


THE BALANCE OF POWER: GENDER RELATIONS AND WOMEN’S ACTION AT A MEXICAN SECONDARY SCHOOL*

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INTRODUCTION

Formal schooling, of course, has long been thought to positively influence the possibilities for women's development and emancipation. The acquisition of literacy, general knowledge, job credentials, and the like allow women to exercise greater control over their lives and pursue aspirations beyond the domestic arena. Thus, the extension of public schooling to greater numbers of young women in Mexico, along with the forceful presence of numerous female schoolteachers, is usually considered an unquestionably salutary prospect for women’s empowerment (see Vaughan, 1994). Yet studies of women and schooling in Euro-American contexts have examined how schools can, ironically, serve to reproduce rather than transform limited identities and possibilities for women. Schools can act to reproduce oppressive gender relations either through messages of the curriculum and teacher discourse (Kelly and Nihlen, 1982; Vall, 1986; Orenstein 1994), or through the play of peer culture made possible by the site of the school (Holland and Eisenhart 1990; Raissiguier 1994). What would the picture show for Mexico? Few have looked closely at exactly how gender relations in Mexican schools get constructed, and whether and how such relations either inhibit or foster positive aspirations and gender identities. This is what I propose to do for one provincial Mexican secondary school.

State discourses on equality and national unity in postrevolutionary

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Mexico have rarely made reference to women's rights. The Revolution was, in many instances, fought by, but not for, women (Tuñón Pablos, 1987; Salas, 1990; Macías, 1982; O'Malley, 1986), and the question of gender equality remained a largely silent issue on the male-dominated postrevolutionary agenda. Mary Kay Vaughan (1990:1) notes that women were "marginalized from citizenship". Yet ironically, as Vaughan goes on to observe, the Revolution "opened a field for creativity and self-realization for hundreds of Mexican women of humble, provincial background who became rural school teachers. They filled the ranks of the only profession open to women since the nineteenth century and took up a crusade for "civilization". Since education remained open to the participation of women throughout the postrevolutionary period, it thus came to constitute one of the primary arenas for the exercise of women's power and agency in the "public sphere". Over the course of this century, women have also come to provide an increased proportion of total educational enrollments, at both primary and secondary levels. Indeed, despite the absence of a committed political rhetoric, formally the Mexican Constitution provides equal educational rights for women.

At the provincial Mexican secondary school I studied from 1990-1991 (I call it here Escuela Secundaria Federal, or ESF), I found Mexico's formal commitment to educational equality more than adequately upheld. Teachers and administrators seemed to prize the independence and initiative of their female charges. Yet this commitment did not suggest that boys and girls were the "same" in their traits and abilities. A number of school practices did indeed attempt to "erase" gender differences, just as they sought — through mixed-ability grouping, a discourse on equality and solidarity, and common uniforms — to minimize the perception of class and ethnic differences. Yet this picture was made more complex by the existence of cross-cutting, clearly gendered practices and activities.

I often asked girls and boys alike if they thought their teachers appeared to "discriminate" according to their sex. Always, the answer was some version of the same: Aquí nos tratan iguales. Still skeptical, I ventured in good ethnographic fashion to focus my observations on teacher-student interactions in and out of the classroom. I had arrived expecting to find girls at some disadvantage for lacking the cultural or educational "capital" — the style of reasoning and method of participation expected in classes, for example — to fully succeed in teachers' eyes. I had expected to see teachers granting boys more time and attention under the assumption they would "need" it more in their future work than the girls. In fact, though, my fieldnotes from this period record no instances of the kind of discrimination I expected to find, and my journal records only disbelief at not finding it. If there was any gender discrimination in teacher-student relations at ESF, it seemed to be against the boys.²

This revelation prompted me to better understand just what the prospects were for women's empowerment at the school. How did female students conceptualize success? What kinds of young women and their strategies were succeeding, and what kinds were not, and why? In what ways did school success translate into a broader sense of empowerment — a feeling of mastery or possibility with regards to future careers and/or relationships in the household? How did these young women respond to, or appropriate, school-based relations and discourses to construct identities for themselves? And finally, in what sense could the school be seen as a contradictory space for the (re)production of young women's gender identities? In this paper, I will examine school-based practices for what they might tell us about the (re)production of gender. Yet in order to fully answer these questions, I had to look well beyond the school, at the kinds of discourses and relations to which these women were already accustomed outside of school.

² I say this because girls were often favored to carry out leadership roles or organizational tasks, especially within the "grupo escolar". They were more apt to participate in class discussions and garner the teachers' attention. Too, though the school's record keeping system did not allow me to easily compare girls' and boys' dropout or subject failure rates, my impression was that boys both dropped out of school and failed individual subjects more frequently than girls. I later discovered that for the 1988-91 and 1989-92 school generations at ESF, girls had a lower overall dropout rate by 7% (20% to 27%) and 2% (17% to 19%) respectively (I thank the current principal of ESF for taking time out of his busy schedule to compile these figures.). My findings differ from those of Delgado (1992), who found that young women in a Mexico City preparatoria were called upon less than men to participate.
COMMUNITY, GENDER RELATIONS AND GENDER REGIMES IN HOUSEHOLD

From 1988-1991, for a total of some 15 months, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork at a federal secondary school in a small provincial city of the west-central Mexican highlands (I call the town San Pablo). San Pablo dates back to the colonial epoch as an important religious, commercial, and administrative center for an extensive rural region. Still known as a rather “traditional” town, San Pablo has been transformed by the growth of tourism, transportation, and logging, and a sustained period of international migration to the U.S. Yet San Pablo remains a study in contrasts. Today, a reduced landed elite traces its ancestry to the earliest colonial families, owns orchards and ranches nearby, and continues to live in the old, centrally located colonial houses. This elite shares power with an emergent upper class which has developed political connections and accumulated wealth through timely involvement in lucrative enterprises such as hotels, timber operations, or soft drink distributorships. A small professional “middle class” (lawyers, doctors, architects, engineers) and “lower middle class” (schoolteachers, shopowners, federal and state bureaucrats, and skilled tradesmen) are in many cases interspersed geographically with the poorest classes in San Pablo, which consist of small-scale vendors, day laborers, housecleaners, construction workers, artisans, and the unemployed.

