

**SANTA MARTA –
A STORY OF THE FIRST LADY OF MEXICO**

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A story about a President's wife

Hillary Clinton had it. Sonya Gandhi had it. Raisa Gorbatojova had it. And *Marta Sahagún de Fox* has it. They have all had the eyes of the world on them. These women have come to be parts of the official image of their successful and powerful husbands and their private spheres, and together they are portrayed as ideals for a successful family. The presidents' wives do not have any official political duties of their own but work in the shade of their men with traditionally female activities like charity and public relations. But they also constitute individuals in which people and media have a great interest, a public story about the *Woman*. They are highlighted alongside their men and thereby become parts of a political message to the people. But which identities does Marta Sahagún de Fox have at her disposal in the story about her as the First Lady of Mexico? What are the consequences of the discursive presentations and in which way is the dominant discourse order challenged in this story? Gender is a fundamental entity in our languages and in the communication between people but also in how our societies are designed and organised. Linguists Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (2003:60) write that "(a) language is a highly structured system of signs, or combinations of form and meaning", and that "(g)ender is embedded in these signs and in their use in communicative practice in a variety of ways". Studies on the language of gender therefore become important for the understanding of how the society is arranged.

Stories about presidents and their wives are stories on power between women and men where the construction of femininity should be understood in relation to the construction of masculinity, a heterosexual tango where the man's moves govern and the woman's steps are adapted to them. The supposition in this text is that a presidential wife is portrayed as one of two linked persons in an idealising heterosexual marriage. It is also a story about relationships of power between the sexes since the prevailing order in society puts limits to women's agency and thereby women's possibility to practice their citizenship. However these limits are constantly challenged.

Three biographic books about Marta Sahagún de Fox were published in Mexico within a short time. This analysis is on the first book, *Marta. La Fuerza del Espíritu. La Historia del nacimiento de un ideal para cambiar una nación*¹ (Marta. The Force of the Spirit. The History of the Birth of an Ideal to Change the Nation), which is an autobiography based on interviews with Marta Sahagún. The book is written by the author and journalist Sari Bermúdez. At the time the book was written she was in charge of cultural questions in the PAN party.² The other two books, *La Jefa. Vida pública y privada de Marta Sahagún de Fox*³ (The Boss. The Public and Private Life of Marta Sahagún de Fox) written by the Argentinian journalist Olga Wornat, and *Marta*, by the author Rafael Loret de Mola, are of biographical character and are only used to demonstrate or underline parts of the analysis. The texts are nevertheless analysed in the same way and the ambition is not to judge their

¹ Abbreviated as *Fuerza del Espíritu* in the text.

² PAN (Partido Acción Nacional), the National Action Party, is the same party where Marta Sahagún and Vicente Fox are members.

³ Abbreviated as *La Jefa* in the text.

objectivity even if they do not necessarily describe the reality “behind” the discourses.

The aim here is to identify patterns in the discourse about the First Lady of Mexico, how she is portrayed as a woman and a wife, and finally from a feminist theoretical frame discuss the consequences of this, that is to investigate the relations between discursive practice and social practice with the underlying premise that discursive practice both reflects and actively contributes to social and cultural reproduction and change. But can the story about a single person, that of Marta Sahagún de Fox, affect the discourse order and as a consequence also the situation and possibilities for autonomy for other women in Mexico? As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003:60) I see that “(a)n individual act /.../ enters into a broader discourse – and its ultimate effect will be a result of its life in that discourse: how it gets picked up, and by whom, and how it mixes with what other people are doing and thinking”. A single person, or the story about him/her, can thereby constitute a potential for change depending on if, and in that case how, it becomes part of a broader discourse. If this person is well-known and at the same time appears in people’s sight it is reasonable to assume that the story can provide new contents to an existing discourse.

A note on the theoretical framework and methodology

Inspired by Norman Fairclough’s critical discourse approach (CDA) this analysis takes as a departure that we reach reality through the language but the relationship is dualistic and the representations of reality that we create also contribute to bring forth this reality. Our way of talking about or in other ways portray our situation, our identities and social relations are thereby not neutral but play an active part in the creation and change of them (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000:7-15). By talking about women in a special way we create frames for how women can act. Kerstin Jakobsson (1997:37) writes about implications of discourses and she means that discourses

“recommend actions in the sense that a certain practice appears as more reasonable than another”. The way in which Marta Sahagún de Fox is portrayed in these texts thereby represents the (ideal) Mexican woman and wife. This line of thought is social constructivist in the sense that the ways in which we perceive and represent the world are historical, culturally specific and contingent. This means that our images of the world and our identities could have been different and they may also change over time.

