

Reforming Gender: The Effects of Economic Change on Masculinity and Femininity in Mexico and the U.S.

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1. Introduction

In his celebrated book, *The Meanings of Macho* (1992), anthropologist Matthew C. Gutmann explores the changing character of masculinity in Mexico City. Buffeted by economic crisis in the late 1980s, middle-class men and women increasingly had to pool personal incomes to support families. Unable to sustain long-held patriarchal expectations, men made virtue out of necessity. “Women are becoming independent,” explained one of Guttmann’s informants, “because men are giving [them] freedom to work. Now women and men have to help each other out. That’s why they both have opinions” (p. 161).

Thousands of miles away, in California, Chicago and New York, gender relations were undergoing equally momentous transformations. *Downsizing* and the consequent displacement of millions of men from stable employment in the 1980s, dealt a severe blow to notions of masculinity. In *Families in the Faultline* (1994: 78), sociologist Lillian Rubin asked, “Why do men talk about wanting to ‘wear the pants’ and complain about ‘ball-busting feminists?’” Because, she replies, there is widespread resentment about changes over which working men have little control—their own diminished income, insecurity about the future, the full-time employment of wives and the new demands women are making on them.

My purpose in this paper is to condense the main findings of research, conducted over the last two decades, about the effects of economic change on gender definitions. By using examples from Mexico and the United States, I illustrate the mechanics of larger developments affecting core and peripheral countries. My argument is built around

three main assumptions. First, I hold that gender is a preeminent vector of social organization—a relational process resulting in the unequal distribution of power and other valuable resources on the basis of sexual distinctions. Because of that, gender is akin to race in that it builds on physical differences but is not identical to them. Second, to conceptualize gender as a process is to challenge perspectives that view sexual roles and inequalities as reflections of biological constraints. Thus, a focus on gender should illuminate the experience of both women *and* men; it should also account for the relationships between women of varying racial, ethnic and class backgrounds and between those women and their male counterparts (Fernández-Kelly, 1994: 144). Third, I maintain that the state, as a bureaucratic apparatus with social, political and economic functions, depends largely on definitions of masculinity and femininity to control and organize populations under its aegis. It is around gender that class differentiations emerge. Understandings about gender are thus more than cultural phenomena—they also constitute potent structural machineries.

Without a dynamic understanding of gender, it is impossible to elucidate the paradoxical realities that marked the end of the twentieth century and ushered in the new millennium. In the United States, the economic upheavals of the 1970s and 80s brought about an epidemic of plant closings, decreases in manufacturing and an expansion of services and advanced technology. Unionization rates plummeted, and real wages remained stagnant. Companies streamlined and reconfigured, leaving in their wake large numbers of dislocated workers. To many observers, social unrest seemed imminent. Yet it didn't materialize. Largely that was because of the massive incorporation of women into the labor force, which softened the effects of rapid economic change. Instead of revolt, the end of the twentieth century witnessed unrivaled prosperity at the aggregate level but also declining standards of living for some segments of American society, especially those formed by rural populations and the urban poor.

Parallel tendencies ensued in Mexico, beset during the same period by a succession of economic setbacks. Miscalculations about the magnitude of oil reserves, followed by a ballooning national debt, eventually led to the devaluation of the peso, escalating inflation and

negative growth rates by 1982. Combined with stiff monetarist policies imposed by international lending organizations, those changes disrupted the fragile achievements of the previous thirty years when the advocates of Import Substitution Industrialization had pushed for a neo-Keynesian model of economic development. Fledgling middle classes saw their living standards plunge and despair grew among the poor. But, as in the case of the United States, economic debacle in Mexico was not followed, for the most part, by violent eruptions.¹ Again, gender played a part in arresting potential conflict. To bolster shaky standards of living, women rushed into the formal labor force or supplemented men's earnings through their involvement in the informal sector (Chant 2004). In other words, on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border, recent economic transitions caused shifts in women's and men's employment opportunities and this, in turn, altered preexisting conventions regarding gender roles.

I expound these ideas in three parts. As a first step to understand subsequent changes, I consider the relationship between industrial expansion and evolving gender identities in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. During that period, expectations grew that women should become dependent wives and mothers, and men the sole providers of families. This was part of a larger social and political transformation that resulted in the attenuation of class conflict under the auspices of an emergent welfare state. In the second section, I turn attention to equivalent trends in Mexico where the Revolution of 1910 opened up paths for the implementation of enlightened social policies. Mexico's government implemented medical and retirement programs that rivaled those in advanced countries and made provisions for mothers in the form of daycare centers, extended paid leaves and lactating periods during working hours. Although those measures were not widely implemented for lack of political will and material resources, they set a standard in accordance with which women's work outside the home was not only legitimated by the state but also given support. Later in the century, with the shift toward economic globalization, other factors began to reshape gender relations in Mexico. I consider those new determinants and their effects in the third section, with special attention to the growing atomization of the labor force in terms of sex. In the Conclusions Section I summarize the main points in the argument.

2. Industrialization and the Rise of Welfare Legislation

Tendencies in the United States

The ascent of industrial capitalism in the latter part of the nineteenth century—with its momentous application of new technologies, its rapid expansion of production and markets, and its bloody struggles over the terms of employment—culminated in a historical pact between investors and workers through the mediation of an emerging welfare state. In exchange for the compliance of a predominantly male labor force, capitalists accepted government discipline regarding higher wages, better working conditions, stronger unions and, eventually, larger benefit packages. Yet the rationalization of industry, and its corresponding social arrangements, was fraught with contradictions. In this section, I briefly consider the plurality of motives and alliances that led to a contested agreement about the role of men and women in the U.S. manufacturing economy. In the next section, I examine parallel developments in Mexico to create a comparative framework.

Factories and mills rapidly multiplied in the United States during the second half of the nineteenth century. In the absence of protective legislation, industry incorporated workers of all sorts, including women and children. Abuse was rampant, leading social observers to press for government intervention. A rich historical literature underscores the relationship between early industrialization and the design of laws meant to ease class tensions while increasing workers' acquiescence. Purposively or not, those laws helped to circumscribe gender roles starting in the early 1900s. The record left by social reformers of that time gives evidence of a vigorous debate about the fitting role of men and women in the home and in the world of paid employment. Florence Kelley, for example, became a topmost leader of the Progressive Movement by fighting for improvements in the treatment of women and children. An indefatigable activist, she pioneered the use of scientific data to sway the U.S. Supreme Court in favor of limits on hours of work for women. With her friend, Louis Brandeis, she influenced the 1908 case of *Mueller versus Oregon* that established women's protected status because of the alleged greater value of their maternal functions by comparison to property rights. Kelley also developed strategies, like consumer boycotts of garments

produced in sweatshops, and lobbied for legal requirements pressing employers to document worker's ages as a step to end the exploitation of children. Her trajectory illustrates a new relationship between American civil society and the state, marked by the prominent role of educated women in the promotion of welfare laws (Sklar, 1995).

