



Economic liberalization, changing livelihoods and gender dimensions in rural Mexico

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Abstract

The paper focuses on changes in rural livelihoods and their gender dimensions in small farmer households in rural Mexico in the context of economic liberalization. Three trends that frame these changes were addressed: 1) the decline of smallholder agriculture in the context of economic liberalization; 2) changes in rural employment and its impact on households; and 3) the importance of private and public transfer payments for rural households.

Macro-level statistical data and three case studies indicated that there has been a decline in agricultural occupations and an increase in non-farm occupations. Women's role in agriculture has been reduced to subsistence; women are increasing their participation in non-farm occupations, with a 'feminization' of non-farm rural activities. The study also considered the effect on women of transfer incomes from migrant husbands and/or of public programmes. Finally, it identified factors that contribute to autonomy and negotiating power within the family, viz education, earning an income, responsibilities due to migration of spouses, right to inheritance and participation in community decisions. However, changes in gender relations evolve slowly and the prevailing male dominated gender ideology inhibits women's empowerment.

Public development programmes have improved livelihoods in central rural Mexico and had a positive impact on women's domestic work, educational opportunities and health. However, though social programmes for poverty alleviation have been enhanced, the abandonment of economic and productive investment in rural localities has constrained employment opportunities for both men and women. That this is the main issue in rural Mexico was also confirmed by the women themselves.

Key words: Economic liberalization, changing livelihoods and gender dimensions in rural Mexico

1. Introduction

On January 2008, agricultural trade was totally liberalized within NAFTA (The North American Free Trade Agreement), ending a fifteen year period of relative protection for Mexico's most sensitive crops.² Trade liberalization has had a profound impact on agriculture and production of different crops. While high value export crops have performed successfully, the same can not be said for food staples grown for domestic market and now fully exposed to international competition. The most important of these is maize the main food staple of both urban and rural population and grown by farmers throughout the country. Consequently liberalization has also had impact on farmers and their livelihoods.

Trade liberalization with declining real prices of basic crops (corn, wheat, rice and sorghum) for over a decade (until 2006) was not the only factor that had an impact on Mexican producers. Prior to NAFTA, structural adjustment policies in the 1980s and the reform of agricultural policies, starting in the early 1990s with the dismantling of direct subsidies to agriculture through credit, technical assistance, input prices, marketing boards (and price supports) had changed the economic context for farmers. This again had a severe impact on small farmers and particularly maize farmers. An important sector of small and medium sized farmers had benefitted from agricultural subsidies under the former model of development in a closed economy which aimed at self-sufficiency in food staples. These farmers have been the losers in the open market economy. Within the policies reforms of the 1990s, they were by large, excluded from new policies to prompt agricultural growth, now targeted at the competitive sectors of farmers, and channeled to social programs. These programs took on an increasing importance during the 1990s and continued in the 2000s.³

In the process of adjusting agriculture and farmers to the new economic context, rural livelihoods also changed. However this was not simply a response to trade liberalization and policy change. For over decades, poor farmers had been engaged in complex livelihood strategies in order to subsist. Incomes from farming were hardly ever sufficient for subsistence and reproduction of the household, hence wage work outside the farm either in agriculture or non-agricultural activities, temporary and long term migration have always been part of peasant livelihoods, as is well documented in development literature. What had changed was that agriculture was no longer the core on which the rural household built its reproduction and hence allocated family labor and other resources according to the needs of the farm. Today for many peasant households, farming has become complimentary to other income generating activities. Local economies are driven by non agricultural activities such as petty commerce, jobs in workshops or personal services demanding unskilled labor. The informal economy has soared on these bases. Even so, employment opportunities at the regional or local level are constrained to unskilled and low quality jobs and migration is the most viable option to earn an income.

At the same time, access to public services such as health and education, to infrastructure such as water, electricity, roads, etc. are widely available, as are communications and information through mass media. The socioeconomic and physical characteristics of the countryside has changed, blurring the divide of urban and rural.⁴

In rural Mexico, not just the economic environment has changed, but also the social, political and cultural context. In a large country with a diversity of regions, the process of change varies in its complexity and outcomes. Rural is no longer identified with agriculture and in most regions it is no longer identified with isolation and lack of access to markets and a number of public goods and services. Infrastructure and communications, basic education and even health services have reached many regions of rural Mexico; migration and particularly transnational migration have linked rural villages to global society and culture. The complex interrelations of economic, social, political and cultural processes are transforming rural life and spaces. Changes in rural livelihoods are both processes of long term continuities as well as ruptures linked to policy change.

The paper will focus on the socioeconomic changes of rural livelihoods and their gender dimensions. In particular I will address the following issues:

1. The decline of smallholder agriculture in the context of economic liberalization.
2. Changes in rural employment and its impact: the feminization of rural non-farm activities.
3. The importance of private and public transfer payments for rural households.
4. As concluding remarks, I will point to some issues underlined in our research findings related to changes in gender relations as livelihoods are adapting to the impact of global trends, and women are increasingly engaged in economic activities.

The paper discusses the first three points at two levels of analysis: at the macro level based on statistical data in order to show the overall change in agriculture over the past twenty five years of neoliberal policies and fifteen years of trade liberalization; and b) at the micro level, based on field research carried out in three rural localities in the center of Mexico.

The case studies illustrate a changing rural context in the densely populated areas of the central Mexican highland, comprehended within the area of influence of metropolitan Mexico City and a network of regional cities and towns. The rural landscape is rapidly being transformed as the rural-urban divide is no longer dichotomized by economic activities and there is an interpenetration of social and cultural processes. It must therefore be noted that the communities in the region do not represent the overall change of rural Mexico, particularly of the more isolated and poorer regions of Oaxaca and Chiapas.

The three communities studied are located in states bordering Mexico City were carried out in 2003-2004 (see map). The communities were chosen as part of a larger project revisiting the research sites.⁵ The communities have in common that they are part of the influence of the metropolitan area of Mexico City, as described above. However, the communities differ due to their geographical localization in different sub regions of Central Mexico. The process of change in each case differs according to the micro agroecological characteristics, and opportunities in market access for crops and labor markets as well as to government development programs through time (see map annex 1 and annex 2).