I chose Escuela Secundaria Federal because, as the only “general” federal secondary school, it enrolled students from a broad array of social classes and groups in town. Moreover, some 12% of the students in the morning shift resided in a rural community self-identified as indigenous. Thus, ESF boasted a rather heterogeneous mix of students. The average age of students was 11-15, with a slightly higher ratio of young women to men. I also focused my work on third year students in the school, who were close to graduating.

As I report elsewhere (Levinson, 1993a, 1993b, 1996), I discovered that the “grupo escolar,” the academic cohort in which students passed virtually every hour of the school day, was a site of intense socialization. Indeed, teachers and administrators strongly urged students in each grupo escolar to act in solidarity with one another, and to ignore their “differences” for the sake of equality. By their third and final year, students had appropriated such messages and constructed their own discourses on equality, with important, albeit contrad references to gender.

This paper is concerned with the politics of gender in and school. R.W. Connell (1987:119-142) provides a useful frame thinking about patterns of gender relations within particular inis and their connection to broader societal dynamics. Connell claims most theories of gender examine either the society as a whole (path or the individual relationships which in some sense compose it. He the need to theorize an intermediate level of social organization institution—within which we spend most of our lives. For conceptions of the institution ranges from the family to the “street and the schools, and the state. Within each institution, the prevailing pattern of gender relations is called its “gender regime”. The “structural inventory” of all a society’s gender regimes is its “gender order” inventory, however, is not composed through a mere “collation” of regimes. Rather, the relations between gender regimes produced in different institutions together constitute the broader gender order (ibid). Likewise, specific gender regimes cannot be adequately understood without reference to their dialectical relation to the overarching gender order, and the material conditions which underpin it. Thus, the “gender regimes” which hold sway at any given historical juncture in institutions such as households and communities both draw or continually constitute the wider “gender order” of a society.

The bulk of research on “gender” in Mexico has in fact been res on women’s roles, actions, and identities, but a number of useful ins into more general patterns of gender relations and ideologies in Mexico can be extrapolated from this growing body of research. Perhaps single most salient observation which runs throughout the liter concers the strong identification of women with the family, housed and children; e.g., the “domestic” or “private” sphere (Alonso, Matthews, 1985; Arizpe, 1989). This social construction of women’s roles appears to extend across most social classes and geographic regions. For instance, both in her work with shantytown dwellers with an elite business family, Lomnitz has highlighted the salient role of women in building and maintaining kin and neighborhood based netw of action and reciprocity (Lomnitz, 1977; Lomnitz and Pérez-Lisau, 1979).
Women appear to have a great deal of power as controllers of family affairs. By extension, they have power in those social arenas which are fundamentally structured by the imperatives of family and kin — arenas such as education, religious ritual, and the marketing of products from family businesses (Sault, 1985; Matthews, 1985; Stephen, 1992). Women often draw on their power in the domestic arena to ensure the successful social reproduction of the group and the household economy, but they also utilize some of that same power to advance their own interests and agendas as social actors.

Presently, I can only hope to give a very general sketch of gender relations and regimes within San Pablo households. While I did not do intensive fieldwork within a wide variety of homes, my interviews and home visits did provide me a fairly consistent glimpse into the kinds of relations constructed there. I know a great deal more about these relations in San Pablo proper, than in the villages and small rural towns in the surrounding region. Thus, I will concentrate here on the kinds of class-based gender relations in San Pablo families which in a general way informed student identities beyond the school.

Social class differences in San Pablo often translate into differences of opportunity, mobility, leisure, and self-expression. Gender is articulated to class via similar hierarchies of unequal opportunity, mobility, and leisure. For instance, wealthier classes generally give greater opportunities to their children than other classes could, but they give more to their boys than their girls.

With certain exceptions, this is generally true of all of the other classes as well. One of the ways we can see this most clearly is in the assignment of responsibilities within the home. Boys and girls of secondary school age tend to have well-defined responsibilities within the home. In lower-class families, this usually means girls attend to cooking, housecleaning, and care of younger siblings. Girls, like their mothers, are seldom allowed out of the house; if they do leave, it may be to run an errand or work, perhaps in the family business, but seldom to play or join up with friends. Play-time may be allowed, but it usually takes place within the immediate environs of the house, and is well-supervised.

Boys, on the other hand, are not expected to help out in the domestic functions of the house. Sometimes they may be called upon to supervise a younger sibling for a short time, or to help out with tasks associated with specifically masculine knowledges, such as repairing household equipment. They may also be asked to help out in the family business, if this is the case. For the most part, however, boys (again, like their fathers) are given the freedom to enter and leave the house as they wish. Many of them must work in the afternoons and evenings, at sawmills, tortilla factories, auto body shops, market stalls, and the like. When they are not working, they can often be found playing video games or sports, or just “hanging out” with a few buddies.