As the century advanced, industry in general, and heavy industry in particular, grew at an accelerated pace. Table 1 shows that by 1910, jobs in manufacturing represented more than a third of those available in the economy at large. A decade later that figure had grown to 39 percent, a proportion without equal in subsequent years. Even as the United States emerged from an agricultural past, nearly half of the working population was involved in industrial production.

Table 1
EMPLOYMENT BY INDUSTRY
(In thousands except percentages)

Year	Total	Manufacturing	%	FIRE*	%	Services	%
1994	123,060	20,157	(16.4)	8,141	(6.6)	42,986	(34.9)
1990	118,793	21,346	(18.0)	8,051	(6.8)	39,267	(33.0)
1980	99,303	21,942	(22.0)	5,993	(6.0)	28,752	(29.0)
1970	78,678	20,746	(26.3)	3,945	(5.0)	20,385	(25.9)
1960	54,234	16,796	(31.0)	2,669	(4.9)	7,423	(13.7)
1950	45,222	15,241	(33.7)	1,919	(4.2)	5,382	(11.9)
1940	32,376	10,985	(33.9)	1,502	(4.6)	3,681	(11.4)
1930	29,424	9,562	(32.5)	1,475	(5.0)	3,376	(11.5)
1920	27,434	10,702	(39.0)	902	(3.3)	3,100	(11.3)
1910	21,697	7,828	(36.0)	483	(2.2)	2,410	(11.1)

*Financial, Insurance, Real Estate

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract, 1996.

It was in that context that protective legislation emerged as a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it represented a salutary response to the savage effects of unrestricted markets, but it also created barriers to women's negotiating capacity. Although social reformers saw labor legislation as a means to limit the misuse and moral defilement of vulnerable workers, the new measures made women, especially mothers, more costly to hire thus creating new incentives for the employment of men and the exclusion of women. Thus, an unexpected consequence of Progressive social reform was female segregation in the workplace, with its underlying presumption that woman's primary ambit is in the home (Lehrer, 1987).

The struggle for the *family wage* as a masculine entitlement was another aspect of the same unfolding events. Samuel Gompers, the first president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), captured mounting feelings on that subject when stating, "It is wrong to permit any of the female sex of our country to be forced to work, as we believe that men should be provided with a fair wage in order to keep his female relatives from going to work." (Quoted in Leckie, 1996: 12). Male organizations, like AFL, but also leaders and participants in women's groups like the American Association for Labor Legislation (AALL) and the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) backed the idea that working men should earn enough to support women and children. For that reason, they provided steady pressure for restricting women's involvement in paid employment, heightening their dependence on men (Kessler-Harris, 1988: 8). Florence Kelley herself saw the family wage as a means to reinforce an order in which husbands would support "the wives throughout life and the children at least until the fourteenth birthday." (Skocpol, 1992: 408). Other social activists, like Emile Hutchinson, saw the family wage as a device to safeguard feminine morality. Fears of female licentiousness as a result of contact with men in the workplace suffused narratives of the time (Smith Rosenberg, 1985).

There were still other dimensions in the debate over protective legislation and the family wage. Working men and union leaders and organizers often supported the new laws as a way to make women less competitive and thus improve their own bargaining capacity vis-à-vis capitalists. According to Skocpol (1992), however, the desire to undercut female competition was not the only, or main, reason behind

organized labor's support of protective legislation; instead, the support for wages and hours legislation expressed broad working-class aspirations to raise living standards. Yet unable, for the most part, to dispense with the services of local labor forces by relocating manufacturing operations to less-developed countries, employers made concessions and complied with the new legislation. Manhood was increasingly equated with the capacity to support families and womanhood with the willingness to specialize in domestic functions. These arrangements ushered in a period of prosperity for American working families, but they also curtailed women's alternatives for paid employment. The events of the age thus highlight the pivotal role of gender in the articulation of class hierarchies. The opposite is also true: given the dialectical character of the process, the struggle for the family wage as a masculine entitlement shows the influence of class distinctions in the way gender roles are defined.

The casting of men as "breadwinners" and women as "housewives" was riddled with tensions caused by the divergent interests of the groups involved. For social reformers and dominant classes, the family wage entailed the possibility of moralizing footloose men by charging them with the support of wives and children, and women by removing them from the perils of paid employment. With the transformation of men into sole "providers," industrialists secured a disciplined labor force but had to comply with costly regulations aimed at improving the working and living conditions of wage earners. This new order made manhood coterminous with submission to the coercive demands of industry, but it also enhanced the purchasing power of ordinary Americans (Ehrenreich, 1984). Finally, working-class women were not passive agents in this process. A retreat into the home and reliance on men's earnings exacerbated their subordination, but it also reduced the strains derived from their earlier attempts to combine paid and domestic labor.

Gender identities, thus forged, prevailed for almost a century, but the Second World War first showed how fluid those self-definitions were. When working men became soldiers, they left behind vacuums in industry and services that were rapidly occupied by women. Nearly three million women entered the labor force during those years. In addition, almost 300,000 served in the Army and Navy, performing such noncombatant jobs as secretaries, typists and nurses. Government

campaigns stretched the limits of gender definitions by portraying women's employment as a patriotic duty. Capturing the sense of the age was *Rosie the Riveter*, a character promoted by the media to encourage the idea of factory work as an extension of feminine skills (Honey, 1985). Shown in posters as a muscular but winsome operative, Rosie became a new model of womanhood. Evans and Loeb sang of her,

All the day long, whether rain or shine, she's a part of the assembly line. She's making history, working for victory. . . That little girl will do more than a male will do, working overtime on the riveting machine. . .” (New York: Paramount Music Corporation, 1942)

Nevertheless, Rosie the Riveter did not arrive to stay long, at least not immediately. The end of the war brought about new efforts to push women back into the home. Hollywood movies of the 1950s and 1960s are filled with the tales of characters who, having experienced the passing allure of career and financial independence, discover true happiness in the voluntary surrender to marriage and family. Even Katharine Hepburn, an actress long regarded as a pioneer of women's independence, played such a role in *Woman of the Year*. Still, the heightened participation of women in paid employment during World War II had irreversible effects that became all the more apparent as the structure of the economy changed in the two subsequent decades. Later in this chapter, I describe that evolution. First I turn my attention to Mexico.

The Mexican Counterpart

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, parallel but not identical changes were taking place south of the border. There, the legacy of colonial domination from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries and subsequent processes of distorted industrialization after the War of Independence delimited employment opportunities for both men and women. As with other Latin American countries, Mexico's landscape has been marked by the presence of a few large cities hovering, like misshapen giants, over a vast but underutilized countryside. Unabated rural-urban migration gives evidence of stagnant opportunities in the rural sector throughout the 1900s. The introduction of machinery to accelerate and expand agricultural

production left large numbers of workers without any means of survival. In cities, the incapacity of industry to incorporate the available supply of migrant labor, as well as government's inability to enforce protective legislation, led to the expansion of unregulated economic activity, the so-called "informal economy" (Portes 1989).