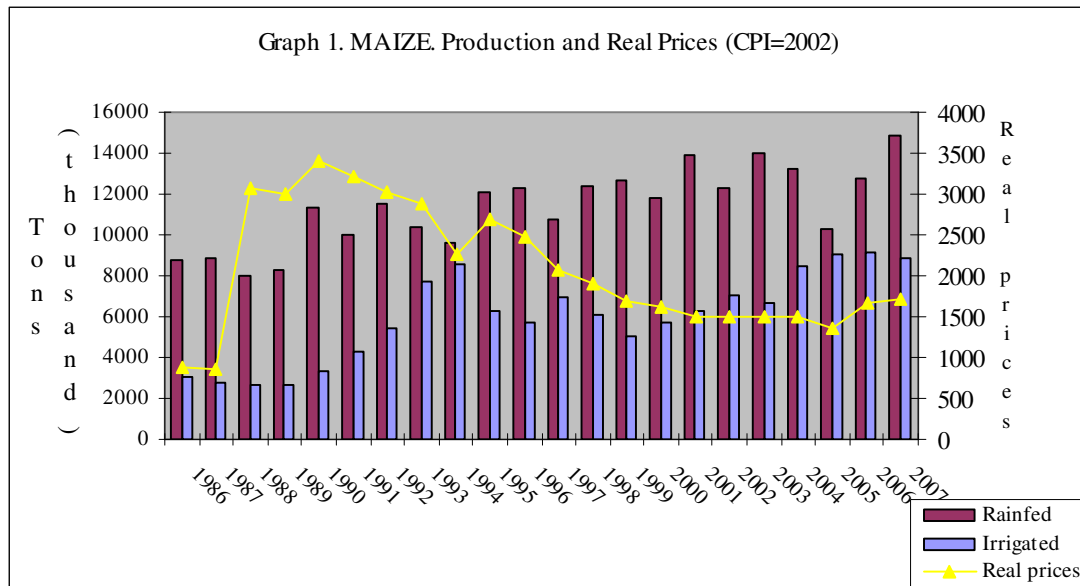
The communities were established in the 1930s with land distributed under agrarian reform. Local institutions were focused on land and agricultural production as part of the national institutional framework for *ejidos*, hence farming was closely linked to public policies and changes over time. Basic crops (mainly maize) for subsistence and market, and livestock were the main activities. With economic liberalization and the restructuring of sector policies as well as agrarian reform laws (1992), these communities became part of the ‘losers’ in the international competitive economy, mainly within NAFTA.

The results reported in this paper is based on quantitative and qualitative research: 1) A household survey carried out in the three communities during the Spring of 2003 with the purpose of capturing the socioeconomic characteristics of the household, agricultural activities, non-agricultural activities and participation in local institutions. 20% of total households were randomly surveyed in each community (a total of 254 households). 2) In depth interviews with women of two cohorts in order to capture the experience of women (60 years old) who in their adult lives had experienced the ‘before’ and development era with the presence of the State in *ejido* agriculture (1970 – 1980s) and women who as adults had experienced the change from state supported ‘development’ to neoliberal policies (from 35 to 45 years old). The interviews enabled to reconstruct the livelihood strategies of their households and the individual trajectories of the women. 3) Focus groups were held in each community in order to discuss issues related to the role of women as income earners, responsibilities as spouses of migrants and participation in the community organizations, and how the women perceived changes in gender relations. Women around 35-45 years of age and young married women from 25 to 35 participated in the focus group. Hence the focus groups included young women who had entered adult life under neoliberalism.⁶

2. Trends in agriculture under trade liberalization: the national data

Agriculture contributed to 3.8% of total GDP in 2007, showing a long term decline (in 1995 participation was 5.5%). With trade liberalization, non traditional export crops, such as fruit and vegetables have increased substantially, representing 54% of sector agricultural exports in 2008. Export crops are concentrated in specific geographic areas and on irrigated land and rarely an option for small farmers whom are mainly located on rainfed land.

Imports of basic crops have increased under NAFTA showing a decline in domestic production, in the case of wheat, rice and soybeans. The import of maize has increased by from 2.6 to 7.5 million tons from 1994 to 2007. However, maize still remains the main crop for Mexican farmers and production has increased in spite of the long trend in declining prices -until 2006- and the withdrawal of public support to small farmers. This is due to the persistence of small farmers in growing maize for subsistence and to the entry of entrepreneurial farmers on irrigated land (see graph 1). The supply structure of maize has changed dramatically since the 1990s, about 70% of maize marketed for human consumption is now supplied mainly by one region –the Northwestern state of Sinaloa.⁷ Since most small farmers and peasants are located on rainfed land the options to diversify into high value crops are limited.



Source: SIAP.

There are 5.6 million farm units in Mexico, and about 60% are less than 5 hectares.⁸ 68 percent are held within *ejidos* or *comunidades* created during the course of agrarian reform (1917-1992).⁹ Farmers who possess land in the reformed sector represent most of the smallholders of the Mexican countryside.

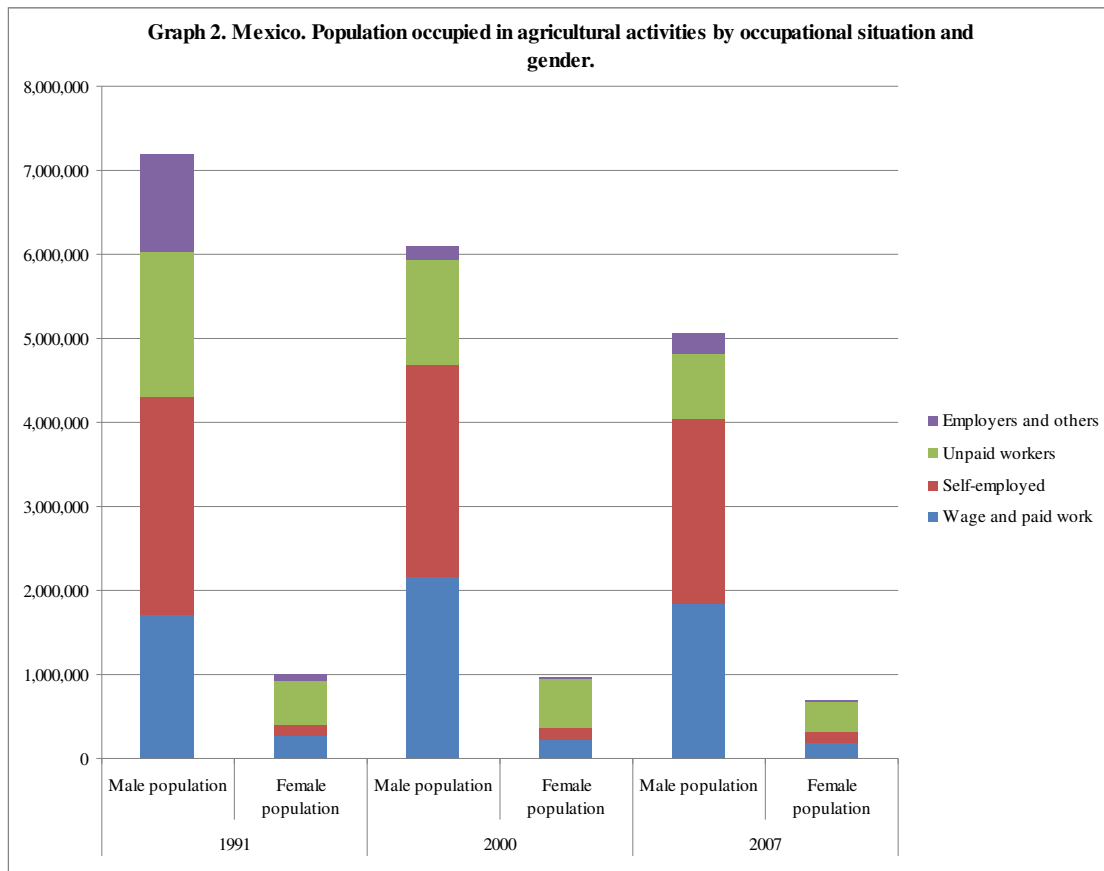
Small farmers have been adjusting to the changing macroeconomic context for more than a decade. Maize has been a key issue in this process. The crop is grown by about 3 million farmers in Mexico, of which 67% are classified as producers with low income (Vega and Ramírez, 2004 cited by Rello and Saavedra, 2007:85). Prior to liberalization and policy reforms maize production –as well as other basic crops- was subsidized through price of inputs, credit and a guarantee price enforced by the former government agency that purchased about a third of the marketed corn in the country. This enabled small farmers to sell part of their harvest and marketed supply of maize came mainly from regions of small and medium sized farms.

