Title
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“Both Mom and Dad Should Go to Work so the Family Would Have More Money”: Children’s Attitudes Towards Occupational Gender Roles in the Village of Metztitlán, Mexico

While the negotiation of gender roles among adults in Mexico has received considerable academic attention (Hirsch, 2003, Guttman, 1996, Melhuus, 1992, Romanucci-Ross, 1986), little is known about how Mexican children reason about gender issues and how they deal with these concerns in their everyday interactions. My research is based on a 12-month-long ethnographic fieldwork in Metztitlán, a mestizo, Spanish-speaking village with about 5000 inhabitants, located in the State of Hidalgo, central Mexico. In this paper\(^1\), I will explore the attitudes of children from 6 to 11 years of age to occupational gender roles in a setting where the discourse on gender equality and its manifestations, explicitly promoted both at school and in certain situations in many homes, coexists with strongly pervasive expressions of ideas rooted in traditional values.

Traditionally desirable gender roles in this cultural context imply a rather clear distinction between women as homemakers and men as economic providers. “The man’s duty was to provide for the family and the woman was supposed to take care of the house and children”, the parents of my child informants often repeated in their accounts of how duties were divided “a couple of decades ago”. However, as I heard many times and had an opportunity to

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\(^1\) The fieldwork was conducted from November 2008 to February 2010. The findings presented in this paper are based on in-depth ethnographic research of 25 main female and male informants from 6 to 11 years of age at home and at school and questionnaires and short interviews conducted with 120 boys and girls from 6 to 11 years of age at the local school.
observe for myself, occupational gender roles in Metztitlán have been undergoing significant changes over the last decades. As a local teacher put it, summing up his perceptions of the current division of labour: “Nowadays many women work². Many men help with home chores. Things have changed”. Several informants explained to me that 20 or 30 years ago they were raised with traditional ideas but that, along with the social changes, they had lived their own personal transformation. But does this mean that young generations in Metztitlán are raised with modern occupational expectations and that they learn about the traditional ideals only in History classes and adults’ narratives on the past?

Although “many women work” and “many men help with home chores”, during my fieldwork, the presence of traditional occupational ideals could be found both in the discourses and in the practices my young informants were exposed to in their everyday interactions. Among my adult informants, from mid–twenties to early forties, there was a wide range of employment arrangements between the spouses: men and women who equally acted as economic providers; men who were the sole breadwinners and women who were not allowed not only to work outside home but also to leave the house without consulting their husbands; women who provided for the family on their own, while their husbands stayed at home, etc.

In contrast to the old conceptions, most of my informants no longer accepted as “normal” the arrangement where a woman did not work outside home. Husbands who opposed their wives’ access to paid labour were often depicted as “machistas” by both men and women. Women who stayed at home reported various reasons for their unemployment, all of which concerned their partners: jealousy, the man’s conviction that “a woman has no reason to work”, the husband’s concern with the fact that the children would remain home alone, etc. When I interviewed these men, they never spoke about “not allowing a woman to work” and most readily explained the

²The term “trabajar” (to work) is used to refer to remunerated occupational activities, usually performed outside home. “Doing household chores or housework” is referred to by the phrase “hacer el quehacer” and it is normally not covered by the verb “to work”.
reasons for their wives’ staying at home by referring to childcare. My female informants who did not work usually expressed their disapproval of this arrangement and most commonly attributed their dissatisfaction to the lack of money or boredom. The compliance with what they perceived as an undesirable position was often justified by claiming that they wanted to avoid conflict for the sake of their children.

On the other hand, modern expectations supported the traditional idea that the least desirable economic arrangement was when a man was maintained by his wife. The men who did not work frequently invoked health issues, although their neighbours usually described them as simply “flojos” (lazy) and pitied the woman who had “the misfortune” to get involved with such a man.

In parallel to the redefinition of the role of breadwinner, the conception of homemaker was also undergoing a transformation. As in the case of employment, home chores were divided in various ways: in some households men engaged in no housework, in others they helped with certain tasks and, in rare cases, all the housework was carried out by a man while the woman was at work. However, although my adult informants claimed that both partners should participate equally in the housework if they were both employed, this did not seem to be a common practice. Women usually either performed all household chores, such as sweeping, washing dishes and clothes, helped by their children or other female relatives, or “occasionally received a little help with some tasks” from their husbands. Similarly, although childcare was usually perceived as a duty that should be carried out by both parents, women were the ones who spent most of the time with the children.

Although locals and scholars alike tend to associate more traditionalist views with “less educated” and “economically more disadvantaged people”, my observations did not always support this assumption. Some of the men who imposed the harshest restrictions upon their wives’ conduct were educated and well or decently paid: a doctor, an accountant and a teacher. Indeed, economic scarcity often served to predict the suppression of traditional occupational
arrangements better than high levels of education. It was, nonetheless, the case that the women who accepted to leave their jobs after marriage were usually employed in low-skilled activities. By contrast, educated women asked to quit their careers often seemed to negotiate such requests in ways that allowed them to continue working. Hence, it was common that spouses’ similarly high socio-economic and educational background consistently led to less traditionalist occupational arrangements, while all the other conjugal combinations lent themselves to a wider range of occupational outcomes.

