No es fácil, pero es posible*:
The Maintenance of Middle-Class Women-Headed Households in Mexico

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Gender and Development

Studies of gender and development have often focused on ‘women-headed households’. Varley (1996) states that this may be because they represent a positive symbol for feminist researchers, being a challenge to the prevailing social norm of a male-headed nuclear household. However, there is increasing recognition that female-headed households have been represented in a one-dimensional way, usually being depicted as consisting of single mothers with young children struggling to survive economically, and being disproportionately concentrated in the poorest income bracket. This fails to recognise the diversity within the ever-shifting category of ‘female-headed households’ (see Chant 1997a,b; Jackson, 1998; Varley, 1996), in particular the way in which middle-class households can have women heads.

The main reason cited for the supposed impoverished nature of female-headed households is their perceived limited access to resources compared with male-headed households. The focus on the resources available to the household as a whole is indicative of the move towards household studies in a consideration of anti-poverty strategies. The resources on which individual members can draw are wide-ranging and can be divided into economic, human and social capital. In economic terms, the household needs an income for survival. Although this income is usually in the form of wages, other sources may include rent, social security benefits, remittances and pensions. Secondly, and obviously linked to economic capital, is human capital, encompassing the skills and experience of the household members. Characteristics such as age, gender and education are important in determining the contributions individuals can make, both in terms of the kind of jobs available to them and the wages they can command, and the activities they can undertake in the domestic sphere itself. Finally, social capital represents the networks of friends and relatives upon which household members can call for assistance. This may be in

* The data referred to in this paper were collected during fieldwork in 1992, 1993 and 1995. The 1992 fieldwork was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of doctoral studies at The University of Oxford (Award No: R00429124300). The 1993 fieldwork was funded by a Study and Action Fellowship by the International Federation of University Women, and the 1995 trip by a Research Development Fund grant from The University of Liverpool. I would like to thank all these organisations for their generous financial support. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Society for Latin American Studies Annual Conference, University of St. Andrews, March 1997. I would also like to thank the two anonymous referees for their very useful comments.
terms of an exchange of goods and services for the everyday running of the household, emergency help in times of crisis, or intangible assistance with, for example, information about a job, or introduction to business contacts (see, for example, Lomnitz, 1977; Sharma, 1986; Vélez-Ibáñez, 1988). By drawing on these three, interrelated resources, household maintenance may be possible. With insufficient resources, households may suffer extreme poverty, may disintegrate, or may adapt, perhaps through expansion (Rakodi, 1995). While the concept of ‘maintenance’, like that of ‘poverty’ needs to be considered beyond narrow economic confines, it is the economic elements of maintenance that will be focussed upon in this paper. This reflects both limited space, but also the main intention of the paper, which is to highlight how female-headed households can form and survive in a middle-class setting.8

If female-headed households are portrayed as single mothers with young children, it is clear that women-headed households have fewer resources to call on than their male-headed counterparts. Firstly, there is the absence of a male wage and significant economic contributions from children, which both reduces the household income, and provides an economic imperative for the woman to enter the labour force. Secondly, the need to juggle both waged work and domestic responsibilities limits the jobs women for which can apply. Discrimination in the labour force regarding appropriate jobs for women and women’s generally lower-levels of education will also limit the range of jobs and the wages available. Finally, time pressures and the absence of the support of a male partner’s family leaves the woman isolated in terms of the development and maintenance of social networks (González de la Rocha, 1994c; Willis, 1993, 1994). However, this analysis does not recognise the diversity of such units. In this paper the focus will be on middle-class households headed by women, which is a clear example countering prevailing stereotypical views of female-headed households.

Research on middle-class households in Latin America is sparse. This is unsurprising given the overwhelming majority of low-income households in Latin America, and the orientation of much social science research towards issues of poverty alleviation and ‘development’. However, in the context of gender research, it is particularly important to address such households to highlight the diversity of women’s experiences and the construction of their identities, as well as to identify commonalities regardless of class position. Two main themes emerge from the work undertaken on middle- and upper class women in Latin America. The first is the linking of women’s activities with the status and class position of the household. Femininity, as represented by a woman’s position as a full-time housewife, is an indication of high status, as the household does not need a woman’s wage for economic survival, so leaving her able to fulfil the socially-accepted norms of appropriate behaviour in mestizo society (see, Gill, 1993, 1994 on Bolivia; Lomnitz & Perez-Lizaur, 1987 on the Mexican elite).

