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Between Two Worlds: Identity and Community in Oaxaca

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Between Two Worlds: Identity and Community in Oaxaca

By Mandy Elder
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Abstract

Access to educational opportunities is the driving force in promoting gender equality and alleviating the effects of poverty among rural populations in Mexico. In Oaxaca, small universities with scholarship programs have recently opened in rural areas to increase logistical and financial access for young people from indigenous communities; however, proper consideration has not been given to cultural constraints and psychological factors that continue inhibiting university access, particularly for young women. Due to traditional, conservative family values with regard to gender expectations that maintain women in subordinate positions to men, women face additional challenges when attempting to balance home community life while pursuing higher education. Qualitative research methods including ethnographic observations, individual interviews and focus groups were used among young, indigenous women attending university, their family members, and university staff to examine the social systems in which women study and live. Through the use of the snowball technique and key informants in the university, participants were recruited in a culturally appropriate and sensitive manner. This research shows the impact diverging from traditional gender norms has on young women's self perception and familial relationships, and provides a better understanding of the impact socio-cultural factors exert on first-generation university women.

Rural Mexican Family Structure

Historically Mexican culture has placed a high value on the collective family unit. This value can especially be seen among rural Mexican families dependent on the labor of each family member to sustain the household. Men in families – fathers and sons - typically are engaged in paid labor outside the home or working in the family's field, tending to livestock and crops to produce food for self-consumption or to sell in local markets (Arias, 2009). Meanwhile, women – mothers and daughters – work within the home cooking, cleaning, raising children, and making tortillas. The gendered division of labor is so strong within these families that community members sympathize with families who have all male or all female children because one of the parents will be left without help in their household duties (Musalem Merhy, n.d.). Historically, women's work inside the home has been viewed as "help" or as "complementary" work to men's work in the public sphere. According to Arias (2009), the perception of women's labor as merely complementary has devalued not only their work, but women themselves as members of the household and community, as well. This has been one form of informal social control preventing women from leaving the private sphere.

As demonstrated by the Oaxacan term "pueblo chico, chisme grande" [small town, plenty of gossip] and the overall concern many women have for their reputation, gossip and innuendos are a second form of social control used to maintain both men and women in their respective roles. Esteinou (2006) explains that comments such as "¡Mira!, ya puso su mujer a trabajar porque no puede mantener a su familia" ["Look! He made his wife work because he can't maintain his family."] cause men to exert force over women to ensure their dominance in the family. Other comments directed towards women such as "Está descuidando a sus hijos" ["She isn't taking care of her children"] place guilt on women for working outside the home instead of tending to her children (p. 87). Thus, in small, close-knit communities both men and women learn to carefully negotiate gender norms to prevent negative reactions from community members.

Due to the influence of globalization and migration, roles within families have been changing in recent years. An increase in the rights of children and decrease in the presence of male authority figures within households has challenged the historical power structure (Esteinou, 2006). For example, fathers traditionally have been in charge of administering discipline to children. Women, however, have begun to take on this role and many others due to male migration to the United States. Courtship between young lovers has changed drastically due to opportunities to meet people from other towns, states, and countries and exposure to new and different ideas. Weddings more frequently take place in December when relatives visit home for the holidays, age at first marriage has increased, and traditional practices such as “bride stealing” have become less prevalent in recent years (Esteinou, 2006). Additionally, emigration has increased the standard of living for many Mexicans due to remittances sent home from work in the United States (Esteinou, 2006). Nevertheless, strict gender norms are still very present in Mexican society, particularly in Oaxaca.

Oaxacan Gender Norms

Jayne Howell (1999) shows that even among educated, employed Oaxacan women from rural communities, gender role socialization is a primary force in life decisions. Although many women participating in her study explained that education is a beneficial and important component of a woman’s life, they still consider their primary role as a woman that of a mother and secondly, a wife. Characteristics of rural family values are reflected in the felt responsibility to fulfill familial obligations women feel and the influence family members have over their lifestyle choices, personal relationships, and professional development. Although the women in this study reflect a changing belief about the roles women are allowed to play in Mexican society, many women still hold traditionally female dominated occupations – teachers, secretaries, and nurses. Despite greater economic security and participation in the public sphere, women continue adhering to traditional gender roles while negotiating careers and pursuing education. Jayne Howell (1999) cites this as an indication of entrenched Oaxacan values and the strong influence of socialization in determining life outcomes.

