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Renegotiating Gender in the Berry Fields of Michoacán, Mexico

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Abstract

This article examines the renegotiation of gender roles in a rural Mexican community where economic crisis in the sugar industry led foreign agribusinesses to promote blackberries and raspberries for export and hire women as berry pickers. Analysis focuses on the challenges and opportunities posed for women's empowerment where women entered agricultural waged labor in large numbers, thus displacing men who traditionally produced sugar cane on their own land. This restructuring of the regional economy raises important questions regarding the marginalization of subaltern groups, the nature of new sets of power relations, and the ideologies and discourses that support reorganization of the production regime. I examine the mutually constitutive ideological and material processes that contributed to the creation of a gender-segregated work force based on non-traditional agricultural export production destined for global niche markets. The changing social field that connects waged laborers, berry growers, company executives, and Northern consumers necessitates a critical perspective for assessing capital accumulation strategies appropriated by transnational corporations under flexibilization of the global economy. The contradictions of such a system reverberate all along the commodity chain, from *campesino* households to the global market. I insist on a dialectic understanding that disposes of the old antinomies that riddled feminist and Marxist theories regarding women's role in the work force and that subverted a more nuanced understanding of these transformations.

Key Words: globalization, transnational agribusiness, non-traditional agricultural production, feminist theory, empowerment.

Introduction

In the state of Michoacán, Mexico, a decade of economic crisis contributed to an escalation of unemployment for sugarcane growers and fostered the entry of transnational blackberry companies into agricultural production. Between 1988 and 2002, structural adjustment and market competition contributed to the closing of seven Mexican sugar mills (Butler Flora and Otero 1995; Buzzanell and Lord 1993; Chollett 2003, 2000; García Chávez 1998, 1997). Ethnographic research in Los Angeles, Michoacán (1997-2006) reveals that the transition of women into waged agricultural labor coincided with the decline and eventual closure of the San Sebastián sugar mill in 2002. This article examines the renegotiation of gender roles accompanying the creation of a new, gender-segmented labor force.

I analyze the shifting fields of power in the transition from the sugar regime wherein mostly male growers formed one of the strongest cane growers' unions in the country and the recently established blackberry regime where women remain relatively powerless and mostly silent regarding their marginalization. Article 123 of the Mexican constitution contained one of the most progressive labor laws in the world. During the 1970-80s, cane growers and mill workers enjoyed union contracts, collective bargaining, higher earnings and wages, and social guarantees such as health insurance. Mexico's move from a nationalist/protectionist government to neoliberalism in the 1980s weakened labor power across the country (LaBotz and Alexander 2005).¹ Labor unions wedded to the

¹ In the Northern maquiladora zone, employment expanded but the proportion of unionized workers fell 10 percent from 1984 to 2000 and wages fell 50 percent from 1980 to 2000. PAN's (Partido Acción Nacional) victory in 2000 ended PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) dominance and Secretary of Labor Abascal promoted labor flexibility. Plan Abascal proposed the elimination of the eight-hour day, severance pay, workers' benefits, training

dominant PRI government found themselves decoupled from that system when deindustrialization led to plant closings. In Michoacán, the strong male-dominated cane growers' union faded away with closure of the regional sugar mill and the faltering economy fostered increased migration to the North. NTAE (non-traditional agricultural export) production largely displaced the sugar regime and had a profound effect on women's incorporation into the labor market in which women remain unorganized, marginalized, and without contracts. TNCs (transnational corporations), together with government support, fostered the replacement of sugar production and its cane growers' and mill workers' unions with NTAE production of blackberries and raspberries. Sugar faced fierce competition from high fructose corn syrup imports from the U.S. and unions associated with the sugar industry guaranteed social benefits such as retirement and health insurance.

This transformation accords well with the more precarious position of a super-exploited labor force that has as its ends the continued profitability of capital in an age of capitalist crisis. An important insight can be gleaned from this transition. The demise of the regional cane growers' union—recognized as one of the strongest in the nation—may have provided incentive for blackberry companies to move into the region. Indeed, Caraway's (2007) cross-country analysis demonstrated that women's employment is higher in countries where male labor has been excluded from political power. A decomposition of the largely male work force associated with sugar production and recomposition of blackberry production under contract and wage-based female field labor ushered in a transformed era of gendered relations. *Campesinos* (small-scale rural producers) of the region who considered traditional cane agriculture as a way of life found that tradition eviscerated by the arrival of NTAE export agribusinesses. Furthermore, these insights apply to the dialectic nature of material conditions and ideologies that are constitutive of the lives of male sugarcane growers and women berry workers.

As Gramsci (1971) made clear, dominant groups exert power via coercion and gain consent of the dominated, creating a tangled web of dialectical power relations between dominators and dominated and vis-à-vis the political economy. Gramsci's intent was to understand how power is produced and reproduced. Consciousness and practical action comprise a material social process wherein meanings and values are mutually constitutive and constituting and experienced as praxis (Williams 1977). Rejecting an antinomous conceptualization, Gramsci (1971) insisted on the dialectic unity of "structure" and "superstructure." Spurning economic reductionism often represented in materialist orthodoxy and understood in terms of a material-ideological divide, a Gramscian perspective examines how class realities in their economic, social, moral, and intellectual dimensions are continually reformulated through historical processes. If, as Gramsci insisted, hegemony entails practice wherein power relations produce inequalities and ideologies come to justify hegemony, dominance and consent must of essence be a dialectical process, wherein hegemony in a particular context may not always be complete. In a different context, counter-hegemonies may emerge out of the lived experience of oppression, but new forms of social consciousness are not inevitable if marginalization becomes internalized and obscures an alternative praxis (Crehan 2002). Social relations of production must be worked out on a contested terrain of differential interests that are both contradictory and permeated by gender. I examine these insights for their application to the lives of women incorporated into

programs, social security, and housing plans in order to attract foreign investment. If adopted, workers would lose job security, union certification would be revoked, and companies could still expel dissidents, yet pregnancy tests and sexual harassment would be unchallenged (LaBotz and Alexander 2005).

blackberry production in Michoacán and the relevant questions raised. Has transformation of the regional economy by these NTAE corporations improved the lives of *campesina* women? How do the changing material conditions of production and ideologies concerning gender roles intersect and how are they constitutive of one another? What is the dialectic nature of hegemonic praxis and potential emergence of counter-hegemonic consciousness? How is women's empowerment evaluated by women berry workers, male partners, and company executives? And how might women's empowerment, or lack thereof, be assessed?

A general review of the prolific literature on women's entry into waged labor in the Global South reveals a tendency to extensively cite literature, theorize, and contribute to important debates on women's place in the labor force (Benería 2003; Busca and Vázquez Laba 2006; Carr and Chen 2004; Chant 2007; González de la Rocha 2001; Hu-DeHart 2007; Reynolds 2002; Razavi 2002; Tinsman 2006; Wright 2006). Nonetheless, a relatively small portion of the literature incorporates rich ethnographic content. Rothstein (2007) even claims that fieldwork seems to have almost vanished. On the one hand, community studies may be inadequate to capture the incorporation of people into global commodity chains; on the other hand, multi-sited fieldwork tends to stretch field data too thin. Barndt (2002), to cite just one example, provides an excellent analysis of a commodity chain that is both rich in ethnographic data and the global connections along the "tomato trail." My own research relies on multi-level analysis, which places emphasis on deeper understandings gained through ethnographic field research without eliding examination of how structural adjustment contributed to a reorganization of the Mexican economy (Chollett 2009) and, as Feldman (1992) suggests, its consequences for everyday life.

I first conducted research in the Los Reyes region of Michoacán in 1997 when the San Sebastián sugar mill was still in operation and concerned myself primarily with male sugarcane growers and their relationship with the newly privatized sugar mill. I returned after the mill closed down and in 2004 turned my attention to the shift to blackberry production. My 2006 research took me into the fields to work alongside women berry pickers and packers. Each field season involved living with a local family, participant observation, and intensive interviews with waged laborers, cane growers, blackberry growers, sugar mill personnel, and managers of transnational blackberry companies. I used my participant observation with berry pickers in 2006 as a venue for a non-random selection of women to interview. Interviews were carried out over a period of two months in the homes of 33 women berry workers in the rural community of Los Angeles, Michoacán.² I also conducted 13 intensive interviews with blackberry growers, all but one of whom were men, and interviewed executives at each of the nine blackberry companies in the region. My intent was to collect data on production and earnings, but also to elicit both men's and women's understandings about the role gender played in this transition from sugar cane to blackberries. My objective is to contribute to research on women's labor in a rural region of Michoacán, Mexico and beyond. Within feminized pockets of agricultural labor in Mexico, 25 percent of the economically active population is involved in fruit and vegetable production; half of these are women who are marginalized as temporary workers (Chant 2003). We find similar increases in agro-export production elsewhere in Latin America (Appendini 2002; Barndt 2002; Barrientos and Perrons 1999; Barrientos et al. 1999; Busca and Vázquez Laba 2006; Deere 2006; Echánove 2005;

² The population of Los Angeles, Michoacán is approximately 1500.

Hamilton and Fischer 2003; Prieto-Carrón 2006; Raynolds 2002; Rubio 2006; Tinsman 2006); the current research will shed light on the dramatic transformations taking place in rural Latin America.

Setting the Context for NTAE Production

A long history of export production in the Global South, beginning with the export of primary products such as sugar (see Mintz 1985), provides historical context for understanding the more recent production of NTAEs. Sugar, one of the first global commodities, maintained colonial hegemony, the slave trade, and impoverished millions as production shifted from subsistence to export. Sugarcane production, based largely on male labor, played a role in creating an industrial work force where gender inequality was inherent (Gunewardena 2007). A tracing of the historical roots of gender inequality in agriculture calls for examination of alienation of land, surplus extraction, and social relations of production going back to the colonial period. Men as well as women were losers in this process. As Benería and G. Sen (1986) clarified, class formation, capital accumulation, and appropriation of women's production and reproduction through a gendered division of labor were historically constitutive of gendered inequalities. Gender and class relations comprise a dialectic that shaped, and continues to shape commercial agriculture.

Sugar helped to structure the regional economy of the Los Reyes³ region of Michoacán since the early colonial period. Antonio de Caicedo received an *encomienda* (grant of indigenous labor) from Hernán Cortés and initiated the production of sugar cane in the region. Soon numerous small factories were producing sugar, including Santa Clara where Hacienda de Montefalcón became predominant, and several small-scale mills in the community of San Sebastián. By 1936 a modern, mechanized sugar mill was established in San Sebastián, but like other sugar mills, suffered multiple boom and bust cycles of the sugar economy. Of special note was the nationalization of the San Sebastián mill in 1975, when during a period of strong, State-led development, it passed into the hands of the government. A new era of neoliberalism ushered in the privatization of the Santa Clara and San Sebastián sugar mills in 1991. Grupo Porres, the corporate owner, shut down the San Sebastián mill in 2002. It is in this context that NTAE production found fertile ground. The discarding of protectionist policies to make way for more brutal market forces under neoliberal flexibilization revolutionized not only the Los Reyes region, but the entire Global South.

Much of Latin America adopted post-war protectionism envisioned in Keynesian economic policies. Through the 1970s, import substitution industrialization offered price supports, subsidies, credit, and social benefits, including health insurance, to agriculture and industry (Feldman 1992; White et al. 2003). The era of high employment and economic growth of the 1950-70s, followed by the oil shocks of the 1970s that fostered increased export production and food dependency gave way to neoliberalism in the 1980s (Razavi 2002). Mexico's initial oil-boom and high oil prices spawned excessive government spending but the 1970s oil crisis culminated in the Mexican meltdown of 1982 (Razavi 2002; White et al. 2003). The Washington Consensus, along with IMF's (International Monetary Fund) neoliberal mandate for state downsizing, trade liberalization, privatizations and promotion of export production in the 1980-90s guaranteed that Latin American countries could acquire foreign

³ The major city in the region is Los Reyes. Santa Clara, where a sugar mill still functions, and San Sebastián, where residents of Los Angeles delivered their sugar cane until that mill closed, are located within close proximity.

exchange and pay off their debts to foreign banks. These policies ushered in a new era of more volatile, wildly fluctuating commodity prices and made possible the iron grip that TNCs hold over global food systems (Rosset 2009). Rubio (2006) noted the weakening of mechanisms of political domination over Latin America since 2000 as some governments sought greater autonomy; at the same time, TNCs strengthened their hegemony. Rather than view the current era as a culmination of global capitalist accumulation, the recent economic crisis represents a period of decadence illustrated by more brutal conditions of production, wherein a unionized proletariat has given way to a flexibilization devoid of any workers' rights and benefits (Harvey 2003). Indeed, Sotelo Valencia (2003) argued that it was not the success of capitalism, but the structural crisis of the same that led to a neoliberal regimen of intensification and super-exploitation of labor. Today, the former bourgeoisie has morphed into corporate executives and much of the Global South is increasingly dominated by foreign TNCs (Harvey 2003).