As economic conditions and schooling opportunities improved in the period before 1982, girls from the lower classes were sent to the secundaria in greater numbers. My interviews with students' mothers suggest that it was largely at their initiative that this began to occur. Husbands and fathers found it increasingly difficult to justify, either economically or morally, the cloistering of their daughters in the home. Mothers pushed hard for their daughters' right to schooling. In their childhood (1950s to 60s), girls were seen as a kind of economic liability: from the parents', especially the fathers' point of view, girls were better to marry than to school. Too, senior daughters were much less likely to have a chance at further schooling, since they were most expected to assume domestic duties and contribute to the care of younger siblings (cf. Levine, 1993). In cases where one of the parents died, these duties became even more onerous. To be sure, many boys could not study for some of these very same reasons. In larger families, older sons and daughters alike may have been prevented from continued studies, while the youngest sons and daughters, born in a new epoch of possibilities and reconstructed responsibilities, were given the opportunity. Even in 1990, many current ESF students had older siblings who could not or did not continue their secondary studies. These siblings tended to admonish their younger counterparts to take advantage of the opportunities they themselves had not been given.

In 1990, it was not uncommon to find the sons of lower- and even professional class families working a part-time afternoon job while they were enrolled at ESF. While their work was often difficult, they appreciated the freedom and extra spending money it afforded them, as well as the conceit of a specifically masculine form of competence. Even some of the wealthier boys at ESF might help in the family business in the afternoons by running

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3 My research into enrollment figures for selected school years showed that the balance between boys and girls at ESF did not even out until sometime in the late 1970s. It is not until about 1980 that we begin to see an almost even enrollment pattern, with girls outnumbering boys in many of the groups.
errands or taking interim charge of some aspects of the operation.

Among "middle-class", professional, or wealthy merchant families the story was somewhat different. In fact, in many ways the daughters of the wealthiest classes led more restricted lives than their professional counterparts. While domestic chores may not have been so burdensome, upper-class girls were expected to pay excessive attention to religious and social details, and serve as exemplars and upholders of a proper aristocratic morality. This required a constant monitoring of behavior, and the development of adequate feminine form in conduct and gesture. It required, too, a greater restriction to realms of kin and church, for instance.

For children of professionals and the emergent upper class, rules were far more relaxed. Both boys and girls were given a good deal of freedom, and spent many of their free hours outside the home. While girls still had to shoulder a disproportionate share of domestic responsibilities, the common practice of hiring household maids freed them up for study and play. Further, while relations between husband and wife still often followed patterns of patriarchal authority, professional parents seemed to encourage greater equality of opportunity among their offspring, regardless of gender or age. Thus, in most of these families there was a kind of collective practice oriented to procuring the best possible education for sons and daughters alike.

Gender Relations in School Structure

Gender Among Teachers

As Cortina (1989) skillfully documents, the training of women as professional teachers is one of the few areas where the Mexican state has articulated some semblance of a discourse on gender equality. In Mexico, as most everywhere else, the expansion of public education in this century has opened new opportunities of mobility and professional employment for women. Often, such expansion has been accompanied by gender ideologies which essentialize and valorize women's sensibilities, portraying them as ideal candidates for the instruction of children (see Aguilar and Sandoval, 1995). Yet while women comprise a majority of primary school teachers in Mexico, they do not have proportional representation either in secundarias, or in the upper echelons of educational policy and decision-making. Socioeconomic, political, and ideological factors combine to assure that women teachers, who typically come from working or middle class families, do not get the same opportunities as men for the advanced educational degrees, or political hobnobbing, which such higher levels often require.

At Escuela Secundaria Federal, in 1990, women comprised roughly a third of the professional teaching faculty. They could be found in each of the core subject areas (Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Math, Spanish, and English), as well as in several of the "talleres" (Secretarial, Knitting, and Clothing Design). Nevertheless, there was a relatively clear sexual division of labor at ESF. Men occupied the three top administrative positions (principal, and vice-principal for each shift) exclusively. With one exception, all the prefecitos were men. The physical and artistic education teachers, as well as those in charge of certain talleres (Carpentry, Drafting, Automotive, Printing, Electricity, and Radio), were men as well. The secretarial staff, on the other hand, as well as the vocational counselor, social worker, and "comptroller", were all women. Moreover, women received a disproportionate number of special "commissions" around the school. For instance, women, and not men, tended to mind the school's "cooperative store", where drinks, sandwiches, and sweets were sold at lunch. They were also put in charge of organizing decorations and refreshments at special school events, such as dances, graduation ceremonies, and regional meetings. For their part, men would most often help maintain the school's physical plant and act as masters of ceremonies.

Thus, in terms of formal positions and tasks, there was a fairly marked sexual division of labor according to dominant conceptions of gendered activity. Socially, too, relations between male and female teachers tended

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1. Muñoz Izquierdo and Casillas (1982:42) note that, in general, as the rate of return on post-primary education diminishes for certain sectors, women experience this devaluing of schooling more acutely than men. See Aguilar and Sandoval (1995) for a discussion of women's teachers' exclusion from the masculine spaces of union and administrative politics.

2. Actually, the percentage was higher during the morning shift (close to 45%), and lower during the afternoon shift. The difference was most likely due to women teachers' requests to be assigned to the morning shift in order to be able to attend to domestic matters in the afternoon.

3. This mirrors the pattern nationally; see Cortina (1989).
to reproduce the divisions observable in the local community. It was rare for men and women to have free, extended verbal exchanges with one another. Rather, at faculty meetings and parties, men and women largely kept themselves separated. Except for the occasional pair dance or committee caucus, they tended to sit in same-sex groups, joking or chatting. Even married couples would split apart in this fashion.

