



# INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S WORK IN MODERN AGRICULTURE\*

L. Crespo Stupková

*The College of Michoacán, Rural Studies Center, Cátedras CONACyT, Zamora, Mexico*

In recent decades, the female Purépecha population has been drawn into wage work as a day labourer in berry fields in Michoacán, Mexico. This manifestation of globalization and the international division of labour is the reason for local economic, social, and cultural changes. The research was conducted between 2018 and 2021 using sociological and ethnographic methods. Over 50 informal interviews were conducted with indigenous women fieldworkers, their family members, intermediaries, small farmers, and migrants to get to know the context and gain views from different angles. Twenty-six in-depth semi-structured interviews aimed to find out how the living conditions had changed after women started working. The study captures the current process of transformation of the socio-cultural system with rapid changes in family organization and positive economic impacts. However, deficiencies in the areas of healthcare and social justice are also pointed out.

rural families, agro-export value chains, berries, globalization

doi: 10.7160/sab.2022.530405

Received for publication on November 24, 2021

Accepted for publication on October 14, 2022

## INTRODUCTION

Globalization is an economic integration of world production and consumption, based on multinational corporations, and at the same time a lifestyle transformation. In a globalizing environment, to increase their competitiveness, companies have been restructuring into more flexible and less hierarchical forms – export value chains (Gereffi, 2009; Pananond et al., 2020; Gereffi et al., 2021).

The pressure of globalization is changing rural families and one of the consequences is the entry of women into the labour market. The Industrial Revolution has given women a role in the household, while neoliberal capitalism has a disruptive effect on family systems that have traditionally focused on cultivating land in local communities and now have jobs outside the village, such as work on plantations (Giddens, 2013). The main reasons for women's entry into the labour market are financial (unemployment or underemployment of men, restrictions on migration), socio-demographic (fewer children, more women outside the traditional family –

divorced, single mothers, widows), and psychological (desire for personal fulfillment and independence).

Social theory tends to exclude women from the realms of industrialization, capitalism, rationalization, modernity, globalization, and labour markets, where attention is focused especially on men. Feminist theories point out that women's domestic work must be considered an important element of a functioning capitalist system (Scombé, 1974) and should be considered comparable to any other work in modern society (Oakley, 1974). Barrett (1980) notices that although oppression of women is not a necessary theoretical precondition for capitalism, it is historically rooted in social and material relations, and the capitalist wage system has accepted and strengthened the traditional family model and power relations between men and women. It is a dualism that determines domination over women, indigenous people, day labourers, and nature (Haway, 1991).

Women face work segregation, which stems from inequality in the family and the male notion that employment is secondary for women only after caring for

\*Supported by the National Council of Science and Technology (Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología, Cátedras CONACyT), Mexico and under Grant FORDECYT-PRONACES/265208/2020 'Agro-food systems, local knowledge and forms of adaptation to changing scenarios in north-western Michoacán' ('Sistemas agroalimentarios, saberes locales y formas de adaptación ante escenarios cambiantes en el noroeste de Michoacán').

children and the household. Therefore, they are more often employed in low-paid, eventual, and routine occupations, with low authority and limited career prospects. Hochschild, (1989) state that women face double oppression, first on the first shift (lower salary) and then on the second shift (more housework). Lower participation in professional networks is also a problem: women know fewer people and usually do not have good connections, which affects their placement in the labour market.

In Mexican national economy, the share of agricultural workers in the total number of workers is 13 %, however, in Michoacán, the participation is higher (21 %). Out of 47 % of employed Michoacán's women, only 8 % (73 000) work in agriculture according to official statistics (INEGI, 2020; SIAP, 2021). However, the level of informality in the primary sector is 84 % (ENO E, 2019), so these numbers must be taken with caution.

Agricultural companies achieve a comparative advantage by employing women, because of women's skills and capacities (that are socially differentiated, historically acquired, and traditionally inherited), their flexibility, and lower pay requirements. Simultaneously, the mechanism of segmentation by sex and ethnicity causes indigenous women to have limited access to qualified positions (Lara, 1998). Seefoo-Lujan (2005a) notes that the Mexican labour market is divided into two sectors: a primary one with more stable, interesting, and better-paid jobs and a secondary, marginal one, with lower salaries, unstable jobs, and without medical and social security. Women and indigenous people are traditionally employed in the second sector and the mobility between the two sectors is very limited, even with a higher level of education.

## METHODS

The main aim of the research is to fill the gap in knowledge about the living and working conditions of rural indigenous women employed in modern agriculture and their families. The secondary objectives were to describe the process of integration into the work environment and the complex network of relationships and capture changes that have taken place as a result of the pandemic crisis. Primary data were collected between 2018 and 2021 in San Felipe de Los Herreros and Peribán-Los Reyes, Mexico.

The questions we are trying to answer are: How did women enter the labour market? Was it an opportunity to work or a necessity to work under the threat of poverty? What is the importance of intermediaries?

If women are free enough to sell their labour, does it free them from dependence on men? Does it improve the living conditions of themselves and their children? In what aspects yes and in which no? What are the working conditions from the perspective of women and the perspective of employers? Are indigenous women migrating from other Mexican states perceived as competition? How does the pandemic affect work in the berry fields?

The locality of San Felipe was selected because of the predominance of the indigenous population. Interviewed women are the first generation of berries workers, which allows us to capture the changes that have occurred. The activity began to appear ten years ago, so a sufficient number of women have experience with it.

The first step was the authorization of the fieldwork by local authorities. Then exploratory fieldwork was undertaken to the knowledge of local conditions, such as physical environment, infrastructure, economy, educational and employment opportunities, migration, cultural customs, family size and arrangement, common eating habits, language, and principal social problems. Many residents were contacted and key informants were selected. The criterion was to achieve the most comprehensive knowledge possible of the issue, so women in different life situations and with different work experiences were interviewed. Of course, the willingness to respond was also important. This research does not aspire to the statistical representativeness of the sample, even so in terms of age, education, and family status. Women from 16 to 65 years of age, without education up to incomplete university and from single childless to widows were interviewed. Most women have work experience with both small farmers and large international companies.