By the 1980-90s, debt, IMF structural adjustment, loss of State subsidies, and unfair trade competition across national boundaries exacerbated unemployment across the Global South. As a result, public expenditure eroded when it was most needed. As the region experienced unprecedented decline in commodity prices after 1998, the burden of adjustment shifted to small farmers, and especially, to rural women (Razavi 2002). Escalating numbers of *campesinos*, who had earlier provided the cheap food for industrialization, were pushed into migrant streams. Testimony to this process are the remittances that substitute for State support and now take second place in foreign exchange earnings (Rubio 2006). White et al. (2003) reported that 40 percent of rural incomes derive from remittances (White et al. 2003). Since remittances take up the slack for IMF-mandated withdrawal of State support, migrants are in effect subsidizing foreign banks. Remittances by migrant workers who suffer hyper-exploitation in the North are a part of State policy for they do not require public resources, yet help to alleviate the economic disaster thrust on the countryside (Rubio 2006). The excessive surplus value derived by agribusinesses from illegal immigration not only is fetishized as "real value" but must be considered "illegal surplus value" (Bacon 2008). It is important to recognize the continued role of the State in these transformations. Indeed, the State is instrumental in attracting corporations to offshore locations, and putting into place policies that support NTAE production and that weaken the bargaining power of labor. Reynolds (1998) observed that the State and corporations collaborate in devaluing and harnessing women's labor in NTAE production, thus enhancing private profits and the success of export-led development strategies.

Most analyses of the macro-level transformations neglect their gendered dimensions, but as Standing (1999) affirmed, the dismantling of Keynesian economics contributed in a major way to global feminization of labor. By the 1980-90s, most studies documented the fact that globalization amplified gender inequality through an inflated feminization and flexibilization of labor around the globe (Appendini 2002; Caraway 2007; Collins 2003; Fernández-Kelly and Sassen 1995; Pearson 1998). Rubio (2006) stated that the defining characteristic of globalization is social exclusion. But for women, it often meant social *inclusion* into the labor market at even further depressed wages. As informal labor replaces full-time contract employment, women and children's labor is underpaid 30-40 percent compared to that of men (Zermeño 2008). The precariousness of women's situation is revealed in the fact that from 2000-04, 65 percent of new positions had no benefits (Salas 2005). These facts contrast with dramatic increases in the profits acquired in 2007-08 by multinationals such as Cargill (86%), ADM (67%), and

Monsanto (44%) (Zermeño 2008). Market liberalization is also a part of this process. White et al. (2003) documented that NTAE production experienced substantial growth once NAFTA was implemented. Mexico produced 57 percent of vegetables and 37 percent of fruit exported to the U.S. in 1999. From 1985 to 2000, exports increased from \$1 billion dollars to \$3.5 billion (White et al. 2003). Since NAFTA, Women gained 83 percent of the jobs created in the NTAE sector. However, agricultural wages dramatically declined from \$1959 pesos per month in 1991 to \$228 pesos in 2003. Poverty among women increased by 50 percent and at a higher rate than for men.

In the research community of Los Angeles, Michoacán, devastation of the sugar economy exacerbated long-standing out-migration of men and left more woman-headed households. Increasingly, some women were abandoned and left to care for dependent children at the very time that government support for rural communities practically disappeared. Women with minimal education responded to new opportunities as harvesters and packers in the recently established blackberry fields. This transformed social order stands in stark contrast to the past. The supply zone of the two regional sugar mills surrounding Los Reyes, Michoacán formerly included 10,000 hectares of sugar cane, produced by 1500 cane growers. By 2006, 3000 hectares had been converted to blackberry and raspberry production. Gabriel Bautista Naranjo, leader of the local cane growers' union at the Santa Clara mill, remarked, "The competition with blackberries is very difficult. I fear that if the sugar mill fails, it will not be because the owners want it, but because of the lack of land." All berry growers in the community of Los Angeles are former cane growers. However, large-scale, wealthy growers from Los Reyes rent three-fourths of the berry fields in Los Angeles and contract with the export agribusinesses. Almost all growers are men and the berry pickers are primarily women. Unlike union-won social guarantees in the sugar sector, women berry workers lack unions and access to health insurance and retirement benefits. This transition from a male-dominated agricultural domain to a female-intensive waged labor force raises important questions for anthropological research: How may scholars offer a more nuanced analysis of the connections between Northern niche markets and workers in the Global South? Does women's extra-domestic work contribute to their empowerment, or is their labor contribution devoid of a concomitant increase in gender equality? Do these rural women envision themselves as exploited by capitalist agribusinesses, or do they consider themselves liberated from domestic chores and male subordination? In what ways may this gender-segmented labor force differentially affect women at different stages of the life cycle and in alternative forms of household arrangements? Are patriarchal ideologies fading or merely repackaged to fit a new era of flexible accumulation?

Economic Restructuring, Feminist Theory, and Antinomies

Four decades of critique and refinement in feminist theorizing contribute to increasingly nuanced analytic attempts to situate women within the relations of power that constitute women's working lives. Despite the feminist critique of the WID (Women in Development) literature (Benería and G. Sen 1986; Boserup 1970; Robinson 2003), more recent critiques of GAD (Gender and Development) literature (Aradhana 2008; Jaquette and Staudt 2007; Kabeer 2001; Moser 1989a; Pearson and Jackson 1998; G. Sen and Grown 1987), and the contributions of post-structuralist and post-colonial approaches (Mohanty 1988, Ong 1988), Chant and Craske (2003) criticized the fact that antinomous concepts (e.g., global/local, Third World/First World, developed/underdeveloped, private/public,

production/reproduction, practical/strategic, capitalism/patriarchy) continue to permeate scholarly analysis.⁴ Cubitt and Greenslade (1997) and Dore (1997) first called for an “end to dichotomy” in thinking about women’s status and identity, thus contributing to a watershed in feminist theorizing. More recently, Caraway (2007), drawing on a Foucauldian assertion that discourse produces gendered subjects, claimed that most Marxist-feminists still fall into the trap of dualistic thinking, while Rowlands (1998) also asserted that the dynamics of gender relationships necessitates a discarding of simple dichotomies. For Kandiyoti (1998), a viable feminist politics would consist of practices that dismantle the binary oppositions that permeate discourse and that obfuscate our understanding of dialectic transformations and shifting social fields.

Nonetheless, much of the current literature continues to dichotomize “local” and “global.” Too often globalization is conceived to occur in far-off spaces; but it can be best appreciated through examination of diverse localities and the mutually constitutive processes of the “global” and the “local” (Jackson and Ward 2008). What is often perceived as “local” becomes transformed as it becomes a part of the global environment and the global sphere becomes reconstituted in relation to particular localities and local actors. “Structure” is often equated with global processes and “agency” attributed to local actors who take strategic actions vis-à-vis their oppressors. But such distinctions may be too facile. A more nuanced understanding of the unevenness of capitalism under globalization and flexibilization of labor accounts for agency of actors all along the production-consumption chain, rather than a too-common reification of globalization (Collins 2003). Government policy makers, TNC executives, local growers, field and packing shed workers, household members, and consumers make personal decisions that shape the global food market. Rothstein (2007) calls for attention to the agency of capital as it plays on gender and ethnic differences and of workers’ alternative understandings and strategies. As Rothstein points out, anthropology’s concern with interconnections and the complexity of social relationships situates the discipline to examine the ways in which power is negotiated and wielded (see also Feldman 1992). Recent research makes obvious the importance of understanding the intertwined nature of structure and agency, discourses of power, and historical struggles at multiple levels of analysis (Parpart et al. 2002). Given Rothstein’s (2007) assertion that globalization theories stress historically deep connections, flows of people, capital, and ideas, I would argue that collapsing these processes into “global” and “local” establishes another of the antinomies that I criticize throughout this article.

That globalization has long created gendered, raced, and classed economic systems bolstered by historical discourses supportive of patriarchal oppression can not be denied. It is undeniable that open-markets and export-oriented growth pushed women into paid work, increased the burdens of women’s labor, and these processes coincided with declining incomes and male unemployment (Elson 1992; Fontana 2008; Lamas 2007; Moser 1989b; Razavi 2002; Safa and Antrobus 1992). But the intensity of globalization and technological innovations to meet the requirements of flexible global accumulation render a remarkable transition in social relations (Harley 2007). As Collins (2003) warns, understanding the way global and local processes intersect is hindered by the weaknesses of our theoretical paradigms. Consideration of global/local connectivities entails analysis of global economic transformations in particular commodity chains, and analytic attention to local/global forces and processes that are

⁴The feminist literature employed more dualistic concepts in the past, yet they are present well into the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Aradhana 2008; Collins 2003; Elson 1992; Feldman 1992; Kandiyoti 1998; Mohanty 1988; Moser 1989a; A. Sen 1990; Pearson and Jackson 1998; Troutner and Smith 2004).

constitutive of class hierarchies where disparate meanings and differential power coincide. Echánove's actor-oriented approach refutes a globally-determined "local" scenario, and instead examines the interconnection of relationships and practices that dialectically intersect geographical, social, and symbolic spaces. Theorizing global commodity chains demands analytic synthesis of relationships between local growers and workers, agro-export industries, Northern markets, and consumers (Echánove 2005). Locations along the commodity chain are constituted at the intersection of households, livelihoods, field and factory production processes, negotiation and protest, capital accumulation, consumer demands, and the global political economy. My own approach utilizes these insights by taking time, space, and scale into consideration and asking how commodity production has changed over time, how different parts of the world are connected by these commodities, and by problematizing the scale of global production. In so doing, I take Jackson and Ward's (2008) caution to examine different scales along a commodity chain not as discreet, but as organically connected.

This global/local connectivity implies the necessity of discarding cold war terminologies and renders the notion of "Third World" obsolete in its application to the Global South. Mohanty (2002) posed a vigorous critique of the universalized "Third World Woman" who apparently shared the same oppressions as women everywhere. Visions regarding the lives of subaltern women in the context of global political economy and local subjectivity and agency thus tend to predetermine women as disempowered and docile. Such a conceptualization fits neatly into the needs of outsourced capitalist production and a search for labor flexibility. A corollary is the continued use of terms such as "underdeveloped" that effect a complete conceptual disengagement of the dialectic processes of capitalist accumulation built upon the wealth and labor extracted from countries of the Global South. Tinsman (2006) argues that globalization scholars rarely link processes of production and state formation to consumer practices. As production of global commodities shifts to the South, I stress the social relationships embedded in the commodities that link producers in the Global South with consumers in the Global North (see also Andreatta 1997). These relationships are too often veiled in the commodity itself (Collins 2003). Commodity fetishism separates producers from consumers by blinding us to the labor process behind the products we consume and to the surplus value extracted by the capitalist firm. Each item produced involved workers' aspirations, thought processes, coordination of hands and materials, and the expenditure of physical labor, often under duress of hours of standing or bending, exposure to agro-chemicals, and so forth (Barndt 2002). A blackberry per se is of little interest. What interests us is its representation of a particular historical moment in which relations of production shifted from sugar cane to blackberries. This involved a transformation in social relations where mostly men worked the cane fields and held a particular relationship to the newly privatized sugar mill, to foreign-dominated export industries that employ primarily women in field labor. What many still call "underdevelopment" requires historical analysis of particular locations that are differentially articulated with capitalist relations over time. The sugar economy privileged cane growers in many ways and marginalized them in others, just as women in Los Angeles, Michoacán today express feeling "liberated" from the household as they are exploited by poverty wages.

The era of early industrialization that fomented the separation of women's unpaid domestic labor and wage-earning and the implementation of neoliberal policies as a catalyst to unprecedented feminization of this labor force are well established (Fernández-Kelly and Sassen 1995; Pearson 1998). Early feminist theories associated men

with production in the public sphere and assigned women to reproductive roles in the private sphere (Elshtain 1981, Lamphere and Rosaldo 1974). As use production and waged production took on distinct spatial spheres, remunerated “public” employment became the prerogative of men and women’s “private” labor in the household and subsistence crop production became transformed, under-valued, and unpaid. This dichotomy—upheld by the patriarchal State and by capitalist-perpetuated myths—obfuscates women’s contribution to the household as a labor of value. Socially-constructed conceptions of gender have deep historical roots, yet under conditions of globalization, company managers are redeploying these notions and discourses in innovative ways (Collins 2003; Elson and Pearson 1981).