The tasks women tended to undertake in the school were thus often associated with domestic gender roles in provincial Mexico. Women did not appear to overtly question the propriety of these roles; indeed, they often assumed them with apparent pride and gusto. However, there was also some evidence that women were negotiating and contesting the kinds of tasks and positions provided by the gender regime. Especially amongst the dissident faction of the national teachers’ union within the school, women asserted equal rights and took on previously denied responsibilities. After the faction’s general secretary died in the summer of 1990, the principal’s personal secretary took the job over. She conducted herself with poise and determination, keeping the movement afloat during a difficult period with aggressive calls to action and an admirable perseverance. Indeed, it was in the context of this dissident union-based politics that I witnessed the most genuine give-and-take between men and women, and the most active interventions by women in questions of tactics and leadership.

These, then, were the kinds of gender relations and roles students observed among the teachers at ESF. Such relations both confirmed and challenged many of the gendered experiences students brought with them to the school. Considering the range of jobs available to them (from maintenance workers to teachers), women employees at ESF engaged in a rather full array of activities, from ones clearly female gendered and carried over from a domestic space, to ones more male gendered and associated with the authority and independence of men. Men, on the other hand, stuck more closely to the roles and activities culturally prescribed for their gender. What, then, were the corresponding relations and roles prescribed for students by the school, and how did the students take them up informally?

Gender-Marked and Gender-Neutral Activities

At ESF, some student activities were clearly more gender-marked than others. However, for the most part the gender regime at ESF delineated few gender-specific practices. Across a range of positions and activities, teachers insisted that boys and girls were equally capable and equally responsible. Students agreed for the most part, though certain activities were given a clear gender association, despite the official possibility of either male or female participation.

For example, most contests among students, in sports, oratory, and the like, were open to both boys and girls, though some showed clearer gender segregation than others. During recess period, impromptu games of basketball and soccer were the sole province of boys, while volleyball games usually involved equal numbers of boys and girls. In more organized contests, the games split along the same gender lines. The school organized only a boys’ soccer team for the state championships. On the other hand, the school did sponsor a track team which encouraged both boys and girls to compete in various events, many of them the same.

The public school system sponsored regional and national contests in two forms of public speaking: oratoria and declamación. Boys and girls were similarly encouraged to enter these contests, but in my time at ESF I noticed few boys participate. During the weekly civic ceremony, too, far more girls than boys performed poetry readings, and served as “master of ceremonies”. This was in marked contrast to the pattern in national public life, where men dominate both forms of public speaking, but especially oratory, since they typically hold the kinds of social and political positions which require it.

Girls also tended to serve as leaders of the academic “grupos escolares”. Girls and boys were elected by their classmates in roughly equal numbers to serve as jefe and subjefe of the grupo. The job of jefe entailed several different functions: coordinating group action on common projects or activities, helping teachers maintain order by straightening rows during morning line-up and quieting fellow students during speeches, for example, and serving as liaison between the administration and the grupo escolar. Male and female teachers alike tended to suggest female candidates more often than male candidates.

Whatever students might be chosen for these official positions, less formally girls also tended to take the leadership roles in making group decisions or negotiating student rights with teachers and administrators. If a grupo wanted to request permission for an excursion or a party, or perhaps bring some grievance to the attention of a teacher or administrator, girls almost invariably took the initiative. When I made this observation to teachers,
they tended to emphasize the girls’ greater maturity. The girls, they said, could be entrusted with more than the boys. The girls, for their part, highlighted their aptitude for verbal advocacy. As one female student put it, “No hay un hombre en el salon que tenga facilidad de palabra”.

In other areas, too, little heed was paid to whether girls or boys participated. The three active extracurricular “clubs” at ESF—music, dance, and journalism—were mostly attended by girls, though I was told in times past boys had participated in far greater numbers. The journalism club produced a few issues of a very simple newspaper, which consisted mostly of “chisme” (gossip), school news, and astrological forecasts. Many boys said they refused to participate because “chisme” was mainly a girls’ activity.

Finally, of the many talleres offered at ESF, only three could be considered gender-neutral. Dibujo Técnico, Electricity, and Printing had roughly equal numbers of boys and girls enrolled, and I never heard suggestions that such shops were appropriate only for girls or boys. In contrast to a couple of the “gender-ambiguous” talleres I will discuss shortly, these three did not provoke commentary about whether such activities were more appropriate for girls or boys.

There were, in fact, very few strongly gender-marked activities in the school. One of these was the school’s banda de guerra, which played the marching tune accompanying parades and flag salutes. I never knew a single girl who was even inclined to participate in the band, and teachers suggested it was only meant for boys. Likewise, most of the talleres were strongly segregated by gender. In my time at ESF, not a single boy had been enrolled in Tejidos y Bordados or Corte y Confección, nor had anyone remembered a male student in times past. Similarly, no girls were enrolled in Carpentry, Automotive Mechanics, or Radio Technician. There was little challenge to this gender segregation. Work with clothing was seen as highly inappropriate for boys, while girls were not supposed to learn the skills associated with heavy or complicated machinery.

7 The vice-principal later wrote me that girls occasionally requested participation in the banda de guerra, but they were turned down due to the school’s lack of “proper” instruments (I could not ask him to clarify this, but I assume he meant that the bugles and drums were judged too difficult for girls to manage). He emphasized that in other parts of Mexico some military bands were comprised of several, or even all, women. When I returned in 1993, the vice-principal, now in fact principal, made a point of observing that the banda de guerra had come to include several girls.

**Gender-Ambiguous Activities**

A number of school activities were characterized by what I call “gender-ambiguity”. This means that the activities tended to be associated with one or another gender, but not without a significant degree of confusion or contestation.

For example, in the Monday morning civic ceremony girls typically escorted the flag around the main plaza as the all-boy banda de guerra played a marching tune. Teachers told me that girls had usually comprised the flag escort in order to balance the boys’ participation in the banda de guerra, and because they were seen as being more disciplined—a matter of some importance to the honor of the flag.8 However, toward the middle of the school year the principal proposed that boys take over the flag escort for the remaining months. He issued a challenge to the boys, urging them to demonstrate they could accomplish this exercise in patriotic duty just as professionally, just as responsibly, as the girls. And so it was that boys began practicing the same steps girls had performed for so many consecutive years at ESF.

