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Gender and Welfare Reform in Post-Revolutionary Mexico

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Early in my research into the history of welfare reform in twentieth-century Mexico, I discovered quotations from two Mexican presidents discussing the centrality of women to the government's goal of modernisation. 'We pride ourselves,' declared President Miguel Alemán in 1946, 'that in Mexico women have been traditionally incomparable mothers, sacrificing and diligent wives, loyal sisters and modest daughters ... The laws of the Revolution have pledged to conserve the legal and social conditions that are the foundation of women's natural sensibility. These conditions reside in the home'.[1] Just three decades later, however, President Luis Echeverría maintained that 'Women and men have identical responsibilities vis-à-vis society and the family. Women should supervise more intensively community events, and men should participate more actively in the development of a healthy family life. There is no work that is only for women or only for men. There is only work for humans'.[2] It seemed clear that presidential attitudes reflected changing social attitudes regarding women's role in Mexican society. But how much impact did the government have upon Mexican attitudes? What was the relationship between government programmes, such as welfare, and the construction of gender during the 'Mexican Miracle'? It was with these questions in mind that I attended the Yale Conference, 'Las Olvidadas' in May 2001. Subsequent conferences organised by this group of scholars in Guadalajara, Mexico (2003), and the University of Utah (2005) have continued to shape my work.

When asked to participate in the Yale conference, I was at the very beginning of my doctoral research and had just begun to sort through my piles of photocopies of documents from the Mexican Ministry of Public Health and Welfare. Like many historians in similar situations, I was not quite sure what I was looking for. While I knew that I wanted my research to remain Mexico-focused, and not explicitly comparative, I had done a lot of reading on gender and the creation of welfare states in Europe and the USA. I found many similarities to the Mexican case, but significant differences as well. I was unsure of how the pieces fitted into place. Listening to the other papers at the conference helped immeasurably in making the picture clearer.

But it was not just the other papers on Mexico that proved to be helpful. Each panel's commentator was a well-established historian of gender who focused on a region of Latin America other than Mexico. This allowed me to begin to place what I was seeing in the documents in a larger Latin American context. Listening to the

comments offered by *comentaristas* such as Karin Rosemblatt, Liz Hutcheson, Heidi Tinsman, Tom Klubock and Susan Besse, I began to realise that welfare programmes in Mexico had more in common with other Latin American programmes than with the United States or European models, and that all welfare programmes created in the 'west', had more significant similarities than differences. Prevailing literature on the welfare state, however, tended to highlight differences between the various European models and the US model, and literature on Latin America tended to stress the similarities between Latin America and the USA, or, in particular, the French model.

Exceptions to this for Latin America include work done by Donna Guy, Karin Rosemblatt and Nancy Leys Stepan. These historians, along with other scholars such as Francesca Miller and Christine Ehrick show that concern for welfare reform was both a product of international reform currents as well as Latin American contingencies.[3] With this work in mind, I began to research the activities of the Ministry of Health and Welfare's Office of International Affairs. I found that Mexican delegates had participated in an extensive number of international conferences dedicated to issues such as stopping prostitution, curtailing the spread of sexual diseases and ending the transmission of tuberculosis. One conference in particular – the Seventh Pan-American Child Congress (1935) – stood out because it had been held in Mexico City. I began by focusing on this conference, hoping it could tell me more about prevailing attitudes towards welfare reform in Latin America.

The Pan-American Child Congresses were part of a larger pan-American movement having its roots in the late nineteenth century with the goal of fostering of greater cooperation between the nations of North and South America. The Child Congresses were also a result of the international welfare reform movement. Reformers viewed a nation's commitment to 'modern' health and welfare programmes, rather than 'old-fashioned' charity, as a marker of national progress. Unfortunately, according to Latin American participants, their own countries' lack of state-sponsored reform reflected negatively on their national reputations. Delegates to the Seventh Congress discussed ways their governments could implement programmes that would allow Latin American nations to compete economically and socially with the 'more advanced' nations of Western Europe and the United States. In particular, the racial 'inferiority' of the home countries concerned Latin American policymakers who also discussed ways to implement policies to eugenically 'uplift' their populations. *Congresistas* agreed that with the implementation of 'modern' and 'scientific' social and medical welfare, Latin American nations could prosper and transform themselves socially as well as economically. With fit and healthy populations, Latin Americans could progress. It was this desire for social, racial and economic transformation that made Latin American welfare reform distinct from other models. As I traced the themes of the subsequent two Pan-American Child Conferences (Washington, DC in 1942 and Caracas, Venezuela in 1948) and looked at the participants, it seemed clear that this organisation had an effect on Mexican welfare reformers. Mexican welfare reformers in turn, helped shape hemispheric attitudes towards maternal-child welfare. This continued after the Second World War with the introduction of UNICEF.

