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Women's Work and Chicano Families

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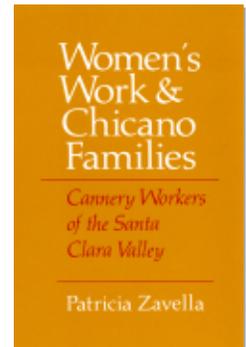
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Conclusion

This book has used both historical and ethnographic evidence to uncover the interplay between women's position in families and in the labor market. It has examined the complex set of forces operating to keep Chicanas in seasonal cannery jobs in the Santa Clara Valley. These women's experiences are not necessarily unique. The structural position of Chicana seasonal cannery workers is no doubt similar to that of women in other seasonal work situations. In even broader terms, the experiences of Chicana and Chicano workers in canning are similar to those of Mexican-American workers throughout the Southwest, who are concentrated in declining industries and occupations (Kane 1973).

Originally a small industry, canning grew into one of the top ten California industries after World War II. The Santa Clara Valley emerged as the center of canning production in the United States. As canning output increased in the early part of the twentieth century, a larger labor force was needed. Immigrant and ethnic minority populations formed large portions of the expanding cannery labor force until World War II. After the war—with a huge increase in demand for canned goods and with great labor turnover—there was a labor shortage. Mexican-Americans began moving to the Santa Clara Valley, in part attracted by cannery employment, and they soon dominated the cannery labor force.

Beginning in the 1950s the canning industry experienced several important changes. Cannery cooperatives began forming to protect

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growers, and production costs steadily increased. Mechanization led to skilled labor forming larger portions of the labor force, and Teamster policy that favored skilled workers threatened further increases in wages. The contractual agreement between the Teamsters and management favored white male workers over women and minorities.

As the market for canned goods became increasingly competitive, profits declined. Increased capital concentration marked the industry as canners were acquired by conglomerates with diversified, global operations. In the face of declining profits and high production costs, the Santa Clara Valley lost its attraction as a production site. The threat of further labor agitation no doubt was a factor in the process of plant relocations. Dissident Teamsters were pushing for more participation in contract negotiations, which threatened to raise wages, especially for seasonal workers. All of these pressures resulted in a wave of plant closures in the Santa Clara Valley, beginning in the late 1970s, and massive unemployment for cannery workers. The restructuring of the canning industry ultimately had a devastating effect on Santa Clara Valley cannery workers. Chicano workers became entrenched in an industry that underwent fundamental transformation, and their attempts to change the working conditions and the union ultimately contributed to the demise of cannery jobs.

The decline of canning in the Santa Clara Valley is but one example of the global restructuring of capital that has occurred in other industries in the post-World War II period. Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison (1982) showed how manufacturing industries have found competitive pressures and rising production costs, including the high price of union labor, to be incentives for alternative business strategies. Plant closures have become widespread throughout the country, leaving cities and regions devastated by "deindustrialization." Clearly, broad societal changes are critical considerations when organizing workers on the local level.

Yet broad structural changes were not the major concern when these women entered the labor market. Particularly when their children were young, and with few child-care resources, women needed jobs, yet had limited options in securing employment. Women's family obligations and their commitments to a traditional family ideology made them prime participants in occupational segregation within the canning industry. Struggles with husbands also pressured women to seek temporary jobs. The unemployment benefits, with

which women saw themselves as being paid for “not working,” were an important additional incentive to remain in canneries. For all of these reasons, cannery jobs were the “best solution” to “women’s problems.” Seasonal jobs—in which they anticipated remaining only temporarily—complemented women’s home obligations.

Once they entered the cannery labor force, Chicano women found limited and contracting job opportunities. Their access to better-paying, full-time jobs was restricted by many factors. These factors included job labeling, in which certain jobs were considered “men’s” or “women’s” work; mechanization; distinctions in the collective bargaining agreements between “seasonal” and “regular” workers; the need for “men’s” job skills to qualify for high-paying jobs; the operation of work-based networks; and sexual harassment by male workers. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that there were also important structural differences between Chicanas and other women. In particular, the operation of work-based networks at times excluded Chicanas from knowledge about better job opportunities, and the favoritism by some supervisors kept Chicanas in the worst jobs.

Despite the limited opportunities in the workplace, however, women did gain leverage in the home when they became employed. Their influence over decision making and family-income expenditures increased. Although Chicana workers have more power in families than women who do not work for wages, it appears that Leonarda Ybarra (1977, 1982b) and Maxine Baca Zinn (1980) have overstated the case when they argue that women’s employment leads to “more egalitarian” family structure in dual-worker Chicano families. Chicano families are clearly not as rigid as suggested by the “machismo” model; nonetheless, they contain family conflict and patriarchal notions that stem from traditional family ideology. My informants were in situations in which they continually moved from being homemakers to being workers. The household division of labor did change when they were working, and women did receive more help, but there was no fundamental transformation of family roles. To the contrary, husbands, children, and the women themselves viewed household work as women’s responsibility. Even when women came to expect more help from family members, none of my informants pushed for an equal division of labor. This stems from several things, but primary was their position as temporary workers. Although they returned to canneries year after year, these seasonal cannery workers were not

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employed for significant periods. Assuming the direction of household work during the off-season seemed "natural" to them. Some of them may even have felt guilty because they were receiving substantial unemployment benefits when not working.

The resistance to family-role redefinition by their husbands (and children) was another crucial factor. Women were in vulnerable positions if they contested men's expectations, for there was the ultimate threat that the husband would leave the marriage. Women retained their economic dependence on husbands, in part because of the lack of job mobility in the canning industry, where women were segregated in seasonal jobs with low annual wages. But women also were pressured not to seek full-time jobs elsewhere or they chose seasonal jobs, further limiting their economic independence within their marriages. So although women may have gained more control over family matters, their subordinate position in the labor market ultimately preserved their vulnerable economic positions relative to their husbands. These families did not undergo a fundamental transformation. The ethnographic data suggest that when women had access to "men's" wages, they were in better positions to enforce change in their families, including leaving conflict-ridden relationships. But the data also show that it is almost impossible for seasonal cannery workers to move into full-time jobs.

I suggest that close attention to women's position in the labor market and the conditions of women's work is necessary for analyzing the impact of women's employment on family structure. Chicana working mothers face occupational segregation by race and sex on the job and the double day at home. While perhaps providing temporary shifts in behavior, seasonal jobs have kept women economically dependent on husbands. Little egalitarian practice has been evident. As workers in a declining industry, in which there were nonetheless powerful incentives to keep working, seasonal cannery workers remained in marginal structural positions. The rigidity of the cannery labor market, then, supported and reinforced traditional family roles. Yet the meaning women ascribed to their jobs and their status as working mothers was complex, varied, and changeable over time. Cannery work has both set in motion and suspended changes in Chicana concepts of family life and gender possibilities.

The case study presented in this book illustrates the usefulness of a socialist feminist framework and how such a perspective must be

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modified. Although socialist feminism guides our analysis to structural features that create and maintain women's subordination and examines conflict between women and men, it has been inadequate in explaining the differences and similarities between groups of women based on racial status and historically specific experiences in American institutions. I suggest that such a conceptual focus will serve us well in future inquiry into women's experiences that aims to build cooperative endeavors to change the conditions of all women.