Several times a year, classes were suspended at ESF in order to celebrate a prominent national holiday. On three of these days—Teachers’ Day, Mothers’ Day, and Students’ Day—students set out to organize a schedule of events designed to occupy much of the day. While any student could potentially participate in the organization of these activities,

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8 Again, the vice-principal wrote me to say that the boys were always welcome to participate in the flag escort, but that few had ever expressed interest. He attributed this reticence to the fact that girls matured more quickly than boys, hence boys would feel embarrassed by their relative lack of motor coordination in parading the flag. He observed that flag escorts at higher educational levels, such as preparatorias, almost always consisted of boys.

9 In justifying this change, which may in fact have been prompted by my own queries, the principal clearly articulated the patriarchal conception of the nation: “The women have been beating the [men] till now, because it’s true, they know how to [escort the flag] perfectly well. But we hombres, varones, we’re just learning, and this group did it very well today...The point is, we varones have to show that we too are capable, we have to be the leaders in everything. We are the ones who will defend the fatherland, and we have to be ready in case it becomes necessary to carry out that defensive role. Besides, ‘somos quienes en la vida civil estamos adelante en el servicio a la patria’.”
planned a program of entertainment. When the day arrived, teachers seated themselves comfortably in the corridor overlooking the plaza, where the program would unfold, while the spectating students ringed the plaza in no particular order. Some boys participated in the “mandatory” part of the program, where entire grupos escolares had been organized by a music teacher, or where one of the official music and dance clubs had rehearsed a number. However, the better part of the program—and by far the more interesting, gauging by teachers’ and students’ responses—had been planned and executed by girls in their friendship groups.

Finally, one shop course—Secretaria— was dominated by girls, but a few boys were enrolled as well. Historically, typing and secretarial work in Mexico has been associated with men as well as women, especially in bureaucratic or political positions. Yet more recently, secretarial skills had become seen as the almost exclusive province of women. Virtually no boys were enrolled in any of the two professional secretarial schools in San Pablo (these schools were designed for secundaria graduates). However, at ESF some boys were enrolled in Secretarial taller—and had enrolled in the past—primarily because their parents had judged the skills taught there to be “practical” in any future career.

STUDENT CULTURE AT ESCUELA SECUNDARIA FEDERAL

Gender relations among teachers, and in the school’s hidden and overt curriculum, thus posited an abstract equality of opportunity and ability, while instantiating specific gender roles, identities, and practices. Even as teachers generally valorized girls’ academic skills, and justified their rights to a career, they provided examples and discourses which marked some activities as more or less masculine or feminine, more or less appropriate for boys and girls. In fact, most parents reinforced traditional gender roles and identities in the school, intervening at meetings and gatherings to assert their prerogatives. They too played their part in the constitution of a gender regime within the school.

Students themselves asserted their gendered identities in different ways. While some students, some of the time, actively contested elements of the broader gender order, others tended to reproduce its operative foundations by reinstating hegemonic masculinities and femininities.

What resulted was a fluid, contradictory process of cultural production of gender identities, in which gender inequalities were largely reproduced in spite of strong normative discourses on equality. In the following two sections, I discuss how two areas of student experience—leadership and humor—provided possibilities for students to both acknowledge and challenge the masculine privilege implicitly embedded in much of local social life. Here we can also see the complex interaction between gender models provided by the pervasive practices of home and community, and those negotiated in the student peer culture at school.

The Masculine Prerogative in Leadership

While girls in fact took on many of the leadership roles in the grupo escolar and elsewhere, they often had to manage the implications of crossing gender lines and taking on the “masculine” attitude associated with leadership. Girls on the whole showed themselves to be just as competent and assertive in school activities, but they, more than boys, ran the risk of being accused of standing out from the group, or being tagged, by boys, a marimacha (masculine tomboy). Too, students who were singled out by their classmates as fachosa (pretentious), specifically for their manner of presenting themselves in class, were almost invariably girls. Girls, in other words, were often more compelled to stand out in academic terms because of the unique conditions posed by family-based gender relations. These relations bound girls more closely than boys to the imperative of fulfilling family “expectations”; girls, for instance, were far more likely than boys to have family support for further studies depend strongly on good grades and discipline. Yet family-based gender relations also provided a negative example, a foil, for the (especially poorer) girls’ career aspirations. Often with their mothers’ encouragement, girls saw schooling as a route to escape and independence from the oppressive gender relations of family and home.

The qualities of leadership students generally admired did not include this kind of self-serving promotion. Leadership in the school context demanded, on the one hand, discipline and orderliness (seen largely as the special quality of women, at least at this age), and on the other, fairness and forcefulness (typically seen as the province of men). When I asked students what qualities a leader should have, and whether they thought a girl or a boy was more suitable for such leadership, their
responses revealed the power of official discourses on equality for gender: they enumerated the qualities above, without gender distinction, arguing that boys and girls alike could manifest them. Interestingly, girls defended their "own" in these discussions. They generally drew on ideologies of feminine purity to argue that girls were morally superior, and thus better suited for leadership roles in the secundaria. Boys, on the other hand, did not advance "their" cause in the same way. Indeed, they often admitted that the best leaders in their gmpo had been girls. Yet in contexts where the qualities of leadership were discussed in more embedded or oblique fashion, boys tended to complain about leaders (mostly girls, but sometimes boys) who could not fulfill the requisite need for initiative and force; girls tended to complain about leaders (mostly boys, but sometimes girls) who could not discharge their functions with sufficient discipline or fairness.