The published texts about Marta Sahagún de Fox build on earlier elements and discourses from other texts, that is, they are *intertextual*. These are texts that have been published about her earlier but also former discourses on other presidents' wives and other women, even if they all are located in a specific context and are socially and historically situated. Together they should however be regarded as a part of a broader heterosexual discursive gender order on women/female, which is contrasted with men/male, and where the male conditions are normative. These norms and practices define the frames for women's political agency, what they are able to say and do, and consequently, this is a key note for women's citizenship.⁴ Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003:34) mean that “(g)ender order is a system of allocation, based on sex-class assignment, of rights and obligations, freedoms and constraints, limits and possibilities, power and subordination”. They highlight the fact that the conditions are unequal between women and men – the rules differ.

Discourses exist in everyday life and we are all part of them but in different ways and to different extents. But how do we frame a study on discourses? It is, according to Norman Fairclough, the social practice which forms an overarching frame within which we study the contents of a text with the purpose to analyse it in the discursive practice (Fairclough 1992). But the

⁴ They are political in the sense that they limit the space of action of people, that is, it is about power.

texts are, according to Fairclough, in themselves insufficient for an analysis since they do not illuminate the relationships between these and society, and the cultural processes and structures. In order to carry out an analysis a cross-scientific perspective is needed where one combines the text analysis with a social analysis. Discourses act, according to Fairclough, ideologically when they create and reproduce unequal power relationships between groups of persons, i.e. women and men (Fairclough 1992:219). In order to capture these relationships in the texts, the discursive practice, the analysis needs to be combined with a social context or what Fairclough calls social practice.

When it comes to effects of the use of concepts they in themselves do not constitute reason for societal change. But the understanding of concepts sets the frames for what is possible to think and say, and they make possible as well as limit action. This in turn influences social relations and practices in society. Discourses, the ways of talking and thinking about reality, thus influence the relationships between subjects and objects. When we talk about reality we influence human relations and subjective positions are created, which means that the subject is linked with characteristics, i.e. identities are created (Bergström & Boréus 2000; Fairclough 1992; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000). By focusing on which subject positions that are shaped through the texts we can gain knowledge about the limits for women's agency, or put in other words, we can focus on the gendered boundary of democracy. Subject positions are relational and therefore the understanding of for example *man* will have consequences for the space of action of those that are named *woman*. The creation of subject positions is therefore connected to relations of power and like Ulf Mörkenstam (1999:59) I regard it as ultimately setting boundaries between individuals.

Marta – the First Lady of Mexico

Like the lives of many other presidents' wives, Marta Sahagún's life is a public story. She has a background as a local politician and began to work at the national level within the conservative political party *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) in Vicente Fox election campaign when he emerged as a presidential candidate. She was employed as the presidential candidate's spokesperson, *vocera*, the first female ever, and had thereby a legitimate role to be at his side during the whole campaign – a symbolic first lady.⁵ She had been his spokesperson since 1995, when he was governor of Guanajuato. Their relationship was a “public secret” long before they got married in July 2001, one year after Fox had won the presidential election in Mexico. At that time they were both divorced, but Marta Sahagún's previous marriage, and the fact that she was divorced, has received much more attention than his. She got divorced in 1998, several years after they had first met.⁶

Marta comes from a traditional upper class provincial family and grew up on a *hacienda*. According to the stories her father was a physician and her mother a truly religious housewife. In early years she attended a local nun school attached to a convent and during two years in her teens she and her sister studied at

⁵ Vicente Fox won the presidency after more than 70 years of presidents from *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), which was also the party that was in majority in the parliament during that time. No party is in majority in the parliament today. In a document on important facts for women in PAN it says that “señora Blanca Magrassi de Alvarez, wife of our presidential candidate señor Luis Héctor Alvarez Alvarez, was the first woman in Mexico who followed her husband throughout the entire campaign. Since then it has been like that in all of PAN's campaigns”. A study made by Victoria E. Rodríguez shows that wives support their husbands during political campaigns but they did not find a single case where a man actively campaigned in favour of his wife's election (Rodríguez 2003:236).