Ester Boserup (1970) offered one of the early critiques of feminists’ neglect of women’s economic contributions to the household and documented the vital role of women in agricultural economies. Some feminists (Acosta-Belén and Bose 1995; González de la Rocha 2001; Kabeer 1998; Salzinger 2007; Wright 2006) tend to focus outside the household on capitalist relations of production, while other scholars (Benería and G. Sen 1986; Dwyer and Bruce 1988; Young 1992) focus on the household itself as analytically central to understanding women’s subordination. The former argued that as women become incorporated into the work force, they are increasingly exploited as cheap waged laborers (Nash and Fernández Kelly 1983). Others argued that if the private sphere was a place of patriarchal oppression, women could escape subordination by entering into the public sphere of men (Acevedo 1995). Cubitt and Greenslade (1997) and Dore (1997) criticize this dualistic approach for compressing the multiple dimensions of women’s identities into an essentialized model. One of the earlier efforts to examine the dialectic of “private” and “public” spheres demonstrated the value of women’s contributions to the household and exposed the myth of the male breadwinner that permeated feminist thinking (Safa 1995b). While institutions like the colonial State and the Catholic Church fostered the concept of a public/private divide in Latin America, the ideology has broken down somewhat in recent years.

Nonetheless, patriarchal discourses that attribute “production” to public, waged labor and “reproduction” to unremunerated domestic labor (conceived as “non-work”) continue to shape the lives of men and women (England and Lawson 2005). Nakano (2007) problematized the way these concepts contribute to the devaluation of women’s labor. Furthermore, care giving—often conflated with reproductive roles—is constitutive of labor involved in the caring roles of both men and women. Caring is integral to reproducing the labor force, educating children, feeding, clothing, and housing future citizens, all of which form the basic building blocks of the political economy. Attributions of caring work are central to a gendered myth that equates private, subjective, caring labor to the “natural” tendencies of women and public, objective, rational work to men. Women are thus conceptually “evicted” from the political economy (Nakano 2007). Under conditions of structural adjustment, care work is central to social reproduction. Women’s unpaid work must be recognized as subsidizing neoliberal reforms as State services and support are withdrawn (Deere 2006; England and Lawson 2005). The capitalist firm, then, depends on and is present in the mythical private, reproductive sphere, and women, through their productive and reproductive activities, have made the so-called private sphere into a public arena. The concept of reproductive work as women’s contribution is taken to task in Guttman’s (1996) work. Why are reproductive roles (provision of family needs, socialization of children, caring relationships) not attributed to men? In fact, why are not remittances sent by male migrants from the

U.S. not “reproduction,” since they ensure the reproduction of the family unit? Again, the productive/reproductive, private/public antinomies fail to convince. Furthermore, as Nakano (2007) asserts, the caring mythology expunges any corporate responsibility for paying decent wages to women.

Gramsci (1971) pointed out the tenacity of hegemonic ideologies, for women may accept the normative prescriptions of the patriarchal myth and socialize their daughters for normative tasks. Ironically, when an agribusiness employs women in food-related skills for which they are presumed to be adept, their acquired abilities, now waged, become devalued as “unskilled labor” (Barndt 2002). Dichotomous conceptions and discourses perpetuate understandings of “natural skills” attributed to men and women. These naturalized skills are treated by outsourcing firms as material resources to be discovered (Collins 2003). Yet only women’s skills would seem to “travel” from a so-called “private sphere” to “invade” the “public” workplace. Benería (1999) earlier took issue with “work” being defined as paid economic activity linked to the market. More recently, Benería (2003) stressed the dialectical relationship between non-market work and the market. One of my informants did unpaid domestic work in Mexico, and then migrated to the U.S. where she is employed in paid domestic labor—yet it is the same work and blurs the lines between “paid” and “unpaid,” “productive” and “reproductive.” As Salzinger (2003) clarified, women do not come prepackaged as workers, but are created as workers in the *process* of production. For berry workers who require almost no training, firms recognize their “natural abilities” even as they deny their skills. Similarly in industry, Wright (2006) informs that factories require skilled work, but deny those very skills. Calling forth old ideologies from the Fordist regime, firms apply them to the new era of flexible accumulation. Wright explains that the worker is thus imagined as a set of disassembled arms and hands that carry out repetitive motions. Likewise, berry pickers are appreciated only for the dexterity of their fingers in treating fruit delicately and the acuity of their vision; skill is essential in selecting fruit by color shade, ripeness, firmness, and delicate handling so as not to damage the fragile fruit. Their low wages reflect a devaluation of the same skills.

Most feminist scholars would concur with Collins (2003) that ideologies and discourses of gender and ethnicity are constitutive of gendered inequalities in the workplace and become the basis for labor recruitment and maintenance of a low-waged labor force. The expectation that women will assume the extra burdens of feeding families, educating children, and so forth—whether via intensified domestic labor or the waged labor market—reveals these tendencies most clearly. In the Los Reyes region, as neoliberal market opening threw the sugar economy into disarray and the government practically terminated all subsidies to small-scale agriculture, it is women who take up a good portion of wage earning formerly contributed by men. Few scholars today incorporate a Marxian labor theory of value, but it continues to be essential in accounting for women’s paid and unremunerated work. The removal by neoliberal policies of State and public support in the form of social wages for reproduction merely privatized these costs to the household where women take up the extra burden of unremunerated labor (Robinson 2003). Women become the pillars in the struggle to cope with economic transformation. As Leacock (1977) long ago asserted, women’s oppression is inextricably bound up with a world system of exploitation. Only a fundamental social transformation that brings an end to the current system of unfettered profit making can improve women’s status. Ideologies premised on dualisms are embedded in that system and must be discarded as well.

Molyneux (1985) and Moser (1989a) offered yet another dualism by distinguishing women's practical gender interests from women's strategic gender interests. Practical efforts on the part of women appeared unburdened by feminist concerns and strategic gender interests became construed in feminist discourse as women's only path toward liberation. Molyneux examined empowerment as a strategic process of awareness-raising and struggle to transform inequitable power relations. We might ask the question, what if women don't struggle? Does that lead to the de facto conclusion that they are disempowered? Here dichotomous thinking once again leads us astray. A more relevant concept is to envision empowerment as a process rather than something achieved (Parpart et al. 2002). Such a process accords a more nuanced view taking account of individual consciousness, engagement in collective action, and ability to effect change. Rowlands (1998) refers to these respectively as "power within," "power with," and "power to." My own research findings illustrate women's contradictory responses regarding consciousness of power relationships vis-à-vis male relatives and agribusiness executives, or "power within." Berry workers report greater self-esteem, confidence, and ability to earn their own wages. Can their own assessments be rejected since these women do not lay claim to empowerment, continue to constitute a subaltern, underpaid work force and according to some, their activities are directed toward practical, rather than strategic ends? When women in Los Angeles, Michoacán choose to go to work in the berry fields, does that not constitute their own struggle to improve their lives in a context of economic crisis? While still exploited through low wages, these women resisted patriarchal notions when they confronted male partners who objected to their working outside the home. Regarding "power with," research findings in my research community do not tidily coincide with a feminist search for women's role as agents in rebellions and social movements (see also Tinsman 2006). Guzmán Bouvard's (1994) work on women in political movements illustrates quite effectively the impossibility of dichotomizing women's experience into practical and strategic spheres. Argentinean mothers, in searching for disappeared children, organized to challenge the very premise of a patriarchal, military government. Structural constraints and persistent gender-based discourses and ideologies also constrain women berry workers' "power to." Most women interviewed recognized machista attitudes and the embedded ideologies of male relatives and company executives, even as a number of them accept some the patriarchal premise of differential gender skill sets. Below I will suggest why they may not have organized to challenge their new employers.

Caraway (2007) criticized 1970s feminists who in their singular focus on patriarchy treated capitalism as gender blind. Researchers have long recognized that "cheapness" is not inherent in women's waged labor or lacking in value to capitalism. "Cheap labor" is one of the oxymorons employed by corporate capitalism to obscure the contradictions of capitalism (Benson and Kirsch 2009). The idiom becomes fetishized through patriarchal discourses of "docility" and "dexterity" to obliterate the fact that women's labor facilitates labor control and malleability of a flexible, unstable labor force (Benería 1989). The mythical construction of discourses regarding women's physical capabilities depreciates the value of their labor and at the same time maintains processes of global capital (Wright 2006). Wright warns that we must not divorce the patriarchal myth from the fact that as a cultural construction it facilitates the material expansion of capitalism and wealth generation. Acosta-Belén and Bose (1995) and Leacock (1983) locate the source of women's subordination in the process of colonialism, global capitalist expansion, and associated patriarchy. They argue that as TNCs hire women at substandard wages their incorporation into a

segmented labor market reproduces “women as a last colony.” As Pearson (1998) noted, construction of the female labor force resulted from the dynamic interplay of capitalist relations and profit seeking with local and specific gender relations and understandings. For Caraway (2007), structural relations of power are constitutive of women’s devalued work, just as gendered discourses shape gendered outcomes in labor markets. Her analysis leaves no room for antinomial conceptions of capitalism and patriarchy. Chant (2003) reaffirmed the coalescence of capitalism and patriarchy and enjoined us to remember that not only are family gendered ideologies embedded in the labor market, but the labor market is constitutive of patriarchal family structures. Just as *marianismo* and *machismo* are myths that shape gender ideologies and prescribe gendered behaviors, patriarchy is a myth that confuses understandings of the gendered labor force (Chow and Lyter 2002). Thus attention must be given to analysis of how that experience reformulated women’s agency and gender identities as they confronted traditional identities and interacted with capitalist systems of production. Appendini (2002) affirmed that women may both accept and contest gender discourses. However, supposed structural determinations by capital and patriarchy are also open to negotiation and reconstitution by women (Chu 2002; Pearson 1998). I confront the contradictions between women’s optimistic enthusiasm for new job opportunities and liberation from domestic work that agribusinesses provide them, against an engrained ideology that devalues their work and marginalizes their wages.

Wright (2006) interweaves Gramscian theory, postcolonialism, and feminist analysis to foreground the dialectical contradiction between women’s generation of value for capital and their loss of value as disposable workers. Discursive myths make of her body a site of exploitation and capital accumulation. Wright refers to the intentional, rapid turnover of women workers as disposable workers who become “industrial waste” when a new supply of fresh workers enters the firm. Furthermore, she argues that even as a woman worker generates value, she depreciates in value. Paradoxically, as her labor depreciates, it contributes to the materialization of global capital. Whereas women’s labor in Los Reyes, Michoacán may not experience such a parallel deterioration, their labor makes possible the accumulation of capital on an international scale. Wright would concur with Salzinger (2003) that the woman worker is in the process of being produced along with the commodities from which value is extracted. I argue that not only do women in rural Mexico represent various orientations concerning their gendered roles, but as Conger Lind (1992) demonstrates, gender itself is not a fixed category. The premise of my own research is to consider the dialectic between patriarchy and capitalism.

Below, I examine how the transformation of women’s lives demands theoretical reassessment as women become salaried agricultural laborers. Before proceeding, it is important to recognize that subaltern groups represent their own internal hierarchies and inequalities. Examination of women’s subaltern positions must be accompanied by analysis of the subaltern positions of men (Caraway 2007; Chant 2003; Fernández-Kelly and Sassen 1995; Troutner and Smith 2004). “Gender” often connotes “women” but the critical conception must remain the *relationship* between men and women (see Pearson’s 1998 critique of the earlier, 1981 work of Elson and Pearson). The masculine subject however, becomes a male worker only through the materialization of the woman worker who stands in opposition to him in the gendered division of labor (Wright 2006). It could be argued in this region that men’s loss of work in the sugar sector was women’s gain in new work opportunities outside the home. I argue for attention to changes in both men’s and women’s lives without the assumption that men are privileged and that their

lives do not need to be problematized. In this context, relations of power, rather than conceptual categories, become the primary concern (Crehan 2002). In the research region, the incorporation of women into subaltern positions in the labor market also has implications for men's subaltern positions. In Mexico, women rarely cut sugar cane; indigenous crews are often brought from even poorer regions to harvest the cane, establishing differential levels of male subordination. The demise of the sugar economy meant that many men lost their source of income. More recent changes involve renting out former cane lands to wealthier blackberry growers, and thus lack of access to productive land for poorer *campesinos* to support the family economy. Paradoxically, women who pick blackberries in Los Reyes earn more than male cane cutters, male berry growers earn more than male berry waged laborers, but all subaltern groups are exploited via low wages and earnings.