Playing With Gender Ideologies

Forms of humor which circulated in relatively closed friendship groups allowed students to "perform" (Foley 1990), and thus reinforce, their gender identities. In the case of boys, sexist banter often formed the backbone of a heterosexual masculinity. However, in broadly public forms of humor, in social spaces such as the classroom or the party, the meanings of gender were more openly negotiated. It was in these contexts that students seemed most to be "trying on" new gender identities, or playfully challenging dominant gender ideologies. Humor thus inscribed an active gender politics through which students could display the kinds of subjectivities formed in the family, school, and the popular media.

Let me give just one brief, but poignant example. Periodically, ESF sponsored school-wide fairs, called a kermés. At one kermés in late November, one grupo escolar diverged from the normal fare to sponsor a "marriage booth" (Registro Civil). Two girls from this group put themselves in charge of organizing this booth, and they enlisted the help of most of their female classmates. In the days leading up to the kermés, several girls were busily (and surreptitiously) typing up marriage certificates in their secretarial class. The marriage booth was undoubtedly the most popular at the kermés. It attracted a large and constant crowd, and cost only 500 pesos (app. 15 cents) to participate. Couples would arrive and fill out the Acta de Matrimonio, exchange simple plastic rings, and then endure chants of "beso, beso, beso" (kiss, kiss, kiss) from the gathering crowd. Sometimes they would even manage a feeble peck on the cheek to placate the onlookers. Meanwhile, well beyond the marriage booth, there was a quite active negotiation of possible marriages. Boys and girls alike ventured to "marry" the objects of their attraction, but often had to count on the good offices of friends or cousins to broker a deal.

In her short story, "El parásito perdido," Mexican author Silvia Molina (1989) describes an occasion when she accompanies her young daughter to an elementary school kermés. She reconstructs the emerging consciousness of heterosexual affiliation and affection promoted by the children's "Registro Civil." At ESF, however, the Registro Civil appeared to play a more complex role. Aside from providing the excitement of allowing students to publicly display their affections (and heterosexual credentials!), the booth also provided an ambivalent, humorous commentary on dominant gender relations in marriage. Specifically, the Acta de Matrimonio, composed by girls and recited by each prospective couple, both playfully challenged and reinscribed dominant notions of proper gender roles in marriage — gender roles which largely crossed class and ethnic lines. The Acta read as follows:

\begin{verbatim}
ACTA DE MATRIMONIO
Hoy jumes de noviembre de 1990. Contraen matrimonio

DEBERES DEL ESPOSO
1. - Querer, amar y respetar a su esposa.
2. - Darle lo menos $500,000 pesos a la semana.
3. - Cuidar a los niños mientras ella pasea.
4. - Hacer el aseo de la casa y la comida.
5. - Dejarle tener por lo menos un amante.

DEBERES DE LA [sic] ESPOSA
1. - Querer, amar y no serle muy fiel a su esposo.
2. - No dejar solo a su esposo tanto tiempo.
3. - Nunca darle el divorcio.
4. - Hacerlo muy feliz.
5. - No dejar que la engañe.
6. - Darle por lo menos un día libre a su esposo a la semana.

TESTIGOS DE LA ESPOSA

TESTIGOS DEL ESPOSO
\end{verbatim}
At first glance, it is obvious the Acta was written by girls. The "duties" of husband and wife largely contradict the traditional conventions of gendered comportment and responsibility in the home. What makes the wife's "duties" ironic and outrageous reversal of dominant gender relations, and the husband's and wife's "duties". Husbands in this area of Mexico do not typically give their wives huge allowances, nor the opportunity to vacation while they watch the children. Nor do husbands typically complete household chores or allow their wives an occasional lover. Thus, in the context of an existing sexual division of labor, the husband's duties stipulated by both husband's and wife's "duties" coexist with more poignant or "realistic" ones. For instance, the wives' injunctions to the humor, a mock marriage ceremony, reestablishes the hegemony of heterosexual marriage as the proper paradigm for gender relations. Moreover, elements of the marriage certificate itself contradict the liberatory potential of its own humor and irony, specifying more traditional arrangements of female subordination.

Most tellingly and troublingly, perhaps, the potential for women's educational empowerment at ESP was severely undercut by student practices around romance and sexuality. In this aspect of student culture, social divisions of class, ethnicity, and family background were accentuated, thus making common identification more difficult. In a taped conversation with two female social studies teachers, this theme emerged:

M2: Cuando tuve tercero "C" hace unos tres años me acuerdo de un problema, que no llegado a mayores. Unas niñas de la clase alta como que nunca se integraron pues al grupo, siempre se mantuvieron ellas aparte, no convivan. Me acuerdo que se realizó una excursión, participó el grupo pero más bien la clase media, y ellas no, no se, se hacían a un lado. Había disco o algo y ellas se mantenían aparte, se consideraban más que los demás. Inclusive se vino la elección de la Sociedad de Alumnos y había una planilla donde estaban dos de esas niñas, ya empezaban a tener cierto respeto de la mayoría, inclusive la empezaron a llamar la planilla de los burgueses. Los burgueses contra los proletarios—si estábamos viendo en tercero la lucha de clases, la burguesía y el proletariado, y lo aplicaron muy bien— dijeron que esa era la planilla de los burgueses; y estas niñas se quejas, más se distanció, pero no ganó esa planilla, ganó otra.

BL: ¿Son las mujeres de esa clase las que tienden a apartarse más que los hombres?

M2: Sí, yo no sé porqué, pero yo sí he visto ese fenómeno.

