

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND CITIZENSHIP IN MEXICO: FINAL RESULTS FROM A PROJECT¹

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Yo pienso que el ser ciudadano nos obliga a actuar, a hacer valer nuestros derechos, a tratar de que lo que pensamos se refleje en lo que se está haciendo, esto es en cómo se gobierna, no es bueno estarse sentado viendo, cómo deciden por ti... se trata de hacer sobre todo en las mujeres más participativo todo y pues me alegra decirte que yo creo que el 80% de la gente que vamos a todos lados somos mujeres, somos las que estamos impulsando más el cambio, así es. (I think that to be a citizen , one must act, one must demand one's rights. We must act following our thoughts, to look at how they are governing us, not letting them decide on your account. It's is also a question of making everybody participate more, specially the women and I am glad to tell you that I believe that about 80% of all those who go everywhere (who participate) are women. It is us, (the women) who are driving the changes (...)) (cid 7, age 58, mixed org.).

The woman making such reflections is deeply engaged in an urban support group of the Zapatista movement as well as in a citizen organization supervising elections in Mexico since the end the 80s. She has been involved in several protest movements since her youth, her main driving force being her desire to fight injustice. But her engagement has been mostly sporadic following political events, not becoming part of an established political organization or party. Her testimony is one among the 45 interviews I have carried out at the end of the 90s with women participating in some kind of social organization, within a research project on women and citizenship in Mexico. The final results of this project are presented in this chapter.

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There have been many studies done on the issue of women's political participation in Mexico, women organized in urban and in other kind of social movements but few of these studies have focused on the individual level trying to find out the perception of these women on issues basic for any democracy like citizenship, rights, participation, political influence and political culture. The study of these perceptions is relevant in order to measure the progress made by women in the realm of the public space. And also to find out which are the mechanisms that make women participate across variables of age, class, ethnicity and class belonging. Finally, this is a way to explore if the pre-conditions for democratization are there and if these have to do with gender variables.

As in the case of any qualitative study the results presented here cannot be generalized. I cannot claim that these perceptions are shared by most women in Mexico but I can claim that the patterns described here have to be taken into account if we are to understand the mechanisms that encourage or hinder the expression of an active participation regarding women and the possibilities of changing the pattern of authoritarian politics that are still the rule in Mexico.

Some theoretical-historical reflections on women and citizenship

Taking as point of departure the understanding of citizenship as the relationship between the state and the individual and between the citizens themselves I also refer to the concept to rights, duties, virtues and opinions and particularly to social and political participation. This relates to the four main traditions regarding citizenship: the communitarian, the civic republican, the neo-liberal and the social-liberal one. (Voet 1998:9) This study takes concepts from all these traditions to the exception of the neo-liberal one.

From the communitarian tradition (MacIntyre 1985) I take the concept of social participation and service to the common good. Of the civic-republican (Arendt 1958, Sennet 1977) tradition I borrow the concept of political participation in order to take part in decision-making processes. Finally, from the social-liberal theories (Rawls 1971, Marshall 1967) I take the concept of social citizenship rights guaranteed by a welfare state and its code of morality of justice and fairness.

Feminist critics of these traditions have in general blamed them for systematically ignoring a 'de facto' subordination of women in most societies and thus the impossibility for them to become real citizens. According to these critics women's traditional gender roles have restrained them to the private domain and have thus hampered their citizenship potentials. Alternative visions of citizens have been offered, from the maternal republican conception of Elshtain (1981), to the political contributions of women's differences of Pateman (1989) and the "ungendered nature of citizenship" of Lister (1995). The 'gendered' or neutral nature of citizenship has been very much discussed particularly by Dietz (1985) and Mouffe (1992) who plead for a 'gender neutral citizenship' against Pateman (1992), Elshtain (1981) and Iris Marion Young (1989) who prefer a 'gendered' citizenship where women's differences should be acknowledged. A third position (Phillips 1991) aims at a gender neutral society although it sees a 'gendered' citizenship as the only way to get there (Voet 1998:14).

In Latin American, as has already been noticed in the introduction, cultural representations of gender have been part of the political discourses on citizenship and these discourses have changed through history. This has also affected the boundaries between the private and the public and led to special strategies from the part of women that have used the 'special attributes' in which they were socialized as their most powerful tool to qualify themselves for political and legal rights. Referring to the above mentioned debate, women in Latin America have used a 'gendered' citizenship strategy in order to gain civil and political rights (Pateman 1992, Molyneux 2000).

This development differed with the one operating in most Western industrialized countries where citizenship was part of a liberal and individualistic tradition. Even the community and welfare tradition represented by Marshall 's evolutionary model of citizenship in which the circle of those who received rights expanded historically as did the type of rights" they were entitled to enjoy (Yuval Davis 1997:69), was hardly developed in Latin American societies let alone in Mexico.

Thus, we have a strong communitarian tradition underlying community, culture and ethics, a political and social participation tradition aiming at the attainment of equality and fairness but also of social rights and a 'gendered ' citizenship strategy used by women to obtain these rights. We thus arrive to the salient features by which Molyneux describes the association of feminism to citizenship in Latin America: *social character and participatory politics* (Molyneux 2000).

However, there is another element that has to be considered in order to understand female citizenship participation in Latin America. As Chantal Mouffe (1992) argues, the subject's different positions affect or even determine collective social practices, in particular social movements, According to Mouffe, "*citizenship cannot be understood only as an identity but as an articulating principle that affects the different positions and allows for a plurality of specific loyalties and respect to individual freedom*" (Mouffe 1992:378). In other words, women as individuals can have a gender identity but they belong to different social groups in which social class, ethnicity and even sexual preferences have a clear significance in their actions.

The alliance of feminism and popular urban movements in the 80s and 90s in Mexico was enriched by the citizenship struggles of the 90s where once again, the majority of the activists looking for participatory -and social responsible versions of citizenship- were women. This enriched both feminist struggles and citizens' struggles in general. The women's situation regarding legislation and political

representation improved following these struggles but also international events as the 1995 Beijing's Women's conference.

