

PART III

Selected papers Workshop contributions

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Economic liberalization, changing livelihoods and gender dimensions in rural Mexico

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Introduction

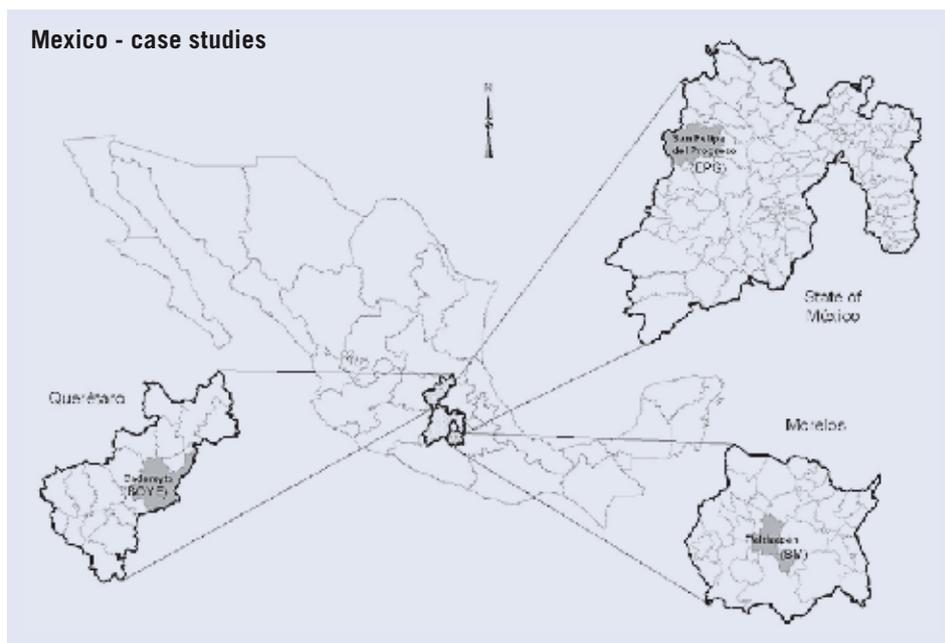
In January 2008, agricultural trade was totally liberalized within the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), ending a 15-year period of relative protection for Mexico's most sensitive crops.²⁵ Trade liberalization has had a profound impact on agriculture. While high-value export crops have performed successfully, the same can not be said for food staples grown for the domestic market and now fully exposed to international competition. The most important of these is maize, the main food staple of the urban and rural populations and grown by most small farmers throughout the country. Consequently, liberalization has affected peasant livelihoods.

But trade liberalization, with declining real prices of basic crops, is not the only factor that has had an impact on Mexican farmers. Structural adjustment policies in the 1980s and the reform of agricultural policies, starting in the early 1990s with the dismantling of direct subsidies to agriculture through credit, technical assistance, input prices, marketing boards and price supports, had changed the rural economic environment. An important sector of small- and medium-sized farmers had benefited from agricultural subsidies under the former model of development in a closed economy which aimed at self-sufficiency in food staples. These farmers have been the losers in the open-market economy. With the policies reforms of the 1990s, they were by and large excluded from new policies to prompt agricultural growth – now targeted at the competitive sectors of farmers – and channeled to social programmes. These programmes took on increasing importance during the 1990s and have continued to the present.²⁶

In the process of adjusting to the new economic environment, rural livelihoods also changed. However this was not simply a response to trade liberalization and policy change. Over decades, poor farmers had been engaged in complex livelihood strategies in order to subsist. Incomes from farming were hardly ever enough to sustain the household, hence wage work was performed outside the farm, either in agriculture or non-agricultural activities. Temporary and long-term migration has always been part of peasant livelihoods, as is well documented in development literature. What had changed was that agriculture was no longer the core of the rural household's livelihood strategies, which formerly allocated family labour and other resources according to the needs of agriculture. Today, for many peasant households, farming has become a complement

²⁵ Maize, milk products and sugar cane. During the period, import quotas and tariffs phased out.

²⁶ For references in English, see Appendini, 2008; Cornelius and Myhre, 1998; Ita, de 2008; Hewitt, 1994; Janvry de, 1997; Randall, 1996.



to other income-generating activities. Local economies are driven by non-agricultural activities such as petty commerce, jobs in workshops or personal services demanding unskilled labour. The informal economy has soared on these bases. Even so, employment opportunities at the regional or local level are constrained to unskilled and low-quality jobs and migration is the most viable option for earning an income.

In rural Mexico, the social, political and cultural environments have also changed. In a large country with diverse regions, the process of change varies in its complexity and outcomes. 'Rural' is no longer identified with agriculture and in most regions it is no longer identified with isolation and lack of access to markets and a number of public goods and services. Infrastructure and communications, basic education and even health services have reached many regions of rural Mexico; migration and particularly transnational migration have linked rural villages to global society and culture. The complex interrelations between economic, social, political and cultural processes are transforming rural life and spaces. Changes in rural livelihoods are both processes of long-term continuities as well as ruptures linked to policy change.

This paper will focus on the socio-economic transformation of rural livelihoods and its gender dimensions, based on three case studies in the central rural highlands. The main issues addressed are the effects of a declining agriculture and the increase in non-farm activities on rural livelihoods. The economic role of women is changing in this context and gender relations are being questioned. In this research, we focused on the women's own perspectives on these changes.

The three communities studied are located in states bordering Mexico City. The land was distributed under agrarian reform in the late 1930s; today the average holdings per household is 1.5 hectares in two of the communities studied – Emilio Portes Gil (EPG) and Boye – and 4.1 hectares in Barranca Honda (BH). Maize is the main crop and cattle are also raised in the latter two communities. These communities illustrate a changing rural environment in the densely populated areas of the central Mexican highlands, located within the area of influence of metropolitan Mexico City and a network of regional cities and towns. The rural

landscape is rapidly being transformed, as the rural-urban divide is no longer dichotomized by economic activities and there is an interpenetration of social and cultural processes. It must therefore be noted that the communities in the region do not represent the overall change in rural Mexico, particularly in the more isolated and poorer regions of the country.²⁷

The communities studied have common trends as mentioned above, but they also differ because of their precise location in different subregions of Central Mexico. The process of change in each case differs according to the micro agro-ecological characteristics, opportunities for market access for crops and labour markets, and government development programmes through time (see Annex 1 for a description of the three communities).

1. Trends in agriculture and rural employment under trade liberalization

Agriculture in Mexico has shown a long-term decline which continues under trade liberalization. In 2007, it represented 3.8 percent of the gross national product. Non-traditional exports such as fruits and vegetables have increased substantially, representing 85 percent of total agriculture export value in 2007, but imports of basic food crops have soared such that the agriculture trade balance runs an increasing deficit. Maize – the main food staple – increased from 2.6 to 7.5 million tonnes from 1994 to 2007 and represents 21.4 percent of the total value of agricultural imports. Mexican peasants living on rainfed land and mainly growing maize are not competitive in an open market and have withdrawn from producing a marketable surplus because of decreasing prices and the withdrawal of subsidies for basic crops.

Small farmers have been adjusting to trade liberalization and changing agricultural policies for more than a decade. Maize has been a key issue in this process. Maize is grown by 3 million farmers, of whom 67 percent are classified as producers with low income (Vega and Ramírez, 2004 cited by Rello and Saavedra, 2007:85). Today, peasants mainly grow maize for subsistence and earn cash from non-farm income sources.²⁸ This has had an impact on the allocation of family labour, according to age, sex and kinship.

As a consequence, the population engaged in the agricultural sector has declined during the period of policy reforms (the 1990s) and its consolidation (2000 to date). At the national level, occupations in agriculture have declined by 2.4 million (30 percent). In the first period, the decrease affected men (15 percent decrease) much more than women (4.1 percent decrease); but from 2000-2007, the decline for women in agriculture was 27 percent versus 16 percent for men. This indicates that women are not tending to substitute for male labour in agriculture. In 2007, women's participation in agricultural activities was 12.2 percent of the total, compared with 13.6 percent in 2000. Within agriculture, women represent mainly non-paid family labour (50 percent of total women employed in 2007), while men are self-employed as farmers. Wage work has gained relative importance for men – from 24-36 percent for the overall period (1991-2007), but women's participation in wage work has remained relatively stable (27-28 percent).

²⁷ The communities were chosen as part of a larger project revisiting the research sites. Financial support was provided by CONACYT (the Mexican Council for Science and Technology); the FAO Gender and Population Programme provided support for the gender component of the field work. The author is grateful to the sponsors and particularly to Zoraida García for this support. For results, see Appendini and De Luca, 2006; Appendini and Torres-Mazuera, 2008.

²⁸ Domestic supply of maize has switched to irrigated lands on large farms, mainly in the northwestern state of Sinaloa.

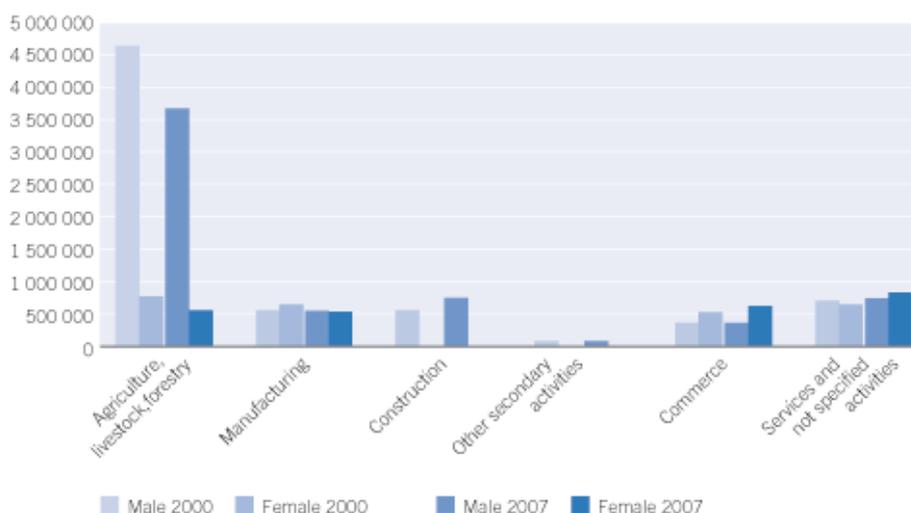
Hence, neoliberal policy expectations for export crops to create substantial rural employment are not reflected in national data. Also, the decline in peasant agriculture and the advent of mechanization have decreased the demand for labour. In both cases, women have not had opportunities for increased rural wage work.

A total of 72.6 percent of agricultural occupations are concentrated in rural localities (up to 2 500 inhabitants). By looking at the national data on occupations in rural localities, we may illustrate the occupation trends in the Mexican countryside (see Graph III-1).

The number of people engaged in agriculture in rural localities declined by 1.2 million from 2000-2007, which has mainly affected men.²⁹ In agricultural activities, participation of both men and women declined in the order of 8 percent. Agriculture remains a male activity, with 60.7 of men engaged, while only 21 percent of women are engaged. Being a farmer, that is, self-employed in agriculture, is related to gender – being male – since the possession of land is in the hands of men. Being a farmer is also associated with age, the average age being 55 years in the *ejidos*.³⁰ Hence, women belonging to a farm household often remain as unpaid family labour (Deere, 2005; González and Salles, 1995; Pacheco, n.d.).

Occupational trends in non-agricultural activities show some notable changes with respect to participation by gender. In 2000, manufacturing accounted for 25 percent of the total occupations for rural women; this dropped to 21 percent in 2007. Men have retained their participation in the industrial sector mainly due to an increase in construction – traditional rural employment for men. However, men have remained in the manufacturing industry, versus a decline in women's participation. In 2000 in absolute

GRAPH III-1
Rural Population by economic sub-sector and gender



Source: INEGI, Encuesta Nacional de Ocupación y Empleo, 2007.

²⁹ Total population in rural localities decreased by 450 000 from 2000 to 2005. Data on occupations for rural localities is only available from the year 2000 on.

³⁰ *Ejido* refers to communities holding land distributed under agrarian reform. Up to 1971, Agrarian Law only gave rights to land distributed under agrarian reform to male heads of household. From 1971, Agrarian Law gives equal rights to men and women, but women only account for 25 percent of *ejidatarios*.

numbers, more rural women were occupied in manufacturing than men, implying that the rural *maquila* (in-bond manufacturing) industry mainly demanded female labour. In 2007 this trend was reversed. Trade and services increasingly account for rural women's labour participation. Women's occupation in trade increased from 19 percent in 2000 to 25 percent in 2007. In the case of men, participation only increased from 15 percent to 17.4 percent. In 2007, women outnumbered men in absolute numbers in these two activities. We may therefore ask whether the constrained employment opportunities in rural Mexico are displacing women in favour of men in manufacturing jobs, often the better opportunity for a wage in rural contexts, while confining women to trade and services, most likely in informal work.

Women are mainly occupied in petty trade and personal services (39 percent of women in total female occupations) that are likely to be low-quality jobs (García, 2007). Men participate in a wider range of activities such as communications, transport and government jobs. Hence, rural populations still face a segmented labour market by gender – and age. Young and single women enter wage work while older and married women are often self-employed, mainly in commerce and services.³¹ Rather than a 'feminization of agriculture' there is a feminization of the rural non-farm economy.

2. Adjusting livelihoods in the central highlands of rural Mexico: a generational perspective from women

The three case studies carried out in 2003-2004 illustrate how small farmers in *ejido* households have adjusted to macroeconomic changes over time. Public policies have played a key role in determining the opportunities and constraints for households. Structural adjustment and trade liberalization mounted on trends that were already ongoing, but also marked ruptures, mainly closing options for farmers and certainly for the younger generations in farming activities. The interviews and focus groups carried out with women of three cohorts assessed both continuity and change in the livelihoods of rural households throughout the past three decades (see Annex 2 for a description of the case study methodology).

The elder women (around 60 years) recalled peasant livelihoods when agriculture was the core of the household and the role of women was determined by a well-defined division of labour. Women were in charge of work within the household as well as specific chores in the fields and the care of small animals. Working in the fields was done under supervision of a male, whether spouse, in-law or parent. Hence, women were subordinate to elders and males both as labourers as well as members of the family. Upon marriage, this meant a subordinate position in the household to the in-laws (and to elder females), as young couples could live many years in the household before acquiring land of their own. In those days, work was hard and farm households were poor. There were no facilities to ease women's workload: they had to walk far to fetch water and gather wood to cook, grind maize to make *masa* (maize cooked with lime to make dough) for the *tortillas*. Also they had to care for their many children, and there were no schools, health clinics, doctors or communication. Poverty had a different meaning then, than today. The failure of a crop could mean hunger, illness and the death of an infant. Jobs were only as field workers, if available. Land was the key resource to avoiding destitution.

31 This trend has also been assessed in other Latin American countries (Deere, 2005).

Nonetheless, women expressed that the economic and social dimensions of life were more structured, within the household and the community. Also, the land was more productive: the *milpa* (plot of land on which maize grows) and the animals enabled a family to live from agriculture. Now ‘the land has tired out’ say the women, and no one can live only by its means.

Daughters (around 45 years) of these women faced a changed environment. Public services had come to the villages of the central highlands in Mexico. Health and education became accessible to these women and their children (and they had fewer children). Communication networks and transport connected the communities with the regional towns and main cities, including Mexico City. Temporary migration became part of the livelihood pattern as men went to work in construction in regional cities – in public works building regional infrastructure. Single young women would work as domestic servants in the cities. As adults, these women were part of households in which *ejidatarios* (see footnote 6) benefited from agricultural subsidies as Mexico strived for self-sufficiency in basic food staples. Work in the fields diminished as tractors and chemical inputs were introduced, and agriculture became even more a male occupation. Some women were able to enrol in a public programme to become teachers in bilingual indigenous primary schools, while others had jobs in a nearby *maquila* factory and experienced industrial wage work.³² The domestic workload decreased with the availability of electricity and running water. Also some domestic appliances entered the households and, most important, the maize kernels were taken to the electric mill to be ground, saving women hours of drudgery when making *tortillas*. The better-off households – those that had been able to benefit from public programmes for agricultural and livestock development – could invest in small local businesses. Married women frequently worked as non-paid family labour in small grocery shops, or helped their husband with activities such as managing a warehouse, renting a tractor or truck, etc. With better economic opportunities, young couples could acquire independent housing and women could free themselves of direct submission to their spouse’s parents. Rural Mexico, at least in the less isolated regions of the country, seemed to be on the road to development.

