

A Summary History of Women Market Traders in Mexico

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The task to which I address my remarks is one of writing a history of an important segment of society, important in terms of the numbers of women involved as well as the strategic services they render. These are rural women who participate in the "tertiary" or "informal" sector of the economy in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean area. Despite the occurrence of greater urbanization and modernization which is accompanying economic "development" in such areas, many rural women continue to engage in traditional forms of household production and distribution activities. They process food, make crafts, and raise produce which they sell in a nearby regional marketplace or in an urban marketplace to which they commute. Such women must develop a number of skills which make for success. These include judging the quality, durability, and maturation rate of produce, the desirability of certain styles of crafts, the management of cash flows, the likelihood of sales in various locations, sources of resupply, customer preference and habits, and in recent times, as I shall show, an ability to do some formal cost accounting.

My own research in rural Michoacan, a state in south-central Mexico, has dealt with the economic role of women marketers within peasant households which act as a corporate budgetary unit. Members of the unit allocate their labor to a variety of types of work, including agriculture, craft production, vegetable vending, or waged work in the formal sector in the nearby town of Patzcuaro when it is available. Both crafts and fruits and vegetables from the rural villages throughout the region are sold mostly by women from such household units in the marketplace in town. (For a detailed discussion of the operation of the marketplace and its connection with household production see Ina Dinerman, "Economic Alliances in a Regional Mexican Economy," *Ethnology*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1978).)

Such marketplaces came into being in Mexico and other areas of Spanish America during the 16th and 17th centuries by Crown fiat. Urban colonists from the Iberian peninsula, who were prohibited from residing in rural Indian communities, and who were

reluctant to enter into agriculture themselves, were assured provisioning of basic regional foodstuffs and household manufacturers by this means. The marketplace was also a primary source of cash for rural cultivators who needed it to pay taxes to the Crown, which required payment in specie. The marketplace became an important feature of the colonial economy; it has persisted, however, beyond the colonial period in many regions in Latin America and, as in colonial times, vendors are mostly women. What this suggests is that over the centuries, hundreds of thousands of women have been involved in a vital sector of the economy, namely, the provisioning of the growing urban centers. Yet we have almost no historical knowledge of such women. This is so for several reasons, I believe.

First, the early chroniclers in Latin America were mainly ecclesiastics interested primarily in belief systems and religious institutions among the indigenous population. Subsequent colonial writers were concerned with the rural economy, but saw rural communities as a source of cheap labor for colonial enterprises, rather than as households of producers. The Spanish Crown's pattern of levying taxes on a community rather than on a per capita basis also tends to obscure knowledge of how such individual production units operated. As a result, contemporary historians who are increasingly interested in social and economic history find themselves without documentary data dealing directly with this sector. Nor do present-day methods for gathering data on such women encourage this research. A reading of available statistics on the participation of women in the labor force in Latin America shows a relatively low participation rate -- below 20 percent as compared with over 40 percent in both Europe and the United States. These figures underestimate female labor force participation in Latin America because women such as market vendors and craft producers are not included in the census category of "economically active." This category applies well enough to women in the modern formal sector, but obliterates the economic contribution of large numbers of women who provide strategic unwaged services in cultivating, bulking, transporting, and vending enormous amounts of foodstuffs for millions of urban dwellers.

A brief description of the way in which women in the marketplace operate as representatives of corporate household units will serve to illustrate how these differ from the conventional understanding of the operation of the "business firm."

Women who sell produce acquire stocks either by raising them themselves or by buying from other local women or women wholesalers in Patzcuaro who are themselves "bulkiers" of other women's produce. A woman acquires supplies for the day, pays a small fee to rent a "sitting space" in the market, and seats herself among other such vendors. Each woman vendor acts as a representative of her household. However, her activities are *not* identical to those of

a business firm. They differ in several ways. First, the corporate groups represented by each vendor differ among themselves in terms of their internal structure. Some units comprise many members, some only a few. Some consist of many adults, others of many minor children. Second, the *goal* of vending differs from that of the profit-maximizing business firm. Each woman vends to meet the budgetary needs of her own household. The needs of the corporate units differ, depending upon household size, age and sex distribution, the amount of subsistence derived from agriculture, the degree of participation in the fiesta cycle and a number of other socially determined factors. Finally, because vending is geared to budgetary needs and household viability, prices are determined by haggling, rather than being a nexus between supply and demand. Each purchase represents an opportunity to maximize cash income, but because it is always better to sell than not to sell, there is always a minimal return which will be acceptable to *some* vendor. Because women do not price their labor, only their products, the cost of regional foodstuffs remains fairly low throughout Mexico.