Women in Mexico, as in the rest of Latin America, have in many cases used their 'gender traits', to obtain concessions. But, as we have seen in the introduction, 'essentialism', may be problematic. These traits may not be accepted by all women's groups and they may also raise expectations difficult to fulfil.

This raises again the problem of diversity as discussed in the introduction to this volume. Heterogeneity regarding the urban, the rural space, the culture, ethnicity, the social class, educational levels, access to information are all variables that divide gender/sex belonging. To find out what is left after these divides is one of the challenges of feminism and of the construction of a 'gendered' citizenship.

Using the above mentioned theoretical instruments I undertook the task of finding out how far the notions of rights, duties, participation as a citizenship practice, gender consciousness and the ambition to change authoritarian political structures and discourses were rooted in 'participant' urban women's thoughts. I wanted to get an insight into their perceptions and how the personal affected their participation linking thus the private and the public as several feminists have argued. I chose participant urban women assuming that their participation was a sign of their interest in making a difference, of contributing to changes, to the common good, in the say of the communitarian and civic-republican tradition. But I did not want to limit my study only to women organization members, I wanted to see if participation *in itself* had any effects regarding gender consciousness in women belonging to movements and organizations that had no link to feminist issues or demands. Moreover, I wanted to test the existence of "feminine virtues" "women's special contributions to the public" among these women. Finally, I wanted to gather the views of a group as heterogeneous as possible belonging to different social, educational, age and urban milieus in order to have a broader image of what participation and citizenship meant in different contexts and

how gender affected or was affected by the participation experiences. In the last phase of the project I decided to include also interviews with a limited number of non-participants urban women in order to test the variable participation.

The sample: urban women from different social contexts

During the period between November 1998 and the end of January 1999, I carried out about 39 interviews with women participating in several organizations in three cities in Mexico: Mexico City, Puebla and Guadalajara.² The organizations to which these women belonged were both women's organizations (such as Ciudadanas en Movimiento por la Democracia, CMD (Women Citizens in the Movement for Democracy) and Diversa) and mixed organizations (such as the Zapatista support groups and the Civic Alliance). The interviewees were selected with the help of the contact persons in the various organizations trying to choose women from the grassroots level. Some interviews were also conducted with leaders but mostly for the sake of obtaining information about the organization. It is also necessary to make clear that several of the interviewees were participating in several organizations at the same time. Their ages varied between 23 and 60 years (see details below). Their levels of education and social origins are also diverse although this diversity was not equally represented.

In the summer of the year 2000, I carried out a second round of interviews, this time mostly with non-participants (twelve in number) but also with other participants (five). The criteria for the selection of interviewees was that their profiles should coincide with some of the profiles of the participants interviewed in the first round of the fieldwork - in respect of age, social

² At first my plans were to limit my interviews to two organizations only: Women in the Struggle for Democracy, ('Mujeres en Lucha por la Democracia', MLD) and Women Citizens in the Movement for Democracy, ('Ciudadanas en Movimiento por la Democracia', CMD). However, this proved difficult, as contacts with these organizations were temporarily broken.

class, education levels etc. These interviews were not as extensive as those carried out during the first round, but they were also performed in three different cities. As already mentioned the aim of the interviews with non-participants was to test the participation variable regarding experiences and perceptions of the same themes. A report on the results of this comparison has already been published (Domínguez 2001).

All the interviews carried out in both rounds of the fieldwork were semi-structured, i.e. open with certain key themes like their notions and experiences of citizenship participation, their perceptions of rights and duties, how gender affected and was affected by this participation, their notions of feminism and feminist organizations, of indigenous in general and Zapatista women in particular, their views on the Mexican political system and the Mexican political culture and finally on the external context and how this affected Mexico's situation.

In other articles and papers I have presented samples of this material dealing with the comparison participants-non-participants, the external context and the views on the Zapatista indigenous women (see my chapter on this in this volume). This paper is the first one to deal with the joint results of the 45 interviews with participant urban women. After describing the profiles of these interviewees I focus on the following aspects: conceptions of citizenship, motivation for participation, women's relationship to power, the specificity of women's contributions to the changes needed in the Mexican political system, the "nodal points" and strategies and some critical views on feminist NGOs and their relationship to movements.

As in other types of qualitative studies it is necessary to bear in mind that my aim is not to present a representative study of the views or situation of women in Mexico in general. I do not pretend to generalize but to offer a glimpse, a sample of perceptions, views, and experiences from a diverse group of women who live in urban environments and share participatory activities.

The Interviewees: profiles and participation

I have chosen 6 variables to describe the profiles of these 45 women. These variables are: age, educational level, occupation, religion, family situation and organizations to which they belong. The correlation between these variables among them and with some aspects, such as motivations for participation is meant to help us to understand the mechanisms of their participation process.

In the sample we have women from *ages* going from of 20 to 70 years old but there is a certain overrepresentation of middle and advanced-age women. Regarding the *educational level* the majority of the interviewees has basic or advance education being the younger ones the most educated. Also, most of these women were *economically active* or students although somewhat less than a third of them were housewives and worked as volunteers. Regarding *religious activities* nearly half of them declared to be non-practitioners and again this is correlated with age being the younger ones the least interested in religion. As to their *family situation* less than half of them were married or had a partner and an overwhelming majority of these “active” women had no small children. Either they had not started getting children or these had already grown up.

Half of the *organizations* in which these women were active were feminist or women organizations and half were ‘mixed organizations’ (men and women non-feminist organizations). Again, this can be correlated to age and educational level: the younger women and the most educated belonged to a feminist or a women organization whereas middle and advanced age and lower levels of education go together with the belonging to a “mixed” organization. Finally, it is worth to notice that 60 % of our sample are single women (widows and divorced included) which naturally gives them an enormous freedom of action.