The second theme, and one which contrasts with the first one, is the way in which the Latin American middle-class is changing notions of appropriate gender roles, moving towards a greater acceptance of women’s labour force participation (García and Oliveria, 1995). This is linked to women’s greater educational levels, increased opportunities for women’s employment (Cohen, 1973) in the expanding service sector, and the influence of the feminist movements both in Latin America and abroad (Willis, 1994).9 Work by García and Oliveria
(1997) highlights the ways in which these dynamic notions of femininity are experienced by women in different class groups in urban Mexico, stressing the interrelationships between paid work and mothering roles.¹⁰

In terms of household maintenance research, there has been a similar dearth of studies on the middle class, although recent work has sought to address the gap (Escobar Latapi & Roberts, 1991; González de la Rocha, 1994b; Willis, 1994, 1996). There is evidence that the Mexican middle-classes, especially state employees,¹¹ were hit very hard by the economic crisis of the 1980s, and the massive devaluation of the peso and ensuing economic downturn in 1994/5.¹² These macro-level events have forced middle-class households to consider the ways in which they utilise their resources. This includes a re-evaluation of expenditure and women’s labour force participation. The use of external social networks has generally not been highlighted, possibly because of the commonly-held view that network mobilisation for the exchange of goods and services only takes place between low-income groups (see Lomnitz, 1974, 1977). However, other research (see, for example, Lobo 1983), has highlighted how network mobilisation requires the ability to reciprocate, thus often excluding those who do not have the time or resources to engage in such exchange.

In this paper, the notion of household maintenance among middle-class Mexicans will be discussed, with a particular focus on the way in which women-headed households utilise their economic, human and social capital to ensure the economic survival of the domestic unit. Do they have fewer resources than their male counterparts, and are these resources utilised in different ways?

Oaxaca City

Oaxaca City is a largely non-industrial city, acting as a marketing and administrative centre for the surrounding, mainly agricultural state, of which it is the capital. The city’s economy is dominated by government employment, tourism and services, with very few industrial operations. Much service sector employment could be classified as ‘informal sector’, because of its ease of entry, lack of job security and low pay. Murphy et al. (1990) estimate that in 1987, 62.7 per cent of the labour force worked in the informal sector.

This paper is based on fieldwork carried out in three colonias (districts) of the city, chosen because of their contrasting characteristics including length of residence, local job opportunities and socio-economic status of households. A random questionnaire survey of one hundred households was taken in each district in the period April to September 1992. I undertook all three hundred interviews on a face-to-face basis with the female head of household, or the wife of the male head. Interviews lasted from fifteen minutes to three hours, and usually included a general discussion during and/or after the formal questionnaire session. This allowed for an elaboration of some of the issues raised, but also an opportunity for the interviewee to ask some questions of her own.¹³ The quotations used in this paper are taken from such conversations, or from semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of thirty women.¹⁴ Where possible, interviews were also carried out with the husbands of the married women in the sub-sample. Some follow-up interviews were also carried out in 1993 and 1995.
In this paper data will refer only to the ninety-four middle-class households in the sample. The majority of these households (86.5 per cent) were located in Colonia Reforma in the north of the city. The current population is a mixture of those who were residents of a rural settlement that has been incorporated into the city since the 1970s and more recent arrivals. In contrast to the migrants in the other two districts, a greater proportion originated from outside Oaxaca state, largely from sizeable urban areas to the north of Mexico. For most of these women, their move to the city came in the 1970s during the expansion of the public sector. The lack of a suitably qualified workforce led to the government providing incentives for non-Oaxacans. Some of the women in Colonia Reforma came to the city as public-sector workers in their own right, but the majority accompanied their husbands.

The other study area where middle-class households were located is La Noria. Located in the city centre, it has a great deal of productive activity taking place within its boundaries, including a variety of shops and workshops, a large indoor market, offices and doctors’ surgeries and an array of restaurants and bars. This reflects its city-centre location and age. The district has been part of the city since colonial times, and generations of residents have improved their houses over time. Most of the buildings are consolidated, being made of brick, and all households have access to urban services – electricity, water and connection to a sewage system – as well as paved roads.

