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Women's Work and Chicano Families

Patricia Zavella

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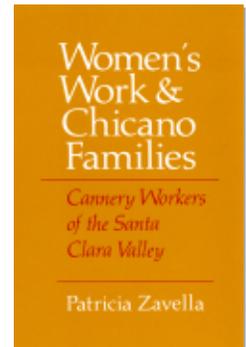
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“It Was the Best Solution at the Time”: Family Constraints on Women’s Work

Several contradictory processes occur when women decide to enter the labor market. The nature of the local labor market and the demand for women workers are the major determinants, but women’s early labor-market experiences also affect their work expectations and aspirations. The family economy—the need for sources of income and the division of household labor—is another crucial consideration. Women typically earn less wages than their husbands, which provides an economic rationale for a division of labor in which husbands support families while wives perform household duties. Women’s socialization often supports this traditional division of labor and plays an important role in occupational choice by women (Marini and Brinton 1984). Yet men’s unstable work histories or low wages may push women into the labor force. Working-class wives tend to make a greater financial contribution to family income than middle-class wives. Working-class husbands often perceive that wives gain considerable power when they work (Bahr 1974; Burke and Weir 1976), and they may feel threatened by women entering the labor market. Finally, there is women’s desire for employment, for the personal satisfaction of participating in the labor force and contributing to family income.

The decision for women to seek jobs is complex, and we need to understand the context in which the decision is made and how couples

balance the various constraints.¹ The discussion here uses interview and life-history material with women cannery workers and illustrates the cumulative process involved when Chicanas decide to enter the labor force.

Profiles

The women I interviewed represent a significant segment of Chicana workers in California. With the exception of one divorced single parent, all of my informants had been married for a number of years (see Table 4). These women had relatively large families, three to four children (except for one childless newlywed), and most resided in nuclear-family households. With the exception of two women in their twenties, most informants were between forty-five and fifty years old. The middle-aged women had been able to retain seasonal cannery jobs because of their high seniority. All of the women had some schooling, with almost half completing high school. The average length of cannery employment for these women was sixteen years. However, since many of the women worked intermittently for several years before becoming permanent workers, they had even longer experience in the canning industry. Two women had worked seasonally in canneries for more than thirty years. The jobs the women performed ranged from entry-level sorter to supervisor, or "floor lady." Only one worked year round and she was the single parent. The rest of the women worked seasonally, between three to six months a year. In the off-season, all were housewives, although one had a part-time job in a packing shed. The seasonal workers earned approximately three thousand to five thousand dollars annually. Together with unemployment benefits, which for some were as much as two thousand dollars, their contributions ranged from a third to more than a half of the total annual household income.

Vicki Gutiérrez, Luz Gálvez, Rosa Zamora, Celia da Silva, and Euleria Torres were in the stage of the domestic cycle when their children were either late adolescent or adults with families of their own. Another group of women—Connie García, María López, Gloria

1. Christine Oppong (1974) has provided a similar contextual discussion of decisions made by African elite couples that leads to a typology of decision making.

Table 4. Characteristics of Chicana informants

Informant	Age	Number of children	Position	Years of seniority	Years in industry
Women with older children					
Luz Gálvez	48	5	"Floorlady"	29	29
Euleria Torres	53	2	Case-off operator	18	21
Vicki Gutiérrez	46	1	"Floorlady"	27	31
Celia da Silva	50	4	Oiler-greaser	28	32
Rosa Zamora	46	3	Sorter	10	10
Women with school-age children					
Lupe Collosi	36	3	Sorter	12	15
Josie Flores	36	3	Sorter	9	9
Connie García	44	3	Shipping checker	16	22
Estela Gómez	47	3	Quality control checker	24	24
Gloria Gonzales	44	4	Line checker	24	24
María López	38	6	Sorter	4	13
Women with preschool or no children					
Lisa Hernández	24	6	Sorter	2	10
Teresa Maldonado	46	6	Sorter	3	10
Blanca Ramírez	41	4	Sorter	16	18
Cristina Estrada	27	-	Sorter	2	2

Gonzales, Lupe Collosi, Estela Gómez, and Josie Flores—had school-aged children. Blanca Ramírez, Teresa Maldonado, and Lisa Hernández had children under the age of five. Only Cristina Estrada had no children.

For the most part, these women were Mexican-Americans who were born in the United States. Six of them—Lisa, Connie, Vicki, Estela, Lupe, and María—were third-generation Chicanas; that is, both they and their parents were born in the United States. Blanca, Euleria, Teresa, and Cristina were born in Mexico and migrated to the United States as adults. I did not ask them directly, but my impression was that these four Mexican women migrated “with papers,” that is, legally. Unlike the others, the four women spoke mainly in Spanish, and our interviews were conducted in Spanish with a few English phrases. In terms of ethnic identification, there was variation. Connie and Lisa preferred the term *Chicana*. The other women used *Mexican* or *Mexican-American* interchangeably, even occasionally using the more euphemistic term *Spanish* (as opposed to *Mexican*), depending on the topic of discussion. Gloria, who was born in Arizona, preferred *Spanish*, whereas the Mexican-born women called themselves *mexicanas* or *Mexicans*.²

Five women are very important in this study: Vicki Gutiérrez, Lupe Collosi, Blanca Ramírez, Gloria Gonzales, and Connie García. Each was selected for her position in the domestic cycle, for her type of job, and for her general political views. Since they represent types of female informants encountered in the field, the chapters in this book focus on their experiences more than those of the others. Each deserves an introduction. Following this, all of the women’s experiences before entering the cannery labor market are discussed.

Vicki Gutiérrez

Forty-six-year-old Vicki Gutiérrez grew up during the Depression in the agricultural San Joaquin Valley. The oldest of five children, she was born in the United States, her parents having emigrated from Mexico. She considered herself a Mexican-American, although occasionally she used the term *Spanish-American*. Vicki was bilingual,

2. The terms *Mexican-American* and *Mexican* are used most frequently by persons of Mexican descent to identify themselves ethnically. See J. García 1981.