As Pérez (2000) showed in the artisan community Santa Maria Atzompa, gender roles guide interactions among family and community members. One significant socialization mechanism in Mexican culture is the *fiesta* (Pérez, 2000). Fiestas are typically associated with religious or political events, include excessive alcohol consumption by men, and often violence. Pérez (2000) explained that the male violence directed at other males, their wives, and/or daughters, is due to men’s insecurity over the increased autonomy women hold in a highly *machista* culture. Because women in Santa Maria Atzompa are the primary producers of the town’s craft, pottery, they have gained power due to the town’s economic dependence on the sale of pottery to tourists and visitors. Santa Maria Atzompa is an example of the development of change in gender roles in Oaxacan culture and the negative reaction to women seeking change, independence, and autonomy.

Education in Mexico

As evidenced by Oaxaca’s 16.3 percent illiteracy rate compared to the national illiteracy rate of 6.9 percent, the level of education in Oaxaca is significantly lower than the national average for Mexico (INEGI Perspectiva Estadística de Oaxaca, 2011). Not surprisingly, women experience a much higher rate of illiteracy than men, which holds true across all age groups nationally (INEGI Mujeres y Hombres en México, 2010). Additionally in Oaxaca, the average level of education for women is only six years – or primary school, compared to 6.9 years for men. More strikingly is the comparison between Oaxacan levels of education and the national average. Women on average in Mexico have 7.9 years of education and men 8.4 (INEGI Censo de Población y Vivienda, 2005).

Careful consideration of these statistics is important because as Stromquist (1992) emphasizes, "elimination of illiteracy among women will necessitate the elimination of poverty and the redefinition of women's role in society" (p. 19).

Despite claims by the Mexican government in Constitution Article 3 that Mexico's education systems provides equal educational opportunities for all, historical sexism and strong gender role socialization inhibits girls' pursuit of education and affects the quality of education they receive (Scherer Castillo, n.d.; Stromquist, 1992; Zubieta-García and Marrero-Narváez, 2005). The subtle reproduction of gender roles within the education system occurs in a variety of ways. First, on an institutional level, consensus built through education, combined with a historical lack of attention to women's educational needs, "sustains the hegemonic thinking of society" (Stromquist, 1992, p. 5). Next, biased teachers who are also products of cultural socialization not only transmit their values about the proper role of women in society but also teach from the perspective of males throughout history. That is to say the curriculum, textbooks, and the education system are designed by males for males, promoting the dominant ideology and ignoring the role of women (Scherer Castillo, n.d.).

Because the education system's role is to prepare students for their future, lessons and classes are biased towards the work men and women will be doing after completing schooling. Men, who will most assuredly work outside the home providing for their family, receive more training in math and sciences and additional encouragement from family and community members who see more value in educating males. Since the ultimate goal for Mexican women in rural communities is to marry and have children, women receive limited support from family members who typically do not value women's labor nor see a need for a level of education higher than secondary (Scherer Castillo, n.d.). Thus, when women do pursue higher education, not only do they tend to drop out at higher rates, but also typically concentrate in humanities and social sciences which traditionally have lower salaries and reflect women's already prescribed gender roles (Stromquist, 1992; Zubieta-García and Marrero-Narváez, 2005) As described in methodologies, however, women who participated in this study are pursuing non-traditional career paths which creates additional tensions young women must negotiate.

The patriarchal structure of Mexican households, prevailing attitudes about socially appropriate roles and ambitions for women, and institutional discrimination within the education system itself create barriers in accessing higher education for women from rural communities. Despite this, young women in Oaxaca are seeking educational and professional opportunities outside of their home communities. In this study, I examine the ways in which higher education has affected young women's perception of their identity as it relates to community and family membership within various relationship subsets.