Finally, brief mention must be made of prevailing gender and family norms in Oaxaca to provide a context in which to assess female-headed household formation and maintenance. Murphy and Stepick (1991, 138-145) stress the centrality of ‘the family’ to Oaxacan society. At the core of this notion of ‘the family’ is a couple and children. While cohabitation takes place [7.0 per cent of women over twelve years of age were living with male partners in 1990, (INEGI, 1995, 29)], the norm in both numerical and social terms is marriage. Family members do not have to live together, but Murphy and Stepick highlight the important of reciprocity between kin.

It is obviously difficult to make general statements about social norms in a whole city, but as a starting point, there is some consensus as to the ‘conservative’ nature of Oaxacan society regarding gender roles and relations (Musalem Merhy, 1982). Stern (1995) suggests that during the colonial period Oaxaca demonstrated greater complementarity between male and female roles, and greater power for women than more northern Mexican regions. He argues that this reflected the ethnic make-up of the state, with the indigenous groups’ gender norms contrasting with those of the mestizo population. However, although Oaxaca’s indigenous population is still numerically significant, these patterns are no longer evident in most urban areas of the state. Murphy and Stepick (1991, 145) highlight how, in the mid-twentieth century, gender roles and relations ‘closely fit[ted] the traditional stereotypes of macho males and submissive females’. While there has been some breakdown of these divisions, especially due to economic crisis, these norms are still widely found (see also, Willis, 1994).
Nature of Women-headed Households

In Oaxaca, female-headed households are found far more among middle-class than low-income households\textsuperscript{15} (see Table 1). Although some of these households lived in the city centre, most were located in the more homogeneously middle-class district of Colonia Reforma.\textsuperscript{16} Given the debate about the extent of women-headed households in Latin American cities, the figure of 41.5 per cent women-headed households in middle-class Oaxaca seems very high. However, as it represents a particular sub-section of the Oaxacan population, it would not be expected to be representative of the city as a whole. The class distribution of women-headed households is a U-shape, with the lowest number of such households in the upper-lower class, and by far the highest percentage of female-headed households in the middle-class. This seems to suggest that either female-headed households are formed more frequently at the extreme ends of the socio-economic spectrum, or that they are formed with similar frequency in all classes, but either do not remain female-headed households for very long, or can only maintain a socio-economic standing of lower or middle class.\textsuperscript{17}

Women may become household heads through marriage/partnership breakdown, which could be initiated by them or their partner; setting up home having never been in a partnership, or widowhood. When looking at the process of household formation (as described by the women), middle-class female heads who had been married were more likely to find themselves as heads through choice (35.9 per cent compared with 27.0 per cent of lower-class and 25.0 per cent of upper-lower class households). These figures suggest that middle-class women are more willing and able to initiate separation from male partners than their counterparts in other class groups and/or are more able to maintain their households regardless of the formation process.

Another difference between class groups is that among middle-class female-headed households, headship through widowhood was more common (20.5 per cent) than among other class groups (8.1 per cent for lower-class and 16.7 per cent for upper-lower class). This suggests that marital break-up is more common among lower-class groups. There is some qualitative evidence that this might be the case, with women in the poorest groups claiming that household poverty had caused so much tension that their husband had left. However, the greater numbers of widows among the middle-class group could be related to the nature of the urban districts surveyed. The lowest-income women were concentrated in a relatively young, informal settlement on the city’s outskirts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Household Headship by Class</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Women-Headed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lower (N=142)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Upper-Lower (N=64)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle (N=94)</td>
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<td>TOTAL SAMPLE (N=300)</td>
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Household heads were younger (on average) than those in the middle-class district, thus widowhood was less likely. In addition, when widowed, women in low-income districts often moved in with their children for both economic and social reasons.

The potential for maintenance is highly dependent on the household’s structure; more specifically, whether the household is extended or not, and the age and gender composition of the household. Among the thirty-nine middle-class female-headed households in the Oaxaca City survey, nearly sixty percent (59.0 per cent) were extended, while 35.9 per cent were single-parent households and 5.2 per cent consisted of women living alone. To a large extent this reflects the processes behind the formation of the female-headed households and the nature of housing provision among the middle-class groups in Oaxaca. Extended households tend to be associated with households in later stages of the household cycle. For example, most of the widows among the middle-class household heads have adult children who live with them, often with their spouses and children.

Secondly, the size of houses and/or plots in the middle-class districts of the city, tends to be much greater than elsewhere, representing the greater financial resources available to such households. This facilitates the development of extended households as there is greater space for additional household members to occupy, while maintaining a ‘suitable’ standard of living. New housing is prohibitively expensive for most newly-married young couples.