The real identity of the respondents is known to the author, nevertheless, the names have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

Qualitative methods were applied for holistic understanding, main techniques used are ethnographic and sociological: participatory observation and interviews. The direct participatory observation took place within eight days when the author of the study worked as one of the women workers in fields with blackberries and blueberries<sup>(1)</sup>.

Over 50 informal interviews were conducted and 26 in-depth semi-structured interviews with indigenous women fieldworkers, their family members (grandmothers, children, husbands, siblings, etc.), intermediaries, small farmers, and women migrants from other indigenous regions. The interviews took place both in the field and in women's households. Interviews with farmers were conducted in the field

<sup>(1)</sup>Access to the small farms was gained with the intermediary's help, who introduced the author to the boss as a woman who was simply looking for a job. The safety rules of large international companies did not allow direct experience of working in their fields, so the experience in this workplace is only mediated by workers.

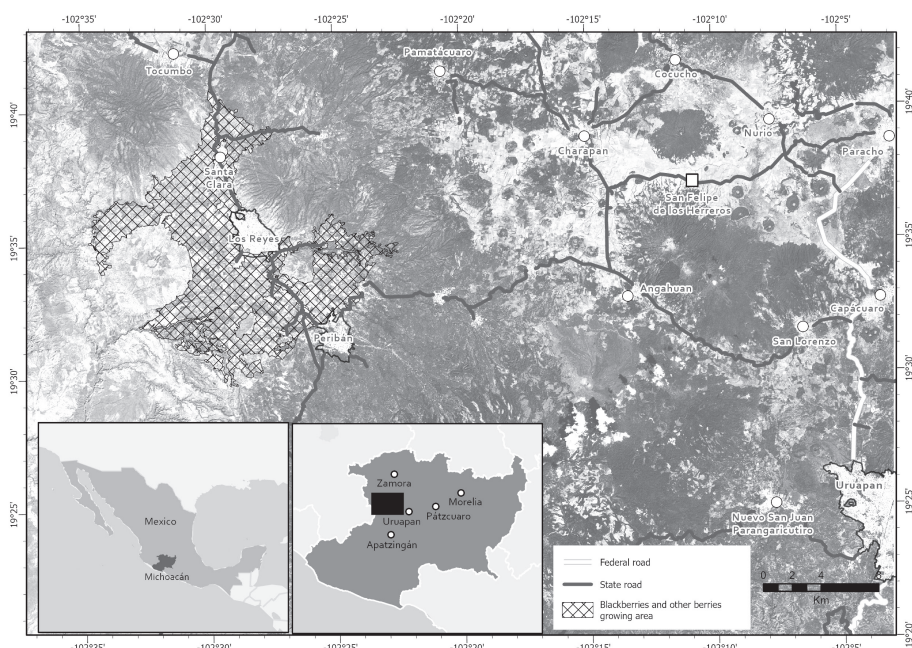


Fig. 1. Study area, berry growing area and Meseta Purépecha

Authors: L. Crespo Stupková and J. Medina

and the interviews with indigenous migrants in their temporary residence.

The interviews were conducted until the saturation point when the responses began to repeat. To increase the confidence, robustness, and internal validity of the study, data and methodology triangulation was necessary. It was achieved by a combination of techniques (regular comparison of actor's declarations with fieldwork notes and observations), and sources of information (to ask several actors for the same information to ensure accuracy and openness to alternative explanations).

The informal interviews and observations from the plots were registered in a field diary, the depth interviews were recorded and transcribed. The analysis of evidence included information and content analysis, decoding, identification of links, and interpretation.

## RESULTS

### Geographical and sociocultural context

To understand the issue, it is necessary to describe the main geographical and cultural conditions. San Felipe de Los Herreros is a village with almost two thousand inhabitants, located on the Meseta Purépecha plateau at the height of 2 220 m above sea level, in the Municipality of Charapan, State of Michoacán (Fig. 1). The village is equipped with a healthcare centre, primary and secondary schools, running water, and it is easily accessible by road.

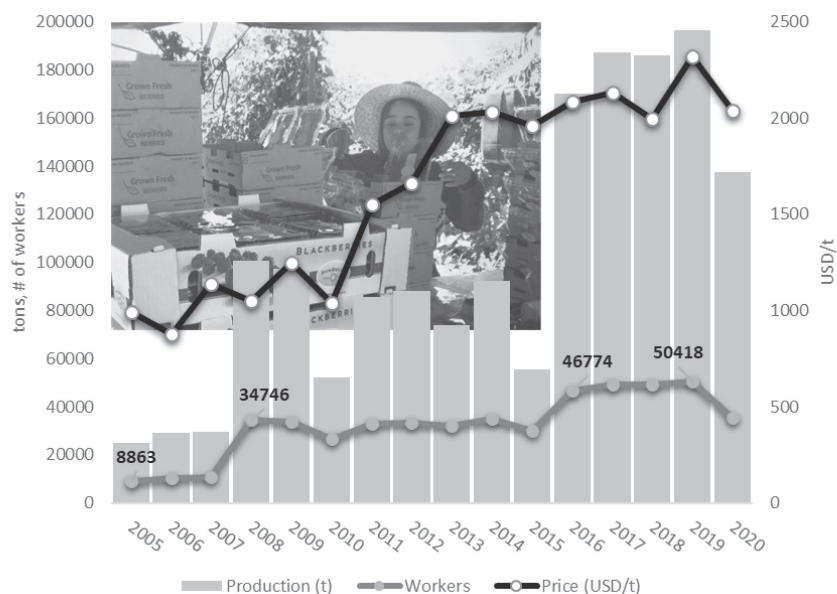
The main source of income is traditionally forestry (resin collection, logging, and furniture production); however, the community sawmill went bankrupt.