Even though this is not a quantitative sample it is interesting to notice that according to Mexican statistics (INEGI 2002: 59) among the whole women population, 46 % have ages ranging from 30-49 years old, the same percentage of the women in that age period in our sample. This is the only coincidence. According to the same statistics women represented 34% of the economically active population but such a proportion comprised only 36% of women older than 12 years old (INEGI 2002:307). That is to say, only one third of the working population are women and only on third of all women in working age work according to official figures. We can suspect the real figures are much higher given the fact that in countries like Mexico the informal labour markets, not accounted by official statistics, encompass a large part of labour. Nevertheless, statistics contrast with our sample in which most of the women are economically active, at all ages and educational levels. In this sense, one can find a correlation of economic and social/political participation.

To summarize, the participant women I have interviewed can be grouped in the following way:

1. A minority of young highly educated women belonging to women or feminist organizations unmarried and without children, not adhering to any religious practice.
2. A relative majority of middle-age women that have either a middle or a high educational level, that are economically active and have either teen-age/adult or no children at all. Approximately one third are active or semi/active Catholics, the rest take a distance from any religious affiliations. Slightly more than half of this group belongs to feminist or women organizations, the rest is active within mixed organizations.
3. A large group (about one third) of elder women, most of them still economically active, some already retired after having been economically active. Although the lowest education levels concentrate within this group we also find a large group of highly educated women among them. Most of the women in this

group are active or semi-active Catholics and needless to say either married, widows or single they have adult children or no children at all.

Several comments can be made from the above. In this sample women from “progressive” organizations predominate, that is those organizations interested in changing society in a more democratic way and those carrying feminist emancipating demands. We are however conscious that many active women-not part of this sample-belong to “conservative” organizations sometimes religious ones whose aims are to avoid any changes that can be considered a threat to their traditional way of life. It is possible that the profiles of those conservative participatory women coincide with the ones we have presented here but it is also possible that their profiles differ, like for example less active economic women with lower levels of education. Whatever the differences, this does not pretend to be a “general profile” for participatory women in Mexico although it does give us some important clues. For example, it is reasonable to expect a “no-small children pattern” among most participant women although, again this depends on the kind of participation, as we noticed above regarding the “economically active” considerations. Another pattern: the experience of extra-domestic work and some kind of education (again, depending on the kind of participation) seems to give them a certain freedom of action and self-confidence.

Something else confirmed by this sample. Women in feminist/women organizations have a higher level of education as these movements have traditionally recruited their members from middle class sectors even if popular sectors women are sometimes adhering to feminist ideas. Moreover, most women from popular sectors are still reluctant to be identified as feminist and they are consequently far from joining these kind of organizations. Therefore we see so few popular sectors women within feminist/women organizations.³

³ See Espinosa in this volume. In the analysis of the views on ‘power’ and strategies a more thorough discussion about this is presented.

Having described the profile of the interviewees we can proceed to the content of the interviews trying to relate this content with the profiles already described.

Participant Women's perceptions

Motivations for participation

Discussing the reasons or background of their participation about one third of those interviewed associated the beginning of this participation with a gradual process of consciousness of the need of social changes, specially at the local level. Another third of the total associated this participation with their studies either in the way of getting involved in student organizations, political groups among students or because of their research activities (dealing with social sciences) which awakened their desire of engagement. Among these we find most of the feminist participants. The rest either speak of concrete events that made them decide to participate like the elections in 1988 or the Zapatista uprising in 1994 or of a familiar background (parents or close relatives as active participants). The interviewed women that associated their engagement to concrete material needs were rather few, about 7 (from 45) and even fewer (2) were those that linked this participation to religious motivations.

It is somewhat difficult to associate the above mentioned reasons for participation with other variables although some correlations are rather simple. Among those speaking of a gradual process of consciousness we find all sorts of categories, young, middle age, elder well and low educated, single or married, feminist or in mixed organizations. Those speaking of concrete events are mostly middle age either of middle or high educational level and they are engaged in mixed organizations as general as *Alianza Cívica* or as particular as support organizations for the Zapatistas. The ones recalling a familiar background are mostly young or middle aged, middle

class, middle or highly educated and as the former they participate both in mixed and feminist/women organizations. Those that associate their participation to their studies or research are mostly young or middle age and the majority participates in women/feminist organizations although we also find them in mixed organizations. The participants that gave concrete needs as the cause of their participation are naturally those engaged in urban popular movements struggling to get their housing needs satisfied. Their age varies and as we have seen, their profiles are lower education and more religious affiliation than the rest.

Whatever their profile it seems that most of these participant women relate their participation to a certain consciousness awakening provoked by their own social experiences (in which their family background, their studies or professional training is included), their living conditions or external events. This would fit in what Molyneux calls "social and participatory politics" (Molyneux 2000). Relating these observations to the citizenship traditions mentioned in the theoretical debates, it seems that it is the lack of pre-conditions for an active citizenship (experienced in themselves or others in their surroundings) that trigger a participation rather than the existence of these pre-conditions.

In any case, the information they get from their surrounding environment: school, place of work, existing organizations, the mass media is very important in precipitating and moulding this participation. This is important to notice as non-participant interviewed (with diverse profiles, mostly middle class but also working class) shared a lack of diversified sources of information, they depended mostly of superficial and highly manipulated TV news.⁴ Regarding gender consciousness this

⁴ This refers mainly to the commercial TV channels whose news broadcasting is widely acknowledged as being extremely conservative and manipulated by powerful private interests. Government channels are also considered as manipulated and even if some kind of objective public service broadcasts is available, it remains quite marginal.

participation is still mediated by a class variable: the lower the income and educational levels the more mixed organizations and less gender conscious participants. However, as we shall presently see, even non-gender conscious participants can eventually gain a gender consciousness through their participation experience.

On the other hand, the *initial* motivation is not necessarily the *current* motivation for their engagement. As we shall presently see, the participation process in which they got involved changed the private lives and transformed the initial motivation of most of these women. The participants that mentioned a religious motive had a high educational level and participated in a religious affiliated women organization, they also belonged to the third age group.

This description proves the need to be cautious with generalizations. Participant actors are led to participation by a varied number of reasons in which both socio-economical and contingent factors are relevant. In the case of women, perhaps more than men, both private and public events are important. It is necessary to take into account these reasons but it is equally important to see where this participations process leads.