Research Context

Research design

Purely qualitative methods were used while conducting this research. While living with young women attending university in the community San Pablo Huixtepec, individual semi-structured interviews, and semi-structured focus groups were conducted. All data were collected in Spanish, and when necessary, bilingual participants translated for monolingual family or community members who spoke an indigenous language. Qualitative methods were the most culturally appropriate and effective approach to connect with young women as it was important that they felt a high degree of trust and confidence when sharing their stories and personal experiences with me. My initial contact with research participants was through supporting English classes in La Universidad Tecnológica de los Valles Centrales de Oaxaca which allowed me to not only offer something in return for the university's support – an act reflecting the importance of reciprocity in Oaxacan culture – but also interview and gain the perspective of professors, the school

psychologist, and women working in the university. In order to interact with women on a repeated basis my housing was arranged by the university which allowed me to live with a small group of young women who receive a university sponsored housing scholarship.

Upon arriving at my new home the first night I was surprised to say the least to see the conditions which I had unknowingly agreed to live in and wondered why no one at the university had informed me of the situation. Two girls shared a single room without windows or a kitchen and slept on *petates* – straw mats – and blankets folded beneath them on the concrete floor. I sat my backpack down, wondering what I had gotten myself into, while I waited for my roommate, Isabel to get home from school. When she arrived, Isabel very patiently showed me where she washes her clothes by hand in the shade of a tree, the bathroom around the corner, and where the hose is to fill a bucket up for bathing and flushing the toilet. Later that night her boyfriend came by, and we found a small *comedor* around the corner to eat tortas and quesadillas while we chatted about our families, friends, and begun to form our friendship.

Conducting ethnographic research allowed me to fully develop a sense of the ways in which young women operate in different social settings including among friends and professors in the university, with community members in San Pablo Huixtepec, and with friends and relatives in their home communities. While living in San Pablo Huixtepec I was able to interview a broad spectrum of residents ranging from *mototaxi* drivers, migrants who recently returned from the United States, housewives, entrepreneurs, and children. Interactions with a variety of residents allowed me to not only understand the community women lived in while studying, but also develop a sense of the general public's opinion of higher education's role in Oaxacan society and women's participation in the university. During visits to the home communities of women I observed the realities of life in a rural Oaxaca town including production of food for self-consumption, the art of making tortillas, and the gendered division of labor. Individual interviews were conducted in informal settings with loose structures, the most realistic method given the living situation described above. Often I found myself sitting around on *petates*, eating tortillas and cheese while conducting guided focus groups with my roommates. From these informal conversations stemmed the most interesting and meaningful findings of my research as they happened organically under conditions that were conducive to interacting as friends instead of creating a researcher-participant dynamic.

Choice of research community

A variety of factors influenced the decision to conduct research in San Pablo Huixtepec. Because of its location it is able to serve students from a variety of communities from around the Central Valleys and other more rural regions. San Pablo Huixtepec is located about forty-five minutes outside the state capital, and is a primarily agricultural town with a population of 9,025 (INEGI Perspectiva Estadística de Oaxaca, 2011). The nearby commercial center, Zimatlan, provides San Pablo Huixtepec with a weekly market, but many of the town's residents are small business owners who opened convenience stores, internet cafes, *estéticas* (beauty supply stores), or simply own a piece of the farm land surrounding the town. Two noisy main streets run through San Pablo where older men often sit on stoops watching as women run household errands on their way home from one of the eight Catholic churches in town. The park in the center of town is home to the government building, the main church, and fountains and benches which in the evenings can be seen filled with young couples – some university students, some high school students – cuddling and flirting outside the constraints of their parents' homes. Santa Ines Yatzeche provides an interesting contrast as San Pablo's closest neighbor, an indigenous Zapotec community a five minute *mototaxi* ride away. Both towns have seen an extremely high level of emigration to the United States, especially to Seaside, California, as evidenced by the American style architecture in homes, American style dress of many young men, graffiti written in English, and signs announcing weekly delivery dates for packages to and from the United States. The familiarity with U.S. culture

present in this town was conducive to connecting with people who had a more grounded understanding of my cultural perspective, and within the university setting, a general familiarity of the research process.