Traditional agriculture is in decline: the reasons are intense fragmentation of agricultural plots, population growth, and demographic pressure, together with low crop productivity. Traditionally, the women have not worked away from home, despite this has changed radically over the last ten years, mainly due to the general deterioration of the Mexican labour market. Whereas in the past the man was the breadwinner of the family, now he works as a day labourer in export-oriented agriculture and faces job insecurity, eventuality, irregularity, and absence of benefits. One of the options for previous generations was to migrate to the United States. Now it is almost impossible due to changes in the immigration policies.

A woman's social status is strongly influenced by her civil status: single women live mostly with their parents while married women with their husband's family. The woman, therefore, passes from a subordinate role to her parents to a subordinate role to her mother-in-law, who controls the internal organization of the household. Nuclear family independence and the establishment of one's household do not occur until middle age. In recent decades, women's education has greatly increased and is currently higher than that of men's – the number of girls completing local secondary school is higher than boys, the girls commute to high school and study at university in Morelia (capital of Michoacán, distance 140 km) or Uruapan (distance 50 km) more often than boys. The birth rate has dropped significantly with young women having now only two or three children. Although it is an indigenous community, most of the population no longer speaks Purépecha due to the educational policy applied until the 1980s, when speaking in Spanish was strictly required at school and mothers were advised not to

Fig. 2. Improvement of the main economic indicators – berry production, price, and number of workers

Source: Production and price (S I A P, 2019), workers – own calculation based on field-work data



speak Purépecha to their children. Social problems include alcoholism and domestic violence.

The valley of Los Reyes – Peribán, with an average height of 900–1 200 m above sea level, is known as the Emerald Valley due to the greenness of its fields. The climate is tropical: warm temperate with rains in summer (900 mm per year) and high humidity from the Pacific.

The liberalization of international trade between Mexico, the United States, and Canada by the signing of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) in 1992 spurred the cultivation of new labour-intensive crops, especially fresh fruits and vegetables. Multinational companies began to produce blackberries in Los Reyes – Peribán, at first Chilean and later from the United States, replacing sugar cane. Sugar cane shrank with a change in agricultural policies (the end of guaranteed prices and a sharp drop in the price of raw material), privatization, concentration, and the abolition of several sugar factories. The crop did not require much attention, purchase prices were guaranteed, input costs were low, farmers' families had social and health insurance and the sugar factory built local infrastructures like irrigation canals, rural roads, sports grounds, nurseries, and schools. Some farmers remember the times when sugar cane was grown with nostalgia.

The reported berry-growing area covers 7 647 ha (blackberries 7 252 ha, raspberries 187 ha, and blueberries 208 ha), and the two municipalities harvest 70 % of the national production of blackberries (S I A P, 2019). Blackberries were first grown in the open fields and irrigated with water from irrigation canals. Raspberry and blueberry production started later and farmers began using macro tunnels and drip irrigation. Till

today, the vast majority is hand-harvested and freshly exported to the USA, Canada, and Europe. Mexico is the second largest world exporter of blackberries and raspberries, 99 % of them are exported to the USA (T r a d e m a p , 2020). More than 50 thousand workers are employed in growing and harvesting berries (Fig. 2). Production and prices have been rising with a few exceptions: in 2010 the market was saturated due to the dramatic increase in production which started in 2007. As a result, prices fell, and many farmers abandoned production. Pest and disease problems caused a decrease in production in 2015 and 2018.

#### Entry into the labour market and changes in family organization

*‘There is work and we are no longer going to bite ourselves with the needle at home, now we are going to bite our whole hand on the field.’* (Paloma, 28 years old, worker)

Purépecha families in San Felipe still operate on the model of the extended family, with several generations living together and if the family has more adult sons, they bring in their brides. Young couples have their bedroom, however, the kitchen, cooking (over an open fire), and dining are common. The traditional craftwork is handmade textiles called *deshilado*, which involves removing fibres from fabric and making a series of holes to create a pattern. It is a very time-consuming, eye-catching job that can earn a maximum of 10 USD<sup>(2)</sup> per week. If a woman does not work on particular orders from clients, she can sell her textiles only twice a year: during Easter markets in Uruapan and the guitar festival in Paracho. Given that women traditionally work neither in forestry nor in the



Table 1. Four types of female workers and their characteristics

Personal status	Seasonality	Earnings for
Married women	work only in the highest season	extra family income, saving, improving household equipment
Single parent, divorced or widowed women	work all year round	main family income
Young single women	some work all year round, others only during the school holidays or during relatively frequent teacher strikes **	covering their own needs and to help their families ***
Migrant women	work for a certain period (several weeks to three months a year)	certain purpose: purchase of land, animals, housing improvement

\*\* Civil servants in education often protest due to non-payment. Dropping out of school to start working in the fields is also frequent, often after completing the secondary school, at the age of fifteen.

\*\*\* Ways to help parents and siblings are different: sometimes it is a specific weekly amount, other times it is done directly by buying food or paying for services such as electricity, gas, telephone or television.

Source: own elaboration

cornfields (*milpa*), and state social aid is low<sup>(3)</sup> this needlework was often their only economic alternative.

This has changed<sup>(4)</sup> some ten years ago due to the great demand for women's labour from export agriculture. Women from San Felipe joined the workforce that commutes daily to Los Reyes – Peribán, a berry-growing area.