**Household Maintenance**

In this section, I will draw on the concepts of economic, human and social capital to examine the ways in which women who head middle-class households ensure the domestic unit’s physical and financial maintenance. Although the different forms of capital will be discussed separately, all three are obviously interlinked. The maximisation of resource use by these households contributes to their continued status as middle-class households.

Economic capital or resources consists largely of the wages which household members earn. Female headship has been demonstrated to be strongly correlated with women’s labour force participation (see, for example, Chant, 1991; Gonzalez de la Rocha, 1994a; Willis, 1993, 1994, 1996), partly because of the need for income, but also because of the freedom which the absence of a male partner provides. This is the case in all income groups, but among the middle-class households, women head’s participation rates are highest (Table 2).

In assessing women’s entry into the labour force, we need to consider both the demand for female labour in the local economy and the supply of labour from households (Chant, 1991). Throughout the world, ‘the feminisation of the labour force’ reflects both a growth in the number of jobs regarded as ‘suitable’ for women, as the expansion of service industries continues and multi-national factories continue to hire cheap female labour, but also a redefinition of previously ‘men-only’ jobs to include women. These jobs are particularly associated with professions such as medicine and law. Psacharopoulos & Tzannatos, (1992, 12) also highlight the importance of the public sector for female employment throughout Latin America.
Table 2: Women Head's Labour Force Participation by Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>% Labour Force Participation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower (N=37)</td>
<td>62.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Upper-Lower (N=12)</td>
<td>58.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle (N=39)</td>
<td>74.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL SAMPLE (N=89)</td>
<td>66.3</td>
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*Includes waged work, self-employment and unpaid work in a family business.

In Oaxaca City, both these trends are apparent. As described earlier, the city has always been characterised by a lack of industrial development, with most workers now employed in the service sector in trading, public administration, tourism and informal activities. These activities can all be regarded as accessible to women wanting employment. The move towards greater numbers of women being employed in professional occupations previously overwhelmingly dominated by men is also evident. Of the twenty-nine female heads who have waged work, many are employed in the public sector as civil servants, doctors, or teachers. Private-sector employment tends to be in law, commerce or medicine. In nearly all cases they are the first generation of women in their family to undertake such activities. In previous generations, women may have worked before marriage, but after marriage they became full-time homemakers, so conferring additional status on the household.

This latter point links into the other side of the labour force participation equation – that of supply. For women to enter into the labour force there has to be a perceived need by the individual concerned, and often by the whole household, and acceptance of this. Perceived need may be in economic terms, but it may also be in terms of personal fulfilment. Economic necessity is usually given as the main explanation for high rates of labour-force participation by female heads. The absence of a male partner's income (which is likely to be much higher than that of the woman) makes the economic state of the household more precarious, so encouraging the woman to enter the labour force. While economic necessity among low-income households is an obvious reason and has been clearly exemplified (see Chant, 1991; Willis, 1993), among middle-class households such an impetus may be less apparent. From the interviews it is clear, however, that the economic imperative, while not a matter of maintaining subsistence levels, is still crucial. In Oaxaca, most middle-class women stated that the need for income was the main reason they entered the labour force. Maintaining a ‘middle-class’ level of living that includes housing standards, cars, holidays, domestic servants and private education needs income, just as much as the struggle for subsistence does.

However, household economic maintenance is not the sole responsibility of the household head. Many studies (see, for example, Selby et al., 1990b) have demonstrated the importance of focusing on the household as the main economic unit of analysis, as contributions from all household members aid the maintenance of the domestic unit. Of the middle-class female-headed households, nearly all are extended (see above). Financially, the woman's contribution to the household budget is relatively small, because her children or chil-
Children-in-law are able to contribute much more (Table 3). However, relative to comparable households in low-income districts, the woman’s financial contribution is much more significant in percentage terms.

Table 3: Members’ Contributions to the Household Income

<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>Per Capita Weekly Income (Old Pesos)*</th>
<th>% Head’s Contribution</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female Single Parent (N=14)</td>
<td>78,420</td>
<td>64.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female-Headed Extended (N=23)</td>
<td>86,742</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Woman (N=2)</td>
<td>150,000</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL (N=39)</td>
<td>93,439</td>
<td>56.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*1,000 old pesos to 1 new peso.