Children, however, were not exposed to ideals related to division of labour only in their own home. Being immersed in a vibrantly interconnected social network, they were commonly surrounded by relatives’ and neighbours’ family values and arrangements. In addition, at school, children were explicitly taught that “in the past there was no equality and only men could go to school and work, while women had to stay at home”. Teachers stressed in their lectures that “the times have changed and that everyone has the right to do whatever he or she chooses to do”. While school discourse was relatively homogeneous, at home and in the neighbourhood children found a host of different interpretations of occupational roles.

The information children received from the environment concerning division of labour ranged from witnessing tacitly performed practices and powerfully displayed emotions to overhearing peers’ and adults’ conversations and receiving direct verbal instructions. Children regularly observed women who went to work and women who stayed at home, men who went to work and (more rarely) men who stayed at home. Some of my child informants continually witnessed their unemployed mothers’ expressions of frustration and impotence during the disputes with their spouses over the woman’s access to employment. Boys and girls often heard adults’ conversations containing diverse evaluations and descriptions of male and female roles, such as comments about a man who was “worthless” because he didn’t “maintain his wife properly” or confessions of a woman who wanted to “make her own money and be self-sufficient”. Besides live interactions, boys and girls also found these alternative gender
arrangements watching different kinds of television shows, among which soap operas were some of the most popular.

Some women, both working and unemployed, constantly reminded their daughters that they “shouldn’t allow a man to limit their opportunities and that they have to take care of themselves on their own”. On the other hand, there were also employed mothers who in spite of their own working status occasionally instructed their children following traditional occupational ideals. Although both Isabel and her husband worked, she advised her 11-year-old son Héctor that he should give his best at school and think about his future, because “you’re a man and you will have to support your family. A woman is born to be supported and it depends on her whether she’ll want to get a job or not, but you are a man and you have no choice. You’ll have to work to support your family!” Children’s own accounts reveal that the idea that a man has “a greater obligation” to maintain the family was quite pervasive and readily emerged even among those who most confidently defended the ideals of gender equality.

The disputes over occupational gender roles that children were engaged in most frequently related to the housework. At most homes that I visited, boys’ engagement in housework was not uncommon. Although boys, at times, invoked the local stereotypes to try to avoid certain tasks, most of my female adult informants showed no sympathy for their sons’ occasional protests that washing dishes or clothes was “not a man’s job”. Women’s reactions were prompt and straightforward: “We are all equal! There are no men’s jobs and women’s jobs”. On the other hand, there were also households where boys were not expected to take part in these activities and were allowed to roam streets while their sisters helped their mothers with home chores. Boys and girls from these households often made fun of those who engaged in what they perceived as opposite-sex occupational activities. However, even within the same household the experiences of many of my young informants were fraught with ambiguities and tension since, while some members of their families encouraged them to behave in one way, others defended alternative gender ideals.
So, in the midst of these often contradictory gender arrangements and expectations, how do children develop attitudes towards adults’ occupational roles? Young villagers’ spontaneous interactions with peers and adults, interviews and responses to hypothetical scenarios suggest that for most of my informants economic factor was especially salient in the construal of their preferred occupational arrangements. Average monthly income of my adult informants was about 4000 pesos (approx. 300 US $) and local children were continuously exposed to different manifestations of financial hardship.

Although division of labour may seem like an issue that more powerfully affects adults’ interactions, it is not surprising that my young informants’ experiences were strongly marked by adults’ occupational arrangements. One of my female informants, whose husband “didn’t allow her to work”, struggled with financial difficulties by frequently sending her 7- and 10-year-old children to her neighbours’ homes to ask for small loans. Although the boys never questioned their father’s decision in front of him, they often shared their frustration with their mother and asked her: “Why doesn’t dad let you work? Can’t he understand that we need money?”

In spite of the fact that most of my adult informants put their children’s needs above all the other existential demands, from an early age children were often confronted with the remark that “there is not enough money” for many of the items they, their siblings or their parents were interested in. Depending on the family situation, the unattainable assets ranged from the most basic products, such as meat, milk or clothes to more sophisticated toys and branded snickers. This observation may account for the fact that most of my young informants showed a preference for the family arrangement where “both parents work outside home” and both of them “participate in home chores”, independently of their parents’ actual division of labour. The support for both parents’ access to paid labour was usually justified by practical concerns. “Both mom and dad should go to work so the family would have more money”, noted numerous children across different ages. If both parents were employed, sharing home chores was, consequently, perceived as the only fair option.
Children’s interest in the material implications of occupational arrangements is also shown in their responses to hypothetical scenarios where they were encouraged to choose between “the family where only father works and earns little money” and the one “where only mother works and earns a lot of money”. In this case, a vast majority of children from 6 to 11 years of age showed a preference for the situation where the woman was employed and readily responded: “The one with more money is better”. This choice becomes especially relevant given the fact that my informants generally considered the family where only woman worked as highly undesirable and many of them laughed at the very possibility of a man being maintained by his wife.

However, the salience of material benefits in my young informants’ discussions of adults’ division of labour does not imply that materialistic concerns prevail in children’s conceptions of family life. A great majority of children noted that money was important for covering basic needs, such as education, food or clothes. “Money is important for living but it is not the most important thing. The most important thing of all is family unity and love”, I heard many times during interviews with young villagers. Most of the children also stressed that “the best thing is not to be either poor or rich but in the middle”. “If you’re rich they can rob you or kidnap you. Who needs that?”, concluded 10-year-old Ariz echoing the voices of many of her peers.

Bibliography:


