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From the Woodwork to the Market Place: Mayan Women in the Market Economy

CINDY HULL

Introduction: Data for this paper is a result of a longitudinal study of a village in Yucatan, Yaxkukul, which has been conducted since 1976 (1976-77 doctoral research; summer of 1989 and summer of 1992). This paper is a report on women’s economic contributions and options in a situation of rapid economic and cultural change, and is not meant to be a definitive statement.

Yucatan, Mexico, is one of three states which constitute the Yucatan Peninsula, formed by the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea. Unlike other regions of the country, Yucatan is not supported primarily by subsistence agriculture. Rather, since the 1800’s, it has been dependent upon monocrop production of henequen (sisal). Henequen has been a major export in the form of rope and binder twine since the invention of the rasping machine at the end of the nineteenth century.

In the past twenty years, the low cost and abundance of synthetic twine and rope, as well as structural changes in agricultural machinery, have resulted in a sharp decline in the demand for Yucatecan products. My initial purpose in conducting research in rural Yucatan was to investigate the strategies employed by villagers faced with economic hardship. I was particularly interested in whether or not out-migration was one of these strategies, and what impact, if any, it had on the village. My interests have since expanded to include an investigation of other responses to change, such as increased involvement of women in wage labor locally.

Before exploring the structure of the wage economy and women’s role in that economy, we must examine the assumptions regarding the social and economic roles of women in rural Latin America and the various economic development theories in monocrop agriculture.

Some observers of Mexico have commonly proposed a model of Latin American gender relationships known as *machismo/marianismo*: *Machismo* refers to a pattern of male dominance whereby one proves his manliness in careless or dangerous behavior which is often pursued at the expense of
women who become victims of male violence and social oppression. Marianismo is the complementary pattern, characterized by the passive, silently suffering woman whose lack of power in the public realm is balanced by her domestic role and the cultural ideal of Madonna-like moral superiority. However, machismo/marianismo may represent an adaptation to critical transformations in the indigenous subsistence system, since this pattern is much less apparent in rural "indigenous" communities than in "Mestizo" urban areas.

According to Ehlers, changes in the structure of family relationships are based on economic shifts among peasants from subsistence to wage labor, on an increased market integration, and on the concomitant changes in male/female roles in society as a whole. In Yucatan, the machismo/marianismo pattern is not deeply entrenched, despite the male dominated political structure. An indigenous pattern of strong assertive women permeates the patriarchal political system. For example, during my research year, a government sponsored milk program was organized in the village. The purpose of the program was to provide milk to children aged one to three. All of the local officers of the program were women, and they took their responsibilities very seriously. One day a local "vigilance" officer employed by the State of Yucatan visited the health clinic. He reported that several women had lodged complaints about the program. The president, Dona Luisa, stood toe to toe (or head to chest) to the unnerved official, arguing that the women in question had broken the rules, had not heeded the warnings, and had subsequently been dropped from the membership rolls. The argument became heated, but Dona Luisa held her ground, as women, children and anthropologist watched in awe. When a defeated Don Pedro left, the triumphant president announced, "What does he know? This is our program."

The second theoretical issue relates to development in the Third World. Analyses of economic development are usually based on the premise that wage labor, as it replaces subsistence agricultural patterns, culminates in the subsequent replacement of the extended family by the nuclear family and the concomitant deterioration of women's social status. In Yucatan, both the nuclear family and the strong, extended family predominate and are even perhaps strengthened by the uncertainties of monocrop agriculture.

While in regions such as Africa, monocrop and wage labor have often resulted in women's bearing the burden of subsistence agriculture, the pattern in Yucatan is different. People in the ejido gardens or raise endeavors are paid (the solar), and the ejido members have children.

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pattern in Yucatan differs. Although women may, and often do, cultivate gardens or raise animals for sale, these and other money-making endeavors are performed within the confines of the enclosed homestead (the *solar*), and the women remain within the shared networks of kin and children.

What I have observed in Yucatan is not the negative impact of economic development on women's status and role, but the entrenchment and resilience of the extended family and the contributions of women in the face of the unraveling of the monocrop system.

