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**The Strategic Uses of Gender in Household Negotiations:
Women Workers on Mexico's Northern Border***

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The Strategic Uses of Gender in Household Negotiations:

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Abstract

The study illustrates the potential of the 'doing gender' perspective to explain why employment helps women win some negotiations at home but not others. Eighteen in-depth interviews with women maquiladora workers in Mexico suggest that employment may help women gain new rights and extend the limits of respect accorded them by male companions and parents. Women were more successful when they used negotiating strategies that conformed to their gender identity, such as making offers, than when they used negotiating strategies that challenged traditional gender norms, such as withdrawing services or making threats.

Keywords:

Household-power, Women, Gender Identity, Mexico, Maquiladoras, Qualitative Research

The Strategic Uses of Gender in Household Negotiations: Women Workers on Mexico's Northern Border

In the 1970s, employment opportunities for women increased as the burgeoning export processing industries hired women worldwide, raising the question: Would more employment opportunities for women improve their well-being? Scholars agreed it was important to focus on whether a shift in women's access to material resources increases women's household power (Benería and Roldán, 1987; Blumberg, 1995; Dwyer and Bruce, 1988; Salaff, 1981; Stichter and Parpart, 1990; Tinker, 1990; Ward, 1990). Like researchers of household power in industrial societies (McDonald, 1980; Szinovacz, 1987), they expected an increase in women's labour force participation to make women less economically dependent on men, and therefore more likely to gain household power.

Research indicated otherwise. In a study of women in the Mexican export processing industry, Fernandez-Kelly (1983) concluded that 'employment of women in multinational assembly plants does not inevitably lead to gains in autonomy on the part of women' (pp. 136-137). Additionally, 'women's control of their earnings is only minimally translated into a bargaining mechanism pertinent to wives' share of unpaid domestic work' (p. 135). Benería and Roldán (1987) found that employment in Mexico City's subcontracting industry did not increase women's control over household income, nor did it reduce their burden of household labour. It did, however, secure women greater respect from their husbands. Research shows that the effects of employment in export processing industries on women's relative power at home appear contradictory and complex (Kabeer, 2000; Ong, 1987; Wolf, 1992). What can explain this complex portrait of intra-household negotiations?

This study explores the potential of an innovative approach to gender, the ‘doing gender’ approach, to help explain the complexity of intra-household negotiations. In doing so it takes up Kabeer’s call to look ‘inside the black box’ of intra-household relations and reveal, ‘the ‘subjective’ insights provided by those experiencing the posited changes’ (1997, p. 262). It also responds to Fernandez-Kelly’s admonition that ‘yet more effort is needed by way of theorizing gender as a relational process...’ (2000). This study revisits the research site of Fernandez-Kelly’s seminal study (Mexico’s northern border) and uses interviews with women maquiladora workers to explore whether women are more successful at negotiating for their interests when they use strategies that affirm their traditional gender identities.

The Potential of a ‘Doing Gender’ Household Bargaining Model

Researchers struggle to explain why new female employment opportunities appear to have such uneven effects on women’s power at home. Scholars turn to gender norms to explain these contradictory effects, some viewing norms as ideologies that cloud perception of reality. Adapting the cooperative conflict bargaining model from economics (Manser and Brown, 1979; McElroy and Horney, 1981; Nash, 1953), Sen (1985; 1990) argues that gender norms can lead women as well as men to misperceive the value of women’s household contributions and therefore to legitimise unfair bargains. Some argue that gender norms may affect the interpretation of the type of work in which women engage (Allen and Wolkowitz, 1987; Benería and Roldán, 1987; Whitehead, 1985), finding that wages earned for home-based work tend to be perceived as less valuable than wages earned for outside work. Others view gender norms as operating through deeply internalised social roles. Whitehead (1981) argues that women do not negotiate for their own interests because they identify with a female role of the altruistic mother.

Each of these accounts can explain why women remain subordinate despite increased financial contributions to the household. Yet they have a hard time explaining why, even when women have new employment opportunities, they win some negotiations and not others. To explain these perplexing results we need to address the ‘major gaps’ identified by Agarwal (1997) ‘in spelling out the nature...of social norms in particular contexts and how they affect bargaining’ (p. 15). While social norms operate through household interactions, few consider how the gendered meanings of intra-household interactions can help explain variation in women’s household power outcomes.

West and Zimmerman (1987) propose that gender norms are the aggregate effect of men and women actively affirming their gender identities through interactions. Adapting their approach, Brines (1994) posits that changing the balance of resources contributed by each household member may not result in redistributing household power because the household is not just a place where people exchange resources; it is also a place where people establish and affirm their gender identity. Finding that female breadwinners increased their housework, Brines reasons they may have done so in order to reassert their female identity. Similarly, as men became increasingly dependent on women, men performed less housework. Brines interprets this as evidence that men affirm their gender identity by not doing women’s work (i.e. housework). Men and women in U.S. working class households, typified by sporadic male employment, worked harder to affirm their gender identity than did their counterparts in more affluent homes.

