significant factor in conditioning women's work in ways not experienced by men, who can maintain a stricter separation between their personal lives and their work.

The recent attention to the household has been a positive development among social science analysts. Feminist researchers, however, have pointed out the limitations of viewing the household as representing a unity of interests. Disaggregating the household by gender, age, and other factors reveals internal hierarchies and power struggles. Calling into question the "hegemonic concept of the household," Roldán argues that researchers must examine the gender division of labor and the construction of gender identity within households if they wish to understand women's work inside and outside households (p. 111). She asserts that

Mexican homeworkers “saw themselves as constrained subjects devising work and other strategies to attain specific and general goals that included bargaining over given areas of conjugal dynamics” (p. 113). Benería’s and Roldán’s research rests on a complex and far-reaching analysis of the multiplicity of types of households and corresponding economic strategies among the population they studied.

In challenging the prevailing assumptions about “the household,” feminists have dismantled the myth of the household head (presumed to be male) and the notion of the family as a “natural” or homogeneous unit (Nash and Safa, p. 4; Neuma Aguiar in Nash and Safa, pp. 23–25). Marianne Schmink argues that many household analysts are overly economic and need to consider power differentials and decision making at the household level (Nash and Safa, p. 149). Deere’s contribution to the Nash and Safa collection shows that in examining beneficiaries of agrarian reform in Latin America only in terms of households, the disadvantages experienced by women have generally been ignored (p. 191). Even these authors sometimes fall back into conventional thinking, however, as when they comment that Mexican women and Chicanas entering the labor force do not “shirk their homemaking and child-rearing responsibilities” (Tiano and Ruiz, p. 237). Yet the same authors are quite clearly critical of women’s “double day” (p. 240). Likewise, “the farm family” and “the rural household” are sometimes discussed uncritically but later deconstructed to show that these are not gender-neutral categories (Cornelia Butler Flora and Blas Santos, in Nash and Safa, p. 209).

There is no single feminist approach to the household and the family. Frances Rothstein suggests a shift of focus from women as mothers to whole families when calculating the cost of raising children in a Mexican proletarian community (in Nash and Safa, p. 42). Indeed, most analysts of Latin America see families and households as limiting for women but also as sharing life’s burdens with them, especially during times of economic stress. In an article on women since the Cuban Revolution that is flawed by unsupported assertions, Isabel Largaia and John Dumoulin (in Nash and Safa, p. 350) remark on the “gradual extinction of the household.” Clearly, households undergo transformations, but these changes need to be documented.

Demographic characteristics of women workers and occupational trajectories during their life courses have been investigated by a number of authors. In contrast to earlier studies that sometimes offered similar data as descriptive information, recent research suggests that such material must be drawn into the analysis of women’s work. For example, in Lima, where the majority of working women are located in domestic service and petty commerce, a pattern has been found of younger women without children working as domestics who later turn to selling when their family responsibilities increase (Bunster and Chaney, pp. 132–33). A

comparison may also be made between younger single women who are hired in Northern Mexico in the maquiladoras and their somewhat older married counterparts (often with children) who comprise the majority of homeworkers in Mexico City (Benería and Roldán, pp. 23–24). Most analysts agree that demographic differences among women underlie the forms of women's insertion in national economies.

*State Policy and the Global Economy*

In *Rural Women and State Policy*, contributors draw on research throughout Latin America to show that women's lives, far from being narrowly circumscribed and affected only by family and household dynamics, are conditioned by state-level interventions. Whether or not women are consciously "integrated" into programs for agrarian reform and development, they nonetheless find themselves caught between the competing demands of parents, husbands, and children on the one hand and state political economies on the other. In the many instances where women were not direct beneficiaries of reform, they generally suffered a relative setback as men gained access to land, modern technology, and the market economy. When case studies of dependent capitalist countries such as Ecuador (Lynne Phillips) and Colombia (León) are compared with emergent socialist Cuba (Stubbs and Alvarez) and Nicaragua (Martha Luz Padilla, Clara Murguialday, and Ana Criquillon), it becomes clear that in the dependent capitalist countries, "trickle-down" of benefits from male "household heads" to women has not occurred. The socialist countries, in contrast, have attempted to award benefits regardless of gender. Nevertheless, the patriarchal ideology continues to operate within the family and the state in socialist countries and often prevents women from accepting the social and economic resources that are available to them in principle.