[Chollett Figure 1 about here, Photograph by Donna L. Chollett]

The Wages of Unequal Pay

Much of the seminal work on the gender-segmented labor force focused on maquiladoras (Cravey 1998; Elson and Pearson 1981; Fernández-Kelly 1983a; Ong 1987a; Pearson 1998; Safa 1995a, 1986). The resilience of gender inequalities forces scholars to grapple with the tenacity of gendered divisions within the labor force (Caraway 2007a; Chant and Craske 2003a; Collins 2003; Fussell 2000; Pangsapa 2007a; Polaski 2006; Salzinger 2003a; Smith and Dolan 2007a; Wright 2006). Women continue to be underpaid, subjected to hazardous work conditions, and affected by job insecurity (Pangsapa 2007a), thus scholars remain attuned to the relevance of women workers and the conditions of their labor. Much of the earlier scholarship accorded gendered discourse a causal role in shaping the gendered division of labor. Fernández-Kelly (1983), for example, explained that discourses contributed to the formation of an international division of labor. As Caraway (2007) argued, feminists then subsumed docility, dexterity, and tolerance for monotony under the wage argument. Caraway instead contends that firms select labor not based on ideology, but on the basis of profitability. Salzinger (2003) concurred, clarifying that gendered images related to women's work do not reflect reality, but instead play a formative role in shaping global capital. Discourses can produce subjects, for example the common notion prevails in the Los Reyes region that women are suited for "light" work and men are suited for "heavy" work, yet women, too express this notion. Gender must not be seen as a residue but as central to the political economy of the productive process and profit-making.

The significant research on maquiladoras offers rich material to enhance our understandings of women's work. There is much less research on the impact of agro-export industries on women's employment (Raynolds 1998; Robinson 2003). Raynolds asserted that women's substantial incorporation into NTAE production was rarely noted in the literature and suggested similarities with patterns of deploying a female labor force with industrial export manufacturing. However, important differences must be pointed out between assembly labor and women who increasingly make up the NTAE work force. Various studies point out the imposition of production quotas, use of statistical process controls, personal humiliation of women who fail to meet managers' expectations, threats to relocate the company prompted by workers' complaints, etc. (Collins 2003; Salzinger 2003; Wright 2006). Whereas women working in agricultural processing plants may be working assembly lines and have quotas, harvesters often do not (although earnings generally depend on piece-rate productivity). Unlike rigid supervision of workers, the

women in my study enjoy a greater degree of freedom without such impositions. Men and women in berry fields do complimentary, mutually dependent work similar to managers and assembly-line workers in maquiladoras, but the informality of field work contrasts with the formality of factory work. Berry fields are laid out in rows that obscure the vision of workers from one row to the next. Several women may be working in the same row, with freedom to chat as they move from one end to the other. They call on men to pick up boxes and provide new containers, but in the company fields there is little supervision over the labor. The private landowners are more likely to observe and admonish women to pick faster. In maquiladoras, men are more likely to be promoted; in the Los Reyes berry fields, men receive slightly higher wages, but promotions are not part of the work relationship. Seasonality is a significant factor that differentiates maquiladora and agro-industrial production; women in the latter are unemployed much of the year. Literature on maquiladoras acknowledges efforts on the part of managers to seek young women and dismiss them after two to three years as a means to avoid paying seniority, social security, retirement and maternity benefits, and to prevent labor organization. Maquiladoras typically have a high turnover rate of relatively young employees (Wright 2006). This is not the case for Mexican berry workers; in the Los Reyes region, a shortage of workers limits this practice and the age range is quite wide. We might ask, then, why gender ideology is not relaxed and the employment of men as berry pickers more prevalent? Men in this region, rather than accept the low wages of field work, often opt for out-migration to better-paid jobs in the U.S. The shortage of women berry pickers and packers makes them less “disposable.” Disposability is more of a seasonal issue. We would think that the low labor supply would drive wages up, but unlike working in a single factory, the presence of nine berry companies and numerous growers in the Los Reyes region divides collective efforts and reduces workers’ bargaining power.

With the exception of garment workers (see Collins 2003), much assembly-line work is mechanized. Blackberries are a fragile fruit that must be handled delicately, thus production involves harvesting and packing by hand. A factor often neglected in the literature is the fact that maquiladora workers, generally migrants, rarely form a community group; berry workers in Los Angeles live at home and work with members of a shared community. Korovkin (2005) notes a similar situation in Ecuador where flower workers, unlike much of the migrant agricultural labor force, remain at home. Another important distinction revealed in the literature is the rapid turnover in fashion and labels that require frequent readjustments in the high fashion apparel maquiladoras. While export fruit is free of such rapid changes, it is likewise subject to the vagaries of middle and upper-class consumer demands.

Whether in maquiladora or NTAE production, long-held myths and discourses persist regarding women’s naturalized abilities. Analysis of how the power of such ideologies continues to place women in harm’s way must not be discarded. Elson and Pearson (1981) long ago revealed the cluster of notions surrounding ascription of “nimble fingers” to women, such as docility, manual dexterity, and capability to withstand monotony. From Fernández-Kelly’s (1983) early work to Pearson’s (1998) revisiting of the concept, scholars must continue to contend with how such notions become embedded in the new flexible accumulation that characterizes the global economy. Ríos (1995) clarified the ideological construct of gender typing that emerged in a particular labor market and its continued role in reproducing relations of production. Hu-Dehart (2007) concurs that still today, “dexterity” and “docility” are consciously inscribed in a hierarchical division of labor that renders women’s labor of little value. Reynolds (1998) pointed out the contradiction inherent in the myth of male strength and female dexterity where

picking and loading spiny pineapples in the Dominican Republic is one of the most physically arduous jobs. Gramsci's (1971) analysis adds further clarification: popular beliefs (e.g., ideologies regarding presumed gendered proclivities) are, in fact, material forces, shaping and constituting structural inequalities. Whether in maquiladoras, agribusinesses, or the case of blackberries in Michoacán, gendered ideologies that maintain women are best suited for this tedious work, have been disseminated from the Global North and coalesced with local ideologies concerning women's "proper" roles. What must be recognized is that impoverishment of former cane growers who feel the need to migrate to sites of waged labor in the North becomes an essential condition for the entry of women as cheap waged laborers into the berry fields. Moreover, former cane growers who have turned to blackberry production must modify patriarchal notions that women belong in the home and hire them as field workers. Within this new regime of flexible accumulation, flexibility is dependent on a set of structural inequalities shaped by nationality, class, ethnicity, and gender that allow maximizing profits while minimizing labor costs, market regulations, and union organization (Raynolds 1999a). Schlosser's words are most relevant in this context:

We have been told for more than a decade to bow down before "the market." We have placed our faith in the laws of supply and demand. What has been forgotten, or ignored, is that the market rewards only efficiency. Every other human value gets in its way.... No deity that men have ever worshiped is more ruthless and more hollow than the free market unchecked.... Left to its own devices, the free market always seeks a work force that is hungry, desperate, and cheap—a work force that is anything but free (Schlosser 1995).

[Chollett Figure 2 about here Photograph by Donna L. Chollett]

Berry companies in Los Reyes usually pay women by the box, on a piece-rate basis. As workers pick the berries, they fill 5.6 ounce clamshell containers that already bear the company label and electronic price code. Workers receive approximately \$10 pesos for each box of 12 containers, or nine cents per container. The average worker can pick 10 boxes (120 containers) per day. Some companies and most growers pay by the day, with wages averaging \$110-120 pesos per day (approximately \$10-11 dollars). María commented on this system of payment: "If I pick faster, they pay me the same, and the bosses don't notice that. The work screws you a lot and it is little that they pay." When I informed women that a six-ounce container sells for approximately \$4.00 dollars in the U.S., they reacted with shock. Clementina remarked, "Well look, they are exploiting us really pretty!" Long working hours further exacerbate low wages. The entry of more companies to the region, together with the vast expansion of production, created a drastic labor shortage. The inability to pick all the berries leads to the super-exploitation of women who may work from 6:00 AM until 8:00 or 9:00 PM. The inadequacy of women's wages can be measured against the fact that a family of four in Mexico requires \$176 pesos per day to survive.

All company managers and growers complained about the labor shortage. Theoretically, supply and demand should result in increased wages, and women should have greater bargaining power, but none of the women had considered organizing as a strategy. The gendered division of labor derives from structural inequalities that force men to migrate to better-paid jobs in the U.S. and perpetuates an ideology about the "proper" work for men and women. Women become substitute labor to supplant the lack of male waged laborers, yet even for those who choose not to migrate, without exception, men receive higher wages than women. Women do not merely fill

positions formerly held by men, for men's exclusion from cane growing is reorganizing gendered patterns, where women emerge as the breadwinners, but at reduced wages (Safa 1995a).

The wage differential associated with this gendered division of labor clearly distinguishes "women's work" from "men's work." Men engage in agricultural tasks of irrigation, clearing the land with a machete, operating mechanical equipment, fertilizing, installing posts and fencing, constructing tunnels, and especially, fumigating with herbicides and pesticides. These are defined as "heavy" tasks that women lack the strength to manage. A Hursts' manager informed me that women have more ability to pick berries. When I asked why that might be, he replied, "I don't know why, it is natural." After itemizing the tasks that men do, one berry grower added, "All of this, the woman can not do." I prodded for an explanation; he replied that when fumigating, the chemicals penetrate women's skin more easily, and added, "I am not going to put a woman at risk." Another berry grower affirmed that men fumigate because "The fumigation tank is too heavy for women; the woman is not going to wear a tank on her back." The Sun Belle manager, explaining why women would never spray pesticides, crossed his arms over his chest with an air of drama, exclaiming that, "For me it is an ethical issue, it is somewhat moral. The woman is more delicate. The man is brusquer." Husbands and growers who hired women repeatedly attested to the fact that women could not manage these heavy tasks. Even though they verbally challenged unequal pay, most of the women I interviewed had also incorporated this gendered ideology into their thinking and discourse.

The entry of women into berry work attests to the decline in employment opportunities for men and women's appropriation of extra-domestic work. Women make up approximately 70-80 percent of the work force. Women's work includes picking berries, pruning bushes with lawn sheers, lifting and weaving the branches into the bushes as they grow, and weeding by hand or with a hoe. Women also work in the packing sheds, receiving and inspecting containers delivered by pickers. Blackberries and raspberries must be of the right color, firmness, and ripeness to meet the stringent quality requirements for export. The picker, then, must distinguish the ripeness of each berry, while handling the fruit delicately so as not to squash it. Picking requires continual stooping and stretching to reach berries at various heights and depths within the plant, causing many women to complain of back pain. Each branch is heavy-laden with one-half-inch thorns. Many women bear the scratches of thorns on their faces, arms, backs, and legs. As I quickly learned through participant observation, tiny thorns remain embedded in their finger tips for several days.

Blackberry plants grow uncontrollably. Lifting up the branches and intertwining them into the plant is a less desirable task than picking berries. As the women adeptly work to lift the branches, the many thorns catch their clothing. This not only requires loosening oneself from the grasp of the thorny plant, but is particularly hard on the clothing of women whose financial resources are limited. Early in the morning, the plants are quite wet and after a few hours of work, the women's clothes become soaked. Since berries require frequent doses of pesticides (Chollett 2009), they may be soaking themselves with chemical residues. Few women, however, identified agricultural chemicals as a health threat. Women identified weeding as the most difficult task. Weeding is done either on hands and knees and by hand, or with a hoe. Removal of the thick, deeply-rooted weeds around the base of the plant requires substantial bending. Workers frequently complain of backaches from being bent over all day. Berry workers prune plants during the off-season. Unlike men, who work with machetes, the women use heavy garden sheers, but

they must carefully select among the new and old growth, cutting off only the old. They begin at the tip, successively cutting off segments of each individual branch until the entire old branch is removed. Mercedes commented, “You have to search for the new branch and all the rest you have to cut. How it screws you pruning! You know, it is the most aggravating to do.”

Almost without exception, company officials and local growers regard women more properly fit to pick berries than men. Berry growers and company executives that I interviewed considered these tasks to be “easy” and “light.” While women earn on average \$120 pesos per day, men often receive \$150 for their “heavier” work. Interviews with local growers yielded ample evidence for rationalizations of women’s lower wages. One grower remarked, “A man charges more because the work is harder.” The perception of men as more “brutish” and thus stronger prevailed in many discussions with both men and women about this segmented labor force. Commonly, growers explained that men were more likely to bruise the fruit. An Expofrut manager bluntly stated, “The man is clumsier. Men can pick berries, but they mistreat the fruit.” Men, in sum, are more “brutish,” squash the berries, and lack the patience for such tedious work.

