

This informal settlement is typical of many communities throughout Mexico that spring up around newly created tourist resorts. Although La Esperanza is now considered to be a permanent community, it continues to rely on the transient and seasonal nature of the tourist industry which inadvertently gave it life. The roles of men and women of La Esperanza and how they are perceived by an outside observer are greatly affected by the season in which one encounters the community.

*L'industrie du tourisme étant le plus grand employeur de La Esperanza, la communauté accuse une forte hausse de chômage en dehors de la saison touristique. Les hommes restent à la maison, tandis que les femmes continuent à assurer la totalité des tâches domestiques; puiser et rapporter l'eau en est une partie importante. Pour contrer la situation de dépendance financière dans laquelle se trouve la femme mexicaine, le gouvernement a mis sur pied plusieurs initiatives. D'autre part,*

## Women and water

by Laurel Miles



Women washing at the well

During the summer months, low tourism levels make work for the men in the resorts scarce, and affects their traditional role as a breadwinner. One can then enter the community and find the men swinging in their hammocks, occasionally being passed a child to mind, while the women race around doing the jobs that hold the family and the community together.

As access to clean water is available to all Canadians, it is difficult for us to relate to Mexican women spending entire days collecting washing water that is unsafe to drink. This water is acquired in several ways. For higher income level families, water can be purchased and pumped to cisterns on the property via a large tanker that drives through the streets of the community. For those that cannot afford this luxury, there are currently four wells in the area that water can be drawn from. Most days, women and children from all areas can be seen endlessly carrying buckets of water from the wells to their homes. Often the least established families live the furthest from the wells.

*trois femmes en particulier jouent un rôle prominent quant à la vie publique de la communauté.*

*Debido al hecho de que el turismo representa una fuerza impulsora para la comunidad de 'La Esperanza', la disponibilidad de trabajo durante las diferentes temporadas turísticas ocasiona grandes efectos en las actividades de la comunidad. Esto origina cuestionamientos en los roles tradicionales, en donde los hombres están usualmente empleados fuera del hogar y las mujeres deben llevar a cabo el cuidado de los niños y las labores del hogar, dentro de las cuales destaca el aprovisionamiento de agua. En respuesta a los estereotipos tradicionales han habido algunos esfuerzos gubernamentales y otros originados espontáneamente dentro de las comunidades en la lucha por la valoración de la mujer mexicana, entre los que destacan los testimonios de tres mujeres.*

Money for shoes being of low priority, the women climb the steep dirt hills in bare feet. In some cases a family that lives half way between the well and the outskirts of the community will carry more water than they need; a family that lives on the fringes of the settlement will pay a small fee to then carry that water the remaining distance to their own home. For those families who cannot carry enough water to fulfil their needs, it is often easier to take the washing, be it laundry, dishes, or grimy children, to the well itself, and clean them on the wash tables set up for such purposes. Some times, children are sent to the well to clean up and will wash their

shade of the canopy and chat over the sound of the television, but there are times when the chairs are drawn up, the television turned off, and pressing problems of the community are discussed. Out of these informal meetings, a group of five women became the leaders of this area and are approached when something really needs doing in the community. As testament to their efforts, these women fixed a section of the road that was in serious disrepair. The dirt roads deteriorate rapidly with every onslaught of torrential rain brought on by the hurricanes of the coastal summer, and were in such bad condition one day that a driver refused to



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clothes while still wearing them. Subsequently, a social event has grown out of meeting to complete these common tasks. Talk is loud and happy and many times water fights start in the warm Mexican mornings. The dream of running water to service every house may soon be realized, and will make the lives of many people much easier, although regretfully, this progress will see the end of an important meeting place within the community.

Three women stand out as examples of incredible strength within La Esperanza. Through their own actions, and efforts by the Mexican government, they are helping to empower the women of this community, and of similar communities across the country.

Bernarda's store serves one group of women, who live in the hills of the community, and who are somewhat isolated from the more established parts of La Esperanza. The store has evolved as a meeting place, as the settlement is sadly deficient in public spaces. Usually people gather just to drink something cool in the

drive his water truck around a bend in the road to supply a high level area. These women were unwilling to simply accept this situation, and in a fashion very uncharacteristic of the Mexican way, they independently collected funds to purchase supplies, and built a retaining wall that maintains the integrity of the road.

Domínguez, the daughter of a single mother, accepted the lease on the piece of land that she, her mother, sister and brother's son live on, because she was able to prove to the government that with her job she could afford the land payments. She has since paid off the land and transferred the title to her mother's name, which she had wanted to do from the beginning. When asked the reason for this action, she claimed that her mother was not capable of making the payments herself, so the government would not use the mother's name on the lease. Domínguez felt that it was the least she could do for her mother who had led her to realize the value of education and wanted to thank her by giving her a piece of property of her own.

As poorer parts of Mexico still follow traditional roles of the male as wage earner and the female as keeper of the house and children, many newly separated women are finding themselves in the position of having to find a job, without ever having gained the skills to do so. In an effort to give women more control over their future in the event of a husband running off with no intent of supporting his family, the Guerrero government offers a tax break program, which encourages families to place land titles under the woman's name. In many cases, the land would be mostly paid for if a divorce

Because the community is so small, and there is so little privacy provided by unglazed windows and cardboard walls, the inhabitants of La Esperanza know much more about the private lives of their neighbours than we could ever fathom, coming from a society where so much goes on behind closed doors. As a result, there are many cases of individuals critiquing the lives of other community members, with full knowledge of the situation. However, because the community is so aware of the plight of their neighbours, cases like Silvia



occurred, and the woman would at very least still have possession of her own home while she made efforts to find work.

One other good example of women helping women to become more self sufficient is Silvia, the mother of one son, who lives comfortably in a well established house, supported by her husband's plentiful income. She originally had a small business of her own making tortilla dough, which she then sold to another woman, Dolores, at very small profit. The intent was never to receive great financial returns from the endeavour, but to allow Dolores, whose husband left her without support of any kind, to take the dough around the community and sell it, to generate enough income to support herself and her daughter. In more recent days, the price of corn flour has risen, and instead of charging a greater price for the manufacturing of the dough, Silvia began to produce the dough at no profit to herself in order to let the seller maintain her level of income.

and Dolores, the group of women at Bernarda's store and even Domínguez and her mother, are examples of people empowering others, be it family members, friends, or just acquaintances, because their situation is understood and then shared by all.



Bernarda la Plaza