The imbalance between the urban and rural sectors had a powerful effect on individual choices. Although many men were ejected from the countryside as a result of the mechanization of agricultural production, it was mostly women who had to leave their hometowns in search of survival. Contrary to a widespread impression, it has been women, not men, who have constituted the majority of rural-urban migrants in Mexico and other parts of Latin America. Diminished opportunities in the rural sector and growing demand for domestic workers in large cities partly explain that trend. Alone and often without protection, young women from small towns and villages in Latin America faced multiple dangers. The life paths described by Chaney and Bunster (1988) for Lima, Peru, are also typical of Mexico City. Young servants were defenseless against the sexual advances of men in the homes where they worked or in the streets they traversed in their free time. When they became pregnant, they were routinely dismissed. Many became peddlers or market vendors, occupations that allowed them to eke out a living while simultaneously looking after their children.

The realities surrounding paid domestic work in cities like Mexico have always been harsh. Perhaps for that reason they have provided a steady well of inspiration for popular culture, including soap operas or *telenovelas*. One of the most famous was *Simplemente María*, a series that galvanized the attention of viewers throughout Latin America for more than a decade in the 1970s and 1980s. It told the story of a beautiful girl from the Peruvian countryside loved by her employers' son. Although the young man plans to marry María, social convention and tortuous intrigue stand in the way of the couple's happiness. Fired from her job and expecting a child, María vows to defy all odds. Slowly but determinedly she uses her sewing skills to become an internationally famous couturier. When the time of her revenge is at hand, she instead forgives her tormentors instead. In her virtue and success, she thus fulfills the dreams of hundreds of thousands of women like herself throughout the hemisphere.

Simplemente María was a staggering success because it gave tangible voice to the yearnings of the popular classes in Latin America, especially women.

Patriarchal ideologies, affirming male supremacy and women's subordination, have been commonplace in Mexico since pre-colonial times but often difficult to sustain for various reasons. As revealed by *Simplemente María*, among the most vulnerable sectors, dire need has always pushed women, as well as children, into formal and informal employment. At the top end of the class hierarchy, women of means—who were able to delegate domestic responsibilities on servants—could secure paid or unpaid employment in prestigious occupations like government and education. In Mexico it has been mostly among the tottering middle classes that the ideal of men as sole providers and women as housewives has been realized. In that country, the confinement of women to the domestic sphere has been as much the product of patriarchal ideology as the effect of limited employment opportunities for both men *and* women.

A narrow focus on Mexican patriarchy would make it difficult to understand conspicuous developments in the early 1900s. The first popular revolution of the twentieth century occurred in Mexico in 1910 and gave birth to a populist state that set into law progressive ideas concerning labor relations and women's employment.² Subsequent legislation made generous provisions in public health, social security, minimum wages and severance payments for workers of both sexes. Furthermore, Mexican law earmarked special allotments for women, especially mothers, including access to subsidized childcare centers—*guarderías infantiles*—generous maternity leaves with full pay, and lactation periods during working hours. Mexican labor law is among the most enlightened and forward looking in the world. Unfortunately, it was never fully enforced, partly because of limited government resources and also because of the pressures brought forth by employers unwilling to comply with costly legal requirements.

Starting in the 1940s and gaining momentum a decade later, Import-Substitution Industrialization (ISI) opened up new possibilities for men and women's employment. A nationalist rhetoric grew out of government efforts to invigorate industry and decrease Mexico's

dependence on external economic forces (Evans, 1995). The goal of import substitution was to replace expensive imports with domestic products, especially those in heavy industry. ISI had positive effects in Mexico and other parts of Latin America. It was responsible for periods of high expansion in manufacturing. As Table 2 shows, the share of industrial output as part of total gross domestic product in the four largest countries grew rapidly between 1950 and 1967.

Table 2
Latin America: Share of Industrial Product in the Total Gross Domestic Product
 (in percentages)

	1950	1960	1967
Total	18.7	21.7	23.1
Argentina	29.4	32.2	34.1
Chile	21.2	23.7	25.8
Mexico	19.9	23.3	25.6
Brazil	15.1	21.4	21.6

Source: "Industrial Development in Latin America," *Economic Bulletin for Latin America*, Vol. XIV, No. 2, 1969

Rapid industrial development in Mexico required a trained labor force that would earn wages large enough to support families and expand aggregate demand. Thus, the idea of the family wage that had informed the aspirations of the American working class at the turn of the century gained strength in Mexico as part of government attempts to achieve economic independence. As with other large economic projects, ISI was associated with definitions about the proper role of men and women in the organization of production. Moreover, it was as part of the efforts to modernize industry that the Mexican government gave new impetus to policies in education, health, housing and transportation. Opportunities grew in the most advanced sectors of the economy for both men and women. A new middle-class with its eyes turned to ways of life favored in the United States began to appear in the urban landscape.

In the next section, I explore the forces that reshaped the fortunes of workers on both sides of the border in the latter part of the twentieth century.

3. Gender in the Era of Economic Internationalization

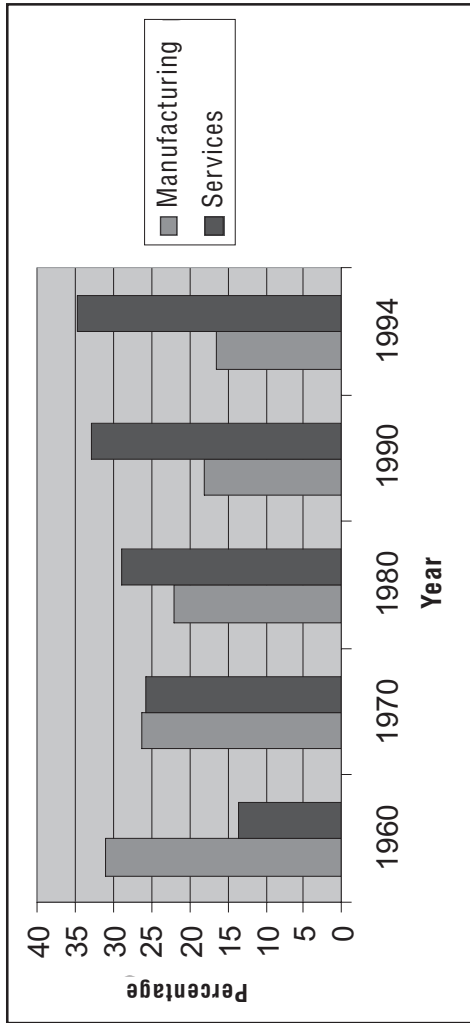
Trends in the United States

In the late 1960s, the economic and political order that had produced the world's most affluent proletariat in the United States began to crack. Computer technology and cheap, rapid transportation freed employers from spatial constraints and reduced their dependence on local work forces. With increased frequency, companies began to relocate industrial operations to areas of the world where wages were low and workers docile. Able to roam the planet in search of optimal conditions, employers had few incentives to continue paying a family wage to the common man. During the 1970s and 1980s an epidemic of plant closings caused massive layoffs in places like New York, Pittsburgh, Baltimore and Detroit. The sputtering smokestacks that had dotted the old industrial landscape gradually went still.