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but her primary language was English. Her parents were poor farm workers. Her father had also worked on a temporary basis in a packing shed, where she was allowed to accompany him. She attended high school but had no diploma. Vicki was first married at age fifteen to a young man she met at the cannery. She differed from the other women in that she was trained as a dental assistant because her terminally ill first husband had insisted that she gain skills to support herself after his death. She knew that if she were to lose her job, "I'm always going to have that." Yet she continued to do cannery work. Her second husband was a mechanic, who with a partner owned his own shop. Vicki and her second husband had been married for twenty years when I met her, and they lived in a small, tastefully furnished house in East San Jose. They had one son, who lived alone and was a sales clerk at a major retail outlet in San Jose.

Vicki started working in the canning industry in 1947 at the age of fifteen as a sorter and line checker. To get the job, she lied about her age, claiming to be sixteen. Except for one year off, when her son was born, she had worked steadily as a seasonal cannery worker for thirty-one years, twenty-seven of them in the same plant. At one point she was working at three jobs to put her second husband through school. She had worked the past three years as a floorlady, a job she enjoyed, earning \$5.80 an hour.

Vicki was a warm, plump, friendly woman, with impeccably coiffed hair. She kept frequent contact with her many friends. (The phone calls kept interrupting our interviews.) She was also close to her three sisters, who lived in San Jose. She seemed lonely during the off-season and enjoyed talking with me. I met her at a party, and she was very helpful in my research. She offered to take me to a union meeting and referred me to other women. Vicki marveled at the idea of a book on cannery workers; as she said, "You *never* see a book about cannery workers." She was obviously pleased to help me, even while being conscious of our educational differences. At one point she told me: "You should work in the cannery so you can see. You won't be stuck working in the cannery for the rest of your life and think, 'God, am I going to be like that?' You'll realize how lucky you are to have an education." I often found myself wondering about her—how could she like her job so much? Yet I liked her and felt comfortable talking with her. I interviewed her twice in person, a total of four and a half hours on tape, and once by telephone.

Vicki represents those women whose children are grown and have moved away. She also represents women who acknowledge that some things need to be changed but are relatively satisfied with their jobs and have few complaints about the union. She preferred seasonal work: "I like some free time; we work six months and stay home six months. I like to draw my unemployment—and it's all tax-free money." She made fifty-eight hundred dollars in wages and twenty-four hundred dollars in unemployment benefits in 1977. "The money's real good." Her husband did not want her to work full time, but he had adapted to her seasonal employment. She therefore had few problems with her husband regarding her job.

Lupe Collosi

The youngest of six children, Lupe Collosi was thirty-six years old and from San Jose. Her father was a construction worker and her mother a homemaker. Lupe's father was born in Mexico, and her mother was born in Los Angeles. Lupe identified herself as "Mexican-American, and although she was bilingual, she preferred English. She graduated from high school, had some clerical training, and met her husband, who was a truck driver, in a local nightclub and married him when she was twenty-three. They had two daughters and a son, all between the ages of six and twelve. Lupe's husband did not like the fact that she worked, and they had separated for a while but were recently reconciled. She lived in a large, wood-frame house in the San Jose foothills, surrounded by orchards.

Lupe had held a number of clerical positions and had worked a total of fifteen seasons in the canning industry. She also had worked in a packing shed during the off-season and had worked for twelve years seasonally at one cannery, where she was a line checker. Like many others (if not Vicki), Lupe was dissatisfied with her job but needed the money to support her school-age children.

Lupe made about four thousand dollars in wages during the 1977 season and then received about one hundred dollars a week in unemployment benefits. Depending on the level of unemployment in the state, unemployment benefits may be extended beyond the usual limit of twenty-six weeks. With full extensions, Lupe sometimes received unemployment compensation until June, when she started

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working again at the cannery. Her total annual income was more than six thousand dollars.

I met Lupe at a party. She was a warm, likable woman with a wan face but a ready smile. She rarely sat still. The first time I interviewed her, it was more of a running conversation in which she would suddenly sit down to ponder a question, reflect a few moments, and then, after her response, rush off to yet another little chore. She served me coffee in the midst of watching a pot roast and then collected some dishes into the sink, dashed off to find her old pay stub so that I could see how much money she made, planted kisses and gave instructions to her children, and rushed off to work. I thoroughly enjoyed my time with her.

The next visit with Lupe was less hectic. Later it was necessary to call her to clarify certain points, but she always seemed to be busy. She saw her kin regularly but had little time for friends. She saw me as a role model for her children and a source of advice and information. She also was enthusiastic about my research and offered to do whatever she could to help me. For example, she referred me to other informants, one woman in particular whom Lupe hoped would give me a different perspective than the one she had provided. At first Lupe wondered, "Why do you want to talk to *me*?" Later she expressed her pride in my efforts to write a book on cannery workers and stressed that I should feel free to call on her again for anything.

Blanca Ramírez

I was referred to Blanca Ramírez by another cannery worker. Blanca was forty-one years old and was born in Mexico in 1937. She was one of three children and her father was a *campesino* (peasant); her mother, a homemaker, was born in Mexico and still lived there. Blanca identified herself as a *mexicana* and could read and write Spanish well, having graduated from high school in Mexico. She had been a white-collar worker in Mexico before coming to the United States and had met her husband, an American citizen, in Mexico, later moving with him to San Jose; he was a full-time cannery worker at the time of the interview. They had four children, of whom the youngest was four years old and the oldest was a teenager, and Blanca therefore represents women with preschool children. She had worked in canneries beginning in 1960 and had sixteen years of seniority. But

she worked primarily for the income and disliked her job. Their modest house in the foothills of San Jose was paid off partially with Blanca's cannery wages, and she was very proud of this, as she pointed out: "Aunque es chiquita, mi casa es bien pagada, y es muy mía" (Even though it's small, my house is paid off, and it's completely mine). She and her husband had been active in labor politics for many years. Although she had few kin in the area, she visited regularly with friends and *comadres* from work. (*Comadres* are bound to each other as mother and godmother of the same child.)