Ten years ago, the work in the blackberry field was very time consuming with a low economic value:

*'It was more difficult because the bus left us in a place, the place where it leaves us is called San Sebastián [day labour market], and from there the bosses came and hired people.'* – *'We want two here' or 'we want three there.'* ... *'Sometimes my girlfriend and I had to split up and go to a different plot, sometimes very far away and with different unknown bosses. At first, I used to be scared because I didn't even know where they were taking me. In the afternoon, the bus was waiting for us [in San Sebastian] while we had to wait for all the people from different plots, for example, I returned from my plot at two and I had to wait until six. I was home at eight in the evening. We earned 100 a day [5 USD]. We paid 20 [1 USD] for transportation and we also had to buy lunch.'* (Paloma, 28 years, worker)

It was never certain if they would have a job that day, if they did not get the job, they still had to wait until the bus left. Although they made little money, it was more than what they could earn doing *deshilado*. At first, the parents did not agree with such work,

arguing that the daughters had no obligation to work. In the end, however, they succumbed to arguments:

*'I told them, well, I want money. And sometimes they couldn't give me everything that I wanted.'* (Paloma, 28 years, worker)

The daughters began to contribute to the household (5 USD a week) and were able to buy new clothes for the *fiestas*. Women were the first to start working outside the community (if we do not take migration into account), because, at that time, men did not work as seasonal workers, neither in avocado nor in blackberry production. That was slowly changing, partly out of concern about public opinion and questioning the position of man as the main provider. As the husband of one of the workers said:

*'I started to go to work [to the berry field] because people were going to say that I am only sending my wife.'* (Rosario's (worker) husband)

Today, women's employment touched almost every household, and women's participation in the labour market is widely accepted in the community (Tab. 1). The initial mistrust was also overcome since women often work with other relatives (either male or older women), and the intermediaries are often in some way related to the family of the woman or her husband (godfather, brother-in-law, cousin, or uncle).

Nowadays, the daily wage in berries is fixed at 10 USD. If there is a lot of fruit and women work overtime, they are paid 1.5 USD an extra hour. Women from San Felipe commute with a specific intermediary

(2) Throughout the text, the Mexican peso is converted to US dollars in the exchange rate of 20 : 1.

(3) State allowances 'Prospera' are provided for children in elementary school – 16 USD bimonthly for a child, and for people older than 65 years – 53 USD bimonthly.

(4) Surprisingly, some (especially older) women carry their fabrics with them to the berry field and use every free moment, such as waiting for transport, to continue working. According to them, the moments of waiting have to be exploited and, moreover, due to the fact that work is done while sitting, this work is a rest compared to work in the field.

in vans and have a job mostly with the same employer throughout the harvest, sometimes throughout the year. The harvest usually takes place from September to June, however, there is also work in the rainy season (pruning, weeding, or fixing shoots).

Single daughters usually contribute around 25 USD a week to the family budget. Given that most seasonal workers have children, their work implies a transfer of some home tasks to other women of the family, whereas this help has been monetized: women who have children pay between 5 and 25 USD per week for their babysitting, the most common rate is 10 USD, depending on how close the relationship between the women is. Extended networks of families and neighbourhoods were mobilized, accepting extra work to organize the caretaking of children.

Most interviewees said they preferred to work away from home rather than take care of children and the household:

*'No, I didn't get tired [in the field], I tell you here [in the house], I get more tired ... walking here and there, doing home tasks and home tasks and home tasks, one gets more tired here.'* (Alicia, 18 years old, worker)

The feeling of freedom in the field was often mentioned, mainly by young women who work for small farmers, in stark contrast to my perception of the work on berry fields as suffering and almost slavery<sup>(5)</sup>. Purépecha's women's household work is very hard and often under the strict control of their mother-in-law. Preparing food (handmade tortillas, hours spent over an open fire) and caring for children of different ages with different school schedules is very tiring<sup>(6)</sup> (and without any financial reward).

Who works outside and who stays at home differs from case to case and is determined by whether they need to make money. For example, a single mother works while her single childless sister takes care of her children (for a fee). A 57-year-old mother with health problems also works (while her daughters do not) because she owes for her son's wedding feast,

and in Purépecha culture, the groom's parents must pay the costs of the wedding.

Working hours in the berry fields are from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m., nevertheless, if we include commuting time, women have to leave home after five in the morning and return at four in the afternoon<sup>(7)</sup>. The married women attend daily tasks such as cooking or washing dishes in the afternoon after returning from work. Manual laundry is usually done on Sundays, which means that this day is no longer set for rest. Men do not help with housework, only one woman said that her husband helps with the laundry. It has been mentioned in many interviews that it is impossible to engage in other activities, which were carried out previously to the work in berries, like gardening or animal husbandry. Most women prefer spending time with their children, resting and preparing for the next day's work.

Most households do not grow corn for self-consumption and have to buy almost all of their basic groceries. Rural livelihoods thus significantly depend on wage labour in export agriculture<sup>(8)</sup>. The description of the ordinary local household's food basket is the following: tortillas, beans, rice, lentils, vegetables, fruits, cheese, and eggs; meat and fish are consumed once a week. Eating habits have changed in the sense that many more industrially processed foods are included, for example, sweets, chips, and sweetened beverages. Employed women no longer make tortillas by hand, they buy the machine-made ones. Some women prefer to buy ready-made food – breakfast, snacks, and/or lunch.

With integration into the work process, the clothing has undergone certain adaptations: traditional sandals have been replaced by rubber boots or sneakers, embroidered wide skirts by trousers (either jeans or elastic). Older women still use *rebozo* (now they tie it over trousers) and still cover their heads<sup>(9)</sup>. Younger women already use sweatshirts and caps.

<sup>(5)</sup> The researcher's perception is marked by her labour conditions; work indoors, in a clean environment, physically undemanding work, relative working freedom, flexible working hours.

<sup>(6)</sup> If the children are of different ages, they have a different schedule: in kindergarten from 9 a.m. to 12.30 p.m., in primary school from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. and in secondary school from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. In addition, it is necessary to bring a snack at 11.30 a.m.