Estimates of the time give an idea of the profound character of industrial restructuring. After conducting the first influential study on the subject, economists Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone concluded that "somewhere between 32 and 38 *million* jobs were lost during the 1970s as the direct result of private disinvestment in American business" (1982: 9). Large manufacturing firms eliminated more than 900,000 jobs a year beginning in the mid-1970s, simply in the course of closing domestic branch plants. Harris (1984) calculated a total loss of 3.5 to 4 million jobs between 1978 and 1982—one out of every four positions in large manufacturing facilities. Others noted with alarm the rising tendency of companies to renege on past commitments to workers under the guise of "efficiency" and "flexibility" (Gordon, 1996; Harrison, 1999). Writings by Michael Piore and Charles Sabel (1990) took a more optimistic view, emphasizing the opportunities that the new economy was creating for individual entrepreneurs. Despite varying positions, there was consensus about the irrevocable nature of economic change in the United States.

Figure 1 shows the dramatic rearrangement of the U.S. economy since mid-century. In 1960 one third of all jobs were found in manufacturing, and services represented only a small fraction of employment (13.7 percent). By 1999 the percentages were almost precisely the reverse. Only 16.4 percent of jobs were in manufacturing, and more than a third were in services (34.9).

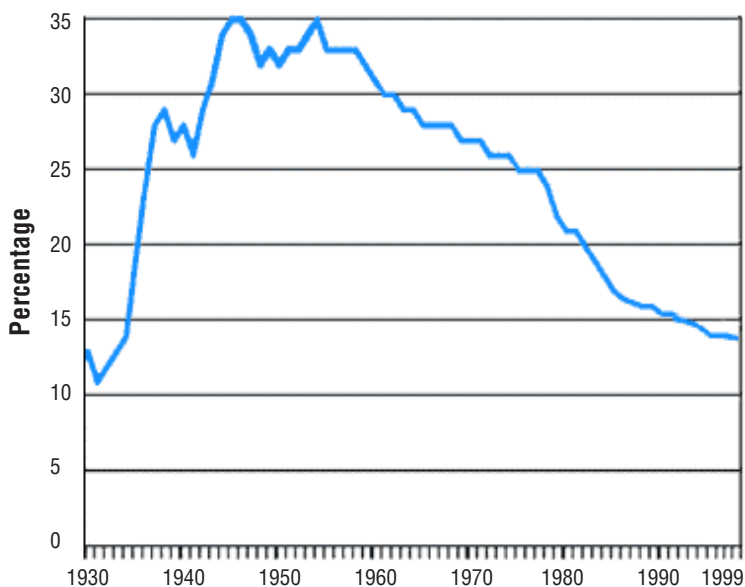
Figure 1
Employment in Manufacturing & Services
1960-1994



Source: US Bureau of the Census: Statistical Abstract

Deindustrialization, as an effect of globalization, was more than an economic strategy to lower production costs—it was also a massive political shift that altered the tenuous balance of power between employers and workers to the advantage of the former. Dropping unionization rates give evidence of that. Figure 2 synthesizes information about trends in union membership between 1930 and 1999. Almost 33 percent of American workers belonged to unions in 1970. That figure fell to 18 percent in 1980 and to an abysmal 13 percent at the end of the twentieth century. In other words, the period that saw the acceleration of global investments and the transfer of productive activities from the United States to less-developed countries, also witnessed a massive depletion of labor organizations and a decline in their bargaining capacity vis-à-vis employers.

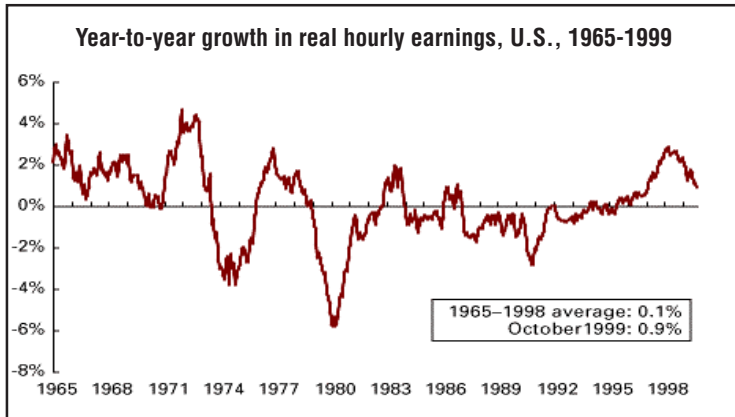
Figure 2
Union Density 1930-1999



Source: Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*; Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Handbook of Labor Statistics, Bulletin 2070, December 1980*; and Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment and Earnings, January, various years, 1983-2000*. Prepared by the AFL-CIO.

Minimal or negative increases in hourly wages give yet another indication of workers' waning fortunes throughout the period of transition. Figure 3 shows that, especially during the 1980s, real hourly wages dropped as much as 6 percent in the United States. It was only after 1995 that they rebounded, partly as a result of vigorous activity in the financial and speculative sectors.

Figure 3
1965-1998 average: 0.1%



Source: Historical Statistics of the United States, National Bureau of Economic Research; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

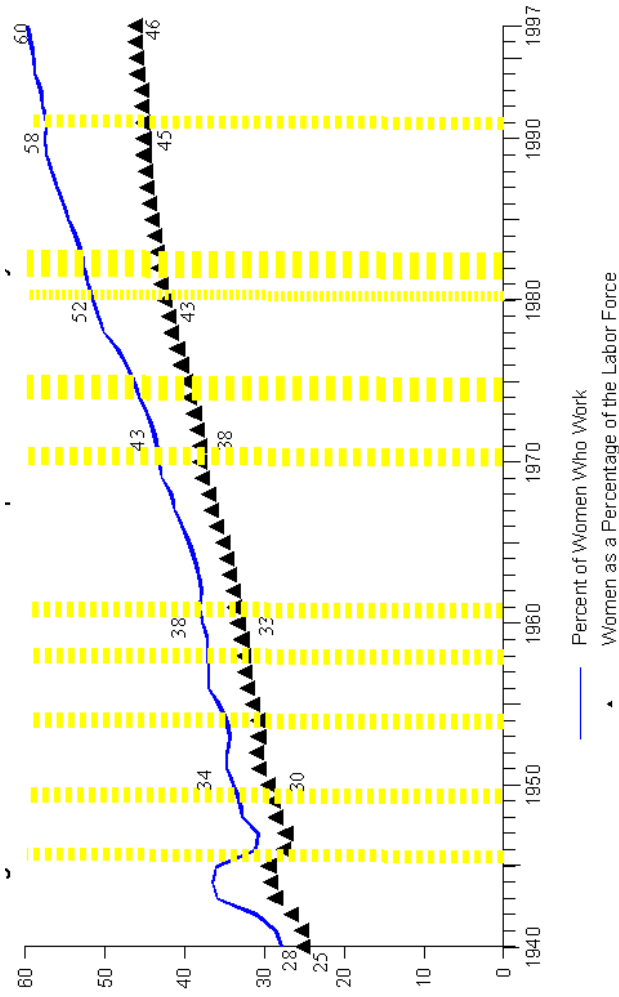
The transition from basic industry to services and information had numerous subsidiary effects. Diminishing opportunities for native-born workers in blue-collar employment paralleled increases in automation and greater reliance on domestic and international subcontracting as a means to disperse the economic and political risks of production. In competitive industries like garment, but also in advanced sectors like electronics, subcontracting chains connected large companies with small firms and even individuals doing piecework at home (Fernandez-Kelly and Sassen, 1995). Ironically, the rising demand for personal services and customized products on the part of new professional classes stimulated the employment of immigrants. As Sassen (2000) has noted most incisively, economic innovations led to the reconfiguration of urban landscapes. Old centers of industry, like New York, rebounded as “global cities” where

fast-growing world trade is coordinated and where professionals coexist with low-skilled immigrants and displaced native-born workers.