⁶ In the texts it is revealed that Marta also had a longer intimate relationship with another politician from the same party, PAN, during several years in the early 1990s.

a nun school in Ireland to learn English, among other subjects. She never completed her high school education but “in January 1971 I decided to marry without having finished my high school education” (Fuerza del Espíritu: 63). She says that she married very young, at the age of seventeen, and that the father was against the arrangement. What her mother thought is not known. Marta explains that she wanted to marry “maybe because of impulsiveness, the blind enthusiasm of youth and freedom” (Fuerza del Espíritu:64). She means that her impulsiveness is something that she believes is a productive and honest way to live but that she has struggled with this part of her personality since it has occasionally caused her problems. We are able to see that already in her youth Marta wanted and also was allowed to make own decisions even if they, which is hinted at, have caused her trouble.

During her first marriage Marta Sahagún lived with her husband at the time in a small city and they had three children. The ex-husband, who is a veterinary, had problems both with his temper and with the consumption of alcoholic beverages. The couple had frequent quarrels and it happened that he abused her badly. We learn from the stories that Marta Sahagún has been professionally active. She was an English teacher before she married, which does not sound credible since she married at the age of seventeen, and later she worked in her husband’s company which marketed veterinarian articles. Which duties she had there and to which extent she worked is not known. After that she worked in the political administration at the local level and later as a spokeswoman for Vicente Fox. The political work is really the only work that is described in the texts. To have had a professional career seems, after all, to be an important part of the construction of the First Lady.

The following division is based on the analysis of the texts in which different identities, or subject positions, are more central than others. The texts have been read a number of times and several identities of the First Lady have been identified. The identities that have been found are that the identity of Marta is, obviously, constructed as a woman, in contrast to a man, and

that she is the wife of the Mexican president, but also that she is talked about as a working woman. Further, Marta Sahagún and Vicente Fox must as a remarried couple but also as individuals take a position relative to the Catholic Church since this still has a very strong position in the Mexican society.⁷ Also the fact that their party, PAN, is a conservative party with strong roots in the Catholic Church motivates such an analysis. Many wives of presidents and other influential men devote their time to charity, and so does Marta Sahagún. How she is portrayed in relation to charity is thus a part of the picture of her as wife of the president. Finally the president, and thereby also his wife, is part of the political establishment which is supposed to improve the country's and the people's situation. Therefore it is interesting to look at the way she approaches her relation to social issues and to common people.

Marta – the Woman

According to her accounts Marta was raised to become a strong woman and her background made her what she is today and ready for the great task that she faces. Her mother was rigorous but according to remarks, that improved her capabilities: "my childhood lay the foundation for a character that one day gave me the possibility to assume a task as great as helping change Mexico" (Fuerza del Espíritu:27). Her background also led to "the education and the build-up of a soul filled with work and sacrifice, which encourages the talent to serve others" (Fuerza del Espíritu:28). The texts suggest that Marta was raised to become a strong woman, sufficiently strong to be able to change a whole nation. This would be carried out through hard work, not any kind of work but through serving others, presumably the Mexican people. Even if it demanded a strong

⁷ This is to contrast with the governments during the PRI period when open relations between officials and the church were strictly forbidden given the traditional feud between both since the "reform period", late 19th century and specially after the "Cristero war", the 1930s.

personality and, above all, sacrifices, giving up a part of her, unclear which, to serve her country, she was prepared to do it. She is presented not only as strong but also as independent and determined.

I believe in the absolute freedom and I do not only believe in it but I also practice it whatever the cost, even when it means that one has to make difficult decisions in life. It does not matter how difficult (it is therefore easier to choose the comfort of ambiguity), one must despite the pain it can cause take the bull by the horns (Fuerza del Espíritu:62-63).

Vicente Fox describes Marta as “the ideal woman”, and the ideal woman shall possess “intelligence, passion, heart, warmth, love” (La Jefa:30). President Fox confirms this female ideal by exclaiming “Oh, how I like women! Intelligent and ready to work, and with great ideals. Women who are willing to serve others. If they also possess physical beauty, so much better!” (Marta:13). The ideal woman should thus be intelligent as well as attractive. This can best be understood as a woman who becomes a beautiful complement to a man. A man would not have been described in these terms, i.e. as a subject in relation to the other sex.

At the same time as Marta is described as an attractive complement to the male partner she is also described as asexual. She is not tempted by the other sex, at least not in a sexual sense, but she is attracted by power. Her former friends say that “Marta is not interested in *that* – sex. And if there is anything that really turns her on, it is the struggle for power” (Marta:20). Here we find both a Virgin Mary character and a power-seeking masculine character in the same person. At the same time as she is portrayed as an asexual saint she is allowed to seek power, something that is associated with men and masculinity. She is described in classical feminine and subordinate terms but stretches the limits that these set.

But Marta Sahagún has a weakness, which however becomes an advantage - her obsession with body weight is also depicted

as evidence of discipline. Her colleagues describe this with a discreet scent of admiration:

Marta was so disciplined, determined and tough that she did not allow herself to put on 100 g. She weighed herself three times a day and if she had put on weight she automatically stopped eating, something that made her lose weight very quickly. This might explain her personality and this yearning for discipline, order and perfection (La Jefa:83).

This obsession with weight rather seems to be regarded more as part of her personality and strong discipline than something that could cause her serious health problems or be a bad example for other women. “Marta has a special character, either she does not eat anything or she eats and goes to the bathroom to throw up, that is, it is a combination of anorexia and bulimia” (La Jefa:84). Marta Sahagún’s character is so special that among other things it includes eating disorders, without this being in any way problemized. The ideal becomes a woman who has discipline and character enough to see to it that she stays slim. But this can be regarded not only as the result of strong self discipline but as founded on faith – “the Teresian perseverance permeated her personality” (La Jefa: 13).

At the same time one can draw a parallel to what Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls the creation of the “negative mirror image” of the western woman,

[where]... third world woman leads a basically curtailed life based on gender (sexual oppression) and her belonging to the ‘third world’ (ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition bound, religious, domesticated, family oriented, victimized etc.). This is in my opinion described in contrast to the (implicit) self-understanding of western women as well educated, modern, in control of their own bodies and their sexuality, and with “freedom” to make their own decisions (Mohanty 2002:198-199).

In this view Marta becomes the modern “western” woman in control, in contrast to those who cannot control themselves. She can thereby become someone else – not the little girl from

the Mexican countryside but a woman who can distance herself from the daily and the bodily.

Marta Sahagún is seldom described together with other women, and when she speaks about *us* she does so in terms of *nosotros*, that is *we* in masculine form (in contrast to *nosotras* in feminine form). When she speaks about the people she talks about us Mexicans, *nosotros los mexicanos*, first person plural, but when she speaks about women she always says *women* in neutral, or third person plural, as *las mujeres*. This is also true for poor, *los pobres*, and workers, *los trabajadores*. Here there is a difference though in the use of pronouns since Marta Sahagún is neither poor nor a worker, but she is a woman. That Marta speaks about Mexicans in *we*-form but not when she speaks about women reveals an interesting difference in identification, or rather lack of it.

At some rare moments she is described in situations where only women are present. Marta Sahagún describes that already at the age of twelve she used to visit the women's prison to give the prisoners food and consolation:

(I) chose to visit the women's prison since there was much pain, which could primarily be seen in the women who were extremely defenceless due to an unfair society. There were some who were there because they had been abused, but as always it is they who end up in prison. Others had killed in self defence and yet they were imprisoned under inhuman conditions (Fuerza del Espíritu:60).

This description differs from others descriptions in the texts since it contains a clear feminist declaration about an unfair and patriarchal society. At the same time as we here can catch a glimpse of a feminist vein she clearly stresses the woman's traditional role in the family. In a speech at the International Women's Day she said:

(...) (t)he woman must take part in all areas in the modern life, without for that sake despise her capacity to be a mother. To promote the woman is to understand her needs, her longing for development, her most noble ambitions, her political partaking but also strive to

strengthen the family – the woman's best contribution to society (La Jefa:21-22).

Again there is a suggestion that women also can, and maybe even should, have ambitions outside the house but such a consideration is not concerned with women's professional work or possibilities for own development, making them independent of men. Only when the needs of the family are fulfilled the woman can for example engage in politics. In stressing the 'female' value of caring and belonging to the community she is not only opposing this to 'male' values, it implies women as a part of a greater unit, the family, in contrast to men's autonomy (Molyneux 2001:178-181). Moreover, only a privileged woman can make the claim that a woman *must* take part in all areas of modern life. It should be obvious that in a country with enormous class divisions and a strong ethnic discrimination it is not easy, but rather difficult, for poor women and for indigenous women, *indígenas*, to run for political positions even at a very low level in society.⁸ Even those who work professionally often work long days, as long as twelve to fourteen hours, which makes it impossible for them to simultaneously get engaged in political work.

Marta – the Wife

Her first marriage is described by Marta as something that she herself did not decide and that there were factors such as impulsiveness that led her to an early marriage. Apparently she did not choose her husband as "one maintained the families and married within these" (Fuerza del Espíritu:30). When Marta later fell in love with Vicente Fox, but still was not certain if her love was reciprocated, she says that "as my father always said, 'if there is something that you cannot get out of your head, make sure to get it'" (La Jefa:81). That is, she often gives the

⁸ See other articles in this volume.

responsibility of her actions to someone else who thus legitimises them. This is especially the case for those actions that are not fully suitable in her “new” life. At the same time she asserts her freedom to act, which is often described as an important part of her life, contrary to what catholic religion proclaims, especially regarding divorce. Marta seems to reconcile this in her “free” interpretation of her faith in *her* God as the God of freedom and love.

At the same time as Marta Sahagún admits that she herself decided to marry already at the age of seventeen, manipulation almost always is mentioned when her first marriage is described. Even if she never explicitly says that she was manipulated, this is somehow suggested. All the same she condemns “manipulation in any way, if so of family, religious or social character, it is the most degrading that can strike a human being” but “(w)ith manipulation you do not live according to your own decisions or your own conviction but according to another person’s decision and conviction and to me that is the most destructive for the soul” (Fuerza del Espíritu:58-59).

Vicente Fox is described as a man with a patriarchal view on life and relationships, who nevertheless accepted when marrying Marta that he had to agree too that in modern marriage common decisions are made on the basis of equality between women and men. “Later he accepted, for the sake of harmony within the ‘presidential couple’, to share the most important decisions with his wife in a spirit of equality, since men and women are equal in society” (Marta: 71). This is the only time when the subject of equality is touched upon in any of the texts. It is never mentioned what equality should enhance, only the household or also the president’s office. Marta is not only presented as an extraordinary woman but also as someone who possesses the capacity to change a traditional man, who is moreover the president of the country. She is even capable of becoming his equal in decision making. At the same time as Marta Sahagún is pictured as the traditional wife who stands next to her successful husband she is also attributed with a certain power over him, the power to change him into a

better husband who respects her views. Even if the latter can be regarded as being valid mainly within the home it is implied that without her Vicente Fox would never have become president and that her power over him stretches far beyond the borders of the presidential palace, *Los Pinos*.

Marta – and the Church

Marta's parents' home is described as exercising open Catholic and non-orthodox religion, *libertad religiosa*, – everyone had the opportunity to exercise and interpret the religion in his/her own way. The important thing was “love of freedom”, *amor por la libertad* (Fuerza del Espíritu:31). At the same time the family, and particularly the mother, stand out as very religious. To live according to the prescriptions of the Church was the only principle. After all only she, Marta, and no one else, is portrayed as having an own and more free interpretation of the Catholic faith. There is a double meaning to be found here. She claims to have a liberal interpretation of the article of the Catholic faith at the same time as she admits close ties to the traditional church through upbringing and education.

It is evident throughout the book *Marta. Fuerza del Espíritu* how important the religion is, but then not in a strict orthodox sense. Marta describes that she already as a child had a strong faith, but that it was “the God of love, mercy and forgiveness who was invoked” (Fuerza del Espíritu:29). At the same time it was a free God, *Dios libre*, who allowed her to listen to her feelings (Fuerza del Espíritu:32). As a child she went to a convent school where the nuns were strict but respectful. For Marta the time spent there “constituted a very important part of the education in my life. It did so because there was an ideal of respect and freedom for personal decisions” (Fuerza del Espíritu:36-37). Even though hers was a classical religious education leading to a strong faith she does not seem to be attracted by a traditional catholic life.

