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## II. Labor and Politics - Introduction

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## **Part II. Labor and Politics**

# Introduction

Of fundamental importance in the new scholarship on women is the delineation of patterns of power and inequality based on gender. The problem of power and its attendant inequalities, of course, had engaged Chicana/o scholars for some time. Indeed, Chicano studies scholarship developed from the need to examine systematically patterns of power and inequality that characterized the experiences of Mexicans in the United States. Whereas, the dynamics of race and class have received the most attention, Chicana/o scholars are increasingly addressing the question of gender.

The following four articles elucidate how power and inequality take form in the experiences of women of color. The authors present a compelling picture of the forces of domination, division, resistance, and solidarity that permeate the lives and struggles of Mexican women. The articles focus on Chicana workers in the United States and Mexicana workers in the border areas and interior of Mexico. Also depicted are diverse struggles for power, among maquiladora workers on their shop floor and among *mujeres* involved in a national campaign for the presidency of Mexico.

To be sure, Mexican women are examined in different contexts. However, despite differences among the case studies, these papers reveal parallels and interconnections that exist in the work and political experiences of Mexican women on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Indeed, these articles raise numerous questions concerning power and inequality, labor and politics, that hold implications for women of color across the world.

In the first article, Denise Segura, from the University of California, Berkeley, focuses on the Chicana population in the U.S. labor market to outline new directions for research. Segura explains how scholarship from several major fields has failed to

address the particular experiences of women of color. Her central concern is with the concept of "triple oppression" and its delineation. Utilizing this notion, she outlines approaches for integrating the factors of class, race, and gender in work on Chicanas. A brief demographic analysis of Chicana labor force participation in recent years serves well to illustrate her arguments. Her call for more empirical study of the Chicana experience is a challenge that must be heeded.

Marta Lopez-Garza, from the University of California, Los Angeles, explores the complexity of women's work in developing countries through a case study of Mexico. Like Segura, she questions the adequacy of social science assumptions and constructs in accounting for women's experiences.

Her study illustrates the great extent to which women in urban Mexico are "economically active," despite academic studies and government pronouncements that contend otherwise. She calls attention to the myriad of activities women perform as "informal" labor. As she argues, there is a "genuine need to reconceptualize" what constitutes employment or economic activity in light of women's work in the informal labor sector. She suggests that additional considerations, such as sexual, class, and age divisions of labor, must enter analyses of women's labor force activity. In the end, Lopez-Garza reminds us how social science is "intrinsically entrenched politically," in this case, how inadequate data can promote the interests of government and capital over those of women workers.

With Devon Peña's article, analysis proceeds to the international economic system and the location of female labor within it. Peña, from Colorado College, focuses on one "transnational, cross-cultural labor process," the Mexican maquiladora or twin plant, to depict a system of capitalist controls over workers. Largely through his own primary research in Ciudad Juárez (Mexico), Peña reveals how capital fuses "Fordist principles" of production with patriarchal forms of control to subordinate its female labor force. The use of male supervisors and sexual harassment of women workers are only two of the elements in the patriarchal system of manipulation.

Importantly, Peña also tells the "other side of the story," that is, the ways in which maquila workers resist capital's efforts to control them. He expounds on this issue more extensively in

other work (see Peña, "The Class Politics of Abstract Labor: Organizational Forms and Industrial Relations in the Mexican Maquiladoras," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1983). But this article also describes the "terrains of struggle" for maquila workers on the shop floor and in their communities.

Teresa Carrillo, from Stanford University, develops the theme of women's struggle by focusing on electoral politics in Mexico. Mexican presidential elections paradoxically stir the emotions of the populace yet seldom present unexpected results. Looking beyond voting outcomes, however, Carrillo finds new significance in Mexico's most recent presidential contest.

In her article, Carrillo points to the introduction of a feminist agenda in national presidential politics through the unprecedented campaign of Doña Rosario Ibarra de Piedra. Doña Rosario is the first woman ever to seek the presidency of the Republic. Carrillo explores the significance of Doña Rosario's campaign for party politics of the Left and the women's movement in Mexico.

She notes how class and gender-specific concerns compete uneasily in the framing of electoral strategies for women. The Ibarra campaign impacted upon thousands of working-class and marginalized women, who began to see their concerns as women addressed. However, how the Left was to organize these women, along class lines or gender-specific issues, remained a source of tension among male and female activists. Carrillo concludes that, in spite of these unresolved tensions, women's issues, organization, and participation remain dynamic elements in national politics that will not be ignored.

Although Mexico provides the context for this case study, implications emerge for the forging of feminist politics into national struggles in other countries as well, including class and racial movements in the United States.