A major consequence of rapid economic change was the growth in the number of two-earner households among both professional *and* working-class populations. In the aftermath of the feminist mobilization that started in the 1970s, new generations saw women's advances in education and employment as birthrights not privileges. The sexual revolution of the 1960s lifted the stigma of premarital sex and divorce, expanding women's options. Extensions to civil rights legislation made sexual discrimination a matter of legal concern. Innovations in contraceptive methods and legalized abortion further increased women's capacity to compete on an equal footing with men in the labor market. By the end of the 1970s, normative images of executives in "power suits," clutching briefcases and marching confidently into the workplace, had replaced those of mothers in aprons. The new professional woman burst onto the scene as a culmination of yearnings for emancipation but, as we will soon see, she had troubles all her own.

The situation was somewhat different for working-class women whose entrance into the labor force was not determined exclusively by a desire for self-fulfillment. As the capacity of men to earn a family wage declined, those women entered the labor force primarily to enhance family earnings. Female labor force participation increased from 20 percent in 1900 to 55 percent in 1988, with much of the growth among mothers in families with annual earnings below \$20,000. By 1988, 67 percent of mothers who were single parents, 65 percent of mothers in dual-parent families, and 53 percent of mothers of children under three years of age were in the labor force (Hayghe, 1997). Those proportions continued to increase during the 1990s. Figure 3 shows that, by the end of the century, 60 percent of adult women were working outside the home, with that figure representing an unprecedented 46 percent of the total labor force (Smith and Bachu, 1998). Furthermore, those figures do not include women working in the informal economy and, therefore, underestimate the actual number of women working for pay.

Figure 4:
Women's Labor Force Participation and Business Cycles:



Labor force participation includes those who work full or part-time, or are unemployed. Recession years are indicated by the horizontal lines.
 Sources: a) 1940-1947 rates, US Bureau of the Census, Series D 13-25, 14 years old and over; b) 1948-1997 rates, US Bureau of Labor Statistics, website extract, 1998; 16 years old and over; c) Business cycles, Statistical Abstract of the United States, Table 895, 1998.

1940 - 1997

Economic change eroded the material foundations that had held together the notion of males as family providers and women as subordinate wives and mothers. The effects were felt in every aspect of culture. During the last two decades of the twentieth century, the popular media, television in particular, obsessively reviewed emerging definitions with alternate glee and horror. Phil Donahue, the man who created the modern-day TV talk show, donned skirts more than once while discussing the new sensibilities surrounding gender. His influential programs contributed to creating a new climate of tolerance for sexual minorities, including homosexuals and transsexual men and women. Just as Donahue was exploding the myths of unchangeable masculinity and femininity, innovative marketing campaigns presented images of men sensitively holding babies and women in army fatigues forcefully clutching rifles. Unisex fashion and haircuts further expressed a new yearning for gender equality. Controversies about women in the military began to demolish the last bastion of male exclusivity.

Several paradoxes marked the massive entrance of American women into the labor force. Despite their growing importance as income earners, they continued to assume the lion's share of domestic obligations, especially with respect to childcare. Juggling the demands of home, motherhood and paid employment remains a defining influence for women of all kinds. This has had a powerful impact on the national ethos, giving rise to a culture of anxiety centered on family life and parental responsibilities. Especially since the late 1980s, a string of legal suits surrounding the physical and sexual abuse of children by service providers in daycare facilities and private homes exposed intense ambivalence among and about working mothers. A rumble of discontent throughout the land covertly or explicitly blames working mothers for problems ranging from teenage pregnancy to rising youth crime. Ironically the shift towards a global economy has not eliminated the old contradictions surrounding earlier patriarchal arrangements.

What has changed, however, is the expectation that domestic and reproductive work should be women's only responsibilities. People of both sexes now expect everyone to be at least potentially able to

support him or herself and make substantial contributions to the household. The new mores reflect, to some extent, value systems that grew in the aftermath of the Women's Movement but they are also the effect of deep economic transformation that has resulted in the atomization of the labor force in terms of sex.

The Mexican Counterpart

The radical transitions provoked by globalization were also felt in Mexico where import-substitution industrialization had gained currency at mid-century. From the outset, liberal economists had denounced ISI because of its reliance on cumbersome protectionist measures. Although it is true that ISI did not meet all its objectives, it did not fail entirely. Instead, the attempts to expand national industry were cut short by new international pressures that provoked what sociologist Anibal Quijano (1976) called a new "opening to the exterior." The hope for self-sufficiency was replaced by a growing interest in export-oriented manufacturing. Mexico's Maquiladora Program, in full bloom by the 1970s, was the main exemplar of this trend. It consisted of government incentives to facilitate foreign investments in the production of exportable goods, mainly garments and electronics products. Assembly plants, known as maquiladoras, were allowed by government to operate along the U.S.-Mexico border as directly owned subsidiaries or subcontractors of foreign corporations, most of them located in the United States. Many of the jobs eliminated north of the border as a result of deindustrialization ended up transformed in Mexican maquiladoras.

The program soon became the fastest-growing sector of the Mexican economy and the second largest source of foreign exchange (Cravey, 1999). In subsequent years *maquiladoras* grew into the largest experiment in export-led industrialization and an early blueprint for the North American Free Trade Agreement. The shift from import-substitution to export-led industrialization entailed a reconstitution of the labor force in terms of gender. For over thirty years, *maquiladoras* have hired an overwhelming majority of women—about 85 percent of their total labor force. This carries momentous implications because, both in the United States and Mexico, female employment has been associated with declining terms of employment for working people in general. Employers pay women comparatively low wages and expect them to leave their jobs when getting married

or pregnant. Women, in turn, tend to see themselves mainly as mothers and wives, not workers. Because they tend to occupy low positions in the labor market, they have had little power to organize and bring about improvements in general terms of employment.

In the next section, I further explain how economic changes on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border have affected specific sectors of workers.

4. An Array of Illustrative Cases

The large transformations that simultaneously resulted in widespread plant closures in the United States and a shift toward export-oriented industrialization in Mexico had major consequences for working men and women in various classes and segments of production. Race and ethnicity also played a part, defining the position of various groups in the reconfigured panorama. Here I focus on five cases—three from the United States and two from Mexico—in an effort to illustrate details and outcomes in this new age.