A sharp, articulate woman, Blanca did not mince her words; she was known for voicing her mind during meetings. She was a fair-skinned woman—they called her *la güera* (the fair one)—who also had many health problems. Our interviews were conducted primarily in Spanish, and she was cordial to me and pleased to help out. At the end of our first interview she noted: "Once you get me started I could talk for hours." Her husband nodded. Blanca hoped that by talking with me some change in plant conditions would come about. As we got to know each other during the Cannery Workers Committee union election campaign, she often asked for my advice and called on me to help her with various chores. I originally felt sympathetic toward Blanca and even depressed after our first interview because of her unhappiness and lack of options. Later I could also feel impatient with her, for she could be domineering while working with others.

Gloria Gonzales

Forty-four years old and with school-aged children, Gloria Gonzales was born in Arizona in 1934. Her parents were also born in the United States and were farm workers. For the first ten years of her life, Gloria was a migrant worker's child, following the crops with her family. She worked in the fields along with her nine brothers and sisters. Gloria remembered moving to San Jose when there were still orchards nearby and recalled how beautiful the area had been. Her family settled in one of the Eastside barrios, where she has lived ever since. She spoke bilingually, moving back and forth in Spanish and English, and she referred to herself as "Spanish."

Gloria graduated from San Jose High School, where she met her husband, Frank. He then dropped out of school and went into construction work. They now have four children, three of whom are

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married with families of their own; only their seven-year-old son lives with them.

Gloria started working in canneries in 1954 and had twenty-four years of seniority. In the off-season she also worked as a cafeteria helper at an elementary school. For five years she had been working as a line checker, grading cans for quality and keeping records for the buyer. She told me her job title with some pride. Lab work is preferred over sorting, which Gloria had done during her previous years at a large cannery. Gloria preferred seasonal over full-time work and claimed that she worked only to gain her retirement benefits.

Gloria and Frank had purchased their small frame house on the Eastside and later had another house built at the rear of their property. Frank was able to do much of the work himself. They rented the second house for a third source of income. Because she worked, they could afford a new car every three years; the car belonged to Gloria since her husband did not drive.

The Gonzaleses had few friends—as Gloria explained, “I’m a loner.” They socialized with their neighbors, a young Chicano couple who had a preschool daughter. The wife took care of Gloria’s son during the canning season. But mainly Gloria and Frank socialized with family—their grown children and grandchildren and other kin in the area. Gloria’s oldest son stopped by daily either on his way to or from his job.

Gloria was attractive—slim, lightly made up, usually dressed in a bright pantsuit. She sat quietly with her hands folded during our two interviews and seemed reticent and shy, steering the discussion away from sensitive issues. During the first interview she told me about her job and how much she liked it: it paid well and was not difficult, and if you ran into any problems the union was always there to help. Frank sat with a look of disgust on his face; finally he blurted out, “Ah come on, your job is no good. They work you like a pig. You always used to come home with your back hurting.” They were both right. Gloria did not like her job as sorter and was pleased that she had gotten a promotion. She preferred to emphasize her current job and working conditions, rather than dwell on her difficult former position. Thus during the second interview, when I came back to working conditions on the line, she often disclaimed dissatisfaction, with statements such as, “Sure it gets cold in there during the winter, but you can always wear a sweater.” Yet much of what she said was

interesting and revealing. Gloria originally agreed to “help me out,” consenting to an interview as a favor to a friend. She did not show much interest in my research on women workers, and I felt distanced from her, wondering how she could tolerate her husband’s apparent verbal abuse.

Connie García

Also born during the Depression, Connie García, forty-four years old, was the oldest of six brothers and sisters. Her parents were both born in the United States, and Connie, who was born in a small town in southern California, considered herself a “Chicana.” She spoke primarily in English but was bilingual. Her parents were farm workers, and her mother worked in a cannery. The family had settled in northern California, following the crops. Connie attended high school for a while and worked in the local cannery after school, beginning at the age of fourteen. Like Vicki, Connie also lied about her age, claiming to be sixteen years old. At seventeen she married a friend who was a cannery worker in the Santa Clara Valley. They moved to the northern part of the valley because he worked there, and Connie got a job in another cannery. She had also worked in numerous clerical and sales jobs and worked sporadically in canneries from 1948 on. In all, she had stayed home for only about two years while bringing up her three children. She had sixteen years of seniority at her current cannery job.

When I met Connie, she was the single parent of two sons and a daughter who were twenty, fourteen, and eight years old. They lived in a tract house with beautiful landscaping, and Connie planted and attended the many flowers and trees herself. She was divorced in 1975, worked full time as a shipping checker, had been a political organizer since the early 1970s, was a founding member of a workers’ caucus, and participated in a lawsuit against the union and companies. She also ran for a major office in a local union election. Connie was critical not only of the work situation but also of women’s traditional role in the family.

Connie had extensive ties with friends but only minimal contact with her kin, who lived several hours away. She was highly intelligent, tense, a chain smoker, and solidly built, with a deep, resonant voice. She was opinionated and articulate, quickly making judgments on

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varied topics. Our recorded interviews were fast paced. Having made many speeches, Connie was used to being interviewed by the local press. She thought some of my questions naive, even silly—"I went to work because I had to!"—and perhaps they were.

I was referred to Connie by a lawyer friend and interviewed her three times, for a total of ten and a half hours. I always came away feeling I had learned a lot. Connie was very helpful with my research and spent numerous hours explaining things, heaping documents and newspaper articles on me. Her experience in the lawsuit against the union and companies and in labor organizing forced her to consider how best to change conditions in the workplace. Connie was cynical concerning the value of a book on cannery workers, but even so, I felt close to her and came away with great respect for her.

Childhood

Most of the women informants had known poverty in childhood, their stories were of struggles to get by, not the least because they typically came from large families. Most resided in nuclear-family households throughout their childhood, with occasional periods in which grandmothers or other relatives resided with them. As children and young adults, they had to contribute to family income by working. They also took care of younger siblings while their parents worked. The American-born women had fathers who worked as farm workers or in unskilled jobs in packing sheds, factories, or construction. Mexican-born women had fathers who were *campesinos*, or petty entrepreneurs. Except for seasonal farm or cannery work, their mothers usually did not work for wages.