In 1976-77, Yaxkukul, located east of Merida, had a population of 1,750 people in 246 households. In the village, 83% of the households were dependent upon henequen production for their livelihoods. Most of the men in these households worked as *ejidatarios*, planting, weeding, and cutting the henequen leaves. Those who were more fortunate obtained well-paid employment in the local unionized Cordemex factory, where the leaves were mechanically stripped, dried and shipped off to Merida. A few other families worked at the nearby hacienda rasper. Other occupations, indirectly related to henequen production, included truck drivers and local *ejido* administrators and organizers.

By 1989, the hacienda had been abandoned, and the factory had been cut from two shifts to one. Severance pay to factory workers enabled them to buy such consumer goods as Beta machines, televisions, and refrigerators. The more entrepreneurial men purchased goods for housefront stores, sewing machines for their wives, or a cheap used car, in response to the growing demand for taxi service to Merida.

Last summer, 1992, during my visit, there occurred two dramatic events which will have a long-term impact on the village and the state. First, the government of Yucatan, in one desperate step, abolished the existing system of henequen production, virtually eliminating most jobs in the village. All the men who had been employed in the henequen fields were given notice and a small severance. Men who had recently abandoned the farming for other insecure employment were denied the severance, even if they had worked in the henequen fields their whole lives. Second, the factory was temporarily closed, and twenty more men were out of work.

Those men who owned private parcels were in a critical situation, since they had no place to sell the leaves they had been nurturing for many years. The twenty-year cycle for henequen demands a long-term commitment. Leaves do not mature for seven years, and if uncut, the plant...
dies. The state government argued that changing the system would allow peasants to become involved in other types of work. The peasants were promised that the factory would soon reopen and would be managed by the workers themselves, yet the villagers were very confused about the outcome of these events and how they should respond.

My question now is: what is the role of women going to be in the future, as men restructure their lives? Women will likely continue to be active participants in the economic system, and as such, they have three options for economic participation: working for wages in the village, commuting to Merida or elsewhere for employment, or out-migrating permanently.

Since Yaxkukul has a long history as a henequen monocrop economy, with most jobs having been related directly or indirectly to the henequen industry, and since few villagers have surpluses of corn and some produce no corn at all, the traditional female skills of husking, soaking, and grinding corn are fast disappearing. This does not imply that women have not been economically active in the village. Many women weave hammocks for the tourist market, a major source of income for some families. Others work in family-owned stores and bakeries. Some are seamstresses; others sell garden vegetables and herbs or raise pigs or turkeys. Increasingly, young unmarried women find employment in local stores or assist their mothers in their economic pursuits. They are also expected to contribute time to the maintenance of the house and to childcare. But there are no growing industries or new occupations available to women, no medical clinics or commercial businesses which would require skilled services, and teachers are brought in from Merida. Of the few available jobs, most are in family-owned stores, where women do not earn wages for their employment. It is only the young single women who are likely to find paying jobs as clerks in the local tortillerias or shops.

Several married women have recently formed a chicken cooperative. They have commissioned the construction of a well, two large chicken coops and a small house for the rotating caretakers. The women raise chickens for eggs and for butchering. They take turns spending the night with their husbands at the granja (chicken farm) to protect their flock from marauding thieves. In the past, there was also a women's cooperative garden near the hacienda, but when Hurricane Gilbert hit Yucatan in 1988, the well became contaminated, and the garden was abandoned. These enterprises not only illustrate the creativity and resourcefulness of village women, but further the concept of marianismo.

Other women were faced with few other alternatives: commuting.

Several factors have contributed to women's limited job options and later found employment by a new road between the village and Merida decreased the travel distance in half, and the increased employment opportunities directly to the center of the city.

The percentage of women gainfully employed increased from less than 3% in 1976 to 6% in 1981. This was due to increased employment in Merida and the relocation of many household responsibilities to the city because they are too far to drive to and from, or the traffic and of getting there. Single women, in particular, have many attended school and have jobs in errands in the city.

The most common type of employment is domestic labor as maids and seamstresses. Women, not the men of the household, have responsibility for driving to and from Merida and have raised pigs or turkeys for a base salary. One of the two factories continues to operate, and the other has been opened after 1989, a small family business. Two factories in Merida and have raised pigs and turkeys, but these factories are now closed. One woman is very pleased with her new upholstered sofa a house. She bought the furniture to her house.

