

Women, Society and Companies

Ángeles Espinoza Iglesias*

Strictly speaking, a society without families and without a concrete economic structure is inconceivable, and the presence of women is basic to both.

Women's role in the economy, understood as society's way of organizing itself to satisfy its need for supplies, has grown along with their access to education.

Their role is not only important in the economy. It is also basic in religion, politics and language. In primitive religions the Earth and Nature are deified and tribute is paid to fertility. The majority of cults include several feminine deities. It is sufficient to remember Coatlicue, the mother of all the gods among pre-Columbian peoples, and Minerva, who represented the essence of humanity, wisdom, in the classic Western world.

Politically, not a few peoples have lived under a matriarchy. Even today, the Western world's best known monarchy, Britain's, is headed by a woman and, curiously enough, that country's government was also run by a woman: the renowned Margaret Thatcher.

In Mexico, several women have played a central role in politics: Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez in the movement for Independence and Carmen Serdán in the 1910 Revolution are clear examples. In 1953, under the administration of President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, Mexican women's right to vote was recognized. From then on, little by little women have ventured into areas previously reserved for men.

In language, another vital social structure, it is not by chance that the first words an infant learns are

to identify its mother. This influence is so strong that the language an individual first uses to relate to others is called the "mother tongue."

Lastly, in the home, women are businesswomen. They manage common goods to satisfy day-to-day needs and to plan for tomorrow. Very often, their planning makes it possible to subsist in difficult times.

It is in the domestic sphere, women's domain, where a basic cultural principle is learned: the meaning of work. This is so important that it is possible to say that a cultural change can be made when man's attitude toward work changes. Seen as a curse from which one should liberate oneself, its effect is socially negative; if seen as a means for self-realization, similar to the exercise of freedom, it would make for a society with a work culture that would lead to success, even if it is collective, not individual, success. Lastly, seen as a means to satisfy family and individual needs, it would result in conformism. For these reasons, women's role is basic for changing this attitude, giving it richer goals not limited to simply fulfilling the most immediate material needs but including the improvement of the quality of life of those dearest to them.

Women's essence includes the attitude of sharing; men's includes competition. Among the things women share are life, food, language, religion, values and an attitude about work. They transmit their appreciation for life according to how they perceive themselves. Social improvement depends on their personal improvement, which rests on three principles:

1. that they appreciate their families;
2. that they have a profession or trade; and

* Director of the Amparo Museum.

3. that they seek the well-being of society.

With respect to the first principle, the appreciation of the family, in Mexico this value is preserved and carries great cultural weight. However, we must be alert to the influence of more developed countries which might lessen this concern for those closest to us.

With regard to the second principle, we are facing a great challenge. Educational levels are low, particularly in the poorer sectors of society. Productivity depends to a great extent on this. But, while schooling is necessary, perhaps even more important is the spirit of improvement. Someone with

a low educational level but a great desire to improve him/herself will be able to acquire the knowledge he/she will need to perform better in his/her profession or trade.

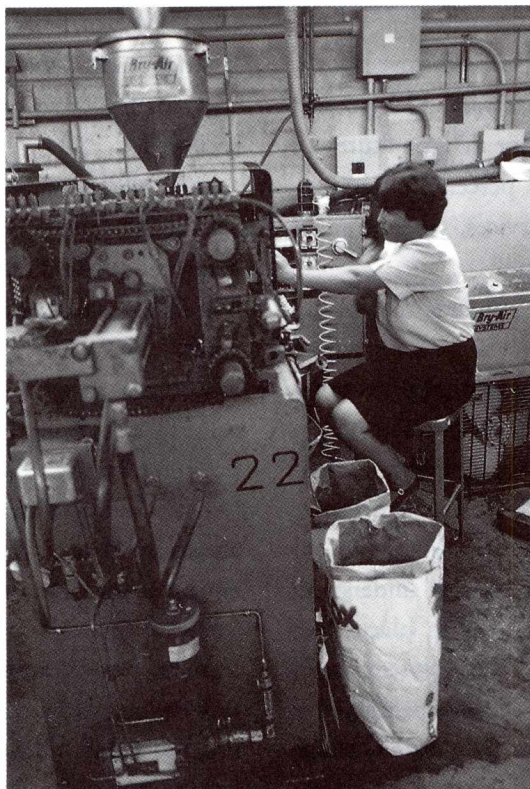
With regard to the third principle, we have to say that social well-being depends to a great extent on family well-being, which today is practically a woman's responsibility.