The availability of domestic servants is also important in the context of female labour-force participation and economic capital. Because of the gender division of labour in Mexican households, in most cases it is women who are in charge of domestic tasks, and in most cases, wholly responsible for their completion. If a woman also has a remunerative occupation, she needs to juggle domestic and waged work responsibilities. For women in low-income households, this involves a massive expenditure of time and effort and, in some cases, calling on other household members or non-residents to assist. Middle-class women have the added option of domestic servants because they can afford to employ them. All the middle-class households in this survey employed at least one domestic servant assisting the women heads in juggling their responsibilities, freeing them to leave the house for waged work.

Finally, labour demand must be considered again. It has been established that the Oaxaca City labour market is open to women, but there is a need to consider the nature of that demand for female labour. Beyond small-scale informal trading and domestic service, education is of crucial importance. The professions, which have experienced such an expansion, obviously demand very high educational levels. It is only now that women have been gaining access to higher education in greater numbers, giving them the qualifications to allow professional employment. This links into the second form of capital which can be mobilised for the maintenance of middle-class households, that of human capital, of which education is the key component.

The educational levels of female heads among middle-class households are far higher than those for their counterparts in other class groups; middle-class women heads have, on average, 12.9 years of schooling, compared with 5.9 among upper-lower class women heads and 3.7 for women heading lower-class households. In addition, 57.0 per cent of middle-class women heads have college or university qualifications, while the figures for the other class groups are below 20 per cent. These levels of human capital provide middle-class women with resources to assist their entry into paid employment. However, they still represent lower levels than male heads in a similar socio-economic position (middle-class male heads have on average 14.2 years of education and 68.4 per cent of male heads have college or university qualifications).

Social capital is the third form of capital that needs to be considered, and it is
here that I am going to focus on social networking. As outlined earlier in this paper, social networking has usually been characterised by a clear class distinction; low-income households are characterised by locally-based contacts which are mobilised both on a day-to-day basis for the exchange of goods and services and also at times of crisis, while middle-class households are characterised by more dispersed networks which are used to cement business relationships and provide friendship, rather than providing goods and services directly.

Among Oaxaca City’s female-headed middle-class households, however, the mobilisation of networks is of crucial importance to household maintenance. Women are able to draw on networks of both relatives and friends. It has been established that in general terms, women who are heads of household are often the most isolated from the operation of social networks (González de la Rocha, 1994c; Willis, 1993, 1994). This is because they do not usually have contact with their in-laws. Thus not having access to one set of relatives, their high levels of labour-force participation and the burden of reproductive activities reduces the time they are able to spend cultivating and developing contacts outside the household. However, class is an important variable in this. Firstly, domestic servants reduce the domestic burden, which allows women to socialise. Secondly, many women are employed outside the home alongside other employees, so providing a chance for social interaction. Finally, as most middle-class households have a car and telephone, keeping in contact with both friends and relatives is facilitated.

The extent of social networks in middle-class households shows little difference by headship (Table 4). Whether a woman is head of her household or joint head with a male partner, the average number of friends with whom she keeps in contact is the same. There is a slight difference in the number of relatives, but the difference is not statistically significant. Women in male-headed households tend to include their husband’s family in their list of extra-household contacts, but because a disproportionate number of female-headed households are at a more advanced stage in the domestic cycle, the lack of in-laws is somewhat balanced by non-resident children and their households.

Having established that female heads do not necessarily conform to the stereotype of isolated individuals, we need to investigate the network mobilisation in more detail. Possessing the social capital in network terms does not necessarily mean that it is drawn upon to contribute to household maintenance. Because the survey was aimed at investigating the use of networks for the exchange of goods and services useful for the day-to-day running of the house-

### Table 4: Middle-Class Women’s Social Networks by Headship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average No. of Friends*</th>
<th>Average No. of Relatives**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female-Headed (N=39)</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male-Headed (N=55)</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL SAMPLE (N=94)</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Respondents were asked to name their five closest friends. Some women named five, while others said they had fewer than five or none at all.

** This represents the average number of relatives with whom the women keep in contact.

hold, the categories of childcare, financial assistance and housework help were highlighted.

As would be expected, relatively few women in middle-class households call on extra-household contacts for help with childcare, housework and finance (Table 5). However, there are differences between male and female-headed households, particularly in terms of housework assistance. Thus, even those households with domestic servants have need of help from other sources. Without the help of non-resident friends and relatives, the maintenance of the households would be made much more difficult.