After 1989, a new factory was introduced. Two factories in Merida and have raised pigs and turkeys, but these factories are now closed. One woman is very pleased with her new upholstered sofa in her house. She bought the furniture to her house.
women, but further refute the passive stereotypes associated with marianismo.

Other women who wish to pursue wage earning jobs or who are unable to support themselves or their families in Yaxkukul have only two alternatives: commuting to Merida or migrating from Yaxkukul.

Several factors have influenced the increase in commuting. First, Merida has jobs. Second, more young people attended school outside the village and later found employment there. Third, transportation has been improved by a new road between Yaxkukul and Merida, which now cuts the driving distance in half, and a new taxi service, for the same fare as the bus, goes directly to the central market in Merida.

The percentages of married women working outside the village increased from less than 1% in 1976 to 10% in 1992; for single women, from 3% in 1976 to 35% in 1992. Married women are less likely to seek employment in Merida for several reasons, the most important being their household responsibilities, which hinder their freedom of movement. And because they are dependent upon public transportation, they are not able to drive to and from Merida according to their own schedules. Furthermore, many are reluctant to venture to Merida, even to shop. They are afraid of the traffic and of getting lost in the crowds; and they do not like the noise. Single women, in contrast, have more flexibility and less fear of Merida. Many attended school in Merida and were recruited by their mothers to run errands in the city.

The most common occupation for uneducated women in Merida is domestic labor as housekeepers or nannies for middle to upper class women. One married woman in the village who does commute to Merida, earns 125,000 pesos ($42) a week plus food as a housekeeper. In contrast, an ejidatorio can expect to earn 100,000 pesos ($33) a week. This woman is very pleased with her job, because her employer gave her a nicely upholstered sofa and chair, rare possessions in the village, and delivered the furniture to her house in the village.

After 1989, a new source of employment for unskilled women was introduced. Two foreign-owned factories (maquiladoras) have opened in Merida and have recruited employees in the village. Every day, buses from these factories come to the village to pick up women and take them to work. One of the two factories is an Asian-owned factory, in which women work for a base salary of $80,000-100,000 pesos ($26-33) a week, to which is added piecework. A good seamstress can earn fairly good wages here.
The villagers are not as enthusiastic about the other factory, an American owned fishing pole plant, which forces workers to sign a three month contract. Workers earn $11,000 pesos a day ($3.25) or $70,000 pesos a week ($21 dollars). The work is difficult, requiring great dexterity to make the small parts of the fishing poles, and the workers are aware of their exploitation, knowing what the poles cost in the United States.

The third option for women is out-migration. Female migrants have largely been ignored in previous studies, the assumption perhaps being that women do not migrate for economic reasons, but only to follow men. This assumption is proven false by the Yaxkukul data. First, despite the protectiveness of Yucatecan mothers, young women are very mobile, constituting nearly half of the migrants in all three research periods (45% in 1976-7 and 47% in 1989 and 1992). Second, although nearly half of the female migrants in the 1976 data left to follow their new husbands, only 13% (8) of the women in the 1989 and 16% (4) of the women in the 1992 data left for this purpose.

There are two features which distinguish migrant women from the general population: their educational level and their marginality. Migrants in general have higher education levels than the population at large, and most of them obtained their education outside the village. The most common occupations for women include teaching, nursing, and secretarial or accounting work. Teachers or nurses are either assigned by government policy or must seek employment outside the village.

Women who seek skilled employment outside the village are in some sense marginal to the local society and economy. There are other sources of marginality, however, which often push women from Yaxkukul, including family size and composition and marital status.

Female migrants tend to come from families with six or more children and from families in which more than half of the children are female. Therefore, their domestic skills may not be crucial to the family, and, if these daughters are among the younger children in the family, they may be an economic burden. Because they have a greater degree of freedom than the older women, they often attend school or seek employment elsewhere.

Marital status is another source of marginalization for women. In all three research samples combined, seven female out-migrants were single household heads when they left; five were divorced, and two were widowed. Another was a single mother when she left her parents' house, taking her young son to Cancun. These eight women decided to migrate rather than rely on their families in the village with their friend, Gloria, one of three female household heads who had been widowed; until her husband died, she had worked as a cook and her teen daughter, Shana, attended school. At the age of 16, Gloria was married and has recently divorced with one of her markas.