An ideology grounded on presumptions of inherently distinct physical characteristics lies deeply ingrained in the thinking of company personnel, berry growers, and the women themselves. An executive at VBM asserted, “We employ more women because of the sensitivity of the fingers they possess.” Inevitably, when I asked men why women were chosen to pick berries, men would raise their hands and wriggle their fingers, imputing the tactile sensitivity and agile dexterity unique to women. At Hortifrut, after displaying this gesture, the manager explained, “The woman is more delicate, she has more delicate manipulation.” The Sun Belle manager agreed: “The women are more patient. Their hands are smoother.” These prolific commentaries on the supposed differences in capabilities form an ideology through which both men and women conceptualize “work” in terms of brute strength and diminish women’s skills and capabilities as less valuable and therefore, deserving of lower wages. The VBM manager illustrated this: “The women are harder workers. They are more committed also. But men do whatever requires more *physical* labor” (emphasis mine). The Expofrut manager likewise concluded that men do the “agricultural *work*” (*labores del campo*, emphasis mine), but women’s activities were described only in terms of “picking.” Sun Belle’s manager informed me that women’s field labor “is not heavy.” When discussing women’s labor at El Molinito, one of the owners referred to men’s “*labor*,” for which they paid by the day, and women’s “*picking*,” at piece-rate wages. “Labor,” then, is often not equated with the work that women do.

Even many women berry pickers employ discourses that support the gendered division of labor as a rationale for differential wages. Rafaela observed that pay differentials were fair because “men do more work, fumigate, and do heavier work.” María explained that the pay differential is fair because the work of men “requires more strength, it screws them more.” Mercedes implied that women are fitter for picking berries since men have thicker hands and women’s hands are softer. Because men carry the heavy boxes in the fields, she thought it was reasonable that they be paid more. Only a few women challenged the dogma of gender-specific capabilities. I asked Estela why men’s work differed from that of women:

There is no reason because we do it all. What the man does, we do too. They treat the man one way and the woman another. Anyway, the man earns more than the woman. They screw us because everyone should earn the same. We work more than the men. They should pay us the same.

An undisclosed truth rests upon the notion that women *can* be paid less because their work is seen as supplemental to that of men, despite the fact that single mothers, abandoned women, widows, and married women rely on these wages to support their families. In Los Reyes, women's "supplemental" wages compliment remittances of male migrants. The work women do in the berry fields is indeed arduous, invalidating any arguments for inequitable wage distributions between men and women. Agribusinesses involved in berry production in the Los Reyes region form part of a global capitalist system grounded on tenets of patriarchy (Acosta-Belén and Bose 1995; Leacock 1983). Unlike the former sugar cane regime that employed mainly males, patriarchy in this industry maintains a segmented labor force that colonizes women's bodies as they labor in the berry fields.

Exposure to chemicals remains a complex issue. With numerous pests to combat, blackberry production contributes to an increase in chemical use in the region. Many pests have developed resistance to these chemicals, entrenching this industry in a pesticide treadmill. Because blackberries are eaten directly off the bush with no processing, to export, companies strive to comply with EurepGAP (when exporting to Europe) or the USDA's GAP (Good Agricultural Practices). Companies recognize the importance of food safety, yet compliance is voluntary and their rationale is based more on marketability of the fruit than on health concerns. While a few women reported spraying during their work schedules, most indicated that they were moved to another field during fumigation. The interviews revealed that many women are exposed to agricultural chemicals without recognizing the health risks involved. Women often complained of the foul odor that drifted to the area where they worked. Guadalupe commented, "It smells awful. When they fumigate, my stomach churns. I don't know what they are spraying—many things." When I asked Alejandra about fumigating, she replied, "The smell is strong. Some women get sick and vomit." María stated, "My eyes burned and I couldn't stand it. Many vomit and have headaches." Other workers reported suffering red eyes, rashes, runny noses, headaches, and sore throats. Evangelina pointed out further dangers:

Sometimes when they fumigate it smells very strong and I get dizzy. They don't spray while we are working, but the next day you can still smell it. Sometimes the women say 'Aye! How awful it smells!' The truth is I don't know [what chemical they are spraying].

The sister of one of my interviewees and her co-workers were sent to the hospital when a methyl bromide tank exploded on a Sun Belle field. Unable to breathe, their lives were at risk. Another berry worker miscarried while working in the field. The long-term impact of agricultural chemicals remains unassessed. Because men do the spraying and rarely comply with safe handling (masks, gloves, boots, etc.) they are more directly affected and numerous reports among villagers attest to illnesses and even deaths caused by pesticides. Although producers are directly at great risk, exposure of women to these dangerous chemicals poses the invisible health risk of women's berry work that remains unaccounted for in the costs of production. It would be irresponsible to analytically neglect pesticide poisonings because they are an integral feature of NTAE production.

[Chollett Figure 3 about here, Photograph by Donna L. Chollett]

Incorporating Women into the NTAE Model

Women's work is often underreported, especially in census data (Deere 2006). In the research community of Los Angeles, interviews on work history indicate that few women worked in agriculture before the late 1980s, even though they were economically active in domestic production, informal activities (managing household gardens, operating small stores, selling food at stands in the community, or marketing crafts). Only one woman had worked in the strawberry fields near Zamora, Michoacán.⁵ The main crops of the region, sugar and avocados, employed men almost exclusively. Avocados are one of Michoacán's primary exports and 50 percent of packing plant employees is made up of women. But these plants are located in Tancítaro and Uruapan, too far for a daily commute from Los Angeles. The formation of the women's cooperative *tortillería* (tortilla factory) is another exception to women's paid labor outside the household. Women in Los Angeles organized for "grassroots empowerment" in order to establish the *tortillería* 20 years before opportunities for berry work presented themselves (Aradhana 2008). The women's *tortillería* offered women a choice to work and earn a small income. However, male *ejido* (agrarian landholding unit) authorities opposed their proposal when women requested *ejido* land to generate revenue to establish the factory in 1980 and denied their request. Only with a change in *ejido* administration the following year and a more sympathetic leader were they granted land, where the women employed men to manage a sugarcane field. Once the 90 women who formed the original cooperative acquired profits from the cane and established the *tortillería* in 1982, male partners resented the fact that women left early in the morning, neglecting household obligations, and made demands that they turn over their earnings. Only 29 members of the cooperative continue to operate the factory, an indication of internal conflicts that arose over time. Many women left or were forced out of the group because, as one member informed, they were "oppressed by their husbands' chauvinism." Members claimed the establishment of the *tortillería* required "thousands of sacrifices" and the work to be arduous; nonetheless, they learned new skills and brought home small incomes. One of the members proudly stated that they had become one of the most integrated and well-known women's cooperatives in Michoacán. Members also view their efforts as benefitting the welfare of the community. They gained a sense of self-reliance and independence and one interviewee commented, "We don't have to follow the orders of men anymore." Unlike women who today work in the berry fields, an oft-repeated sentiment among the tightly-knit group of tortilla workers is that "We are all bosses." The *tortillería* allowed women to develop a shared identity and involved them in multiple roles as mothers, housekeepers, and salaried workers. This effort may have inspired other women in the community, but none of the *tortillería* members—many of whom are aging today—work in the berry fields. I now turn to the shifting dynamics of household organization accompanying the expansion of labor in the berry fields of the Los Reyes region.

The Export of fruits and vegetables dates from the 1960s in Mexico, but NAFTA promoted substantial growth of NTAEs (Carr and Chen 2004; White 2003). Blackberries entered the Los Reyes region only within the

⁵ The former strawberry production zone in Zamora, Michoacán, Mexico was one of the early fruit export agribusinesses in the state. When women first began to work as strawberry packers in 1965, they were considered out of men's control and equivalent to prostitutes. It took 30 years for women's packing work to become more acceptable (Mummert 1994). The decline in subsistence crops in the region from 1964-74 displaced family farmers and sent them into migrant streams (Arizpe and Aranda 1981).

last 15 years, making women's waged labor in agriculture quite recent. In 2006 there were nine berry companies operating in the Los Reyes region of Michoacán: three were Mexican (El Molinito, Exifrut, Expofrut), two were Chilean (Hortifrut, Sun Belle), three were from the U.S. (Driscolls, Hursts, Sunny Ridge) and one was a Chilean-U.S. joint venture (VBM-Giumarra). Hortifrut is the largest company in volume, with 1,700,000 boxes of berries exported in 2006. By that year, the state of Michoacán had dramatically increased its exports to 4,674,272 boxes, with a value of \$46,742,720 dollars. Interviews with company managers disclosed a disjuncture between practices and motivations of globalized agribusiness and those of *civic* agriculture that is embedded in cultural meaning and socioeconomic development of local communities (Lyson 2004). Few companies own or rent land for production. Most rely on contract farming to purchase berries from growers and offer credit only after the grower has proved to be an efficient, productive, and sanitary producer of berries. As the Hursts' manager explained, "I am not going to risk it. They have to be successful first. This is a business. We are not like Santa Claus!" This practice allows companies to maintain quality control, while transferring the risks of production to the growers. Growers in turn lower their costs through employment of women at substandard wages.

Women are now entering the work force in large numbers and earning personal incomes. Some women work directly for these companies, others for the wealthier, large-scale Los Reyes growers, but the majority work for local growers in Los Angeles who contract with the berry companies. Women who work for local growers enjoy more congenial relationships than those who work for more demanding Los Reyes growers or companies. All suffer the economic impact, however, when companies reject the fruit as substandard and refuse payment to growers. A fusion of ideologies regarding gendered skill differentials and corporate desire for capital accumulation contributes to the segmented labor force and accords lower wages to women than to men. Berry-exporting companies claim that women are particularly suited for this work due to their dexterity for selecting and picking the fragile fruit and presume their docility to be an asset. The boundaries between objective conditions and subjective understandings concerning gender roles are indeed blurred; I examine these more indeterminate, less conceptually bounded categories by taking into account the discourses of women as their lives become reordered by conditions in the political economy of transnational commodity trade. Contemporary feminists recognize that gender identity in the workplace is not pre-given, but involves a *process* through which women become socialized in the workplace and gender identity is open to constant renegotiation (Salzinger 2003).

Most berry workers consider themselves *campesina* women and not as members of a rural proletariat. Women who labor in the berry fields represent a diverse assortment of married women, female-headed households, abandoned and widowed women, and single mothers. Age, marital status, life cycle, and economic status among berry workers shape the internal differentiation of households in Los Angeles. While the women interviewed ranged in ages from 13 to 67, participant observation proved this wide age range to be the norm. Child labor is not uncommon and companies, to avoid social security payments, knowingly hire under-aged women in defiance of Mexican labor law. Marta, only 13 years old, worked in the Sun Belle packing shed. As her mother explained, "She looks older than she is," thus the company appeared beyond reproach. In the packing shed, I asked Marta, who had completed fifth grade, if she wanted to continue her studies. She replied, "No, it's better that I earn money." I had ample opportunity to observe that many very young women dropped out of school in order to work, some out of dire

need to help their parents and others rejecting their educations in order to acquire personal spending money. Striking among these women was the low level of education (the mean educational level in the community is five years of primary school); some had never attended school. Very few young women pursue education outside the village, but for lack of local opportunities, a few leave to find better-paying jobs elsewhere. At the other end of the age scale, Candelaria, age 67, recalled:

From 7:00 in the morning until 7:00 at night we picked 150 boxes. When we stopped to eat, we would have to eat very fast, to return to work. This is really hard work for a man and we have to do it—weeding, lifting the branches, and the plants are tall. Picking is a little easier, but you leave tired. Now, lifting the branches is hard. Aye! My arms really get tired. And your clothes get worn out [with the thorns].

Because she feared losing her job, Candelaria never complained, but her advanced age made the work particularly taxing.

Age is the most significant factor for determining whether berry earnings are channeled to household costs, rather than kept for personal use. All of the women who contributed less than 30 percent of their wages for household costs—either to spouses or parents—were between the ages of 13 and 27. A large majority of these young, single women admitted that they worked more for pleasure and diversion, rather than need. Sixteen-year-old Rosa exclaimed, "The first week I was dizzy with the money I earned! I couldn't believe it!" Age is not a clear dividing line, but in general, young, single women work primarily to buy fashionable clothing, shoes, and jewelry that they otherwise could not afford. Interview responses with these young women clearly indicate that many prefer to forego education to earn spending money. This becomes quite visible on Saturday nights when most village folk stroll around the plaza in their finest—the social event of the week. Clothing and appearance are particularly important in a village culture where social events bring together community members and where young women are socialized for attractiveness.