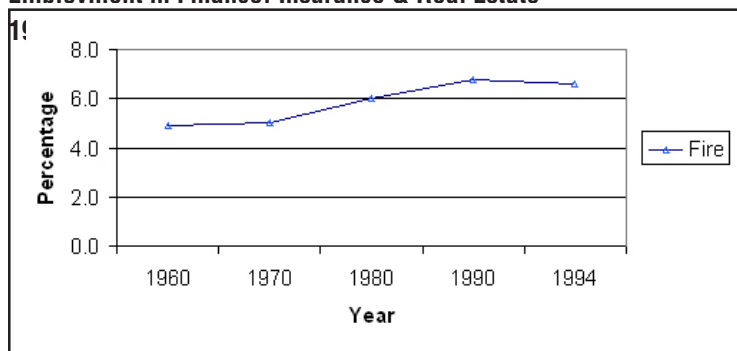
Zoe's Dilemma

In 1992, shortly after the election of William Jefferson Clinton to the presidency of the United States, the name of Zoe Baird galvanized national attention. A successful lawyer married to a Yale professor, she was the epitome of professional womanhood and Clinton's choice for the post of Attorney General. Her rise to prominence was as rapid as her downfall. In congressional hearings that recreated a trial by fire, Baird was forced to confess that she and her husband had engaged the services of a Peruvian couple, of dubious residency status, to care for their infant son. Adversaries of the Clinton administration rapidly portrayed Zoe Baird as a lawbreaker unfit for public service and succeeded in removing her from the political scene. More interesting, however, were other aspects of the case that received negligible attention at the time. Zoe Baird, her husband and newborn child represent a new class on the ascent, formed by two-earner households of means and education. The circumstances that led to her undoing exemplify the plights that professional women now confront.

The same forces that caused declines in manufacturing over the last three decades led to an unprecedented demand for specialized and

professional workers. Baird was one of several million who benefited from those trends, and her type of employment was defining of the moment. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, jobs grew most rapidly in the FIRE sector whose apt acronym designates Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate. Figure 5 shows the rapid growth of the FIRE sector since the mid-twentieth century. Between 1960 and 1994 its labor force almost quadrupled. By 1994, jobs in finance, insurance and real estate represented 7 percent of total employment.

Figure 5
Employment in Finance, Insurance & Real Estate



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census • Statistical Abstract

Although comparatively small in the aggregate, FIRE encompasses some of the most lucrative and demanding jobs in the nation. As the economy internationalized, cities like New York and Los Angeles became the locus for the administration of international markets and their multiple derivations. Even smaller places like Hartford, Connecticut, became the seat of corporate clusters. Aetna, the insurance giant where Zoe Baird accepted a lucrative position shortly before her advent to public notoriety, was located in that city.

Professional salaries grew as fast as the demand for what Robert Reich (1990) called “symbolic workers.” Lavish earnings were only matched by the exigencies of long working weeks. The growth in the number of households formed by high-powered professionals fueled the demand for unskilled and semiskilled workers in numerous niches of production. From designer’s clothing and custom-made furniture to

chefs with an international flair, specialized caterers, dog walkers, personal trainers, nannies and *au pairs*, all were occupations that met the needs, and relied on the elevated purchasing power, of the new technocratic class. More importantly, the dilemmas created by maternity and childcare induced a new demand for “live-in” service providers to fill the spaces and functions left empty by the employment of professional women (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001).

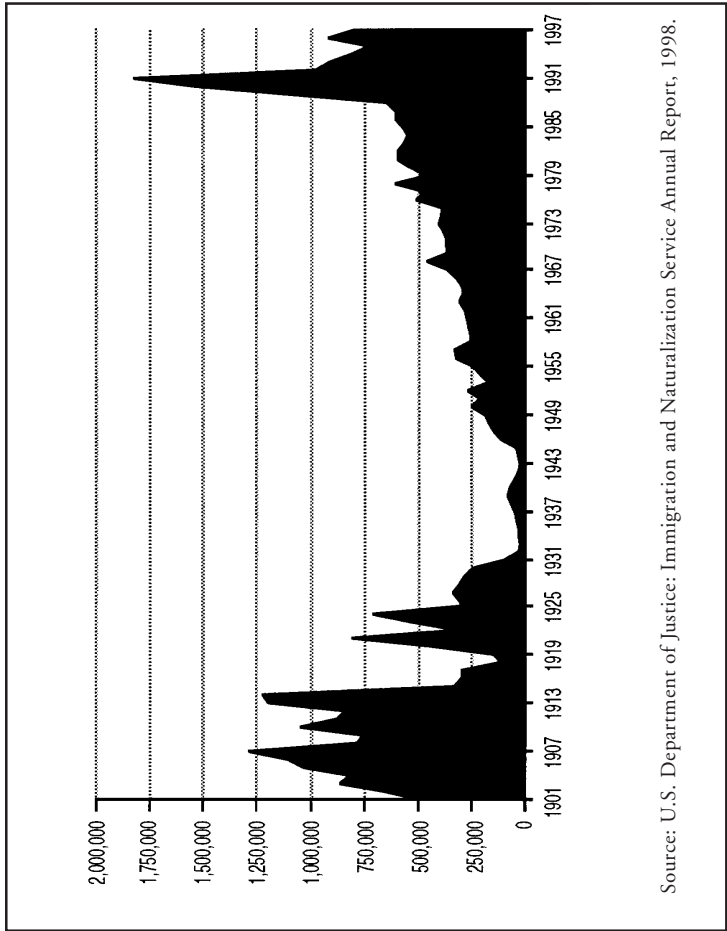
Zoe Baird’s circumstances were emblematic of the period. Well connected and charismatic, she had been a diligent student and a valuable employee who spent most of her time in the office. In the early 1990s her salary surpassed \$150,000, and her duties multiplied. Her new job with Aetna required an hour’s commute by car from her New Haven home. Responsible and forward-looking, she had long postponed motherhood. Her first son had arrived after careful planning. Unable to find native-born workers willing to provide live-in services, she had depended on immigrants. The scandal that followed exposed some of the difficulties surrounding the new professional woman. Condemned and vilified, Baird faced a series of unflattering characterizations. Many saw her as the incarnation of all that is wrong with the women’s movement: in the pursuit of material success, she had supposedly abdicated maternal responsibilities. Her comeuppance was met with satisfaction by those who saw her as a representative of a new ruling cadre whose prerogatives depended on the exploitation of vulnerable immigrants. Yet Baird’s case was of a more simple character. For all the glitter of her life, she confronted the same dilemmas that even the most humble of working women must face: how to attend to the needs of children while maintaining jobs.

The Immigrant Machine

Baird’s ordeal also shows the growing interdependence between the new professional classes—whose fortunes are based on high levels of education and employment in information-based sectors of the economy—and recent waves of immigrants. Throughout the period of economic reconstitution sketched in the previous sections, immigration to the United States grew rapidly, reaching unprecedented levels by the end of the century. Figure 6 presents the contour of legal immigration to the U.S. since 1901. By the year

2000, approximately 10 percent of the American population was foreign-born, reaching levels close to those that prevailed early in the twentieth Century. Official figures, however, do not take into consideration a substantial number of immigrants, mostly from Mexico and other parts of Latin America, who arrive and remain in the country illegally.