Economic restructuring with the Mexican economy’s recurrent crises (1982, 1987, 1994-5) changed the continuity of ‘progress’. Maize has become less profitable to market, the younger generations no longer want to work in agriculture, and they do not have access to land which is still held by parents. Education and the social-cultural impact of urban lifestyles have changed the expectations of the young. They see more opportunities in migrating, until recently, to ‘the north’ (USA). The women between the ages of 20 and 35 participating in the focus groups often belonged to independent households that had no access to land. In some cases, the spouses are working in the USA and send remittances. Women who were working were engaged in a number of activities, including catalogue sales, *maquila* in small workshops, piecemeal contractors, or in grocery stores or shops that provide ‘modern’ services to local consumers such as photocopying or hairdressing. Few women and men have stable jobs. Even the opportunities as public employees or in factory jobs have decreased in the villages studied. Peasant society is a thing of the past. But rural life is valued, as people perceive rural localities as places of residence, where children can grow up in a non-polluted, healthy and non-violent environment, close to family and kin.³³ The contradiction is that there is no local employment to enable

32 The employment opportunities varied according to the community, each located in a different geographical area.

33 For a discussion of changing identities in the indigenous ejido studied, see Torres-Mazuera, 2008a and 2008b.

this generation to earn stable incomes. Hence, dependence on income transfers – from poverty alleviation programmes and remittances – have increasingly become the means for sustaining household consumption. Household chores have eased and consumption patterns are also changing with access to industrialized food. *Tortillas* are still the staple for each meal, but now *tortillas* can be bought at the local *tortillería*. It is no longer necessary to bake them at home. But other burdens have been added to the chores of the family: namely complying with obligations imposed by public programmes both at the household level and for community services. For example, women of families that qualify for the poverty programme ‘Oportunidades’ must attend conferences and have health check-ups at the local clinic so as not to lose bimonthly payments; they often must help clean the clinic and the school; also it is often women who attend community meetings to deal with problems of local services and infrastructure.

3. Changing livelihoods: evidence from survey data in three communities

Maize production has decreased at the regional level in two cases: for the *municipio* (administrative unit, equivalent to a county) of Tlatlitzapan, where BH is located, the decline has been at a yearly rate of 15.8 percent; in San Felipe del Progreso, an important maize region to which EPG belongs, the rate of decline is 44 percent. Only in Cadereyta, where maize has always been confined to subsistence, has the crop remained stable.

As a consequence, the percentage of the population that is economically active in agriculture decreased substantially from 1990 to 2000: in EPG (from 20.8 to 10.5 percent) and in BH (from 43 to 35.5 percent). Only in Boye has participation in agriculture increased (from 28.5 to 32.6 percent). Survey data collected in 2003 confirmed low female participation in agriculture in relation to total occupations: the female population economically active in agriculture was 16 percent in EPG, 12 percent in Boye and 9.3 percent in BH. Agriculture was mainly the occupation of the head of the household and a male occupation. All mechanized practices and spraying with chemical inputs, such as fertilizers, or weeding are male occupations. When women do participate in the fields, their tasks are manual. In EPG, women belonging to the household participated in most field practices, but male labour days outnumbered female, except harvesting, for which 77 percent of labour days were female.³⁴ In Boye, women also participated in most tasks, but accounted for less than one-third of the total labour days. In BH the participation of female labour-days was not significant. In the two latter communities, hired labour by the household was male labour.

Women expressed that they were not keen about working the land. There was little incentive to invest in agriculture because of low prices of maize (before 2006). In fact, young women participating in the focus groups had little interest in discussing agriculture at all. When responsible for the plot, women saw this as an extra burden on their workload and not as a way of acquiring responsibility, autonomy or acknowledgement. Agriculture was considered a male activity and decisions were made by the men.

In sum, gender relations in agricultural activities have not changed the subordinate position of women, even though they no longer work side by side with the men but are

34 For a study of women's participation in agriculture in the early 1990s, see Preibisch, 2000.

more apt to be responsible for the plot, when men are absent due to migration (Boye and BH). Women are receiving instructions over the phone from absent husbands or from their kin remaining in the village.

As a consequence, women saw no reason to gain greater access to land as a productive resource. However, land was valued as an important asset for residential purposes and/or a claim in family inheritance. Patterns of inheritance are also changing, as land may be subdivided among children. The custom of passing the land on to the youngest son who would continue farming and be responsible for the elders is now changing. As daughters contribute to household income, they may be more apt to claim part of the family inheritance. Parents may negotiate the promise of future inheritance to the children who will care for them, regardless of their gender. In all three communities, there was an appreciation of intention of heads of household for a more egalitarian distribution of land to sons and daughters.³⁵

Non-agricultural occupations accounted for the main female occupations in the three communities, following the trend observed in the national-level data. Non-agricultural occupations were, with few exceptions, related to 'traditional' jobs that had been part of livelihoods for several generations. In some cases, access to formal wage employment has eroded, as is the case in Boye, where there were no further public works in the region – male jobs – and the garment *maquila* had downgraded its fringe benefits and wages, making jobs less attractive. In EPG, quality jobs such as teachers were already saturated and no longer accessible to the young generations. Even the agricultural labour market for day labourers, available to the populations of BH in the 1970s and 1980s, had contracted, because of the disappearance of cash crops for the Mexican market.