Even so, 13-year-old Marta worked for very different reasons. Her 29-year-old mother was abandoned and left to provide for her five children, the youngest of whom was five months old. The mother quit picking berries when she became pregnant, thus her 13-year-old daughter was the only source of support for her family. Teresa and Margarita, ages 16 and 18, also worked to help their parents. Both sisters wanted to continue school, but their father requested that they go to work. Margarita explained, "It is little that we earn, but it helps our parents a lot." Teresa reflected, "We were a big family and I felt obligated to quit school."

Among the research sample, 36.5 percent consisted of married women. Another 36.5 percent were single, 12 percent widowed, and 15 percent abandoned by their husbands. Abandoned and widowed women tend to spend all of their income on household expenses, leaving themselves little for personal use. Estela, an abandoned woman who lives with her mother, sister, children, and sister's children explained, "My salary is spent so that all the family can eat. Nothing is left for clothes, nothing. All of it is to eat." Lucía, another abandoned woman clarified:

Don't think that I earn enough to buy food and clothes. One week I buy one thing and the next week the other. I eat very little. I think I have to save money to pay the gas, and then the electric bill arrives. And we don't have [health] insurance. I have to save in case I get sick, to pay the doctor.

Some berry workers are wives of berry growers and others are not. The lives of married women tend to be less severe, yet even where double incomes support the family, resources remain limited. Many interviewees mentioned having to buy on credit and pay in installments. Angela, who works with her husband growing berries, explained:

It has improved some, but not much. The crisis is always here. The prices have increased and what I earn is not enough. Take \$120 pesos for the pay, and a kilo of meat costs \$70. We are a little better for paying our loans. We hardly buy, we buy only what is necessary.

Sonia, 27, and her 37-year-old husband both work for the Chilean company, Hortifrut. Squeezing her stomach, Sonia related, “During the rainy season there was no work—until we were holding in our stomachs. Before I bought things on credit and now I know that I am working and paying. We live better with the salary of both of us.” Her income thus far had gone toward the construction of an indoor bathroom, which cost \$1000 pesos (about \$91 dollars). She explained, “We didn’t even have \$5 [pesos] because of the bathroom.”

The multiple incomes in other dual-earner households provide the ability to make home improvements, purchase furniture or major appliances, pay for the education of children, or even purchase a few luxury items. The berries Francisca and her husband grow provide 70-80 percent of their family income. The new automatic washer, dryer, and stereo system in their house attest to the fact that they make a decent living growing blackberries. Eva, whose husband is an attorney and grows berries, mentioned a number of luxuries that their berry earnings allowed them to enjoy: cell phones, bicycles, Intendo, Barbies, and so forth. Inés, a married woman, purchased a motorbike with her berry earnings and Consuelo identified the purchase of a “moto” as her prime objective for picking berries.

Clearly, among women berry workers, the “normative nuclear family” is non-existent, for differing economic circumstances contribute to a variety of household arrangements representing diverse economic statuses. Guadalupe’s situation illustrates how the strategy to form an extended household allows abandoned women to survive. Her husband left for the U.S. when her children were small, and initially sent money, until he took up with another woman. Guadalupe’s son-in-law also abandoned her daughter. This daughter is the mother of two children, so she also picks berries. Guadalupe’s other five children all migrated to the U.S. Despite many obstacles, she forged a life for her family. Three women in her household, including her daughter, daughter-in-law, and an unrelated woman who also picks berries pool their berry incomes to cover living costs. None would be able to survive on her own. Lucía, on the other hand, is an abandoned woman who lives alone. Lucía’s husband abandoned her just four months before the 2006 interview, which is when she began to pick berries. “Well, what else was I going to do?” she asked. Her berry income is her only source of support.

Marital status, then, influences choice of extended or nuclear family, but marital status is cross-cut by stage of the life cycle. When there are few workers to total family members, nuclear families were the norm among my sample. As a greater proportion of family members become economically employed, extended family structure is a more likely choice. Life cycle is important as married children reach an age where they can economically contribute to the household. There is a greater trend toward a strategy to pool resources of married siblings, in-laws, and single adult children at this stage. Here, too, diversity marks household arrangements of berry workers. I now turn to an

examination of the conceptual tools that allow analysis of the degree to which women berry workers may or may not achieve empowerment.

Women Berry Workers, Households, and Empowerment

Contrary to my expectations, most women berry workers did not bitterly complain about their substandard wages or difficult working conditions. Without exception, they lauded the entry of export companies and the new job opportunities provided to women. Women's liberation from the household clearly figured into their discourses. A third of the women pointed out the "distraction" that working in the berry fields offered; as Inés stated, "It is a long, sad day here in the house." Francisca related, "I don't like to be in the house much, I get desperate. At times I am sick, I go to the fields, and I am fine. On the contrary, I am more bored in the house." Guadalupe explained, "Working in the *campo* (fields), I relax. We work together, we talk about our problems, and when you have a problem, sharing it, you forget about it."

Nonetheless, I encountered an anomalous mixture of assessments in women's discussions of their work in the berry fields, illustrating a dialectical contradiction between women's sense of liberation and exploitation. They alternately punctuated positive assessments of improved economic status and liberation from the household with criticisms of the low pay and difficulty of the work. Francisca, a young woman of 20, exclaimed, "And if the woman is working in the blackberries—aye! Now we are going to eat! It is good, I like it." But in the next sentence she added, "This work kills you, and there is not enough money." Such contradictions became typical during interviews. Elisa worked for a large-scale grower who contracted with Driscoll's. After stating that "One is more content working," she complained:

If you are sick, you have to work. When we can't work, the boss becomes angry. The boss doesn't even let us leave to drink water or to go to the bathroom. If we complain, he swears at us. The men have more privileges. They have the right to rest. It makes you angry, [but] one is afraid, because if you complain, they can fire you.

Working in the berry fields contributes to significant household reorganization because these *campesina* women did not work for extra-domestic wages until recently. Families experience structural transformation as women must prepare their lunch, feed children, get them ready for school, and arrive at the plaza to be picked up by 6:00 AM. Work in the fields allows women less time to spend with their families, children, and to engage in other social activities. A very young, widowed woman forced to work after the murder of her husband related, "At first I cried because I had to leave to work and leave my kids. I wasn't used to leaving them. I wasn't used to working." Interviews revealed that many women with young children left them with their mothers or other adults to care for, placing greater stress on the workloads of middle-aged and older women. Domitilia, age 58, began picking berries when her husband died, but terminated her work upon becoming ill. During an interview, she repeatedly chased after her energetic 16-month-old grandson, left in her care by her daughter-in-law while she picked berries. The child, a virtual ball of motion, obviously posed an immense drain on her energy. Consuelo left her ten-year-old and five-year-old children with her mother, who also cared for two other grandchildren. Her mother elaborated on the tremendous responsibility she took on: "It is dangerous because they are out hanging from trees, and I have to be

responsible. Sometimes I feel more tired.” In a culture where family life is so important, many of these women, on returning to their homes, have little energy for interacting with family members. As María explained, “I arrive tired, but without any desire to be with my family. Sometimes, I don’t even want them to talk to me.”

Clearly, women’s discourses reveal contradictory expressions of liberation and exploitation related to berry work. Since the 1970s, feminists have fueled ardent debates on the empowerment of women, but the issues became particularly contentious by the 1990s (Chant 2007; Kabeer 1999; Korovkin 2005; Parpart 2001; Safa 1995a; Tinker 2004). Many authors have documented the tendency for women to experience waged work as liberating and to afford them greater autonomy (Collins 2003; Elson 1992; Lim 1990; Raynolds 2001; Tinsman 2006). These authors reject the wholesale exploitation of women workers and argue that waged labor at least partially improved women’s situation. Tinsman (2006), for example, asserted that women fruit workers challenged family patriarchy as they assumed the role of family breadwinners. Elson (1992) concluded that economic restructuring opens new opportunities for women’s control over resources and for new forms of struggle, and Ong (1987a) documented women’s active resistance to workplace conditions. Other scholars have claimed that the romanticized idea that waged employment would decrease women’s subordination has long been laid to rest (McClenaghan 1997; Pearson 1998). Indeed, the overwhelming majority of research focuses on women’s exploitation and the negative impact of waged employment (Benería 1989; Benería and G. Sen 1986; Bose and Acosta-Belén 1995; Busca and Vázquez Laba 2006; Collins 2003; Pangsapa 2007; Razavi 2002; Rubio 2006; Safa 1995a; Salzinger 2003; Wright 2006). It is certainly worth considering Safa’s (1995b) admonition that women may have gained bargaining power vis-à-vis male household partners, but they rarely gain similar bargaining power in the workplace and often their wages continue to be seen as supplementary and underpaid. The metaphorical segregation of women to the private sphere is now replicated via occupational segregation in the workplace.

Whether from the perspective of political economy, post-structural perspectives, postcolonial theory, or an amalgam of the same, given the diversity of histories, contexts, and particular cases, I find determinations of women’s empowerment or lack thereof to be problematical (Aradhana 2008). Safa (1995a) argued that understanding how women’s independent income and development of feminist consciousness changes gender relations is complex and contradictory. Chant (2003) concluded that the relationship between women’s employment and empowerment continues to be analytically vexed. Our ability to conceive of what constitutes empowerment and how it might be measured, as well as the positionality of the researcher has been called into question (Aradhana 2008; Kabeer 2001; Mohanty 1988). My own positionality vis-à-vis women berry pickers situated me as a woman who participated in their berry work, but of a distinct professional and class status, and of foreign nationality. I must ask how my own positionality influenced the questions asked and my interpretation of women’s lives. We might ask, have feminists reified the concept of empowerment? A more nuanced approach resists determinations of the “presence” or “absence” of empowerment and regards it as a complex, multi-faceted process. Many feminists now accept the difficulties of defining and measuring empowerment. Kabeer (1998) explained that the complexities of

gender relations elude economistic and formal models.⁶ As Kabeer (2001) so astutely pointed out, the value of the concept of empowerment lies in its fuzziness.

To illustrate this fuzziness, I examine women's discourses regarding domestic relations and their extra-domestic labor and bring a critical perspective to commonly used analytic variables: 1) autonomy; 2) self-confidence and self-esteem; 3) economic independence; 4) decision-making power; 5) equity in family relationships; 6) women's attitudes regarding empowerment; and 7) women's right to a safe work environment. I do not consider these dimensions of empowerment either individually sufficient or mutually exclusive as constitutive contributors to women's empowerment and maintain the assumption that measurements of empowerment are illusive at best. As women renegotiate their positions within gendered, classed, and patriarchal structures, they redefine their subjectivities and strategic actions (Aradhana 2008). My analysis of women berry workers examines the everyday lives of subaltern women in the context of local subjectivities and actions and vis-à-vis processes of the global political economy (Mohanty 2002).

Autonomy requires control of material resources that reduces a woman's dependence. But autonomy also accords women decision-making power that gives them control over their personal lives and exposes them to external social fields (Casique 2001; García and Oliveira 1994). Casique (2001) found that women who worked for wages had more autonomy regarding resources than those who did not, but they experienced no increase in family decision making. Autonomy, she concluded, contributes to power but does not constitute empowerment. Barrientos et al. (1991) and Tinsman (2006), however, concluded that waged labor did increase women's autonomy.

The concept of autonomy carries the risk of imposing Western feminist categories across cultural boundaries where women may consider autonomy and independence subordinate to family unity. Feminists' assumptions that individual achievement and personal independence contribute to empowerment may be incongruent with women's desire to maintain family and community harmony and to play complimentary, rather than competitive roles, vis-à-vis their male partners and relatives (Troutner and Smith 2004). Rural Mexicans hold strong family-centered values and women may be given greater respect for conforming to cultural norms of family-centered life. When women sacrifice personal welfare, family welfare may trump personal well-being, and their values and behaviors are less likely to reflect a search for autonomy and independence (A. Sen 1990). Feminists have appropriated the discourse of empowerment (inclusive of autonomy), thus promoting a personal individualism that nestles cozily with the demands of a down-sized State apparatus and the requirements for the flexible accumulation of global capitalism. Hence, altruistic family attitudes may perpetuate intra-household inequalities and at the same time be complicit with the capitalist economy's devaluation of women's labor. Social norms and cultural

⁶ Various attempts to measure women's empowerment include indices such as: UNDP (United Nations Development Programme—overall well-being), HDI (Human Development Index—life expectancy, literacy, education, standard of living, per capita gross domestic product), GDI (Gender-Related Development Index—inequalities between men and women), GEM (Gender Evaluation Methodology—political participation and decision making, government seats held, economic participation, decision making, professional positions, and power over earned income) (Troutner and Smith 2004).

values that bind women to the patriarchal family emphasize the very traits that the berry companies find desirable: proclivity to serve others, docility, and obedience (Arizpe and Aranda 1981).