Almost all informants had worked in the fields along with their parents. Connie García, who began her work pattern while young, stated: "We all worked out in the fields when we were kids. My parents were not very educated so the only thing they knew how to do was work out in the fields. And of course my mother used to have to drag us along because there was nobody to babysit; the whole family was out in the fields. That was typical of those days. The majority of us *mexicanos* and Chicanos worked out in the fields." Vicki Gutiérrez recalled extreme poverty and instability, but she had positive views regarding her early work experiences: "When I was ten,

we got to work in the fields during the war; we got to learn how to pick tomatoes and peas. A truck used to come to pick up all the teenagers and kids because they needed help. I was earning thirty-eight dollars a week. I thought that was real good. So I bought my own bike and school clothes. And we thought it was a lot of fun. I don't say that we went out and got rich, but it didn't kill us."

Moving the whole family in search of work was a common experience. Most women moved to the Santa Clara Valley as teenagers or young adults. The effect of uprooting and traveling hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles rendered childhood a blur of names and places. Many women lost touch with childhood friends. They assumed adult roles early and experienced few if any years of ordinary childhood activities. Rosa Zamora quit school after the fourth grade because of her family's moves; she wistfully recalled: "When I was a little girl, I wanted to go to school so much, Pat! But I couldn't because we were poor." Rosa had to stay home and care for her younger siblings as well as work in the fields. She characterized her life then as "terrible."

Along with having to contribute to their families' income, the women learned female skills that would be applied in later years as wives and mothers. Connie described her training: "My mother is a real lady. She believes you must know how to cook, wash, clean house, crochet, embroider, knit, and do all that good stuff, besides working out in the fields." Vicki's socialization was similar: "My mother taught us to be young ladies, how to cook, clean, be clean with our bodies, speak Spanish, and take care of our money, to be a little thrifty." In describing her childhood, María sighed, "My job was to make tortillas—*every day*." With a touch of pride, Rosa described the traditional roles of her parents: "My father was very strict, very authoritarian. Whatever he said went. He was very strong, very macho. He came from Mexico and believed in hard work. They don't make men like that any more. My mother was the opposite. She was very warm, loving." Consistent with this, Lisa Hernández described her family's division of labor: "My father didn't do anything around the house; my mom did it all." These backgrounds of conventional divisions of labor in the family conditioned later expectations of married life.

Typically, work histories that began in childhood were carried over into adolescence and adult life. Although sixteen was the legal age for

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full-time work, many of the women lied about their age and began working in the cannery at the age of thirteen or fourteen. Connie explained: "When my mother went to work in the cannery, I worked right along with her. Then I worked at a frozen food place and the cannery nights when I was going to school. And when I got married [at age seventeen] we moved over here. And of course knowing cannery work, I went to work at the cannery here."

Thus lasting economic orientations were formed early in childhood. As Vicki noted: "When you grow up in a small town, you have a chance to do these things [farm work]; you learn what the penny's all about." Other experiences, such as racism in the schools, influenced adult perspectives. Connie bitterly recalled being treated differently from her schoolmates and being punished for speaking Spanish. "The Mexican kids were herded like animals to check their heads for lice. Everyone had it at one time or another, but they never checked the gringos! And they would question the Mexican boys about saying nasty things to the gringo girls, but they never questioned the nasty things that the gringo boys said to the Mexican girls." Her early experiences of discrimination would sharpen Connie's sensitivity to the way Anglos treated Chicano workers in the cannery.

It appears that the girls of the fields and canneries had role models in the adult men and women who struggled to make ends meet. Blanca saw her organizing activities continuing the family tradition, since her father became a respected labor leader in Mexico. For Connie, it was her mother who commanded special respect: "There are some little die-hards like my mother who's going on sixty-two, but she won't retire until she's sixty-five. She's a strong woman. She's very active and enjoys working. And now that we're all grown and married the only thing she knows is how to work."

The recurrent themes in their early lives—large traditional, migrant families accustomed to hard work in the fields, poverty, and experiences of ethnic oppression—created a general attitude that life was difficult. The women carried a legacy of hard work and the need for perseverance into their adult years.

Early Married Life

As they matured, these women often sought relief from the difficult conditions. Young men left home for short periods to work and seek adventure, but women were more constrained, and they often chafed

under the restrictions. Rosa's father, for example, wouldn't allow her to date. When she went to the movies with girlfriends, she had to be home early. She recalled hating her father and eloping because "I felt trapped." Other women, however, were allowed some freedom with their friends. Vicki often went "nightclubbing" in San Francisco, for example. Most women met their spouses through mutual friends. Cristina Garza and her husband, both reared in Mexico, met while strolling in the plaza, as is customary. At sixteen they became sweethearts and married; later they moved to San Jose and worked in different canneries. Other couples met at the cannery, and they married young, around age sixteen, and began having children soon thereafter. Along with the usual hopes for happiness and romance, and perhaps escape, most couples sought, in marriage, lives more settled than those of their parents.

The early years of marriage were times of mutual adjustment to the traditional notions of family stressed during their socialization. My informants were sometimes overzealous in their attempts to fulfill the image of a good wife. By the time she was twenty-two, María López, who was reared in South Texas and married at fifteen, had five children.

I was the one! I don't know why I was like that. I had all the kids little, and I used to keep the house spotless—I'd mop in the mornings and in the evenings. I'd start dinner an hour early, so everything would be ready when Víctor came home. He'd just walk in and go straight to the table, and I'd serve him. Everything would still be steaming hot. And we'd all sit down and eat. Then he'd watch TV or whatever, and I'd clean the kids' faces, change their clothes, and put them to bed. Then I'd wash the dishes. I was busy working all day long, and I didn't have to! Victor would tell me, "María don't work so hard. You don't have to do so much." But I felt that I had to.

