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Women's Work and Chicano Families

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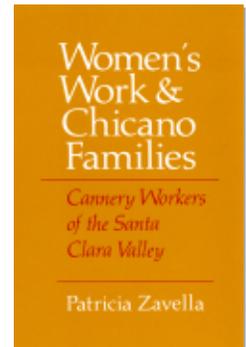
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Preface

Scholarly attention has increasingly focused on the feminization of the labor force since World War II, especially on the great increase in paid employment among women with children—a phenomenon that has been characterized as a “subtle revolution” (Smith 1979). The impact of this development on women themselves continues to be debated. Some people argue that women gain autonomy because of their new earning power; others show that women’s employment contributes to their subordination; still others hold that the gender inequality within families is reconstituted in new forms in the workplace.

Most research on women workers in the United States has overlooked Chicanas.¹ Margarita Melville (1980) has correctly noted the dearth of research on Chicanas’ participation in the labor force—a lack all the more regrettable because, at least during the decade from 1960 to 1970, the proportion of married Chicanas who entered the labor force for the first time was higher than that of white women (Cooney 1975). Recently the percentage of Chicanas who are employed or looking for work has nearly equaled that of all other women. In 1980, for example, 49 percent of Hispanic women were in the labor force, compared with 52 percent of white women. But unemployment rates have consistently been higher among Chicanas (U.S.

1. Throughout this work, the terms *Chicano* and *Mexican-American* are used interchangeably. *Chicanos* can refer to males only or to both males and females; *Chicanas* are Mexican-American women.

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Bureau of Census 1982). Hispanics are the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States,² and these statistics reflect an increasing population of Mexican-American women. At the end of World War II, Chicanos were concentrated in Southwest labor markets, which only in recent decades have expanded to provide large-scale employment for women. The growth of Chicanas' labor-force participation has brought many changes to Chicano families, changes this book will investigate.

Chicanas living in California have often found work in the fruit- and vegetable-canning industry, which has always employed many women and ethnic minority workers and has been among the most important contributors to the economy of the Santa Clara Valley, where I did my fieldwork.³ In recent years, however, the canning industry has declined until few full-time jobs are available, and even seasonal jobs are at a premium. Working conditions are archaic. These realities affect not only a woman's feelings about her work but the organization of her family life as well. This book examines the linkages between Chicano family life and gender inequality in the labor market, specifically the inequality associated with long-term seasonal employment in the canning industry.

Recent research on Chicano families has suggested that women gain power and autonomy when they become employed, and that therefore Chicano families are more "egalitarian" when wives work. Leonarda Ybarra (1977, 1982a, 1982b), for example, has claimed that such couples are more likely to have "egalitarian" values in regard to the household division of labor and to act on those values. Glenn Hawkes and Minna Taylor (1975) and Maxine Baca Zinn (1980) support this view, having found that decision making in Chicano families is shared more fully by working wives than by full-time homemakers.

2. By the turn of the century, Hispanics, 60 percent of whom are Mexican-Americans, will become the largest minority group in the country, surpassing Blacks. Between 1970 and 1980 the Hispanic population increased by 61 percent (reaching 14.6 million), while the rest of the U.S. population increased by 11 percent and Blacks by 17 percent. The Mexican-American population showed the greatest increase in this census decade, surging by 93 percent to about 8.7 million people (U.S. Bureau of Census 1983). These figures on the Hispanic population are probably too low because of the impossibility of counting accurately the many undocumented immigrants.

3. *Canning* here refers to the food-processing industry and the manufacture of canned, preserved, and frozen food.

This research, however, fails to distinguish women who hold full-time jobs from those who work part time or seasonally, as do the cannery workers I studied. Several incidents that occurred as my fieldwork began caused me to question whether the perspective of the existing research permitted adequate understanding of the impact of women's seasonal cannery work on Chicano families.