The 2003 household survey confirmed the narrow employment spectrum for household members, whether in the locality or outside. An overview of the labour force in households by kinship related to the head of household follows:³⁶ Women who are heads of households or spouses of the head of household responded that their main occupation was in domestic work with no pay. Male heads of household in non-agricultural occupations worked in construction (BH) or petty trade (EPG, mainly as street vendors outside the community). In Boye, men are in the category 'other wage work', including work in the US and in construction. That is, both women and men were engaged in 'traditional' occupations, except in the case of migrants, whose occupations were often unaccounted for since informants were not aware of how they were employed.

The occupational patterns from a generational perspective showed a slightly broader perspective for 'sons' of the household, but not 'daughters' (15 years and older). 'Traditional' non-agricultural activities still predominate but differences were found by community and gender.

For 'daughters', engagement in unpaid domestic work is the main activity in all three communities, showing little change over time.³⁷ In EPG there is more diversification of occupations: 'sons' follow their 'fathers' in agriculture, petty commerce, construction and government employment, but are also present in 'other income-generating' occupations (mainly the migrants). EPG is the only community in which employment in public services is available. This is mainly as grade-school teachers and is due to a 1970s government

35 This has been observed in other rural regions of Mexico (Arias, 2009).

36 For a detailed analysis of the survey data, see Appendini and De Luca, 2006:41-48.

37 Included 'daughters' of the household that have established their own households, showing little change for women.

programme for becoming indigenous and bilingual rural teachers. According to the survey, less than 9 percent of the women were teachers. For 'daughters', employment besides domestic unpaid work is in domestic employment (EPG). For generations, the women of the region have been employed as such in Mexico City and in the state capital, Toluca.

In the other two communities, occupations that account for 9 percent or more of the categories 'sons' and 'daughters' are few or dispersed. In Boye, occupations for women are dispersed in 'other paid work', such as employed in stores or the garment factory, both located in nearby towns. In the case of 'sons', who had emigrated, it was difficult to obtain the occupational category. The same is the case for BH, including 'daughters'. BH was the only community in which female migration was significant. A total of 9 percent of 'daughters' in BH were also engaged in 'other paid activities', mainly working at a local garment workshop or doing piecemeal work in their homes, such as assembling costume jewellery.

In sum, occupations are concentrated in low-skill jobs, and have not changed significantly from one generation to the next. In each community, livelihood strategies combine agriculture, if land is available, and non-farm occupations that have predominated over time, according to the economic trends of each community: construction, domestic employment, petty trade and teaching in EPG; and migration in Boye and BH.

4. Gender perspectives on income-earning activities

In the interviews and focus groups, women of different cohorts expressed their opinions and perceptions about working for an income related to their role in the household, and particularly in relation to their spouses. There was a general consensus that the income earned by women was necessary and often covered special needs. Work outside the home and earning money also contributed to their self-esteem. However, working for an income added to the work burden of women, as men seldom shared domestic chores.

In all three communities, gender relations were entrenched in a male-dominated ideology (*machismo*). In the focus groups, women confirmed that husbands were openly against or at best dubious about having their spouse work outside the home. The need to ask 'permission' to work and abide by the husband's opinion was a serious issue for young and middle-aged women. Opinions differed by community, age and educational status. Women in BH expressed themselves as more autonomous in their decisions, while Boye women (recipients of remittances) were much more restrained, especially the young women. In EPG, there was a marked difference according to education and employment status. The publicly employed women participating in the EPG focus group had openly confronted partners and family about their autonomy.

An important issue concerning gender relations refers to migration. Labour migration is an important source of income for households in the communities studied, as in many other parts of rural Mexico. Traditional patterns of migration for women have been to work as domestic servants, and for men to work in urban construction sites or public regional works. This type of migration was temporary and related to the agricultural cycle since family labour resumed in the fields in peak seasons. Today migration stretches over longer periods of time.