Until now we have mainly discussed women's role in the home, but it is important to emphasize that in the working world, women participate in ever increasing numbers.

According to the last census (1990), of Mexico's 81,249,645 inhabitants, 50.9 percent are women. Interestingly enough, there are more females in the age groups over 14 years old and more males in the younger age groups.

This distribution of the population is not strange if we consider that the unfortunate export of Mexico's workforce is generally male.

This also explains why the number of women heads of household has increased. According to specialists at the Colegio de México, 2.23 million house-



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holds in Mexico are headed by women.

On the other hand, according to the *Anuario Estadístico de América Latina y El Caribe* (The Latin American and Caribbean Statistical Yearbook) for 1994, published by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL), Mexico's economically active population ten years of age and over is 72.9 percent of the total population in that age group, as compared with 40.4 percent in 1970.

Of that number, statistics indicate that in 1970, 15.2 percent were women,

while in 1995 the figure had risen to 30.9 percent. Proportionally women are entering the work force at an increasing rate, to the point that, some firms prefer female personal to male because they are more responsible, they are absent less and they work harder. These characteristics correspond mainly to women with a low educational level who work as factory operators.

By contrast, in industries which require a high educational level, like the computer industry, for example, only 17 percent of personnel is female. In managerial posts, women are the exception in Mexico.

Participation of women in the workforce differs according to age groups: only 6.2 percent of girls between 10 and 14 years old work. This proportion rises to 35.2 percent of women between the ages of 15 and 19 and 53.4 percent of women between 20 and 29 years old. Women join the workforce in the third decade of life, between the ages of 20 and 30, which is the same period in which they establish their own families. The most viable conclusion we can come to is that this is producing a transformation in the family and the world of work in Mexico: women, who previously

worked only in the home, today combine their tasks in the home with a job in the world of productive labor.

In the different economic sectors, 32.7 percent of Mexican women workers labor in agriculture, 14 percent in industry and 53.3 percent in services. Clearly, the majority are in services, where human relations are of major importance.

All these figures lead us to conclude that we are experiencing a cultural change. The positive nature of this change depends to a great extent on companies, since every day their influence is greater on the men and women of the economically active population, the productive motor force of this country.

This change will also be positive if the general population, including men, is able to understand how women cannot be substituted in places like companies. If women share with those close to them the spirit of improvement which is indispensable for bettering all aspects of their lives, the cultural change toward quality and excellence will stop being a mere discourse and will become a reality.

In addition to the spirit of improvement, another important characteristic for achieving the cultural transformation of our country is the ability to work as a team. Women's importance in this is also fundamental, given that due to their natural inclination to cooperate instead of compete, they are more prone and able to do teamwork.

Another important facet of women's overcoming obstacles is training. It is the company's duty to organize training courses emphasizing the value of individual responsibility, particularly in a country like ours where responsibility has been diluted in the collective by the negative influence of decades of paternalistic unionism. To carry out this difficult but necessary task, women's capabilities should not be underestimated.

I will cite one example of women's capabilities of meeting challenges. In New York, in the last five years the number of women business owners has increased 255.2 percent; in Washington, D.C., this growth was extraordinary: 473.3 percent. In both cases, training programs have given optimum results. It is estimated that by the year 2000, 50 percent of businesses in the United States will be owned by women.

In Mexico, women's ability to meet challenges has still not reached this level. However, their role as protagonists has taken on real weight in all facets of our society.

For all these reasons, it is no longer possible to put off the full utilization of women's characteristics for ameliorating the difficulties of the domestic economy. The family is the most important value for the majority of Mexicans. That is where—to a great extent thanks to women's strength—it is possible to lead Mexicans to value their work more, collaborate more with the company and share its objectives.

It is not by chance that our countrymen working abroad travel more on Mother's Day (May 10), than on any other day of the year. This date is a measure of the influence of women on workers. If we take this into account, we will achieve better results in the difficult task companies face in sharing out collective tasks in order to satisfy individual needs of both the men and women who make up the society we live in. *W*