From the 1990's on, maize is cultivated mainly for self-consumption as declining prices and increasing input costs have excluded farmers from the market. Research has documented that small farmers invest less labor and other inputs in growing the crop. Though land is available, credit and technology is no longer accessible after structural reforms and access to markets have high transaction costs (Janvry, *de et. al.* 1997). Hence agriculture has become a complementary activity within the household and assigned to labor with low opportunity costs. This has had an impact on the allocation of family labor according to age, sex and kinship.

Rural households have adapted to the decline in agriculture by entering into off-farm occupations, an increasingly proportion of which is non-farm activities. While the diversification of income sources have always been a livelihood strategy for smallholder households, there has been a key change: off-farm income is no longer channeled to sustain the household as a farming unit, but to consumption or other activities such as petty trade, workshops or transports, or education and to finance migration. Hence household decisions as to the allocation of family labor and other factors of production are no longer assigned according to the needs of the agricultural cycle.

3. Changes in the pattern of rural occupations: evidence from national data

Population occupied in the agricultural sector has declined during the period of policy reforms (1990's) and the consolidation of the reforms (2000 to date). From 1991 to 2000 the decrease in agricultural occupations was 1.1 million people; in 2007 1.3 million people are further reduced in agriculture. In the first period, the decrease affected men (-15% decrease) much more than women (a 4.1% decrease); but in 2000-2007, the decline for women occupied in agriculture was 27% versus 16% for men. (see graph 2). This is a change, since female participation in agriculture had increased relative to men until 2000. In 2007, women accounted for 12.2% of agricultural occupations, while in 2000 it was 13.6%.



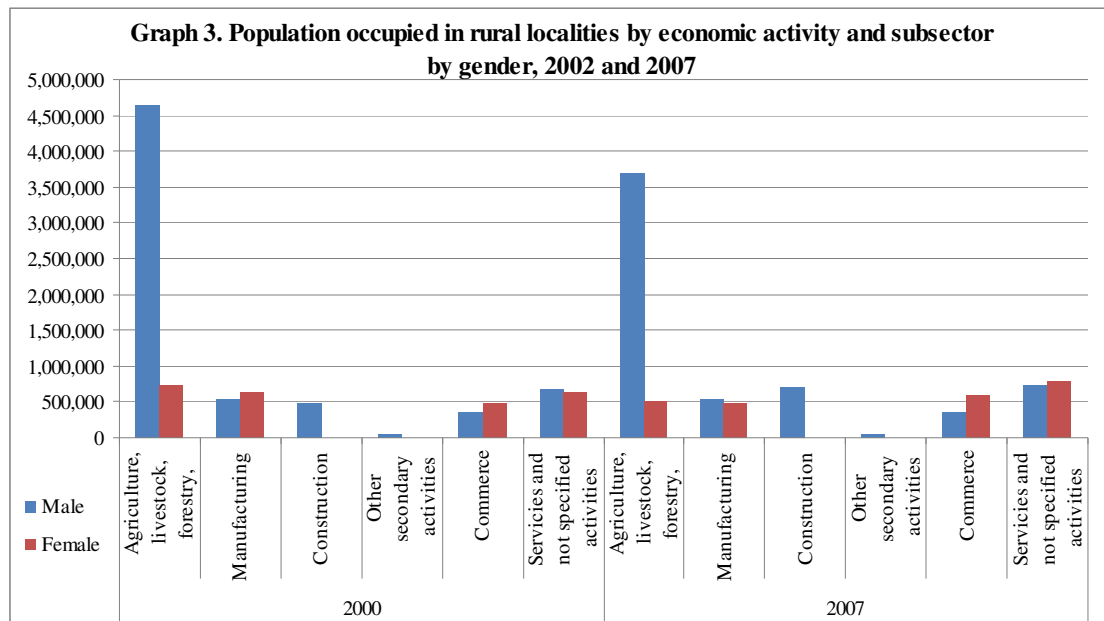
Source: INEGI, Encuesta Nacional de Empleo, 2000 and INEGI, Encuesta Nacional de Ocupación y Empleo, 2007.

The occupational position in agricultural activities shows marked differences: men are self-employed (for example, as farmers) while women are non-paid workers (likely for the self-employed men). This has varied little over time, being 50% in the 2007.

The second category in importance for women in agriculture is as wagedworkers. The number of women in this category and its relative importance decreased in the first period (1991-2000), but has increased in relative participation by 2007 (28% of women occupied). In the case of men, wagedworker participation increased in the first period and remains at 36% in 2007. The decrease in the absolute number of wagedworkers leads to two considerations: one, neoliberal policy expectations in the sense that the growth of export crops in fruit and vegetables would create substantial employment, and particularly female, does not reflect in the national data. Two, the decline in wagedworkers in general may be due declining demand due to the mechanization of cultivation practices and/or less labor demand due to the declining smallholder agriculture.

National data on occupations in rural localities shows the structure and trends of employment in the Mexican countryside, where employment in agriculture is

concentrated. 72.6% of the total population occupied in agricultural activities live in rural localities.¹⁰ Therefore the structure of occupations in localities of 2,500 inhabitants and less, describe the occupational structure of the farming areas (see graph 3).



Source: INEGI, Encuesta Nacional de Empleo, 2000 and INEGI, Encuesta Nacional de Ocupación y Empleo, 2007.