Research in the developing world supports Brines’ conclusions. García and Oliveira (1997) find that working class Mexican women, i.e. those most likely to be equal or primary financial contributors to their households, were more likely than middle class women to view motherhood as a ‘guiding principle’ (p. 378). Similarly, although Kabeer (1997; 2000) does not

draw from the 'doing gender' perspective, she underscores its potential for explaining why employment has, as she puts it, such 'elusive' effects on women's power at home. Employed women in Bangladesh 'went to considerable lengths to diffuse the possible challenge that their earning capacity might pose to gender hierarchies within the household' (1997), implying that employed women made a conscious effort to counteract the challenge to female identity.

In part because she does not empirically examine household interactions, Brines does not take her argument to its logical extension. Her work could be extended to predict that women 'do gender' even as they negotiate for their interests. Brines implies that the reason employment makes women assert their gender identity more actively is because employment makes women aware that they deserve more. Nevertheless, if women are also aware of the importance of maintaining their gender identity, as she posits, they may try to use negotiating strategies that conform to their gender identity even as they try to pursue their interests. Such a negotiating strategy might offset the challenge to their identity posed by the act of interest negotiation. This resembles Kandiyoti's (1998) characterization of women's negotiations in households as 'bargaining with patriarchy', while also resonating with Kabeer's (1997) description of intra-household power relations as a 'complex interweaving of self-interest and altruism, co-operation and conflict' (p. 300). Like Kabeer, the 'doing gender' approach to household power emphasises women's agency to affirm their gender identity and to negotiate for their interests.

Research on Mexico provides evidence that men and women may affirm their gender identities even while they negotiate for change. 'Cultural norms regarding motherhood change far more slowly in urban Mexico than child-rearing or fertility control practices' (García and Oliveira, 1997, p. 382). The same study found that 'many women from different social classes still consider motherhood as their main source of identity', although 'many women are ready to

accept child-care substitutes... [and are]...using contraceptives and limiting their family sizes' (p. 382). These findings could be interpreted as evidence that Mexican women try to affirm broad aspects of their female identity, such as motherhood, while renegotiating the practical realities of those identities in their everyday lives. Gutmann (1996) finds that working class Mexican men, faced with chronic underemployment and concomitant financial dependence on wives, tolerate redefining the practical meanings of male identity to include traditionally female tasks such as childcare but sustain a commitment to traditional notions of masculinity.

Stern's research (1995) on gender and household power negotiations in colonial Mexico suggests that men and women are highly strategic. Even 'before the historical awakening of feminist consciousness' (Stern, 1995, p. 301), colonial era women used a range of bargaining strategies to pursue a host of interests with bargaining strategies used as social weapons. 'The social weapons forged by women in such struggles were diverse and formidable.... The range of specific issues in play also proved impressive' (p. 300). By treating negotiating strategies that conform to traditional gender norms as social weapons he reminds us that women may act in ways that appear at cross-purposes to their interests, but may in fact help them secure practical changes that they value.

[Figure 1 about here]

These studies point to a household bargaining model that integrates the 'doing gender' perspective. They imply that a woman's relative dependency on her husband or parents may influence the gender identification of the negotiating strategy she chooses (arrow 1 in Figure 1). Decreasing financial dependence may raise women's expectations and, as a result, their concern with maintaining their gender identity. This could lead women to choose negotiating strategies that affirm gender identity. García and Oliveira's research (1997) suggests that gender

appropriate negotiating strategies may help women secure practical changes in their lives (Arrow 2 in Figure 1). To evaluate this claim, however, research must determine the practical changes desired by women. The research presented below elaborates the range of women's interests on Mexico's northern border before it examines the relationship between the gender identification of their negotiating strategies and household power.

Participating, Observing and Interviewing on Mexico's Northern Border

The analysis presented below is based on 37 days of field notes, recorded conversations and observations with 32 households, and 18 taped interviews with maquiladora workers. Data was collected during the summer of 1995 in Agua Prieta, Sonora, a small border town. Similar to other border towns in its experience of urbanization and industrialization after Mexico's Border Industrialization Program began in 1965, approximately 20,000 of its 100,000 inhabitants work in maquiladoras (mostly foreign-owned export assembling factories). Having spent two years promoting workers' legal rights in Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila, I introduced myself to households as both a legal rights educator and as a researcher interested in maquiladora workers. Households from three different working class neighbourhoods were sampled, and in each one a cluster of homes in a four-block radius were sampled (one rejection). Between one and nine contacts with households, resulted in visits ranging in length from one hour to several days (average 90 minutes). Interviews were taped – eleven with married women and seven with single women (two single mothers living on their own, three single mothers and two childless daughters living with relatives). I asked women about changes they desired (i.e. interests), the way they negotiated for interests (i.e. negotiating strategies) and whether they won their negotiations (i.e. power outcomes).