International migration is important, particularly in Boye and BH. According to the 2003 survey data, 68 percent of men living outside the household in Boye and 63 percent in

BH were in the USA. Only in BH was female migration reported. In the case of EPG, migration was mainly to other states (one-third of household members living outside the household, both men and women). In Boye, 27 percent of the households received income from members away from the household; in BH the figure was 47 percent and in EPG 21 percent.

Although it is by and large men who migrate in the communities, migration has an impact on the role of women within the household as their responsibilities and workload increase. Women are in charge of managing income and daily consumption expenses, investing in and supervising agricultural activities, overseeing the construction of a house, etc. Women are alone in bringing up and educating the children, caring for the elderly and participating in community affairs.

Being the spouse of a migrant had complex effects on gender relations within the household and the community. In the focus groups, women often expressed ambiguity about being on their own, since they had more work and no one with whom to share daily decision-making. This was a particular concern when it came to the upbringing of children. While women around 45 expressed that they had more freedom in their daily lives, young women were concerned about the absence of a partner and the children's father.

In the case of one community, Boye, in which migration has a history of two decades, women worked less outside the home, as remittances brought in a relatively reliable income. They were also more prone to the social supervision of kin and neighbours and the long-distance control of spouses. In BH, women expressed less ambiguity with respect to the absence of men; they were not subject to supervision by families and hence were more autonomous. The women wanted the men to live in the villages and have jobs. The problem is social, not individual.

5. Concluding remarks on changing livelihoods and gender dimensions

Trade liberalization and neoliberal policy excluded smallholder agriculture from markets and intensified the need for non-farm income. Non-farm occupations, especially in trade and services, have become increasingly important for women. At the same time, the migration of men has given them additional responsibilities.

The changing trajectories of livelihood strategies as seen from the perspective of women belonging to different cohorts in the three studied communities show the complexity of gender relations and their change in relation to: women's participation in economic activities; income earning; and women's roles as managers of the household when men are absent.

In our research, we focused on economic strategies and occupations and on how work for income was affecting gender relations within the household and community. We found that the local context was important in explaining changes related to the situation of women. Basic infrastructure and services have eased the burden of women's domestic work, women have fewer children, and the drudgery of providing food and undertaking daily chores are a thing of the past. Access to public health services and schooling have notably changed the quality of life for people in general, but women in particular, who have access to birth control, physical check-ups and medical attention for their children.

Public policy of rural development has been the main factor in providing an improved context for rural populations. In the 1970s, basic services such as health and education, electrification and roads were widely extended to rural populations, especially in central Mexico. Up to the mid-1980s, rural development was also based on government support to agriculture and small farmers, particularly by making green-revolution technology available through public credit, technical assistance and marketing services.

But even in regions that have undergone profound economic and social changes, as in the case studies reported, gender relations are still anchored to traditional gender roles despite women being income earners or in charge of the family and household economy. And, domestic work and caring for the family remains women's domain. A male-dominated gender ideology prevails as part of the social norms and inhibits the empowerment of women. Women are aware of the prevailing *macho* ideology but are ambivalent about confronting it. Their ambivalence is mediated by their roles as 'mothers' rather than by their awareness that submitting to this role feeds into gender subordination. Only few women, with better education and technical or professional jobs, have openly challenged their situation and are empowered as individuals.

The younger generations face challenges that are very different from those of their elders. Young women have more resources than their mothers – and certainly grandmothers – to confront male dominance in their individual daily life and also in the community. Women today recognize and question male dominance and are aware of their own capabilities and limitations. But they are still not empowered.

In the paper, the importance of public development programmes has been emphasized as drivers of the improvement of livelihoods in central rural Mexico. Neoliberal policies continued the social programmes but abandoned economic and productive investment in small-farm maize-producing regions. Agrarian communities have a precarious productive base, not only in the case of agriculture but also in non-agricultural activities such as agro-industry or even manufacturing. Hence, rural economies are limited to petty trade and services responding to the consumer demands of the low-income populations. Communities are becoming residential sites with informal economies; this is certainly not a sound basis for sustained local or regional growth. The main challenge is a revision of development policies and the role of the state, not only in rural infrastructure and services or poverty alleviation schemes, but with productive projects and particularly agricultural development, in order to activate local and regional markets.

In an overall context of poverty, economic uncertainty, fragmented families and communities due to migration, precarious jobs and, in general, a lack of opportunity in localities that lack economic drivers, a change in gender relations has to be mediated through the empowerment of both men and women in rural society.