The first observation is that there is a decline in the absolute number of people occupied in rural localities from 2000 to 2007 (1.2 million) which has mainly affected men.¹¹

In agricultural activities, participation for both male and female occupation has declined in the order of 8 %. Agriculture remains a male activity, with 60.7% of male occupations dedicated to this activity, while only 21% of females are involved. Being a farmer, that is self-employed in agriculture, is related to the possession of land and this resource is in the hands of men.¹² Being a farmer is associate with age, the average for *ejido* farmers is 55 years old, restricting access of land to the younger generation. As mentioned above, women in agriculture remain as unpaid family labor.¹³

Occupational trends in non-agricultural activities from 2000-2007 show some notable changes in the participation by gender. In 2000, the industrial sector accounted for 25% of total occupations for rural women, this has dropped to 21% in 2007. Men have retained their participation in the industrial sector mainly due to an increase in construction, a traditional employment for rural men. However, men have maintained their occupations in manufacturing industry, versus a decline in the number of women occupied. In 2000 women occupied in the manufacturing industry were of the same numeric order as men, implying that rural *maquila* industry mainly demanded female

labor. The commerce and service sector is increasingly the activities in which rural women are occupied: 57% in 2007 versus 44% in 2000. Occupations in commerce have increase notably, from a participation of 19% in 2000 to 25% in 2007. In the case of men, participation increases only to 17.4% from 15%, in the same period and commerce has not increased male participation, accounting for 5% in both years. In 2007, women have outnumbered men in absolute numbers in the tertiary sector. We may hence ask whether the constrained employment opportunities in rural Mexico are leading men to displace women in manufacturing jobs, often the better opportunity for a wage in rural contexts- and confining women to commerce and services, most likely in informal occupations?

Women occupied in tertiary sector activities concentrate in commerce and various services (39% of women in total occupations); while men participate in a wider range of activities. For example, men are employed in communications and transports and government jobs, where the participation of women is low. This underlines that job opportunities for rural men are wider than for women: a segmented labor market by sex continues to be the fact in rural localities. This has not changed over the 2000-2007 period.

The incorporation of rural women into non-farm jobs have been assessed by literature in other regions of Latin America (Deere, 2005) which also shows that jobs are segmented by age and marital status and kinship. Young and single women enter into wage-work while older and married women are often self-employed, mainly in the tertiary sector. Rather than a 'feminization of agriculture', there is a feminization of rural non-farm economies. The data above for rural Mexico show that this trend does not point to jobs that may reflect better employment opportunities, but rather to occupations in commerce and services that are likely to be low quality jobs (García, 2007).

4. Adjusting livelihoods in three communities in the central highlands of Mexico: a generational perspective of rural women

The three case studies carried out in 2004 illustrate how small farmers in *ejido* households have adjusted to macroeconomic changes over time. Public policies have had a key role in determining rural development and the socioeconomic context for rural population at local levels. Structural adjustment and trade liberalization mounted on trends that were already ongoing, but also marked ruptures, mainly closing options for farmers and certainly for the younger generations in farming activities. The interviews and focus groups carried out with women of three cohorts showed continuity and change as the overall development of Mexico changed the livelihood strategies of rural households.

The elder women (around 60 years) recalled peasant livelihoods when agriculture was the core of the household: the role of women was determined by a well defined division of labor. Women were in charge of reproductive work within the household as

well as specific chores in the fields and the care of small animals. Working in the fields was done under supervision of a male, whether spouse, in-laws or parent. Hence women were subordinate to elders and males both in work as well as members of the family. Upon marriage this meant to subdue to the household of the in-laws (and to elder females) as young couples could live many years in the household before getting land of their own. In those days, work was hard and farming households were poor. There were no facilities to ease women's workload, they had to walk far to fetch water, gather wood to cook, grind maize to make *masa* for the *tortillas*. Also they had to care for the many children they had, there were no schools, no health clinics, no doctors, no communications. Poverty had a different meaning then, than today. The failure of a crop could mean hunger, illness could mean the death of an infant, jobs were only as fieldworkers, if available. Households without land were destined to the bottom of the economic and social scale.

Nonetheless, women expressed that economic and social life was more structured, both within the household and in the community. Also, the land was more productive, the *milpa*¹⁴ and the animals enabled a family to live from agriculture. Now the land has tired out, say the women, and no one can live only by its means.

Daughters (around 45 years) of these women faced a changed environment. Public services had come to the villages of the central highlands in Mexico. Health and education began to be accessible to these women and their children (and they had fewer children). Communications and transports connected the communities with the regional towns and main cities, including Mexico City. Temporary migration became part of the livelihood pattern as men went to work in construction in regional cities, in public works building regional infrastructure. Single young women would work as domestic servants in the cities. As adults, these women were part of households in which *ejidatarios* benefitted from agricultural subsidies as Mexico strived for self-sufficiency in basic food staples. Work in the fields diminished as tractors and chemical inputs were implemented, agriculture became even more a male occupation. Some women were able to enroll in a public program to educate bilingual indigenous primary school teachers, others had jobs in a nearby *maquila* factory and experienced industrial wage work.¹⁵ The domestic workload decreased with availability of electricity and running water. Also some domestic appliances entered the households, and most important, the maize kernels were taken to the electric mill to be ground saving women from hours of drudgery. The better-off households –those that had been able to benefit from public programs for agricultural and livestock development- could invest in small local businesses. Married women frequently attended a small grocery shop, or helped the spouse with activities such as a storage facility, renting a tractor or truck, etc. With better economic opportunities, young couples could attain independent housing and women would free themselves of direct submission to the spouse's parents. Rural Mexico, at least in the more communicated areas of the country seemed to be on the road to development.

Economic restructuring with the Mexican economy's recurrent crisis (1982, 1987, 1994-5) changed the continuity of 'progress'. Maize became less profitable to market, the younger generations no longer wanted to work in agriculture, nor do they have access to land which is still held by parents. Education and the social cultural impact of urban lifestyles, have changed the expectations of the young. They see more opportunities in migrating, until recently, to "the North" (USA). The women between 20 and 35 participating in the focus groups often belonged to independent households that had no access to land. In some cases, the spouses were working in the USA and supported the family with remittances; women who worked engaged in a number of activities, ranging from catalogue sales, *maquila* in small workshops or as piecemeal contractors, or in small shops from grocery stores to shops that provide 'modern' services to local consumers such as photocopying or hairdressers. Few women and men had stable jobs, even the opportunity for public employees or factory jobs have decreased in the villages studied.

An urban lifestyle is penetrating the expectations of the young generation, who have attained middle school levels of education and are exposed to mass media, etc. The peasant society is a thing of the past. But rural life is valued versus urban, people express that the rural environment is better than urban. Rural localities are perceived as places of residence, where children can grow up in a non-polluted, healthy and non violent environment, close to family and kin.¹⁶ The contradiction is that there is no local employment to enable this generation to gain their incomes and hence dependence on income transfers has more and more become the means for sustaining household consumption. Household chores have eased, as for their mothers, but perhaps the most important trend is related to food, as consumption patterns are also changing with the access to industrialized food. *Tortillas* are still the staple for each meal, but now *tortillas* can be bought at the local *tortillería*, it is no longer necessary to bake them at home. But other burdens have been added to the reproduction of the family: namely complying with obligations imposed by public programs both at the household level and for community services. This has increasingly become women's domain. Women are the recipients of the most important public anti-poverty program – 'Oportunidades' - which conditions a bimonthly transfer payment to women with school children with obligations that can be time-consuming. Promoting different community services or infrastructure to improve the village has also become the task of women who participate in different organizations in order to promote and obtain public funds for the locality.