The symbolism around *Marta. La Fuerza del Espíritu* seems to be rather strong. The book's cover is all white with an elegant italicised text on the front cover. There is also a photo of Marta's face, from the shoulders and up, and she rests her head in her hand, dressed in white and with a delightful and calm expression on her face. White is meant to symbolize innocence, purity and honesty. The Spanish word *espíritu* means spirit, soul and has a strong religious connection (cp. el Espíritu Santo – The Holy Ghost). The title of the book and the portrayal of Marta suggest the image of a saint, a *Santa*, someone with a special mission on earth. Notably is that during the PRI period it was not allowed for officials, nor their families, to be publicly associated with the church. Marta is breaking this tradition in a clear but sophisticated way.

Her given names are *Marta María*, and those too, like most Latin given names, have religious origins. She claims to be happy with her name, "I love it because as a symbol I have wanted to associate it with two evangelical characters, with Marta and with María. With Marta, the affectionate, and with María, she who gets things done (*hacedora de cosas*)" (*Fuerza del Espíritu*:63). The Spanish word *hacedora*, the creator/the maker, also has a religious meaning (cp. el Supremo Hacedor – The Creator). Marta here connects herself to well-known biblical characters and once again there is a hint that she is something out of the ordinary, someone who has a special relationship with heaven. Marta however does not mention that María, Virgin Mary, also represents the purity, the goodness and the innocence. This would not correspond with her life as a divorced, remarried and with extramarital relations. It is thus selected parts of María and the life that Marta leads that are elaborated upon.

Marta – the Working Woman

Marta Sahagún has a working life experience as a teacher of English and within her previous husband's company. In 1988 she joined the already mentioned political party PAN, and then

“I learned to love PAN and Mexico in a much more devout way” and as a politician she came to “be overwhelmed by the calling to serve” (Fuerza del Espíritu:71). She describes how her life was changed when she became active in the party but “the most important was always the willingness to serve, (t)hat was the only thing that motivated me ...” (Fuerza del Espíritu:84). She emphasises her engagement as an altruistic one: “to be active to me did not only mean to appear on the lists as a party member, but to be prepared to devote myself to the political life” (Fuerza del Espíritu:74). In contrast to other politicians she declares that her ambition goes beyond being elected, she also wants to serve her people. The book title *Marta. La Fuerza del Espíritu. La historia del nacimiento de un ideal para cambiar una nación* (Marta. The strength of the soul. The history of the birth of an ideal to change a nation) reinforces the serving vocation that even enhances the aim of changing the nation.

Marta Sahagún ran herself, unsuccessfully, as a candidate in the governor race in one of the states in 1994. She diminishes the importance of this defeat: “(i)t was no defeat to speak of since I from the beginning thought that I through my work would be able to give something to that society” (Fuerza del Espíritu: 75-76). She proclaims that she once made a good example for three very humble women, *tres mujeres muy humildes*, which she met in the street. These women approached her to thank her for the good example she was giving other women. She thus gives the image that she did not necessarily need a political office to change things as her mere presence was enough to for example empower women. At the same time this gives women’s voluntary work the same value as the classical political one in accomplishing changes in society. But the mere fact of having run in the governor election strengthened the power of her example regarding the possibility for other women to participate at such a political level.

In Mexico, the opportunity to work politically is granted to few women, something which is never discussed or even mentioned

in the book.⁹ When Marta Sahagún began her work as responsible for public communication, *relaciones públicas*, in the governor Fox's office she did *not* accept to be paid, "Of course not!". For her the fact that the work was a change in her life and that the work would lead to something new – "for we will of course do something new" was enough (Fuerza del Espíritu:84). Only a financially privileged person can make a statement like that. By not accepting payment for the work she did she simultaneously displays a lack of sensibility towards the fact that most women cannot afford such a gesture. For these women, their bread-winning activities have to be given priority over any political engagement. There is a class dimension in the fact that women are doing voluntary non-paid tasks as a part of their political involvement that is never highlighted. A political career is a possibility for many people in Mexico to get an income though. That the wife of the president of the country did not accept payment when she worked in the political administration is a gesture that becomes part of a discourse, a frame of reference for other politically engaged women, and men.