<sup>(7)</sup> In some alternatives of remunerated work are even more difficult working conditions: some women have experience with mango processing in the agroindustry in Zamora which involves leaving the house at 7 p.m., arriving at the factory at 9 p.m., starting work at 10 p.m., at 1 a.m. having a meal break and leaving the factory at 6 in the morning. At 9 a.m., the women are home (they usually sleep on the bus). The work is dangerous (mangoes are cut manually with a sharp knife, the fruit is washed without gloves using aggressive cleaning agents) and stressful (a high daily plan must be met), for the same wage (60 USD per week).

<sup>(8)</sup> Actually, men work in avocado orchards and it is better paid than the harvest of berries (15 USD or more per day), nevertheless this work is reserved only for men, because it is conceived as more dangerous and physically exhausting – more than standing for hours in the sun when harvesting blackberries or be bent over in the tunnel when harvesting blueberries. Fruit harvesting from trees (such as apples, peaches or pears) is commonly carried out by women in the USA or Europe.

<sup>(9)</sup> Rebozo is a long flat garment, very similar to a shawl, worn mostly by women and still popular in rural and in indigenous areas of Mexico. Rebozo shades from the sun, provides warmth and is also used to carry babies and large bundles. Indigenous women wear traditionally a woven head covering.

A woman entering the labour market gains a higher degree of financial independence and a better negotiating position in the family when it comes to spending planning. Principal expenses are food, clothing, shoes, cosmetics, children's education-related expenses (studying at the public high school means an expenditure of 25 USD per week in transportation, school supplies, and internet). The money is invested as well to minor home improvements (roof repair, floor improvement), and saved for unexpected expenses.

On the other hand, women observe that after they started working, men's responsibility diminished:

*'Unfortunately, when the woman works, the man becomes lazy.'* (Citlali, 35 years old, worker)

*'We work double, at home another shift that nobody pays us. Moreover, as we make money, they want us to lend it to them.'* (Rosario, 38 years old, worker)

### Working conditions

Women usually do not have agency (capacity to act independently) in the work environment. Women use the phrase 'they invited me' to describe the entry into the work process, which means that they did not actively look for work, they only responded positively to an invitation from another person, mostly a family member. Although many women have higher education than their male counterparts (many studied high school, some even partially university), this fact remains hidden, untapped, and underappreciated. There is practically no possibility of a promotion or an increase in wages for women. The only position women can aspire to is to be the boss of the group or work in packing and weighing the fruit. In both cases, the bonus is not financial yet consists of greater autonomy (and also responsibility). More experienced women specialize in certain activities (planting, pruning, supervision of the fruit quality, weighing, or packing) and gain trust from employers. They can work without much supervision and train the new ones.

Employment of women is justified by stereotypes relating to the physical condition and attitudes ascribed to the female nature: they have a greater delicacy in handling and are more careful. Farmers often state that they prefer the harvest to be carried out by women:

*'People preferred women more because as it is a very delicate fruit, they have the most delicate fingers, they did not crush them so much.... It is that men sometimes have rougher, larger hands and yes, the majority are women.'* (Héctor, 32 years old, small producer)

Some producers want to empower the women, especially with direct payments, however, they encounter intermediators' resistance (intermediators charge 40 pesos (2 USD) for each worker).

*'They bite their hand, so I think it's fair to pay the ladies directly. But he [intermediary] told me that it doesn't work like that and he didn't bring me people anymore. I tried to get people on my own nonetheless sometimes I couldn't get enough.'* (Arturo, 56 years old, small producer)

Farmers experiment with various forms of contracting: most of them concluded that it is not advisable to pay per harvested box because the labourers try to collect as quickly as possible, they leave less accessible fruit and mistreat the plants.

Farmers thus prefer to reward the best workers directly, while others do not see it (their experience is that direct competition rather demotivates).

*'Those who I see picking faster I give them a tip on the weekend, not seen by others. I give them a hundred or two hundred pesos more.'* (Héctor, 32 years old, small producer)

*'If they work well, I pay them an hour more.'* (Arturo, 56 years old, small producer)

Women must decide whether they prefer flexibility (small farm) or formality (international company). Smaller farmers are more tolerant: it is allowed to listen to music, hygiene standards are not so strict, and a worked day is a paid day<sup>(10)</sup>. They usually do not register employees anywhere, do not sign a contract with them, or pay the insurance premiums. Women often do not even know the name of the company they work for or its owner.

One of the worst jobs, according to women, is removing old plastics that covers the soil and prevents weeds: spiders, scorpions, or mice often hide beneath it, so it can sting or bite. Although women do not normally apply agrochemicals, they are applied near their workspace, so the wind brings the smell and also the breeze. In addition, old plastics are usually burned directly on the plot. Temporary workers cannot count on any help except in the case of work-related accidents in the field (injuries like burns, cuts, insect bites), in which someone takes them to the nearest clinic and cover the costs, for which women express gratitude:

*'They help us, they quickly take us to the clinic.'* (Carmen, 50 years old, worker)

However, the aid no longer applies in case of other illnesses such as pesticide-caused headaches, allergies, heat illness due to the work in a tunnel, or colds. If a woman is ill and does not work, no one will compensate her for the lost salary. There also is no compensation in the event of permanent consequences (like musculoskeletal pain) or illnesses that manifest themselves with a delay of several years. After ten years of work in the field, Paloma (28 years old worker) stopped working due to lower back pain. However, if her mother stops working, Paloma must return to the field.

<sup>(10)</sup> Although if workers miss work to attend weddings or other fiestas, that means high instability for the employers and may also be the reason why they prefer to employ immigrant workers.

Regarding health insurance, most women state that they have signed some forms, nevertheless they do not know if they are entitled to health care. Similarly, they do not know whether they are entitled to a pension or other legal benefits like a vacation.