As host of the Seventh Pan-American Congress, Mexican reformers showcased their own country's achievements in health and welfare reform. Building on a tradition of both public and private welfare work, Mexican reformers by the 1930s drew

upon earlier, nineteenth-century models in combination with the latest developments in 'scientific' thinking to implement a welfare model that resonated with the state's post-revolutionary goals. But what were these goals and how were they gendered? Once again, listening to the other papers at the Yale conference helped me frame these thoughts and place Mexican welfare reform in its own context. It seemed clear that the Mexican Revolution played an important role in the way reformers conceived of the post-revolutionary welfare state.[4]

The Mexican Revolution (1910–17) was a widespread, violent movement aimed at changing the status quo politically and, to a certain extent, socially and economically. The victors in the Revolution, the *Carrancistas*, represented Mexico's emerging middle class – who were terrified by the violence and chaos of the Revolution itself. The new government moved quickly to consolidate power and implement political and economic reform. Part of that reform included constructing new ideas of appropriate masculine and feminine behaviour. Through educational policies, such as the Ministry of Education's Cultural Missions and other urban programmes, reformers sought to curtail a masculinity based on violence and lack of control and create a new Revolutionary man who was self-disciplined and hard working. Educational reformers taught women as well the benefits of hard work and self control.[5] Welfare reform, I discovered, had these same goals.

By the 1930s, the ambitions of the Revolution included state-sponsored industrialisation, which necessitated the creation of stable, well-disciplined workers. Industrial plans were coupled with President Lázaro Cárdenas's populist agenda – highlighting land and other social reforms. Desire for economic progress complemented earlier revolutionary goals of social justice as government policymakers turned to welfare reform as well, as one means to transform Mexico's predominantly rural, peasant population into an urban, industrial workforce. In the countryside, rural welfare programmes sought to teach *campesinos* modern medicine and childrearing techniques, as well as discipline and appropriate educational and recreational activities. Programmes in the cities, aimed at the existing poor as well as new arrivals from the countryside, had essentially the same goals. Both sought to create 'modern' Mexicans for a 'modern' Mexico. It would be this twin emphasis, on both the rural as well as the urban that was a result of Revolutionary upheaval, which marked the Mexican welfare state as distinct in Latin America. Comments by Mary Kay Vaughan, Jocelyn Olcott, Sarah Buck and others during discussions at the Yale conference helped me see this distinction. The Cárdenas regime created the first post-revolutionary federal welfare agency: the Ministry of Social Assistance. President Manuel Ávila Camacho then merged Social Assistance with the Mexico City Health Department to create the Ministry of Health and Welfare in 1943.

What both rural and urban welfare programmes also had in common was their primary target: mothers. Welfare advocates saw mothers as critical to the success of their vision of a modern welfare state. The result was the construction of a welfare state that saw women as central to its modernisation project. The Mexican welfare state expanded greatly during a period called the 'Mexican Miracle' – roughly the years between the Second World War and the 1960s, when the Mexican economy grew about 8 per cent per annum and the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) enjoyed political hegemony. My research focuses on this period and the expansion of the welfare system.

Women participated in this expansion in three important ways. First, most welfare targeted poor mothers. Mothers had access to educational programmes primarily through Mother–Infant Centres. Mother–infant centres provided medical care for mothers and their children and taught women 'modern' and 'scientific' childrearing techniques – in order to further reformers' goals of an uplifted population. Second, each centre also had a Mothers' Club. Volunteers, usually middle- or upper-class women staffed the clubs and worked either as fundraisers or as instructors. Clubs provided different kinds of classes for poor women, ranging from sewing and cleaning to reading and domestic economy. Welfare workers aimed to teach poor women, many of whom were single mothers, how to support themselves and their families – and raise their children in an appropriate manner. Mother–infant centres and mothers' clubs gave women of all classes an opportunity to participate in welfare reform. Mexican welfare reformers also had programmes in place to help families – Family Dining Halls and a foster care programme. The Ministry of Health and Welfare designed both of these programmes to bolster what they considered to be the ideal family structure: the nuclear family. In an urban setting with a population of recent arrivals, this middle-class ideal could be difficult to attain.