The previous discussion has demonstrated the existence of female-headed households in the Oaxacan middle class, so refuting the prevailing stereotype of such households as the poorest of the poor. By combining economic resources with social and human capital, households headed by women can maintain a middle-class lifestyle and status. Household extension seems to be a crucial strategy in the maintenance of such households. However, although we have seen that such activities are possible, in the next section we will delve deeper to investigate the social processes at work and the experiences of women who find themselves heading these households.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Childcare</th>
<th>Housework</th>
<th>Money</th>
<th>Not Used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female-Headed (N=39)</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male-Headed (N=55)</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>74.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL SAMPLE (N=94)</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>70.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Case Studies

The two households discussed in this section have been selected to demonstrate the experiences of two women, one living with her adult children and working full-time, and the other, a full-time housewife, living with her sister and brother-in-law.

Claudia, aged forty-six, is typical of many female-headed households in Colonia Reforma. She lives with her four children, of whom only one, Mercedes, is employed. The other three children aged from 17-23 are students. Claudia works in the state education department and is responsible for the posting of primary school teachers throughout Oaxaca. Originally trained as a teacher, she left work when she got married and only returned when the youngest child reached school age. Her husband left her when the children were all still at school. Her income was the only financial input into the household budget. When I asked her how she had managed during these early years as a single mother, Claudia outlined how she had attempted to maximise her income, while cutting back on what she regarded as unnecessary expenditures, including the car, full-time domestic servants and holidays. One outlay she would not compromise on was the children’s education, as she saw this as a crucial in-
vestment for the future. These initial years of single parenthood were very difficult as described by Claudia:

I took on another job to increase our income. I used to tutor secondary school pupils in the evenings, once I’d got back from the office and at the weekend…. My family was also a great help, especially my mother. She would come and look after the children when the servant was not around, and would help do the dishes if necessary…. I had decided that the children’s education was not going to suffer, but I don’t know how I would have managed without my parents’ contributions to the cost of fees and uniforms.

This quotation demonstrates the importance of utilising resources available to the household. Claudia is able to draw on her qualifications and experiences as a teacher, in this case by advertising her services through friends and colleagues. She is also able to call on the help of family members to provide both financial and practical assistance in maintaining the household. Since those early days, as the children have grown up, Claudia has been able to reduce the amount of time she spends providing extra tutoring because her eldest daughter is earning a good wage as a lawyer, and contributes a large proportion of her salary to the household budget. However, as Claudia pointed out ‘No es fácil, pero es posible’ in response to my questions about the situation today. The future looks even more hopeful, as her three sons are all coming to the end of their studies and should be able to find employment. However, whether they will contribute to the household budget is impossible to predict, as is what will happen if and when they get married.

Given her concern about the maintenance of the household and the difficulties she has faced in bringing up the children without her husband, I asked Claudia if she had ever considered another option, such as moving into her parents’ house, or even embarking on another relationship. Neither had ever been entertained as a viable proposition, the latter partly because it would be at odds with Claudia’s Roman Catholicism. She is not divorced from her husband and does not intend to agree to divorce in the future, even though her husband is living with another woman and has started a family with his new partner. What Claudia appreciates most about her current situation is the independence and her ability to control her own life:

I am my own boss, why would I want to give that up? I never really get lonely – I have my children, my family, my friends and my faith…. However, despite this positive interpretation of her situation, it is clear that there are conflicts of identity, particularly over the sometimes incompatible roles of mother and sole wage-earner. Spending so much time away from the children when they were younger, leaving them to be cared for by servants and her mother, Claudia talks of feelings of guilt. This supports what Musalem Mehry (1982) found in her qualitative study of professional women in Oaxaca City. Mexican social norms regarding appropriate gender roles and gendered identities are characterised by emphasising the mothering role for women. Although women are clearly participating in a range of non-mothering activities,
the norm of ‘good wife and mother’ is still often referred to, particularly in a place such as Oaxaca City. As outlined earlier, compared to much of the rest of Mexico, it has somewhat more conservative population.