5. Changing livelihoods: evidence from survey data in the three communities

Quantitative data for the *municipios*,¹⁷ in which each case study community is located, show the decline in maize agriculture and production. The *municipio* of SFP in which EPG is located, is one of the main maize growing regions in central Mexico, and both acreage and production have tended to fall, even though there is a change in the trend as of 2006, perhaps reflecting a response to the increase in maize prices. In the case of the other two *municipios*, Tlaltizapan (BH) maize has declined notoriously and in Cadereyta

(Boye) sown acreage has been staple, indicating the subsistence aim of growing maize (see table 1).¹⁸

Table 1. Hectares sown with maize			
<i>Municipio</i>	SFP	Tlaltizapan	Cadereyta
2001	25150	1091	4825
2002	25150	646	4374
2003	23100	652	4810
2004	23945	426	5700
2005	21982	524	4340
2006	23897	396	4525
2007	24599	387	4836
Annual rate	-0.44	-15.88	0.04

Source: Sagarpa-Siap

Agricultural activities. In the three communities studied, census data indicates that economically active population in agriculture has decreased substantially from 1990 to 2000: in EPG (from 20.8 to 10.5%) and in BH (43 to 35.5%), This is associated with the declining importance of maize production. In Boye participation in agriculture has increased (from 28.5 to 32.6%).

Survey data confirmed low female participation in agriculture in relation to total occupations: female economically active population in agriculture was 16% in EPG, 12% in Boye and 9.3% in BH.¹⁹ Agriculture was mainly the occupation of the head of the household and a male occupation. The exception is in EPG in which 43% of female head of households are direct producers (but only 7% of total head of households). Wagework in agriculture amongst the households interviewed were mainly a male occupation and only important in Boye, both for head of households as well as for ‘sons’.

When women do participate in maize cultivation their tasks are manual, all mechanized practices and spraying with chemical inputs such as fertilizers or weeding are male occupations. As tractors and green revolution technologies have been adopted over time, agriculture became more male dominated. This is the case observed in the communities studied. In EPG women belonging to the household participated in most cultivating practices, but male labor days outnumbered female, except harvesting in which 77% of labor days were female and performed by female wage labor. In Boye, women also participated in most tasks, but accounted for less than one third of the total labor-days. In BH the participation of female labor-days was not important. In the two latter communities, hired labor by the household, was male labor.

The difference between communities concerning female participation in agriculture is not related to international migration, which is present in Boye and BH. Rather it is related to the degree of mechanization, use of chemical inputs for fertilizing and weeding and local customs, for example women in EPG were more apt to work the plot that in the other two communities. Both because maize agriculture is much more important in this community and because men have increased non-agricultural activities as maize no longer provides an income (Preibisch, 2000). Wage work in the fields such as manual weeding and harvesting may also be performed by women, but only the very poor women will do this kind of job.

Women expressed that they were not keen about working the land. Agriculture was no longer a profitable activity, so there was little incentive to invest in the land. In fact, young women participating in the focus groups had little interest in discussing agriculture.

When responsible for the plot, women saw this as an extra burden on their workload and not as a way of acquiring responsibility, autonomy or acknowledgement from others. Agriculture was considered a male activity and decisions were made by the men.

In sum, gender relations in agricultural activities have not changed the subordinate position of women even though they no longer work side by side with the men in the fields but are now more apt to be responsible for the plot, when men are absent due to migration. Women are still subordinate receiving instructions over the phone from absent husbands or from their kin remaining in the village.

As a consequence, women saw no reason to gain greater access to land as a productive resource. However, land was valued as an important asset for residential purposes and/or a claim in family inheritance. Patterns of inheritance are also changing, as land may be subdivided among children, for residential purposes. This was observed, for example in EPG, a change from the custom of passing the land on to the youngest son who would continue farming and be responsible for the elders. As daughters contribute to the household income, they may be more apt to claim part of the family inheritance. Parents may negotiate the promise of future inheritance to the children who will care for them, regardless of their gender. In all three communities, there was an appreciation of intention of head of households for a more equalitarian distribution of land to sons and daughters.

Non-agricultural occupations accounted for the main female occupations in the three communities studied, following the trend observed at the national level data. In the three communities, non-agricultural occupations were, with few exceptions, related to 'traditional' jobs that had been part of livelihoods for several generations. In some cases, access to formal wage employment has been eroded, as is the case in Boye, where there were no further public works in the region –male jobs- and the garment *maquila* had

degraded benefits and wages, making jobs less attractive. In EPG in which quality jobs such as teachers were already saturated and no longer accessible to the young generations. Even the agricultural labor market for day laborers, available to the populations of BH in the 1970's and 1980's had contracted, due to the disappearance of cash crops for the Mexican market.

The 2003 household survey confirmed the narrow employment spectrum for household members, whether in the locality or outside. Most non-farm occupations were related to activities that were already part of people's livelihoods for several decades. Changes observed in wage-work were related to changes in regional labor markets that have become constrained in the overall trends of the economy, as mentioned above, and so informal activities or migration are the options followed.

A brief overview of the three communities by position in the household follows:²⁰ Women who are head of households or spouses of the head of household responded that their main occupation was in domestic work with no pay. Male head of households in non-agricultural occupations worked in construction (BH) or petty commerce (EPG, mainly as street vendors outside the community). In Boye, men are in the category 'other wage work' including work in the US, and in construction. That is, both women and men were engaged in 'traditional' occupations, except in the case of migrants, whose occupations were often unaccounted for since informants ignored their occupation.

The occupational patterns from a generational perspective showed a slightly broader perspective for 'sons' of the household, but not daughters (of age 15 years or more). 'Traditional' non-agricultural activities still predominate but differences were found by community and gender.

For 'daughters' occupation in unpaid domestic work is the main activity in all three communities, showing little change for women as non-domestic workers.²¹ In EPG there is more diversification of occupations: sons follow their 'fathers' in agriculture, petty commerce, construction and government employment; but are also present in 'other income generating' occupations (mainly the migrants). EPG is the only community in which employment in public services are available. This is mainly as grade-school teachers and is due to a government program for educating indigenous and bilingual rural teachers. This program was available in the 1970s and 1980's for the *mazahua* region in the State of Mexico. Bilingual teachers have a strong presence in the communities, and these are the best quality jobs in a rural context. However, according to the survey less than 9% of the women were teachers. Employment for 'daughters' beside domestic unpaid work, is in domestic employment (EPG), for generations, the women of the region have been employed as such in Mexico City and Toluca.