In the analysis, I divided each woman's life history into stints demarcated by changes in employment status, giving a sample of forty-five stints of varying lengths. Interests, bargaining strategies and power outcomes for each stint of each woman's life were coded. Each stint was also coded according to whether they were daughters living at home or wives. Focused exclusively on intra-household negotiations between women and other adults, the analysis did not include stints when women were single and living alone.

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 summarises the distribution of these forty-five stints for eighteen women. At the time of the interviews, fourteen women were employed and two unemployed. (Two single women were working and their stints not included in the analysis.) Before the interview, women had collectively experienced twenty stints of employment and nine unemployment stints. Most employment stints were experienced as daughters living at home (fourteen of twenty). As all "daughters" interviewed were employed, only married women recounted previous stints of unemployment. Among them, they had had nine prior stints of unemployment.

Women's Interests on Mexico's Northern Border

I define women's interests as a desire for change that they themselves express. By inductively defining women's interests, I elaborate what Maxine Molyneux (1985) terms their practical gender interests: interests that might not 'entail a strategic goal such as women's emancipation' (p. 233). Women in this study identified some interests, such as the desire to win the right to employment, which challenged traditional female identity, while others had more ambiguous gender meanings.

Data was coded not only for instances when women expressed an interest in increasing their control over the flow of resources in the household or in reducing their burden of housework, but also for instances when women expressed an interest in renegotiating the limits of respect in their relationships. Prior research indicated the importance Mexican women placed on redefining the 'limits of respect'. Disrespect resulting from alcohol abuse was 'the most commonly reported source of misery' in a study of rural Mexican women (Townsend, 1995, p. 109). Being treated like servants or children by mother-in-laws drove women to pursue the legal right to leave their husbands, according to supreme court rulings on divorce cases in early post-revolutionary Mexico (Varley, 2000, pp. 250-251). Employment in Mexico City's subcontracting industry in the 1980s helped some women (those in households dependent on woman's earnings) redefine 'the limits of respect' and demand 'new rights' (Benería and Roldán, 1987, p. 161). According to this study, working-class Mexican women expected not to be physically or verbally abused, to have some control over their fertility and to be recognised for their household contribution (p. 138). Employment did not, however, help these women significantly reduce their housework, nor did it increase their control over the flow of household resources. Similarly, recently employed rural Javanese women did not acquire more control over the flow of resources in the household but did acquire some autonomy from parents and husbands in their marriage, sexuality and fertility choices (Wolf, 1992, p. 229). Women employed in Bangladesh's new industrial centres did not increase control over resources at home but earning a wage increased life choices, leading some women to leave husbands and others to live in households with no male guardian (Kabeer, 1997; Kabeer, 2000).¹

Employment itself may be an important interest for which women negotiate (Benería and Roldán, 1987; Blumberg, 1988; Blumberg, 1995; Dwyer and Bruce, 1988; England and Farkas,

1986; Folbre and Hartmann, 1988; Fuentes and Ehrenreich, 1983; Gonzalez de la Rocha, 1994; Pyke, 1994). Many Bangladeshi women confronted resistance from husbands and fathers when they expressed their interest to seek employment (Kabeer, 2000). Kabeer argues that the reluctance of many recently employed women to negotiate for their interests may be partly due to the feeling that they already gained a right to work (p. 189). Thus, I also examine whether women viewed employment as their right. To distinguish from instances of women being allocated by households to work (Fernández-Kelly, 1983; Kabeer, 1998; Salaff, 1981; Schmink, 1986; Tilly and Scott, 1978), only instances when women faced opposition to their desire to take employment were coded as women viewing employment as a right.

A significant portion of women interviewed faced opposition to their desire to work (Table 2). In 31 percent of all stints (fourteen out of 45 stints) women wanted to work but were not supported by husbands or parents. For example, Maria was upset when her husband would not let her work, ‘I was sad because I didn’t like being at home.’ She had worked before her marriage, which lasted a few months. Reyna, married at sixteen, described her husband’s unwillingness to let her work. ‘He didn’t want me to work. I wanted to but he wouldn’t let me. I got bored in the house...’. Reyna explained that she wanted to work to have access to her own money. Nonetheless, Reyna complied with her husband’s wishes and stopped work, enduring three years in an unhappy marriage.

Married women such as Maria and Reyna were more likely to identify employment as an interest. They did so in 42 percent of their employment stints. By contrast, daughters identified an interest to be employed in only fifteen percent of their stints. Many married women faced opposition to their desire to earn wages.

[Table 2 about here]

Did women go to work in the maquiladoras because they negotiated with their families for the right to work? According to Table 3, twenty-nine percent of stints represented successful bargains by women to go to work. In the remaining stints, families gave daughters and wives their blessing to earn wages. However, married women confronted more opposition than daughters: they had to negotiate to work for nearly half, or forty-five percent of their stints.