The second case study is that of Maria, who lives with her son, her sister, brother-in-law and their two children. Maria was widowed when she was fifty-one, and her husband left her the house and a share in their clothing business. Typically for a woman of her generation and class in Oaxaca, Maria was educated to preparatoria level and then got married. Her husband’s family was in the clothing wholesale trade and once the children were of school age, Maria would occasionally help her husband. Her main occupation was, however, that of full-time housekeeper and hostess when they held parties for her husband’s business colleagues. She described her married life as one where financial pressures were not apparent:

We were always having parties…suppliers from Mexico City, Puebla or Guadalajara would come for the day and after the business was completed we would host a reception or dinner here [at home]…. We would combine business trips with holidays and went all over the place (…) We took the children to Disney World one year and always tried to get to the coast at least once a year….

Although her lifestyle has changed since her husband’s death, Maria remains a full-time housekeeper, although she retains an interest in the business even though her sons are responsible for running it. The economic crisis of the 1980s had a dramatic effect on the clothing trade, as expenditure on clothing fell as households sought to save money. However, Maria still receives some income from the business as a partner, and from one of her sons who contributes to the household budget as he still lives with his mother. The other main source of income is her brother-in-law who works in local government, although Maria did not know what his exact title was. Her sister and her husband moved into the house after the death of Maria’s husband. As Maria explained:

When Javier died, although financially we were not badly off, I did have to be careful with our expenditure. The crisis came at a bad time and our profits fell…. Although I have many friends, I missed having someone around the house. The children have their own things and they would go out leaving me alone…. My sister needed somewhere to live when she and Pedro [her husband] moved back to Oaxaca [from Monterrey] and it seemed a good idea for them to move in here. Financially it made sense and having my sister so close is very comforting.

In her attitude to motherhood and women’s roles, Maria epitomises the stereotypical Mexican upper-middle class women of her generation, putting her domestic role above any other aspects of her identity. She talked fondly of when the children were growing up and how she prided herself on her well-run home and well-behaved children. While recognising her daughter’s achievements in work, Maria also speaks with regret that she has not yet married and had children.
These two case studies exemplify the range of experiences middle-class female household heads have in Oaxaca. The households have been able to maintain their middle-class status despite the loss of the male head, but the strategies adopted have differed. The two women also differ in the constructions of identity, with Maria stressing the role of mother, while that of Claudia is a combination of mother and wage-earner. García & de Oliveira (1997) found a similar diversity of identities among Mexican middle-class women.

Conclusions

In this paper, three main themes have been discussed. Firstly, it has been established that households headed by women can survive economically in middle-class Mexico, so highlighting the heterogeneous nature of female-headed households and adding to the research challenging the notions of female-headed households as inevitably poor. Secondly, even within the middle-class group, female-headed households differ, varying with the strategies adopted in order to maintain a particular standard of living and the perceptions and experiences of the women. Household structure is of particular importance, whereby extended households and employment-aged children had the greatest impact. Different discourses of ‘appropriate behaviour’ for women are adopted; some women operate within ‘traditional’ notions of femininity and good motherhood through their position as full-time housewife, while other women engage ‘feminist’ notions of paid employment as a route to good motherhood as well as self-fulfilment.

Finally, the question of the usefulness of the category female-headed households needs to be addressed. Given the diversity of experiences within the category in the middle-class, let alone across the whole gamut of so-called ‘female-headed households’ and the definitional problems, is there any need or utility in identifying them as a separate group? In the context of household economic maintenance, it is clear that middle-class female-headed households experience particular problems in relation to money and time. While certain household configurations enable these households to survive, there is no evidence that women either can, or want to live in separate households with their school age children, that is, in the configuration most associated with single parent households. However, while these problems are recognised, it should be stressed that middle-class households headed by women are by no means homogeneous and that households are able to survive through a combination of the resources at their disposal.