M1: Yo creo que porque en su casa son las que más están apegadas a la familia... son las que sus papás más marcan las diferencias, son las que más aprenden a marcar las diferencias que los hombres; o sea, los hombres siempre como que tienden más a convivir con los de menos dinero. Las mujeres como que ellas tienen una educación diferente, o sea, como que las familias las educan de otra manera, las hacen más burguesas que a los hombres. Yo he convivido un poco con gente burguesa, siempre me he fijado en ese detalle, que las educan más para la burguesía que a los hombres.

As both teachers suggest, upper class girls' ability to cross class and ethnic lines in forming friendships was more strongly circumscribed by parental (and most significantly, fatherly) sanction. While I observed few "upper-class" friendship groups among the girls in my year of research, I did note that age seemed to be a much less salient consideration in girls' friendships than among the boys. In other words, girls formed strong and lasting friendships more often across age (and grade) lines, while boys crossed ethnic and class lines more easily than age lines.

This difference seemed at least in part due to the family-based imperatives to which both teachers allude in the discussion. In other words, families, especially "bourgeois" families, tended to socialize girls...
to maintain status distinctions and uphold the family name and honor. However, the family-based logic which allowed girls to easily cross age, but not class or ethnic lines, varied a great deal. If wealthier girls were discouraged from mixing, it was more likely due to efforts to maintain status distinctions. Other, equally wealthy parents, however, may have come into their money more recently and through different means. These parents, unlike the "bourgeois" families to which the teachers refer, were not as likely to guard their children from such contact. They were much more inclined to send their children to public schools precisely for the social mixing it afforded. If poorer or indigenous girls didn't mix, on the other hand, it was more likely because of parental efforts to control their sexuality and their contacts with boys — contacts often initiated by the more "liberal", "modern", "middle class" girls in school, whom I came to think of as the "vanguard" for their popularity and proficiency with the new popular cultural media. Families from the outlying ranchos and pueblos were especially conservative in this regard. Rural Indians and mesti- zos alike seemed determined to guard their daughters from what they perceived as the rather brazen sexuality of city girls.

If "conservative" or "traditional" families guarded their daughters from liberal tendencies in the school, even those families I would consider "liberal" occasionally intervened to steer their daughters away from what they perceived as negative — often overly sexual — influences. It was not uncommon for mothers (and some fathers) to appear at the school in order to enlist teachers in efforts to keep their daughters separated from certain classmates, often close former friends.

Yet perhaps more importantly, students themselves undertook to police and manage the expression of sexuality in the school. The most active and popular girls defined a kind of "ideological center" around questions of romance and sexuality in the school. While poorer and rural girls shied away from the romantic pursuits and "liberal" practices of these popular girls (talking to boys, dressing in jeans, dancing suggestively to rock music, and the like), the latter, in turn, stigmatized yet other girls for being fickle, promiscuous, or overly permissive in their relations with boys. In this fashion, too, then, divisions between girls were produced and reproduced in ways which did not always correspond to the dictates of social class. Discourses and practices around romance and sexuality, which fundamentally constructed girls' bodies as objects of boys' attraction, divided girls' loyalties and sympathies in ways that were not true for the boys.

While the discursive emphasis on solidarity (see Levinson, 1993b; 1996) could powerfully mobilize girls to submerge their individual or factional interests for the benefit of the grupo escolar,\(^\text{10}\) instances of cooperation and solidarity between girls were in fact relatively rare. More often than not, girls came together within their smaller friendship groups to press claims against teachers, organize student events, or negotiate assignments. However, these friendship groups often developed mutual antipathies toward one another, even (or sometimes especially) within the same grupo escolar. Boys were fond of pointing out that girls "naturally" squabbled, especially over romantic rights to boys. By grounding their interpretation in the logic of "nature," boys avoided confronting their own complicity in a system of gender relations which compelled girls to compete for boys' affections.

Moreover, parents, teachers and students alike agreed that girls were far more prone to romantic distraction. It was not uncommon to hear teachers lament the tendency for girls to pasarse suspirando por su novio. In cases where teachers were well-informed of their students' relationships, they even resorted to stating the obvious about a girl's latest romantic interest in front of her classmates. They tried to use this technique of embarrassment to recover the girl's attention.

As might be expected for this region of Mexico, girls were more subject to parents' censure than boys. Boys were allowed, indeed expected, to pursue their sexual impulses as they developed in adolescence. They were seen as more independent, more volatile, more difficult to control. Girls, on the other hand, were supposed to be modest. The dominant gender ideology stipulated that women must restrain their sexual impulses and concentrate on the appropriate domestic (or school) tasks at hand.

While this gender ideology (and the sexual double standard it contains) retained a strong hold on students, and constituted a significant component of the school's gender relations, it was also contested in a number of ways. Some of the grounds for this contestation lay outside the school, where students' gender identities were also being formed. In particular, the growth of a more significant professional class in San Pa-

\(^{10}\) Just as Delgado has also described in her research on a private preparatoria (1995:226, 230), young women at ESF were more apt than men to provide responses to difficult teacher prompts, distribute homework responses for copying, and act otherwise to "protect" their classmates from teachers' efforts at discipline. This could be attributed to prior socialization in the family.
blo, and a rise in the number of adults who had migrated seasonally to the U.S., had by the 1980s led to more liberal, permissive parenting practices and a relaxation of the control over daughters' sexuality. Too, students' increased consumption of television, movie videos, rock music, and teen magazines — cultural commodities which portrayed the heterosexual romantic pursuit in more egalitarian terms — had encouraged the reconfiguration of traditional gender roles, and provided girls with resources for more active participation in the courtship process. Thus, within the school one could see a wide range of orientations toward romance and sexuality, and a wide range of corresponding masculinities and femininities, especially among girls. Some maintained their distance from boys and dedicated themselves entirely to schoolwork, while others actively sought interactions with boys, even exaggerating their sexuality in flirtatious gestures and suggestive repartee.