La Universidad Tecnológica de los Valles Centrales de Oaxaca (UTVCO) is a small university that opened in 2009 in order to cater to the region's specific needs by offering majors in fields related to agriculture: Business Development, Renewable Energies, Agro-Industrial Processes, and Commercialization. Although these majors are not traditional subjects studied by women, 59.9 percent of the students in the UTVCO identify as female (Reyes Morales, 2009). The poverty prevalent in Oaxaca is present among the student body population, as well. The average monthly income of the students' families is \$4,998 Mexican pesos or about \$400 US dollars; however the lowest income is \$800 Mexican pesos, or the equivalent of about \$70 US dollars. Low income levels reflect the low average level of education among the students' parents: fathers on average have eight years of formal education, and mothers have a mere seven years. Several scholarships are provided to qualifying students: tuition, housing, nutrition, and a quarterly cash stipend. Although minimal (the nutrition scholarship provides one meal a day), these scholarships offset the cost of education for low-income students, do not detract from families' limited resources, and make it possible to attend college.

Overwhelmingly students observe traditional divisions of labor among their parents which reflect the conservative, traditional nature of typical Oaxacan families. 46.4 percent of all fathers are *campesinos* or farmers, while 75.9 percent of all the mothers declare themselves an *amas de casa* or homemakers. Additionally, only 69 percent of all parents expressed interest in their daughter or son studying at a university level, leaving 31 percent who do not express interest and perhaps would find it harder to support the university experience and their child's pursuit of higher education (Reyes Morales, 2009). The low percentage of parents who studied at a university level – 3 percent of fathers and only 2 percent of mothers – could also contribute to a lack of interest in their sons and daughters studying, as well as a variety of other disadvantages first-generation college students experience due to a lack of cultural capital and social scripts that aid in successfully mastering roles as students (Collier, 2008).

It is additionally important to understand that this university does not fit the typical American university model. Typically, the United States' view of the university experience is that of enriching opportunities, a dynamic social environment, and interactions with scholarly, experienced professors. The UTVCO, however, strikingly lacks these characteristics. Much of the faculty is comprised of young, recently graduated, urban twenty-somethings who generally lack field experience, mentoring training, and the diversity of perspective generally expected of an institution of higher education. There are no student clubs or university life, relatively few opportunities for leadership, and the campus is isolated from the San Pablo community. Students are divided into separate *salones* – essentially classrooms - where they spend the duration of their *carrera* – major – with the same group of ten to twenty-five students. Teachers rotate between the salones while students stay within the same four white walls every day. Thus, although college is traditionally thought of as a transformative experience, the environment within the walls of the university is not conducive to creative thinking nor personal growth and development. In the end, the university does provide a new experience distinct from that of a small, rural village, but in a way that is difficult to negotiate and fails to take into consideration the unique needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The following text is divided into two main sections: Perception of Identity in San Pablo Huixtepec and Perception of Home Community Dynamics. Location is an important factor in understanding how young women perceive themselves as many of the students are from communities several hours away from San Pablo Huixtepec. Students whose families are from San Pablo Huixtepec or nearby towns remain living with their parents, but students from communities throughout the

Central Valley, the Sierra Sur, or the Mixteca must move in order to attend classes. When at all possible students, particularly young women, remain living with their families for both economic and personal reasons. Overwhelmingly, young women who live with their parents express significant distress over the thought of moving out of their parents' home and missing their family members. Upon learning that my parents were not in Oaxaca with me, young women would quietly gasp and ask, "Don't you miss them?" Their concern about my connection with my family demonstrates the strength of familial bonds and connections in their home communities and sets the back drop for understanding tensions women experience upon moving to San Pablo Huixtepec.

While living and studying in San Pablo Huixtepec a new subset of relationships forms with classmates, professors, and community members. Among these new relationships are people from different communities, ethnicities, ideologies, experiences, and languages that influence and shape a young woman's perception of herself and her role within her family and community. At times these relationships challenge women's perspective; other times they reinforce already prevailing ideologies. Thus, within the geographically divided sections, I discuss perceptions of relationships both within the context of San Pablo Huixtepec and young women's home communities and the complex social structures women must negotiate in their attempts to reconcile two distinct worlds while attending college.