Lastly, perhaps the most significant way women participated in the construction of a modern Mexican welfare state was through the new professional field of social work. Social work, a field dominated by women, came into being in the 1920s and 1930s and in Mexico allowed women of all classes a professional career. Social workers staffed the Ministry of Health and Welfare and implemented many of its programmes. Thus, women had a profound impact on the way welfare programmes worked. Most significantly, social workers had a tremendous amount of power over poor women.[6] Social work allowed the state to insert itself into the Mexican family and rewrite norms for feminine and masculine behaviour in order to undergird its own political and economic project. As Mary Kay Vaughan and others have pointed out, the result was the modernisation of patriarchy in Mexico.[7] What emerged from this project was a welfare state that, while it was male-dominated in the upper echelons, was nevertheless realised in practice by women. Modern patriarchy, I contend, wore a female face in Mexico.

The result of welfare on the lives of Mexican women is ambiguous. While welfare policy promoted what may have been difficult to achieve middle-class norms to the poor, the middle-class women nevertheless believed themselves to be involved in a significant social movement. They were providing poor women with better options. Professional social work or participation in voluntary committees gave women access to the government. Women were given a central role in creating a post-revolutionary, modern and progressive society and participated in a transnational dialogue regarding maternal-child welfare. While it is true that they helped construct and maintain a modern patriarchy, one nevertheless has to examine the ways in which women had agency. The mere presence of women in an authoritative role could have a profound effect on the way women constructed their own reality.[8]

The professionalisation of welfare meant that Mexican reformers no longer saw charity as the province of wealthy ladies of leisure. Through voluntary committees, the government was able to capture both the energy of the 'charity ladies' but also new middle-class housewives participating in the volunteer clubs as well. Social work became professionalised: as a result a bachelor's degree was needed to practice, giving

social work a new status that was central to conceptions of the middle-class women who were moving into the workforce.[9] Social work and volunteer work, both dominated by women, allowed them to define themselves as middle class not only through their participation in these activities themselves but also through their ability to prescribe a middle-class ethos to their clients, the poor women whose lives they wanted to shape.

The persistence of poverty may lead one to conclude that welfare was singularly unsuccessful during the 'Mexican Miracle'. Looking at welfare in strictly class-based economic terms that would appear to be true. The use of gender as a category of analysis, however, allows us to complicate that assertion. Professional welfare workers trained poor women to accept middle-class standards. But through job training (albeit very specific types of jobs) and the provision of day-care centres, welfare gave poor women a conduit into the middle class. Many social workers themselves came from working- or lower-middle-class backgrounds and used the professional status that social work gave to ascend more firmly into the middle class.[10] Thus, while the welfare state may not have eradicated poverty, nevertheless it contributed to the growth and strength of the emerging middle class, a group of vital importance the post-revolutionary government. Discussing the intersection of class, gender and race at the Yale Conference as well as the Guadalajara and Utah conferences has helped me rethink how these categories intersect in Mexico.

I argue in my project that the creation of the Mexican welfare state was gendered. Most importantly, this process reflected international as well as particularly Mexican discourses on women, the family and economic development. My work challenges the dominant historiography on twentieth-century Mexico that champions the Mexican exceptionalism resulting from the processes of consolidation after the upheaval of the Mexican Revolution. On the contrary, my research, and the research of many of the participants in the Yale Conference, shows that welfare policy in Mexico had important antecedents before the Revolution, and responded to national as well as international contingencies. Discourses on welfare not only changed over time – the creation of a strong central welfare state also coincided with shifting international social attitudes towards women, charity, work and citizenship. My work contributes to our understanding of women's participation in Mexican state formation and demonstrates the centrality of gender to government policymakers' visions of economic development and modernisation. 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.

Finally, my research shows that the election of Manuel Ávila Camacho in 1940 did not necessarily lead to populism's demise. The number of shelters, dining halls, public bathrooms, day-care centres, workshops, food and clothing distribution centres and other forms of aid increased from twenty-three in 1936 to 186 in 1963 (although the rate of increase was irregular). The number of hospitals, asylums, rehabilitation centers increased as well, from 803 in 1934 to 1,671 in 1961. Privately run shelters and charities increased as well during the period – calling into question some historians' assertion the Revolution died in 1940.[11] It allows us to also rethink the role of gender and class in populism. Is populism gendered? Can you have a middle-class populist movement?

