
FEATURE

Reflections on Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Mexico

Introduction

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The three papers published here are testimony to the vitality of the field of women's and gender history and to the importance of conferences in maintaining that vitality. Not just any conferences, but small, focused meetings where serious exchange can take place. David Lodge appropriately satirised large academic conferences (in *Small World*) as vehicles for star performances and political jockeying.¹ (The American Express card had replaced the library card, he wrote, as the primary tool for scholarly advancement.) But the International Colloquium on the History of Women and Gender in Mexico, which met in Yale in 2001, Guadalajara in 2003, Utah in 2005 and Zamora in 2007, doesn't warrant this kind of characterisation. Instead, it has created a network of active scholars, a forum for critical examination of method and substance where the different traditions of Mexican and North American historiography can fruitfully interrupt one another, and a space for reflection on the project of writing the history of women in Mexico. Having attended the second colloquium at Guadalajara in the autumn of 2003, I can attest to the energy and enthusiasm as well as the fruitfulness of the event. At the end of the conference there was a wonderful reception, the highlight of which was an all-female mariachi band. Conversation (in Spanish and English) was soon interrupted by dancing, and the scene – Mexicans teaching North Americans traditional dance steps, North Americans improvising their own variations, each group incorporating the others' movements – replayed the cross-fertilisation of culture and discipline that had earlier marked the scholarly interactions. The general hilarity expressed what many already felt about the days' proceedings: camaraderie, enthusiasm, mutual respect and the sheer pleasure of learning from one another.

Each paper presented here is the product of the colloquium experience. Presented in Guadalajara at the Second International Colloquium, they each attribute change or clarification of their conceptual frameworks to the first colloquium held at Yale in 2001. Sarah Buck found her horizon enlarged from women to gender, although she still worries (unnecessarily, I think) about the implications of this move. María Teresa Fernández-Aceves was pushed to link the history she had written about women workers

in the tortilla industry to the history of *caciquismo* – the operations of local, informally organised, predominantly male, political power. ‘The challenge’, she tells us, ‘was to combine . . . *cacique* and gender studies’. Nichole Sanders realised she had to frame her study of Mexican welfare programmes in a larger Latin American context. ‘In order to understand the creation of the Mexican welfare state, we must understand the way national and international discourses used health and welfare programmes to incorporate women politically. These discourses influenced Mexican policy, even as Mexican reformers in turn shaped international attitudes’.

All the papers ought to assuage Buck’s worry that gender will somehow replace women as an object of historical study. In fact, the papers demonstrate that gender is an analytic tool, not a substitute for women’s history. Asking questions about gender enlarges the perspective for understanding experiences of and attitudes towards women; it deepens our insight, enriches the story and makes sense of things that we otherwise have difficulty explaining. The issue of maternalism, touched on in all these papers, is an example. From some feminist perspectives, accepting the idea that motherhood defines women and ought to justify the recognition of their rights as citizens is counter-intuitive. The comment of the French feminist Madeleine Pelletier captures this position well: ‘Maternity will never give women a title of social importance’, she wrote in 1908. ‘Future societies can construct temples to maternity, but they will only serve to imprison women.’ But these papers offer another way of understanding feminist appeals to maternalism, not so much as a belief in an essential trait of women, but as a strategic move (with different historically specific outcomes) in a social and political context in which women’s role as mothers was being idealised. (I take ‘gender’ to mean that social and political context in which the meanings of sexual difference are being articulated and institutionalised). If (as Buck tells us) ‘motherhood remained women’s most glorified role’ in popular representations between the 1920s and 1950s, then it made sense for feminists demanding citizenship to link their demands to motherhood. That was a way both of acknowledging and undermining conventional stereotypes whether of peasants, workers or middle-class professionals. It was not only, as Buck writes, that ‘maternalism effectively ameliorated the contradiction of female Mexican citizenship’, but also that the granting of citizenship in the 1940s necessarily contradicted images of mothers as passive, domestic – ineligible to enter the public sphere. Fernández-Aceves alerts us to a different set of outcomes: on the one hand, the women who organised the CFO (*Círculo Feminista de Occidente*) in 1927 made strategic alliances with male labour bosses, sometimes conceding their views on the traditional role of women. Yet when it came to the vote, they refused to accept (male) labour’s opposition and launched their own campaign for women’s suffrage, insisting that motherhood and citizenship need not be at odds. Sanders later shows us how the primary target of welfare programmes were mothers, and she links this not to traditional patriarchy, but to modernisation. The programmes provided medical care and information about ‘scientific’ child rearing. They also offered classes in domestic management and income-earning. Taking care of mothers, in this period, meant teaching them to take care of themselves, developing a certain autonomy that – in feminist hands – could upset rather than solidify traditional roles for women.

Thinking about maternalism as a strategy of feminism gives us a better handle on the phenomenon. The aim was not to define women’s identity for all times, but effectively to interrupt policies that neglected what could be defined as mothers’ interests.

The feminist call to define and defend mothers' interests was a political move; the categories of women and mothers were deployed for political ends. 'A category may be at least conceptually shaken if it is challenged and refurbished, instead of only being perversely strengthened by repetition', wrote Denise Riley in her path breaking *'Am I That Name?' Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*.² And she specifically mentioned what she called 'familialism' as an area in which tensions between the need for political mobilisation and the desire to avoid reproducing stereotypical images of women characterised the feminist project.

One of the important uses of 'gender' as an analytic category is that it moves women's history into the broader historical context in which feminists have always argued it belongs. Thus in these papers, women's history cannot be understood outside the contexts in which it developed. Feminists demanding the vote necessarily engaged not only with the state, but with the political theory that articulated the standards for and the meanings of citizenship. Feminists in the labour movement had to negotiate with male labour leaders, sometimes adopting their methods and tactics, sometimes refusing them. It ought not to be surprising that, when the populist government turned its attention to improving workers' conditions (in the 1930s), feminists took up the cause of women workers, employing the ruling party's rhetoric to plead their cause. Similarly, as mothers became the focus of the welfare state, 'maternalism' became a lever for feminism. The history of feminism is not, as these papers demonstrate, a history that takes place outside mainstream events (despite the neglect of mainstream historians). To the contrary, feminism is shaped by these events, even as it engages critically with them.

The use of a gender perspective allows the authors of these papers to write their subjects into Mexican history. They reject earlier histories of women that 'glorify feminist leaders as heroines', or attempt to assess women's history in terms of its failures or successes, or accept without question the idea that women were absent from politics, or condemn their participation in politics on terms that seem to compromise rather than realise feminist goals as defined by today's standards. Instead, 'gender' leads to an exploration of the discourses that construct women's and feminist identity, to insight into the complexities of feminist (as any) politics, to an appreciation of the intricacies of struggles for power and the role of gender representation in those struggles, and to renewed attention to those who do not fit into the categories we have accepted without question. These papers interrogate such categories as public and private, they open the question of the meaning and uses of maternalism, and they insist on the specificity of Mexican history. Perhaps, most important of all, they are genuine *histories* in which women become actors whose actions we understand not as a function of their feminine identity, not as the product of an inevitably feminist resistance to oppressive patriarchy, not as the narrow result of 'women's experience' (conceived apart from or in opposition to the discourses and institutions of their times), but as produced within those discourses and institutions, in strategic and critical relation to them.

Notes

1. David Lodge, *Small World* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984).
2. Denise Riley, *'Am I That Name?' Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 113.