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Notes

1. ‘It’s not easy, but it’s possible’, quoted by Claudia, a household head in Colonia Reforma, Oaxaca, 1992.
2. Defining a female-headed household is notoriously difficult (see Chant, 1997a; Varley, 1993, 1996). In this paper households are defined as female-headed if a woman’s partner is not co-resident (see also Chant, 1991).
3. Portes (1985) identified the problems of using ‘western’ constructions of class in Latin America and devised a five-fold division for Latin American societies. However, this fails to account for the class position of those not employed in ‘productive’ work of some kind. In this paper, class will be considered on a household basis and will include indicators of household income, education levels of head and spouse, housing quality and ownership of consumer durables.
4. While poverty has traditionally been regarded as purely an income-based phenomenon, there is increasing recognition that issues of marginality and vulnerability are also important in assessing risks to households. The range of household resources discussed in this paper recognises this broader definition of ‘poverty’. For a discussion of these issues and a consideration of the gendered nature of poverty measures, see Jackson (1996). In this paper, the term ‘household’ refers to a group of people who live on the same plot of land, share at least some of the domestic tasks and pool some of their income. The household is selected as the most appropriate unit of analysis, as it acts as a mediating agent between wider society and the individual, and for most individuals, the household provides economic and social support on an everyday basis. The contributions that individuals make to household maintenance are often regarded as representing ‘household survival strategies’ (see, Chant, 1994; Selby et al., 1990a and Wolf, 1990 for a discussion of this concept).
5. Household resources can be classified in a variety of more complex ways. For example, Rakodi (1995, 415) categorises household resources into: material goods, personal goods (time and skills), social capital (networks), social and citizenship rights, and cultural capital (information).
6. Non-monetary inputs such as subsistence agriculture and payment in kind could also be included in this category. There were no cases of middle-class households receiving this kind of input in the Oaxaca City sample.
7. The notion of ‘social capital’ has been adopted to cover a wide range of ideas and has, as Putzel (1997, 940) argues, become ‘‘all things to all people’ in a fashion not dissimilar to the fate of “human development” and “sustainable development” in recent years’. Harriss and de Renzio (1997) also demonstrate the diverse conceptualisations of ‘social capital’. A common area of disagreement is whether social capital accrues to individuals and households, or to communities (see Putzel, 1997 for a discussion of this). The former approach is adopted in this paper.
8. Maintenance in its broadest sense would include qualitative factors such as the continued provision of a supportive home environment, and the ability to survive despite potentially hostile reactions from members of the local community.
9. Gutmann (1996) suggests that low-income households in Mexico City have also been influenced by feminism in terms of attitudes to women’s employment and political participation.
10. Class dimensions in women’s participation in political activities have also been highlighted by some authors (see, for example, Tarrés, 1990 on middle-class involvement in Mexico opposition politics).
11. Between 1982 and 1987 the real minimum wage decreased by approximately 50 per cent. Government employees experienced a similar or greater loss of real income. For example, teachers received 2.0 minimum salaries in 1981, but by 1989 this had fallen to 1.3 minimum salaries (Escobar Latapí and Roberts, 1991, 104).
13. While recognising that this is only a partial solution, this was an attempt to move away from the ‘data mining’, one-sided research process that has been so criticised by feminist researchers (see Madge et al., 1997 for a summary of these debates in Geography).
14. Before the interviews and ensuing conversations women were told about my research and where it would be used. However, I am sure that this was forgotten as conversations progressed. All the quotations used were taken from tape-recorded interviews so the use of this material for the research was more explicit. I have also used pseudonyms throughout. See
Madge (1994, 95-96) for a discussion of the ethical dilemmas associated with using material gathered during conversations in the field.

15. To qualify for categorisation as a middle-class household, the households had to meet at least four of the following criteria: a per capita weekly household income of 65,000 old pesos or more (June 1992 exchange rate: US$1.00 = 3,001 old pesos); a weekly income of the head or spouse of 300,000 old pesos or more; professional employment of head or spouse; post-secondary education of head or spouse; fully-serviced dwelling and high-quality housing; a large number of consumer durables and a car less than ten years old. Income, education, employment and material goods information was reported by the female head or spouse in the questionnaire survey. Housing quality was assessed by observation.

16. In discussions of female headship very little is said about the destination of the ex-partner. Rather than setting up home by himself, men are far more likely than women to enter another co-habiting relationship. This was the case (according to the women) for all the ex-partners. See de Vos (1995) for a discussion of gender differences in household formation in Latin America.

17. As Bradshaw (1995) notes in relation to Honduras, the actual number of female-headed households, does not reflect the potential female-headed households. In the Oaxaca survey, it was clear that a number of women in male-headed households had remarried/moved in with a male partner soon after becoming a female head because they could not survive (economically, emotionally or socially) as solo household heads.

18. Muterbaugh (1998), in his study of gendered agricultural labour in Santa Cruz, Oaxaca, highlights how women’s employment is often individuating, in comparison to men who are often employed in communal activities, increasing their networking opportunities.

19. This is an educational institution between secondary school and university or college.

References

Bradshaw, S., ‘Women’s access to employment and the formation of female-headed households in rural and urban Honduras’, Bulletin of Latin American Research, 14, No.2 (1995), 143-158.


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