In general these women give very positive accounts of their participation experiences, of an increase in their self-confidence, of personal realization, of the establishment of friendship and solidarity links, of increasing engagement in a social project that tries to open "new spaces". Even those who had a practical interest as their main motivation seem to have overcome this 'practical need' motivation and gone into some kind of 'strategic need' process as Maxine Molyneux would put it. However, even if the experience has been in general positive, many of the interviewees also describe several obstacles to this participation. Some of these conflicts had to do with their gender roles, as we shall presently see.

Views on Citizenship

Most interviewees associate the concept of citizenship with *rights* (political but also socio-economical rights) and with participation. Regarding the “rights concept” some young interviewees elaborate on it “to include even sexual, ethnic” and naturally women’s rights. Obligations are included but sometimes both concepts are mixed, for example: to vote is for some a right, for others an obligation.

The same happens with the concept of *participation* which is sometimes understood by the interviewees as a right and sometimes as an obligation. Participation in all areas becomes political, since it is the expression of demands to be satisfied by the state and society; it also represents the need to assume *public responsibility*. The notion of common good of both local and national community, like in the communitarian tradition, is also associated with citizenship which is on the whole regarded as having a powerful, *transformatory* potential.⁵

For example when we, in the young people's network for sexual and reproductive rights, understood these rights as part of the family.. as part of our citizens' rights, it was very nice, very important because it helped us to integrate this issue in several places where it was previously very difficult to speak of sexual and reproductive rights. (cid 6, age 26, women's org.).

Citizenship is to demand your rights: it is to create consciousness against government's abuses (cid 3, age 58, women's org.).

Citizenship is the right to participate in social issues, in finding solutions to social problems, it is to support other citizens and even the government if it does a good job. The problem is that the majority of the population does not assume itself as citizens. (cid 27, age 42, mixed org.).

Citizenship is the right to get information, to know about public affairs and to demand but not only to criticize, to propose and participate (cid 28, age 44, mixed org.).

⁵ The source of the following quotations avoids the name of the interviewee but identifies her by a code consisting of the interview number (ex: cid 1), the age and her belonging to either a woman or a mixed organization.

"A citizenship participation gives rights and responsibilities to all whatsoever their age. It is for example to observe and demand accountability from the candidates. It is to leave behind the fear and personal convenience and to work for the common good" (cid 29, age 53, mixed org.).

Citizenship (as a concept) implies the project one has for one's own community, for one's own neighbourhood and in general for the nation, for example the duty to participate, the compromise one must make to participate. For example in your neighbourhood there are several needs that have to be satisfied and the citizen has to help to solve these needs. I think that if constant citizen participation is attained, important changes can take place both at the level of the political structures and at that of the social structures (cid 8, age 23, women's org.).

When asked to specify which rights and duties they associate with citizenship, the interviewees try to refer to their own experiences in their organizations. One of the interviewees belonging to an urban popular organization associates these duties with solidarity:

Citizenship participation (...) takes many forms, many approaches, for example, when they are on the verge of dislodging people from their houses, let's say in a neighbouring district, we come to give them support, we try to help them, to advise them on the alternatives they have (cid 36, age 38, mixed org.).

And as we had previously noticed, participation to satisfy a concrete material need can generate new kinds of social engagements.

One starts struggling in order to get a house but one goes further to a 'culture of rights' (cid 37, age 40, mixed org.).

Finally there are also other notions that at least half of the interviewees associate with citizenship: respect for diversity and tolerance.

Citizenship is to make all more participative, it implies respect for diversity and tolerance, it reflects plurality (...) We have responsibilities in the sense that the rights of others should be

sacred for us, we should not try to impose our points of view but try to respect the diversity of opinions, actions and lifestyles (...) Our constitution should reflect this diversity of Mexican men and women, if the Indians have a particular way of being, the Mestizos have another, and all of them should be recognized as citizens, as people who have the same rights in spite of the colour of their skin or their social origin (...) (cid 7, age 58, mixed org.).

I think that when we think of participating at the local level we also have to think of participating at the national level. Linking this to the idea of diversity, you cannot think of local or national participation if you don't think about diversity, that we are different, have diverse points of view and different forms of participation and different ways of solving problems. I think that the issue of recognizing diversity and differences is a key point that could make it possible to transform this authoritarian culture (cid 8, age 23, women's org.).

Citizenship is to respect each other, to avoid aggressions, to become equal (cid 36, age 38, mixed org).

This brings us back to the discussion on the diversity of identities and Mouffe's concept of citizenship "*as an articulating principle that affects the different positions and allows for a plurality of specific loyalties and respect to individual freedom*" (Mouffe 1992:378). These women refer to participation as a way to exercise democracy and to transform their environment through the legitimating of social demands. Such demands evolve into a discourse of *rights* which encompasses tolerance, accountability and public responsibilities.

However, apart from the young interviewees, there is very little discussion on individual rights, on demands in order to fulfil one-self as individuals. Liberal concepts of citizenship centred on the individual's rights against the state are rarely mentioned unless they are applied to justice and fairness of opportunities. The aim of *participation* is to press the state to fulfil its obligations and to account for its responsibilities, not to replace it in this fulfilment. However, this participation is also seen as an obligation in order to share the responsibility of solving common

problems. This would confirm the '*perverse confluence*' between a participatory civil society and neo-liberalisms' goals as certain of these organizations are 'de facto' fulfilling these functions.

Summarizing, citizenship as a concept is given a participatory nature of social engagement associated with a discourse of rights, solidarity and obligations in a relationship with both the state and the rest of society. Even though some young participants mention individual rights, individuality is mainly associated with justice not with neo-liberal demands. On the contrary, community rights are frequently referred to and the state is still held as the main responsible for the common good even though several organizations are in reality fulfilling the state's responsibilities.

Another aspect of the social politics of women's participation is according to Molyneux linked to "motherly" virtues in Latin America. This takes us to the gender features the interviewees perceive as influencing their participation.

How gender affects participation and is affected by it: is women's participation different from men's?