In 1997 Vicente Fox was elected governor in the state of Guanajuato and Marta started to work as responsible for the public communication in the governor's office. She describes that when she arrived at the building where the state cabinet has its office it was stuffy, dark and gloomy:

Open the balconies! I pledged and at the same time I asked for a bunch of flowers. It must not be allowed to be like this! We must get the light and some happiness in! We must transform this place into an office where we can all feel happy and where quality, happiness and responsibility are the keys that will make it possible for us to work successfully (Fuerza del Espíritu:83-84).

In other words it was PAN and her own intervention that made it possible for the light (hope), the air (life) and the happiness

⁹ The different perspectives on women's possibilities of political participation are discussed in several of the articles in this volume.

(future) to be allowed to enter and sweep through the offices. This event displays her ability to quickly identify and to act for a swift and efficient change. Moreover, it relates to bringing in light and happiness as a female privilege together with bringing flowers that symbolise the colour and the joy. This intervention was regarded as also contributing to efficiency.

A strong determination is also underlined as part of her capabilities. "When I begin a new task or make a very important decision it is important since there is an iron conviction within me to get involved in that duty or to go along with that decision to the very last consequences" (Fuerza del Espíritu:58). The Mexican people here learn that she will change Mexico to the better, irrespective of the cost.

Marta – caring for the People

In *Fuerza del Espíritu* Marta Sahagún is described as sensible to class differences and with a strong sympathy for the poor. Her father was a physician and even if she claims to have experienced an unfair treatment as a child she depicts him as fair:

My father had his practice there (in the house), something that often gave us the opportunity to see the illnesses, pains and needs of those people who came there for help. Most had very limited resources. But they were treated with the same concern by my father (Fuerza del Espíritu: 26-27).

Thus we get a hint to the generosity displayed by her father towards the poor, something which Marta strongly identifies herself with:

To me poverty is shocking. When I was still a student in the convent school they invited us to engage in social work. Among other commitments I devoted my time to reading from the bible in the most needing areas, to the children, and at certain times I went to the women's prison to visit the inmates (Fuerza del Espíritu: 60-61).

She plays the role of a messenger of the Church with the duty to spread the Catholic faith. That the people she visited in the poor quarters perhaps were in greater need of food and clothes than anything else never occurs to her. Once again it is an elitist view of the world that emerges, but it probably corresponds to the historical and social context that she is present in. Note that poverty never becomes unfair or unjust, though it is *shocking*. The sources of the problem are never analysed or questioned.

During her years at the government office of Guanajuato, it is claimed that Marta visited the women's prison often. She stopped doing it, according to her accounts, because her employer, the Guanajuato's government, *gobierno de Guanajuato*, argued that it was best for her own safety as well as for that of the state. However, it is not clear exactly why her visits to the prison would threaten her safety or that of the state. Perhaps this was only an excuse for stopping these visits. Nevertheless she insists that her concern for the poor was part of her motivation to start working politically in 1988 (Fuerza del Espíritu:66). Again, poverty in the text is associated with her social work, but it is never presented as a problem in itself.

On the other hand, despite her concern for poverty, her luxury tastes come forward. Everybody knows that "Marta only dresses in European clothes" (La Jefa:230). Her expensive taste seems to be well known, and when it comes to clothes and accessories money is no object, they can be ordered custom made from the large fashion houses in Europe and they are used only once. Also home furnishing, parties and the children's weddings are large, very large, items of expenditure. That this should be regarded as contradictory in a country

where more than half of the population lives below the subsistence level is not even discussed.

Marta talks about her impulsiveness and how this among other things led her to marry at a very young age. In spite of this early marriage she describes this impulsivity as something very positive both for herself and for the country (Fuerza del Espíritu: 65). As a result she met Vicente Fox who in turn is depicted as positive for Mexico. She considers herself Mexico's equivalent to Evita Perón. After marrying Vicente Fox she asked for a fund of her own: "A fund, I need a fund for the poor. Just like Evita, I must become Evita, I can (...)" (La Jefa:219).