Some berry workers claimed that earning capacity bolstered their sense of autonomy. Silvia, a married woman, informed, “I am no longer afraid that my husband will abandon me or leave me a widow.” Interviewees also expressed the notion that women’s agricultural labor is associated with greater sexual freedom. In at least a few cases, women shifted to other growers to be with boyfriends or future spouses. Only one-third of the women in my sample, however, reported greater autonomy in their activities when they contributed to household incomes. For single women, parents rarely interfere in their decisions on how to spend berry earnings, but parents still carefully control the activities of their daughters. It is generally fathers, rather than mothers, who maintain more patriarchal notions in regard to their daughters. Teresa, age 16, related, “We have to ask permission to leave the house. If there is a fiesta—nothing like this. To go out into the street, to fiestas, we can’t.” I found Julia, a young single woman, to be a highly competent and skilled worker. She invested her berry earnings in chick clothes and jewelry. While promenading in the plaza with her friends one Saturday evening, a young man forced her—against her protests—to go with him. The father of the young woman refused to accept his daughter back into his home. A common thread pervades women’s relationships with fathers, husbands, and bosses; many informed that men continued to control the activities of women. Even though women contribute to family income, some spouses still restrict the activities of their wives and the majority of married women reported that they still require permission of their husbands to leave the house. Patriarchy and protection of women’s virtuosity remains a relevant value in everyday social life, despite women’s entry into the paid labor force (Benería 1992; Cockcroft 1998). Women did not report similar restrictions regarding freedom of movement and sexuality in the berry fields. In the berry fields, it is the assumptions of docility that render their autonomy over resources and their depreciated compensation as forces for disempowerment. Interviews clearly indicated that male control over the lives of daughters, wives, and employees not only regulates relationships, but limits the autonomy of these women.

The majority (83 percent) of women reported increased self-confidence and/or self-esteem since beginning their berry work. Their statements expressed some of the strongest indicators that waged work had contributed to women’s empowerment. According to Elisa, “I have more confidence that I can do things. In the campo I feel free. In the house is where you lose your esteem.” Her statement reveals that unlike family relationships where she feels subordinated, extra-domestic work offers her a degree of liberation. Another interviewee stated, “I feel more capable, you can be like the man now. Now the man and the woman are equal.” Eva stressed that “I value myself more, I am not afraid to make decisions. And that is very important.” Berta explained it this way: “I value myself more; I feel that I have more ability to get ahead.” Margarita expressed much enthusiasm for the self-esteem she had gained: “I’ve improved a lot in every sense. I can make more decisions, do things that I never could do before, and go out with my kids. I can yell to the heavens!”

These concepts relate to the “power within” defined by Rowlands (1998). Conscientization derived from self-confidence and self-esteem is but one component of a package of capabilities that can contribute to empowerment. Yet caution is in order. Do the discourses of these women in fact capture women’s subjectivities? Here I draw on Kandiyoti’s (1998) critique of gender struggles and consciousness. Whether applying Gramscian

hegemonic ideology or the notion of false consciousness, we may assume that women are unconscious of the structural constraints that restrain their empowerment and are thus limited to expressions of “power within.” The problem becomes how to avoid essentialism in our assumptions about the self-determined individual. Analysis of the woman subject, as Kandiyoti warns, risks essentialism, but avoiding analysis risks erasing her agency. How is the cultural “Other” rescued from patriarchal discourses and hegemonic structures, yet not transformed into the self-determining individual of feminist theorizing? I concur with Kandiyoti that the messiness of social reality may exceed the explanatory power of our conceptual frameworks.

Most women berry workers, as well as community members, commented on the improved local economy since arrival of the berry companies. A number of interviewees specifically reported that they enjoyed increased economic independence. Economic empowerment would suggest a gain in access to income and material resources and an increase in capacity to make choices, yet these alone are unlikely to have a significant impact without changes in social, cultural, and legal structures that perpetuate gender inequality (Kabeer 1999). Empowerment must account for not only objective, material conditions and power relations, but also take into account women’s felt experiences as expressed through their own voices (Chant 2007). Women berry workers’ discourses express an aggregate of disparate conceptions that range from patriarchal discourses to assertions of greater economic independence as they confront their new roles as wage earners (see also Crehan 2002). Nonetheless, changes that affect women’s ability to make choices are underway in this community. At least some young women stated a preference to remain single because “We can go where we want and when we want without depending on a husband.” Others stated that it is easier for women to leave their husbands now that they have their own earnings. Interviewees often reported that fewer women marry now and there are more single women, more divorces, and more unmarried mothers than in years past. González de la Rocha (2001) also documented increasing divorce rates as women entered the waged labor market. Another consideration is that men have migrated for years, leaving families behind. Women in this situation have already had the opportunity to develop a degree of independence and autonomy.

Economic independence varies considerably among my sample. As I have shown above, earning an income allowed young, single women to assist parents with household costs, purchase clothing, or to have personal spending money. A select few of the married women improved their homes through the purchase of appliances, furniture, and so forth. Married women’s earnings, in general, bring them more economic independence, yet very young couples struggle for economic advantage with limited success. Cecilia and her husband, who both work for the Chilean company, Hortifrut, had not improved their dire economic situation. Ironically, Cecilia must wear the quintessential badge of labor flexibility—an electronically coded identification card—to enter the berry field, yet even with their dual income, she and Ricardo live in a tiny, one-room house with no running water, stove, or refrigerator. Substandard wages, as discussed above, limit Cecilia’s ability to attain economic improvement. Because the company offers no medical insurance, Cecilia spends her entire earnings on medical expenses for their chronically ill daughter. Sophisticated electronic systems that facilitate flexible accumulation for transnational capital intersect with the low wages that compromise women’s economic independence and detract from their ability to achieve empowerment.

Decision making regarding household expenses appears to be relatively egalitarian among berry workers. Other researchers (Benería and Roldán 1987; Chant 2003; Safa 1990) also document women's increased ability to make decisions when they work outside the home. Almost all interviewees claimed they shared decision making with spouses or made independent decisions about spending their earnings. María explained, "Having a salary, you have the right to speak." Analysis of the decisions women make on spending their income shows that, with few exceptions, they may have greater say, but limited household resources still constrain them to directing most of their earnings to essentials for daily living.

Decision making entails additional dimensions that prove to be problematical. Decision-making power in the family is mediated by cultural ideologies and the social environment. Thus gains in empowerment may be constrained if men in their households consider women's income a threat to patriarchal power (Safilios-Rothschild 1990). Daniel took great pride in the fact that his earnings from years of migration to the U.S. supported his family. Ten years ago when his two daughters asked his permission to pick berries, María related: "At that time, the woman did not work in agriculture—only widows and abandoned women did that. There was a lot of machismo. My father did not want us to work. He said, 'What I earn is sufficient.'" When she told him she wanted to work in the berry fields, Francisca's husband told her, "No, because people will think that I don't have enough to support you." Many of the berry pickers confront resistance to their extra-domestic labor on the part of their husbands; this phenomenon is substantiated by Benería (1992) and Deere (2006).

Suspensions over women's activities that are outside of men's control also influence resistance. Several of the women mentioned that their husbands agreed for them to pick berries only when they worked for male relatives. Even at age 59, Candelaria's husband initially rejected her request to pick berries. Candelaria explained, "If I were the only woman, it would be bad. But I told him, 'Look, there is going to be a group of only women.'" Cecilia's husband, Ricardo, worked in the U.S. from 2002 to 2005. Regardless of begging his permission to pick berries and despite their grinding poverty, he had never given her permission to work outside the home. While he was in the U.S., Cecilia began to work secretly. When Ricardo returned from the U.S., he recalled, "It really made me angry." Domitilia's husband told her, "When I die, you can work." That is exactly what she did when he died. This phenomenon is not particular to older men for men's resistance to extra-domestic work of their daughters and wives cross-cuts generational lines. Some women, however, did over-ride male partners' or parents' objections and chose to enter the berry labor force. For abandoned or widowed women, their increased capacity to make decisions and their sense of autonomy derive from the fact that they are once again single, rather than from the berry work itself. One of my informants, an abandoned woman with young children who struggled to meet her family's survival needs, expressed pleasure in the fact that she no longer had a partner to boss her and tell her how to spend her money.

The foregoing examples fit Moore's (1994) model of the household as a locus of competing interests, rights, obligations, and resources. One informant expressed ambivalence toward the contested terrain of women's agricultural work: "Now they are accustomed to women working. [But] there are still many who do not allow the woman to work." Still, some families negotiated this contested terrain more easily than others. Inés' husband, a former cane grower, consulted family members before shifting to blackberry production, with the intent of assuring

their agreement to help pick the berries. Inés clarified that when the family worked together, sharing the work, there was less machismo. Similarly, Sonia and her husband both engaged in waged labor for the same grower. Sonia explained: “I take my old man too. We live better with the income of two.” Despite patriarchal control over women’s lives, for some families who work together in the berry fields, the result is to enhance equality between spouses, suggesting Gita Sen’s (1990) model of the household as a site of “cooperative conflict.”

The measurement of women’s decision-making capacity (such as management of household budgets, expenditures, and choice to engage in waged work) is a repetitive theme in feminist literature. Much of this literature focuses on the household, where decision making involves processes of negotiation, bargaining, cooperation, and conflict (González de la Rocha 2001; Kandiyoti 1998; A. Sen 1990). But men may still be making the strategic decisions; the day-to-day negotiations between men and women often remain invisible to researchers (Benería and Roldán 1987). If attempts to measure resources and agency in decision making within the household are problematic, the bargaining literature tends to set examination of women’s negotiating power in the labor force aside. While the entry of NTAE production contributed to renegotiation of household decision making, berry workers have practically no bargaining power with the agribusinesses. On one occasion, Sun Belle had underpaid women for their work. A group of women confronted the administration, but they were humiliated and left crying. A Sun Belle agronomist confided to me that women’s berry containers were sometimes undercounted in order to pay them less; confrontation is impossible for illiterate women who are unable to read the ledgers.⁷ Several women confessed that they do not complain to growers about intolerable working conditions for fear of being dismissed. Thus while flexibilization and niche market production contributed to the reorganization of households and enabled women to enter the waged labor force, women confront another hierarchy of patriarchal discourse and practice in the berry fields that limits their choices and decision making ability.

Almost without exception, research demonstrates that although women’s employment outside of the home is increasingly required to sustain household incomes, they bear double burdens since men do not generally take up domestic chores (Casique 2001; Fontana 2008; White et al. 2003). Indeed, none of the husbands of berry workers had increased their contribution to household chores. One woman observed, “The work is very hard, my back hurts, and later I arrive home and have to clean the house. And the man arrives and he rests.” Mercedes retorted, “The man sleeps, rests, and we are screwed.” Changes in gender roles became a frequent topic of conversation, reflected in such comments as: “During the day, the village is absent of women;” “It is the men who take lunch to the women;” “The men watch after the children;” “Now the woman earns more than the man;” “The men have become lazy bones;” and “Now the men are very maintained.” María observed:

The woman works more than the man—that is the real truth. Haven’t you seen that big bunch of men drinking on the corner? I think that when women work picking berries it makes their husbands lazy. The men don’t go to the fields to work—they are drunks, and the woman goes to the fields.

Unwillingness to share household chores equitably reinforces the idea that women’s obligations to the home are primary and their work outside the home is of lesser value. The domestic patriarchy that devalues

⁷ All of the women in my sample were Mestizo women. Tarascan women, many who are illiterate, come from villages to the north of Los Reyes to pick berries. They sign the ledgers that account for the amount of berries they pick with an “x.”

women's contributions to the household thus provides support to the corporate patriarchy that devalues women's labor in the berry fields.