María would customarily lay out her husband's clothes with the rationale: "He expected to be waited on hand and foot by the woman. He felt that women are there to serve the man. And that's the way I was raised too. My mother did everything for my father." Many women related similar incidents of catering to their spouses or keeping spotless homes with little help from the men. Women expected and even welcomed their child-care responsibilities. María was defensive about this: "I don't think that we should take turns taking care of the kids when they're sick. I feel like that's my responsibility. *I'm*

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responsible for them 24 hours a day. And if they're sick I couldn't let him take care of them. No, do you think he's going to worry about them all day long?" In accordance with this traditional outlook, husbands reciprocated by providing for their families. Women expected marriage to be this way. As Connie remarked, "That's the way it's always been."

María's beliefs about the traditional division of labor are illustrated in a classic argument she had with her brother-in-law, who was also reared in South Texas.

The other day Ray began talking about how women's work is easier than men's work: "Women just sit around the house and watch TV."

So I asked, "Ray what time do you get up to go to work?"

He said, "At 7:30."

I said, "I see, you go to work at 8:00."

He nodded.

"And what time does Linda get up?"

"6:30."

"So when you get up she is already working, making tortillas, making breakfast, coffee, and making your lunch. And then after you've gone she has to wash the dishes, and take care of the kids, and wash and iron, and make something to eat for her and the kids. Then you get out at five o'clock, and already by four o'clock you are getting ready to come home. You know that you don't work very hard that last hour.

"But for the woman, that is when her work has just begun. She has to make dinner and have it ready so that when you get home, she can serve you right away. And then after dinner you go watch TV or whatever. She still has to wash the dishes, get the kids ready for bed, make sure they're clean and covered. And you've already been relaxing for two hours. So the woman puts in more hours than you do."

María has made an effective argument, pointing out the wife's work contribution. She did not want to claim that women's work was more important, however, just equal. So when her brother-in-law responded that men have more responsibilities, she agreed: "A man has the responsibility to bring in the money para hacer los pagos [to make the payments]. And he has to make sure that he has a job. A woman doesn't have that responsibility. If she works, fine; if not, it's

all right. So, yes the man has more responsibility, but he doesn't work harder than the woman." María was pleased that she had won the argument.

It was rare to find women like Connie, who felt unhappy with traditional expectations and deference to husbands. After her divorce, Connie recalled:

I found myself doing things that I didn't agree with. I'd tell the kids: "Be quiet because your father's asleep, and he's tired and he needs his rest." I'd make a meal and leave something for him to warm up. I always had this feeling, "Well he's the daddy; and you respect the daddy, so I'd better make the kids be quiet, and I'd better cook his meals," or whatever. He's a grown man; he could do things for himself. But you're taught to do these things without thinking, because he's the man of the house. It's inbred into you.

Connie's independence, along with a variety of jobs, enabled her later to gain a different perspective on home life. This lack of isolation probably contributed to her frustration with traditional roles.³

Few of the conflicts that arose in the early years of marriage were over role expectations. Husbands and wives expected that women would not have to work. Although some women worked during the first few years of marriage, almost all quit after their children were born. These early patterns of behavior would later become a source of adjustment or conflict when the wife went to work and could no longer meet her family members' needs in the manner in which they had grown accustomed.

The first years of married life usually were the hardest economically. Most informants had difficulties establishing a home, bringing up children who were born in quick succession, and handling the husband's unstable work histories. The women's husbands worked in low-paying, unskilled jobs—in construction, packing sheds, farm work, canneries, or other factories. These were the lean years of stretching the paycheck to make ends meet. Rosa's husband also worked in the cannery part time, and his other job was that of a part-time clerk. She described how they managed: "When your husband

3. Mirra Komarovsky (1962) and Lillian Rubin (1976) have pointed out that socially isolated couples maintain closer agreement on marital norms than when they have outside activities or organizational affiliations.

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doesn't have a steady job, you do things. Like we used to have a freezer, and we used to make pretty good money in the summer time. I'd stock my freezer with all the essentials; then in the winter time we'd just skimp by on unemployment." Blanca Ramírez related a similar situation:

When we got married, we lived in a tiny house; we paid \$25 rent. I was pregnant with my first son and was sick because I had a difficult pregnancy. And we didn't have a washing machine, we didn't have a car, and we had to go real far to wash clothes. And since we didn't have money for the dryer, we had to bring the clothes home to dry. And my poor husband didn't have a job. He could only work one or two days out of the week. He was getting unemployment, \$39 a week, and we just couldn't make it.

Not being able to "make it" came from the hardship of low wages when work was available and even less when men were laid off. These years created pressures for the wife to help out. Some tried taking in ironing or doing babysitting for others at home, with the children around. But the meager income did not suffice, so the only alternative was to look for a job.

Deciding to Seek Work

Virtually all of the women originally sought work for economic reasons. The actual decision was made after careful deliberation with husbands, although in several instances women had to argue their cases. Some men viewed working wives as a symbol of their own shortcomings as providers. Others worried about the effects on the children or household.⁴ In exchange for husbands' support, women agreed to certain restrictions. Lupe succinctly gave the reason for beginning her job search: "I did it for my family. We needed the money. Why else?" Yet as Lupe recalled, her husband "at first never wanted me to work," so she made some concessions. "He put pretty

4. Generally, husbands' attitudes are very influential when married women decide to enter the labor force. See Nieva 1985.

strict conditions for me to get a job. He wouldn't allow me to work nights or take the kids out of the house [for child care]."⁵

For some of my informants, the decision to seek a paid job was also an assertion of their independence.⁶ Despite the dire situation of Blanca's family, her husband opposed the suggestion of her working: "He told me that he wanted a woman for his home and not to go to work. But I went anyway to help him, even though he didn't want me to." After long days spent looking for a job, Blanca recalled her husband's advice: "He said, 'Don't go back, you're not going to find a job anyway.'" Blanca shrugged: "Tú sabes que en este mundo, uno tiene que cuidarse a sí mismo" (You know that in this world one has to take care of oneself). Luz Gálvez also went against her husband's wishes: "At first he did mind, when the kids were small. We used to have a lot of arguments. But I went anyway." Rosa was able to persuade her husband to support her entrance into the labor market: "My husband didn't want me to work, period. But I convinced him."