In the other two communities occupations that account for 9% or more of the categories 'sons' and 'daughters' are few or dispersed. In Boye, occupations for women

are dispersed in ‘other paid work’, such as employed in stores or the garment factory, both located in nearby towns. In the case of ‘sons’, emigration made it difficult to obtain the occupation of ‘sons’ (often the head of household does not know) hence the category ‘not specified’ account for a high percentage. The same is the case for BH, including ‘daughters’. BH was the only community in which female migration was relevant. 9% of ‘daughters’ in BH were also engaged in ‘other paid activities’, mainly working at a local garment workshop or doing piecemeal work in their homes, such as assembling costume jewelry.

In sum, occupations are concentrated in low skilled jobs, and are not very different from one generation to the other. In each community, livelihood strategies combine agriculture, if land is available and non-farm occupations that have predominated over time, according to the economic trends of each community: construction and domestic employment, petty trade and teaching in EPG, and migration in Boye and BH.

6. Gender perspective on income earning activities

In the interviews and focus group, women of different cohorts expressed their opinions and perceptions about working for an income, be it outside the household or at home, as related to their role in the household and particularly in relation to their spouses. There was a general consensus that the income provided by women was necessary and often covered special needs. Work outside the home and earning money also contributed to their self-esteem. However working for an income, added to the work-burden of women, as men seldom shared domestic chores.

In all three communities gender relations were entrenched in male-dominated ideology (*machismo*). In the focus groups, women confirmed that husbands were openly against or at the best dubious of having their spouse work outside the home. Whether to ask ‘permission’ to work and abide to the husbands opinion, was a serious issue for young and middle aged women participating in the groups. Differences in opinion were perceived by community, age and educational status. Hence women in BH expressed themselves as more autonomous in their decisions, while Boye women (recipients of remittances) were much more restrained, especially the young women. In EPG, there was a marked difference according to education and employment status. The public employed women participating in the EPG focus group, openly had confronted partners and family for their autonomy, while other women had a more ambiguous attitude.

Notably, all women expressed the ambiguity of working for an income and the care of their children, concerned about whether children would suffer from their being away from home or busy with work. Child care is unquestionable considered a woman’s job, however the young wives of migrant men in Boye expressed concern about the absence of the children ‘father’. But this was not because of the lack of sharing daily

chores in child caring, but rather the absence of fatherly affection and overall decisions about the education of children.

7. Transfer payments: are rural localities becoming residential and consumer economies?

Rural households have become more dependent on transfer payments as an income source. Transfer payments, whether private or public, are driving rural local spaces to be residential and to become consumer economies rather than promote sustainable economic growth based on production. Incomes from transfer payments prompt local demand for goods and services, and may partly explain the growth of petty commerce and services in the communities.

At the national level, the percentage of income from transfer payments in rural households has increased from 7.0% in 1992 to 19.5% in 2002. Increase in social spending rather than agricultural development and migration account for this increase. Public transfer payments accounted for 9.2% of household income in 2002 (versus 0.2% in 1992); and private transfers to households accounted for 10.3% (6.8% in 1992). Poor rural households are even more dependent on transfer payments (23.8% in 2002) and on public sources (17% in 2002 versus 6.8% for private transfers). (Rello, and Saavedra, 2007: table 4.3:175).

Increased importance of transfer payments in household income have a gender dimension. We will look at this focusing on poverty alleviation programs and migration.

Public transfer payments. There are two major transfer payments that reach rural populations: *Procampo* and *Oportunidades* (formerly named *Progresa*). Each program is gender specific.

Procampo is an income subsidy paid to farmers based on the amount of hectares of land possessed; it is received largely by the male population. *Oportunidades* (named *Progresa* when it was first launched in 1998) is the most important public social transfer program.

Both programs were received by households in the case study communities, as shown in table 2. *Procampo* covers about all households that possess land. *Oportunidades* is aimed at poor households and hence only the qualifying ones received the benefit, in the villages over half the households were recipients of the social payment.

Table 2. Households receiving income transfers			
Community	No. of households		Average annual pesos (2003)**
	receiving	%	
Public transfers			
<i>Procampo*</i>			
EPG	106	93	1,126
Boye	19	92	1,584
BH	26	93	2,862
<i>Oportunidades</i>			
EPG	71	62	3,258
Boye	43	54	3,888
BH	31	51	3,252
<i>Private transfers</i>			
EPG	13	11	25,723
Boye	22	28	33,260
BH	29	47	28,512

Source: 2003 Survey

* Households with land

** Ten pesos equal to one US dollars.

Oportunidades is designed with a gender perspective. Women are the participants and recipients of the Program. A bimonthly cash payment is given to the ‘mother’ for each child in school with the condition of school attendance and health check-ups at the local clinic. Girl students at middle school level get a bonus payment. Other payments included are for pregnant and breastfeeding women, and for children less than two years old. Women are also obliged to health check-ups as well as attending to health and nutrition related talks at the clinic and performing community work such as cleaning the school or clinic. In our case studies, we did not focus on this program, so I will only refer briefly to the discussion on the gender issues that has been brought up concerning *Oportunidades*.

Numerous evaluations of the program have assessed its success in terms of school attendance, health and poverty alleviation. However, the impact on gender relations has been at the best questioned. Several studies argue that *Oportunidades* is reproducing the existing gender stereotypes as women are given the role of ‘mothers’ and reinforce the traditional roles of women in the family and community (Molyneux, 2007). An evaluation of the program’s impact on *Mazahua* indigenous women in the Northwestern region of the state of Mexico in which EPG is located, reaches a similar conclusion. The study emphasizes how women are often subordinate to the power of local authorities in order to retain participation in the program and how recipients perceive obligations as an extra burden on their daily workload, also constraining time and opportunity for income generating work (Vizcarra, 2008).

The present generation of women who participate in the program have a transitional role; if there is a change in gender relations, it would be for their daughters who have benefitted from the educational component. After over a decade of implementation, the outcome in terms of autonomy and empowerment for the young women is now an issue for further research. However, in a context of limited opportunities for quality jobs and sustainable means for their livelihoods, rural women - and men- will not likely be able to fulfill their expectations of their personal and social development.

In sum, public transfer payments have effects on the economic strategies of households as to how decisions are taken concerning the allocation of resources such as family labor, land use, cash income, food procurement, etc. as well as investments in economic activities and human capital; mitigating risk and vulnerability. These issues need to be understood better. How income transfers contribute to decision making concerning production and consumption and how this plays out in the type of local economies that are emerging in rural Mexico seem an important question for future development trends.

Private transfers: migration. In the case studies, migration and its effect on the life of women was an issue constantly brought up, particularly in Boye and BH. According to the 2003 survey data, 68% of men living outside the household were in the US in Boye and 63% in BH. Only in BH was female migration reported. In the case of EPG, migration was mainly to other states (a third of household members living outside the household, both the case for males and females). 27% of households in Boye received income from members away from the household, in BH the case was 47% and in EPG, 21%.