As I mentioned before, one of the main points of our enquire was to examine whether these women held some views on gender differences regarding participation, consequences for their private lives and families, views on the relationship between women and political power. I was also interested in their views on the Mexican political culture, and their appreciation of women initiatives like the Zapatista women's actions, the "Women's Parliament" and the creation of "Diversa".

For most participants, the exercise of citizenship by women has very much to do with overcoming the private context. The private-public dichotomy is very relevant here. Women have to

confront the private context before being able to participate. For men, according to the interviewees, the private-public relationship is less evident. This is specially clear for the young interviewees:

(...) yes, I think that we girls, we try to relate our political participation with personal processes, in contrast to the boys for whom the personal process is completely disassociated from their political participation, for us it is very close and I think that the experience of many girls that have worked in 'The Witches' project is that the personal process is always there, you have to confront the family because, in order to participate and to be at the meetings, you have to confront your father and mother. Moreover, when you grow up and you have other kinds of experiences, love experiences, you continue to confront the political and the personal, you want to maintain consistency between them. This happens in all social classes and organizations. There is a moment when we women, we question our participation in relation to our personal life (cid 8, age 23, women's org.).

In a woman (...) this implies a much longer process to modify all internal things. It is not only to feel comfortable when you speak in public, it is something else and... I don't know, from those things that are very deep to basic things (cid 6, age 26, women's org.).

Even elder women have experienced this as a problem, the price of participation: time and energy that have to be taken from family tasks that are still considered as "women's responsibilities":

Yes, it is different, the participation of women from that of men, yes I think so because, as I was telling you before, the double day's work, at home and outside, implies a lot of responsibilities for women, it's more difficult for women to say: "I'll soon come back", because they have to clean, wash dishes, make the beds etc. Even when men try to help, their help is mostly symbolic (cid 7, age 58, mixed org.).

If I had been married it would have been much more difficult to develop myself, that is why I could do so many things, I was not accountable to anybody (cid 39, age 60, mixed org.).

From these perceptions it is clear gender roles count regarding participation. Moreover, it is interesting to contrast the young and elder women's opinions on this issue. Both of them see the private as a problem but while the young interviewees point to

the need of internal changes (overcoming the lack of self-confidence, of shyness, of family rules), the elder interviewees point to the 'double burden', family responsibilities traditionally entitled to women. One could argue that the young interviewees have not yet dealt with the problems pointed out by the elder, as they have not started building a family of their own. However, it is not clear that these young women (mostly belonging to women organizations) will accept in the same extent as the old ones the classical responsibilities put upon women. On the other hand the questioning of the interiorized obstacles, in itself a process of gender consciousness, is perhaps more difficult for the elder generation, who, in this sample, mostly belongs to mixed organizations.

Nevertheless, a process of questioning of these 'gender burdens' (both internal and external) may be under way for certain of the middle age participants with working class background, belonging to mixed organizations. This process has even resulted in ruptures.

Our husbands see that we participate that we are pressed (...) they feel somehow neglected (...) (for example) we have coordinating meetings on Thursdays and we finish at about ten, eleven o'clock, at night, our husbands are already at home and we arrive after them and that makes them feel neglected: 'I'm the one who has the right to come home late, not you, why do you do it?' (cid 36, age 38, mixed org.).

"Women's participation can have high costs, family conflicts. I'm not the only one that has left the husband because of this (cid 35, age 52, mixed org.).

Surprisingly, these ruptures are reported mostly by urban popular organizations members, that means, mixed, not women organizations. Participation, as a process and an experience has thus awakened a gender consciousness that has helped these participants overcome even their interiorized obstacles. Why are these ruptures reported mostly among these women may have to do with a stronger and less flexible gender hierarchy within these households where family unity and values are highly praised. Not surprisingly, it is also among the

urban-popular, working class women that we find most moral warnings against jeopardizing the family unity:

Women should demand to be respected and they should defend their sexuality but they should also be careful to avoid endangering their couple, their family, they should avoid extremes (cid 28, age 44, mixed org.).

Participation for women is always connected to the private sphere as a challenge, an obstacle or a limitation to overcome. Women, according to these interviewees, always search for coherence, linking personal and public processes - something that quite often results in conflicts both at the internal and at the family relations' level. The different identities (militant-participant-daughter, mother, wife) combined with traditional gender roles create contradictions. This explains also why so few women with small or school-age children participate. And this applies particularly to women with family responsibilities among the working class sectors where these roles are difficult to escape and where delegation or sharing of responsibilities (something which middle classes can sometimes afford), is rather problematic. Moreover, it is difficult for these women to question gender traditional roles and the belief in the family as an institution that is necessary to maintain whatever the cost. Therefore it is surprising to find among some of these women, rather the younger ones, a clear process of gender consciousness that has driven them even into painful family ruptures.⁶

We have started speaking about the problems women confront because of gender expectations when they participate. But what are the views of our interviewees on 'women's special attributes, specificities? And could these specificities, according to them, contribute to change the political culture and the existing power structures? What is the image these women have of women as politicians?

⁶ For more information on the urban popular women's attitudes towards feminism see Gisela Espinosa's chapter in this volume.

How can women's participation contribute to a change of the political system and culture?

Most of the women in this sample agree that women in Mexico share differential attributes to men. Such attributes (some are mentioned once, others are repeated frequently) are for example: women tend to be more engaged than men, to become more involved in social issues, they are more concerned, and enthusiastic, they are more demanding with themselves, less corrupt, more honest, less egocentric ('protagonist'), more focused on common interests, better administrators, closer to practical needs and local contexts, more attentive to details, less interested in and more afraid of power, more full of initiatives and proposals, more emotional and affectionate, more peace-loving, more fair, more democratic. Consequently, many of the interviewees coincide as to affirm that women's skills and experiences would make a positive contribution to politics.

This "essentialism", supporting Pateman and Elshtain's arguments, are shared, by the majority of the interviewees as a group. This can perhaps be surprising given the heterogeneity of the sample and the fact that half of these women belong to mixed organizations, not to feminist or women organizations. Moreover, I found that these views were shared by 60% of those interviewees belonging to women organizations and by 86 % of those belonging to mixed organizations. Not surprisingly, most of these views are to be found among the middle and elderly age group. Among the young ones, only one third shared these views.⁷

I think that (the system) would change (if there were more women) in the sense that women are very much linked to the needs of daily life, not to the politics of pamphlets or to that of structures and institutions.