Concluding discussion

Marta Sahagún de Fox takes advantage of certain existing discourses in new ways, and she can thereby stimulate change at the same time as she consolidates other discourses. The possibilities for change are always limited by power relations, but since Marta Sahagún possesses great power herself she has greater possibilities than other women to articulate a counter-discourse in the prevalent discourse order. Her privileged situation for example gives her possibilities to interpret the traditional views that the Catholic Church has on marriage, divorce and extramarital relations more freely. Perhaps her intimately associated affiliations with the Catholic Church and the conservative party PAN give her a greater space for action than if she had belonged to another less traditional party since her religiosity and engagement are now not questioned. However, she opens up for personal and freer interpretations of the Catholic faith, something which can for example challenge traditional gender roles.

We can find different competing roles; the modern woman who gets divorced, remarries and gets herself a new life, the religious woman who has a strong faith but exercises a personal interpretation of it and the traditional woman who puts

the family first, at least rhetorically, and who altruistically rallies to the support of her (new) successful husband. A new and modern discourse on the woman and femininity gains ground alongside a traditional discourse on the same. The traditional view that women are passive and not acting is not true in the case of Marta Sahagún. She is rather a carrier of the classical male attributes active and energetic, although they are curtailed (Eduards 2002:146). The traditional and idealised representation of motherhood in Latin America (Molyneux 2001:169) is however not present in the texts. Only in the sense of her being the “mother” of the nation.

It is interesting that we can find a classical and traditional discourse on women at the same time as a counter-discourse on this – the modern woman who gets divorced and has a political career of her own but who nevertheless returns to the classical female role of caring and sensibility when she marries the president. At the same time as Marta is a model as a new strong, modern and independent woman her action space is limited when she is to become the First Lady of the republic. This should be interpreted within theories saying that women’s agency and strategies are created within the power structures or discourses that oppress (Eduards 2002; Molyneux 2001). A way to interpret this is to consider her marriage to the president of Mexico as the real starting point of her political career. Here she uses what Maxine Molyneux calls special strategies of traditional gender roles, such as charity, caring, and social sensibility, to make a political career (Molyneux 2001). The publication of *Marta. La Fuerza del Espíritu. La historia del nacimiento de un ideal para cambiar una nación* can be seen as a part of these strategies. The future will tell us how successful she is using different strategies.

Michel Foucault (1996) means that the subject originates from notions of normality, which builds on exclusions. Female and male identities thus come true through the stories, discourses, about what a woman or a man *is* and *should* be that are provided by different groups in society. Judith Butler has applied the ideas of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault to the

maintenance and naturalisation of the categories man and woman. She means that the categories rest on the preservation of heterosexuality as the norm, a *heterosexual matrix of interpretation* where man and woman are seen as the “natural” complementary couple (Butler 1994, 1997). Vicente Fox and Marta Sahagún are the perfect couple where he represents strength and power and she represents social sensibility and goodness, with a suitable altruism. The man and the woman – in a tango for two. It is in this matrix of interpretation that one can understand how Marta Sahagún once again becomes the traditional wife after she has married the president. To go a little further, Marta can stretch the discursive limits and challenge the discourse order as long as she is not the First Lady of Mexico; afterwards the order should be re-established, something that she nevertheless uses in her independent political career.

The text about Marta Sahagún is political in the sense that it builds a bridge between her private life and the agency that Mexican women can conquer, that is how citizenship can be *practised by women* in a Mexican context. Through the stories of other women, women can make interpretations and find their own strategies for change. But the stories about Marta Sahagún are also active producers of the public discussion on women’s agency and female identities. The stories about Marta Sahagún de Fox, the First Lady of Mexico, strengthen traditional gender roles at the same time as they also open up to new interpretations of them – she has power and she knows how to handle it, and at the same time she is the caring and altruistic perfect female character. Marta Sahagún is a remarkable mixture of Mother Theresa, Florence Nightingale and Eva Perón. Like Evita her presence on earth is not a coincidence, but she has a special mission to accomplish. She thinks of herself as predestined by God and she was created to become Vicente Fox’ wife, the First Lady of Mexico and mother of her people – Mexico’s *Santa Marta*.

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