The first Chicana cannery worker I interviewed was Gloria Gonzales, who lived in San Jose's east-side barrio. Gloria invited me into her home to sit in the living room with her husband and some neighbors, who were drinking beer. I suggested that we go someplace else or arrange to meet again some other time, but she was eager to begin at once. Despite misgivings, I started to explain my interest in women workers. Gloria's husband, Frank, interrupted to announce, "Oh, she doesn't work, she just sits around the house all day." I explained that I had been told Gloria was a cannery worker. "Oh, she is," he said. I asked Gloria how long she had been working. "Twenty-four years this season," she replied. Evidently my presence and Frank's drunkenness had brought out a recurring marital conflict.

Gloria and I began an informal conversation about her job: how she had gotten it, what she did, and how she felt about it. Frank continued to drink and joke with the neighbors. Throughout our conversation, the others interjected their own commentary, teasing and arguing with one another. Their verbal jabs made it clear that Frank and Gloria had been quarreling. In the middle of our talk, Frank announced that Gloria was going to quit so that she could stay home and take care of their youngest son, who was seven years old. Gloria explained that she had the option to "freeze" her seniority and retire early, and that she planned to do so after next season: "It's better not to work, get unemployment, and you get by." But later, when I asked for her general views on employment for married women, she indicated that she placed a high value on independence: "Women *should* work outside the home, see what they can do for themselves. It brings you satisfaction to earn your own money when you're old and your husband is gone." With a glance at Frank, she laughed and said, "When I quit, I'm going to start a housewives' union."

Gloria's sally brought an abrupt end to Frank's patience, and he became abusive. Gloria, he complained, was lazy—and to support his charge he enumerated a long list of domestic chores (including

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making his dinner) that she had not completed. He was so dissatisfied with her negligence, he informed me, that they now slept apart. He then questioned my motivations and integrity, demanding to know what I was going to do with the interview information. He shouted, "You could be anybody, from the union—who knows? Gloria could get fired." When I tried to explain that I was doing independent research, he launched into a harangue about people who help "those Mexican people." He obviously did not identify himself as a "Mexican" (the term I had unfortunately used) and felt threatened by my questions. His anger was intense.

It was clear that our meeting could not continue. Gloria walked with me to my car, and we scheduled an interview in my home. She apologized profusely, emphasizing that Frank had been drinking all day. Then she rationalized: "He's awful, but he's better than nothing."

At the time I was concerned that I had precipitated the blowup, but I later concluded that I had become embroiled in an ongoing struggle over the working-wife issue: Frank wanted Gloria to quit; she planned to work one more season. My questions had broken through the facade of marital harmony normally presented to strangers. This incident revealed that when Chicanas enter the labor force, the possibilities of egalitarian family practices clash with traditional gender ideology. Why was Gloria's seasonal job still a matter of contention after so many years?

A short time later I interviewed Blanca Ramírez, who had been working the four-month season at the cannery for twenty years. Blanca was a sorter, at the bottom of the cannery job ladder. She wanted a promotion and was succinct in her appraisal of her chances of moving up: "Discrimination is blatant. If you're white or know the bosses, you last maybe a week on the line. If you're brown or a woman, you work for years and never get promoted." Blanca belonged to a group of workers who only a year earlier had won a race and sex discrimination suit against California Processors, Inc. (a canning industry association).⁴

Several weeks later, at a party attended primarily by Chicano

4. In 1976 the plaintiffs were awarded five million dollars, at that time the largest award made by the San Francisco District Court in an employment-discrimination case (*San Francisco Examiner and Chronicle*, 25 November 1979). A key victory was the removal of separate seniority lists for seasonal and full-time workers. The effect of dual seniority had been to restrict women to seasonal jobs.

cannery workers, I tried to explain my research to Mary Lou, a Chicana seasonal worker, and her Anglo husband, a plant superintendent at another cannery. As I spoke of my interest in women cannery workers, her husband interrupted: "They're all women, and they all can be replaced by a machine." After a tense silence, Mary Lou said winsomely, "Where could you find a machine that acts like me?" She tilted her head and fluttered her eyelashes. In an effort to erase tension by self-mocking silliness, she told us of the crazy things she did, and then she repeated her question. Everyone laughed at her clowning and the absurdity of the notion that a machine actually could replace Mary Lou. Most of the women present were seasonal cannery workers, and they could not have been pleased to hear this management representative callously refer to the possible loss of their jobs. His insensitivity was blatant, and so was the deference that everyone's laughter accorded him.