[Table 3 about here]

I identified sixteen interests expressed by women during stints of employment. Employed women expressed an interest in several types of new rights, which challenged prevailing gender norms. Employed daughters, in particular, wanted new rights or freedoms. Four daughters sought to challenge existing gender identities that restricted their freedom of movement or freedom of association. For example, Carla pleaded with her mother to be allowed to attend the city fair, despite her mother's reluctance. Maria, a twenty-year-old single mother living with her parents, identified her interest in volunteering for the Red Cross. Recently separated, Maria supported herself and her baby by working in a maquiladora, but her parents forbade her from going out. Out of earshot of her parents, she explained, 'They [her parents] are afraid that I will meet someone else like that [like her former husband] and the same thing will happen to me. I feel very closed in.' By expressing her sense of claustrophobia, Maria expressed her interest to have greater freedom of movement.

Employed wives valued their freedom of movement, particularly after growing accustomed to these rights as employed daughters. Two employed wives expressed discomfort when their husbands constrained their rights. Jorgina, a married woman in her mid 30s who had worked since she was 16, said, 'being married just isn't like being single when you can go and come as you please, without asking permission.' Estella was acutely aware that marrying her husband

had cost her the accustomed freedom to go grocery shopping. Her husband was dissatisfied, ‘he went the very first week and bought groceries and I gave him money and he bought the necessities.... He demanded it [the money]. I still never go out. He doesn't like it when I go out....I think he doesn't trust me and that he should trust me because he knows how I am.’

By expressing her interest to have freedom, Estella may also be expressing an interest to have control over household resources. Several women expressed their interest in having control over the flow of household resource, which did not always challenge gender norms. For example, when two employed daughters expressed a desire to reduce contributions they challenged the generational expectation that children financially contribute to the household, while also challenging the gender norm that daughters contribute more earnings than boys. Having supported her family from the age of ten, Carla, now 17, told her mother ‘It doesn’t seem fair that I should automatically have the responsibility to pay for the gas. Why shouldn’t my sister pay for the gas?’. Her fifteen year old sister, Cecilia, had recently begun earning money and sharing the financial burden. Other women reinforced gender norms as they sought to increase the household pool of resources. Alicia, a 30 year-old woman who had worked all her life, wanted her husband to increase his household financial contribution, and her interest could be interpreted as a desire to reassert traditional gender identities. Alicia related her dismay with her former husband of twelve years. ‘He was very bad. All he wanted was his beer. It didn't matter how high prices were. We didn't have electricity, or water or a gas stove and sometimes I would ask him to get firewood and he had a truck, but he wouldn't even get that for me. Sometimes [the children] were hungry but he didn't care.’

Alicia’s frustration with her husband also represented an interest to command more respect. When women sought to renegotiate the limits of respect accorded them by husbands, they sought

changes with ambiguous gender identifications. Women, particularly employed wives, identified a wide range of spousal and parental behaviors that they felt denigrated them. Karina, an employed married woman with two small children, found living with her in-laws onerous. She said, 'I told [her husband] I was ready to move out to our own plot of land and live in our own house. I think he was afraid to leave the house. He is very spoiled by his mother.' Several women wanted their husbands to show respect by reducing alcohol consumption or infidelities. Now in her late forties, Liana had worked before, during and after her marriage in which her husband drank heavily and had multiple affairs. Liana lamented, 'He was very shameless. He had other women. I wanted him to stop drinking. He became less responsible as I took over [the household responsibilities].'

These women expressed desires for new rights, including the right to be employed. They also wanted their husbands to treat them with respect and some wanted control over household resources. None of these women, however, expressed a desire to reduce their burden of housework. While a desire for rights may be easy to categorise as challenging gender identities, the interests in renegotiating the limits of respect and greater control over household resources were difficult to classify.

Gendered Negotiating Strategies

To examine whether the gender identity of negotiating strategies affected women's power outcomes, the bargaining strategies were coded according to whether they reinforced or challenged traditional working class gender identities in Mexico. Mexican women define motherhood broadly, often reinterpreting their wages as contributing to their identity as mothers because wages give them an opportunity to contribute financially to their children. Indeed,

women tend to redirect most of their earnings to overall household expenditures and children in particular (Benería and Roldán, 1987; Chant, 1997). Mexican motherhood identity in Mexico may be more associated with the act of offering help to the household than with the actual day-to-day care of children. Negotiating strategies were coded according to whether women offered something to the household through which they could maintain their primary gender identity. For daughters, an offer might affirm their identity as female and as children serving parents. In contrast, instances when women tried to negotiate by withdrawing services or making threats were coded as negotiating strategies that challenged gender identities. I identified and coded 26 bargains (when women negotiated for their interests) in all: thirteen bargaining strategies used by eleven women to seek employment and eleven bargains pursued by employed women.²

Offers

Table 4 summarises the range of bargaining strategies women used to negotiate for the right to earn wages. Daughters and wives tended to use offers, negotiating strategies that affirmed their gender identity, in order to win the right to work. This correlation suggests that women tried to offset a gender-challenging interest by using a gender-affirming negotiating strategy. Several women offered to do more household work as a bargaining strategy. One of five children, Karina recalled her first decision to seek employment when she was sixteen. Her parents wanted her to stop working to spend more time on housework. ‘They wanted me to quit to help out more in the house, but I didn’t want to because I liked the money.’ She was able to convince them that she could do both, and remained employed for over a year in the maquiladora until leaving to the USA as a domestic servant.