Although there are more stable and longer-term contract options, as in the case of the US company Driscoll's, however, these companies have stricter job requirements. Permanent employees earn 15 USD a day, they are insured, entitled to paid vacations and a Christmas bonus, on the other hand, the company requires hygiene and discipline: workers cannot wear earrings, rings and painted nails are not allowed, hair must be covered, pants must not be leaky. Many employees are annoyed that they cannot use a cellphone or a personal radio in the field, so they cannot listen to music while working. Supervisors do surprise checks, and they take out workers who do not comply.

Still, even though they have health insurance, the distance to the insurance company's health centre in Paracho is an obstacle, so in the event of mild health problems, most women take the advice of acquaintances and buy medicine in San Felipe or visit the local rural health centre (which offers only basic care). In the case of more serious health problems, they pay private doctors.

The day labour market in San Sebastian (periphery of Peribán) described above still works. Closer villages usually already have firm contracts, more distant ones are still going through an initial process of uncertainty. People arrive from the Purépecha villages (Zacapu, Paracho...) up to 2 hours away (some leave at 4 a.m.) and pay 50 pesos for transportation. It is never certain that they will get a job that day, and in cases when they do not get one, they have to wait for the others to return from the field and pay for the transportation. The women admit that they get into the truck even though they do not know the manager of the plot. At present, farmers hire workers in this way only if they have an excess of unharvested fruit while during the blackberry boom it was difficult to get enough workers for everyday work:

*'There was so much work that a relative would go to Paracho for them. It's two hours of distance, every day at dawn he would leave and bring a truck full of people because there were no people here, everything was busy. Then a market was formed in San Sebastian, you arrived and there they all went to work.'* – *'How do you pay me?'* [asked the worker]. *'Two hundred,'* [said farmer A]. *'They got into the truck. 'Come with me, there they will only pay two hundred, come, I'll pay you two hundred fifty,'* [said another farmer]. *'They got out of the truck. 'Three hundred,'* [said farmer A]. – *'It was an auction and that's the way it was, at the end of the day those who did well were them [workers] because they earned their good money. Now it is not like that, they already beg you, they beg you to give them work.'* (Raúl, 35 years old, small producer)

Another option is to employ migrants from indigenous communities (Nahuat, Mixtec) in the state of Guerrero. The region is known for drugs cultivation (poppy, marijuana) and violent clashes between cartels and the military. The view of Purépecha women on them is ambiguous: on one hand, they understand them and perceive that they are in a precarious situation:

*'They said that they came here to work because the women did not work there (in Guerrero) and had financial problems and the men were paid very little, that sometimes they earned fifty pesos (2.5 USD) all day, eighty pesos at the most (4 USD), so they came here and we already thought it was good for them to come here to work.'* (Yareni, 23 years old, worker)

But they are also perceived as competition and accused as the reason for stagnating wages for workers:

*'Sometimes they (employers) scolded us or we had problems...our people were sent to rest (were fired) moreover they do that because those from Guerrero came to work, for a hundred pesos a day (5 USD), well, little... and they did work hard.'* (Meztli, 54 years old, worker)

During the pandemic, work stopped, however only for a short time. Most of the Purépecha villages closed the access roads and tried to isolate themselves from the outside world. However, workers and their families were left without income and the intermediaries began to put pressure on local authorities. After a few weeks, the possibility of travelling to the berry fields again opened up. Farmers describe the 2020–2021 season as very successful in terms of both harvest volume and prices. Exports grew in response to consumers' desire to eat healthy and fresh food.

Both employers and workers define working in the field as safe and healthy because they are in the open air. Intermediaries claim that there was no infection, not even in transport (which takes place in very tight vans where people are huddled together). Salaries remained the same as before the pandemic, whereas there was an influx of new workers: men and students. Many Purépecha men are musicians who have found very difficult the cancellation of all (normally very frequent) celebrations and fiestas. Faced with the difficulty and sometimes impossibility of following online classes, many students entered agricultural work.

## DISCUSSION

In the context of rural Mexico, domestic work and childcare are systematically assigned to women and considered to be their roles. As stated by Gertel, Sippel (2014), a labour contract might simultaneously empower women while also increasing their daily tasks. On the other hand, Guadarrama Olivera's (2008) finding, that many poor women who work by necessity, despite the difficulties they face, find satisfaction in working outside the home



and even come to see their work as an instrument to rebuild their self-esteem and achieve economic and emotional autonomy, was confirmed. Childcare is normally delegated to other female family members which increases their workload: sometimes as an extra burden to old grandmothers who have to care for children, from babies to adolescents.

It was observed a noticeable increase in local economic activity with the work of women day labourers; above all, increase in the consumption of basic goods such as food (unfortunately, often industrially processed and nutritionally poor sweets and snacks), cosmetics, shoes, and clothes. Women also contribute economically to their own families (if they are single) or to the family of their husbands (if they are married).

The claim of Arias (2016) that the daughter's parents do not invest in them because they will join the husband's family and so they do not represent a long-term investment, was not confirmed. At present, girls are supported in their studies and have a higher education level than young men. They are also more likely to look for work in the city. In contrast, young men find a well-paid job in harvesting avocados.

However, reinterpreting patriarchal family structures as Helliö (2014) mentions has not been observed in our case: within families, there is a matriarchal arrangement and the main decisions are still made by the mother-in-law. Outside, in the community, decisions continue to be made by men.

Just the same as described by Sippel (2014), even though some parts of the rural population still own land or have land-use rights, as well as some livestock, self-employed agriculture only plays a minor role in guaranteeing livelihood security. Some men suffer from the inability to provide sufficiently for their families so that their wives have to work. That is why they follow their wives and also get hired as day labourers. Another reason (usually unacknowledged) is to have their wives under control in the workplace.

There has been a deterioration of the labour market, as claimed by Guadarrama Olivera (2008) and highlighted by Gertel, Sippel (2014): workers live in a permanent situation of flexicurity, they are looked upon as superfluous, abundant and, as individuals or even groups, replaceable, thus irrelevant; nevertheless, this has an impact on both men and women. It has not been confirmed that 'occupations that are feminized at the same time as disqualified' (Arias, 2016), or that 'generally, it is poor women who did not have access to higher education who see their possibilities in the labour market limited' (Guadarrama Olivera, 2008). The negotiating position of both women and men working in berry picking depends primarily on labour demand, i.e. production. In the peak time of harvest, there is demand for all types of workers, even those without education, and the salary raises for all.