⁷ About 30% of those within the age group 20-30 years old, 76 % of the age group 30-50 years old and 72 % of those between the ages 51-70 share these views.

We women, we don't normally lose our link with daily realities (cid 8, age 23, women's org.).

As we can see, relatively less feminist than non-feminist and more elder than young women share these views. Is this surprising? According to some Mexican feminist scholars this is hardly surprising.⁸ Traditional gender roles in Mexico are extremely uprooted and this is specially the case the older women are and the lower the educational level (as this sample also shows). Women belonging to women or feminist organizations, on the contrary are younger, more experienced on feminist issues and less inclined to idealize "women's virtues" realizing the need to qualify these, as we shall see. Both Pateman and Molyneux spoke of the use of "women's virtues" as an argument against and for the granting of women's rights when women's struggles began. What we see in this sample is that these arguments reappear once more to legitimate women's participation in public affairs making them preferable to men. Besides, many of the attributes described above are also associated with maternity. The lack of selfishness attributed to women in general is only an example but there are many others that could illustrate Dietz description of 'feminist maternalists' who consider the private as a "locus for a possible public morality and as a model for the activity of citizenship itself" (Dietz 98:387).

As part of this dichotomization of the masculine and the feminine most of the interviewees identify the Mexican political culture as authoritarian and anti-democratic, a typical example of 'machismo'. Even interviewees from mixed organizations agree that in their organizations' structures, leaderships are still very 'machista', that is to say patriarchal and authoritarian.

Participation parameters are still masculine (cid 6, age 26, women's org.).

⁸ Discussion during the Swedish-Mexican workshop on gender and Citizenship, September 25-26, 2002 Göteborg's University.

In all organizations there is still a lot of machista tutorship, women lack self-esteem (cid 7, age 58, mixed org.).

Women are the majority in the base, they are the ones that make the grassroots work (*talacha*) but they don't become leaders (cid 17, age 34, mixed org.).

When asked if they thought that the political culture in Mexico would change if more women participated most interviewees agreed that it would. However, several young and middle age women say that a massive women participation would be significant only if women became really conscious of their rights and responsibilities because otherwise they would be supporting the same "*machista*" authoritarian structure.

(...) the political culture would change with more women's participation but women should acquire more consciousness because many women tend to accept the '*machista*' behaviour (cid 25, age 66, mixed org.).

We see that already today most of those who participate are women but not all are conscious [of their rights], they concede on power issues because they want to avoid conflicts (...) besides women are still '*machistas*' (cid 27, age 42, mixed org.).

If there were more women things would change but (...) women also assume '*machista*' positions once in power. To finish with authoritarianism it is necessary to understand what is a democracy (cid 28, age 44, mixed org.).

Women are thus also hold responsible for the existence of "*machista*" structures, they nurture them by accepting its rules and educating their children according to them. Moreover, according to several of the interviewees, many women politicians try to copy this "*machista* model" because it is the only way to succeed or to survive within those structures.

(...) the problem is that when I see the news or TV and I see a woman like Maria de los Angeles Moreno and many other Congresswomen that were in the feminist movement for some period, it would seem there is no difference (to men). Then I'm somehow confused because I'm convinced that women relate in a different way to power, but I'm also convinced that women in power positions can also react like men (...) it's very difficult to go alone against the world (...) there is a whole structure

and even if you can change it in a certain moment you must be able to function in those structures (...) (cid 8, age 23, women's org.).

I think it depends on which women you speak of, there are all kinds.. those that act in a "*machista*" way when they have power, they have all the macho attributes, they give orders, and take decisions as such.. There are others that try not to fall into such a pattern, they try to find a balance, but it is very complicated for these women, they risk being eliminated by the men (cid 6, age 26, women's org.).

One cannot generalize but those women [politicians] they already smoke and drink and go to those kind of parties (...) and then I wonder, what is happening? What is the novelty we women can contribute with? Then, why do we want to replace the men? We have to do something better, more honest, something that shows there is a woman (cid 39, age 60, mixed org.).

The same structures are blamed for demanding more of women politicians as women are expected to be "more intelligent, more competent" in order to succeed. And some of the female politicians do succeed in becoming 'role models' according to some interviewees.

Look, I think that when a woman comes to power, more attention is paid to what she does, she is expected to do more, to be more honest, to be more intelligent and to have more visions and I think that women in general, with certain horrible exceptions, have played a very positive role, trying to have a better government. It is true that there are few who have succeeded in attaining important positions but they have done a good job (...) (cid 7, age 58, mixed org.).

I have seen such women who do not imitate men's vices, they are respectful, well balanced, have a lot of experience and knowledge. There are many such women but also many of the other sort (cid 39, age 60, mixed org.).

According to the elder and mixed organization' interviewees, women who want to make a political career or become leaders have a double challenge: to be more competent and to contribute with their "specific virtues" to politics. But, for many of the interviewees in women organizations the real problem confronting women in public affairs is their reluctance to take power. According to these views women are afraid of power,

they are reluctant to become leaders. This is a view mostly absent among the mixed organizations' members although many of them often speak of a general lack of self-esteem.

Grassroots women do not build naturally vertical structures of power, they do not see themselves as leaders, they organize because of practical needs, to come forward as leaders frightens them (cid 9, age 38, women's org.).

(...) women in general are more enthusiastic, active and full of ideas but they are afraid of power, of a double or triple responsibility (cid 13, age 22, women's org.).

There are generational differences in women's attitudes to power, the old ones are afraid of it, the young ones long to get it" (cid 15, age 51, women's org.).

Politics is very masculine, men have the advantage and women do not recognize themselves as leaders, the challenge is to get to power without losing ones' views as women (cid 22, age 40, women's org.).

