

## The Construction of Modern Public Education and Gender Politics in Mexico

Reiko MATSUHISA

The object of this dissertation is to analyze the process of establishing gender norms through public education from the end of the Nineteenth century to the late 1930's, when the modern nation-state was being shaped in the wake of the drastic social changes brought about by the Mexican Revolution. In order to analyze this process, I focus on first wave feminist movements and their relations with various power-holders, in particular the state-reconstructive government, labor movements and the Catholic Church. I show that with the conflicts and power politics among those groups a gender norm based on motherhood had been reshaped from the traditional one established under the Catholic Church to a new one adapted to the demands of the modern nation-state.

The first wave of Mexican feminism emerged from the anti-Diaz movement at the beginning of the Mexican Revolution. The participants were women who had been educated in women's educational institutions, such as vocational schools (*escuelas de artes y oficios*) and normal schools. Among these feminists, middle-class women who supported themselves working mainly as teachers were the main driving force of the movement. During the same period, "*escuela racionalista*" (rationalist schools), challenged the traditional education given by the Catholic Church. Many feminist teachers participated in this educational movement, which expanded across several states, among which Yucatan was one of the most active.

The case of the state of Yucatan is a good example of synergy between feminist and educational reform movements. During the civil war, the socialist governor Alvarado accelerated social reforms, including educational reform. Rationalist schools, which already had taken firm hold before Alvarado came to Yucatan, became more active with Alvarado's support. Additionally, Alvarado began to work with female education because he thought that it is necessary to educate women in order to liberate them from the influence of the Catholic Church.

Alvarado hosted the first Mexican feminist conference in order to discuss what social roles women should play and what kind of education was appropriate in order to carry out these social roles. These questions aroused enthusiastic debate among the women at the conference, which was very important because their discussion set the stage for the future policy of the Mexican feminist movement, including such issues as

female suffrage, self determination of sexuality and reproduction, and women's contribution to a modern nation-state. The resolution determined that women's work within the home should be treated with as much dignity as men's work in the public sphere. A resolution recommending the domestic skills to be taught in public rationalist schools was adapted at the conference. Also, the need for female vocational education was recognized in light of the increasing participation of women in the labor market.

Alvarado's social reforms were handed over to the next governor, Felipe Carrillo Puerto. Under his government, such radical feminist policies as a bill legalizing divorce, female suffrage at the state level, and the distribution of Sanger's birth control pamphlets by a feminist organization were carried out. The Catholic Church and the conservatives were strongly against the latter and called for anti-birth control campaigns, one of which was the celebration of "Mother's Day," which proved so popular that the birth control movement was obliged to retrench.

The SEP (*Secretaría de Educación Pública*) also supported the culture of admiring motherhood through the establishment of a Mother's Day festival as a formal school event and emphasized the spiritual nature of motherhood in order to mobilize women in their literacy and hygiene campaigns. They also asserted how the profession of teacher was in conformity with the nature of women: the teacher being a model of the combination of profession and motherhood. The SEP strengthened the patriarchal gender structure in the modern nation-state by casting mothers in the role of reproducing citizens.

Finally, the modern nation-state had a special interest in eugenics considering women's reproductive function. From the 1920s to the 1930s, the federal government confronted the drastic decrease in population after the civil war and worked out a policy based on eugenics to increase and raise a healthy, good-quality population. The eugenicists recommended that the federal government introduce Puericulture, Hygiene, and Home Economics into public education, especially into female education. During this period, "home-schools" (*escuela-hogar*) were founded in order to educate lower-middle class women to be good housewives and gain the skills to earn their own living. Gradually home-schools were replaced by vocational schools specializing in professions for women such as secretarial work, sewing, embroidery, and food processing. Through the founding of these schools, female education was institutionalized and stratified between middle-class and working class.

This idea of gender connected with the modern nation-state was extended to rural areas with the expansion of the public educational system. In the 1930's President Cárdenas revised Provision Three of the Constitution in order to emphasize

"socialist education." He carried out a policy focused on working-class and agrarian workers (*campesinos*). The federalization (centralization) of education was implemented and rural schools were founded. Women teachers were as central to improving standards of living as literacy campaigns in rural areas. Elena Torres, a feminist bureaucrat and leader in rural education, argued that sexual education was necessary in the curriculum for women. However, for the reasons I have discussed above, female education focused on only home economics in the rural educational system of the SEP.

The new gender norm presented by the state-reconstruction government based on motherhood without sexual self-determination was established through public education and vocational education in urban areas and institutionalized through the curriculum for female education in rural areas which gradually became dominant in the educational policy during Cardenas's regime.