The Yale Conference, 'Las Olvidadas,' had a profound impact on the shaping of my thesis. Contact with and comments from a variety of scholars pushed me to frame the evidence in new ways. I was pleased to be able to present my findings two years later in Guadalajara, and benefit once again from the insights offered by other feminist scholars of Mexico.

Notes

1. Berta Hidalgo, *El movimiento femenino en México* (Mexico: Edamex, 1980), p. 42 (my translation).
2. Hidalgo, *El movimiento femenino en México*, p. 54.
3. See, for example, Donna Guy, *White Slavery and Mothers Alive and Dead: The Troubled Meeting of Sex, Gender, Public Health and Progress in Latin America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000); Nancy Leys Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Karin Alejandra Rosemblatt, *Gendered Compromises: Political Cultures and the State in Chile, 1920–1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Christine Ehrick, '*Madrinas* and Missionaries: Uruguay and the Pan-American Women's Movement', *Gender & History* 10 (1998), pp. 406–26; Francesca Miller, *Latin American Women and the Search for Social Justice* (London: University Press of New England, 1991).
4. In particular, see 'Las Olvidadas' conference participants' published work: Katherine Bliss, *Compromised Positions: Prostitution, Public Health, and Gender Politics in Revolutionary Mexico City* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001); Ann Blum, 'Conspicuous Benevolence: Liberalism, Public Welfare, and Private Charity in Porfirian Mexico City, 1877–1910', *Americas* 58 (2001), pp. 7–38; Carmen Ramos Escandón, 'Señoritas Porfirianas: Mujer e Ideología en el México Progresista, 1880–1910', in Carmen Ramos Escandón et al. (eds), *Presencia y Transparencia: La mujer en la historia de México* (Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico,1987); Patience Schell, 'An Honorable Avocation for Ladies: The Work of the Mexico City Union de Damas Catolicas Mexicanas 1912–1926', *Journal of Women's History* 10 (1999), pp. 78–103; Julia Tuñon Pablos**,** *Women in Mexico: A Past Unveiled* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987). Two new volumes of papers from the Las Olvidadas Conference have recently been published, Stephanie Mitchell and Patience Schell (eds), *The Women's Revolution in Mexico, 1910–1953* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006); Gabriela Cano, Jocelyn Olcott and Mary Kay Vaughan (eds), *Sex in Revolution: Gender, Politics, and Power in Modern Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). In addition, a volume from the Guadalajara conference has been published in Mexico: María Teresa Fernández-Aceves, Carmen Ramos Escandón and Susie Porter (eds), *Orden social e identidad de género: México siglos XIX y XX* (Guadalajara: CIESAS-Universidad de Guadalajara, 2006).
5. See, e.g., Patience Schell, *Church and State Education in Revolutionary Mexico City* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2003) and Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants and Schools in Mexico, 1930–1940* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1997).
6. See Nichole Sanders, 'Gender, Welfare and the "Mexican Miracle": The Politics of Modernization in Post-Revolutionary Mexico, 1937–1958' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, Irvine, 2003), ch. 5. See also, Aída Valero Chavez, *El Trabajo Social en México: Desarrollo y Perspectivas* (México:UNAM, Escuela Nacional de Trabajo Social, 1994).
7. Mary Kay Vaughan makes this point about rural teachers in 1930s Mexico in her 'Modernizing Patriarchy: State Policies, Rural Households, and Women in Mexico, 1930–1940', in Elizabeth Dore and Maxine Molyneaux (eds), *Hidden Histories of Gender and the State in Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 194–214.
8. Vaughan, 'Modernizing Patriarchy'.
9. David S. Parker shows how professionalism was key to a middle class identity in Peru in David S. Parker, *The Idea of the Middle Class in Peru* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998). Susie Porter shows this for women office workers (*empleadas*) in Mexico. See Susie Porter, 'Empleadas: La necesidad económica, la moral sexual, hábitos de consumo, y el derecho de la mujer al trabajo', *Signos Históricos* (2004).
10. See Sanders, 'Gender, Welfare and the "Mexican Miracle"', p. xx.
11. Moisés González Navarro, *La pobreza en México* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1985), pp. 267–9.