Theoretically, taking a job against the husband's wishes could have jeopardized the marriage. However, several factors mitigated the husbands' opposition. Given the precariousness of their situations, the husbands could not legitimately argue against their wives going to work. Consequently, their protests may have masked their unstated desire to have wives enter the labor force. Indeed Víctor López wanted María to work (while she was pregnant with their sixth child), with the idea that it would be a temporary solution until he found a job. But he said he did not like the idea and grumbled about it.

Married women with children had conflicting demands once they decided to get jobs. Working mothers had to find time to care for their families, yet spend long hours away from home. Recall the independent views expressed by Gloria Gonzales—"Women *should*

5. Recent research on Chicano and Mexican families suggests that working wives have greater influence on decision making than housewives. See Hawkes and Taylor 1975, Zinn 1980, and Ybarra 1982b. Bean, Curtis, and Marcum (1977) have found conjugal decision making to be husband-dominant for almost half (45 percent) of their Chicano sample, which was a slightly higher percentage than in the Anglo sample. They did not ask who made the decision for the wife to work, however, which would probably have altered the findings.

6. Women who decide to enter the labor force tend to be more independent. Myra Ferree's (1976) study of working-class women shows that employed women tend to support the notion of women taking jobs despite the husbands' opposition, whereas housewives tend to defer more to husbands' wishes.

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work outside the home, see what they can do for themselves.” Yet when asked why she had entered the labor force, she replied, “It was for my kids’ benefit that I got a job and not for anything else. My family comes first.” Her husband’s opposition and her children’s needs at home prevented her from seeking a full-time job. By evoking traditional family ideology—“my family comes first”—she could rationalize her seemingly nontraditional actions and minimize her own independence. This would be necessary only for women who believed men should support families.⁷

Lisa and Teresa, both with very young children, had little choice in the matter since they desperately needed jobs. Euleria, Estela, and Cristina’s husbands did not object when they went to work since these families needed an additional source of income.

The women did not carry out the job search through formal agencies. They were acutely aware of their limited education, lack of marketable skills or training, and, for a few, limited English. Their past experience as farm workers or as domestics provided no skills for better-paying jobs. They knew, as Chicanas, they faced discrimination in hiring. As a consequence, their job expectations were minimal: “When I started, I was looking for *anything*,” Luz recalled. “I thought, ‘there has to be something better than the fields.’”

Local labor needs dictated the jobs they would find. Having to take what they could get, women who entered the Santa Clara Valley labor force after World War II found agriculturally related employment readily available. Vicki recalled: “This was all the type of work there was. Either you would work in the packing house, or you went to work in the canneries. There was no other employment, really, and there was no problem getting a job then [in 1947].” Luz, who entered the cannery in 1949, had an easy time also: “After the war they really didn’t care about age.” These women’s experiences were congruent with the post-World War II expansion in production, which created plenty of cannery jobs. The need for labor was so great that Vicki could stretch the truth and get hired: “They wanted people with experience in apricots, so I raised my hand even though I didn’t have any experience. I was scared but I got the hang of it right away.”

As we have seen, beginning in the late 1950s the need for cannery

7. Glenn Hawkes and Minna Taylor (1975) have found that among Chicano and Mexican couples, the decision for the wife to work is made jointly 49 percent of the time and by the women only 26 percent of the time.

labor declined. By 1960 when Blanca applied, jobs were scarce.⁸ She described her experience: "I waited all day long, from six in the morning until sometimes eight at night. You couldn't even go for a cup of coffee because while you were gone they would take other people. I waited like this for two and a half weeks." María, who was twenty-five and had small children, also had a hard time in 1965 and was ready to give up: "Ya decidí a batallar no más que un día más" (I decided to struggle only one more day). Lisa and Cristina, who had only two years seniority when I interviewed them, had relatives who got them in.

Once the process of seeking cannery work began, one was subject to the industry's informal means of labor recruitment. Gossip networks were the usual way workers found out about job openings. With only word-of-mouth reports that canneries were hiring, crowds appeared outside company gates to wait in the hot sun. Since there are no union hiring halls, getting a job in the cannery was similar to the "shapeups," or casual assemblies of laborers to secure jobs, that farm workers endured before unionization (Galarza 1977). This could be a demeaning experience since there were no standard criteria for how people were chosen for this unskilled work. Once she was selected, Blanca described her "interview": "I didn't even know English. They asked me questions, and I said 'yes' and 'yes' and 'yes'. And with nothing but 'yeses' they gave me work."

By the 1977-78 seasons when I participated in the cannery shapeups, it was almost impossible to get a job. The majority of the job applicants were men, and from the indications of dress, accents, and the use of Spanish slang, most of them were from Mexico. Many of these job hunters were accompanied by kin, neighbors, or friends. I struck up a conversation with a woman from Tijuana after we accompanied one another to the water faucet in the midst of a boisterous group of men. A great deal of laughing and joking went on, but it did not mask the intensity of hoping. Any indication of work possibilities—the offhand word of a secretary going to lunch, a passing friend who heard that "they'll need people on the swing shift in the warehouse"—was quickly circulated and evaluated. Sometimes just a

8. There is also evidence that cannery workers preferred to be hired by other workers rather than off the streets, because this method provided a more stable work force. The use of seniority after unionization consolidated the existence of a long-term seasonal labor pool. See Brown 1981:83.

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small handwritten sign, "Hiring at 4:00," created minor traffic jams and much frustration when the "hiring" did not happen. The competition for jobs was stiff; people crowded elbow to elbow on the steps of personnel offices waiting for a chance to be hired. Although a few canneries recruited unskilled labor through the employment office, a referral was no guarantee of an interview, much less a job. I observed applicants with job referrals from the employment office waiting along with the rest of us.