Figure 6:
Legal Immigration: Fiscal Years 1901-97



There is nothing new about the persistent arrival of foreigners into a country whose very identity is coterminous with immigration. Nevertheless, since the 1970s several dimensions of the phenomenon have changed. Earlier immigrants, mostly from Europe arrived into American cities that provided a bounty of industrial jobs. Historically, large farms and agricultural firms in the Southwest absorbed Mexicans. Many children of immigrants joined unions and moved into jobs of higher status. By the 1980s the old paths for economic and social mobility were not available to new immigrants who, therefore, often ended up providing myriad services, or working informally, in global cities.

In New York, Los Angeles and Miami, immigrants became preferred providers of labor in small firms specializing in the production of goods ranging from clothing to electronics products. Many of the firms that hired them had opened factories in overseas locations. Moving assembly jobs to less-developed countries paralleled the growing employment of immigrants at home. The maintenance of plants in strategic U.S. points presented additional advantages derived from the proximity to opportunity markets. By combining “outsourcing” with reduced production in the United States, employers improved their competitive stance. Subcontracting arrangements proliferated as producers sought to reduce costs. The growth of informal work during the 1980s also created vigorous demand for foreign-born workers.

In global cities and sectors where professionals clustered in response to the new demands for high-skilled labor, immigrants became the logical candidates for menial positions, especially those linked to reproductive labor and the provision of personal services. The number of immigrant *au pairs*, nannies and live-in maids in American cities increased over the last twenty years after a long period in which paid domestic service had all but disappeared (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001).

The new exigencies altered somewhat the character and composition of immigrant flows. Women are now more likely than in the past to migrate alone, leaving behind children in the care of relatives. In many American cities, and even in suburbia, immigrants—men as well as women—constitute the foundation of economic activity. Although their presence is often undetected, they form a strategic

sector whose modest wages and vulnerable status present multiple advantages to employers.

Under any circumstances, migration is a jarring experience that forces individuals to make major adjustments. Gender relations among immigrants are particularly susceptible of impact. A new literature on this subject suggests that migration can be a powerful vehicle for women to acquire added leverage vis-à-vis men in their homes. Because immigrants must pool scarce resources in order to survive, women's contributions acquire greater value than in the countries of origin. Immigrant women have been notable in their capacity to reproduce cultural practices in areas of destination, thus enabling the adaptation of their families into churches and community organizations (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1996).

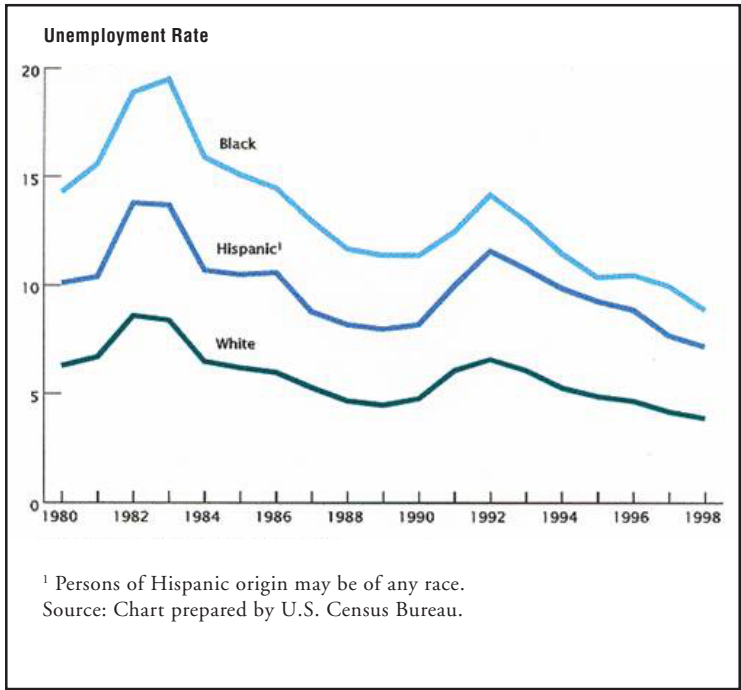
In addition, the growing need for paid domestic workers—and other like occupations—enables women to acquire an independent income, small as it may be. That, in turn, has allowed them to refashion their own identity. Ironically, the fragile position of immigrants as a whole can expand the negotiating capacity of women and force men to modify patriarchal expectations. It is not surprising, therefore, that when interviewed, men are more likely to yearn for their hometowns and countries of origin where, they imagine, manly prerogatives remain unquestioned. Women, on the other hand, soon see the benefits of added independence in the United States. The outlook is not entirely sanguine, however, because the tensions brought about by changing roles can also exacerbate conflict. In some communities, domestic violence, alcoholism and other maladaptive symptoms are the result.

The Disappearance of Manhood

The adjustments immigrants must make to adapt in areas of destination are fraught with tension. Yet there are groups for whom the drama of gender has acquired even larger proportions. African Americans living in impoverished neighborhoods have long faced obstacles in the labor market. A history marked by residential segregation and racial exclusion has limited their options in the United States to a larger extent than any other group. Changes in the global economy exacerbated even further the conditions surrounding this nation-within-a-nation. The decline of manufacturing that resulted

from the transition to an “information-based economy” broadened the gulf between those able to benefit from the new opportunities and those left behind. Clustered in inner cities with collapsing infrastructures, negligible investment and appalling school conditions, new generations of black Americans are more likely to be permanently unemployed than their ancestors. They increasingly constitute a “non-working” class whose very existence challenges every previous hope for assimilation. Figure 7 provides a comparative look at unemployment rates by race between 1980 and 1998. Consistently, and despite upturns in the nation’s economic performance, black unemployment nearly doubles that of whites. Unaccounted for in these calculations are thousands of African Americans who have fallen entirely out of the labor force.

Figure 7
Unemployment Rate, by Race and Hispanic Origin: 1980-1998



William Julius Wilson (1996) first called attention to the unique effects of the “disappearance of work.” One of them has been the virtual collapse of notions of masculinity dependent on paid employment. Instead of accepting demeaning jobs, which forebears held without sizeable benefits, impoverished African American men often seek meaning and power outside the limits of legality. Not able to support families, or hold rank vis-à-vis women, they often redefine the meaning of success by rejecting marriage and emphasizing independence and sexual prowess. Women’s yearnings for security and intimacy are viewed as potential entrapments. Hip-hop and rap music often gives voice to gender resentment. The portrayal of women as ‘hos’ and ‘bitches’ is but a veiled expression of men’s loss of masculine status. In those circumstances, women too have had to rethink the meaning of womanhood by emphasizing personal autonomy and rejecting romantic illusions of marriage and family. Singular for its level of atomization, the experience of urban blacks underscores the role of gender as a pivotal force in the organization of social groups, even those most vulnerable.