Moreno-Nieto's (2014) claim was confirmed – control over workers is established by creating a

hierarchy among different types of workers based on existing hierarchical structures among social groups such as gender, ethnicity, and age groups. Managers are non-indigenous men from local affluent families. Technicians (working group supervisors) are mostly young agriculture engineers and often this is their first job. They normally come from another state which, according to the owners, is a positive factor, because it limits personal relationships with workers. Intermediaries are indigenous middle-aged men with social capital (many contacts in the village, with the authorities, and also with the farmers), they often have experience from migration to the city or the USA. Within the female working group, older women with long experience and a good relationship with the supervisor or intermediary, usually have a higher status. Young women and migrant women have a lower status.

Berry workers are not unqualified: this work requires knowledge and skills, yet women's attributes – sensitive fingers, careful handling, patience, ability to perform repetitive and tiresome tasks, docile character, and tolerating bosses' disrespectful treatment – are deemed to be innate and natural. However, as Moreno-Nieto (2014) points out, the less confrontational character of women within the work environment is indicative of a set of social relations emerging both in and out of the workplace. The gender-based division of tasks originates from custom and culture: it refers to an assumed tradition according to which the berry harvest was allegedly undertaken by women. Not surprisingly, just like at home, in the field, the cleanliness of toilets and eating shelter is the responsibility of female workers.

As regards the training of new staff, Aznar-Sánchez et al. (2014) have stated: 'with a high degree of rotation it becomes problematic in terms of the time the owner must invest in training and the time the worker needs to familiarize themselves with the recommended tasks'. However, this does not apply in our case because the obligation of training is delegated to the veteran workers.

Blackberries must be harvested even in the periods when prices are so low that they do not cover wage costs because otherwise there is a risk that crop diseases will spread. So, in line with Sippel, Gertel (2014) – the relationship between farmers and workers is an asymmetric interdependency, both are exposed to massive external pressures, both are dealing with multi-fold insecurities. The production costs are increasing, and it is impossible to control them because most inputs are imported. Prices are unstable. Therefore, labour costs cannot be increased, explain farmers.

Seefo-Lujan (2005b) asks how most vulnerable individuals may bear the risks of applying agrochemicals in food production. The author concludes that they have no other options (due to structural conditioning such as subordination and limited oc-

cupational opportunities) and instead of risks, before which decisions are made, we should speak about imposed dangers. He adds that there is an acceptance of certain hazards as 'natural' components of work so a conflict between worker and employer does not occur and the worker relies on his 'luck' that nothing will happen to him. In the berry fields, the relationships between employer and employee can be qualified as paternalist ('our boss helps us and protects us in case of misfortune'). Social and health insurance is not seen as a legitimate claim arising from the employment relationship, rather a 'help' – a voluntary benefaction of the employer who decides if he helps and how.

## CONCLUSION

The employment of Purépecha women in berry production for wages is framed by the traditional gender conditioning of rural women (the aspects of patience, submission, and skillful hands mentioned above). However, there has been a dramatic change, since the majority of women find themselves working outside the home, earning their salary, and can decide on certain expenses for the first time in their lives. They typically decide on day-to-day household expenses, however, they are mostly not involved in strategic decisions concerning the family budget and the spending of larger amounts. Thus women are not completely independent, nor fully economically self-sufficient.

There is a higher degree of individualization of women and a freer choice of way of life, nonetheless, it is not a one-way process, because the social network formed by the family and godfathers is still very strong. Collectivism (acting according to the interests of the group), inward orientation, perception of time as synchronization (coordinated acting according to the agricultural cycle), and social status according to the past and hierarchy still prevail in San Felipe. The pressure of globalization is being counteracted by consolidating identity through traditional culture and ancient customs. The political strengthening of the indigenous community takes place, for example, through the introduction of direct budgets (independence from the municipality and the possibility of managing the budget by local representatives), or elections not by political parties, whereas according to indigenous customs.

Women field workers in berry production cannot be seen simply as victims; they are actors that have agency and negotiation power that they can use when there is a lot of fruit and a shortage of workers, although these may be only short periods. They are neither a homogeneous mass nor stable in time; their social positions and relations continuously require negotiation. The flexibility of employees is high: they can change employers and choose between formal jobs

with higher requirements (international companies) or informal jobs (small producers).

Although the economic effect is positive and leads to greater independence of women and improved living conditions for rural families, there are many invisible costs, for example, the decline in the quality of food, abandonment of traditional productive activities which ensured food self-sufficiency (keeping farm animals, cultivating own garden), less time for the family and rest and health deterioration. When women start to work, food preparation is simplified under time pressure and semi-finished or ready-to-eat meals are preferred. In the case of Purépecha women and their families, the income allows higher consumption of meat, eggs, and dairy products however also consumption of sweets, chips, and sweetened sodas.

The main problem of the labour market is the absence of alternatives: if there was no possibility to work in intensive agriculture (berries or avocados), women would only sell their handicrafts and men work in forestry (but this would cause higher pressure on communal natural resources). Or they would undergo risky illegal migration.

In this study, we can observe the concentration of the global in the local. Many of the problems found are structural and can be solved only at the state or even global level. The global organization of trade in agricultural products is manifesting itself in many developing countries as extractivism with negative social and environmental externalities.

An increase in economic activity in a certain territory does not automatically lead to social development. The women empowerment so far manifests itself only in the form of neoliberal feminism – it gives women the opportunity (or rather a necessity) to work, yet no longer solves the problems of asymmetry in work performance and remuneration, unequal status, or unavailability of social and health protection. The role of the Mexican state is weak, both in securing and enforcing the law and in implementing development programs that, for example, provide accessible health infrastructure.