Indeed, no simple relationship exists between capitalist and socialist development and women's work. Capitalist expansion in agriculture and industry may either incorporate or marginalize women, depending on specific historical and social factors (María Soledad Lago in Deere and León, p. 30). Likewise, socialist development may open the possibility of more equitable sharing of resources, but without special attention to women's traditional "double load" and ways of confronting the gender division of labor, efforts to bring women into productive relations may fail. Latin America's earliest agrarian reform, introduced in Mexico in 1915, ignored women until 1971. Even after women were legally entitled to the same rights as men as *ejido* members, traditional cultural practices restricted women's access to land. In 1984 women made up only 15 percent of *ejido* membership, and these women were mainly widows

who had inherited their husbands' land (Lourdes Arizpe and Carlota Botey in Deere and León, pp. 70–71).

As in the rural sector, women's work in the urban sector must be examined in the broad framework of national policy-making. Mexico's status as a "newly industrialized country" makes it an interesting case to study. In the capital city, heavy in-migration and natural population growth have resulted in the expansion of the industrial labor force as well as a large labor reserve entering informal enterprises. The degree to which unregulated activities are tolerated by the state bears a significant impact on women, who fill the ranks of the informal sector. Industrial homework, subcontracting, and labor segmentation exploit women's low-paid labor according to the dynamics of dependent capitalism (Benería and Roldán). Similarly in Lima, female labor is plentiful and cheap and tends to be overwhelmingly employed in domestic service and petty commerce. Little protective legislation governs these occupations, and the state is more apt to adopt a repressive role, as when street vendors are periodically swept off the city streets. Thus those who determine the daily work lives of the "uncontrolled" urban sector are not only hard-hearted employers of domestics or cunning wholesalers who trade with small vendors but government policymakers (Bunster and Chaney).

The U.S.–Mexican border region is unique in the Western Hemisphere in linking First and Third World countries. Studies of women in the region reveal the distinct dynamics of state policies in relation to a common labor pool. Researchers show that an understanding of the international economy and the gender division of labor is essential for analyzing women's work in the maquiladoras in Mexicali, Mexico (Tiano) or in domestic service in El Paso, Texas (Ruiz). Women's favored status in such occupations, despite their often marginal earnings, makes them important economic providers. As the authors note, this status has sometimes led to misconceptions about women asserting their economic independence at the expense of men. Rather, women have long worked on both sides of the border out of urgent economic necessity.

Nash observes that with the internationalization of capital and the global expansion of industry, "women's disadvantaged position in the labor markets of the less developed countries and their greater availability give them a preferential status in the multinational corporations' search for cheap labor" (in Nash and Safa, p. 11). Women are thus hired in low-skilled assembly work as well as in a host of small-scale commercial and service occupations in Latin America. Particularly affected are women who have recently migrated to the cities, often in a desperate attempt to improve their economic condition.



*Economic Crises and Women Organizing for Change*

In much of Latin America since the 1970s, it would be almost impossible to examine women and work without considering the effects of economic crisis. Many of the authors reviewed here have explored the various strategies of women and their families for surviving crises, often through economic diversification within households. For the large number of female-headed households, the problems are particularly acute, as seen in the case of urban Jamaica described by Lynn Bolles (in Nash and Safa). Working-class women in Kingston rely on multiple incomes, with the population studied holding factory jobs but depending on informal activities as well. A kin network provides the extra support needed by these women. Similarly, Safa shows that working-class women in Puerto Rico bear the greatest burden of the economic crisis when men face unemployment and women head households (in Nash and Safa).

Benería's and Roldán's research was coming to a close in the early 1980s, when Mexico experienced a transition from a period of economic growth to one of crisis. Faced with a mounting foreign debt, increasing inflation, and dependence on declining oil prices, Mexico's economy suffered a major setback. Yet during this time, women's employment rose because families needed several income-earners and women were preferred by employers as cheap labor. The authors indicate that ideologies changed and women's paid work became more acceptable to both family and society during the period of crisis.

In rural areas, women may respond to the crisis by joining the exodus to the cities and often enter the informal sector, or they may remain part of an impoverished agrarian population. The decisions they make are generally part of broader household strategies. In families where men migrate to the city to work, women may become the chief agricultural workers. Younger women, in contrast, may leave to work as domestics and thus relieve their families of the cost of supporting them. As Deere and León eloquently point out, one central question is,

on whose terms and under what terms rural women will participate in the solutions to the Latin American economic crisis. Will they be simply a source of cheap labor for renewed export expansion or, as unpaid family workers in smallholder agriculture, providers of cheap foodstuffs to ameliorate the growing urban tensions of the 1980s? Or can rural women be organized and mobilized as a political force with their own vision of development and a different vision of themselves, empowered to challenge their subordinated gender and class position? (Deere and León, pp. 1-2)

It is more often urban rather than rural women who are considered in discussions of Latin American women mobilizing for change. Even then, the view is frequently pessimistic, emphasizing the social constraints on women developing a political consciousness and organizing together. Chaney describes domestic servants in Lima as isolated from

other women working in households in their neighborhoods and also from women in their communities of residence (p. 155). They have almost no time to attend meetings, and most of them reject organized or trade-union activity. Bunster reports that Lima's market sellers lack medical care, child care, and retirement plans and must cope with daily harassment by city officials and irrational government policies (p. 117). These women also lack time to develop relationships with other marketers, and their social isolation prevents them from becoming involved in unions. Despite this dismal picture, very recent accounts report some organizing activity among domestic servants, who now call themselves "household workers" (Chaney and Garcia Castro 1989), and among small-scale sellers in Latin America and the Caribbean (Babb 1989).