The informal recruitment method allowed a great deal of leeway in hiring, and this sometimes led to abuse as in Jesse Valenzuela's experience. During the Depression he had lied about his ethnicity and had claimed to be the brother-in-law of a worker in order to get hired in the cannery. One Japanese-American informant, who was hired after returning from an internment camp, had to get a job counselor to pressure the cannery to hire her. (For the first month, her job was peeling onions in the basement with other Japanese-American women, isolated from the rest of the workers.) Most of my informants were lucky enough to have friends or relatives working in a cannery and secured jobs with their help. After enduring the shape-up, or having to resort to other means, most women felt lucky to get a job at all. Josie expressed the common feeling of relief after getting her job in the cannery: "It was worth it."

Child Care

Husbands often helped to take care of the children when the women worked. Couples tried to arrange their shifts so that one parent would be home at all times, or they relied on an older child to care for their siblings. Estela claimed that "it's easy to work with young children." Since she started working on the swing shift (3:30 P.M. to 11:30 P.M.) and then switched to graveyard (midnight to 7:00 A.M.), she was home to take care of her children during the day: "It worked out better when the kids were small." Rosa worked nights for four years while her husband took care of the children. She was relatively satisfied with this arrangement: "The kids were real good. Oh they'd tattle, 'Mommy he did this . . . ' but it was more convenient for us. They knew I was there at home [during the day] if they needed me." Josie said: "I have three children aged seven to eleven, and I can't afford

to pay fifty dollars a week for a babysitter. So I can only work when my husband will be there to take care of them." When Teresa started to work, she had her sixteen-year-old daughter take care of the younger children while she worked days in the summer, until she was able to change her shift: "They could do it [take care of the younger children when they were not in school themselves], but I felt like my boys needed me when the girls weren't there." When she started working nights, her husband took over. Lupe did not have this option: "A lot of fathers cooperate; they are home nights when the mother has to work. My husband was not like that." Estela's husband, however, did not want her to work nights, and she had to change to the day shift so she could be home with her children.

If it was impossible for the family members to trade off work hours, arranging child care could become a major problem. The single San Jose agency that placed children in family day care in private homes had a waiting list of more than three hundred and fifty children in the spring of 1977. Except for a short-lived cannery child-care center in operation during World War II, federal- and state-funded child-care centers were not widely available until the midsixties in the Santa Clara Valley. (This was the case throughout the nation [Baxandall 1975; Wolk-Feinstein 1979].) Given the limited availability of formal day-care agencies, women were forced to make other arrangements. Contrary to findings for Mexican-Americans in other studies, it was unusual for my informants to rely on kin for babysitting.⁹ Lisa was one of the few women who had a relative take care of her children. Euleria did not have to worry about child care, since her mother lived with them and took care of her children. By the time her mother died, the children were old enough to care for themselves. Vicki had a sister and then a niece to care for her son until he was eight years old. Then he came home and watched television by himself until Vicki arrived after her shift ended at 3:30 P.M. Most women, however, were not as fortunate. They did not have kin who were in a position to babysit. Even though most informants had some relatives living in the area, extended family members either worked or lived too far away to make it feasible. Therefore, women hired babysitters they

9. Susan Keefe (1979) and Roland Wagner and Dianne Schaffer (1980) have found that compared to Anglos, Chicanos rely more on relatives than friends or neighbors for babysitting, and Chicanos also tend to have more available relatives.

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found with references from friends or relatives or through newspaper ads.

Women and their husbands agreed that if they had to pay for child care, the ideal situation was care in a private home with a woman whose reputation was established. A preference for family day care has been noted in other studies of working-class families (Komorovsky 1962; Lamphere, Silva, and Sousa 1980).¹⁰ Women who were Spanish speakers also required that the child-care provider speak Spanish and be familiar with Mexican customs. For this reason, but mainly because they charged less, many working mothers hired undocumented women from Mexico to care for their children.

As for many working women, the availability and quality of child care was a major concern for my informants. Several women had stories about hired babysitters who neglected children or who quit unexpectedly. These were recurring problems with *mexicana* babysitters, who often moved from the area giving little notice. Gloria believed that finding and keeping one reliable person to care for her child is so important that, "When you have sitter problems, then you should quit." She could afford to say this since her neighbor of many years cared for her son. Most women, however, made other less dependable arrangements.

Blanca hired a succession of babysitters, "some good ones and some bad ones." She told me of problems with one who stole food, another who would not change her son's diapers, and a third who romanced her boyfriend in front of Blanca's son. Blanca found out about the third babysitter only because she stayed home unexpectedly one day, and the boyfriend walked in unannounced. Blanca confronted her oldest son—"only five years old, *fijate!* [mind you]"—and he confessed that the sitter had threatened to beat him if he tattled. Blanca recalled: "It was too much. After all the work I did, to find this. I just broke down and began to cry." Lupe hired several women whom she found by putting ads in the newspaper. Unfortunately, several of these women were "weirdiës. . . . I had to hire this kind of girl cause I couldn't afford babysitting wages. . . . That's the breaks for me, I had no family." Lupe did have relatives — three sisters in particular. But they also worked in canneries and could not help. Lupe admitted

10. The vast majority of children in the United States, about 75 percent, are cared for by individuals (either relatives or nonrelatives) in private homes. Only 10 to 12 percent are cared for in center-based arrangements (Woolsey 1977, cited in Wolk-Feinstein 1979).

that she kept minor problems with her babysitters from her husband out of fear that he would make her quit work.

Connie was very satisfied with her paid babysitter. When she and her husband could no longer arrange their shifts so that one would always be home, she hired a teenage daughter of a friend from work. Regarding these arrangements, Connie remarked: "I've been very fortunate. She's like family to us now." Luz had a different babysitter every year; some of them were friends who were pregnant and on leave from canneries. She was pleased with the flexibility that cannery work provided: "The cannery was good in that if your babysitter didn't show up or something, you could call in and they would say, 'It's all right, just come in when you can.'" Satisfaction with the quality of child-care arrangements was often crucial to women feeling good about continuing to work.