[Table 4 about here]

Lydia, a 28-year-old married woman, recounted how she bargained with her husband for the right to work. Having worked on and off in the maquiladoras for 7 years, she promised her husband food on the table if he let her work. Another married woman in her early 30s, Miriam, told me ‘It [working] doesn’t make a difference to him [her husband], so long as the house is clean and his food is ready when he comes home.’ She explained why she liked work: ‘Sometimes I just get tired of being at home, so I go to work for a while.’ These women offered housework as a bargaining strategy to win the right to work. However, offering housework was not the only offer used to negotiate for wage earning rights. Some teenage daughters offered to take care of themselves if their parents let them work. Coming from a village to the south, Reyna and her family visited the border for several months when she was fifteen. She wanted to work in a maquiladora at the time: ‘I wanted to buy my own necessities, to buy my own clothes.’ When her parents returned to their hometown, she and her sister wanted to work in the maquiladoras despite her father’s opposition. ‘[My father] scolded me a lot, and Chela [her sister] didn’t pay attention. He was scared that we would get married, but in any case we stayed here.... for two months more than they did.’ Reyna had not given any money to her family, but supported herself. Karina, now a veteran maquiladora worker at 26, explained that her parents allowed her to work as a domestic in the USA at age 17, because it was a way to ‘take care of myself’. Both Reyna and Karina affirmed their gender identity through a negotiating strategy that offered help to the family – in this case relief from financial burden.

Others used an offer made possible by employment: an offer of a financial contribution to the household. At age 14, Maria negotiated with her parents to work at a maquiladora, as she ‘wanted my own things, that’s why I wanted to work.’ However, ‘[the] family didn’t like it because my father says that women should be at home keeping house and that men should be

working.’ Maria negotiated for an interest that challenged her father’s notions of appropriate female identity, not just her child identity, by offering to give them half of her earnings after which they permitted her to work.

Wives also used offers of financial contributions to convince spouses that they should work. Some used specific large household endeavours, such as house building, to justify returning to work. Lea offered to help finish the house if her husband would allow her to work. Patricia acknowledged that ‘He didn’t want me to work, but it helped us out for me to work.’ Her husband viewed her employment as a challenge to his idea of what a wife should be, and only reluctantly permitted her work. Estella stopped working for two years when she married and had children, but returned once her youngest was seven months old, having negotiated with her husband. ‘I wanted to work to help out, because what he makes goes for food and the water and electricity bills. I want to have something more, more than just a one room shack...’. Offering a financial contribution towards house-building convinced him that she should be permitted to work. Mona persuaded her husband that she should work as it would enable them to move out of his parent’s house.

Some wives used an economic crisis to justify their interest in working for wages. They offered financial contributions during an economic crisis in exchange for the right to work. Twenty-seven years old and married for nine years, Jorgina convinced her husband to let her continue working after they married. ‘He doesn’t want me to work, but because of the crisis [the 1995 peso devaluation], I felt I needed to...to buy the building materials for the house.’ At fifteen, she had worked for several years to support her family after her mother died. Now, she justified employment in terms of helping her young family survive the economic crisis, even though her husband viewed her employment as inappropriate female behaviour. With the peso devaluation in

December 1994, Neomi and her live-in partner could not make ends meet, and she wanted to return to work, but he forbade it. In her bargaining strategy, ‘I try to tell him that between the two of us we can make our lives a little bit better.... Sometimes there isn’t food and I’ve got children and I’m getting older. With both of us working we can do something, I tell him. But he’s closed. No, I’ll do it, he tells me. I don’t want you to work.... He always says “wait, I’ll do it.”’ Neomi’s pleadings were in vain: her partner would not change his mind. Some husbands remained unwilling to allow their wives to work, viewing employment as a direct challenge to her female identity and his male identity.

Employed women also offered their wages in negotiations to seek other interests. Estella negotiated for her right to greater freedom of movement by offering a household financial contribution. She renegotiated for freedom to do grocery shopping: ‘.... we aren’t the same now [after she restarted work]. We always go shopping together now. He is different with me...I feel better. When I wasn’t working I never asked him for money or anything.’ Estella used waged work as a bargaining strategy to gain desired freedoms. Carla and Cecilia negotiated with their mother to go to the city fair, pointing out their financial household contribution. These women used earnings to bargain for their interests by making financial offers to the household. Making an offer was, however, not the only bargaining strategy used. Some turned to strategies that more directly challenged traditional gender identities.