While industrial workers have traditionally made up the grass roots of trade unions, women who toil alone as homeworkers experience the same social isolation as domestic workers and are also unlikely to organize, according to Benería and Roldán. Their study revealed that women in industrial homework continue to identify themselves primarily as wives and mothers and count themselves fortunate to have employment that reconciles work and "proper motherhood" (in the home) (p. 149). Notwithstanding low wages and long hours, the dominant ideology of women's proper sphere keeps these women from developing a consciousness of their gender and class subordination (p. 152). Even those women who were not opposed to unionization in principle expressed the fear that they might lose their jobs if they attempted to organize.

Such fears are not unfounded; both homeworkers in Mexico City and maquiladora workers in Northern Mexico have witnessed the flight of companies whose employees begin to organize. A study of gender and class solidarity among maquila workers in Ciudad Juárez examined work experiences that promote women's consciousness raising (Gay Young, in Tiano and Ruiz). Maquila women in general are aware of the instability of their jobs and view themselves as a temporary labor force. But one group that participated in a course at a local women's center and another group that had gone out on strike departed from the traditional female role and the stereotype of these women as compliant and unorganizable (p. 124). Another study suggests that women are engaging in informal struggle on the shop floor of maquiladoras (Devon Peña, in Tiano and Ruiz). Specifically, women are restricting their output as a form of collective resistance to speed-up (p. 136). Peña concludes that such informal modes of struggle may be "a form of political socialization, preparing the way for higher levels of struggle" (p. 151).

The Nash and Safa volume closes with a section on women and political action, including an article that discusses the increasing participation of women in the Cuban labor force (Larguia and Dumoulin). Presented as successes for women that came from the top down are the

virtual elimination of the informal sector where women worked as domestic servants and prostitutes before the Cuban Revolution, the diminishing importance of the sexual division of labor in the wider economy, and the institution of the Federation of Cuban Women and the Family Code. To the degree that this top-down change has occurred, it may be instructive to compare the Cuban case with that of Nicaragua, where women appear to play a more decisive role at the grass-roots level. In Nicaragua women have achieved legal equality with men, along with the right to land, cooperative membership, and equal pay for equal work. Padilla, Murguialday, and Criquillon point out, however, that a persistent gender division of labor has resulted in limited opportunities for women to become central participants in production. They suggest that an autonomous women's organization is essential for promoting gender and class consciousness and improving rural women's participation (Deere and León, p. 138).

Emphasis on women's potential to become a force for change is expressed powerfully in Deere's and León's conclusions. They call for an alternative conception of development advanced at the end of the UN Decade for Women by a Third World women's group, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN). Central to this view is a critique of development as gender-neutral (Sen and Grown 1987). A similar position and concluding statement are offered by Benería and Roldán in their chapter "Development as if Women Mattered." They argue eloquently that women must challenge the material and ideological aspects of gender and class in order to advance a new vision of democratic development.

#### *Toward a Collaboration of U.S. and Latin American Scholars*

Research on Latin American women and work has long benefited from the cross-fertilization of ideas across national boundaries. U.S. scholars have gained from their association with prominent Latin American researchers and theoreticians such as Lourdes Arizpe (in Deere and León), Neuma Aguiar, and Heleieth Saffioti (in Nash and Safa), whose writings have pointed to significant new ways of conducting investigations of women, work, and development. A thorough review of research on Latin American women and work should consider the substantial literature coming out of Latin America in recent years (for example, Barrig 1985, 1986; Guzmán and Portocarrero 1985; Ellis 1986; Berger and Buvinić 1988; Pérez Alemán, Martínez, and Widmair 1989; ISIS and DAWN 1988; *Nueva Antropología* 1986).

It is noteworthy, however, that all five of the books under review here include work by Latin American authors. Indeed, about half of the research represented in these U.S. publications was written by Latin Americans. This representation is a healthy sign of the vitality of collaborative projects and the strength of the field of Latin American women's

studies. Such scholarly cooperation may also account for the more sophisticated and critical analyses that are now emerging.

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