Women of the Maquiladoras

Twenty years ago, when Mexico’s *maquiladora* program was still new, researchers and public officials often saw it as a temporary solution for rising levels of unemployment along the northern border. The abrupt termination of the *Bracero* program, which had enabled Mexican men to enter the United States as guest workers, heightened joblessness and the possibility of popular turmoil (Fernández-Kelly, 1983). As described earlier in this chapter, Mexico’s government reacted by creating incentives to foreign investment in export manufacturing. *Maquiladoras* multiplied rapidly but, against the expectations of many, those plants did not create jobs for displaced men; instead, they targeted young, single women as preferred providers of labor.

Although the story is by now familiar, it is well to remember that the preference for women as providers of labor was part and parcel of a larger strategy on the part of employers to retain competitiveness in a global setting. At the local level, however, women’s employment brought about a number of effects worth considering. It increased the capacity of many to make contributions to fragile households mostly formed by parents and siblings. Single mothers were also

represented among *maquiladora* workers. Some evidence suggests that toward the end of the 1970s, another type of household was gaining prominence—that formed by single women living together and pooling income to defray shared expenses. Most of those women were recent migrants from rural towns and villages in nearby Mexican states.

Maquiladora work is unlike other forms of employment—even other types of factory work—for its level of intensity and requirement to engage in repetitive operations over extended periods of time. Low wages and reduced opportunities for promotion increase the probability of rapid turnover. Women employed in Mexico's export-processing plants tend to rotate frequently from one employer to the next as a way to assuage tedium and maximize personal advantage. This limits their capacity, however, to benefit from government regulations that reward long-term employment. In other words, export-processing industrialization bears little resemblance to earlier forms of manufacturing that grew during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe and the United States. Those early stages eventually led to improvements in standards of living. After several decades of existence, there is little evidence that maquiladora work will achieve similar objectives. That is because present conditions make it possible for companies to employ workers in less-developed countries without having to consider them as potential consumers of their products. The disconnection between markets and production is having a profound impact upon living standards. Televisions assembled in the Mexican border find their way into the homes of middle-class people in advanced industrial countries. There are few incentives to expand the buying capacity of workers in less-developed areas.

Starting in the early eighties, *maquiladoras* faced a series of labor shortages in cities like Tijuana and Ciudad Juarez. A common explanation was that the growth in employment had exhausted the labor supply. Yet there were other factors at work. The devaluation of the Mexican peso and high rates of inflation reduced the appeal of factory work for many women in need of maintaining already low standards of living. In search of higher wages, they shifted to other forms of employment in U.S. border cities, mainly as domestics. Paradoxically, the spaces left empty by women in the *maquiladoras* were occupied by a growing number of young men who had been

ejected from small rural communities by policies of austerity imposed by the Mexican government in response to the support of international development organizations. Although men have never constituted the predominant labor force in export-processing plants, their increasing numbers in them point to the deteriorating conditions of employment for large numbers of Mexican men.

The New Meanings of Macho

In his influential account about the changing conditions surrounding men in Mexico City, Matthew Gutmann (1996) notes the extent to which gender relations have been altered in the last two decades. Economic crisis and neo-liberal economic policies narrowed the options of most urban families. Unable to survive without women's financial contributions, men were forced to make new adjustments, especially with regard to childcare. Surprisingly, economic crisis has not led to an epidemic of fractured families and households. The opposite has often occurred. Women in need of holding jobs have often incorporated younger relatives, cousins in particular, to care for children and do housework in exchange for room and board and the possibility of continuing their education. Thus, an expansion in the number of household members has often been an adaptation to economic exigencies (Chant, 2002).

In these circumstances, men, too, have had to assume responsibilities that were formerly an exclusive female domain. New values associated with the merits of paternity and father's care seem to be emerging in a country known for its patriarchal pride.

5. Conclusion

In this article I have summarized findings about the relationship between economic change and gender identities over the last century. By comparing events taking place in the United States and Mexico, I have tried to gain insight into larger trends occurring in advanced and less-developed countries. My analysis shows that gender is not a secondary process but a central aspect in the articulation of class hierarchies. On both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, the purposive definition of realms of activity for men and women was decisive for organizing production and shaping the interactions between capital and labor.

In the United States, women's employment outside the home became the contested terrain around which welfare legislation was passed in the early 1900s. Heated debates of the time revealed two interdependent dimensions. One was the intent to protect a growing proletariat from the abusive practices of employers. Another was to circumscribe the roles of men and women as part of the effort to enhance working-class standards of living. The casting of men as sole family providers and women as specialized mothers and wives was, therefore, not only an expression of continuity with respect to value systems forged earlier on but also a selective organizational strategy suited to changing economic conditions.

Social reformers of the Progressive Movement were especially active in bringing about modern approaches toward the treatment of women and children. By restricting hours of work and kinds of employment appropriate to those two populations, government curtailed the supply of labor available to employers and enhanced the negotiating capacity of a predominantly male labor force. Manly feelings of solidarity between workers and employers further enhanced the capacity of industry to expand production. Thus, protective legislation for women and the family wage, as a male entitlement, helped to form a working class whose prosperity was without precedent. It also charged men with the sole support of families and made women entirely dependent on men's earnings.

Despite the socially created boundaries between male and female employment, women's participation in the labor force increased during the Second World War and ebbed immediately afterwards only to rise again in the 1960s. In their efforts to retain competitiveness, manufacturing firms threatened by foreign competition increasingly tapped new pools of labor, especially those formed by women, in less developed countries. Mexico's *maquiladoras* became a classic example of that process. At the same time, in advanced economies, the shift from manufacturing to services and advanced technology led to the proliferation of new jobs bearing characteristics long associated with female employment. The streamlining of corporations, the decline of unionization, outsourcing, and the growth of contingent work increased the probability of women's employment but also the tendency for men to work in feminized occupations. As with the early years of industrial expansion in the 1900s, changing gender

definitions were a pivotal aspect of the reorganization of production in the latter part of the twentieth century.

The examples provided in the previous section point to several facets of contemporary gender relations. The most general trend consists of greater atomization of the labor force in terms of sex. The disappearance of the family wage entails a new expectation that all workers, regardless of ascribed characteristics or domestic involvement, will assume responsibility for the maintenance of at least one person: him or herself. As more women join the world of employment, they face the promise of added autonomy and economic self-reliance. At the same time, the deteriorating conditions of work in several economic sectors raise concerns about the full meaning of gender atomization. As suggested by the case of Mexico's *maquiladoras* and dramatically exposed by the situation of inner-city blacks, the transformation of gender relations is fraught with dangers.

Perhaps most importantly, the new economic arrangements that followed globalization did not bring about solutions for the intractable tensions between the demands of paid work and home, especially the care of children. To bring about a solution to this most enduring contradiction is a major challenge in the new century.

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Notes

¹ An exception was the Zapatista Movement that began in 1994 in the southern state of Chiapas. Even that most dramatic manifestation of public discontent was sedate by comparison to insurrections of the past.

² The Mexican Revolution preceded the Russian uprising by seven years. The two explosions shared several features in common, including a growing frustration among the popular classes over the concentration of land in the hands of a small oligarchy.