Withholding and Making Threats

Women sometimes found that making an offer was insufficient to secure their interests, and they turned to withholding services and making threats, a negotiating strategy that more directly challenged a gender identity. Lacking direct access to money, one might expect unemployed

women to resort to withdrawing services or threatening to do so. This strategy is exemplified by Maria's efforts to convince her husband to curtail his infidelity. Having stopped work after she married at his request, Maria negotiated with her husband by withholding her cooking. She said, 'I noticed right away that he was seeing someone, because he started to dress up to go out, he came home about a half an hour late everyday and said that he was working over time. He had always given all of the money to me, but I found his receipts for his paychecks and I learned that he hadn't been working over time and I confronted him with it. I said that he already had another woman. I wouldn't make him dinner that night, or lunch the next day.' In this instance, Maria challenged her female identity when she tried to negotiate more respect from her husband. However, even employed women – those that had the additional advantage of financial resources to offer to the household - turned to withholding services or making threats in order to secure their interests.

Several employed daughters negotiated for greater control over the flow of resources in the household. Cecilia, 15 years old, negotiated a reduction in her financial contribution to the household by not disclosing her earnings – a strategy employed by men in Benería and Roldán's study. Hiding her pay stubs, she also tried to evade paying for household cooking gas by buying a pair of shoes. She withheld financial contributions as a way to negotiate a reduction in her regular financial contribution, while additionally threatening that she would leave the house. She knew that this would be a serious threat as her financial contribution kept the household afloat.

Additionally, several employed wives negotiated to alter the limits of respect by making threats. Mona's husband moved to the border, several hours away from her home state, and for two years they had a long-distance relationship. She tried to negotiate with her husband to come back. Mona said, 'I had a good job working in a nursery in [her home state].' Mona negotiated

with her husband by threatening not to move to the border. 'I didn't really want to come...But he had a job here and so I came here.' Humiliated by living with her in-laws, Karina tried to convince her husband to move out of their house by threatening to leave him. Now in her mid-twenties, she recounted her negotiations with her husband. 'I told him that I was ready to move back with my mother if he didn't want to move.' With threats of moving out, Karina led her husband to buy their own property. Alicia negotiated with her husband to try to increase his household contribution and reduce his drinking by threatening to force him to leave the house. Zilla, too, threatened to throw her husband out of the house if he did not stop drinking. When he refused, she forced him to leave. Liana decided she would no longer accept her husband's philandering; 'I separated from him. I decided to leave [their home and him].' During their seven years apart, she worked and supported her children on her own.

Although employment opportunities give women the option of bargaining for the right to be employed by making an offer of a financial household contributions, many women found it necessary to turn to a more confrontational bargaining strategy. As Table 4 indicates, some women resorted to threats in their negotiations to seek employment. Despite abject poverty, male partners sometimes would not consent to their wives' work. Both women who used threats faced considerable economic hardship. Neomi gave her partner an ultimatum, 'I gave him a month to prove to me...to put up one wall [of an additional bedroom to their house] but if not...I will have to go to work...and go on alone....' She realised that to carry out the threat, she had to contemplate leaving her partner. Her tearful account of this dilemma indicated her high level of anxiety over using this bargaining strategy.

Carmen threatened to move to the border with the children by herself, if her husband would not go with her. When Carmen was twenty-three, her husband's father died and left the

family farm to her brother-in-law rather than her husband. As a result, ‘we were very poor there. Sometimes we didn’t even have food to eat. I remember that I didn’t have any shoes. In fact my son, the older one, cried because he couldn’t go to his kindergarten graduation because we didn’t have enough money to buy him the uniform...I had no money.’ At this point, she tried to convince her husband to go to the border. ‘He didn’t want to move, but I said that I would leave and go by myself, if he didn’t want to, because I needed money for the children.’ Her threat worked, and he sold a cow to make money for the move, although ‘he didn’t want me to work early on...but now he’s used to it and we make more money.’ After using a threat to win the right to move the family where she could work, she is able to justify employment on the basis of family financial contributions. However, the question remains - did women’s negotiating strategies make a difference in how likely they were to achieve their interests? The following section addresses this question.

How did women win their interests?

Table 5 summarises how likely women were to win their bargains according to the type of strategy they used. Women won all of the interests for which they negotiated by making an offer. By contrast, they only won fifty percent of bargains when using a threat. In other words, when women negotiated by affirming their gender identity they were more successful at securing their interests.