I think that women mostly, because of their [lack of] education, or because of traditions, they back on issues regarding power. Starting with family matters, and continuing within their organization (...) They want to avoid conflicts and as they have never had it [power], they don't aim at getting it (cid 27, age 42, mixed org.).

Quite often, I insist, there are fears, traumas, all that one carries, because one has always seen that it is men that head [organizations] and take the main positions, so we lack more motivation (cid 37, age 40, mixed org.).

Consequently, even if women make the majority of any kind of movement their reluctance to take power results in few women leaders of these movements. And women do not recognize themselves as leaders because power is very masculine. Therefore, according to many of these women, it is necessary to change the political culture, the power parameters, creating a non-masculine type of leadership, a "non-*machista*" power model. Specially the young and middle age interviewees belonging to feminist organizations, argue that the solution, more than an increase in women participation is a change in educational patterns, in human attitudes encompassing both men and women, a new *political style*.

What is needed is not so much more women participating but that more men and women create a new culture through two processes: the electoral and the civil society-NGOs. What we need is to convince men to see feminism as a new form of constructing citizenship through gender equality and equity. There are not yet any alternative forms of 'non-machista' power that women can follow. It is not only a question of seizing power but of creating new models (cid 30, age 33, women's org.).

Only a general awakening of consciousness of both men and women and a culture of equity would change the political culture but this demands deep changes at the level of the human beings. It is necessary that women assume the positive part of their own and of the masculine role, not only the negative aspects (cid 18, age 40, women's org.).

I think that more is required than an increase in women's political participation. What most women have proposed is a new form of politics.. the Zapatistas have been very clear in this matter when they ask for new forms for politics and from my viewpoint these new forms are somehow linked to feminist movements since one of the first movements to refer to this was the feminist movement (...) (cid 8, age 23, women's org.).

Nevertheless, participation by more women continues to be relevant, according to most interviewees, since women have something to contribute. And an increase in women's participation will, of necessity, result in new styles of politics, one in which 'lo cotidiano', the daily problems and the local context have a place.

But anyhow it is relevant that women participate in increasing numbers because of the experience we have and even the Zapatista experience has been a key factor. In the transformation of community life in Chiapas, not only have women occupied important positions in the leadership of the Zapatista movement, in the community assemblies, but they have also achieved important cultural transformations in the communities. I don't know if one can do the same at the city level but I think that women have an advantage - our link to daily life allows us to go from our daily tasks to formal politics. This guarantees that we can transform our local reality, the one in which we live (cid 8, age 23, women's org.).

On the other hand and whatever the need for deep cultural transformations and the alleged reluctance of grassroots women to take power, one of the few feminist leaders interviewed in this sample had another view of the issue. For this leader, the priority is the choice of effective strategies in the short run, going beyond networks and alliances, in order to seize power.

Networks and alliances are not enough, it is necessary to seize power, to have behind a critical mass, a strong movement in order to demand concrete changes, to have our own candidates (...) in this way we can construct citizenship by circulating information and demanding accountability from the candidates we support. This is the only way of constructing a nation taking as point of departure diversity (cid 21 age 41, women's org.).

This leader had a long experience of NGOs projects and advisory functions and was not satisfied with the changes accomplished by the women's movement. She argued that in order to be taken seriously women, fighting for their rights had to learn the rules of the game, forming a political movement that could exercise a real pressure.⁹

Summarizing this part we can see that most of the interviewed, regardless of the sort of organizations they belong to, do share some sort of 'essentialist', 'women centered' view on women's possible contributions to public life and politics. However, such views are rather qualified, less idealizing in the case of young-middle aged, more educated women belonging to women's organizations. These women tend to be more liberal in the

⁹ The gathering of a 'critical mass' around a political association was the project of DIVERSA. The project failed, in part, because the movement failed to go beyond the urban environment and the 'enlightened' middle class ranks. Hardly any woman from other social sectors (even those of urban-popular women organizations) among those I interviewed had any information about this project. The same failure was faced by a new alternative party formed by diverse advocacy groups working on human rights, environmental and feminist issues, "*Mexico Posible*". During the 2003 congressional elections the party failed to get enough votes to assure its registry.

sense of aiming at a higher women participation level and representation not because women are endowed of better public virtues than men but for the sake of equality.

On the other hand all the interviewed seem to be conscious of structural obstacles to women's participation given a patriarchal and authoritarian (*machista*) culture and the need of a new political culture or *political style* that can seek inspiration in the alleged women's attributes, in feminism or even in the 'zapatista movement'. The issue of power is related, not surprisingly, to the patriarchal structures and the reflection about this takes place mostly among the women organizations members. The mixed organizations and specially the working class women among them rarely refer to 'the fear of power' although they admit the existence of a lack of self-esteem that limits women's potential development as leaders.

But how are women to change the nature of the political structures and of a male-dominated power? Most women in this sample speak of a broader women participation but don't discuss the possibility of seizing power, although perhaps, that would be the natural conclusion. Therefore it is interesting to see how a feminist leader speaks about it in a direct way. The problem is the formulation of a program that can unite such a diversity, looking for the nodal points in order to attain a 'critical mass'. This seems certainly a difficult task that has nevertheless been attained at a limited level by some women organizations and movements.

Are women's organizations any better than men's?

As we have already explained half of the women I interviewed belong to women organizations. Many of these organizations (NGOs, non governmental organizations) were created as part of the civil society's awakening in Mexico, in the 80s, giving many feminists the possibility to elaborate their projects in a rather independent way.

We were really tired to be participating in democracy proposals where men had always the initiative and where our proposals were not heard...that is how we started to enter the cooperation world in order to carry out our own projects. That's why so many people have become interested in forming 'civil organizations', to leave the parties, the mass organizations, the clandestine organizations, to organize our own projects (cid 9, age 38, women's org.).

These groups became also important advisors to women's movements and eventually favourite partners to both the state and international organizations filling the void the latter had left during the privatizations period and thus making possible the 'perverse confluence' between feminist organizations and neo-liberalism . Moreover, according to several observers, in Latin America many of these NGOs became more involved with their financial supporters than with the movement they were supposed to advice or represent (Alvarez S. 1998). And this involvement even led, according to some of our interviewees, to power struggles that seriously damaged the movements, particularly the women workers' movement, they were supposed to help.