Results

Perception of Identity in San Pablo Huixtepec Living away from home

Isabel and I sat on the stoop of our room one evening watching men return home from a day's work in the field in wooden wagons pulled by horses and donkeys. Barefoot women passed by carrying tortillas in palm baskets on their backs, children played in puddles of rainwater, and Mexican banda music squeaked from Isabel's cell phone speakers in the background. When Isabel did not have homework or a project due, this was a fairly typical evening after school for us. All the by passers greeted us with "Buenas tardes" or "Adios" and a head nod as they continued on their way, but one man stopped. He must have noticed that we were sitting on the floor instead of in chairs or seen the lack of furniture inside the room because he asked us if we wanted to buy a couch. "No," Isabel responded, "es que no vivimos aquí. Solamente estudiamos en la universidad." [No, it's that we don't live here. We just study at the university.] The man seemed to understand, excused himself, and continued on his way.

Isabel's comment that evening was an indication of the way she identified with the community and her sense of belonging in San Pablo Huixtepec. Although she had lived in this community for four years and was now in her final year of college, she did not consider her living arrangement permanent enough to warrant purchasing a couch to sit on (financial constraints aside). In fact, many of the women whom I interviewed reported that although they "stayed" in San Pablo during the week, they returned home every weekend and on breaks from classes to help with household duties. This is reflective of the strong ties they hold to their home community and family, as well as the expectation families hold that after studying the student will return to their home community to live and work. Additionally, as these young women are not married and living with their husband's family, due to the patriarchal structure of Mexican households they remain under the supervision and authority of their fathers despite living independently or with classmates. Thus, familial obligations continue, perpetuating strong familial ties that prevent women from fully embracing their new living arrangements.

Two of the women I interviewed, however, reported feeling "más a gusto" [more comfortable] in San Pablo Huixtepec than in their home communities. In these cases, being in San Pablo afforded

them the opportunity to be away from home and escape not only the patriarchal structure of their household but also avoid tumultuous family issues and domestic violence. Because they were no longer under the supervision of their parents or community members, they were able to begin creating a new identity and self perception. Rebecca, who comes from a small community two hours from San Pablo Huixtepec, gradually embraced the opportunity to adopt a new identity. One professor at the university reported that when Rebecca started attending school, she was very shy, withdrawn, and performed poorly in her classes. He attributed these qualities to the sheltered life she had led in her home community and a lack of proper preparation during high school. Now, outgoing, energetic, and always smiling, Rebecca is one semester away from completing her degree. Rebecca also took advantage of her independent living situation to invite her boyfriend to visit and stay in San Pablo. When I asked if her family knew he stayed with her, her eyes widened and her smile broke into a laugh that clearly meant "No."

El Salón

Due to its enclosed and isolated nature, the salón is a very important social environment for students as relationships with varying degrees of intimacy are formed through daily classroom activities, group projects, and field trips. The combination of women and men from different communities throughout Oaxaca working and studying together in the salón creates social dynamics that serve as informal control mechanisms and reproduce divisions between genders, social class, and ethnicity that students learn in their home communities.

Divisions in gender are made explicit within the university through overt expressions of gender. First, on days where students are required to wear their school uniforms, males come to school dressed in blue collared shirts and females in light pink. A third white shirt option is available, but apart from professors and university personnel, I only observed one female student wearing one. Women frequently cinch the shirts on the sides, sewing them so that they fit more snugly. Secondly, during group field projects, the gendered division of labor is replicated through both the students' choosing and direct professor instructions. One afternoon I had the opportunity to accompany Isabel's salón to their group farm plot where they learn to cultivate products for market. Males arrived that day with machetes prepared to cut briars to line the vegetable plots to prevent the neighbor's goats from eating the bean and squash plants. One woman had brought her father's machete with her that day, but handed it over to the males when it was time to start work. The women sat their bags and purses down in the shade and headed out to the field to pull weeds, as instructed by their professor. Tasks in the field were clearly divided according to gender and perceived expertise or abilities.

During a three day salón field trip to Cuernavaca, gender roles were explicit with regard to meal planning and preparation. Prior to leaving, the food planning committee, which was entirely comprised of women, planned all the meals including ingredients, number of portions, and individual expenses. Men were neither asked what they wanted to eat nor to contribute to the planning but were merely informed of the pesos they were required to contribute. Shortly before arriving in Cuernavaca, the women – who were all sitting together in the front of the bus – started discussing that night's meal. Would we have soup, tlayudas, or just quesadillas? The discussion continued for at least five minutes as they weighed each option carefully, wondering if they had enough lettuce or meat for one dish or the other and how hungry everyone would be. Finally one woman chimed into the conversation, "¿Por qué no preguntamos a los chavos?" [Why don't we ask the guys?]. A few of the women laughed and rolled their eyes as another shouted towards the back of the bus asking what the men wanted to eat. As all the women had expected, the men did not care and suggested we stop for roadside tacos. The men's opinion was considered momentarily before being dismissed as the women continued debating the best dinner option.

Melanie, from an artisan community near San Pablo Huixtepec, seemed to take charge of the other women. While everyone unloaded the bus, Melanie snapped her fingers, gave a little whistle, and shouted, “¡Chicas! ¡A la cocina! [Girls! To the kitchen!]” The food was carried into the kitchen, and all the women got to work preparing dinner. Meanwhile, the men took a tour of the ranch we were staying at, milked cows, and relaxed at the dinner table while they waited for the women to serve them. When I questioned the women about why they had decided to take the lead in food preparation and why the men were not helping in the kitchen, some looked perplexed as to why I would even ask the question. Others answered that they did not find the division of labor fair, but they did not see another option. “Habríamos comido tacos de la calle,” they responded. [We would have eaten roadside tacos.]

During this same field trip to Cuernavaca my roommate, Isabel, expressed to me her feelings of being an outsider among the other women. While she had to borrow money for the trip and was unable to purchase souvenirs, she commented that she felt sad as she watched her other classmates buy “anything they wanted”. She used this opportunity to explain “Las Divinas” [The Divine Girls] to me. In her salón there were four girls from the city and Central Valley. These girls were distinct from my roommate and her closest friends. They were typically lighter skinned, wore tighter, flashier clothing and makeup, carried cell phones with MP3 players and cameras, and were overall less reserved. When the salón first formed during their first term these four girls clustered together in a corner of the room and proudly hung a sign above their area with their self-proclaimed title “Las Divinas”. Eventually a teacher asked them to take the sign down, but the girls remained in their corner of the room and the sentiment they evoked among the other women in the classroom continued. Isabel, who is dark skinned from a very humble, indigenous background, was reminded of the class and ethnic divisions between herself and her peers by not being invited to join Las Divinas. The clear contrast Las Divinas had created in the classroom set the stage for future interactions, and Isabel never formed a close relationship with them. She said while she tried not to pay attention to them or the fact that they received the most attention from males, dressed nicer, and intentionally set themselves apart, she could not help but feel bad about her own appearance and lack of financial resources.

My own attempts at conversing and connecting with Las Divinas were not always successful. This group of girls interacted with me on a more superficial level despite my attempts to connect with them. A professor explained to me this could have been because I associated more with Isabel and they did not want to be closely associated with her; however, judging from non verbal cues and the way their body language and interactions changed in the presence of men or women, my best assessment of the situation was slight feelings of mistrust or suspicion. Thus, although I interacted with Las Divinas very superficially I was never able to interview them about their relationships within the salon, which is indicative of their self-proclaimed exclusivity.

Perception of Home Community Dynamics

Introduction of new knowledge

In many Valley communities most residents communicate in Zapotec. Young people are taught Spanish in schools, but within the home purely Zapotec is spoken. Typically men are more proficient in Spanish than women, as was the case with Isabel’s mother and father. When I spoke with Isabel’s older siblings and parents, we all strained to understand each other’s accents and misconjugated verbs. Of course in the university in San Pablo classes are held in Spanish. While other students and faculty are generally aware who speaks a “dialect” as they call the indigenous languages, rarely are they heard spoken. Dialects of the different indigenous languages vary so greatly from town to town that often speakers of one dialect cannot understand speakers of another – even if the other town is only a few kilometers away. Thus, trendy or commonly used words in one town could be completely unheard of in others and certainly would be difficult to translate to Spanish. Nevertheless, Isabel’s mother has asked her to translate a word specific to

their town to Spanish. When Isabel did not know, her mother responded, "Don't they teach you that at the university?"