One significant source of difference amongst girls, then, was their variable relation to older gender ideologies and notions of sexuality. While some girls were active in promoting romantic themes and interactions with boys, they nonetheless policed the boundaries of acceptable expressions of sexuality and romantic interest. On the one hand, these girls tended to deride or ignore girls who displayed little interest in boys. Occasionally, they would attempt to instruct or entice one of these girls into the practice of romance. On the other hand, these girls also marginalized — through rumor, innuendo, or outright accusation and rejection — girls who transgressed the boundaries of acceptable expressions of sexuality and romantic interest. I believe the "vanguard" girls tended to occupy this central position in large part because their moderation most closely corresponded to the dominant pattern of gender relations in the overall school culture. Most teachers tolerated, even moderated most closely corresponded to the dominant pattern of gender relations in the overall school culture. Most teachers tolerated, even moderation most closely corresponded to the dominant pattern of gender relations in the overall school culture. Most teachers tolerated, even

them why they no longer associated with the other girls, Guillermina did most of the talking, with Rosita nodding her head:

Guill: Es que de veras son bien llevadas, a veces dicen muchas groserías, con sus palabras y todo.
BL: ¿Todas son así?
Guill: No todas, pero Inés, Sylvia, Kati y Patricia, esas sí son las que se dejan llevar con los hombres, y eso no nos parece... y a nosotras no nos gusta estar en medio de tanto chisme. No somos ni santitas ni muy relajas, bueno pues, sí nos gusta echar relajo y todo, pero de otra forma... Vivían es una chismosa, muy metiche, se mete en mucho que no le corresponde, y Virgina, ooooh, hasta dónde no llega con su chisme.

This exchange is interesting for the way it defines an "ideological center" (ni santitas ni muy relajas), as I've already observed. Guillermina and Rosita are navigating a middle ground between the "santitas" — which refers to the girls of more conservative families who keep mostly to themselves — and the "relajas" — girls who overstep the bounds of school rules and the informal rules of the mainstream student culture. The exchange is also interesting in the way it combines a condemnation of the girls' excessive interest in boys with their tendency to gossip. Unlike the boys, the girls do not claim their friends' gossiping is somehow natural and inevitable. Rather, they see it as related to the girls' excessive interest in boys. Girls who allegedly gossip are often the same girls who use vulgarities and get "carried away" with the boys.

Thus it was through mutual avoidance and mutual stigmatization that girls commented on, and "managed" the differences posed by sexual maturity and sexual conduct. Such avoidance had its roots in a particular construction of "appropriate" sexuality, and appropriate engagement with romantic themes in student life. Social divisions among the girls were thus largely produced and reproduced around the variable definitions of appropriate romantic and sexual involvement.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

While reminding us how patriarchal power operates in a society such as Mexico, feminist scholars have increasingly highlighted the sources of women's power. Women have drawn on culturally constructed gender
ideologies to validate and articulate their specific modes of emergent political action (Chaney, 1979; Martin, 1990; Schmukler, 1992; Alonso, 1992a). Too, the creation of new, often more "public," forms of female organization has enabled women to forge a broader political identity out of the myriad political skills and traditional forms of "female consciousness" they bring to the work. Nevertheless, even feminist revisionists admit that the evidence for female power and new forms of female politico-economic participation does not outweigh the continued practical and juridical dominance of men over women. This dominance continues in large part because new forms of women's participation have generally not challenged the oppressive gender ideologies and practices which reinscribe women into structures of inequality. In Connell's terms, the gender order in Mexico continues to reflect patterns of strong male dominance even if women have begun to successfully challenge specific inequalities in gender regimes within such institutions as the family/household and workplace. The cultural production of new, counterhegemonic gender ideologies has not accompanied the significant revision of the myriad political skills and traditional forms of "female consciousness" they bring to the work. Nevertheless, even feminist organization has enabled women to forge a broader political identity out of class, ethnicity, and age, which they had to negotiate according to both the demands of the family and the demands of student culture. Often, the position they thus negotiated for themselves in the peer system of gender relations either challenged or reinforced their position vis-a-vis gendered responsibilities, expectations at home.

Moreover, notions of gender hierarchy often disrupted and challenged discourses and practices of equality. In spite of frequent verbal commitments to equality, boys and girls alike took up unequal positions and tasks proposed by broader discourses on "natural" gender qualities. While teachers generally primed boys and girls alike for leadership roles, the quality of leadership was actually a contested topic of discourse in which deeply entrenched notions of power, force, and masculinity usually held sway. Young women often appeared to negotiate away their own leadership by endorsing a "good patriarch" who might best represent the interests of the group escolar (cf. Malon, 1994: 19). Humor and playful commentary also provided a discursive arena in which students could challenge, modify, and reinstate dominant constructions of gender.

The pattern of gender relations at ESF on balance reflected the findings of much of the research on gender in Mexico and Latin America. That is, women — both teachers and students — struggled in different ways against the dominant construction of masculinity and nationality, against the identification of a gendered male persona with public power and educational success. Yet as they struggled against this construction, they often struggled within its terms as well; that is, they drew on "female" modes of private, domestic power, of resource-sharing and alliance (including "gossip"), and most saliently of participation in romantic relations to articulate the terms of their struggle. Following Fowler-Salamini and Vaughan (1994:XX-XXIII), women created new spaces for
action within a state institution ostensibly dedicated to forming allegiance to the patriarchal nation. Such creative struggle often altered the balance of power in the gender regime at ESF, and threatened to make ripples in the wider gender order. However, because of marked social divisions among them, it also tended to reinscribe some women—especially students, and especially indigenous or lower-class girls—even more deeply into a system of gender inequality.

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