To improve workers' situation, it would be necessary to gain higher protection by legislation: the Mexican Labour Code should respect work flexibility and ensure seasonal workers' pensions. Workplace inspections should check that insurance obligations are fulfilled and personal protective equipment provided and used. The establishment of labour unions could also contribute to the improvement of working conditions. However, it is organizationally demanding and unachievable even for a much smaller group of intermediaries and transporters.

The hardest part is to deal with the health consequences that occur outside the workplace and years after the work was done. Pressure for higher productivity and efficiency in a high-risk work environment leads to physical and emotional exhaustion which escapes

economic measurements and workers, their families, and society bear the consequences currently.

Agricultural exports increased during the pandemic and therefore the need for a labour force does not decrease. However, workers are exposed to extra health risks (in addition to the many they are already taking), especially during transport to the field.

## REFERENCES

- Arias P (2016): Female work: from permission to obligation. *Papeles de población*, 22, 197–228. doi: 10.22185/24487147.2016.90.039. (in Spanish)
- Aznar-Sanchez JA, Belmonte-Urena LJ, Tapia-Leon JJ (2014): The industrial agriculture: A ‘model for modernization’ from Almería? In: Gertel J, Sippel SR (eds): *Seasonal workers in Mediterranean agriculture*. Routledge, London–New York, 112–120.
- Barrett M (1980): *Women’s oppression today: Problems of Marxist-feminist analysis*. New Left Books, London.
- ENOE (2019): A dataset. National Survey of Occupation and Employment. <https://www.inegi.org.mx/programas/enoe/15ymas/default.html#Microdatos>. Accessed 8 March, 2022
- Gereffi G (2009): Development models and industrial upgrading in China and Mexico. *European Sociological Review*, 25, 37–51. doi: 10.1093/esr/jcn034.
- Gereffi G, Lim H, Lee J (2021): Trade policies, firm strategies, and adaptive reconfigurations of global value chains. *Journal of International Business Policy*, 4, 506–522. doi: 10.1057/s42214-021-00102-z.
- Gertel J, Sippel SR (2014): Epilogue: The social cost of eating fresh. In: Gertel J, Sippel SR (eds): *Seasonal workers in Mediterranean agriculture*. Routledge, London–New York, 246–252.
- Giddens A (2013): *Sociology*. Argo, Prague. (in Czech)
- Guadarrama Olivera R (2008): The meanings of female work in the global world. Proposal for a debate from the field of culture and labor identities. *Estudios Sociológicos*, 26, 321–342. (in Spanish)
- Haraway D (1991): *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, technology and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century*. Free Association Books, London.
- Hellio E (2014): ‘We don’t have women in boxes’: Channeling seasonal mobility of female farmworkers between Morocco and Andalusia. In: Gertel J, Sippel SR (eds): *Seasonal workers in Mediterranean agriculture*. Routledge, London–New York, 141–157.
- Hochschild A, Machung A (1989): *The second shift: Working parents and the revolution at home*. Viking Penguin, New York.
- INEGI (2020): Population and housing census, a dataset. National Institute of Statistics, Geography, and Informatics. <https://www.inegi.org.mx/programas/ccpv/2020/tableros/panorama/>. Accessed 8 March, 2022
- Lara S (1998): New productive experiences and new forms of flexible work organization in Mexican agriculture. Juan Pablos Editor, Procuraduría Agraria. (in Spanish)
- Moreno-Nieto J (2014): Labour and gender relations in Moroccan strawberry culture. In: Gertel J, Sippel SR (eds): *Seasonal workers in Mediterranean agriculture*. Routledge, London–New York, 199–210.
- Oakley A (1974): *The sociology of housework*. Martin Robertson, London.
- Pananond P, Gereffi G, Pedersen T (2020): An integrative typology of global strategy and global value chains: The management and organization of cross-border activities. *Global Strategy Journal*, 10, 421–443. doi: 10.1002/gsj.1388.
- Secombe W (1974): The housewife and her labour under capitalism. *New Left Review*, 83, 3–26.
- Seefoo-Lujan JL (2005a): Being an agricultural labourer today. In: Barragan Lopez E (ed.): *Rural people, heritages and rural dynamics in Mexico*. El Colegio de Michoacán. (in Spanish)
- Seefoo-Lujan JL (2005b): The quality is ours, the intoxication... yours! *El Colegio de Michoacán*. (in Spanish)
- SIAP (2019): Annual agricultural production, a dataset. Agrifood and Fisheries Information Service. <https://nube.siap.gob.mx/cierreagricola/>. Accessed 2 December, 2020
- SIAP (2021): Analysis of employment in the primary sector, a dataset. Agrifood and Fisheries Information Service. <https://www.gob.mx/siap/prensa/analisis-del-comportamiento-del-empleo-en-el-sector-primario-134567?idiom=es>. Accessed 9 March, 2022
- Sippel SR (2014): Disrupted livelihoods? Intensive agriculture and labor markets in the Moroccan Souss. In: Gertel J, Sippel SR (eds): *Seasonal workers in Mediterranean agriculture*. Routledge, London–New York, 186–198.
- Sippel SR, Gertel J (2014): Shared insecurities? Farmers and workers in Bouches-du-Rhône. In: Gertel J, Sippel SR (eds): *Seasonal workers in Mediterranean agriculture*. Routledge, London–New York, 37–48.
- Trademap (2020): Trade statistics, a dataset. International Trade Centre. <https://www.trademap.org/Index.aspx?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1>. Accessed 3 December, 2020

---

### Corresponding Author:

Ing. Lucie Crespo Stupková, Ph.D., The College of Michoacán, Rural Studies Center, Zamora, Mexico, phone: +420 777 805 748, e-mail: lcrespo@colmich.edu.mx

---