It has been suggested by one writer on the informal sector that such marketplaces can serve as a training-ground for entrepreneurial skills with which some women might enter the formal sector. In 1974, a governmentally initiated change in the Patzcuaro marketplace took place which enabled me to test this hypothesis. A market building was erected which contained a fixed number of stalls. These could be rented on a yearly basis by vendors, but they were then required to pay for water, licenses, garbage collection, and other fees to the town. It meant, in short, that the cost of "doing business" would have to be rationalized.

In 1976, I interviewed 27 women who entered the building, to learn what I could about entrepreneurial activity. Briefly put, it was clear that indoor vendors were women with more initial back-up capital, due largely to husbands who owned land or who had been migrants to the United States. Many were second- and third-generation vendors with better skills. Yet none of these had become a wholesale supplier to other vendors, as had four men from the town. Here, cultural factors outweighed the rural women's ability to assume entrepreneurial roles. Women who must deal regularly with male truckers, or travel alone to nearby towns to acquire supplies, are sexually suspect both by husbands and other women. Moreover, vendors are reluctant to have their credit arrangements and profits known to members of other households within the community. Highly successful vendors are open to a variety of social sanctions including gossip, envy, and even accusations of sorcery, which derive from a community ethic of egalitarianism and the sharing of wealth. For a woman to engage in entrepreneurial activity, she would have to know more about other women's households than is culturally acceptable.

The type of economic activities I have studied, and the context in which they operate, present both a problem and a challenge for historians of women in business. One difficulty is in measuring, by conventional means, the economic contribution of the informal sector to the development of a modern nation. Even more difficult is the problem of using traditional categories developed for the business firm as it exists within the modern, capitalized economy.

I wish to suggest some possible ways to proceed in such an endeavor, and to raise the issue of what contribution such studies might make to studies in business history.

There exist in libraries and archives in Spain, Mexico, and the United States numerous documents, treatises, censuses, and tax reports developed for the Crown which make reference to Indian communities and their activities. While it is doubtful that many of these deal directly with marketplace participation, there is a strong likelihood that because of the Crown's difficulties in supplying the urban centers, and the practice of petitioning the Crown for new and improved marketplaces, that there are references to such markets. These could be used to determine the presence, size, and location of such markets. Other kinds of materials may yield further information. These include novels, poetry, newspapers, calendar illustrations, photographs, travel diaries, and autobiographies written during the colonial and postrevolutionary periods.

A second possible avenue is one which derives from the methodology of the social sciences, particularly from anthropology's concern with the persistence of societal structures over time. I want to suggest the possibility of "retrodicting" from knowledge of what is presently the case to the existence of a similar set of features in the past. That is, if the structural features within which such markets operate can be shown to exist over long periods of time, interpolation of the structure, combined with empirical documentary evidence, may yield a reasonable picture of the participation of rural women in the maintenance of urban society.

The contribution of such an effort to a general history of business, I believe, is manifest. First, it would lead to a more balanced social history which takes into account the contribution of a much-neglected segment of human society, namely, the lower class, especially lower-class women. Second, it could stimulate new methodologies in history which utilize new types of data. The possibility exists of creating new linkages with some techniques of the social sciences, particularly that of creating structural models of society. Finally, it could raise interesting and refreshing questions about the categories and terms used in developing histories of business firms. A widening and extension of the units included in the term "business" which is based currently on limited phenomena in space and time, could open new

possibilities for an understanding of other kinds of production and distribution units.

NOTE

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