Comments such as these were reported frequently among the women I interviewed. By criticizing the education women receive family members discredit the importance of education and the new knowledge acquired in college, a critique that may discourage women from continuing. As an institution primarily focusing on agricultural training and product marketing students at the Universidad Tecnológica de los Valles Centrales de Oaxaca focus a lot of their studies on efficient and environmentally conscious farming practices. This is particularly useful given that many of the students come from rural communities that survive on subsistence farming. Thus, several women shared that they had attempted to explain better, more modern, or more efficient cultivation methods to family members only to be met with resistance. Grandmothers and mothers alike reacted as if insulted. They had been making tortillas, planting corn, or harvesting fruits and veggies for years the same way as their mothers and grandmothers had and did not see a reason to change now. Information women shared with their family members included basic hand washing, food sanitation, and recycling all of which were shrugged off as impractical habits learned in college and not grounded in the families' realities. Women reported that this rejection of new knowledge and the questioning of the university's and young woman's authority made them feel devalued and like their hard work is not respected by their family members.

Sibling relationships

Siblings proved to be a significant source of familial tension, particularly for women whose siblings did not also pursue high school or higher education. Mexican families typically have strong bonds between siblings; women live in their parents' home until they marry and after marriage move into the home of their husband. Negative reactions towards women from brothers and sisters can be particularly hurtful due to these strong familial bonds. For example, when Isabel began studying, her brothers and sisters refused to believe that she was actually taking classes. They did not understand how she could spend all day in a classroom until her first semesters had passed and she could prove to them she had been in school the whole time. While Rebecca's sister did believe she was going to school, she questioned her motivation - it must be in order to meet a boyfriend.

Women also reported jealousy from their siblings. Samantha's salón had taken an overnight trip to Veracruz one term. Later, her family decided to take a vacation together to the beach in Oaxaca but her sister claimed it was not "fair" that Samantha got to take two trips – one to Veracruz and one to the beach. Their father defended Samantha's right to go to the beach as a member of the family, and in the end, her sister stayed behind. Little did Samantha's sister know, the trip to Veracruz was strictly academic and the students were not granted free time for the beach. The same misunderstanding of what happens during a school day is common, as well. Samantha's brothers and sisters all complain that it is not fair that Samantha does not have to work around the house as much because she just "sits in a classroom all day." They not only misunderstand the amount of mental energy and homework college requires, but they also again delegitimize the pursuit of higher education and the young woman.

Meanwhile, classmates in young women's salones understand the amount of work and personal commitment college requires and can build relationships based on this mutual understanding. While it is important that students connect with each other, young women encounter difficulties when their relationships with other students begin developing deeper meaning. After time women find they cannot connect with their siblings in the same way as they do with their classmates due to changes in sense of humor, personal interests, and the tensions described above. This is particularly stressful for young women and for family members whose prior frustration compounds with their decreased ability to communicate.

Rejection of relationships

Overwhelmingly all the women interviewed in this study reported that the majority of the other women they went to middle or high school with have stayed in their home towns to get married and have children. One girl even said there are kids on every corner of her town because the girls “van embarazándose” [keep getting pregnant]. The lifestyle that is required of attending college and the lifestyle of raising children in a small, rural community are very distinct. Given this, it is not surprising that every woman interviewed reported that she no longer spends time with her friends from middle and high school. In many cases, friends simply stopped talking to the women and only on occasion will greet them as they pass in the street. No one had answers for exactly why people stopped talking to them except guesses and assumptions – jealousy, perceived feelings of inferiority or superiority, or a lack of commonalities. When Samantha and her high school boyfriend broke up after her first year of college, however, she knew exactly why. He had quit attending high school and had no interest in pursuing higher education. As Samantha had to spend even more time in school, he was jealous of other men she might be meeting and felt threatened by her level of education – he was afraid if they got married, she would earn more money than him.