[Table 5 about here]

Women tended to win negotiations when they used an offer, even when the interest for which they negotiated challenged traditional gender identities. They were successful in all instances when they negotiated by making an offer for the right of employment, an interest that

challenged gender identity. The only instance when a woman did not win her negotiation to go to work was when she used a threat. Neomi was the only one to use a threat to win the right to work, and by late summer 1994, she admitted to me that she had given up trying to convince her partner to let her work. Apart from the right to employment, employed women also secured most of their new rights when using offers in their negotiating strategy. Carla and Cecilia won the right to go to the city fair by making financial offers to the household. Estella, too, won additional freedom of movement by offering her earnings to the household income pool.

Women were much less successful when they used threats, even when they negotiated for interests that could be interpreted as reinforcing traditional gender norms. For example, when Alicia threatened to throw out her husband, she negotiated for an interest that reinforced a male breadwinner identity. Her effort to force him into this role failed, and he left. However, Alicia was not unhappy with this outcome, and proudly told me how she and her children were better off. ‘After all, I suffered with him and my children and we never lacked for food after he left the house and we ate whenever we wanted to. I mean we didn't have everything, but we never lacked for food. You know, that's all I've ever worried about....’.

When women negotiated by withdrawing services or making threats, they often negotiated to expand forms of respect that had ambiguous gender meanings. Such ambiguity may have contributed to varying outcomes in negotiations. For example, Zilla wanted her husband to stop drinking alcohol making his return to the household conditional upon attendance at Alcoholics Anonymous. Sobriety could be viewed as an interest in re-instating the male household role or a challenge to the right of men to drink with friends. Perhaps Zilla's husband agreed and remained sober for six years because he interpreted her interest as a desire to reinstate

his role as head of the household. Similarly, the ambiguity of Karina's interest to move out of her in-laws' house may also have contributed to her success.

Husbands may have interpreted efforts by wives to enforce fidelity as either an effort to support a traditional notion of the faithful husband or as a challenge to their male right to have affairs. Varied interpretations of this interest might help explain why Liana was successful in gaining respect from her husband, but Maria was not. Liana successfully renegotiated the limits of respect in her relationship, including fidelity, by carrying out a threat to leave him. Liana's husband eventually begged to come back, to which she agreed stipulating that she would control household finances and come and go as she pleased. She proudly describes her relationship after his return as 'equal'. She explains,

'Life before now? Married life? Well, it was like:...you did what he said...and now I do what I want. I am not AS oppressed! I AM not oppressed!! [emphasis reflects her intonation].'

Liana's successes came after a long period of separation from her husband. Perhaps her husband accepted these new terms of respect because they afforded him the opportunity to regain his masculine identity as husband and nominal head of household.

Maria, however, was less successful. She failed to convince her husband to end his infidelity by withholding her cooking services. In fact, she thought her threats led her husband to leave her. 'A few days later, he left. He said that he wouldn't take care of the child and that he was going to support this other woman instead...He has never come back since...' Her husband may have interpreted her threat as an attempt to challenge his masculine identity. The fact that these interests could be interpreted in various ways may contribute to the divergent outcomes of

negotiations, which suggests that the gendered meaning of women's interests may also affect women's household power outcomes.

Conclusion

This study explores the potential of a 'doing gender' model of household bargaining. By analyzing a sample of interests for which women negotiated, this study illustrates how women use the gender identification of negotiations strategically. The fact that so many women in this study used offers (a negotiating strategy that conforms to women's gender identity) illustrates that they used gender strategically to negotiate for interests that could challenge their gender identity. They used offers to pursue the right to employment, greater control over household resources and greater respect from other household members. The evidence indicates that women may indeed attempt to maintain their gender identity, and therefore sustain gender norms, even as they pursue interests that challenge gender norms.

Although the association of success with certain negotiating strategies could be interpreted in several ways, the results highlight how the gendered meanings of household negotiations mediate the effects of employment opportunities on household power. The success women experienced when they made offers may mean that offers offset resistance from other household members because offers affirmed their female identity. The difficulty women encountered when they withdrew services and made threats may indicate that these strategies provoked resistance from other household members because they challenged women's female identity. Thus, employment may enhance women's bargaining position at home because it adds a gender affirming negotiating strategy to their repertoire: that of offering their earnings.

Alternately, the association between failure and threats could mean that women choose threats when negotiating for interests that they think will encounter stiff opposition. Women tended to choose threats when negotiating for interests that could be interpreted as challenging masculine identity (interests with ambiguous gender meanings such as a wife's desire for her husband to be faithful or sober). This may have been because they expected, and in fact experienced, greater resistance when negotiating for those interests than when they negotiated for interests that merely challenged their own feminine identity (such as a wife's or a daughter's desire for greater freedom of movement or the right to work). Even though, according to Gutmann (1996), many working class Mexican men abstain from drinking or favor other means of satisfying sexual desire than extra-marital affairs, men may interpret a women's direct plea for sobriety or fidelity as a challenge to their masculine identity and 'do gender' by refusing to comply. Gutmann's portrayal of men as agents of their own gender identity suggests that working class men may be willing to redefine practical realities of masculinity in modern Mexico but may still 'do gender' when key aspects of their masculinity are directly confronted. Gutmann acknowledges that working class Mexican men are 'acutely aware of official images of the Mexican male drunk' (p. 193) and admits that 'stereotype of men in Mexico being subject to uncontrollable bodily urges and needs is widely held' (p. 130). Future research could extend Gutmann's research and examine how male interpretations of women's interests as well as their negotiating strategies affect women's household power.