The case of Celia's innovation. Celia's family consisted of her husband, Cordemex, and four children and one household head. In the process of building a cement house, an additional cement house, and their three children, Cordemex built; in addition, Celia, the household head was alone Celia's. If it is true that Cordemex, the Yaxkukul woman Celia, however, she and her husband left for Cancun. Needless to say, she and her husband had already left for Cancun, the children, including the baby, and the money from her husband Celia bought two lots in Yaxkukul in what is being made in the village once or the fifteen year old school.

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other factory, an employer to sign a three month ($3.25) or $70,000 ($70,000) or leed to be aware of the United States. Male migrants have been perhaps being that to follow men. This. First, despite the workers are very mobile, with periods (45% in nearly half of the low husbands, only women in the 1992 women from the marginality. Migrants in that large, and most the most common jobs secretarial or performed by government workers are in some are other sources of Yaxkukul, including or more children or in the family, and, if the family, they may be in a sense of freedom than many elsewhere. Diverse women. In all three children were single and two were parents’ house, and decided to migrate rather than rely on resident kin ties, although two of them left their children in the village with their mothers while they worked and lived elsewhere. Gloria, one of the oldest of the out-migrants, was in her 40’s when her husband died. She had no formal education and remained in the village until her friend, who owned a drycleaning shop in Mexico City, offered her a job. Her teen daughter, Diana, remained with Gloria’s mother in Merida to attend school. At age 16, Diana joined her mother in Mexico City. Diana married and has not returned to the village. Gloria later returned and lived with one of her married sons until her death in 1992.

The case of Celia illustrates not only marginality, but remarkable innovation. Celia’s husband died in 1976, leaving her at the age of 27 with four children and a fifth on the way. She and her husband had been in the process of building a new house separate from both parental households. When her husband died, Celia moved her family into her parent’s solar, which consisted of two traditional stick and thatch houses and a newer cement house, and was already terribly crowded. Her older brother, his wife and their three children were living there while their new house was being built; in addition, the solar held five of Celia’s unmarried siblings. The household head was an alcoholic, unable to support his own family, let alone Celia’s. If it had not been for his two oldest sons who worked in the Cordemex factory, the family would have been destitute. Celia, however, proved to be a clever entrepreneur. She sold the house she and her husband were building and began selling Avon products. Needless to say, business in the village was not promising. Eventually, she left for Cancun, taking her oldest boys with her and leaving three children, including the baby, with her exhausted, yet uncomplaining mother. With the money from her land sale as well as that earned as a domestic on Cancun, Celia bought two small parcels of land on the island and a store stall in Yaxkukul in what the villagers jokingly called “la mall.” She returns to the village once or twice a month with inventory and checks upon the store, which is being managed and run by her thirteen year old daughter and her fifteen year old sister.

The story of Patti is also instructive. Patti is the unmarried mother of a boy who was only a few months old when I met her in 1976. The boy’s father was one of the young bachelors in the village, and his paternity was generally known. She was plagued not only by the stigma of her social position, but by the fact that she had little education. She took her son to Cancun, where her older sister already lived with her husband and children.
Currently, Patti is learning English and is a supervisor of maids at one of the luxury hotels on the island.

In Yaxkukul, out-migration must be understood in a context of both social and economic factors. While both men and women migrate for similar reasons, female migrants share certain characteristics which set them apart from other women and from male migrants. They come from large families, which are no longer advantageous in a developing market economy; and their gender specific skills are no longer an integral part of the rural economy. If they are educated, they have limited opportunities to utilize their hard-earned education. And they are marginal in their marital and social status.

These studies illustrate the complexity of the economic decisions which face women in a changing economy. Women base their decisions on a myriad of social and economic factors: education, marital status, family commitments, and economic need within the family unit. The assumption that women are merely submissive and passive as in the marianismo model, ignores their influence as wives and mothers and their active participation in the local economy.

NOTES


3 The samples for data in this section are as follows: In 1976, data was obtained for 412 women thirteen years or older in age from a total of 197 households; in 1989, data from 100 households was obtained including 272 women aged 13 or older; in 1992, data on 140 women in that age group was obtained from 50 households.