These incidents reveal some of my informants' conflicts as they handled the roles of cannery worker, wife, and mother. The neat correlation of paid employment with rising marital equality faded. In the workplace these women were segregated in seasonal jobs with limited access to full-time work and better working conditions, and they even faced the threat of being replaced by machines. At the same time, they had made long-term commitments to seasonal cannery jobs, which in turn had brought changes that required accommodation by family members and sometimes created problems at home.

The interview with Gloria Gonzales made apparent the continuity of traditional family norms despite her egalitarian ideas.⁵ Her husband still expected her to perform all of the housework. The couple's open conflict over her neglect of the housewife role indicated that egalitarianism did not flourish in the Gonzales home. Furthermore, as a seasonal worker who was economically dependent on her husband, Gloria had little power and low status. Interviews with other workers made it clear that these families did not easily change their attitudes and behavior to accommodate the demands of the wives' jobs. I learned about marital problems, women's misgivings about the fact that they worked, and changes in domestic arrangements which lasted

5. In my view, both partners in an egalitarian relationship have equal power and status as well as joint responsibility for economic maintenance and household chores.

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only as long as the work season. Thus family adaptation and women's seasonal cannery work seemed interrelated, and the data I collected, along with women's repeated denials that their work had any effect on their families, showed the complexity of the issue. This crucial dimension of family conflict was ignored in earlier studies of Chicano worker families. Rather than the increase in marital influence reported by these studies, I found that, to the extent that company practices keep women in "women's jobs," Chicana workers will have difficulties effecting changes at home. Like other minority women workers, Chicanas seem to be at risk, since they are concentrated in declining industries or in occupations slated for elimination because of changing technology (Kane 1973).

My approach in this book is historical and ethnographic; it aims to merge what is most valuable in existing analyses of Chicano families with a feminist perspective. In the following chapters I construct "actor-oriented" descriptions (Geertz 1973)—interpretations of informants' renditions of their experiences—but I use women's own words to convey the meanings of their actions as they manage work and family responsibilities. I know, however, that I, like any anthropologist, came away from my interviews with only partial impressions of the society I had explored, given by informants who had varied motivations for talking with me. Nevertheless, I have tried to understand these women's views of their situations, and I hope that such understanding may contribute to the betterment of the conditions that shape their lives.

My fieldwork was conducted over fifteen months during 1977–78, while I lived in the Santa Clara Valley. Most of my data come from in-depth interviews with twenty-four cannery workers and labor organizers and from their life histories. These materials are supplemented by historical research on the canning industry and participant observation in canneries and other settings frequented by cannery workers. In the course of my fieldwork, several questions emerged: Why are Chicanas concentrated in seasonal cannery jobs? How did these women become cannery workers? How do they feel about their cannery jobs? How do cannery jobs affect their families? How do Chicanas feel about being working mothers? These questions are explored in the following chapters.

As the sample in my study is small and fairly homogeneous, I make

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no claims that my findings can be applied to all Chicanos. I hope, however, that my perspective will contribute to the understanding of Chicana workers in other situations and that it will stimulate more detailed observations on Chicano families in the future. I also hope my work will be useful in comparative research on the millions of part-time and seasonal non-Chicana women workers.

This book owes much to the help and emotional support I received from many people. The labor activist Jaime Gallardo originally encouraged me to focus my research on cannery workers. He, his law partner, Amanda Hawes, and Richard Rodriguez all helped me in the initial stages of my research. Andy Lucero provided important insights during a particularly hectic period of fieldwork, and Martin Brown and Peter Philips, who were conducting research on the canning industry when I was doing fieldwork, generously shared their writings and data with me.

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