Freedom from physical and mental abuse constitutes an important component of gender equity within the home. Several conversations suggest an increase in violence towards women. The literature also reports an increase in violence when women's extra-domestic labor challenges men's identity as breadwinners (Benería and Feldman 1992; Núñez and Pulido Gaona 2006; Mummert 1994; Raynolds 2001; Tinsman 2006). Domestic violence reveals the contradictory nature of women's attainment of financial gain and the physical abuse inflicted on them. Some women in Los Angeles did report cases of domestic violence involving others, but only abandoned women reported experiencing it. As one woman pointed out, "There are women who want to work, but out of jealousy, the husband doesn't want them to. When the husband does not permit it, some [women] go and that is where the problems come out." An interviewee affirmed her conviction that women in Los Angeles suffer an environment of abuse: "Men depreciate women. They are violent. There are still men who beat their wives and mistreat them." Some women defy abusive relationships, yet others continue to live under the threat of domestic abuse, leaving them disempowered.

Women's discourses conveyed the contradiction between changing attitudes and persistent patterns of machismo and patriarchy. A few women in my sample believed machismo had given way to greater gender equality. Indeed, many men are yielding to the new reality, but macho attitudes and behaviors remain prevalent. Other women viewed machismo as an enduring social force that is unlikely to disappear. Elisa commented that "We have always felt equal [with men]. The woman, if she wants, can be equal, or better." Her sister María, in disagreement, sarcastically retorted, "How is it much better!?" Lucía bluntly stated, "Machismo is machismo. It can not be changed." Sonia voiced agreement: "I don't feel empowered. Here, the one who orders is the man." Several of the women explicitly stated that women should not think of themselves as superior to men. In numerous discussions on this subject, women supported an *ideal* of equality in gender relations, but these were often underscored by a veiled message: it is necessary to maintain a delicate balance so as not to upset pre-existing power relationships in the domestic realm. As Amartya Sen (1990) revealed for India, where harmonious family relationships may be more significant than gender equity or individual empowerment, women may come to accept the legitimacy of patriarchal discourse and become accomplices to their subordination. But an alternative explanation is in order. Women may be astutely aware of their marginalization, while recognizing the material impossibility of realizing any goals for empowerment.

An uncomfortable relationship persists between deeply ingrained machismo and the new reality of agribusiness export production dependent on women as a low-waged work force. The productive process and its contingent social relationships intersect with household production and reproduction in dynamic ways, thus the conflicts involved in renegotiating relationships illustrate how gender ideologies are constitutive of economic and political processes and have material consequences (Kandiyoti 1998). I would identify this as a dialectic process. These contradictions imply a lack of evidence to sustain the generalization that women's earning power significantly increases gender equality in the research community.

Patriarchal myths generated by companies and melded with local gendered discourses naturalize women's abilities and shape their marginalized insertion into the global labor market. Such myths justify inequalities and

conceal power relationships within firms and across national boundaries (Wright 2006). Blackberry and raspberry production contributed to increased pesticide applications which create unsafe work places for both men and women. Pesticide poisoning of agricultural workers is well noted in the literature (Faber 1993; Langman 2008; Murray 1994; Pretty and Hine 2005; Wright 1990). It is morally inexcusable to neglect the suffering it imposes on men and women in Michoacán, when pesticide applications are on the increase. Pesticides are but one component of a patriarchal scientific framework that simultaneously dominates nature and men's and women's bodies (Sachs 1996). Martínez-Salazar (1999) noted that many hidden oppressive realities lie behind the perfect, exported fruit or vegetable. Like collateral damage in warfare, pesticides become the externalities of NTAE production. These externalities are made invisible, yet very present, in the electronic label and the price tag posted on the supermarket shelf. Northern consumers fail to discern that their own consumption contributes to miserable wages and exposure to toxic pesticides, while companies remain unaccountable for creating unsafe work places and for the suffering brought about by the accumulation of extraordinary corporate profits.

A multitude of pesticides are used on blackberries and raspberries in the Los Reyes region; most of these bear significant health risks (Chollett 2009). These include the organophosphate pesticides (Azinphos Methyl, Carbaryl, Diazinon, Diuron, Methyl Parathion, Permethrin), fungicides (Benomyl, Captan), and herbicides such as Paraquat. Even Mexican agronomists recognize that contamination of soil and water by pesticides is the most worrisome problem for blackberry growers. Perales Rivas (2005) expressed concern for the large amount of chemicals used with no control or regulatory norms regarding application. The human cost of these abuses reveals itself in birth defects, developmental problems in children, miscarriages, sterility, and rising cancer rates (Langman 2008). To expose women and men to these dangers contributes to their materialization as disposable workers. Rural women and men labor daily in fields that are poorly regulated and where food safety rules protect an industry that earns \$30 billion per year on the sale of pesticides, to the neglect of workers' exposure to toxic chemicals. It is the berry picker who risks her health, putting in excessive hours at inferior wages, who is marginalized at the bottom of this commodity chain as a disposable worker.

Empowerment Assessed

Power can not be taken as an essentialized reality. I take empowerment to weave together the variables discussed above: autonomy, self-confidence and self-esteem, economic independence, decision-making, equity in family relationships, and women's right to a safe and healthy work environment. The concept of "empowerment" was not well understood by most women I interviewed and none of the women's discourses expressed feminist ideals. Analysis of the discourses shared with me by *campesina* women in this rural village is not intended to neglect feminist scholarship in Mexico or Latin America, nor the many women who have participated in protests, rebellions, social movements, armed struggles, or international women's organizations (Alpízar Durán et al. 2007; Earl and Simonelli 2005; Kampwirth 2002; Lamas 2007; Marcos 2005; Rodríguez 1998; Stephen 1997). These simply were not expressed in Los Angeles. For women berry workers in Los Angeles, disparate patterns of accommodation, resistance, and transcendence reflect different women's responses to their place within the emergent production regime in a way that suggests the complex nature of power, agency, consciousness, and their relationship within the

parameters of dominant gender ideologies. One might ask why women did not openly resist exploitative relations of berry work or openly protest their subaltern positions within their households. As Kandiyoti (1998) asserted, we can not take the absence of protest as evidence for its absence. Subaltern actors often perceive their marginalized positions, but also recognize the material limitations for transcending them.

Evaluation of women's discourses reveals the persistence of hegemonic ideologies (Gramsci 1971). Berta's statement, "Just because I earn money does not give me more rights in the house," reveals that the contribution of income to the household does not automatically equate with empowerment. Eva asserted that "My self-esteem has grown, but it is not because I have more power." As Berta concluded, "When the woman earns money, she says she has more rights to give orders in the house. In some cases, the couple separates." Angela, who works in her husband's berry field, explained that she had not gained more power because, "Everything depends on the husband. One should not speak—for not being the owner of things. The man is always more. He wants to keep the woman more subjugated." Eva's relationship with her husband further illustrates the limitations to women's empowerment. Eva works producing blackberries, unpaid, with her husband. During our interviews, Eva struck me as a woman empowered with impressive self-esteem, self-confidence, and decision-making power. Eva explained, "Here in the house, everyone makes decisions. Here, there is no king or queen. I decide what I want. My husband does not influence me. We talk. Here, we are equal." This egalitarian relationship appeared somewhat compromised, however, by the unexpected appearance of her husband during our interview. Suddenly, Eva retreated from answering questions, and deferred to her husband who she claimed had greater knowledge to answer my questions. The discourses of these women reveal the dialectic between integration into the capitalist economy of waged labor, interest in preserving traditions of family harmony, and confrontations with local patriarchy. To the contrary, all of the abandoned women and most of the widows stated that they enjoyed increased empowerment. Given their ongoing struggle for economic independence, their autonomy vis-à-vis former spouses is a greater factor than berry work per se as a contributor to empowerment.

Family dynamics also provide insights that argue for an end to dichotomous thinking about private vs. public, practical vs. strategic, and global vs. local conceptualizations. Global processes, including free trade agreements and the mobility of capital enjoyed by agribusinesses become part and parcel of rearrangements to family life. Women's labor releases husbands and fathers for migration to the U.S. As men migrate, the burden of supporting families falls heavily on the shoulders of women who become the primary breadwinners. As such, they are simultaneously involved in production and reproduction. Indeed, dichotomous thinking compresses the multiple dimensions of women's identity into an essentialized model of "empowered" or "disempowered" women. The individualism inherent in capitalist society is simply incongruent with the "empowered" woman many Western feminists seek.

Given the realities of women's diverse and complexly textured responses to berry labor, dichotomous gender categories prove untenable. Gender remains not fixed, but involves a dynamic of constant renegotiation through processes that socialize women in the berry fields and rearrange relationships within the family (Conger Lind 1992). The enthusiasm with which women approach opportunities for berry work indicates a step toward economic independence. It must be remembered, however, that these women's substandard wages serve as

substitutes for the higher incomes and social guarantees that the berry industry displaced from the region. More women have jobs, but fewer men do so. Women's wages fall at the bottom of a chain of profit that transfers millions of dollars outside the region, to the countries of transnational agribusiness interests. Their labor is essential to, and an integral part of, flexible accumulation in the global economy.

[Chollett Figure 4 about here Photograph by Donna L. Chollett]

The foregoing discussion does not stray far afield from the lives of Northern consumers who demand luxury food items available only seasonally in the U.S. That consumer never realizes that when he or she purchases a \$4.00 container of blackberries produced in Los Reyes, it was directly picked and packed by the hand of a woman, laboring under the hot sun, who earns nine cents for her effort, risking her health, while the agro-chemical giants reap immense profits. Contestations with spouses over laboring outside the house or foregoing education to support parents' meager incomes are embedded in the fresh berries that the Northern consumer purchases to garnish Sunday morning waffles on a cold January morning. Northern desires, corporate greed, and household arrangements in the Global South are bound in a network of dialectical contradictions that require the marginalization of some for the enrichment of others.

Conclusions

The tenacity of gender inequalities demands that scholars continue to examine their causes, processes, and outcomes (Caraway 2007). Decades of theorizing about gendered inequalities do not erase the fact that ideologies, as material forces, continue to oppress and materially-deprived people continue to labor for devalued wages in unsafe work environments.

All of the women interviewed praised the introduction of berry companies to the region, the jobs they provided, and improvements to the local economy. People frequently commented that double family incomes allowed people to live better: "The family economy has improved a lot. Before only the man worked and now we all work." These views suggest improved socioeconomic status for women. Evaluation of the changes to women's lives, however, calls for a more critical perspective. The transnational blackberry agro-industries form part of a vertically-integrated commodity chain that establishes hierarchies of power that reach into the packing sheds, berry fields, and the households of men displaced from cane production and women freed for berry picking. Berry production destined exclusively for the international market replaced many of men's productive activities with the cheaper waged labor of women. My research demonstrates wide diversity in age, marital status, life cycle stage, and household headship among women entering berry work. That these factors contribute to differences in self-confidence, autonomy, and negotiating power is supported by Deere (2006). Some—both teenagers and elderly—may enter out of dire need, others to cover household expenses, and still others to gain personal spending money. Those women most likely to benefit are younger, single women and married couples with multiple family incomes. The waged labor of single mothers, abandoned women, divorced women, and widows in my sample provides a survival strategy that barely covers, if at all, women's needs. I also conclude that women household heads express greater autonomy and independence. Women indeed experience increased confidence and self-esteem, and play a

greater role in household decision making, but these become subverted to lingering traditions of machismo, continuing male control over women's lives, and depreciation of the value of their labor.

Empowerment, as defined here, constitutes a package of qualities, none of which should be mutually exclusive of the others. Different women reported that they acquired some components of empowerment, but few achieved the whole package. Contrary to both feminists who predict women's enhanced empowerment (Acevedo 1995) and those who attribute their waged work to absolute exploitation (Nash and Fernández Kelly 1983), no uniform pattern emerges since improvements are made in some variables, but not others. The complexly patterned relationships among these variables vary across the diverse group of women berry workers. Such a pattern is to be expected in an analysis that avoids essentializing the lives of rural Mexican women (Appendini 2002; Deere 2006; Korovkin 2005).

Can no conclusions be drawn then? I insist that is not the case. Despite countless positive assessments of their entry into waged labor, testimonies by women reveal that their potential empowerment is compromised by dialectically intersected structural factors and ideologies that largely serve the purposes of capital accumulation. A political economy that fosters agribusiness, drawing scarce resources away from rural communities to provision consumers thousands of miles away with luxury fruits fails to enrich household and community life. That political economy interweaves gendered ideologies and discourses into a praxis that becomes a material force for devaluation and super-exploitation. As women struggle daily for an empowerment that enriches their lives, less visible global forces contribute to maintenance of low wages, hierarchical power relationships in the workplace, exposure to dangerous agro-chemicals, and the tremendous costs of transporting blackberries produced, not for local consumption, but for consumers who will never contemplate the human costs of providing them those tiny plastic containers filled with delectable fruits.

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