We had a great success, we could improve our situation, improve labour relations in the factories that joined the trade union but this didn't last, politics came back and as I told you before, they[(the NGOs that advised us]'charged us', that was the problem, they divided us and the trade union started to disappear (cid 39, age 60, mixed org.).

Also, in some cases, as these interviews argue, the struggle for power and control involved the manipulation of information:

We got to know about this meeting by some Canadian contacts but the Mexican NGOs never told us. Also for Beijing and other meetings there has been a problem of information, it is always them who want to go (...)(cid 16, age 35, women's org. and mixed org.).

Although most of the interviewees speak well of their own organizations and many positive experiences with feminist NGOs are accounted for, the quotations we have just presented certainly question the issue of women's public "virtues". As more than one of the interviewed cautioned before these,

“virtues” risk getting lost once political or some kind of power is involved. Class belonging is also relevant, middle class highly educated women seem to be less fearful of power. Their transition to forming their own organizations seems to have helped them to overcome such a fear something that may not be the case among working class women. Gender solidarity seems rather weak in these cases, questioning the possibility of forming broad alliances in order to create new political cultures.

Final reflections: are active, participant women contributing to a new type of political culture?

In this project I undertook the task of finding out how far the notions of rights, duties, participation as a citizenship practice, gender consciousness and the ambition to change authoritarian political structures and discourses were rooted in ‘participant’ urban women’s thoughts.

Not being a quantitative study this project didn’t aim at showing a valid sample of these women’s views. In fact, the interviews we have presented have a profile that only partly coincides with the general statistical profile of women in Mexico. Most of the interviewees have a middle-advanced age, there are few young ones, they have an advanced educational level and high rate of participation in income-earning activities, they display as well a high rate of non-religious or non active religious attitudes and the majority has either adult children or no children at all. In spite of their not being statistically representative, these traits give us a glimpse of what participant women engaged in social changes struggles may look like in Mexico. With the exception of those struggling for concrete material needs, most of them have some kind of economic activity outside the house, whatever their marital status they have no small children to take care of and the more educated and young they are the most probable their social engagement becomes radicalized and also political.

Something which is also important to notice is the role played by the different factors leading to participation: family background, external events, information (and formation in the sense of education) and the hope to improve their own living conditions. These factors must be thoroughly analysed when studying social movements. Apart from the personal background and unexpected external events, information seems to play a key role in triggering participation. This became clear in the comparison with non-participants. On the other hand, all these factors point to a general dissatisfaction with the political system, with society, with the government. As I mentioned before, the participation of these women is linked more to the absence of a democratic system, in which they feel they can have some influence through their votes, than to the existence of one. They are struggling in order to create the pre-conditions to become real citizens.

Gender reflections and how they are intertwined with citizenship was a central part of this study. As foreseen I found out that participation, according to most of the interviewees, regardless of their belonging to women or mixed organizations, demands more of women than of men in the sense of internal and external gender obstacles. These are confronted both at the departure and as a consequence of this participation and are referred to in the form of high costs for their personal life. Here we see the difficulty in articulating different roles and identities, something which creates contradictions that these women assume not without a sense of blame because even if they question their traditional roles most of them accept *women are essentially different*. Also, there is a general notion of women being the majority of the movements but a minority at the top and of the need of a broader women participation to change the political system and culture in Mexico.

That most of the interviewees idealized 'women virtues' and specificities was perhaps not so surprising given the context of such a traditionalist society as the Mexican one. This would apparently reinforce the strategy described by Molyneux, a strategy based on these 'women virtues' to unify but also to

reclaim a share of power and finally to continue looking for a new political style, for new models of power. There are however qualifications to such an idealization, mostly among the feminist but even among the mixed organizations. Specially those identified with feminist ideals tend to follow a more liberal-equality agenda than women engaged in mixed organizations or with working class background. The distrust on 'essentialism' goes together with a scepticism as to the benefits of a wider women participation; the emphasis is put instead on the need to change attitudes and to demand of women politicians an awareness of women's rights, in other words, a gender consciousness.

The discussion on power is also related to gender issues. Power is generally identified with a masculine style that dissuades women to approach it. But class belonging marks different attitudes towards the exercise of power: the lower the class, the less the educational resources, the more difficult to overcome the fear to exercise it. And this is perhaps not so difficult to understand, middle class-educated women, specially those in the sample, have had the possibility to create their own projects, to become independent from man-dominated organizations. And this allows them to be more pragmatically orientated as in the case of the leader we present for whom the conquest of power became an aim at least in the short run. But the lack of questioning of the nature of this power has its consequences, as the criticisms regarding manipulation and power struggles have shown. These cases not only seriously question the existence of 'women public virtues', they also witness the fact that social class divides can sometimes be more powerful than gender solidarity.

We can thus identify two main problems regarding the struggle for women's rights within a citizenship participation: 1) how to attain the necessary 'nodal points', broader alliances around a common program in order to get the necessary political leverage; 2) how to neutralize the negative traits of power that have damaged certain women's movements, without developing a fear to exercise it.

In spite of these problems it is unquestionable that participation may generate more than a gender consciousness, it is a process leading to a culture of rights. We found very broadly shared opinions concerning the significance of participatory experiences for the notion of rights and obligations (the 'right to have rights') that encompass all kind of aspects and levels where sexual and ethnic rights are only an example. Moreover, citizenship as a notion seems to become associated with tolerance for diversity, respect and solidarity, all of them essential pre-conditions for the well functioning of a democracy.

Finally, it has been a privilege to meet and speak to these women, to have a glimpse of their views and experiences, to learn what citizenship is supposed to be through their own life-stories. Whatever their differences and contradictions it is clear to me that these women are really opening a new path of democratization, a path that is breaking authoritarian traditions and parameters. It is also clear that they are not a majority, a critical mass, that the process is a long-term project and that if citizenship is the basic element for the construction of any real democracy, these women are certainly contributing to putting the premises of this project.

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