While friends usually did not blatantly state the termination of friendships, Betsy's father did. Betsy's oldest sister had attempted to emigrate to the United States and was deported and jailed on three occasions. She now lived in the northern part of Mexico. Betsy's other sister also attended college, and Betsy was now in her last year of classes. All of her father's children had “left him” to pursue other – non-familial – interests outside of the town. As we sat around on our *petates* in San Pablo Huixtepec, Betsy explained the abuse from her father her family had suffered growing up with tears in her eyes. While she saw attending college as an escape or relief from the pressures of her town, her father had told her, “ya no tengo hijos” [I don't have children anymore]. Betsy's explanation for this comment was that her father is *machista* – the same explanation she gave for why he did not support her studying in the first place. Damaging comments from family members and friends not only complicate women's experience while attending college, but also serve as a type of warning for other women who remain in their home communities. Seeing the consequences attending college has on these young women's relationships other young women including sisters, cousins, and friends, could be convinced not to do so for fear of ending friendships and family relationships.

Acceptance of and desire for more egalitarian gender roles

Finally, every young woman interviewed in this study expressed a higher level of acceptance for more egalitarian and varied gender roles compared to their reports of family and community members' gender role expectations. While this is beneficial for the women and for promoting gender equality, it can have negative ramifications for women who attempt to diverge from their traditional role within their families. Most notably, women reported questioning the traditional role of men and women within their families and within both present and future romantic relationships.

Traditionally in Mexican households women prepare meals and serve the men who wait at the dining table. This custom was shared among every household of the women participating in this study as was the sentiment that women's subordination to men with regard to meal preparation is unfair. Upon expressing these feelings to their mothers women were met with resistance. Rebecca, for example, thought it would be a good idea to teach her younger brother to cook, clean, and do laundry. Her mother, however, refused to allow it claiming he would never need to know how as he is male. Other women have refused to serve their brothers food on the basis that they are capable of serving themselves, but after time the effort is not worth it. Betsy is an example of someone who has not yet given up the hope of changing her mother's mind. After years of abuse from

Betsy's father, Betsy has slowly began to convince her mother that she does not have to stay in a relationship with him and that domestic violence is unacceptable.

Attending college has also influenced the way in which young women perceive their current romantic relationships and future marriages. First, because these women decided to study instead of marry after middle or high school they already had a different vision for their future than the typical young Oaxacan. Furthermore, everyone agreed they would only marry a man who would allow them to have a career and work outside the home. As one woman stated, "¿Cómo puedo seguir adelante si tengo un marido que quiere que me quede en casa?" [How can I advance if I have a husband that wants me to stay at home?]. Additionally, all the women wanted to first finish school and start their professional careers before marrying or having children. Isabel enacted her newly formed ideas about acceptable gender roles with her current boyfriend, although she found this more difficult to do while they were in their home community together. On a joint school project not only did Isabel take the lead in developing their project idea, but she was widely recognized as more hardworking and committed to success than her boyfriend despite his best efforts to diminish the perceived value of her work.

In these instances, new knowledge gained from attending university, working equally intellectually with males, and contact with women in leadership positions has influenced these students' ideas about gender roles and has allowed them to begin creating new constructions of familial and romantic relationships.

Concluding Remarks

Higher education has a profound impact on the lives of young women from rural communities. Despite the emotional and relational consequences women reported experiencing since pursuing higher education, all the young women unanimously agreed that education has positively impacted their lives. Indeed, all the women reported they had decided to continue their education to increase their quality of lives for themselves, their families, and their future children. This study is comprised of a small group of very motivated and hardworking young women who generously shared their lives, struggles, and friendship with me during the summer spent in San Pablo Huixtepec. For many women, this study was the first time someone had asked them about their experience and discussed the topics presented in this essay, and many expressed feeling pride and comfort in having their voice heard. Empowering opportunities such as this and an increased focus on educational access among marginalized populations is essential to the elimination of *machismo* and inequality in Mexican society.

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