More concretely, this study demonstrates that there are instances when women view offers of housework or financial contributions as a negotiating strategy rather than as the source of their oppression. When this is the case, we should reinterpret an increased burden of household labour as a calculated trade-off made in order to win practical changes. It is

undeniable that these and many other women working in the burgeoning export processing industry worldwide have what Molyneux (1985) would call a strategic interest in reducing their burden of housework and financial responsibility. Nevertheless, identifying when this increased burden arises from a moment of agency is important because doing so reveals how women redefine gender norms through household negotiations (Agarwal, 1997). When women offer to take on responsibility in the household in order to win the right to work, they contribute to the process of redefining gender norms that restrict women's access to resources, in this case earnings, which can improve their future bargaining leverage. According to Elson (1992), such bargains may eventually embolden women to redefine other gender norms; ones that pose, in Molyneux's words (1985) strategic barriers to gender equity. Elson (1992) argues that women's efforts to secure practical interests may be the building blocks of a women's movement mobilized around women's strategic interests. She promotes movements that 'help to transform gender relations by meeting both women's practical needs and their strategic gender needs' (p. 42). To build such a movement, however, we need studies, such as this one, that first identify when and how women assert their practical interests.

Figure 1: “Doing Gender” Household Bargaining Model

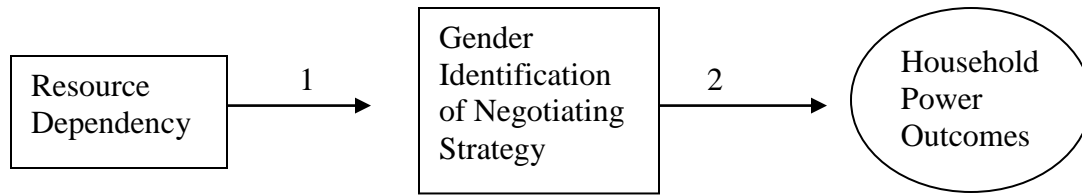


Table 1: Sample of Employed and Unemployed Stints Experienced by 18 Women

	Daughters	Married	Total
Employed Stints			
Current	5	9	14
Past	14	6	20
Unemployed Stints			
Current		2	2
Past		9	9
Total	19	26	45

Based on 18 interviews.

Table 2: Employment as an Interest

	Number Of Stints During Which Women Expressed An Interest To Work*	Total Number Of Stints	Stints During Which Women Expressed An Interest To Work As A Percent Of Total Stints
<i>Column Letter</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>A/B</i>
Daughters	3	19	15 %
Wives	11	26	42 %
Total Number of Stints	14 ^a	45	31 %
Total Number of Women = 20			

* This only includes the stints during which other household members expressed opposition to women's desire to work.

Table 3: Employment as a Bargained Outcome

	Successful Bargains To Go To Work	Total Number Of Employed Stints	Bargained Employment Stints As % Of Total Employment Stints
<i>Column Letter</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>A/B^a</i>
Daughters	3	19	16%
Wives	7	15	46%
Total Number of Stints	10	34	29%
Total Number of Women = 20			

a. Column percents are not intended to add to 100%.

Table 4: Negotiating Strategies Women Used to Seek Employment

Type Of Bargaining Strategies	Daughters	Wives	Total
Offers (Total)	4	7	11
Offer To Care For Herself	2	0	2
Offer Housework	1	2	3
Offer Financial Contribution	1	5	6
Threats (Total)	0	2	2
Threaten To Leave Relationship		1	1
Threaten To Move		1	1
Total Number Of Bargaining Strategies	4	9	13
Total Number Of Women	3	8	11

Note: One woman tried using two bargaining strategies in pro-longed negotiations with her partner to earn the right to work. One woman made two different bargains to seek employment at two different times. Therefore, there are 13 bargaining strategies used by 11 women.

Table 5: Power Outcomes By Bargaining Strategy Offers

	Wins	Losses	Wins As A Percent Of Bargains By Bargaining Strategy
Offers	13	0	100%
Daughters	5	0	100%
Wives	8	0	100%
Withholding or Threatening to Withhold Services	5	4	55%
Daughters	2	0	100%
Wives	3	4	42%
Total	18	4	82%

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Notes

¹ Note that optimistic portrayals of the effects of employment in export processing industries on women's power at home focused on how employment influenced the respect accorded to women (Lim, 1983; Stoddard, 1987; Tiano, 1994).

² Two women used two different bargaining strategies in their attempts to win the right to work.