Migration has an impact on the role of women within the household as responsibilities and the workload increases with the absence of men. Women are responsible for managing income: daily consumption expenses, investing in and supervising agricultural activities, the construction of a house, etc. Women are alone in bringing up and educating the children, care for the elder, as well as participating in community affairs.

Being the spouse of a migrant had complex effects on gender relations within the household and the community. Responsibility for the household and fields or small shops could mean an increase in the autonomous decision making of the female head of household, but often she was supervised and reported back to the spouse by telephone.

In the focus groups, women often expressed being on their own as ambiguous, since they had more work and no one to share daily decision making with. This was particularly a particular concern with the upbringing of children. While women around 45

expressed they had more freedom in their daily life, young women were concerned about the absence of a partner and the children's father.

In the case of one community, Boye, in which migration has a history of two decades, women worked less outside the home, as remittances enabled a relatively reliable income. They were also more prone to the social supervision of kin and neighbors and the long distance control of spouses. In BH, women expressed less ambiguity with respect to the absence of men; they were not subject to supervision by families and hence more autonomous. The women wanted the men to live in the villages and have jobs. The problem is social not individual.

8. Concluding remarks on changing livelihoods and gender dimensions

The changing trajectories of livelihood strategies as seen from the perspective of women belonging to different cohorts in the three communities studied, show the complexity of gender relations and their change in relation to women's participation in economic activities, income earning and as administrators of the household when men are absent.

In our research we focused on economic strategies and employment and on how work and income were affecting gender relations within the household and community. Since the 1980s, literature has assessed that female participation as wage-workers or income earning as self-employed contribute to the self-esteem and relative autonomy of women. Our research confirmed this but also showed the ambiguities.

We found that the local context was important in explaining changes related to the situation of women. Basic infrastructure and services has lessened the burden of women's domestic work, women have less children and the drudgery of providing food and daily chores is a thing of the past. Access to health services and schooling have notably changed the quality of life for people in general, but women in particular, who have access to birth control, health check ups and attention also for their children. Public policy of rural development has been the main factor in providing an improved context for rural population in general, and for women.

But domestic work and caring for the family remains women's domain. Gender relations in rural Mexico, even in regions that have undergone profound economic and social changes, as in the case studied reported, are still anchored to traditional gender roles despite being income earners or in charge of the family and household economy, when men are absent.

Field work, interviews and focus groups with different cohorts lead to the conclusion that a male dominated gender ideology prevails in the social context of rural communities and inhibit the empowerment of women, even though in our case studies women recognize their willingness to work and the need for income. They also are very

much aware of the prevailing macho ideology but are more ambiguous about confronting this context. Their ambiguity is mediated by their roles as ‘mothers’ rather than awareness that submitting to this role is part of gender subordination. Only few women, with better education and technical or professional jobs have openly challenged their situation and are empowered as individuals.

Education at the technical or professional level emerged as the one important factor of empowerment, and the ability to confront unequal relations both within the family and in the community. However this was a specific case for EPG in the context of a government program.

The younger generations face challenges that are very different from those of their elders. Young women have more resources than their mother –and certainly grandmothers- to confront male dominance in their individual daily life and also in the community. Women today, recognize and question male dominance and are aware of their own capabilities and limitations. But they are not empowered. In an overall context of poverty, economic uncertainty, precarious jobs and in general, lack of opportunity in localities that lack economic drivers, a change in gender relations has to be mediated through the empowerment of both men and women in rural society.

In sum, trade liberalization and neoliberal policy excluded smallholder agriculture from markets and intensified the need for non-farm income. Non-farm occupation, especially in the tertiary sector has become increasingly important for women, at the same time, the migration of men have given more responsibilities to women. The occupational data for rural localities in Mexico shows signs of shifts in the 2000-2007 period: the industrial occupations are increasing for rural men, while occupation for rural women has importantly increased in commerce. If there was a trend of rural women occupying jobs in industry in 2000, this seems no longer the case. In the context of precarious labor markets, men are now competing for jobs that were typical female, as in the rural *maquila* manufacturing?

Transfer payments have increased as an income source in rural households. Poverty alleviation programs are extended in rural Mexico, but are only mitigating the needs of families. However *Oportunidades* has had an impact on gender relations. These effects are controversial and generational specific. We need to know more about the effects of the programs on the young girls that have benefitted from extended schooling, favoring females. Will they be passive recipients of a poverty alleviation program, that reinforced the traditional role of their mothers?

Income from remittances has become the second foreign exchange source for Mexico since 2000. But from 2007, the amount has fallen. Return migration is an increasing phenomena. This poses new issues that need to be understood such as the effect on local rural economies, on labor markets; as well as the more complex issues concerning gender relations within the households and communities.

Finally, smallholder agriculture and food security remain important issues. The 2006/7 food crisis posed challenges to domestic agricultures. One important question in the case of Mexican farmers was whether farmers would respond to increasing prices. One argument is that for many, agriculture has become so marginal that farmers would not have the necessary conditions to enter the maize markets. But little research has been done on the topic, and remains an open question. However, the context rapidly changed in late 2008, and the overall global economic crisis is the mayor issue on the international agenda.

Future scenarios are so uncertain that reflections on the short term future of rural livelihoods and its gender dimensions, can only point to major trends. In the case of Mexico, violence and social upheaval are already exacerbating the social fabric of rural (and urban) Mexico.

In the paper, I underline the importance of public development programs as drivers of the improvement of livelihoods in central rural Mexico. Neoliberal policies continued the social programs but abandoned economic and productive investment in rural regions of peasant agriculture. Agrarian communities have a precarious productive basis, not only in the case of agriculture but also in non-agricultural activities such as agro-industry or even manufacturing. Hence rural economies are limited to commerce and services to respond to the demand of low income of communities that are becoming residential with informal economies; not a basis for sustained local or regional growth.

The main challenge is a revision of development policies and of the role of the state in rural and agricultural development. In this context, the lessons learned from the vast amount of research on the gender dimension in change –in the period of development and restructuring under neoliberal policies- are to be upfront on the agenda. The gender perspective also needs to incorporate the focus on men, as the consequences of economic crisis and the option of migration is becoming constrained which will certainly have effects on rural livelihoods and gender relations.