After entering the cannery labor force, workers did not necessarily remain, since the seasonal nature of the work created a great deal of turnover. Men left seasonal cannery jobs in search of permanent employment. Women worked intermittently during the initial years, a few weeks at one cannery followed by a layoff. They might work off and on for several seasons, perhaps at several canneries. Women took leaves because of family responsibilities and difficulties in arranging child care or to have babies. Connie, for example, worked at nine jobs (including the canneries) in the period between the age of fourteen, when she started in the cannery, and twenty-eight, when she became a permanent worker. Since 1962, she has worked continuously on a seasonal basis for eleven years and for four years as a full time worker. Altogether she had worked for twenty-two years in the canning industry, but she had only sixteen years of plant seniority, since each time she left the cannery, she lost her seniority. Connie's work history is typical of women cannery workers and of female workers in general (Blau 1975). Her typical history embodies the conflicts between a woman's family responsibilities and her need to work for wages.

Work Expectations

Given their previous experience in menial jobs, particularly farm work, most women began their cannery jobs with certain expectations about the work. They knew that it would be physically demanding,

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but few felt that the relationship of exchanging their labor power for a wage was exploitive. Most women believed that the company was entitled to make profits. Workers expected to be paid a fair wage and to put in a hard day's work for that wage.

Women viewed working in a cannery as a step up from work in the fields. In the hierarchy of agricultural work, fieldwork was at the bottom, packing-house work next, and cannery work best. Although the work was seasonal, the union wages were much higher than those in farm work. (Most of these informants entered canneries long before farm workers were unionized.) As Rosa asked: "Where else can you get a job that pays more than five dollars an hour?" Cannery work was also perceived as being better than farm work because of the working conditions. Workers were not out in the hot sun, and the actual work process was easier than farm work. Rosa characterized her initial feelings about cannery work: "It was so nice; it was a breeze compared to the fields." Cristina recalled: "The fields are the worst; the pay is so cheap, and you work without a contract. It's too much sacrifice to get together a few cents. I heard about the canneries, that they pay more, and the union protects you, so I tried to work there. And I'll never return to the fields!" Women were also pleased that they were hired to work alongside other women they already knew.

Women needed jobs with flexible hours so that they could complete their home duties. One resolution was to work swing (evening) or graveyard shifts. The seasonal nature of the job was an added incentive, since women could resume homemakers' obligations full time during the off-season. The season conveniently occurred during the summer months when the older children were home from school. For these reasons, then, cannery work for women was seen as "the best solution to our problems at the time," as María put it. Lupe agreed: "It made sense."

During the first years on the job, women expected to work temporarily. Luz, with twenty-nine years of work in the industry, recalled: "I was just going to work that one year, but we needed the money." Responses that indicated an expectation of permanency were rare. Vicki, who was childless for many years, said: "I figured that I'd be working there simply because I liked it." Connie stated: "I would have preferred a permanent job [rather] than working the two jobs I had. But at that time women didn't have an opportunity to go into

something where you could get more hours and become regular.” Most women originally hoped their tenures as cannery workers would be brief, something to tide them over until their husbands could find better jobs. They aspired to be full-time homemakers, without the added pressures of a job. Their husbands also expected that their jobs would be temporary. Women’s cannery jobs complemented the traditional division of labor, as Connie’s remarks illustrate: “I worked in different places, and then I would go back to the cannery because it was seasonal and because it was convenient, and I could work nights because I had small children. It helped out with the responsibilities of the family. It made it lighter for my husband, so that he wouldn’t have the full responsibility of all the bills and everything.” (Chapter 5 discusses how this shift in responsibility affected other aspects of family life.) After working a few seasons, these women became permanent seasonal cannery workers. The main attraction was the temporary nature of the work. Lupe stated: “I planned to stay seasonal. You work only three months out of the year and can stay home with your kids.”

Company practices also facilitated women’s retention in cannery jobs. The personnel office would send out cards informing workers of the time to come in and register to work another season, and they registered according to their number on the seniority list. As it got nearer to peak season and the seniority list was exhausted, companies then took applications at the personnel office. The first people allowed to turn in applications were those who had union books, which indicated that they had worked previously in canneries. Once the union members were all hired, canneries took new applications. Women who were considered good workers could expect to be called back the following season.

“Long-term seasonal cannery workers”—those who work seasonally for four years or more—comprised approximately 16 percent of the northern California cannery labor force (Winklevoss 1978). It wasn’t until the 1976 Conciliation Agreement established a plant-seniority list that seasonal workers were eligible for full-time work based on the number of seasons they had worked. Thus whether or not they would have preferred full-time work, seasonal work was all that was available for my informants and for a whole sector of the cannery labor force.

Conclusion

Despite their beliefs that men should bear the major responsibility for supporting families, most women found themselves in economic situations in which their wage contributions were necessary for family maintenance. Despite the need for an added income, however, husbands often protested their wives' decision to seek a job. Women made the decision on their own or got husbands to accept by asserting the maternal right to provide for their children's welfare. Women's beliefs that their jobs would be temporary and would not interfere with family obligations added weight in favor of entering the labor force.

Yet these women faced many constraints in finding jobs. They had high school educations or less, few marketable skills, and, for some, limited English. Cannery jobs were considered relatively good, primarily because they were seasonal.

The evidence suggests that the decision for a woman to seek work was critical and subject to negotiation between husband and wife. Rather than being an example of the couple's usual mode of making decisions, the decision for women to work in the canneries resolved a structural conflict. Given their husbands' unstable jobs, women could not afford to maintain their positions as full-time homemakers. As mothers, the primary nurturers of children, neither could they accept full-time jobs. Their home responsibilities gave them leverage with which to assert their will, even if it also prevented them from becoming full-time workers. Uncovering this context of decision making enables us to understand how women can be both powerful and acquiescent. With two sets of constraints—the family and the local labor market—cannery work was considered the best solution to married women's problems. Yet by seeking work that complemented their family obligations, these women ultimately may have contributed to their own segregation at work.

The next chapter follows women to work and examines their experiences within the canneries. In addition to the need for women's wages in families, women's participation in work culture provides another reason to return each season to the canneries.