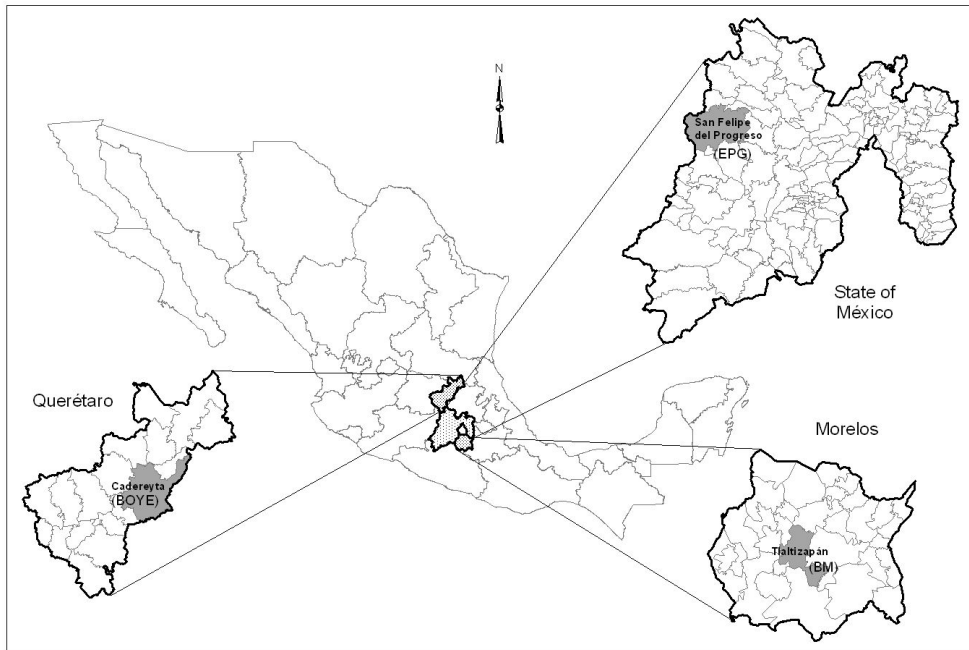
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Annex 1

MEXICO: CASE STUDIES



Annex 2. Agrarian and economic trajectories of case studies

Period:	EPG Population: 3076 Municipio: San Felipe del Progreso State of Mexico	Boye Population: 1742 Municipio: Cadereyta State: Querétaro	BH Population: 735 Municipio: Tlaltizapan State: Morelos
Agrarian reform and land distribution	<i>Ejido</i> founded 1936 Food staples (maize) and wheat Livestock Non-farm Male migration to regional and urban construction works	<i>Ejido</i> founded in 1920's Food staples (maize), barley Livestock Recollection and production of <i>pulque</i> Non-farm Male: mule transport, workers in regional public infrastructure works Female: domestic employment in Cadereyta	<i>Ejido</i> founded in 1937 Food staples (maize), cotton, raising draught animals Non-farm Male: recollection of firewood Wageworkers in nearby farms in horticulture
Development with state intervention, 1970-1990	Maize sold to government agency Subsistence Non-farm Male: petty commerce in regional cities Female: Domestic employment in Mexico City Rural teachers Public programs: Bilingual education; financing and support prices for maize; pig raising program	Food staples for subsistence Non-farm Male: work in regional infrastructure works. Migration to US Female: workers in <i>maquila</i> factory in Cadereyta Public programs: improved seed for agriculture; electrification of rural regions.	Maize for subsistence. Sorghum for market. Livestock Non-farm Male: agricultural wageworkers in region: horticulture and sugar cane Migration to US Female: domestic employment in nearby towns Public programs: Financing sorghum, livestock
Neoliberal policies 1990-present	Fragmentation of land for inheritance Maize for subsistence Non-farm: Male: construction and petty commerce in central and north Mexico Female: rural teachers; self-employment in commerce and services Public programs: Oportunidades, Procampo	Maize and horticulture for subsistence Livestock Non-farm Male: Migration to the US Female (young): employment in commerce nearby town Public programs: Oportunidades, Procampo, Genetic improvement of livestock	Incipient land transactions for residential purposes Decrease of maize for subsistence Sorghum and livestock Non-farm Male: construction, migration to US Female: local <i>maquila</i> , domestic employment in regional vacation homes, start to migrate to US

Notes

¹ The author is grateful to anonymous reviewers for comments and to Edith Pacheco for facilitating 2007 tables from the national employment survey (Encuesta Nacional de Ocupación y Empleo).

² Maize, milk products and sugar cane. During the period, import quotas and tariffs phased out.

³ There is a vast literature referring to the impact of trade liberalization and policy reform in Mexico. For references in English see, Appendini, 2008; Cornelius and Myhre, 1998; De Ita, 2008; Hewitt, 1994; Janvry, de 1997; Randall, 1996.

⁴ The discussion of the changed rurality has been subject particularly in the Latinamerican context and expressed in concepts as 'new-rurality' 'peri-urban' 'rurbanization'. See Arias, 1992; Delgado, 2003; Schjetman, 1999; Carton de Grammont, 2004; Arce and Long, 2004.

⁵ The project was focused on the transformation of the central rural region of Mexico and financed by the Mexican research council CONACYT. For the results of this project, see Appendini and Torres-Mazuera, 2008. Thanks to the interest and support of the FAO Gender and Population Program, a project on the gender dimensions of rural change was carried out in the same communities in 2004-2005. The author is grateful to FAO and the above mentioned Program, and particularly to Zoraida García for this support. For results see, Appendini and De Luca, 2006. The present paper is based on the FAO project.

⁶ For detailed explanation of the methodology, see Appendini and De Luca, 2005.

⁷ It is beyond the aims of this paper to explain the causes of this shift in the supply structure, see Appendini, 2008.

⁸ Data from the 1991 agricultural census. Data from the following census, 2007, is not yet available.

⁹ Data for 2005, Registro Agrario Nacional (National Agrarian Register). The tenure system is *ejidos* or *comunidades* and refer to agrarian communities and their land recognized by agrarian legislation.

¹⁰ A locality is classified as rural when population is 2,500 inhabitants or less according to the ENE.

¹¹ Total population in rural localities decreased by 450 thousand from 2000-2005.

¹² Up to 1971, Agrarian Law only gave rights to land distributed under agrarian reform (*ejidos* and communities) to men head of households. Women were only entitled in case of being head of households. From 1971, Agrarian Law gives equal rights to land for men and women, but women only account for 25% of *ejidatarios* and *comuneros*.

¹³ This trend has been assessed for Latin America; see Deere, 2005. For Mexico see also González and Salles, 1995; Pacheco, n.d.

¹⁴ Plot of land on which maize grows.

¹⁵ The employment opportunities varied according to the community, each located in a different geographical area (see map).

¹⁶ For a discussion of changing identities concerning the indigenous *ejido* studied, see Torres-Mazuera, 2008a and 2008b.

¹⁷ The equivalent to county as an administrative unit.

¹⁸ The data refers to the *municipios* in which each community is located; there is no data available at the level of communities.

¹⁹ Agro-industry was not present in any of the communities, so we can not account for trends in the specific case, which has been well documented in other literature (Appendini, 2002; Arizpe and Aranda, 1981; Barndt, 2002; Lara, 1998).

²⁰ For a detailed analysis of the survey data, see Appendini and De Luca, 2006: 41-48.

²¹ This includes 'daughters' of the household surveyed that also have established their own households, showing little change for women.